Virginia Woolf: Masculinity as Imperial 'Parade'

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Abstract
This paper is a joke. Of course it is a serious joke and I'm haunted by Freud's suggestion in jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious that 'a joke loses its effect of laughter' for the recipient 'as soon as he is required to make an expenditure of intellectual work in connection with it'. 1 So relax and envisage me agonizing over my paper when I should have been dealing with Second Year modularisation and suddenly urgently a~are I had washing-up to do. So on go the radio and my rubber gloves and I gatner that in a few moments Dr Karen Burke will be telling 'us ladies' how to have 'thin thighs for life'.2 My ears prick up, suddenly cellulite is one of life's major problems.
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This paper is a joke. Of course it is a serious joke and I’m haunted by Freud’s suggestion in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that ‘a joke loses its effect of laughter’ for the recipient ‘as soon as he is required to make an expenditure of intellectual work in connection with it’.¹ So relax and envisage me agonizing over my paper when I should have been dealing with Second Year modularisation and suddenly urgently aware I had washing-up to do. So on go the radio and my rubber gloves and I gather that in a few moments Dr Karen Burke will be telling ‘us ladies’ how to have ‘thin thighs for life’.² My ears prick up, suddenly cellulite is one of life’s major problems. A few moments later the lyrics of ‘Magnificent Obsession’, as sung by Nat King Cole: ‘You’re my magnificent obsession, the greatest wonder on this earth. The Taj Mahal and other splendours to me really had no worth. You’re my magnificent possession, a treasure left me from above. As long as I have breath within me, you’ll be my one and only love ...’ have me tearing off my rubber gloves and scribbling them down.³ Back to the washing-up with all the ironies in mind of reading Joan Riviere’s 1929 paper on ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ which cites the case of the analysis of an intellectual woman who on one occasion dreamt of ‘washing off dirt and sweat, guilt and blood’, the traces, according to Riviere’s interpretation, of the ‘sadism’ involved in taking a masculine position as a public speaker, when I was doing just the same.⁴ I might be consciously cynical but ideology was clearly at work.⁵ I was washing up and worrying about cellulite while planning to give a paper referring to ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ and its discussion in particular of two intellectual women who, we might now say, were accommodating themselves to the male fantasy of the woman: one, as Rivere argues, by ‘flirting’ with ‘father-figures’ after public speaking and one by being defensively ‘feminine’ in her attire and disturbingly ‘flippant’ when lecturing to male ‘colleagues’. The latter’s usurpation of a masculine position, Riviere avers, had to be, defensively, a ‘joke’ (pp. 36-39).

I was aware too of other ironies, of listening in 1995 to a black crooner singing lyrics which were both patriarchal and imperialist. Seduced by them, I too was under the spell of what Stephen Heath reminds us in
his paper 'Joan Riviere and the Masquerade' is masculinity as 'parade' which Heath translates as 'display' – a showing off of possession of the phallus. If men had the phallus, they would not need woman to figure it – or the Taj Mahal. Indeed, as Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, quoted by Heath just after a reference to Woolf's Three Guineas, avers 'if the penis was the phallus, men would have no need of feathers or ties or medals ... Display [parade], just like the masquerade, thus betrays a flaw: no one has the phallus'. Thus I at least was still within what Riviere terms 'womanliness as a masquerade' – still thinking I must have thin thighs to accommodate myself to that masculine fantasy of womanliness; to what Riviere accepts as, and terms, 'fully developed femininity' even as she declares it is always a masquerade. For her, 'fully developed femininity' involves most importantly: 'the renunciation (less intensity) of sadistic castration-wishes deriving from the later oral-biting level. "I must not take, I must not even ask; it must be given me"' (p.43).

So (suitably robed I hope), let me hide behind Professor von X. as Woolf pictures him in 1929 in A Room of One's Own after a day spent reading books by men about women in the British Museum:

It was the face and the figure of Professor von X. engaged in writing his monumental work entitled The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex ... His expression suggested that he was labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained.7

In A Room of One's Own Woolf concludes that such an attitude supports male self-confidence:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size ... For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished. How is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast and at dinner at least twice the size he really is? (pp. 32-33)

In For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor Slavoj Žižek points out that, 'the child from Andersen's tale who with disarming innocence states the obvious', that 'the Emperor has no clothes', does more than expose 'hypocrisy and pretence' since the whole 'intersubjective network' which depends on maintenance of that deception will collapse.8 Yet in A Room of One's Own this is precisely what Woolf is (oh so urbanely saying) or rather, she is saying that the Emperor has only his clothes, his imperial gear; and she says it all the more emphatically and overtly in the later Three Guineas. In current
terms she makes it clear that there is no substance to his or anyone's claim to have the phallus though it certainly has effects of power as long as we go along with it. The procession of 'educated men' from which 'the daughters of educated men' were for so long excluded, employs clothes Woolf concludes in Three Guineas, 'to advertise the social, professional, or intellectual standing of the wearer':

