From Vested Interests by Marjorie Garber

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THE TRANSVESTITE CONTINUUM LIBERACE–VALENTINO–ELVIS

> You don't understand. It's not that there's something extra that makes a superstar. It's that there's something missing.
>
> George Michael[1]

> Madonna announced to her screaming fans: "I want you all to know that there are only three real men on this stage—me and my two backup girls!"
>
> Liz Smith, "Gossip"[2]

The television show "Saturday Night Live" once featured a mock game show called "¿Quién es mas macho?" in which contestants vied with each other to make gender distinctions. "¿Quién es mas macho?" "Fernando Lamas or Ricardo Montalban?" In Laurie Anderson's avant-garde film, *Home of the Brave*, this became a contest to distinguish between two objects: "*¿Qué* es mas macho?" Which *thing* is more macho? Pineapple or knife? Toaster or convertible? The choices here were deliberately self-parodic; it was culture itself that was being gendered. And the joke was further perpetrated by Anderson herself, deftly deploying a special microphone, or "audio mask," that lowered her voice to a "male" register. She appeared live onstage in a tuxedo-like black suit and white shirt, but within the film, for one startling moment, she cross-cross-dressed to play Eve in a gold-lamé skirt. *Qué es mas macho?*

Throughout this book I have tried both to theorize the question of transvestism and to demarcate certain structures that seem, sometimes surprisingly, to characterize or accompany it. As I have already noted, the more I have studied transvestism and its relation to representation the more I have begun to see it, oddly enough, as in many ways normative: as a condition that very frequently accompanies theatrical representation when theatrical self-awareness is greatest. Transvestite theater from Kabuki to the Renaissance English stage to the contemporary drag show is not—or not only—a recuperative structure for the social control of sexual behavior, but also a critique of the possibility of "representation" itself.

In order to make such large claims for transvestism as a social and theoretical force—in order to argue, as I have, that there can be no culture without the transvestite, because the transvestite marks the entry into the Symbolic—I need to test out the *boundaries* of transvestism, to see it or read it in places other than where it is most obvious. I need to argue, in other words, for an *unconscious* of transvestism, for transvestism as a language that can be read, and double-read, like a dream, a fantasy, or a slip of the tongue. In the domain of theater, which we have seen to be the self-reflexive locus of much transvestite activity, I want to hypothesize what might be called "unmarked" transvestism, to explore the possibility that some entertainers who do not overtly claim to be "female impersonators," for example, may in fact signal their cross-gender identities onstage, and that this quality of crossing—which is fundamentally related to other kinds of boundary-crossing in their performances—can be more powerful and seductive than explicit "female impersonation," which is often designed to confront, scandalize, titillate, or shock.

But first, let me discuss for a moment the "normative" case and the issues it raises. One clear space in which to explore the power of transvestism as theatricality is in contemporary popular culture, specifically the pop-rock-scene, where cross-dressing, "androgyny," and gender-bending have become almost de rigueur. David Bowie, Boy George, Kiss, Tiny Tim, Twisted Sister, Siouxie Sioux, the New York Dolls, from glam- and glitter-rock to heavy metal, from the seventies to the nineties, cross-dressing has meant deliberately and brashly—and politically—calling into question received notions of "masculine" and "feminine," straight and gay, girl and woman, boy and man. To give one random but suggestive example, Dee Snider, male lead singer of Twisted Sister, was voted one of the worst-dressed *women* of the year in 1984.[3]

When Boy George, in full makeup, wig, and flowing skirts, accepted a Grammy Award in 1984, he remarked to the television audience, "Thank you, America, you've got style and taste, and you know a good drag queen when you see one."[4] When he published a book of clothing patterns, complete with makeup instructions, it was immediately snapped up—by his *female* fans.[5] Let us agree to call Boy George (né George O'Dowd) a *marked transvestite*, a cross-dresser whose clothing seems deliberately and obviously at variance with his anatomical gender assignment.

Consider another telling instance of marked transvestism. At an event billed as "The First Annual Female Impersonator of the Year Contest" one of the broadcast commentators was short, plain, comic actress Ruth Buzzi, former star of "Laugh-In." As the curvaceous, stunningly coiffed and made-up contestants in their glittering gowns emerged, on-camera, from a door prominently marked "Men," and the camera panned back and forth between them and Buzzi, the audience was tacitly invited to speculate on the nature of "womanhood" or "femininity." This may well rank as a species of producer misogyny, but it also frames a question: if "woman" is culturally constructed, and if female impersonators are *conscious* constructors of artificial and artifactual femininity, how does a "female impersonator" differ from a "woman"? The question seems both ludicrous and offensive,

but its theoretical and social implications are large and important. Female impersonators are often accused of misogyny (and regularly deny the charge), but in the female impersonator, the feminist debate about essentialism versus constructedness finds an unexpected, parodic, and unwelcome test.

Here is one drag queen's answer, describing the heyday of the London drag balls of the sixties: "there was a definite distinction then as there is now between the drag queens, who enjoyed masquerading as women, and the sex changes [that is, transsexuals], who regarded themselves, and were regarded, as real women."[6]

"Masquerading" versus "real" women. It makes sense that transsexuals, who have invested so much in anatomical alteration, should insist that the ground of reality is the feminized body: the body undergoing hormone treatment to develop breasts and hips, undergoing surgery to translate the penis into a vagina. But this binarism between "masquerading" and "real women" has been at the center of disputes and discussions among psychoanalytic critics, feminist film theorists, and, most recently, lesbian or self-described "queer theorists." Drawing on Joan Riviere's classic essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," and on Lacan's revision and extension of that essay in "The Signification of the Phallus," theorists have sought to define "woman" as a construct that depends, for reasons social and political as well as erotic, upon masks and masquerade.

Riviere had argued not only that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men," but also that it was impossible to separate womanliness *from* masquerade:

> The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade." My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.[7]

The woman constructed by culture is, then, according to Riviere, already an impersonation. Womanliness *is* mimicry, *is* masquerade.

Here is Jacques Lacan, rewriting Riviere to describe "display in the human being," not just in the woman:

> the fact that femininity finds its refuge in this mask, by virtue of the fact of the [repression] inherent in the phallic mark of desire, has the curious consequence of making *virile* display in the human being itself seem feminine. ("The Signification of the Phallus," 291)

What does this mean? Is it that *all* display is feminine, because it is artifactual and displaced, a sign of anxiety and lack? Or that virile display *becomes* feminine because in being displayed it exhibits its own doubt? Or is it that the phallus is that which cannot be displayed? As we will see, the upshot of each of these three scenarios is the same.

