

Penis Bearer

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Abstract

A creative romp across the terrain of gender, drag, clothing, penises, and maleness, to end up at gender reassignment without hormones or surgery. I explore the linguistic and filmic use of “man” as descriptor for people with penises, and discuss three well-known movies about men and drag to tease apart the associations of “man”, “woman” and “penis”. I describe some of the variety of clothes in my own wardrobe, and the varying sensual experiences of wearing them. Then, evoking stark images of my naked body inside “women’s” and “men’s” clothes, I argue that tying “male” or “man” with penis becomes increasingly problematic and, ultimately, redundant: I can simply state that I am NOT a man. Instead, because I bear a penis, a more helpful description is that I am a ‘penis bearer’.

5,400 words

I’m pretty tall, I’ve got a deep voice and broad shoulders, I’m bald with a beard and a hairy chest, I have a penis and testicles.

Since I was about 13, I’ve been described as “man”. Since I was about 19 I’ve described myself as “man”.

There’s a lot of it about.

man, men, male, masculine - all words used in connection with people of the same sex as me.

Man, Mankind, Man the Hunter, Man on the Moon, the Ages of Man - all words used to refer to people or humans.

But that last lot of words are slippery as well: they kind of mean all humans but they kind of only mean people with penises. Is there a word that JUST means “people with penises” and DOESN’T mean “everyone”?

Let’s go back to those other, smaller words: man, men, male, masculine. “men” can also mean “people”, as in “Now men, your orders for today are...”. And “man” can mean “people” also, as in “The information stall was manned on Sundays as well”. Or “Cool, man!”

And you can have “masculine” men - obviously. And, of course, “feminine” women. But more recently, we have seen “masculine” women and “feminine” men.

“male” seems pretty immune to this slippery sliding of “people with penises” into “people generally”. “male” pretty clearly means “someone of the male sex”. But then you can have male tigers, male fish, male pawpaw trees, even male water pipe fittings! So males are not only people.

And feminism has done some pretty shocking things to all these words that refer to people with penises. Mankind is now an indicator of insensitivity and political incorrectness. Male has been connected with Chauvinist and Pig, men have become all

men and rapists and bastards, masculine has become a device for the oppression of others.

Not only that. Using any of those words to describe myself inevitably position me in particular ways to others, and to social institutions as well. Those descriptor words - man, men, male, masculine, Man - not only refer to some aspects of my body: that I have a penis and other particular characteristics. They also IMPLY things - about the tone and shape of my muscles, the way I use my voice, the way I stand and move when I walk, how I touch others, the sorts of interactions I have with children, with women, with men.

And the implications of these words don't just refer to my body and actions. They also refer to how I interact with the government, with bank managers, with the car mechanic, with my colleagues.

Try these associations - the first things that come to your mind:

Man - forest - bulldozer.

Woman - forest - bulldozer.

Harbour Bridge - man - overalls

Harbour Bridge - woman - overalls

Football - legs - man

Football - legs - woman

Man - young girl

Woman - young girl

There's nothing fixed about all these associations - and indeed a lot of them have been challenged and disrupted in recent years by events like women wearing overalls and men caring for young children. There's no automatic link between having a penis and behaving in a particular way. Having a penis doesn't mean that I just simply HAVE TO behave in specific ways - that somehow or other my biology or my body just COMPELS me to do certain things. The enormous variety in how people with penises act in the cultures across the world is testimony to that. And also, there is no-one standing over me with a gun or a whip COERCING me to do the "male" thing - although there are of course laws saying what I can and can't do.

But there are other forces involved as well. Think of the movies "Tootsie" and "Mrs Doubtfire", in which a man dresses up as a woman and thereby has access to situations that would not have been open to him dressed as a man. We as viewers know that "she" is a man, but the other characters don't know that. They think "she" is a woman. The edginess of both movies revolves around that issue of: will "she" be found out? To remain in character, to be able to appear totally or convincingly "she" is the goal.

