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Undressing the Power of Fashion: the Semiotic Evolution of Gender Identity By Coco Chanel and Alexander Mcqueen

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UNDRESSING THE POWER OF FASHION:

THE SEMIOTIC EVOLUTION OF GENDER IDENTITY BY COCO CHANEL

AND ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

by

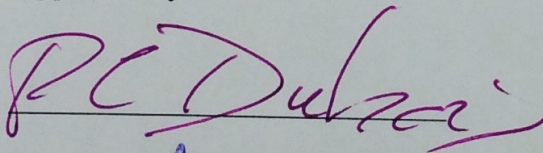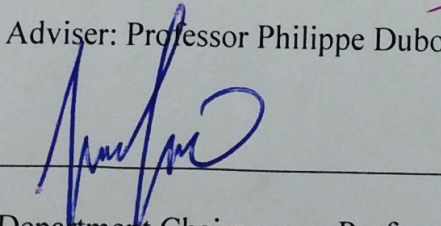**Sveva Marcangeli**

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council
For Honors in French & Francophone Studies

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ABSTRACT

The use of clothing reinforces gender roles culturally assigned to men and women by emphasizing individuals' biological sex and encouraging them to behave in specific ways based on their sex. However, individuals can manipulate their clothing to challenge the gender roles assigned to them. 20th century Gabrielle Coco Chanel and 21st century Alexander McQueen are two designers who have freed women from binding and restricted clothing, which set women as objects and not as strong assets with knowledgeable contributions. I use various studies of semiology and sociology through a gender theory and linguistic standpoint to understand the signs found within these artists' designs and how they have liberated or restricted gender stereotypes. My thesis attempts to analyze how the designs of Chanel and McQueen challenge gender stereotypes through different signs within their historical contexts.

The historical time periods in which the fashion garments were created will be used in this framework to examine how the time period influenced Chanel and McQueen's signs. My thesis solidifies the importance of recognizing fashion as a device that can be manipulated and molded as a means to break through gender boundaries. I draw a comparison between the two designers methods of liberation of gender norms and argue that by observing the liberation of gender stereotypes from two different eras there has been an evolution. This will allow me to provide an overview of the evolution of gender stereotypes from one historical context to the other and will permit me to propose an answer as to where we are revolving around the question of gender today.

INTRODUCTION

"She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt and her hair brushed back like a boy's. She started all that."
    Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (2006[1926])

What do Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Jean Paul Gaultier and Alexander McQueen have in common? They are designers who have challenged ideas on gender norms. The use of clothing reinforces gender roles culturally assigned to men and women by emphasizing individuals' biological sex and encouraging them to behave according to specific character traits associated with their specific sex. However, individuals can manipulate their clothing to challenge the gender roles assigned to them. Twentieth century Gabrielle Coco Chanel and twenty-first century Alexander McQueen are two designers who have freed women from binding and restricted clothing, which set women as objects and not as strong assets with knowledgeable contributions. This research proposes to use various studies of semiology and sociology to understand the signs found within these artists' designs and how they have either reinforced or broken gender stereotypes. Past critics have analyzed the politics of gender role in fashion. Judith Butler claims that since culture imposes gendered expectations on the clothing deemed appropriate for women and men, the individual can use clothing that defies gender expectations to assert personal identity and to critique culture's values and methods of enforcing those values. This study will take this a step further and attempt to analyze how the designs of Chanel and McQueen challenge gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity through the manipulation of different and similar signs within their historical contexts.

If one looks at the work of contemporary fashion designers Tom Ford, Prada and Versace, one sees that many of their strategies echo what Chanel once did. Chanel never defined herself as a feminist but rather as one who expressed femininity through the liberation of women. The way she mixed up the signs of male and female clothing created a fashion that offered the wearer a feeling of freedom from binding and restricted clothing, which marginalized women in society and emphasized their gender stereotypical "feminine" traits of weakness and volatility. Chanel changed the style of women's clothes by making them for women's bodies rather than for men's eyes. She allowed women to take on a "boyish look" through her costume jewelry, little black dress, camellia flower, short skirts, broad shoulders and straight silhouette.

Recent years have seen a massive shift in women's fashion to accompany the new wave of feminism. What began in the 1920s with Chanel has given rise to an entire generation of designers challenging conventional ideas of beauty, sexuality, and femininity. McQueen was an active feminist who reshaped the female form to challenge traditional stereotypes of feminine beauty. He states, "I want to empower women…When you see a women wearing McQueen, there's a certain harshness to the clothes that makes her look powerful. It fends people off. It is a very psychological way of dressing" (Bolton, 60). In his designs, McQueen, much like Chanel, pays careful attention to women's capacity for strength, resolve and versatility and redefines femininity through these traits. What is useful about the idea of liberating and redefining femininity is that it simultaneously redefines masculinity.

This study will use twentieth century French literary critic and semiotician Roland Barthes' theory to approach garments as signs and seek to uncover socio-historic

connotations, manipulation of connotations and repetition. For Barthes, fashion is a non-verbal communication of clothing that is subjective. Semiotics studies how forms of social production of meaning are constructed through a system of signs. Meaning is communicated to us through the interpretation of signs found within the garment system. It teaches us that through learning to translate signs, we can open our eyes to the connotation behind the text (Barthes, "The Semiotic Challenge," 12). What we know about semiotics is that each sign can be deciphered differently due to the different degrees of knowledge of the interpreter towards the collection of signifiers. What the wearer perceives may not be what the creator perceives. Yet there are some commonly accepted connotations for the signs that eventually are reflected in everyday clothing. Barthes elaborates on Saussure's binary linguistic and structuralist model of the composition of a sign by applying it to the garment system. The signifier is the particular garment while the signified is the mental representation (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 35). For example, within this paper, the six carefully selected garments of McQueen and Chanel break gender stereotypes of femininity and in turn masculinity. This mental representation is the signified. The tangible garment represents the signifier. The sign is the combination of the signifier and the signified, and the sign system is the larger historical system that secures the meaning of the sign within a chain of signs, or in relation to other signs (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 36). What Barthes aims to uncover is the psychological concept, or sign, of an object and how its meanings reproduce hierarchies of value and power in historical and culturally specific ways. This is useful for this study because it will aid in the understanding of signs found within the garment system and the value they evoke.

The subtext, the signifieds, signifiers, connotations tied to the signifiers and signs found in the garment system using a semiological approach will then be scrutinized and interpreted utilizing sociological theorists Diana Crane, Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick and Judith Butler in chapters two and three to propose that the garments have helped break gender stereotypes. Butler's concept of gender goes against traditional feminism in that it is a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality. She goes on to explain how individuals are able to escape gender by playing with the rules that create it in order to claim their own meanings for those social acts. Crane argues that clothing plays a crucial role in gendering individuals. She claims that individuals do not choose clothing based on innate gender preferences, but rather are encouraged to wear clothes that will reinforce the gender roles society encourages them to play. Crane explains how the structure of clothing reinforces men's role over women by restricting women's bodies leaving little time for meaningful social contributions and thus symbolizing "women's exclusion from male occupations and their economic dependence on husbands and male relatives" (100). Cavallero and areinforce Crane's argument by claiming that if clothing can successfully "fashion" the individual by reinforcing the gender roles required of him or her, the individual may also be able to challenge those prescribed gender roles through the conscious manipulation of gender-deviant clothing (42). The preceding sociological theorists and Roland Barthes' semiology will facilitate the translation of Chanel and McQueen's fashion garments, demonstrating that they have helped women of all social strata evade from their traditional feminine roles, thereby achieving a balance between expression and repression.

These theories will help situate the historical time period in which the garments were created. The historical time periods in which the fashion garments were created will be used in this framework to examine how the time period influenced Chanel and McQueen's signs. This study will solidify the importance of recognizing fashion as a device that can be manipulated and molded as a means to break through gender boundaries. This study will observe and draw a comparison between the two designers methods of breaking gender norms and argue that between the two different eras there has been an evolution. This will allow me to provide an overview of the evolution of gender stereotypes from one historical context to the other and will permit me to propose an answer to where we are revolving around the question of femininity today.