As the Lacanian analyst Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni explains, in a passage we have

already noticed in connection with "fetish envy," "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."[8]

In the same essay ("The Signification of the Phallus") Lacan had talked about the relations between the sexes as governed by three terms, not two: "to have" the phallus, which is what, in fantasy, *men* do; "to be" the phallus, the object of desire, which is what, in fantasy, *women* do; and the intervening term, "to seem." This intervention, of "seeming" (or "appearing"), substituted for "having," and protecting against the threat of loss, is, precisely, the place of the transvestite. So that, in psychoanalytic terms, the transvestite does represent a third space, a space of representation, even within a psychic economy in which *all* positions are fantasies. The theatrical transvestite literalizes the anxiety of phallic loss. The overdetermination of phallic jokes, verbal and visual, that often accompany transvestism onstage, is a manifestation of exactly this strategy of reassurance for anxiety through artifactual overcompensation.

Lacan's suggestion about "virile display" *seeming* feminine is a key one, because it is precisely this "curious consequence," paradoxical as it may seem, that characterizes the "transvestite effect" in what I am calling "unmarked transvestites." For while it is easy to speak of the power of transvestite display in figures like David Bowie, Boy George, and Annie Lennox, these overt cross-dressers, ("marked transvestites,") may in fact merely literalize something that is more powerful when masked or veiled—that is, when it remains unconscious.

I would now like to turn to three figures from popular culture in whom a certain consternation of gender is, to use a distinction from Roland Barthes, "received" but not "read."[9] ("The rhetorical or latent signified," says Barthes, discussing the ideology of fashion, is "the essential paradox of connoted signification: it is, one might say, a signification that is *received* but not *read*.") This is another opportunity to look *at* rather than *through* the transvestite, in this case by regarding the unconscious of transvestism as a speaking symptom, a language of clothing which is, tacitly, both dress and address. Unlike professional female impersonators, or comedians who affect travesty for particular theatrical ends (Milton Berle, Flip Wilson as Geraldine, Dana Carvey as the Church Lady), these performers do not think of themselves as transvestites. But—as we will see—the way they are received and discussed in the media, and, increasingly, the way they emphasize their own trademark idiosyncrasies of dress in response to audience interest all suggest that the question of cross-dressing, whether overt or latent, is central to their success, and even to the very question of stardom.

My first example may strike you as a bit too obvious to be considered completely unmarked, but he is, I think, at the origin of a certain theatrical worrying of exactly that borderline. I refer, of course, to the figure "known variously as Mr. Showmanship, the Candelabra Kid, Guru of Glitter, Mr. Smiles, The King of Diamonds, and Mr. Boxoffice," and described as "undoubtedly America's most beloved entertainer"[10]: Liberace.

His performances were more like fashion shows than piano recitals. Parading up and down the stage in outfit after outfit ("Pardon me while I go slip into something more spectacular") he was in effect the first to mainstream "voguing"—the eighties dance craze, borrowed from male transvestite drag shows in Harlem in the sixties, that incorporates exaggerated fashion model poses. Liberace dressed for the stage, he said himself, "just one step short of drag" (Thomas, 215).

Displacing sexual questions onto sartorial ones with practiced ease, Liberace used the word "straight" to describe his "civilian" or offstage *clothes* (Liberace, 179). Although in his stage performances of the eighties he joked that he'd never wear in the street the clothes he wore on the stage, "or I'd get picked up, for sure," he preserved a theatrical space in which he could both assert and put in teasing question his heterosexuality and his biological or anatomical maleness. Thus the gag lines in his nightclub act about "streaking" with sex-symbol Burt Reynolds ("I've got the diamonds, he's got the jewels") and about the necessity of getting up from the piano from time to time ("it straightens the shorts").[17]

While he was not afraid of feminization, and in fact courted it, he steadfastly denied that he was gay, despite clear evidence to the contrary. He even went so far as to sue the London *Daily Mirror* columnist "Cassandra" (William Neil Connor, writing under a cross-gendered pseudonym) for using words like "fruit-flavored" and "it" to describe him. Cassandra had written—bizarrely, we may think—that Liberace was "the summit of sex—the pinnacle of masculine, feminine, and neuter. Everything that, he, she, and it can ever want." Masculine, feminine, and neuter. He, she, and it. Cassandra, oracularly, had consigned Liberace to the space of thirdness, the realm of the Lacanian Symbolic and of the transvestite. The space of desire.

The court case was itself a shrewd performance of transvestite theater stage-managed for optimal effect. Liberace's London barrister, dressed in his wig and robes, gestured toward the Beefeaters, the Knights of the Garter, and the guards at Buckingham palace as models of "glamour" "in these days of somewhat drab and dreary male clothing." "Look at me, My Lords and my learned friends, dressed in accordance with old traditions. We do not dress like this in ordinary trial testimony, nor does Liberace" (Thomas, 130–31) As if to make this point, Liberace had arrived in court wearing a conservative blue suit, white shirt, and necktie.

On the occasion of another law case, this one a palimony suit directed at him by a long-time male companion, a judge ruled in Liberace's favor when a woman process server said she had delivered a summons to him when he was dressed in a brown business suit. "That man wouldn't be caught dead in a brown business suit," said the judge (Thomas, 230). The plaintiff in the case, his former protegé, Scott Thorson, had told the scandal sheet *National Enquirer*, spitefully, that Liberace was almost totally bald and wore hairpieces on stage, and that he had had two major facelifts. "When he took me in his arms," Thorson testified with self-justifying "candor," "it revolted me at first." "I was

unaccustomed to his full make-up." When asked if he himself was wearing makeup at the deposition, Thorson acknowledged that he was (Thomas, 228).

Makeup, wigs, face-lifts. This is the apparatus of "woman," that is to say, the artifactual creation of female impersonation and the drag queen on the one hand, and the youth culture on the other. "In fashion," says Roland Barthes, "it is age that is important, not sex." "Both sexes tend to become uniform under a single sign . . .: that of *youth*" (Barthes, 257, 258). By the end of his career Liberace's face looked as rigid and wooden as those of the mannequins at his Liberace Museum in Las Vegas ("the third most popular attraction in the entire state of Nevada"[18]), to which his old costumes, like Roy Rogers's stuffed horse, Trigger, were retired. As famous for his love of his mother as for supporting singlehandedly the entire Austrian rhinestone industry, he had somehow to remain a "boy," both in his private life as a gay man and in his public life as the crown prince of Mother's Day.

And this may be a reason for the one extraordinary and unexpected act of female impersonation that did become incorporated into Liberace's act: the aerial flying, back and forth across the stage, that developed into a regular feature of his performance. Already "ageless," a parodic version of the eternal "boy," with his face-lifts, hairpieces, and increasingly heavy makeup, he conceived of a desire to become (although he never says so): Peter Pan. Ostensibly this fantasy was triggered by the aerodynamic effect of his cape as he left the stage one night; soon he had enlisted Peter Foy, of the English Flying Foys, the man who had taught two generations of female Peter Pans, including Mary Martin, to "fly." Liberace here is, for a moment, a triumph of metonymic transvestism, a middle-aged man imitating a woman who plays a fantasy changeling boy.