We the viewers have privileged information. We've seen "her" naked, so to speak, stripped of the accoutrements that make this man a woman. We know with certainty that "she" is a man. In both movies, Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire are characters that don't get too close to others. Indeed, they keep others at a distance - for good reasons! Think of women you know that you are not close to. Do you actually know for certain that all of them "are" women? Can you absolutely without question state that they have vaginas and not penises hidden under their clothes?

Why is it so important? Why would it make a difference if we discovered we'd been "fooled" by someone in this respect? I suggest it's important because we all carry with us a sense of order, and a sense of gender order in particular, a sense that there is an order and predictability to penises and vaginas and the behaviours associated with each. We want, very understandably, to have our world resonate with our expectations - with what we "know". We want this so that we can easily find our way around our world without constantly being tripped up by unexpected things.

We want to be able to allocate positions to people, and we also want to hold a definite position ourselves. The reason that Tootsie is so edgy, so exciting, so funny, is that we are seeing someone holding two positions at once. But the plot of Tootsie is structured around the assumption that holding two positions at once is not OK. The “transition” bits where the female appearance is created on Michael Dorsey’s male body, and the “private” bits where he is talking with his friend and being “normal”, are not public. They are not “Tootsie”, they are Michael Dorsey.

So there’s this jagged bit during which “man” “becomes” “woman”. The two bits aren’t integrated. There’s a sense of stepping from one position to the other.

Why would anyone want to step from being a man to “being” a woman? As I said, both Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire wanted to because it gave them access to situations and people from whom they would have been excluded had they “been” men. There was an advantage to them - they wanted more than what they had. But the way they went about getting that “more” meant they had to keep some vital bits of themselves hidden - for instance the fact that their bodies had penises and not vaginas. This led to hiding a whole lot of other aspects of themselves - keeping themselves distant in important ways from the others around them, so as to maintain their “integrity” as “women”.

Remember, though, that it was not important for them that they actually be women totally in the way that a transgendered “woman” really wants to go the whole hog, so to speak. Neither Tootsie or Mrs Doubtfire actually wanted a vagina and breasts. All they wanted was to be accepted SOCIALLY as women - to be admitted to social spaces normally reserved for women. “Being” women was just a means to get what they wanted - it was a device that worked. So the “integrity” that was important for them to maintain was also a means to an end. It was not an integrity that went all the way through. It was not an integrity that they relied on in the “private” moments in their own room. In “private”, they had an integrity that said something like “I’m Michael, (or Daniel Hillard) and I’m dressing up as Tootise (or Mrs Doubtfire) so that I can get a job (or be close with my kids).”

What would it be like to be able to not have to hide one’s bodily reality to the extent that Tootise and Mrs Doubtfire had to, but at the same time have “more” than what is normally reserved just for “men”? Drag queens and female impersonators do this sort of stuff. Let’s look at some of the experience of the characters in “Priscilla Queen of the Desert”.

In this movie, the main characters don’t have the same sense of “split” that Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire have. They arrive in a town simply as men driving a bus - although admittedly odd sort of men - and do the publicity for their show, go to the shops and buy food, etc. Then they “put on” their drag and perform. The fact that they are men performing “women” is known everywhere - that is the essence of their show. The point around which the comic theme revolves in this movie is not that their bodily realities must be kept hidden, but rather the shock and amazement of outback small-town people upon meeting urban drag queens for the first time. The outback residents are being asked to considerably expand their idea of what is possible for male bodies to do - and their reactions are funny.

But this expansion of ideas about male bodies happens in a very specific direction. It is not simply that our heroes arrive in town and start doing traditionally “feminine” things like baking cakes or going to CWA meetings or putting band-aids on hurt children. All these things COULD be carried out equally well by male or female bodies, and the fact that those actions are generally considered “feminine” is pretty obviously social convention. In addition, although obviously bodies are involved in carrying out these actions, it is the actions themselves that are the primary focus, rather than the bodies.

