

# HOME IS WHERE THE HAIR IS: AN EXPLORATION OF ANDROGYNY, SELF-IDENTITY AND GENDER DISPLAY

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By eschewing the gender binary, does androgyny affect how ‘at-home’ (i.e. how comfortable and confident) people feel in their gender presentation? Appearance and dress feed into the ‘gender display’ which we create (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127), so a myriad of social ambiguities are attached to visual androgyny. This became especially conspicuous to me when I, a woman, had a friend shave my foot-long hair in my first term of university. West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 133) note that hair style is one of the key characteristics through which we visually assess ‘sex category’; suddenly changing this aspect of my appearance made me less at-home in my presentation as a woman. Whether or not I intend it as such, visual androgyny affects how others perceive my identity, an issue which is more salient as a woman of colour in the context of Westernised beauty standards. As well as this, forgoing traditional femininity is interpreted as a political statement; as a facet of a broader split in feminist thought around the relevance of women’s life choices to their political opinions, the politicisation of women’s style choices has long been a subject of debate (Srinivasan, 2021; Hillman, 2013). This essay will explore the nature and problematisation of androgyny, and the impact of gendered appearance on how we perceive ourselves and others.

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‘Androgyny’ is a highly contested and questionable term, though one which I believe is still useful. Derived from the Greek ‘andro’ and ‘gyne’ (‘male’ and ‘female’), androgyny entails an ambiguous or poly-faceted gender presentation which incorporates elements of both, or neither, masculinity or femininity (Wood, 2022). This concept has been questioned in many ways: the categorisation of certain presentations and identities as ‘androgynous’ implicitly reinforces the idea that there are solidly defined ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ categories on either side, whilst the scrutiny of androgyny from a purely visual standpoint arguably neglects the traditional or untraditional gender identities behind people’s appearances (McCormac, 1983; Wood, 2022). A further difficulty with the concept of androgyny is how it is applied, given that a prevalent Western bias shapes how femininity, in particular, appears. As the feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth pointed out in her ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ speech (1851), non-white and working-class



manifestations of womanhood have long been othered and invalidated due to their deviance from a white middle class norm (a norm which Truth was fighting to overturn). This can also be applied to queer and trans women, especially in the modern-day context of online transvestigation culture, wherein people try to reveal the suspected trans history of celebrities or public figures whose features fall outside of a stereotypical gendered norm. In terms of appearance, ‘feminine’ beauty standards are often implicitly linked to a more white mode of appearance, with a bias towards features such as a slim nose, straight hair and fair skin; as Amia Srinivasan points out, women’s value is often tied to their Westernised conventional attractiveness (Srinivasan, 2021). Similarly, Natacha Kennedy (2018) describes the phenomenon of ‘cisgenderism’, a wide, implicit societal preference for features and behaviours which easily fit into binary gendered norms. The racial and

transmisogynist aspects of feminine attractiveness are further muddled by the disdainful hypersexualisation of non-white and trans people in various contexts; the social value of gendered presentation is not just pro-cis/white but actively hostile to those who deviate from a Western, gender-binary norm. We should perhaps therefore hesitate to categorise people’s appearances as ‘androgynous’, since doing so seems to paradoxically reinforce harmful binary norms around gendered appearance. However, to view the use of ‘androgyny’ as discriminatory is to view deviance from binary gendered norms as negative; many queer and trans people find visual androgyny to be empowering rather than limiting.

Equally, the space between and outside of traditional masculinity and femininity, and the marginalisation of non-white modes of femininity, cannot be effectively questioned without understanding the language and concepts through which these negative views are enacted; I believe that the concept of androgyny is still a helpful analytical tool when considering gendered presentation in our current era of enduring gendered aesthetic norms.