It was not Peter Pan, however, who was Liberace's ideal, but rather a male star who had remained forever young by the unlooked-for expedient of dying early—his namesake, Rudolph Valentino. Liberace's mother, a great fan of the Latin lover, named her son Wladziu Valentino Liberace and, for good measure, also named his younger brother Rudolph. In many ways Liberace seems to have been haunted by the phantom of Valentino, "my namesake," as he described him to reporters (Thomas, 100). He had some of Valentino's elaborate costumes copied for stage performance. He bought Valentino's bed and put it in one of his guest rooms; he collected and exhibited at the Liberace Museum a pair of silver goblets said to have been intended as wedding gifts to Valentino and Pola Negri.

Furthermore, Valentino appears as a major figure in Liberace's personal social history of crossover style: "Years ago, both male and female movie legends influenced the fashion and cosmetic industries. All over the world, you could find copies of Dietrich's eyebrows, Joan Crawford's shoulder pads and shoes, Valentino's slave bracelet, as well as his slicked-back, glossy patent-leather hairstyle" (Liberace, 222). All of these, we might note, are cross-dressed or cross-gendered examples: a woman's shoulder pads, a man's bracelet, Dietrich's eyebrows.

He-man, heartthrob, movie idol, Valentino seems about as distant from Liberace—and from transvestism, marked or unmarked—as it would seem possible to get. Yet he is in fact an exemplary figure of unmarked transvestism, at once feminized and hypermale. His appearance in Arab robes, eyebrow pencil and mascara as the title character in *The Sheik* (1921), as we have noted, set off a frenzy of response among (largely female) filmgoers with its drama of sexual sadism amidst the tents of a "Middle Eastern" locale.

In fact the cross-dressing elements in Valentino's story are stronger and more omnipresent than the eye-makeup and the flowing robes. A notorious photograph of him as a faun, dressed in fake fur tights and playing a flute was exhibited in court. Valentino apparently tried to explain it as a "costume test" for a never-produced film called *The Faun through the Ages,* but it is more probable that he was posing in the Nijinsky role from *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* at the behest of his wife, the dancer Natacha Rambova. But then his wife—or rather, his wives—were part of his image problem, at least with men. For Rudolph Valentino, ballyhooed as the Great Lover, had married two women reputed to be lesbians, both members of the coterie surrounding the celebrated Alla Nazimova.[19] Rambova, his second wife, apparently had him prancing about in fur shorts; his first wife, Jean Acker, who according to one account "favoured a short, very masculine hairstyle, and wore a white blouse and tie under a rather severely cut suit,"[20] had locked him out of the marital bedroom and refused to consummate the marriage.

His unusual marital history, coupled with the masterful and pleasurable sadism of the original *Sheik* and the masochism and misogyny of its sequel have led some recent commentators to speculate about Valentino's own sexual orientation: "The obvious pleasure he sought from the company of young men, often as handsome as himself," writes one observer, "should not make us suppose he was homosexual." And, from the same source, "There is always something inherently feminine in the 'Great Lover,' for it is his own narcissistic reflection he seeks in the depths of his beloved's eyes" (Walker, 119). The campy appeal of Valentino to film audiences today exposes an inherent bisexuality in his self-presentation, again emphasized, if not in fact made possible, by the Arab dress he wore in his most famous film.

Valentino, as an immigrant from Italy who had worked as a gardener and a dance partner before making it in films, was first read as a foreign interloper replacing the image of the "All-American [i.e. Anglo] boy." This young Italian actor, despite the European specificity of his origins, became the prototype of the so-called "Latin lover"—the category to which, without saying so explicitly, the wits at "Saturday Night Live" had consigned the contestants for their "macho" contest, Fernando Lamas and Ricardo Montalban. (The Anglo television actor Jack Lord, star of "Hawaii Five-O," apparently "won" the contest.) In this catch-all categorization ethnic and racial distinctions become invidiously blurred, as Latino, Hispanic, Italian and presumably other dark-complected, dark-haired men are deliberately conflated as "Latin"—smooth, seductive, predatory, irresistible to women. And once again "hypermale" and "feminized" become, somehow,

versions of the same description: these men are too seductive to be "really" men. As Miriam Hansen has noted, "the more desperately Valentino himself emphasized attributes of physical prowess and virility, the more perfectly he played the part of the male impersonator, brilliant counterpart to the female 'female' impersonators of the American screen such as Mae West or the vamps of his own films."[21] The mythical "Latin lover," like the "Third World," was an entity that could be simultaneously invented and manipulated. And chief among these fantasy figures, in the puritanically xenophobic imagination, was the dangerous Valentino. In other words, Rudolph Valentino was himself a significant figure of *crossover*, disruption, rupture. It was doubtless his foreignness, as well as his eye-makeup, his hair style, and his slave bracelet, that set up the confrontation between Middle East and American Midwest that led to the famous "Powder Puff" incident.

On July 18, 1926, the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* ran on its editorial page an article headlined "Pink Powder Puffs," which is worth reprinting here in its entirety:

> A new public ballroom was opened on the north side a few days ago, a truly handsome place and apparently well run. The pleasant impression lasts until one steps into the men's washroom and finds there on the wall a contraption of glass tubes and levers and a slot for the insertion of a coin. The glass tubes contain a fluffy pink solid, and beneath them one reads an amazing legend which runs something like this: "Insert coin. Hold personal puff beneath the tube. Then pull the lever."
>
> A powder vending machine! In a men's washroom! Homo Americanus! Why didn't someone quietly drown Rudolph Guglielmo, alias Valentino, years ago?
>
> And was the pink powder machine pulled from the wall or ignored? It was not. It was used. We personally saw two "men"—as young lady contributors to the Voice of the People are wont to describe the breed—step up, insert coin, hold kerchief beneath the spout, pull the lever, then take the pretty pink stuff and pat it on their cheeks in front of the mirror.
>
> Another member of this department, one of the most benevolent men on earth, burst raging into the office the other day because he had seen a young "man" combing his pomaded hair in the elevator. But we claim our pink powder story beats his all hollow.
>
> It is time for a matriarchy if the male of the species allows such things to persist. Better a rule by masculine women than by effeminate men. Man began to slip, we are beginning to believe, when he discarded the straight razor for the safety pattern. We shall not be surprised when we hear that the safety razor has given way to the depilatory.
>
> Who or what is to blame is what puzzles us. Is this degeneration into effeminacy a cognate reaction with pacificism to the virilities and realities of the war? Are pink powder and parlor pinks in any way related? How does one reconcile masculine cosmetics, sheiks, floppy pants, and slave bracelets with a disregard for law and an aptitude for crime more in keeping with the frontier of half a century ago than a twentieth century metropolis?
>
> Do women like the type of "man" who pats pink powder on his face in a public washroom and arranges his coiffure in a public elevator? Do women at heart belong to the Wilsonian era of "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier"? What has become of the old "caveman" line?
>
> It is a strange social phenomenon and one that is running its course, not only here in America but in Europe as well. Chicago may have its powder puffs; London has its dancing men and Paris

its gigolos. Down with Decatur; up with Elinor Glyn. Hollywood is the national school of masculinity. Rudy, the beautiful gardener's boy, is the prototype of the American male.