Our heroes, on the other hand, are explicitly highlighting their bodies. The whole audience is looking at them, they are up on stage, brightly lit, inviting the audience's gaze. And they have made their male bodies (which everyone knows is under their clothing) to appear female. This appearing female is not simply confined to suggesting a female body shape. Their aim is to completely convince the audience that they ARE women - that they are women IN ESSENCE. Good drag performers (and these guys are good) use all the recognisably female gestures, movements, ways of interacting, and voice intonations and inflections. To support them in this, they are wearing or have to hand all the recognisably female clothing and accoutrements - high heels, fish-nets, handbags, make-up, the works. Not only is their physicality recognisably female, but the content of their "conversation" with each other and their audience is recognisably female. The sorts of themes they discuss, and the views of themselves and others that they reveal, in the conversation are typically attributed to women and not to men.

This is one major source of the wonder and excitement of a drag show: being entertained by a vivacious and extraverted woman - a woman who makes a point of her woman-ness - who you know is a man. But there is a very important aspect of the whole performance of drag which is required to make it work: the woman whom the drag performer is performing has to be unequivocally a "woman". Although there are a wide variety of "women" characters now portrayed by drag performers, including characters like butch dykes and corporate power-dressers, it is still essential that the actor make clear to the audience that they are portraying a "woman".

To see the importance of this point, I ask you to remember a moment when you have seen a person whom you have had difficulty in deciding whether they are male or female. Parents in the 1960s and 70s used to complain of this problem frequently, during the era of the ubiquitous long hair and scruffy jeans. Now imagine what would happen if a drag performer performed that sort of "woman". Clearly, the "edge" that provides the thrill of the drag performance would not be there, because the whole point of drag is to highlight that "men" and "women" are completely separate things. Even if, as has been done, a performer "in role" gets a laugh by carrying out actions that are those of a man, they ensure that the audience knows that they are portraying a "woman" doing a "man's" actions. At moments like these we have the apparently complicated situation in which we are watching a man performing a "woman" performing a "man". The performance only "makes sense" if we are able to attach the relevant labels to the relevant layers of the performance.

My point here is that drag centrally relies upon a split between "man" and "woman", between "male" and "female", between "masculine" and "feminine". Drag relies on a collective "knowledge" that the two parts of each of these dualisms is different and is readily recognisable. The central characters of "Priscilla" are able to smoothly move between those two poles - there is no split in their lives in the same way that Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire had to create a split and "hide" some parts of themselves. In "Priscilla", the characters are simply doing "women" as a job. People can and do go backstage and see them being men-as-women. It's how they make a living, and it's in this context that they create their integrity as men.

But, as we have seen, it is important to them that "man" and "woman" are different. They earn their money by exploiting the fact that it is socially unacceptable for men to move between those two poles, but that they as performers have some special attributes that enable them to do so. People pay money to come and watch them perform this apparently magical feat. Were there no distance between "man" and "woman", they would have no job, and "Priscilla" would no longer be an adventurous comedy.

So, we have been exploring the fortunes of some fictional characters who are stepping a long way out of the conventions of "man" and actively taking on "woman". In all

three movies, there is a sense of the boundaries of “man” and “maleness”, and a sense in which those boundaries are transgressed. All the transgressors have personal motivations for carrying out those transgressions, those incursions in to “foreign” territory - and quite pragmatic self-centred motivations. For some characters the incursion itself and the foreign territory of “woman” is bewildering and scary, while for others it is extremely familiar and everyday. But for all of them, there is a heightened awareness of the “man”/“woman” divide and a reason to move across that divide from one to the other.

But let’s go back to Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire a moment. I like those characters because they find themselves involved in gender transgression almost by accident. The characters in “Priscilla” have a professional interest in that gender divide, whereas for Tootsie and Mrs Doubtfire their gender transgression situationally gets them closer to personal goals. In a sense they would much rather that the gender divide were not there, and that it was simply OK for men to do what they wish to do.