Clothing's function has always been that of a social act rather than a means of solely protecting or caching nudity. Clothing neither serves to protect nor to adorn but rather both. Fashion signifies protection of oneself through the adornment of the body and self. It is a *langue* not *parole*, a language not a word, which is created and given meaning by a group of decision makers, the fashion group, rather then categorized by its practicality. I chose to study fashion as a mode of communication over any other form because it offers something that human language has always refused to the linguist, a pure synchrony between protection and adornment. While synchronous, however, fashion does maintain a certain level of evolution, ever-changing from year to year but remaining stable throughout one year.

Some dress scholars focus on the wearer but this study analyzes gendered dress through the eye of the creator, the designer, by using techniques from sociology and gender theory to consider instances where gender norms are transgressed or challenged.

This area of study could be analyzed through several different approaches such as technological, economical, and sociological, but I chose semiological, to study what designers are trying to say and express to the public through fashion. This study will aim to communicate that if we can start to understand the meaning behind fashion designs as a means to influence our own gender understanding, we can better recognize the power that fashion has on societal gender views and its control over not only individuality, but culture as well.

CHAPTER 1

A Semiotic Approach to Gender

A. Method of Development Overview

"Clothes make the man, naked people have little or no influence on society," said Mark Twain (Johnson, 1927). If this is true, then clothing and therefore fashion's main function is to cover up man and manipulate gender. This permits clothing to emphasize or transform people's gender by metamorphosing men into women, women into men, and even leaving gender a mystery through androgyny. Clothing is known for fortifying men and women's gender roles by emphasizing their biological sex and compelling them to behave in specific ways. However, people do have the ability to alter their clothing and challenge the gender roles assigned to them. Coco Chanel and Alexander McQueen use clothing to point out the constructed nature of gender and to break gender norms from their constructs through their fashion designs.

This chapter will elaborate on two approaches that will be used to analyze Chanel and McQueen's designs. The chapter will begin by defining the important distinction between sex and gender. From this distinction, it will then expound on how clothing has historically constructed gender identities. The first approach it will delineate is a sociological approach from a gender theory standpoint utilizing Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" tied in with Thapan's discussion of deconstruction as tools. This study will utilize Diana Crane's research to support Butler's claim that the clothing people choose is based on intrinsic gender preferences subliminally imposed on through

cultural norms. Warwick and Cavallaro will be used to extend on how gender performativity can be consciously manipulated and deconstructed. Lastly, this study will expand on the linguistic approach used through semiology and its concepts of signs, signifier and signified, as a means of decoding the garment codes found within Chanel and McQueen's designs.

B. What is Meant by "Sex" and "Gender"?

Fashion and clothing are indispensable to the gender transformation movement. Before deciphering the role of fashion in liberating individuals from gender constraints it is important to understand what *gender* and *sex* truly mean. In our society, *sex* and *gender* are used interchangeably. To a scholar, the word *sex* is used to denote biological factors, such as whether one is male or female. The concept of "gender" was not introduced till recently in 1955 by sexologist John Money. *Gender* is used to describe a person's appearance, behavior, and role based on what culture defines as gender specific traits based on one's biological sex. As explained, gender is therefore not a direct indicator of one's sexual orientation (Money, 13).

Another factor that should be taken into account when dealing with gender theory is that sex is not binary. Sex is not black and white; there is not solely a female and male sex because biologically one could be both. Therefore, if sex is not binary, accordingly gender, which is grounded on sex, is not binary either (Paoletti, "Fashion, Dress and Gender"). However, "The history of dress…so far has to be perceived as a duet of men and women performing on the same stage…the arrangements of each are always being made with respect to the other" (Hollander, 7). The result of the duet that Hollander

speaks of is the cultural notion of heteronormativity, or society's need to produce and reproduce two sexes that are defined by their complementary relation to each other, therefore leaving no space for any other gender identities aside from female or male (Lehnert, "Gender"). This study endeavors to show that McQueen and Chanel offer a solution to the deconstruction of heteronormativity by playing with gender specific garment codes. For the purpose of this paper, femininity is the characteristics or traits that are associated with the gender stereotype of being a woman. Examples of gender stereotypical traits used to describe femininity are emotional, dependent, passive, sensitive, graceful, innocent, weak and sexually submissive. The traits commonly associated with masculinity are independent, non-emotional, aggressive, competitive, experienced, strong, rebellious and active. Clearly, although culture teaches us to abide by and delineate these stereotypical gender norms associated with men and women, they are impractical. Every man has some feminine traits and every woman has some masculine traits. The rising numbers of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of gender and sexuality have provided scholars with multiple methods to study dress. It is for this reason that in order to fulfill research in gender liberation through dress and fashion it is important to gain some familiarity with the history and recent works in gender studies.

C. Historically Fashioning a Gendered Approach to Dress

Historically, fashion has functioned in a complex and interesting way to construct gender identities, specifically feminine identities. Women's erotic body features such as arms, busts, hips and breasts have always been emphasized in dress, while women's legs

have been hidden and ignored for centuries. On the contrary, men's legs have been

emphasized as their erotic zone. It was only in the twentieth century, through Chanel, that

women chose to go astray and show their supremacy, autonomy and of course

masculinity by showcasing their legs. The same cannot yet be said about males. The role

of fashion in constructing gender identities can be seen as early as the Middle Ages. It

was in this era that fashion became more erotic due to the Oriental influence brought to

Europe that emphasized layered dresses, sleeves, heightened waistlines and veils (Lehnert, "Gender"). It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth century that women began to rebel against gender norms. In this era they were given more leeway in their clothing and were permitted to borrow

1.1 1659 Oil Canvas Meeting between King Louis XIV of France and King Philippe IV of Spain at Isle des Faisans. Painted by Laumosnier.

aspects of men's fashion as long as it did not challenge the reigning political and social

order (Lehnert, "Gender"). Evidence of gender code borrowing is noted in men's wear in

Laumosnier's 1659 oil canvas (see Figure 1.1). The painting portrays the meeting of King

Louis XIV of France and King Philippe IV of Spain in the mid seventeenth century. In

the painting, Louis XIV is depicted wearing petticoat breeches, lots of fabric, ribbons and

low breeches with lace frills, which was an extremely feminine style of the time (see

Figure 1.2) (Lehnert, "Gender"). The same gender code borrowing can be found in the

June 1786 *French Cabinet des Modes* journal, where a lady is wearing a masculine riding

dress, or *redingote*, a waistcoat and even dared to go as far as wearing a tie, or *cravat* (see

Figure 1.3) (Lehnert, "Gender").

1.2 1701 Portrait of Louis XIV draped in ceremonial robes revealing his lower legs and calves. Painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud.

1.3 1788 Victorienne Delphine Natalie de Rochechouart Mortemart, Marquise de Rouge wearing a *cravat* and a *redingote*. Painted by Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun.

Once the early nineteenth century came around, males no longer felt the need to

adorn their bodies as they began to proliferate within the work place and women became

more confined to the domestic sphere. This was when women's fashion came to be

pompous and lavished and their bodies invisible under the layers of fabric and frills.

According to Thorstein Veblen, this was due to the increase in husband's wealth and

success, which led women to conspicuous and overindulgent consumption (Lehnert,

"Gender").

During the 1920s and 1930s, the adornment of the female body was at the heart of

a range of contradictory beliefs regarding the nature of feminine identity. During the inter-war patriarchy, fashion was one of the only "welter of experiences and images, that presented a world beyond the family, domestic service and the locality" for women (Buckley and Fawcett, 83). Fashion was a critical tool in defining women's identity as gender was renegotiated based on women's changing social, economic and political power. It provided women with a non-verbal language to contest their oppressive depictions and to begin to construct new versions of their identities. Fashion became a cultural artifact, a visual dialogue, of the social, economical and cultural involvement of women. Gender theorist Li elaborates on this notion by observing that:

"Countless studies of Nineteenth century women and gender have attested to the pervasive presence in English culture of the separate-sphere ideology which assigned the private domain of home and family to women and the public arena of politics, commerce and work to men. In contrast to these ostensibly gendered sphere, fashionable society appeared not to be gendered" (128).

