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by Bob Schildgen

On Halloween, in San Francisco, when thousands of normally normal folks will actually run around in costumes normally reserved for the opposite sex, they will be part of a mass sex identity change which is normally taboo even in such an abnormally transsexual city.

Halloween, the great witching time when the souls of the dead come forth, is also a sacred time here when everyone is permitted to drag right into strange worlds in which they would not normally find themselves.

The smugness of this city, the pride which many of its straight residents take in their tolerance of sexual non-conformity, would lead you to believe that it's the first place in the world that allowed such far-ranging transvestism.

Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. The Great Sexual Masquerade is as old as history. Transvestism has been around since Eve and Adam McAdam donned the undifferentiated fig leaves, and it will undoubtedly survive all cultural transformations.

The shamen in some "primitive" societies, whose androgynous nature allowed them great freedom in matters of clothing, were revered for their spiritual powers. Tiresias, the ancient Greek super-shaman, was actually changed from a man to a woman by divine power.

The History Of Drag

The ancient Greeks had many *kinaidos*, men who went around in frankly feminine garb and makeup. The ancient Hebrews even had transvestite temple priests, the *kadesh*, who lived in the world of both female and male, while the drag-queen "contrary societies" among certain Native Americans are well known to first-year anthropology students.

And the Elizabethan theatre, which allowed only male actors, even in the most feminine roles, may have been the most artistic and enduring drag-festival of them all. Shakespeare himself is reputed to have played many a feminine role, and there are rumors in some scholarly circles that the famed dark lady of his sonnets was actually an attractive young black or Moorish actor.

The most amazing transvestite in European history was, of course, a Frenchman--Chevalier d'Eon de Beaumont. Born in 1728, he made his first mark on European diplomacy when he was sent with French diplomats to patch up relations



with the Russian Empress Elizabeth. He managed to smooth things over by gaining intimacy with Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting as a lady-in-waiting himself.

Although he was an accomplished

swordsman, and a successful dragoon in the Seven Years' War, his appearance, mannerisms, and lack of heterosexual affairs led his enemies to accuse him of being female, especially when he was living in London. In the early 1770s, the English papers ran many caricatures of him as half-man, half-woman.

He became a famous figure there, and thousands of pounds were publicly bet on the question of his sex. Always a publicity-hungry man, he rather enjoyed the controversy, to the point that he was even accused of promoting the gambling for his own profit.

Finally, as if in a gesture of ridicule aimed at both English and French societies, he announced that he was a woman.

From that point he dressed as a female and enjoyed the title of baroness.

Although d'Eon Beaumont had many political and financial difficulties in his long and immensely interesting life, he was considerably more fortunate than the transvestite Roman emperor, Heliogabalus, who ruled for a few years around 220 A.D. Trained as a transvestite priest in a Syrian cult, Heliogabalus was not at ease with himself or his position as emperor.

Unlike these who will revel in drag on Halloween, a change in clothing was not enough to satisfy his need to change sexual identity. Since the gods weren't obliging enough to transform him, as they did Tiresias, he took it on himself. The historian Dio Cassius says that Heliogabalus, "Planned, indeed, to cut off his genitals altogether, but the desire was prompted solely by his effeminacy. The circumcision which he actually carried out was a part of the priestly requirements of Elagabalus, and he accordingly mutilated many of his companions in like manner."

According to Cassio, this emperor as

cruel to himself as to others, did not stop at circumcision, but became perhaps the first known human being to request a sex-change operation. Cassio says that, "Heliogabalus carried his lewdness to such a point that he asked the physicians to contrive a woman's vagina in his body by means of an incision, promising them large sums for doing so."

Whether the operation was actually carried out is a mystery. It was probably superseded by his death in one of those inevitable late Roman assassinations.

The history of theories of drag is almost as complicated as the history of drag itself. For secure straights who are enjoying the festivities of transexuality, I must quote the early, and somewhat severe Wilhelm Stekel, who speculated that "The latent homosexual becomes a transvestite only on account of his guilty conscience."



Nietzsche's observation is probably a lot more comforting to us all. He says, "Everyone carries within himself a pattern of womanhood derived from his mother; that determines whether he should respect or depreciate women.

So, whether your sexual quest is to be like or unlike your mother, to improve on or parody her, you should still enjoy the masquerade, and become the mask as much as you want. As I said, E. and A. McAdam didn't know the difference. When they found out, they covered it up. Since then, the coverings have gone through many magic transformations, and there's no reason why people can't drape in the alternate identity of their choice, at least on the Eve of All Saints.