Hell's bells. Oh, sugar.[22]

Oh, sugar, indeed. Masculine cosmetics, depilatories, sheiks, floppy hats, and slave bracelets, effeminacy and a propensity for crime, pacifism, and communism—blame for all of these is placed squarely at the foot, or the braceleted wrist, of "Rudy, the beautiful gardener's boy." Here, without strain, the dark complected, hot-blooded Italian is conflated with the dark-complected, hot-blooded Sheik. No face-saving gesture reveals *this* Sheik as really a blue-blooded, white-skinned aristocrat. Instead his clean cut looks are attributed to an effeminate use of depilatories.

Valentino's taste for finery, including the infamous slave bracelets, laid him open to this kind of xenophobic attack from middle America in the midst of the summer doldrums. He took it personally, and very badly, issuing a challenge to his detractor, not to a duel, which the laws of the country forbade, but to a boxing or wrestling match, "to prove in typically American fashion, for I am an American citizen, which is the better man." The challenge concluded, "Hoping I will have an opportunity to demonstrate to you that the wrist under a slave bracelet may snap a real fist into your sagging jaw, and that I may teach you respect of a man even though he happens to prefer to keep his face clean, I remain, With utter contempt, Rudolph Valentino."[23]

Time magazine, reporting on the editorial and the challenge, described him as "a closely muscled man, whose sombre skin was clouded with talcum and whose thick wrists tinkled with a perpetual arpeggio of fine gold bangles, [who] read the effusion with rapidly mounting fury."[24] *Time* quoted him as saying that his profession required the makeup, while sentiment demanded the bracelets. But the editorial writer never revealed himself, and after a boxing match with a friendly New York sports reporter (which Valentino won, perhaps by this feat inspiring the mother of Cassius Clay to name her second son Rudolph Valentino Clay [Botham and Donnelly, 200]) he denounced the absent editorial writer as a coward: "The heroic silence of the writer who chose to attack me without provocation in the *Chicago Tribune* leaves no doubt as to the total absence of manliness *in his whole make-up.*" Valentino wrote, with evident irony and, no doubt, unintended double entendre, his mind still dwelling on the powder puff incident.

Unavenged, the insult continued to rankle to the end of his life. When he was rushed into the hospital for the gastric ulcer and consequent peritonitis that would shortly lead to his death (though some claimed that he had been poisoned by a jealous rival), his first words on awakening from surgery were, reportedly, "Doctor, am I a pink puff?"[25] And in the final twist of fate, when his body lay in state at Campbell's Funeral Parlour in New York City, where an unprecedented 100,000 people filed by his catafalque, the mortician's art fulfilled his greatest fear: "Valentino lay in a half open casket, his hair slickered down into the familiar patent-leather imitation of life, his eyebrows freshly pencilled by a make-

up man and his cheeks rouged in a manner that did indeed recall the gibe about the 'pink powder puff' " (Walker, 116).

Xenophobia, classicism, racism, homophobia. Notice that Valentino is not being explicitly described as gay, but as contributing to effeminacy and foppery, sapping the virility of the American Male. Again display and masquerade are perceived as feminine, and feminizing.

We have been looking at Rudolph Valentino as the unlikely role model for Liberace and as the equally unlikely object of what might be called "transvestification." Where Liberace was complicit with his cultural classification as a transvestite figure, instinctively understood its relationship to "star quality," and made it work for him, Valentino was both surprised and appalled, challenging the editorial writer to a boxing match to prove "which is the better man." But there is a third figure who stands in significant relation to these two, uncannily linked by circumstances that seem both bizarre and overdetermined, and that is the figure of Elvis Presley.

We have already noted that Liberace thought of himself as the precursor of glitter rock. But of all the show business "copies" to which Liberace laid claim, the one he most insisted upon was Elvis Presley. In his testimony in a British court in 1959 he maintained that he had to "dress better than the others who were copying me. One was a young man named Elvis Presley" (Thomas, 131). He made the same claim to the media on the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary in show business: "Because of Elvis Presley and his imitators, I really have to exaggerate to look different and to top them."[26] Elvis became a *cause* of feminine virile display.

There is a famous moment, a kind of sartorial primal scene, in which Elvis and Liberace themselves change clothes, become each other's changelings. In 1956 they met in Las Vegas, when Elvis appeared in the audience at Liberace's show. Liberace invited the young singer backstage, where, apparently at the suggestion of a press agent, Elvis put on Liberace's gold-sequinned tuxedo jacket, and Liberace donned Elvis's striped sport coat. They then swapped instruments, Liberace on guitar, Elvis on piano, and jammed together for twenty minutes on two of their signature tunes, "Hound Dog" and "I'll Be Seeing You." "Elvis and I may be characters," commented Liberace, "me with my gold jackets and him with his sideburns—but we can afford to be" (Thomas, 117).

This crossover moment between two crossover stars (Liberace traversing the boundary between pop and classical, Elvis between "white" and "black" music) has important implications beyond those of local publicity. The *New York Times* obituary for Liberace says, succinctly, about his gold lamé jacket, "Soon Elvis Presley was wearing a suit of gold lamé. Soon Elvis impersonators were wearing suits of gold lamé."[27] (So that Elvis impersonators are really Liberace impersonators.[28])

Predictably, the keepers of the Elvis legend are less forthcoming about any Liberace connection.[29] The film *This Is Elvis* shows a shot of the Riviera Hotel marquee proclaiming

"Liberace" in large letters, presumably to show what kind of entertainment Las Vegas was used to before the arrival of the King. An off-screen narrator impersonating the voice of Elvis says, "Liberace and his brother were one of the top acts of the time. I wasn't sure the place was ready for Elvis Presley." The point is contrast, disruption, not continuity.

Thirteen years later Elvis returned to Las Vegas, heavier, in pancake makeup, wearing a white jumpsuit with an elaborate jeweled belt and cape, crooning pop songs to a microphone: in effect, he had become Liberace. Even his fans were now middle-aged matrons and blue-haired grandmothers, who praised him as a good son who loved his mother; Mother's Day became a special holiday for Elvis's fans as it was for Liberace's.

A 1980 videotape of *Liberace in Las Vegas* (made, therefore, three years after Elvis's death), opens with a lush videotour of his home, including a tour of his closet. This is surely in part a camp joke, but the racks and racks of sequins, rhinestones, and furs—all of which we will shortly see him model onstage—will be oddly but closely echoed in the 1981 Elvis retrospective film, *This Is Elvis,* in which—also quite early in the film—attendants are shown readying his wardrobe for the show. Once again there are racks of clothes, jumpsuits with spangles and rhinestones, a whole rolling rack of jeweled belts. Watching the two films in succession it is difficult to tell whose closet is whose.