Similarly, cultural studies scholar Wilson notes on her theory of embodied cognition that "Fashion became an important instrument in a heightened consciousness of gendered individuality" (120). Gender borrowing continued into the twentieth and twenty-first century, as this study will demonstrate through the use of Chanel and McQueen's garment codes. The ways that their garments have influenced the construction of gender identity has yet to be fully explored, but this study aims to offer a number of insights into the process. From the history and development of clothing as a means of communication,

one can deduce that fashion was and still is a systematic encryption, a transmission, and an interpretation of social meaning and signs.

D. Construction of Gender Through Fashion

It is important to take a look at the early work of psychologists Ann Constantinople and Sandra Bem in 1971 involving sex research to truly understand the study of gender (O'Brien, 30). The findings from their psychological test, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), divided sex into four categories rather than two – masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated (O'Brien, 31). The androgynous category consisted of individuals who combined very masculine and feminine traits, while undifferentiated individuals had low scores in both categories (O'Brien, 34).

The most influential gender theorist would have to be post-structuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler who in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble* coined the term gender performativity. Gender performativity explores the idea of gender as an "'act' which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler, "Performative," 279). It has to do with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms. "Gender is an impersonation…becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits" (Artforum, 85). Performativity therefore hypothesizes that gender expressions are the result of constant negotiations between an individual's sense of self and society's influence and reaction towards that self, in a context of signs and symbols that are ever changing. Hence, gender roles do not stem from explicit differences between men and women but rather from repetitive social acts that create gender distinctions and make them the norm until they are contested. Therefore, even though society forces a

gender binary upon humans at birth, what society cannot do is claim whether a human is masculine or feminine. "Femininity is an artifice, an achievement, 'a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms, which surface as so many styles of the flesh" (Lee, 65). It is only by changing and manipulating the repetition of those acts that a "subversion of identity becomes possible" (Butler, "Gender Trouble" 145). By individually manipulating the act of clothing and adorning oneself with repetitive signs one can challenge the gendered system. Clothing becomes an advantage, not an obstruction as feminists once used to believe, to portraying gender, not sex, to the outside world. Coco Chanel and Alexander McQueen follow Butler's theory of challenging prescribed gender roles as they seek to break their era's narrow definitions of gender through clothing.

Sociologist Thapan in *Gender, Body, and Everyday Life* elaborates on the concepts written by Judith Butler stating "that 'woman' itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing…an ongoing discursive practice…open to intervention and resignification" (37). Here, the notion that fashion has the power to construct gender norms and stereotypes is reiterated once again. Although people focus more on the power of construction, people must not overlook the power fashion has in the deconstruction of norms it has historically constructed. This is where Thapan's theory of deconstruction aligns with Butler's concepts. To deconstruct is not only to resist construction of stereotypical gender norms, but it is also to obliterate gender barriers that have been created and activate social change.

When exploring the role of fashion in the creation and alteration of gender studies, we must most notably focus on sociologist Diana Crane's study in *Fashion and*

Its Social Agendas. Crane combines social history with focus groups of women to examine the multiple meanings of clothing and how individuals use clothes to communicate class and identity. She traces clothing's economic, social class and consumer implications in France, England and the United states for the past two centuries underlying the notion that clothing is about the "social construction of identity" (1). Crane argues that clothing plays a crucial role in gendering individuals. She claims that individuals do not choose clothing based on innate gender preferences, but rather are encouraged to wear clothes that will reinforce the gender roles society wants them to play (37). She points out that during the Victorian era clothing reinforced the narrowly defined gender roles deemed appropriate for women and men. She goes on to describe how "Dresses were composed of several separate garments and enormous quantities of fabric…These clothes constricted the body and made any form of movement difficult" (100). Crane explains how the structure of clothing to this day reinforces men's role over women by restricting women's bodies leaving little time for meaningful social contributions and thus symbolizing "women's exclusion from male occupations and their economic dependence on husbands and male relatives" (100 - 101).

Crane notes that fashionable clothes were always utilized to "make statements about social class and social identity," but that after fabric and clothing became mass-produced, "the principal messages were about the ways in which women and men perceived their gender roles or were expected to perceive them" (16). Crane uncovered that two styles arose in the late nineteenth century to reinforce this non-verbal resistance: the dominant feminine style and the alternative style, or androgynous style, that mixed masculine clothes with feminine clothes. From her research, Crane concludes that for the

last century, women have used clothing as a form of "non-verbal resistance" to oppressive and constraining sex roles (101).

Fashion theorists Cavallaro and Warwick reinforce Crane's argument by considering a Lacanian framework in their book *Fashioning the Frame* when studying clothes whereby the depth of a thing can be manifested on the surface by a system of signs. In turn, this makes a garment an example of the unconscious at work. Warwick and Cavallaro coined the word "frame" when speaking about dress. They define dress as a "frame" contending "the limitation of physical visibility via clothing, for example, parallels metaphorically an intended limitation of psychological accessibility" (28). Much like Roland Barthes, the authors view clothing as a symbolic language that speaks a great deal about suppressed feelings or experiences. Consequently, they regard clothing as a deep surface of the inner psyche that expresses itself through signs. The interpretation of these signs is subjective. What the wearer is trying to convey may not always be what the receiver reads. However, when signs are consistently communicated and build shared understanding amongst a community, they transform from flexible fashion codes to fixed fashion codes. The authors furthermore support Crane's claim by asserting that if clothing can "fashion" an individual by reinforcing gender roles required of him or her, the individual can challenge the prescribed gender roles through conscious manipulation of clothing and its gender significant signs.

E. When did Clothing become Fashion?

Until the nineteenth century, there had not been a study or history of clothing, only an archaeology that allowed historians to understand the mindset of the era by

looking at the clothing. The first signs of research in the field of fashion arose in 1860 by French scholars and archivists Quicherat, Demay and Enlart who established the principle method that treated dress as the sum of individual pieces and the garment itself as a kind of historical event (Barthes, "The Language of Fashion," 32). The goal was to determine the garments date of birth and context therefore making dress both a historical and sociological object. Later on French authors such as Balzac, Baudelaire, Michelet and Proust would write beautiful pages on the subject and realize that clothing was an element which involved the being as a whole. This theory is reinforced by Proust in his 1913 oeuvre *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* that utilizes clothing as a mean to expose and cache his characters.

F. Proust as a Couturier of Fashion Motifs and Signs in Literature

From *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, I decided to decipher Albertine's garment to demonstrate how clothing was used in early literature as an extension of a character's identity. In the novel, the main character and narrator, Marcel, falls in love with Albertine Simonet. From the start, Albertine makes it evident that she wants a platonic relationship with Marcel. Conversely, Marcel obsesses over Albertine and begins to suspect that she may have lesbian relationships. His desire for her becomes even more powerful when she strays away from him. Marcel keeps Albertine close, hoping to marry her one-day and keep her a prisoner in his Paris residence. Despite his efforts, the gifts he showered upon Albertine do not work as she one day runs away and completely vanishes. The novel ends with Marcel learning that Albertine dies falling off a horse. I chose to decipher her clothing because a foreshadowing of her death and Marcel's personal desires are seen

through Albertine's Fortuny Venetian garment. Furthermore, the signs found within the Fortuny garment are similar to signs that we will later decipher in Chanel's mid-twentieth century garments.