If you will excuse the humble illustration, your dress fulfils the same function as the tickets in a grocer's shop. But, here, instead of saying 'This is margarine; this pure butter; this is the finest butter in the market,' it says, 'This man is a clever man - he is Master of Arts; this man is a very clever man - he is Doctor of Letters; this man is a most clever man - he is a Member of the Order of Merit.' It is this function - the advertisement function - of your dress that seems to us most singular. In the opinion of St Paul, such advertisement, at any rate for our sex, was unbecoming and immodest; until a very few years ago we were denied the use of it. And still the tradition, or belief, lingers among us that to express worth of any kind, whether intellectual or moral, by wearing pieces of metal, or ribbon, coloured hoods or gowns, is a barbarity which deserves the ridicule which we bestow upon the rites of savages. A woman who advertised her motherhood by a tuft of horsehair on the left shoulder would scarcely, you will agree, be a venerable object. (p.137)

Meanwhile, excluded from the professions, women have had to dress to attract husbands and therefore dress their ideas to suit. Hence Woolf cites Lady Lovelace's reference to "our splendid Empire" ... "the price of which," Lady Lovelace added, "is mainly paid by women" (p.160). Placed in the context of such arguments, the photographs Woolf chose for Three Guineas [Plate IV] make us take another look at masculine dress. The 'feathers', 'ties', 'medals' which for Lemoine-Luccioni, as we have seen, function as mere 'display', masking an ever-absent phallus, feature similarly in the photographs of Three Guineas as mere pomp and ceremony along with what appear to be quite fabulously (and no doubt quite unnecessarily) tall boots [Plate V]. The parade of boots is a topic to which I'll return but the way in which photographic and verbal texts interact to offer us an estranging view of the familiar may be illustrated by comparing the photograph of the bewigged judge [Plate VI] with Woolf's acidly interrogative commentary when she quotes 'the late Mr Justice MacCardie summing up the case of Mrs Frankau':

'Women cannot be expected to renounce an essential feature of femininity or to abandon one of nature's solaces for a constant and insuperable physical handicap ... In matters of dress women often remain children to the end. But ... the rule of prudence and proportion must be observed.' The Judge who thus dictated was wearing a scarlet robe, an ermine cape, and a vast wig of artificial curls ... what degree of social prestige causes blindness to the remarkable nature of one's own clothes? (p.279; my emphasis)

Adopting the defamiliarizing view of woman as 'outsider' Woolf
analyses empire in *Three Guineas* (itself as Heath argues, ‘a strong social-political, feminist joke’\(^{10}\)) on the home-front. The patriarchal home is at once seedbed of empire and fascism and a *front*, a deceit. It functions, one might say, as a fantasy scenario where male dress is a ‘parade’, a showing off of power, of the specious possession of the phallus and female dress is a masquerade of inferiority and dependence whilst also being a figuration of the phallus for men. Fantasy here, as Žižek suggests in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is an organization, a framing of desire but paradoxically also a masking of desire, of ‘the abyss of the desire of the Other’.\(^{11}\)

I started this paper at home, and Woolf analyses the logic of British imperialism from the home-front. Indeed with Mr Justice MacCardie and Professor von X. Woolf might well have been analysing her own paternal uncle, Fitzjames Stephen, who in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, written during 1872 while he travelled back from being the appropriately named ‘Legal Member of the Viceroy’s Council in India’, took issue with J.S. Mill’s arguments for women’s equality. For Stephen:

Ingenious people may argue about anything, and Mr Mill does say a great number of things about women ... but all the talk in the world will never shake the proposition that men are stronger than women in every shape. They have greater muscular and nervous force, greater intellectual force, greater vigour of character.\(^{12}\)
Stephen goes on to aver that: 'Strength, in all its forms, is life and manhood. To be less strong is to be less of a man' (p. 199). Hence his necessary belief in inequality:

I say the wife ought to give way. She ought to obey her husband ... just as, when the captain gives the word to cut away the masts, the lieutenant carries out his orders at once, though he may be a better seaman and may disapprove them ... No case can be specified in which people unite for a common object from making a pair of shoes up to governing an empire in which the power to decide does not rest somewhere; and what is this but command and obedience? (p. 197)

The overall argument here is actually contradictory: men he avers are stronger both intellectually and physically but then he admits that the woman/lieutenant may be more able. Thus Stephen, an admirer of Hobbes, can only assert that a structure of command and obedience is as necessary for 'governing an empire' as it is for 'making a pair of shoes' and it is precisely the way he dresses up his argument that interests me: 'Government ... ought to fit society as a man's clothes fit him. To establish by law rights and duties which assume that people are equal when they are not is like trying to make clumsy feet look handsome by the help of tight boots' (p. 192).