But something else, even more uncanny, ties Elvis and Liberace together. Both of them, remarkably, were twins, each born with a twin brother who immediately died. Both, that is to say, were—in the sense in which I have been using the term—changelings, changeling boys, substitutes for or doubles of something that never was.

Elvis Aron and Jesse Garon. *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll* notes that "His twin, Jesse Garon, died at birth, and he was always to be reminded of this absence ('They say when one twin dies, the other grows up with all the quality of the other, too . . . If I did, I'm lucky'), as if he were somehow incomplete, even down to his matching name,"[50] and almost all his biographers make some version of the same point.[51] Had Elvis's own child, Lisa Marie, been a boy, the parents intended to call him John Baron, continuing the rhyming line.

One biography of Liberace begins with a dramatization of the entertainer's momentous birth:

> "One of the babies was born under the veil," said the midwife in a voice shaded with sadness. "But the other one, my dear . . . " her voice suddenly joyful. "A *big* baby boy!"
>
> How pitiful the dead infant looked, its tiny body almost a skeleton, a film of placenta over its shriveled face like a cloth for burial . . .
>
> But the other baby—what a pulsing, squalling, robust piece of humanity. (Thomas, 1)

Uncannily enough, here is a *third* version of this changeling scenario, from the opening paragraphs of yet another biography.

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Just before the turn of the present century, two bouncing babies were born who were to bring untold happiness into the lives of men and women all over the world.

One was the fledgling cinema. . . .

The other was Rudolph Valentino. . . .

As the babes grew up together, it was tragically ordained that so they would die.[32]

Jesse Garon Presley, Liberace's unnamed twin, the silent movie: three ghosts that haunt, and perhaps shape, the very notion of contemporary stardom.

Furthermore, Elvis, like Liberace, was obsessed with Rudolph Valentino, to whose celebrity (and spectacular funeral) his own were inevitably compared. The son of his promoter in the early Memphis days remembers that Elvis "aspired to be a second Rudolph Valentino" (Goldman, 129). Hence the sideburns, the "sullen, sultry leer" (the adjectives are those of Albert Goldman, a highly unsympathetic biographer), the photo sessions from this period stripped to the waist, the claim to friends that he had Italian blood.[33]

But it is the delicacy and vulnerability of the two men's visual images, as much as their sheer sexual power, that binds them. The pout, the curled lip (about which Elvis would joke onstage in his later Las Vegas years, "This lip used to curl easier"), the cool stare and contained sexuality, an auto-voyeurism incredibly provocative—all of these can be seen in Valentino's *Son of the Sheik*, an uncanny phantom of Elvis. Indeed Elvis made his own Sheik movie, *Harum Scarum* (1965), in which, dressed in "Arab" robes and headdress, pursuing the Princess Shalimar (played by Miss America Mary Ann Mobley), he is clearly intended to evoke memories of Valentino. Even the antics of the midget Billy Barty—seemingly gratuitous to the plot—echo, as if for emphasis, the hapless dwarf in *Son of the Sheik*. In an earlier—and better—film, *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), Elvis is stripped to the waist and beaten, in another clear citation from the popular Valentino film. In fact, the example of Valentino is one reason why he chose a movie career, and thus missed out on the early great days of what he himself had started—the theatricalization of rock and roll.

The comparison, explicit and implicit, is everywhere in the press. An article in *McCall's* (presumably a Bible for the matrons of fandom) described Elvis's bodyguards as "on a scale not seen in Hollywood since the days of Valentino and Fairbanks."[34] The *New York Times*, reporting on the hysterical scene at his funeral said, "Those old enough to remember said there had been nothing like it since Rudolf [sic] Valentino."[35] "Not since Valentino has a showbiz death so touched the national spirit," reported *People*,[36] and a Tennessee professor of psychiatry linked Elvis's superstardom with the American propensity for cult figures, suggesting, "Think of someone like Rudolph Valentino."[37] In 1989 a retro film was released about teen love in the fifties, which begins with the young hero purchasing Elvis's trademark car, a pink Cadillac; both the car and the film were called *Valentino Returns*—another evocation of the phantom, for Elvis, as we will see, is the other revenant, the other always-expected visitor, too-early lost.

Elvis, like Valentino, seemed to take the world by erotic surprise. Contrasted, again like Valentino, with a notion of the clean-cut all-American boy (represented in his case by Pat Boone), Elvis seemed for a time to stand as the personification of sex. But what does it mean to personify sex? And which sex?

The famous Ed Sullivan story—of how the camera filmed Elvis only from the waist up—has been told and retold, debunked as myth and explained as titillating publicity, a displacement upward that increased desire for a peek below. But what would that peek disclose?

"Is it a sausage? It is certainly smooth and damp-looking, but whoever heard of a 172-lb sausage 6 ft. tall?" This is the beginning of *Time* magazine's review of the film *Love Me Tender* in 1956. The referent, it soon becomes clear, is Elvis himself, not—as one might think—only a part of his anatomy. But Elvis as part-object, Elvis the Pelvis, became, not only a fan's fantasy and fetish but also, perhaps inevitably, his own. "The Pelvis"—an anatomical region which seems at first specific, but is in fact both remarkably vague and distinctly ungendered—became the site of speculation and spectatorship.

Thus, for example, an admiring male rock critic writing in 1970 praised Elvis as "The master of the sexual simile, treating his guitar as both phallus and girl. . . . rumor had it that into his skin-tight jeans was sewn a lead bar to suggest a weapon of heroic proportions."[38]

But a boyhood friend of Elvis's tells it somewhat differently, describing a stage ploy from the singer's early career, around 1955: "He would take the cardboard cylinder out of a roll of toilet paper and put a string in one end of it. Then, he'd tie that string around his waist. The other end, with the cardboard roller, would hang down outside his drawers, so as when he got onstage and reared back with that guitar in his hand, it would look to the girls up front like he had one helluva thing there inside his pants."[39]

Lead bar or toilet-paper cylinder, truth or rumor, this tale of Elvis stuffing his own pants with a prosthesis presents the Presley phallus as marionette, the uncanny as canny stage device, one that can manifest its phallic power automatically, so to speak, with the tug of a string or the backward push of the hips. Recall once more Lacan's paradox about virile display. The more protest, the more suspicion of lack. For this is what the phallus signifies: "its reality as signifier of lack." It is, as Stephen Heath points out, "the supreme signifier of an impossible identity."[40]

Psychoanalytically, transvestism is a mechanism that functions *by displacement* and *through fantasy* to enact a scenario of desire. In fetishistic cross-dressing, particular objects of clothing take on a metonymic role, displacing parts of the body, and especially the maternal phallus—that is, the impossible and imagined phallus which would represent originary wholeness.

What I am going to claim—what I have claimed throughout the book and will particularly want to argue here—is that transvestism *on the stage*, and particularly in the kind of entertainment culture that generates the phenomenon known as "stardom," is a

symptom for the *culture*, rather than the individual performer. In the context of popular culture these transvestic symptoms appear, so to speak, to gratify a social or cultural scenario of desire. The onstage transvestite is the fetishized part-object for the social or cultural script of the fan.