Mariano Fortuny, the man who designed Albertine's Venetian gown, is a real life designer from the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century who specialized in finely pleated silk gowns. Unlike *couturier*'s, who constantly introduce new silhouettes, colors and textiles, Fortuny reproduced multiple versions of the same garment with slight alterations to it (FIDM Museum, "Mariano Fortuny"). Aside from his attention to detail that acted as an extension of the socio-historical time in which he lived in and the desires and identities of his clients, he was also well renowned for his extremely difficult technique of creating permanent narrow pleats on silk gowns, also seen in Chanel's 1950's Art Deco gown in chapter two. It was not until his death in 1949, that his well renowned pleats came to a halt in production. In the novel, Mariano Fortuny acts as Marcel's tool of emotional communication. Since Marcel does not have very good taste in garments, Fortuny is the designer who expresses Marcel's desires to travel to Venice from Paris. Marcel cannot leave Paris because he feels forced to control and survey Albertine. For this reason, he is only able to order clothing for Albertine from Fortuny, rather than physically go see him.

Albertine's gown acts specifically as a sign of Marcel's desire to go to Venice. When the Venetian Fortuny robe arrives and Albertine wears it, Marcel embraces the fabric. The signs found within the Venetian Fortuny gown are the coupled birds, the Carpaccio of Venice, Venice itself, the colors blue and gold, and the multiple layers of fabric (see Figure 1.4). Therefore the signs within this garment system were categorized

as design. When Marcel sees the birds on Albertine's dress, he immediately feels that the

signifiers of "ces oiseaux fatidiques" ["those fateful birds"] are suggesting Albertine's

imminent escape and fleet from his hands (Proust, 871). Birds are known to be a signified

of freedom due to their ability to walk on land, live in the water and fly in the air. Birds

are a signified that are still used today in gowns, as we will see in Alexander McQueen's

gowns in chapter three, as a signified of freedom.

1.4 1910 Mariano Fortuny, Venise. A soft blue velvet ground stenciled in gold with Medieval style patterns to recall Venice. The sides are inset with pleated silk, laced with silk cords and fasted with Murano glass beads.

Marcel demands that Albertine spin around for him in Fortuny's Venetian gown,

draped in his materials as a woman that he can erotically delight and contemplate on

aesthetically. The signifiers of multiple layers and unnecessary frills, decorations,

multiple fabrics and weight of the dress are a signified of rich ostentation, erotic generosity, exposition, and possession. The multiple layers and frills serve as a way for Marcel to control and possess Albertine by limiting her ability to move. Through the restriction of movement caused by her clothing, Marcel imposes a constraint on her freedom and future escape. The primary purpose of the signifier of the Carpaccio painting is to create a signified that brings Venice to life. The same can be noted for the primary colors used for the dress, blue and gold. The colors blue and gold as a signifier evoke the Grand Canal's of Venice, whose water is touched by the sun. Once again, the signified here is that of bringing Venice to life.

Proust ties a lot of Mariano Fortuny's fashion signs and motifs to various architecture and paintings. In this context, the gown demonstrates a connection between Albertine's gown and the social and historical context of the era. Fortuny designs the signifer of the Venetian painting the Carpaccio, *La Guérison d'un Fou*, to evoke "cet Venise saturé avec splendeur orientale…la lumière de soleil et les turbans autour, la couleur fragmentée, mystérieuse et complémentaire" ["This Venice saturated with oriental splendor…the light of the sun with the turbans around the mysterious, complementary and fragmented color"] (Proust, 871). The painting denotes the influence of the Art Deco period of the time that carries orientalist influences and a mystery of the future that lies ahead. "Il était couvert avec des ornementation Arabe, comme les palaces Vénitienne caché comme les femmes de sultan derrière un écran de pierre percée, comme les liaisons dans la bibliothèque Ambrosienne" ["[The garment] was covered in Arabic ornamentation, like the hidden Venetian palaces, like the wives of sultans behind a perforated stone walls, like the affairs that take place in the Ambrosiana library"] (Proust,

872). Albertine's form is primarily emphasized with paintings of Venetian structures and libraries that were considered forbidden to the public at the time. The painting on the gown is a signified of the mystery and oriental eroticism that lies ahead for the future of Albertine. Albertine's dress acts as a sign of Marcel's desire to go to Venice as well as a sign of her future escape from Marcel's constraint as she sets herself free. The allusions to Albertine and Marcel's identities, characters and exterior socio-historical environment are indubitably embedded subtly and indirectly into their designs. The same correlation will be explored in Chanel and McQueen's designs in chapter two and three.

Sartre went even further than Proust and treated the question from a philosophical standpoint claiming that clothing allowed man to "assume his freedom" and represent himself as he chose, even if what he had chosen to be represented what society had selected for him (Lehnert, "Gender"). According to Baudelaire, women needed to utilize fashion to surpass their status as natural beings and be visible to man. Through his statements such as, "Vive le maquillage!" ["Long live make-up!"] it is evident that he sees fashion for women as a tool for them to exploit their erotic power to be socially accepted by men (Lehnert, "Gender"). Clothing was being perceived as a language and a grammar, as a clothes code.

G. Clothing as a Sign System

It was not until 1916 that Saussure hypothesized a general science of signs, or semiology, in his *Course in General Linguistics* that was to be applied solely to linguistics. Semiotics is the study of how social production of meaning is constructed through a system of signs (Saussure, 16). The signified and the signifier make up the

components of the sign. The signified is not a tangible object, but rather the mental representation of the object; it is a plane of content (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 35). This mental representation can be deciphered differently according to the each individual's degree of knowledge surrounding the object. The signifier is the plane of expression, or the tangible object (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 35). Together, the signifier and the signified are combined through a process called signification to create a product, the sign (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 65 – 67). The term symbol is never utilized in substitution for sign because symbol implies an idea of motivation in creating a sign rather than a natural process. The sign is anything that carries meaning that is determined by particular codes or systems in which they appear. Therefore, signs can be read differently and it is through the combination of signified and signifier that we can open to our eyes to the general meaning behind objects.

Both Saussure and Barthes were interested in the study of semiotics, the language of signs. However it was Barthes that took a particular interest in the non-verbal communication of clothing. Barthes widened the study of semiology to include reading any system of signs – image, gesture, sound, and object – and combining it with the association tied to any of those objects to form a language or system of significations. According to Barthes, the signifier, with reference to clothing was the denotation, or the clothing code, the clothing, as it appeared to be (Barthes, "The Language of Fashion," 111). While the signified was the connotation, or the fashion code, the idea that there is more than meets the eye (Barthes, "The Language of Fashion," 118). What separates Barthes from Saussure is his conceptualization that transferring the decryption of

language to clothing proves useful when analyzing historical developments and changes in dress. Dress had always been analyzed according to the trickle-down-theory of clothing, where the trend began in the aristocratic class and eventually trickled down to the lower class (Barthes, "The Language of Fashion," 5). From this perspective, the only function of fashion is that of transmitting social status. However, when Barthes applies Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified to clothing, suddenly clothing becomes a transmitter of much more complex signs.

A sign functions and achieves its meaning through its associational and differential relations with other signs within its code or network known as a system (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 58). With reference to fashion code, a garment system is a set of pieces, part or details, which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 25). For example, one cannot wear a bonnet at the same time as a beanie or a toque. The variation in garment system corresponds to a change in the meaning of the clothing. The juxtaposing of various garment systems next to one another forms a syntagm, or different signs and associations based on different garment combinations (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 60 – 64). When studying fashion the commutation test allows for us to spot the important signifiers within each system that together weave the syntagm. By introducing a change in the signifier, or plane of expression, one can observe whether that change brings about a correlative transformation to the signified, or plane of content (Barthes, "The Elements of Semiology," 65 – 66). By combining different signifiers within the syntagm, one is able to generate a change in meaning from the substitution that changes the expression but not the content.

The decoding of signs was even more important for the gay community who were very closeted until the twenty-first century. Belonging to their group meant that they needed to excel in decoding invisible vestimentary signs. To examine this claim in more depth, it is important to note the historical context of Barthes' theory. Society in the 1960s instructed gays and lesbians to adhere to normative dress codes in order to be accepted by the larger society. These strict rules urged gays and lesbians to dress down instead of flamboyantly (Barthes, "The Language of Fashion," 84). "Respectable" and "ordinary" attire was preferred to visibly different dress. Therefore, as a form of resistance and as a means of communicating with the rest of the gay and lesbian community, signs in clothing became necessary.