Why is visual androgyny relevant to how at-home we feel in our gender? The vast majority of modern gender theorists repudiate traditional biological essentialist views of gender in favour of theories which emphasise the societal and performative aspects of gender – West and Zimmerman (1987), for example, frame gender as a mode of doing rather than being. This means that even in private, our appearance can strongly affect how at-home we feel in our body and gender. In the Midwestern second-wave feminist journal *Ain’t I A Woman?*, a woman describes her experience of cutting her hair short as radically changing the way she views herself: she feels stronger and more self-confident (Anon, 1971). Her ‘refusal to act an established role,’ she asserts, has allowed her to escape the importance of gender to her identity; her reflection in the mirror ‘doesn’t look like a girl [...or] a boy. She looks like ME’ (Anon, 1971, p.2). Given that Judith Butler (1988) describes gender as purely ‘performative’ (created by our perpetual enactment of it), even a simple act such as cutting one’s hair can undermine the boundaries of gender that dictate somebody’s identity. The writer in *Ain’t I A*

Woman? finds the androgynous nature of her new appearance unequivocally liberating, enjoying ‘non-involvement’ in gendered expectations. For her, feminine gendered presentation was obfuscating her identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) note that girls relate their gender identities to their appearance much earlier than boys do; in my experience and that of those around me, this cruciality of appearance to gender self-identification persists into adulthood. Many girls I know, myself included, feel ‘unwomanly’ without shaving their legs and armpits, even when the only person seeing them is themselves. For me, shaving my head strongly impacted on my relationship to my own gender, though not in such a straightforwardly positive way as for the Ain’t I a Woman? contributor. The writer in Ain’t I A Woman? notices that cutting her hair initially leads her to ‘objectify’ her own appearance more, focusing on the aesthetic nature of her features (eyelashes, lips, biceps) rather than on their functions. I similarly find myself analysing the amount of femininity in my newly exposed facial features. Whilst gender is by no means solely tied to external appearances, the introspection that follows visual disruptions to our typical gendered performances highlights how inextricable visual performance is from our own gender identities. This means that ‘androgyny’ is still useful as a concept, because it helps us to understand our relationship with our appearance in the context of our own social preconditioning.

Gender, however, is never purely a personal affair. Robert Leach (2008) points out that theatre audiences not only ‘read’ the meanings with which somebody imbues a performance, but also ‘manufacture’ additional meanings, contributing as much as the performer does to the significance of a performance. Butler (1988; 2006) argues that the performative aspect of gender identity means that this, too, is shaped as much by outside perception as by introspection; the individuality of gendered performance is strongly shaped by the contexts in which it is learned and received. How I choose to visually present myself to others is therefore of great importance to how at-home I am my gender identity, as problematic as this can become. When somebody on the bus addresses me as ‘Sir’ from behind, then apologises when I turn around and they see my face, their ‘gender attribution’ to me is shifting based on the information

which my appearance gives them (Kennedy, 2018, p.7); others’ perception of my gender presentation can in turn affect how I see my own gender. Leach (2008) describes the ‘conundrum’ of multidirectional causation in the relationship between perception, intention and meaning; if, as Butler (1988) asserts, the ‘pretence’ of gendered performance is the source of gender, is my own gender identity unreal if it is partially illegible to others? This is clearly not the case, given that racial and trans issues play into the meanings which our cisgenderist society derives from androgyny. One evident example of the problematic implications of societal cisgenderism is J. K. Rowling’s inflammatory assertion during the Paris 2024 Olympics that boxer Imane Khelif was ‘a male’, seemingly based solely on Khelif’s square facial features and muscular physique (Rowling on X, 2024). Rowling’s



reduction of Khelif’s perceived gender down to being ‘a male’ exemplifies harmfully biological-essentialist language, as well as showing the negative reaction of cisgenderist perspectives to visual androgyny; from Rowling’s perspective, trans-ness is framed as an insult based on Khelif’s visual androgyny. Khelif is in fact an Arab cisgender woman; Rowling’s biased and incorrect assumption of her gender should not have any impact on the truth of her gender identity. Nevertheless, how at-home we feel in our gender, however false people’s assumptions about our presentation are, can unfortunately be affected by them. It bothers me irrationally when people assume that I do not identify as a woman based purely on my appearance (an assumption I had never faced before cutting my hair), because I feel unsure whether the validity of my gender presentation is based on its interpretation by others; the imperfect world that we live in imposes external binary perceptions onto everybody, which particularly affects

those who fall outside of a white cisgender norm. Here, again, the concept of visual androgyny helps us to understand how gender is perceived by others.