One of the hallmarks of transvestic display, as we have seen repeatedly, is the detachable part. Wig, false breasts, the codpiece that can conceal male or female parts, or both, or neither. In the Elvis story the detachable part is not only explicitly and repeatedly described as an artificial phallus but also as a trick, a stage device, and a sham. Not for the first time the phallus itself becomes an impersonator—and, moreover, a female impersonator, for only a female would lack the phallus and need a substitute.

Elvis as female impersonator? Let us look further.

Elvis's appearance at the Grand Ole Opry, at the very beginning of his career, provoked a double scandal. His music was too black, and he was wearing eyeshadow. He was not asked back. For Chet Atkins, soon to become the organizer of Elvis's recording sessions in Nashville, the one lingering memory of Elvis at the Opry was his eye-makeup. "I couldn't get over that eye shadow he was wearing. It was like seein' a couple of guys kissin' in Key West."[41] (Notice here once again the conflation of cross-dressing, theatricality, and homosexuality.)

Elvis's hair created even more of a furor. It was like a black man's (Little Richard's; James Brown's); it was like a hood's; it was like a woman's. Race, class, and gender: Elvis's appearance violated or disrupted them all. His created "identity" as the boy who crossed over, who could take a song like "Hound Dog" from Big Mama Thornton or the onstage raving—and the pompadour, mascara, and pink and black clothing—from Little Richard, made of Elvis, in the popular imagination, a cultural mulatto, the oxymoronic "Hillbilly Cat," a living category crisis. Little Richard, defiantly gay, his conked pompadour teased up six inches above his head, his face and eyes brilliantly made-up, his clothes and capes glittering with sequins, appearing, as we have already noted "in one show dressed as the Queen of England and in the next as the pope,"[42] was vestimentary crossover incarnate,[43] not passing but trespassing. To put it another way, Elvis mimicking Little Richard is Elvis *as* female impersonator—or rather, as the *impersonator* of a female impersonator. And it is worth remembering that Richard attributes his adoption of bizarre costume in this period to *racial* crossover. "We were breaking through the racial barrier. . . . We decided that my image should be crazy and way-out so that the adults would think I was harmless" (White, 65–66). The year was 1956.

Elvis was the white "boy" who could sing "black," the music merchandiser's dream. And that crossover move was (perhaps inevitably) read as a crossover move in gender terms: a move from hypermale to hyperfemale, to, in fact, *hyperreal* female, female impersonator, transvestite.

It was in 1970, only two years after his much-heralded television "Comeback" performance, that Elvis made a striking vestimentary crossover in Las Vegas:

> Not since Marlene Dietrich stunned the ringsiders with the sight of her celebrated legs encased from hip to ankle in a transparent gown had any performer so electrified Las Vegas with his mere physical appearance. Bill Belew [the costume designer], who had been very cautious up to this point about designing any costume that would make Elvis look effeminate, decided finally to kick out the jams. Now Elvis faced the house encased in a smashing white jumpsuit, slashed to the sternum and lovingly fitted around his broad shoulders, flat belly, narrow hips and tightly packed crotch. And then there were his pearls—loads of lustrous pearls, not sewn on the costume but worn unabashedly as body ornaments. (Goldman, 448)

"Not since Marlene Dietrich." This—in the voice of Elvis debunker Goldman—is Elvis precisely as female impersonator. Critic after critic notices that his sexuality is subject to reassignment, consciously or unconsciously, though the paradox—male sex symbol as female impersonator—remains perplexing and unexamined. "As for Elvis himself," writes one biographer, "he'll be gradually castrated into an everlasting pubescent boy. And as movie follows movie, each one worse than the last, he will actually start resembling a eunuch: a plump, jittery figure."[44]

Elvis moves in the course of his career along a curious continuum from androgyne to transvestite. This male sex symbol is insistently and paradoxically read by the culture as a boy, a eunuch, or a "woman"—as anything but a man.

His ex-wife Priscilla, the executive producer of the recent television series depicting Elvis's life, wanted in fact to repress, or expunge, the memory of his later years. "The problem," wrote one critic sympathetically, "is that Elvis left in such bad shape: overweight, forgetting the words to his songs, wearing clownish rhinestone-covered jumpsuits. It's *that* Elvis—the one who keeps cropping up in books and TV-movies—that Priscilla wants to get out of people's minds." And, "if only Elvis had paid more attention to his image. Maybe he would have made it through the '70s, checked into the Betty Ford Center, turned on to aerobics. . . ."[45]

Overweight. Reviews and commentaries on Elvis in his last years speak frequently of him as having a "weight problem," as looking fat, not being able to keep the weight off. Of which gender do we usually speak in these terms? We may think of Elizabeth Taylor and her constant battle with extra pounds: Liz fat, Liz thin, Liz in and out of the Betty Ford Center. This is the spirit in which Elvis watchers watched Elvis watching his weight, as if the eternal boy within could be disclosed by the shedding of pounds, the disappearance of a telltale paunch. The comparable corpulence of wonder-boys Orson Welles and Marlon Brando, though remarked by the press, is not feminized in this way.

Yet the feminization and/or transgendering of Elvis begins much earlier than the Las Vegas jumpsuit days.[46] Whether through his mascara, his dyed hair, or his imitation of black music and style, Elvis was always already crossing over.

The 1990 debut of a weekly TV series on the life of Elvis Presley broke new ground for television programming, as John J. O'Connor noted in the *New York Times*. "It is," he points out, "the first weekly series built around the life of an actual entertainment

personality"; "a decided rarity—a half-hour format devoted not to a sitcom but to straightforward biography." "Can," he wondered in print, "episodic biographies of Marilyn, Chaplin, Dean, et al., be far behind?"[47]

This list of celebrities to be compared to Elvis is instructive: Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, James Dean. For all of them have been, like Elvis Presley, objects of imitation, repetition, replication—and re-gendering. (Think of Boy George's former boyfriend, the transvestite pop music figure Marilyn, with his long blond hair and hairy chest; of Lucille Ball's Chaplin [and Chaplin's own cross-dressing films[48]], of James Dean as lesbian butch idol, etc.) Andy Warhol, the master of pop replication, did multiple Elvises as well as Marilyns and James Deans, lots of them: a silkscreened print of Elvis's face reproduced 36 times (six across and six down); *Double* and *Triple Elvis; Red Elvis,* and a work called *Campbell's Elvis*—with Elvis's face superimposed over the label of a soup-can. Elvis was, in fact, the only pop figure Warhol carried over in his work from the fifties to the sixties. Critics have noted the affinities between the artist and the rock star: each "opted for a blank and apparently superficial parody of earlier styles which surprisingly expanded, rather than alienated, their audience." "[B]oth took repetition and superficiality to mask an obscure but vital aspect of their work: the desire for transcendence or annihilation without compromise, setting up a profound ambivalence on the part of both artist and audience as to whether the product was trash or tragedy."[49]

Newsweek read Warhol's interest in Elvis as the recognition of "an almost androgynous softness and passivity in his punk-hood persona,"[50] and the claim to androgyny, as we have seen, is not infrequently made as an explanation of Elvis's powerful appeal to women and men. But one of the things Andy Warhol may have seen in Elvis was the perfection of his status as a pop icon in his condition as always already multiple and replicated. The phenomenon of "Elvis impersonators," which began long *before* the singer's death, is one of the most startling effects of the Elvis cult.