It was not until the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that the lack of critical analysis in fashion was broken. Fashion theory is grounded in the principle that "fashion" is a cultural construct that embodies consumers identities (Barnard, 21). The term "fashion theory" was now finally considered an interdisciplinary field that studied fashion as a meaning system within which cultural and aesthetic portrayals of the clothed body are produced (Barnard, 23).

H. Conclusion

Semiology is a science that uncovers the underlying meaning behind a text, image, object, or garment. It is interested in how the signifieds came to be and what the signifieds within a certain time period are. Like all sign systems, fashion is interconnected with other elements of culture and can be used as an analytical tool for examining various aspects of cultural significance. Furthermore, clothing can act as a

guide to various events, histories and even gender struggles of past eras. Clothing is an effective tool in communicating diverse signs due to its visual cues. Drawing on semiotic and gender theories as main tools for analysis, the next chapter will decode how Chanel's garments of the 1920s and 1950s broke gender norms within their appropriate time periods. This analysis will be divided into several different sections. This study will decode Chanel's garment codes within its significant periods in chapter two and McQueen's in chapter three. The steps and the process undertaken when conducting a semiotic analysis will be covered in depth in the next chapter when applied to one of Chanel's designs. In chapter four this study will compare how the two designers have broken gender norms through the transformation of different and similar signifieds. To conclude, in chapter five this study will expound on whether from the early twentieth century to today there has been an evolution in the reinforcing or breaking of gender through clothing.

CHAPTER 2

Chanel's Role in Redressing Sexual Hierarchies

A. The Little Black Dress

I chose three different designs by Alexander McQueen and Coco Chanel that will be a platform for discussing the ways that both McQueen and Chanel challenge gender roles and norms through fashion. The previous chapter elaborated on two approaches used to analyze the designs of Coco Chanel. The first is a sociological approach from a gender theory standpoint utilizing the concept of gender performativity as my tool. The second is a linguistic approach within semiology utilizing the concepts of signs, signifier and signified. By utilizing Barthes' theoretical approaches influenced by Saussure, this chapter aims to conduct a semiotic analysis on three designs by Coco Chanel with the objective of analyzing their codes of breaking gender stereotypes within their current époque. The underlying assumption of this analysis is that the designs are in some way culturally significant to the era and require decoding and examination. All the theories stated will facilitate the translation of Chanel's fashion garments, demonstrating that they have helped women evade from their traditional feminine roles, thereby achieving a balance between expression and repression.

CHANEL was created by the legendary couturier, Gabrielle Chanel who later adopted the name Coco Chanel when she became successful in her fashion career. She was the woman who freed women that were prohibited from wearing small amounts of fabric and who were forced to wear heavy material clothing. Simply put, her fashion was

"a commitment to new way of living that explicitly rejected the old" (Driscoll, 151). When looking at the designs of Alexander McQueen, one notes that many of his strategies mixed up the vocabulary of male and female clothes and provided the wearer with a feeling of hidden luxury just like Chanel did 75 years before. Although Chanel refused to define herself as a feminist, she spoke a lot about femininity and how her work was indisputably part of the liberation of women. In this chapter, this study will analyze how she helped women free themselves from a form of social constraints not once, but twice, during the 1920s and 1950s. It was due to her incorporation of non-verbal messages into fashion designs and her creation of designs that accentuated the individual without the influence of societal vestimentary constraints that she was labeled as part of the modern movement. Chanel seeks both to understand gender roles and explore their limitations when challenged. The combination of her background and experiences will allow me to observe and comment on various signs of gender roles in fashion pieces in ways that will encourage the incessant rereading of gender markers.

a. How to Conduct a Semiotic Analysis on Fashion Garments

The reason why I chose the little black dress, the Camellia dress and the Boyish look ensemble by Coco Chanel are that each show how she mixed feminine and masculine text to blur gender lines, achieve androgyny and gender equality. In each of these garments, Chanel attempted to place women in men's physical garments to reverse the relations of power. She endeavored to make women play the role of men by wearing black, revealing calves and expressing their sexuality through signs that helped them redefine femininity and in turn masculinity. Each of the designs chosen show how Chanel

decides to use masculine signs to a woman's advantage. Chanel deconstructs gender stereotypes by shifting the signified of color, form, length and body that are present in each of the three designs. She does so by taking on the design process from a new and innovative technique. She never sketched like other designers, but rather would have a dress or coat placed on a model, and start tearing the fabric apart, sometimes piercing the skin of the poor girl who was forced to stand there for hours. This reflected the savagery noted in the slashing, tattering and deconstruction of the twentieth century stereotypical perfectionism. Each of these designs is a piece of one of Chanel's most powerful creations, the flapper or femme fatale of the early twentieth century.

In the early twentieth century, men dominated the fashion industry making clothing for their own eyes rather than for women's comfort. Although women were uncomfortable in their dresses and corsets, they were forced to wear mounds of fabric and cages in order to look more curvaceous. Chanel, angered by this constriction of the body, challenged these designs by creating relaxing yet elegant dresses that were multi-purpose thus serving both the corporate and social world (Waddell, 125). She claimed, "nothing is more beautiful than freedom of the body" (Alston, 84). Her most famous contribution to this collection of versatile dresses was the 1926 little black dress.

Semioticians look at clothing as a sign waiting to be decoded and analyzed. When conducting a semiotic analysis on Chanel's invention of the little black dress, the objective is to analyze its social significance in the year 1926 and how women who wear the little black dress have changed culture's concept of gender norms. The underlying assumption of this analysis is that the garment code in some way was culturally significant and required decoding and analysis.

The first step in conducting this semiotic analysis is to establish the signs within the little black dress to be decoded. In this case, the signs found within the little black dress are the ribbon located around the neck, the color black, white cuffs, glass beads and imitation pearls, wool and the long and straight silhouette. Therefore, the signs within this garment system are categorized as follows: accessory, color, length, fabric and shape. The next step is to determine what each sign means by analyzing its signifier and signified in the context of 1926 and sketch the overall historical, cultural, and political context in which the sign appears.

b. Silhouette

The study begins by analyzing the text of the shape of the dress. The 1920s were nicknamed the Androgynous era or the Gender Crisis era due to their shift in couture to cleaner lines with a de-emphasis on the breasts and butt (Boland, "Art Deco Fashion"). The little black dress' signifiers are a long and straight cut with a flat bust and a straight waste. The flat bust is a signified of a boyish figure, while the waist and figure are ignored to create a signified of an ambivalent androgynous figure. Women in those days had to wear large amounts of fabric put together as well as

2.1 1892 House of Worth Afternoon Dress. Note the abundance of ruffles and layers of fabric that constrict the woman's movement.

corsets so they looked curvy and beautiful and were restricted in their movements; this

made it difficult for women to do anything other then work in the house (see Figure 2.1)

(Nischa, "Semiotics: Chanel vs Dolce & Gabbana (Wk 3)"). The fact that women felt

uncomfortable and were restricted to their culturally constructed social roles angered

Chanel. She claimed, "A girl should be two things: who and what she wants" (Karbo,

120). She decided to rebel by rewriting the fashion code and making the little black dress,

a small loose fitting, easy to wear and comfortable dress (see Figure 2.2). The novel

silhouette of the little black dress allowed for women to both work *and* play. The approach to the design focused on speed, efficiency and elegance. It was designed to allow for women to move and slide easily over the uncorseted body it was intended for. As aforementioned, gender performativity is the repetition of social acts that create gender distinctions and gender norms that are caused by the struggle between society and ones inner self. It is only by changing and manipulating the repetition of those acts that a "subversion of identity

2.2 1926 Little Black Dress. The original little black dress designed and worn by Coco Chanel.

becomes possible" (Butler, "Gender Trouble," 145). Chanel liberated women from the