And what is it they wish to do? In “Tootsie”, Michael Dorsey just wants employment as an actor. So why doesn’t he just do that directly? It’s quite OK really for a man to play a woman’s role. In a sense, like the men in “Priscilla”, to “be” a man and play a “woman” is a very legitimate and also highly skilled ability. Michael’s agent, if he were really smart, could have in fact recognised that there was a big demand for “women” actors with the sort of character that Tootsie comes to have, and advised his client Michael to purvey his skills as a player of that sort of character. Because “she” is a character who is unlikely to be required on screen to do things like breastfeed a baby, or engage in an X-rated sex scene, the reality that “she” has a penis is really irrelevant. The only thing against it is our collective social expectations. We like to have our “women” and “men” actors pure all the way through - especially our women. We don’t like uncertainty about this. We don’t like to be disturbed by considerations like “maybe this woman who I’d like to fuck, or that other woman who reminds me of my mum, has a penis in their knickers.” And the celebrity press, of course, would be disturbed because it would end up being a very complicated story to tell: when, for example, does one use the pronoun “he” and when the pronoun “she”? At such moments, the enormous divide between “man” and “woman”, the divide that underlies our social gender structure, becomes a tangling morass.

I want now to turn to a slightly different consideration, but one that is linked to the above discussion because it furthers the issue of pragmatic self-interests that lead into gender transgression. For many years I’ve enjoyed wearing dresses and skirts. When I was working as a welder and then as a sawmiller, I used to enormously enjoy at the end of the day to get home, have a shower and put on a soft flowing long skirt or long dress. After the intense noises, heat, heavy work and the huge weight and toughness of the objects I was working with all day, and the tough and rigid protective clothing I wore, it was such a pleasant relief to wash all that atmosphere away and don soft, tactile clothes that flowed and swirled around my body, and that had a range of colours and patterns that caught the light and the shapes of my body in myriad ways.

These clothes gave me such a different sensual experience of my body. In the heavy leather, denim, boots and gloves I wore at work I felt huge, invincible, safe, and strong. Like armour, it allowed me to feel confident to deal with large heavy and hot lumps of steel, or enormous logs weighing several tons. Such clothing was very appropriate. At home, relaxing, having a smoke and a drink on the verandah, cooking dinner, the softer looser colourful clothes were a real delight - and equally appropriate.

More recently I’ve discovered the pleasures of dancing in a long clinging dress or in tights and tight top. Each outfit gives me a different sensual experience. The long dress with no knickers promotes a feeling of a flow of sensual energy all over the

surface of my body with no differentiating lines or fixed areas. The only points where there is any firm pressure on my skin is the shoulder straps that hold it up, and the points of contact with my partner. Dancing with a partner in this dress also heightens my awareness of the whole front of my body exposed to her, available for interaction with her body.

The tights and tight top, on the other hand, give me a feeling of taut energy electrically contained, a feeling of muscles straining against bonds, a heightened awareness of the exact shapes and movements of my body, all the muscles that ripple and come into play and the areas of my body highlighted as I dance through the steps and move around the floor. Dancing with a partner in this outfit highlights the firmness, the tautness and the definite movements of my body against hers, the points at which we spark off each other and the sense of exertion and work that I do in leading her.

In summer up here on the hot and sticky North Coast, I find the coolest things to wear are light cotton frocks with no knickers. Again there is that sense of flow, of loose flexibility, as well as a sense of sensual summer freedom. But also it is incredibly cool. Unlike the conventional shorts, there are no tight pieces of clothing around my waist or my genitals, and the movement of the skirt as I move promotes movement of air around my middle and over my genitals and my bum.

In terms of “man” and “woman” when wearing these outfits, how can I be described? At first glance I appear to be a man wearing women’s clothes. Yet in what sense are they “women’s” clothes? It’s true that men don’t wear those sorts of garments, while women are commonly seen wearing them. But most of my tights and my summer frocks I’ve made myself - they’ve never been anything other than “a man’s” clothes. My tight tops are usually very small men’s cheap tank tops or singlets or women’s singlets or tank tops - the main thing is that they fit tight and are bright colours. It’s true that my favourite red dress was a women’s dress when I bought it in that it was made “for” women - with a woman purchaser and wearer in mind. But when I bought it, it became a man’s dress - in that it now “belongs” to a man, owned by a man.