What, then, is the relationship between transvestism and repetition? For one thing, both put in question the idea of an "original," a stable starting point, a ground. For transvestism, like the copy or simulacrum, disrupts "identity" and exposes it as figure. In one of the most famous of twentieth-century cultural analyses, Walter Benjamin noted the effect of mechanical reproduction on works of art like photography and film. "The technique of reproduction," he wrote (and think of *Elvis* here),

> detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.[51]

In the mystical anagram adopted by his followers, "Elvis lives." (Or, to cite the slogan employed by Elvis's long-time manager Colonel Parker after his "boy" 's death, "Always

Elvis." That Colonel Parker deployed this slogan in the form of a rubber stamp says much about the reproduction of Elvis Presley. Had Colonel Parker known or cared anything about literary theory he might have had it read "Always already Elvis.")

Elvis made his public debut as a performer in 1954. By 1956—only two years later—the warm-up act for his show at the Louisiana Fair Grounds was performed by "exact replicas of Elvis Presley, doing his songs with his gestures and dressed in his clothes."[52] In Nashville one Wade Cummings, or "Elvis Wade," as he called himself, was described as the "first," or "original imitation Elvis," complete with paunch and flashy costume slit to the waist. According to him, "All Elvis impersonators are Elvis Wade impersonators." (So, in his view at least, there *was* an original, an original impersonator.) But there are hundreds of others. Notice here the relationship of the "impersonator" to Freud's "uncanny." The impersonator is something alive that seems almost like a machine. Is it possible that this is overdetermination through the dead brother, that all of these impersonators are some version of Jesse Garon Presley?

Most of these acts got their start *before* Elvis Presley's death; they were not only ghostly revisitations but also proliferations, multiplications. Some were even surgically reconstructed, like the man in Florida who had his nose, cheeks, and lip altered to look like the King. The surgeons "gave a slight millimeter push to the left-hand corner of [his] lip," to approximate the famous sneer.[53]

Indeed, the impersonation of Elvis always seemed to verge on the multiple, the replicated, as if one could never be enough. Two hundred Elvis impersonators were scheduled to perform at the birthday party for the Statue of Liberty. (Only seventy-five showed up.) What was this insatiable desire that could never be gratified?

After his death the Elvis impersonators assumed the magnitude of a major cult. "What, other than psychological transference," asked *People* magazine rhetorically one year later, "can explain the hysteria over the 100 or so ersatz Elvises around the country who are putting on eerie shows—complete with drum rolls from *2001,* sweaty scarfs tossed to screaming women, karate chops, bodyguards, sneers and bathos?"

Time magazine noted the success in Saigon of one Elvis Phuong, who, "complete with skintight pants and sneer, does Presley Vietnamese style."[54] Two Elvis impersonators in London, one Chinese, the other an Indian Sikh who wears a turban, prompted a two-page feature on the front page of the "Living Arts" section of the *New York Times* ("Honestly, not too many Chinese people do Elvis," Paul Chan confides to the *Times* reporter. "I think I must be the first Chinese Elvis in the world.").[55] And a routine news item in the entertainment pages of the *Los Angeles Times* noted a casting call for Elvis impersonators, "preferably overweight," for a "small but fun role" in *Robocop II.*[56]

At the First Annual EP (for Elvis Presley) Impersonators International Association Convention held in Chicago in June 1990, dozens of impersonators put in an appearance, including a female Elvis from Hertfordshire, England, a "Jordanian-American anesthesiolo-

gist Elvis" described by a Chicago newspaper as the "Hindu Elvis," and a seven-year-old Elvis from Brooklyn. The event was coordinated by a group that eventually hopes to develop a "Code of Ethics" for Elvis impersonators around the globe. "If the actual Elvis was at the convention," one reporter commented, "he might have been overlooked in the mob of look-alikes."[57]

One of the most popular sessions at the EPIIA, "How to Become an Elvis Impersonator," noted the three sartorial stages of Elvis's life as a performer: the fifties, or the Gold Lamé Period, the sixties, or the Black Leather period, and the seventies, or the Vegas Jumpsuit Phase, also known as the Aloha Years. Why do most impersonators choose the third phase, often believed to mark the decline of Elvis's career? This "question that has plagued Elvologists" was answered by the session leader in two ways: on the one hand, the seventies were the most visually exciting of Elvis's career; on the other, the "midlife demographics of the impersonator subculture" (largely over 40, largely working class) made the baritone, overweight Elvis an object of more ready—and more convincing—impersonation. As will be clear, I am suggesting a third reason for the appeal of the Vegas Jumpsuit Elvis, and also a link among the three vestimentary phases—a link for which "unmarked transvestism" might be thought of as a common term.

Here once again, in a passage of typically purple prose, is Elvis biographer Albert Goldman on the subject of this phenomenon of impersonation:

> What one saw after Elvis's death . . . was not just emulation but replication: the rite according to St. Xerox. Like those mythical soldiers sprung from dragon's teeth, there appeared overnight a new class of entertainers who were not so much mimics, impersonators or impressionists as Elvis clones. Some of these human effigies were so fantastically dedicated to their assumed identity that, like transsexuals, they submitted their bodies to plastic surgery so that their natural resemblance might be heightened to virtual indistinguishability. (Goldman, 584–85)

We are very close here to Freud's notion of the uncanny repetition-compulsion, the *heimlich* transformed into the *unheimlich,* castration anxiety, the multiplication of doubles, "something repressed which *recurs.*"[58] Meantime at Graceland, the Presley home (*Heim?*) and museum in Memphis, his costumes live, too, on mannequins (like Liberace's), for the delectation of the faithful. Elvis as ghost comes home to rejoin the ghostly twin brother whose grave has been moved to the Graceland memorial garden.

And these mechanisms of impersonation lead, with uncanny inevitability, to woman as Elvis impersonator. As Elvis's fame grew, and his looks became as famous as his sound, the hair and makeup began, fascinatingly, to cross *back* over gender lines. When his underage girlfriend Priscilla, later to become his wife, moved in with him in 1962, Elvis took charge of her appearance and turned her into a version of himself, insisting that she tease her hair up about twelve inches and dye it the same jet-black that his own hair was

dyed. "In fact," writes biographer Goldman, "some people began to insist that Elvis and Priscilla were coming to look alike, that they were becoming twins" (355). Another set of uncanny twins: changelings.