1926 rules of gender performativity of curvy bodies in a tight constricted silhouette

confining the woman to the domestic sphere by flattening the bust and therefore allowing

women to become androgynous in their gender, free in movement and one step closer to

gender equality.

c. The Color Black

The invention of the little black dress was multipurpose for the woman and an innovation to the female form. She introduced the design during the inter-war period when bright colors, prints and heavy patterns dominated the fashion industry. While men were fighting in WWI, women were working and therefore wearing black, a lower class color. To truly understand the development of the signified of the color black according to its socio-historical time period, it is important to backtrack its signified to the beginning of time. In the beginning, during the Christian era, black was a signified of the devil, hell and death, since the world was assumed to have started from nothing, from blackness (Pastoureau, 30). Towards the medieval era, couturiers began to make a habit of utilizing the color black in their royal luxury items (Pastoureau, 100). The phenomenon began in Italy and initially only involved urban circles. Many merchants possessed great wealth but were not able to break through social classes boundaries. They were forbidden from using the royal colors red and blue, which represented the two feuding royal cities of Venice and Florence (Pastoureau, 100). In turn, merchants chose to provoke these boundaries by dressing in a very specific tone of black that could only be created for the rich that were

2.3 1926 Chanel's "Ford" as seen in America's 1926 publication of Vogue.

more solid, vibrant, and seductive. This is when black took on a new signified of wealth

and luxury. The first car to be industrially produced was the Ford Model-T. In order to

reduce the cost of the car, it was painted in black. That is when black's signified became

that of the industrial revolution and modernism (Calcaires, "An Introduction to Black

Color Symbolism"). In fact, in 1926 American *Vogue* compared Chanel's "little black

dress" to the Ford, alluding to its universal popularity as a fashion basic. Reiterating

Henry Ford's line, "any customer can have a car painted in any color that he wants so

long as it is black" (Basye, "Hang Onto Your Pearls: The Little Black Dress Is Born").

Vogue had accompanied the picture of the Chanel "Ford" with the following blurb (see

Figure 2.3):

> "The Chanel "Ford" the frock that all the world will wear is model 817 of black
>
> crepe de chine. The bodice blouses slightly at the front and the sides and has a
>
> tight bolero at the back. Especially chic is the arrangement of tiny tucks which
>
> cross in front. Imported by Saks." (Basye, "Hang Onto Your Pearls: The Little
>
> Black Dress Is Born")

In 1926, black's signified changed once again as it was worn mainly during the

period of mourning of the inter-war era. In 1926, black was a signified of sorrow, sin,

death and submission (Pastoureau, 139). After WWI and the Spanish Flu epidemic, a lot

of widows in France were forced to solely wear the signifier of an austere matte black for

a year with a thick English crepe veil and opaque black stockings (Bisset, "Why Chanel's

Little Black Dress Has Never Gone Out of Fashion"). After a year, women could add

more discreet signifiers such as trimmings, white embellishments to add a bit of color, and substitute thick veil with a thinner black veil. However, they were still forced to wear black and the color was still a signified of mourning. Farther family relatives were limited to wearing darker colors as well, but were given more flexibility allowing them to choose between colors such as grey and navy blue (Bisset, "Why Chanel's Little Black Dress Has Never Gone Out of Fashion"). Other members of society that were permitted to wear black at the time were urban working class males and the clergy. The clergy wore black as a signified of their submission to God and authority (Pastoureau, 96). Male suits were also solely made in black, which signified authority. From 1926 to today, black came to be a signified for authority due to the color's nature. Black is able to give the allusion of distancing oneself from normal beings and asserting his or her authority upon others (Calcaires, "An Introduction to Black Color Symbolism"). Women were only allowed to wear black undergarments and intimates, even though they mainly signified the demimonde (Pastoureau, 98).

Chanel used the signifier black in the little black dress as an unambiguous sign of sexual impropriety, modernity and authority, similar to that of men, as a clear sign that women were ready to enter the workforce. Her little black dress made the upper class' colorful extravagant gowns appear preposterous and boastful. Chanel had created the urban uniform of shop girls equal to the suits of professional men. She shifted the signified of black from a solely male, authoritarian, and sorrowful color to a sophisticated, dignifying, gender neutral and authoritative color. She gave women strength and gender ambiguity by transforming the power of the color black in the little black dress. Black is not an easy color to decode due to its numerous signifieds that

change according to its socio-historical context. However, the signified that Chanel is trying to impose onto the signifier black is that of power and authority. Only a character that is strong enough can confront all other signs that may be read from black and make them his or hers. A person who wears black is self-confident, fearless, and fully assumes the fact that black may be read from other observers as a negative sign.

d. Obscuring Masculine Text

Designer's of the twentieth century typically obscured masculine text in their ensembles through the use of various "finishing touches" or signifiers such as embroidery, lace collars, trims and cuffs, as seen in Chanel's little black dress (Stewart, 183). Chanel was making harsh gender statements and allegations through the use of these signs in her garments, so decided to sidestep some sex and gender controversies by adding gender codes consisting of white trimmings and cuffs to go with the black and white trend of the time. Being an orphan, Chanel had been raised in a convent and was therefore still loyal to the nuns that took care of her growing up (Rather, 110). The influence that the convent and the nuns had on her life made Chanel soften some of the masculine and immoral signs in the making of her little black dress, such as the signs associated with the color black of the naughty demimonde and male authority. Although she added white trimmings that signified purity to cover up some of the immoral signs, she still made the dress mildly transgressive in Catholic-raised but largely secular urban circles.

e. Costume Jewelry

The term "costume jewelry" was first coined in the 1920s in what people called the Art Deco era or "streamline modern" (Collectors Weekly, "Art Deco Costume Jewelry"). Art Deco arose in response to Art Nouveau and, therefore, embraced industrialization. Art Deco rejected laidback women with layers, multiple fabrics and corsets and favored geometric harmony, straight lines and angles intersected by circles and curves (Collectors Weekly, "Art Deco Costume Jewelry"). Now that the war was over, technology began to advance in the business arena and focused on creating new materials and processes. Materials that were once used for the war, such as metal, plastic and glass tones, began to be used to create faux jewelry. As a result, jewelry no longer stood as a differentiator between social classes, "costume jewelry" was now being created as cheap adornment. The socio-economic impact of the creation of costume jewelry gave more women access to this mode of breaking gender norms. Rather than just giving wealthy women access to the tools necessary to rebel against culture's constraints, the common folk were given the tools as well. Flappers, young and single women who dictated their own lives and were against social norms and traditional female roles that resubmitted to strict Victorian morality, especially embraced costume jewelry as a means of expressing their desire to be free and modern. Flappers rebelled against these social norms by engaging in activities previously limited to men such as cutting their hair to a short and bobbed hairdo, wearing red lipstick and short skirts, smoking cigarettes in public, drinking alcohol at bars and danced at jazz clubs (Forever 20s, "Conflicts"). They knew that changing their lifestyle and ideology was the only way they would gain equality even if society did not want it.