Boots and shoes: Woolf's *Jacob's Room* ends as Mrs Flanders holds out a pair of the dead Jacob's old shoes; bloody shoes figure in *Between the Acts*. In both cases they are related to force and war. I want,
however, to conclude with *To the Lighthouse* where Woolf negotiates her own patriarchal and imperialist past: her relations with her father, Leslie Stephen, – brother of Fitzjames and son of ‘Mr Mother-Country Stephen’, and with her mother Julia Stephen whose father was a doctor in India. The home-front’s connections with India are indeed clear in the novel, Mrs Ramsay significantly has a necklace ‘which Uncle James had brought her from India’ and ‘had the whole of the other sex under her protection ... for the fact that they negotiated treaties, ruled India, controlled finance’. But it is the Stephen family’s obsession with boots that most concerns me here. Remember the scene where Mr Ramsay feels justified in forcing women ‘he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy’ and pressurises the resistant Lily, who sees he is parading his grief: ‘he was acting ... this great man was dramatising himself’ (pp. 165-166). She finally blurts out ‘“What beautiful boots!”’, expects ‘complete annihilation’ for such a feeble response to his demand but, surprised, finds she has given Mr Ramsay what he wanted: ‘Ah yes, he said, holding his foot up for her to look at, they were first-rate boots. There was only one man in England who could make boots like that’ (pp. 167-168).

Here Mr Ramsay fetishizing his boots, Mr Justice MacCardie, Fitzjames Stephen, imperialism and masculinity as ‘parade’, come together. Freud in his analysis of fetishism ties it to male narcissism and fear of castration. As Colin MacCabe has suggested, ‘The fetishist inaugurates desire by the replacement of the mother’s penis. This replacement involves an admission of the absence of the mother’s penis ... and yet an assertion of its presence in the substitute’. It is ‘the forms of masculine authority’ MacCabe goes on to argue, which, more generally than is often admitted, become ‘invested’ by the fetishist ‘as a guarantee of the man’s possession of the phallus’. Thus ‘the transformation of the man’s own penis into a fetish involves’, MacCabe suggests, ‘the designation of objects and institutions with phallic authority in the face of the evident failure of the real father (p.110). Hence Freud’s comment in ‘Fetishism’, quoted by MacCabe: ‘In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that *Throne and Altar are in danger*, and similar illogical consequences will ensue’ (p. 110).

Fitzjames Stephen admits possible lack on man’s part – the lieutenant/woman may be more able and the man less so – but disavows it: women are less strong intellectually and in every other way, hence a structure of command and obedience and women’s inequality go without saying. The same structure of disavowal justifies absolute rule in India in Stephen’s paper ‘Foundations of the Government of India’. India was won by conquest, does not have representative government, nevertheless absolute rule by ‘educated Englishmen’ is justified because of the perceived inferiority of Indian
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institutions. Likewise, Mr Justice MacCardie sees women as lacking but is blind to the lack masked by his own scarlet robe, ermine cape and wig, and Mr Ramsay, whose dependence on women is manifest, lights on his first-rate boots in the face of an unsympathetic woman and is reassured of his own superiority. He 'poohpoohed her [Lily's] feeble system' of tying knots, we learn (p. 168). Thinking of the judge in ermine and Ramsay's boots, it is of course 'the foot or shoe ... fur and velvet' that Freud observes as common fetishes supporting a split - that of both the admission and the disavowal of lack: ultimately the man's own. In the scene of Mr Ramsay's boots, Woolf exposes the split, the disavowal; before his moment of triumphant reassurance she has already turned the narrative tables on him by parading those boots as farcically empty.

The joke of the empty boots, still walking, repeating the same old story even in Mr Ramsay's absence, is used to undermine a specific patriarchal construction of masculinity; showing it as just that: empty boots on parade with all their imperial and imperious vigour. If I started at home, with cellulite and Nat King Cole, it is because they precisely brought home to me the persistence of those boots: that structure of masculinity as 'parade' and femininity as masquerade. For me at least those boots still keep on walking ...

NOTES


3. Fred Karger and Frank Laine, 'Magnificent Obsession'; recorded by Nat King Cole in May 1958. Quoted by kind permission of Windswept Pacific Musci Ltd.

4. Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', in Formations of Fantasy, ed., V. Burgin, J. Donald and C. Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35-44 (pp. 38-40) (first publ. in International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 10 (1929)). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


7. Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Hogarth, 1929) repr. in Michèle Barrett eds., A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas (London: Penguin, 1993), p.28. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.


10. *Formations of Fantasy*, p.56.
13. On James Stephen see Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 83. Marcus points out: 'The press called him "Mr Mother-Country Stephen," for it was he who coined the phrase "the mother country." It was he who made the policies that bound the British colonies in a domestic metaphor that was to determine their relations for more than a hundred years, to yoke whole nations in a position from which to rebel was to insult sacred motherhood itself'.
14. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* ([1927]; London: Penguin, 1992), p. 88 and p.10. All further references are from this edition and are given in the text.