As early as 1957 Little Richard toured Australia with a package of artists including Alis Lesley, billed as "the female Elvis Presley," complete with pompadour and low-slung guitar (White, 91). At the 1984 American Grammy Awards Show pop singer Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics, known for her close-cropped orange hair and gender-bending style, made a startling appearance "in full drag, as a convincing Elvis Presley."[59] In Jim Jarmusch's film *Mystery Train* (1989) a young Japanese Elvis fan assembles a scrapbook by pairing pictures of Elvis with the Buddha and two women: the Statue of Liberty and Madonna. "Elvis was even more influential than I thought," says her boyfriend. Canadian rockabilly star k.d. lang, who enjoys particular popularity with lesbian audiences, is famous for her short cropped hair and male attire. Often compared by critics to Elvis Presley, lang, whose lip in performance seems to curl, like Elvis's, of its own accord, did an Elvis impersonation on one of Pee Wee Herman's Christmas shows. And comedienne Roseanne Barr, who has achieved stardom by playing a fat, lower-middle-class housewife on television, appeared in a one-woman show where she made jokes about her weight, "handed out scarfs like Elvis," and "closed the show singing 'My Way' arm in arm with an Elvis impersonator."[60]

So that Elvis is impersonated and evoked on the one hand by female pop and rock stars (Alis Lesley, Annie Lennox, Madonna, k.d. lang) and on the other hand by an overweight comic actress. What I want to suggest is that these particular impersonations, impersonations of Elvis by women, were not only apt but in fact inevitable.

It is almost as if the word "impersonator," in contemporary popular culture, can be modified *either* by "female" *or* by "Elvis."

Why should this be? Why is "Elvis," like "woman," that which can be impersonated?

From the beginning Elvis is produced and exhibited as parts of a body—detachable (and imitable) parts that have an uncanny life and movement of their own, seemingly independent of their "owner": the curling lip, the pompadour, the hips, the pelvis.

Compare him, for example, with an All-American boy like Pat Boone, for whom the only detachable parts are his white bucks. The All-American boy doesn't have a body—or didn't until recently. Again it is useful to compare Elvis to Valentino, who replaced the All-American boy movie star with a model infinitely more dangerous and disturbing—because it had moving parts. Indeed, it could be said that a "real male" cannot be embodied at all, that embodiment *itself* is a form of feminization. If women, in the Western tradition, have been seen as the representatives of sex itself, then to personify sex on the stage must inevitably be to impersonate a woman.

Elvis is also—like a woman—not only a marked but a *marketed* body, exhibited and put on display, merchandised, not only by his manager Colonel Tom Parker, but also by Steve Binder, who invented the slick look of the 1968 TV "Comeback Special," leather

suit and all, and by David Wolper, who produced the posthumous film *This Is Elvis* and also staged the Statue of Liberty extravaganza.

"The woman of fashion," writes Roland Barthes in a passage we have already had occasion to note, is a "collection of tiny, separate essences." "The paradox," he says, "is a generality of accumulation, not of synthesis: in Fashion, the *person* is thus simultaneously impossible and yet entirely known" (Barthes, 254–55.) Here Barthes says "person," but, earlier, "woman." It is "woman" whom fashion creates as this illusion of parts. And "woman" is what can be known, exhibited, disseminated, replicated—while at the same time remaining "impossible."

Elvis, too, is simultaneously impossible and entirely known. Much as he is exhibited, he is also withheld from view: in the army, in Hollywood, holed up at Graceland. At the end of every performance, while his fans screamed for more, an announcer would solemnly intone, "Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building." Like the changeling boy, Elvis is always absent or elsewhere. Indeed as always already absent, Elvis himself was the best, and the most poignant, of Elvis impersonators, staging a much-heralded "comeback" in 1968 at the age of 30, and, in another comeback, revisiting his classic crossover rock songs of the fifties from the curious vantage point of Hawaii or Las Vegas in the middle seventies. Like a revenant, he just never stops coming back. (Here we might recall the story of the phantom hitchhiker in the film *Mystery Train*—who turns out, of course, to be the ghost of Elvis heading for Graceland.)

We have briefly noted the fact that Elvis in effect sat out the rock revolution that he himself had started. Instead of taking to the concert stage like the Beatles, he went to Hollywood to become a "movie star," following the game plan of Colonel Parker, but also, presumably, his own dream of being a Valentino. Like Flaubert writing for the French theater, he was a genre behind. He missed his own moment—the moment that he had engendered—and spent the rest of his career as he had spent the beginning, being always too early or too late to be the Elvis that he was.

Is it possible that this is the essence of stardom, of superstardom? To be simultaneously belated and replicated; not to be there, and to cover up that absence with representations?

In a recent essay on camp, Andrew Ross has suggested that "in popular rock culture today, the most 'masculine' images are signified by miles of coiffured hair, layers of gaudy make-up, and a complete range of fetishistic body accessories, while it is the clean-cut, close-cropped, fifties-style Europop crooners who are seen as lacking masculine legitimacy" (Ross, 164). As a cultural observation this is shrewd, yet it reinscribes the binary *within* the reassuring domain of the masculine. Ross underestimates the power of the transvestite as that spectral other who exists only in representation—not a representation of male or of female, but of, precisely, itself: its own phantom or ghost.

The argument from "masquerade" tries to establish "woman" as artifactual, gestural, a theatrical creature who can be taken apart and put back together. But what has become

clearer and clearer is that "man"—the male person—is at least as artifactual as "woman." Mechanical reproduction is the displacement into its opposite of the fear of artifactuality and dismemberment.

"Which is most macho"? The answer can come only from the impersonator. For by enacting on the stage—or the video screen—the disarticulation of parts, the repetition of images that is the breakdown of the image itself, it is only the impersonator who can theorize gender. Let me quote once again from Roland Barthes.

> As for the human body, Hegel had already suggested that it was in a relation of signification with clothing: as pure sentience, the body cannot signify; clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning; it is, we might say, the signified par excellence. But which body is the Fashion garment to signify? (Barthes, 258)

What are the choices? An article in the gay and lesbian journal *Out/Look* called attention to the power of "The Drag Queen in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction," because the drag queen foregrounds illusion and falsehood as material reality: "being a drag queen means the constant assertion of the *body*."[61] But again, *which* body? The fashion garment of the drag queen signifies the absent or phantom body. Paradoxically, the body here is no body, and nobody, the clothes without the Emperor.

It is epistemologically intolerable to many people—including many literary and cultural critics—that the ground should be a figure. That gender exists only in representation. But this is the subversive secret of transvestism, that the body is not the ground, but the figure. Elvis Presley watching *his* figure, as his weight balloons up and down, Elvis deploying his lips and his hips to repeat by an act of will and artifice the "natural" gestures that once made them seem to take on an uncanny, transgressive life of their own, Elvis Presley, male sex symbol as female impersonator, becomes the fascinating dramatization of the transvestite effect that underlies representation itself.