Chanel reflected on the cultural shift of the time claiming that a woman "could do or say whatever she wanted as long as she was wearing pearls" (Karbo, 169). Any woman could buy herself a string of pearls and flirt with men, not only the elite. The white vertical-beaded imitation pearls found on top of Chanel's little black dress reflect the Art Deco style that was widespread at the time and signified a desire to be free and modern from society's impositions. The light color of the pearls placed on top of the harsh black of the dress, on the other hand, are a signified of sisterly chastity, an influence of the nuns once again. The signified of the word *modern* changes according to the socio-historical context it is being referred to or used for. In the context of the 1920s, *modern* was a woman who was beginning to enter the job market and political arena and who redefined marriage, motherhood, and "womanliness" for a new era (America in Class, "Modernity").

f. String Tie Bow

Throughout history bowties had been associated as a strictly male accessory until the 1920s when they officially began to be introduced in women's wear as a form of gender bending. Women chose to either wear bowties around their neck or wear a more subtle form of the bowtie, a ribbon. Ribbons on children's dresses had signified a restraining device. It was not until the 1920s that ribbons on children's dresses took on the signified of a child being seen as a child and not as a little adult (Historical Boys' Clothing, "Shoulder Ribbons on Dresses"). Ribbons became a sign that little children had the right behave as children. The same could be said about the ribbon found on Chanel's little black dress. The ribbon is a signified of a woman having the right to behave as a

woman. During the 1920s, different styles of ribbons signified different codes. A firm knot signified marriage, while the flamboyant and lose ribbon found on Chanel's little black dress signified that the wearer was single and interested in flirting and mingling (Historical Boys' Clothing, "Shoulder Ribbons on Dresses"). Once again, this subtle take of the bowtie found on Chanel's dress was a sign of androgyny and a self-confident and free woman.

g. Fabric

Chanel's little black dress is made of wool, one of the least feminine fabrics of the 1920s worn more often by men than women, that signified a sophisticated, masculine, urban business look. Fashion "is ultimately determined by its materials," which means that the texture, weight, color and motifs of fabrics are essential parts of gender messages conveyed by any ensemble (Stewart, 185). Cavallaro and Warwick argue that materials "may be seen as embodiments of two distinct albeit interacting types of space: the smooth, as the locus of fluidity, fusion and boundless, and the striated, as that of order, classification and categorization" (Stewart, 186). In turn, smooth fabrics signified a feminine inflection, while ribbed fabrics, such as the wool in Chanel's little black dress, signified masculine inflections. Roland Barthes contends that all fabrics are classified by weight such that lightweight fabrics signified a light, fine, and frivolous identity while heavyweight fabrics signified a heavy, authoritative, and solemn identity (Barthes, "The Fashion System," 58).

h. Deconstruction of the Little Black Dress

The slogan "little black dress" is still used today, but is long removed from what Chanel's little black dress used to be. One thing Chanel had emphasized over anything else was the accessibility of her clothing. When speaking about her garments, she claimed, "I like fashion to go down the street, but I cannot accept that it should originate there" (Howard, "The Little Black Dress - Everyone's Favorite"). Since she wanted her designs to be everywhere, she made them versatile and simple, but most of all affordable so that every woman could have access to them and feel empowered (Howard, "The Little Black Dress - Everyone's Favorite"). Chanel's little black dress was used for any function, but its primary purpose was of creating a comfortable outfit for women entering the workplace. This continued until the 1950s, when Christian Dior created the "New Look," erasing the little black dresses signified of authority for a business setting and applying it to a signified that revolved more around the femme fatale for a cocktail setting (Howard, "The Little Black Dress - Everyone's Favorite"). To this day, the little black dress is known as the "cocktail dress." Its use is now that of a "simple black ferment suitable for a woman to wear at most kinds of relatively formal social engagements" (The Oxford English Dictionary). Today, Chanel would deem that the little black dress is not being used to its full potential as its left on a hanger until the next black tie event. Chanel would want women to wear the little black dress everyday and everywhere from work and cocktails to lunch with friends. It is simply a matter of knowing how to style it.

i. Conclusion of the Little Black Dress

What the little black dress did in the twentieth century was break through gender performativity, or in this context, the ritual practice of wearing frills, corsets, and constricting clothing that created a "feminine" gender in a domestic sphere. She broke through gender performativity by creating the narrow, shapeless silhouette of the little black dress with a reduction in fabric, leading to a more authoritative, free and androgynous style. Chanel obviously criticized societies gender norms, and consequently society's power to determine what is considered clear gender. She attempted to break down binary oppositions of male and female making it easier for women to construct their own gender identity at an individual level. By allowing women to switch from being feminine to masculine without a change in personality, Chanel denies the existence of a male or female gender core. She believes in androgyny. Her genderless fashion was able to aid in the breaking down of gender stereotypes by associating both gender norms with one individual. Chanel attempted to escape gender identity positions by placing women in men's shoes and reversing the relations of power. She made women play the role of men and helped them redefine masculinity as appearance. She took masculine clothing and feminized it. Therefore, not only making women more equal to men, but transforming culturally male gender norms into feminine norms. The changing view of femininity is inextricably linked to the changing view of masculinity. Essentially, she, like Judith Butler, believes in the deconstruction of these gender categories.

B. Camellia Dress

The next ensemble to be decoded is the 1937 Camellia evening dress (see Figure 2.4). The signs found within the Camellia evening dress are the Camellia, split-sleeves, backless cut, the black and white color contrast, and silk and lace. Therefore the signs within this garment system are categorized as form, accessory, color and fabric.

a. Silhouette

Beginning with the form, instead of creating a gown composed of many layers as was common in the 1920s and 30s, Chanel created a form-fitting dress that showcased the female form rather then cached it. The emphasis in the dress was on the waist, shoulders and chest, which were accentuated by the split sleeves. The form-fitted dress functions as a signifier to emphasize the natural lines of the body rather than the constructed corseted form of the body. It was form-fitted to the natural lines of the body utilizing delicate and fluid fabrics so as to make the body comfortable and free to move

2.4 1937 Camellia Evening dress by Chanel.

around in, therefore the signified is not restricting women to a reticent role in society. The split-sleeves as a signifier help broaden and open the chest while simultaneously accentuating the shoulders of the woman, which was considered the erotic zone of the body in the late 1930s. The broader shoulders naturally separated the women's breasts

allowing for ease of movement and a comfortable body free from heavy, stiff, corseted mechanisms. The signified is a masculine feature of authority and sign of power caused by the open chest of the woman, much like that of a man wearing a tux, that instills uneasiness in the people neighboring the dress. The other signified is that of androgyny noted through the accentuation of the shoulders, a sexually ambiguous and genderless area. The low cut back as a signifier also emphasizes the signified of androgyny, the back being one of the most androgynous, genderless, most vulnerable yet erotic parts of the body.

b. Silk and Lace

As an advocate for comfortable yet stylish clothing, Chanel was the first women to take typical male fabrics used for undergarments, such as jersey and cotton, and transform them into women's everyday wear. Chanel embodies the experimentation of these conventionally masculine fabrics that would invert these essential fashion gender and class distinctions. In the Camellia evening dress, the white Camellia flowers made of silk are of particular interest. Throughout history, silk has shifted as a signified from a hard masculine rich fabric to a feminine, smooth and soft fabric, steadily associating itself with a smooth, erotic feminine feel (Cavendish, 231). The use of lace as garment fringes has evolved as well from medieval Europe, where it used to be considered a masculine signified of wealth, to a feminine signified (Bolich, 214). Although both fabric's signifieds do lean towards more of a gender restraint, what needs to be taken into account is the fact that their other signifieds are that of a light, fine and frivolous identity, the opposite of how women were supposed to comport themselves at the time.

c. Camellia Flower

As previously mentioned, Chanel had shifted the signified of the color black to a sophisticated, dignified, authoritative and gender-neutral color. The color white contrasting with the black was a signified of purity, innocence and status in order to not stir any turmoil with her big gender claims. The contrasting black and white not only are a code to temper the gender claims made by Chanel but are also a means of placing extra emphasis on the white Camellia flowers (see Figure 2.5). The Art Deco period had exposed Europe to many exotic Asian concepts, the Camellia flower being

2.5 1937 Camellia Evening dress by Chanel.

Chanel's favorite. The Camellia as signifier is an exotic forbidden flower found in eastern and southeastern Asia. A deeper analysis into the nature of a flower however, reveals that flowers are signifieds as seducers. Flowers are seducers because they endure in the wild by using their beauty and scent to lure pollinating insects and birds. Flowers have always been a sign of female sexuality throughout history, showing either a lack or presence of sexuality. Since the flower is the reproductive organ of the plant, reproduction depends on the ability of the flower to attract birds and bees with its color, odor, sweetness and form (Graziano, 74). Therefore, flowers are a signified of female genitalia (Graziano, 74). The flower's signified is a juxtaposition between life and death, innocence and sinister seduction, and everlasting and short-lived beauty (Ben-Horin, "Fashion in Black & White- Part III, Flowers"). The Camellia flower's petals fall when the flower is finished

blooming, but unlike most flowers, its calyx does not and remains on the tree (Copeland, 598). The calyx as a signifier is the signified as the strength of women against the brutal forces of society that endeavor to strip them apart.

d. Camellia Conclusion

The Camellia evening dress is a clear example of the use of clothes as gender performance to strengthen the sense of a gender and make it more ambiguous. By utilizing these signs as an opportunity for resistance, "the universality of [dress] codes and their meanings allow for the [subversion of] mainstream 'messages' they convey and through this to illuminate the existence of alternative [gender] identities" (Hawkes, 261 – 270).