In the movies I’ve discussed above, it was crucially important for all the main characters that when they don “women’s” clothes that they are identified by others as “being” women. The clothing signifies “I want to appear to be a woman”. But for me personally, I don’t have that motivation. When I wear a skirt, a dress, tights, a frock, I don’t have a motivation to appear to be a woman. My focus is upon the sensations of movement, of the sensuousness of the touching of my body by the textures and shapes and feeling of the fabrics over my body. And on the appearance of my body draped in those shapes and colours, the particular shapes that such garments lend to the fixed lines and shapes of my body. And on the qualities of openness, of looseness and flowing, that I bring, while wearing those clothes, to interactions with others.

So in what sense am I “a man wearing women’s clothes”? At what point do “women’s” clothes stop being “women’s” clothes and become “men’s” clothes? This is the same problem the entertainment tabloids have with the pronouns “his” and “her” when reporting on our hypothetical “male” actor selling acting skills as a female character.

Perhaps, to look at it another way, part of the problem is not with the descriptions of the clothes but rather with the description of the BODY involved. Let’s accept the convention that dresses, tights and frocks are called “women’s” clothes simply because men don’t wear them. Let’s leave aside for the moment the fact that, even though men don’t wear them, men COULD wear them if they wanted to. If that really were so, i.e. if it were OK for men to wear them, then we would have to describe them as “men’s dresses” or “men’s tights”, in the same way that there are men’s jeans and women’s jeans, men’s undies and women’s undies. But “men’s dresses” doesn’t exist - it is currently a meaningless term in that it doesn’t describe anything. The fact that the garments I am discussing here - dresses, tights and frocks - are called “women’s”

arises because applying the label “women’s” to them is a useful description in some way. It says, in effect that they are “NOT men’s”. To be male and wear a dress is definitely possible AND it involves a transgression of the gender divide.

So I (with my body) am wearing “women’s” clothes and with no desire to “be” (taken as) a woman. The convention is to say that, because I have a “male” body (I have amongst other characteristics, a penis), I am a “man”. Wearing women’ clothes.

I am, in short, a man and I am doing something that men don’t do.

One way to resolve the conflict revealed by that sentence is to rephrase it more precisely:

I have a penis and I am wearing a dress.

This sentence is kind of “smooth” in that it doesn’t refer directly to the set of models and ideas and social significances that we attach to the words “male”, “man” and “men’s”. It is a difference sentence to:

I am a man wearing a dress.

And different to:

I am a man wearing women’s clothes.

What I am in effect doing is re-phrasing this little moment of me with my body wearing a dress. I’m trying to circumvent or mute the sense of gender transgression. I’ve attacked this from two directions; first by calling my garment a “dress” rather than the more explicitly gendered “women’s clothes”; and second by describing myself as having penis rather than the explicitly gendered “man”. I want to take this a bit further.

We have seen in the last 30 years how the gendered appellations of some garments have changed and loosened up significantly. Although “suits” are generally still thought to be “men’s”, it is increasingly common for women to wear suits - “women’s” suits. Jeans just don’t have the same gendered connotations, nor do pants. Trousers, however, are more often men’s, while slacks are more often women’s. Shirts are interesting: while shirts have for a long time been men’s, there is a particular fashion statement made by a woman wearing a man’s shirt. And there are even men’s shirts made specifically for women, just as there are “his pants for her” - “unisex” knickers made to suit “female” genitals and buttocks. In short, the gender assignment of a particular sort of garment can and does change over time and can encompass some quite complex gendered layerings.

So it is quite conceivable that, given some particular events, “men’s dresses” could become a meaningful term. But what about the gender assignment of particular sorts of bodies? What circumstances or events would have to unfold so that the link between “penis” and “man” or “male” is changed? What if the problem we have with the sentence “a man wearing women’s clothes” was resolved, not by reassigning the CLOTHING, but by reassigning the BODY?

Remember the problems that arose for our heroes in Tootsie, Mrs Doubtfire and Priscilla. All of those problems arose because of the link between penises and “male” and the associated divide between “male” and “female”. (Of course, if those problems did not arise, we would have no movies - but then I wouldn’t be writing this essay either.) There is a very thick, wide and deep-seated cultural connection between those two words “penis” and “male”. It is almost as though one means the other.