One friend's reaction to my haircut was to joke that it was 'so gender studies of [me]' to make this change – inescapably (and arguably more so for men), subversion of gendered fashion norms is seen by many as a political choice. As Hillman (2013) describes, the extent to which women's fashion choices are political has been a hotly debated topic since second-wave feminists split over the politicisation of women's private life choices. Within the feminist movement, many saw fashion choices as an important, even necessary part of feminist practice. Blanchard and Reville (1974, p.58) describe androgynous self-presentation as a 'visionary' step towards a 'sex-role less society', viewing all women's choices about their appearance as either reinforcing or undermining the gender order. Much as political lesbianism in this time period was undertaken as a way to undermine the unequal sexed relationship between men and women appearance as either reinforcing or undermining the gender order. Much as political lesbianism in this time period was undertaken as a way to undermine the unequal sexed relationship between men and women, many second-wave feminists saw androgynous fashion as a tool by which to escape oppressive gender roles which saw femininity as 'weak, gentle... and above all, sexual' (Freeman, 1968, quoted in Hillman, 2013 p.161). One could argue that this view of androgyny's significance is overly dramatic in a modern day setting: modern-day social progress may have rendered fashion and appearance choices much more politically neutral than they were in the 1970s and 1980s when the *Ain't I A Woman* contributor and West & Zimmerman were writing. Rather than radically unsettling the gender order at the cost of being derided as 'ugly' and 'gender deviant' (Hillman, 2013, p.164), androgynous fashion, like many other aspects of queer culture in the modern-day West, is increasingly mainstream and acceptable or even aspirational (as exemplified by the popularity of shows such as RuPaul's *Drag Race* or *Heartstopper*, which feature and celebrate gender nonconformity).

There are many other problems with viewing stylistic androgyny as a progressive political stance. For one, as

discussed above, it may not be effective: the relational, interpretation-dependent nature of gender presentation means that even my androgyny arguably reinforces the dominant masculine-feminine binary (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Woodhill & Samuels, 2022). Most people measure me up compared to their ideas of what a 'man' or a 'woman' is, rather than perceiving me as neither. As well as this, politicising the decision to crop your hair projects ideological perspectives onto a choice which, for some, is based solely on 'convenience and practicality' (Hillman, 2013, p.162) – for me, the prospect of a 2-minute hair wash was undoubtedly a major factor in my haircut(!) The view of visual androgyny and an eventual genderless society as conducive to gender equality also arguably devalues the importance of femininity to my, and other women's, identities: even in the 1970s, many argued that a feminism which did not prioritise women's choice to enjoy feminine dress if they pleased was no kind of feminism at all (Srinivasan, 2021). The view that traditional femininity is empowering hold true for some trans women, too:

Andrea Long-Chu (2018) describes how she transitioned for 'mascara and lipstick' and other visual trappings of womanhood. In this vein, the modern-day feminist activist Florence Given (2020, p.168) advocates for prioritising 'your own visual satisfaction' simply as a personal act of joy; gendered presentation is largely about 'feeling electric' rather than about attempting to systematically undermine patriarchal gender roles. The femininity, or lack thereof, of my own outfit choices is based solely on what I think looks good – arguably, though, I only have this luxury because of the normalisation of varying degrees of femininity through the deliberately political fashion choices of those who came before me. I am lucky enough to be able to view myself as a beneficiary of, rather than a member of, movements to change norms around women's dress; I can safely choose how to manipulate my appearance to feel the most 'at-home' in my gender, though many trans people are not so fortunate.

Overall, how 'at-home' we feel in our gender is inextricably linked to our level of visual androgyny. Personal gender identity can and should be decided by ourselves alone, and is arguably an inner state rather



than appearance-based. However, the imperfect sociopolitical climate in which we exist means that our appearance is regularly assessed, evaluated, and compared to traditional masculinity, femininity and therefore androgyny; the term 'androgyny' therefore remains a useful one for understanding societal perceptions of gendered presentation. Only in a truly gender-equal world (or arguably even a genderless one), without 'androgyny' or any other gendered language of appearance affecting our lives, would we ever be able to feel truly at home in our gender entirely on our own terms.

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