



Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety

By Marjorie Garber

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Beginning with the bold claim, "There can be no culture without the transvestite," Marjorie Garber explores the nature and significance of cross-dressing and of the West's recurring fascination with it. Rich in anecdote and insight, ***Vested Interests*** offers a provocative and entertaining view of our ongoing obsession with dressing up--and with the power of clothes.

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- Sales Rank: #982993 in Books
- Published on: 1997-11-27
- Released on: 2008-04-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.00" h x 1.17" w x 7.01" l, 2.31 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 498 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

From the "transvestite theatre" of Shakespearean England and Japan's kabuki to Peter Pan, Boy George and female Elvis impersonators, cross-dressing is a pervasive social phenomenon, claims Garber, director of Harvard's Center of Literary and Cultural Studies. She states that "there can be no culture without the transvestite," who, she argues, calls attention to cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances. The weight of her thesis is carried by such figures as Liberace, Divine, Oscar Wilde and David Bowie, yet her witty, consistently provocative study demonstrates effectively how cross-dressing is wrapped up with recognition of the power of women, androgyny, responses to gay identity and anxiety over economic or cultural dislocations. Garber also looks at transsexuals, drag performances, plays and movies. Photos.

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From Library Journal

Do clothes really make the man? What do Elvis and Liberace have in common? Why is Peter Pan always played by a woman? These are just a few of the questions of sexual and sartorial politics raised by Garber. From the sumptuary laws of medieval Europe to "vogueing" in New York City in 1991, she traces Western society's inconsistent and often arbitrary views regarding the clothes we wear and how they affect class structure, gender stereotyping, and our own self-image. Garber boldly asserts that transvestism makes culture possible by deliberately confusing the constructs of gender identification and challenging the social control they seek to maintain. Well documented and thoroughly researched, Garber's book is a serious work that is not without a piquant feel for the ironic, especially as she details the lengths to which both men and women have gone to hide their gender in order to get ahead in the world. Often raising more questions than it answers, this is nevertheless a fascinating book about an equally fascinating subject. Highly recommended.

- Jeffrey Ingram, *New port P.L., Ore.*

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From Kirkus Reviews

An elaborate theory by Garber (English/Harvard), insisting that the transvestite is at the elusive heart of Western culture. In a century-sweeping book, Garber applies current critical thought to the phenomenon of "cross-dressing" in fact and fiction, high culture and low. Arguing that gender is culturally constructed, she contends that cross-dressing challenges the binary categories of male and female as well as the concept of category itself. It signals "cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances." Garber argues that critics have looked "through," not "at," the transvestite, failing to see what is a Freudian "primal scene." Defined here again and again, the transvestite is "the space of desire," "a space of possibility," a "third." Garber plays out her theory in detailed analyses of countless transvestite figures- -Shakespearean heroines, Tootsie, Lawrence of Arabia, M. Butterfly, Madonna, and Laurence Olivier (here portrayed at death as "the triumphant transvestite"). There is no shortage of provocative speculation and information, some worth considering and some--like that about transvestite magazines and the politics of transsexual surgery--not. Unfortunately, the sub-flooring of French critical terms sets Garber's argument on a slippery slope ending up too often in a theoretical mire where "the transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification." A discussion of Elizabethan dress codes and costuming concludes with the typically reductive claim that "there is no ground of Shakespeare that is not already cross-dressed." Also, when critical terms are rampantly applied--Elvis and Liberace, for instance, labeled, like Peter Pan, "changeling boys"--they quickly lose impact. Bound for controversy, this study admirably attempts to cross from the academy to popular culture, but theory here acts less as a window onto cultural evolution than as a screen drawing

attention its own overwrought, repetitive pattern. (Color and b&w illustrations--150--some seen.) --
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Users Review

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