What if I tell you (or, even more explicitly, show you) that I have a penis and I say I am not a man? Say I stand before you totally naked, facing you so that you can see my penis, while I tell you I am not male.

Now watch me put on a pair of King Gees and gauntlets and a heavy protective jacket and pick up a welding mask while I tell you I am not a man.

Now watch me take off those clothes so that, again, you can see my penis, and watch while I put on a long red clinging dress while I tell you I am not male.

In doing this I am doing nothing more profound than rejecting that habitual association between penises and maleness. It's just an association, it's not fixed, it's not "natural".

But how on earth can I do such a thing and have it make any sense? How can I reject that term "male" if I have a penis? How can I say I am not a man when I obviously have a man's body? It's "obvious" that I "am" a man, even while I'm NOT naked. As I said at the beginning, I'm tall, bald, with a beard, etc. I "am" male.

But as we have seen, Tootsie "is" a woman to some people (the other characters) but not to us, the audience. Tootsie carefully conceals the "truth": that underneath that female appearance is a penis. Bodies, apparently, hold such essential truths. When I stand naked before you and my penis is visible to you it seems impossible that I could not be a man. There can be no doubt that I have a "male" body.

From one perspective that is certainly true. But I am seeking to create another view, another perspective, just as "we the audience" has another view from those in the story of Tootsie. Within this new view, there can be no doubt that I actually have the body with which I stand before you, i.e. that "I" am somehow unavoidably implicated with my body. But I have a profound doubt about whether it serves my interests to describe my body as "male". Given the linguistic linkage of "male" body with "man" that is integral to the conventional gender structure, and given the problems I've already investigated with the sentence "a man wearing a dress", perhaps it is just easier and simpler if I deny the linkage of my body with that gender structure.

I am saying here that, while there exists a viewpoint I "am" both male and a man, from my viewpoint I have a penis and I am neither a man, nor a male.

If I have a penis and I'm not male or a man, what "am" I? I have a penis - perhaps I am a penis haver.

But "penis haver" has some rather inelegant sounds about it as a word, and also, inherent in the word "haver" (which is not really a word at present) is the idea of "having" something. To "have" something is to possess it, to consume it, to swallow it down, to engulf it, to claim it as mine. If I "have" a penis, in what sense do I "have" it? Do I "own" it in the sense of holding legal title to it? Do I "have" my penis in the sense of consuming it, like it were an ice cream?

I prefer to think that I "bear" my penis. I bear a penis in that I carry it, as one may bear a load in one's arms or on one's back. I bear it in the sense that a woman bears a baby, encompassed within her and nurtured by her. I bear my penis in the way a standard bearer proudly bears the flag. I bear my penis in the sense that someone can bear witness to something that they incontrovertibly saw or experienced.

I am a penis bearer.

So I stand before you naked so you can see my penis and I say to you I am not a man and I am not male. I am a penis bearer.

This covers enough of the facts to distinguish me from that other large group of people who have vaginas. It deals with an unavoidable reality about humans and many other

beings as well - that there are two sexes that have quite different genitals and some other characteristic, though by no means guaranteed, bodily features; and that the two sexes do that highly charged activity of “fuck” (giggle!) to make babies.

But it doesn't do the things that the words “male” and “man” do, which is to connect the obvious fact that I have a penis with the enormous cultural edifice of expectation, limitation, obligation and confusion that is our gender structure. Specifically, it does not assume the gaping divide that currently exists between the positions “man” and “woman”, “male” and “female”. And, since I am creating this entirely new territory and we are talking about dresses, I am creating it to be perfectly normal that penis bearers wear dresses.

This seems to be as easy as changing the gender assignment of dresses. In fact, in a sense, it is easier: Rather than having to laboriously go around and change the gender assignments of all those social and cultural objects that currently are not legitimate territory for “men”, why not just get straight to the point and simply create another position which people with penises can occupy that does not continue this same mad divided gender structure that creates all the problems?

I'm claiming I'm not a man, I'm a penis bearer. Penis bearers can do heaps of things that are not OK for men to do, as well as heaps of things that are not OK for women to do.

D'ya wanna play?