

Re-Reading Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade': putting sex and the (trans) body back into question

Claudia Lapping

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Vignette

A student arrives early for my assignment tutorial and asks whether they can sit in on the other students' discussions, rather than talk about their own essay. Two or three more students arrive, sit together, and talk through their notes with me. I occasionally glance towards the first student, who is sitting on a table slightly behind the main group. As another student is explaining their ideas, the first announces, 'I really have to go to the library', jumps down from the table and leaves the classroom.

Later, I'm in the canteen. The student from earlier comes up and touches the top of my arm to attract my attention. They run their fingers gently down to my elbow. Then they apologize, say they weren't prepared for the tutorial today, and ask if I'll have time to see them later in the week. They say they think they really need my help.

This scene calls into question, perhaps, something about shifting registers of words, space and touch; about intellect and the body; and perhaps about gender, sex and anxiety. It evokes shame, for me, and unknowably for the student. It came to my mind when I was reading Riviere's (1929) 'Womanliness as a Masquerade'. I'd heard of the paper long before I read it – Have you read it? – And was taken aback by the intensity of my response to aspects of her argument; and by its resonance with my own early work; and then by the flow of images or associations that continued to come to me, following my reading, or, perhaps, following my decision to write about my response. Sometimes a decision, like the cut at the end of a session in Lacanian analysis, can provoke a new flow of affect and ideas.

Perhaps one reason why Riviere's paper still resonates, for me at least, is its juxtaposition of alluringly radical, passionate insight with more conservatively reductive strands of thought. Riviere presents a case study of an intellectual woman patient whose experience perhaps resonates with her own, as patient and colleague of both Ernest Jones and Sigmund Freud (Bower, 2018). She speculates that her patient exemplifies a 'type' of woman, publicly successful but with a need to compensate for their – *our* – potentially threatening embodiment of a masculine mode of being. This compensation is the womanly masquerade: the subject's adornment in features that might mitigate a painful instability associated with a performance of manhood. Riviere notes in these women behaviour that distracts or covers over their competence and knowledge: coquettish flirting, distinctively feminine dress, pretending ignorance in relations with men, 'inappropriate' flippancy or joking in academic contexts, and pleasure in heterosexual intercourse, despite frequent homosexual dreams and identifications (Riviere, 1929: 304–8). Alongside these mitigations of masculinity, Riviere describes her patient's rivalry with other women's achievements, in appearance and housekeeping, but also, perhaps contrarily, in intellectual prowess.

Associations: the womanly masquerade

- *A memory of passing a senior academic in my university building when I was doing my PhD. Severe, grey haired, trouser suited, earnest. I'm struck by her bright pink lipstick.*
- *An image of a female lecturer whose seminars I'm observing for my PhD on gendered and classed exclusions in university curricula, lightly interjecting flippant asides, as if her thoughts momentarily leapt out of the classroom; in contrast with a male participant's laboured, scholarly wit.*
- *A twinge of surprise, gratification, envy: but that's what I wrote about*

Riviere suggests these mitigations and rivalries indicate a fault-line, a painful vulnerability in an apparently stable subjectivity; and notes that

for her patient gratification in heterosexual intercourse ‘was of the nature of a reassurance and restitution of something lost, not pure enjoyment’ (307). This feminine masquerade disguised an ‘abyss of anxiety’; and threats to its coherence had brought on the depressive illness that led her to analysis (312). Riviere’s analysis here points to an emptiness within sexed subjectivity, suggesting, she says, that there is no line to be drawn between ‘genuine’ womanliness and ‘masquerade’ (306). For a moment there appears to be a possibility of radical subversion, a denaturalisation of the categories of sex, gender and the body.

But she immediately follows this observation with what feels like a retraction:

The capacity for womanliness was there in this woman – and one might even say it exists in the most completely homosexual woman – but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development, and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment. (1929: 306–7)

Here Riviere reverts to a claustrophobic pairing of physiological and psychological reductionism: a ‘capacity for womanliness’ as an ontological characteristic of female bodies; and the subject’s representation of this capacity as a function of internal conflicts. For Riviere, the womanly masquerade seems to be dependent on a speculative magic trick that conjures a naturalised internal capacity whose functioning is dependent on conflicts that are internal to the subject. She maps these conflicts as an individualised unconscious representation of familial dynamics, explaining her patient’s compensatory femininity as ‘an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated from the father figures after her intellectual performance’ (305); and elaborates the origin of this anxiety in a primal scene of envy and appropriation of the father’s penis, followed by reparation and appeasement via the feminine masquerade (310–11). This analysis of her patient’s supposedly individual unconscious nevertheless conforms to the stereotypical – Jean Walton says ‘obligatory’ (1995: 790) – features of

a Kleinian narrative of ego development. An apparent opening up of the categories of sex and gender is thus tamed into an individualising story following an established psychoanalytic discourse of internal phantasy as a defense against anxiety, rage, dread and helplessness (Riviere, 311).

This initial reading might indicate something of my affective response to the paper: surprised recognition; excitement at its subversive potential; anger at the naturalisation of sex and the reiteration of Ernest Jones' language of female 'types'; irritation at the qualification of flippancy as 'inappropriate' to an academic context; and a sense of claustrophobia at being pulled into an internalising account that apparently eviscerates the social. However, despite the predominance of negativity in my response, Riviere's paper still somehow allures and intrigues me. It should also be read, as others have suggested (e.g. Butler, 1990; Bower, 2019), as a performative enactment of the psychical dynamic she is describing. The opening paragraph eulogising Jones' work can be read as a parody of her patient's unconscious reassurance of her male colleagues. It is also possible, Bower has suggested, that elements of her account are a coded critique of Jones' failings as her analyst (2019: 121). From this perspective the paper is not just a neatly bounded example of submission to the contemporary psychoanalytic milieu, but perhaps also something a little more subversive.

This chapter develops a re-reading that holds onto aspects of Riviere's interpretation but expands possibilities for understanding the masquerade as an articulation of the social, something beyond an internalised family drama, and as an embodiment of corporealities that both resist and seek categorisations of sex and gender. To do this, my first move is to go to Lacan (1958/2017; 1958/2006) and Butler (1990; 2005), my reliable and subjective sources of symbolic destabilisation and a discursive politics of sex. Alongside that, I set out some of the exclusionary effects traced in cultural analyses of Riviere's work (Walton, 1995; Vyrigioti, 2019). I then map parallels and divergences between Riviere's paper, feminist analyses of early childhood education (Blaise, 2005; Jones, 2013; Davies 2014) and Patricia Gherovici's contemporary Lacanian theorisation of transgenderism (2010). I also share some of my own associations to the

paper, that seem to have evoked for me a continual coming into being of the sexed body; and suggest that the chapter has implications for the way psychosocial studies might think about unconscious relations in writing and politics, and ways of attending to the subjective location of our analyses and our theories.