C. Boyish Look Ensemble

The last Chanel garment system to be decoded is the 1956 boyish look ensemble (see Figure 2.6). The signs found within the boyish look ensemble include a shortened skirt cut above the ankle, a sharp tailored cut, elbow length sleeves, a leather belt, repetition of Japanese kanji, a neckline with a bow, and the black wool coat with the white Camellia embellishment. Therefore, the signs within this garment system are categorized as tailoring cut, fabric and print. Chanel's lesser-known 1950s line was received with much controversy. After WWII, people wanted to move forward with the war just like they did with WWI and were expecting Chanel to come out with another revolutionary style. Men were going back to the workforce, while women were expected to put all their energy into their role as domestic housewives. However, women were

reluctant to go back and wanted to go back into the workforce (George, 86 – 88). Chanel was intuitive and decided to create clothing that once again spoke about what the woman wanted rather then what society wanted women to wear.

a. Form

At this time, other male fashion designers were trying to impose frills, corsets and artificial curves once again. Chanel rebelled against these gender ideals through the signifiers of shortening the length of the skirt to well above the ankle and making the waist invisible once again. This look came to be known as the boyish look. The short length of the skirt signified closer equality between men and women. By shortening the skirt, Chanel went against the male fashion grain that was imposing long skirts and frilly skirts and managed to close the gap between gender differences by downplaying male's role of superiority. Chanel repeated the signifier of the straight cut she used in the little black dress in 1926 in her 1956 boyish look

2.6 1956 Boyish ensemble with black

ensemble to make the body less curvaceous so that no specific female body part would be emphasized, eroticized or stand out. By shaping a woman's body androgynously equal to a man's, Chanel made her boyish look a signified of freedom and breaking of cultural gender norms. The elbow length sleeves are a signifier fashioned through pin tucks to create a stiff form. Men were the only ones who would roll up their sleeves in society

when doing manual labor or work. Hence, the rolled up sleeves on the boyish look are a signified of power. This helped women show their stance of where they wanted to be and how they wanted to be viewed in culture. Wearing other designer's looks, such as Dior's New Look, would be conforming to male societies ideals of what women should wear. Women want to be in the workforce, rolling up their sleeves and not be slaves within their own house.

b. Leather

Chanel added a simple leather belt around the waist as a signifier to hint at the wearer's waistline without making her feel confined. During WWII, significant advancements in the leather jacket were developed for aviation (see Figure 2.7). In the 1950s that leather jackets became synonymous with motorcycling. Motorcyclists were known for being a very open group of people who were very tolerant and accepting, so in the 1950s gay and lesbian people began to adopt their style (Geczy & Karaminas, 89). The gay and lesbian culture found leather as a signifier extremely appealing due to it sensual contact with the skin of the wearer. Leather jackets were now being worn as a statement rather then just as a means of

2.7 late 1930s leather bomber jacket from WWII aviators.

protection, transforming them from a signified of authority to pride, belonging, brotherhood and in some contexts defiance. By adding leather around the waist, Chanel is giving women the chance to be defiant in their expression of gender. By adding leather to

the dress the power of the woman here is transgressed, destabilized, negotiated and challenged.

c. Art Deco Japonisme: Outdated or Relevant?

As mentioned previously, Art Deco style, which lasted from 1910 to 1935, had a huge influence on Chanel's past garment system. Her outdated repetition of Art Deco style in the boyish look ensemble puzzled people who expected her to conform to societies novel fashion norms. The signifier of the Japanese Kanji symbols was probably chosen due to the fact that the Japanese had allied with France during WWI. After the war, Asia opened up to Europe allowing for an influx of novel fabrics, cuts and designs that played a huge role in the Art Deco era. Japonisme, or the influence of Japanese art and culture on Westerners, had a huge impact during the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Broquet, "Fine Fettle: Fashion Inspiration: Japonisme"). Japonisme's influence can be very clearly noted through the origami-like folds in Chanel's 1950s ensemble and print blocking. This pin-tuck technique, very similar to Mariano Fortuny's from the analysis of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* in chapter one, forms wavy parallel folds that evoke the abstract image of a raked Zen rock garden. The signifier of the Zen rock garden in Japan is itself a signified of the waves of the sea, another essential minimalist motif found in Japonisme (Broquet, "Fine Fettle: Fashion Inspiration: Japonisme"). The signified of waves deciphered from the Zen garden could be even further analyzed to mean repetition of history once again. Waves are repetitive in their act, going through a continuous cycle of building up energy then dying down. This repetition can come to symbolize the repetition of history from after WWI. By utilizing this technique, Chanel

manages to reintroduce the idea of Japonisme present in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to prove that society had not made progress since the last post war. Furthermore, the kimono, which many times bore Kanji signifiers, was constructed much like the boyish look as a garment that was deconstructed to create a novel shape and androgynous body. The signifier of the Japanese kanji symbols within the boyish look ensemble is repetitive in order to attempt to represent the wearer. The repetition of the Japanese Kanji symbols is a signified of the repetition of history, that there has been no change in society. Society had not changed since the Art Deco period. Women were still working at home and men were still dominating over women. Although people wanted to move past WWII, Chanel's return to the signifier of Art Deco in the boyish look made people question whether they were ready to move forward and past the war. Chanel believed that no progress had been made since the last post war for women so used the repetition of the Art Deco Japonisme style as a sign.

d. String Bow Tie

The boyish look ensemble had a simple neckline with a string tie bow on it, which is a very untraditional signifier. Like in the little black dress, Chanel bears a string tie bow around her neck, a signified of a woman having the right to behave as a woman. The looseness of the string tie bow is a signified of a wearer who is single and interested in flirting and mingling. Once again, this subtle take of the bowtie found on Chanel's dress was a sign of androgyny and a self-confident, modern and free woman.

e. Black Shifts Signified Again

Although in the 1920s Chanel had shifted the signified of black from a solely male, authoritarian, and sorrowful color to a sophisticated, dignifying, gender neutral and authoritative color. In the 1950s she shifted the signified of black once again to a sophisticated, gender neutral, sorrowful color of mourning (see Figure 2.8). By utilizing a black coat in a an era when people wanted to move past the war, she forced people to think back to the grief and mourning that took place after WWI. She endeavored to give women strength and gender ambiguity whilst still reminding society of its unchanging stance by transforming the power of the color black in the boyish look ensemble.

2.8 Boyish Ensemble worn with a black wool jacket and the iconic Camellia flower.

f. Camellia Flower

A Camellia flower is found around the neck of the black wool coat. Chanel still sees the Camellia's signified as the strength of women against the brutal forces of society

that endeavor to strip them apart, but applies it in the new context of the 1950s. What male designers are endeavoring to do is reposition women back in their place by converting back to old garment systems that use corsets and frills. What Chanel is allowing women to tell society through the Camellia is that they will not let society tell them what to do.

g. Boyish Look Ensemble Conclusion

By staying consistent with her idea of comfortable, chic and art deco clothing, Chanel helped free women of conforming to what male designers wanted to see on them. Chanel believed that no progress had been made since the last post war for women so used the boyish look ensemble as a sign for women to non-verbally speak about this. Chanel tries to get rid of this gender binary by breaking through Butler's theory of gender performativity by creating new androgynous styles through the use of signifiers, transforming signifieds, and by changing what it means to be feminine and masculine through signs.

D. Availability of Clothing

Chanel's garment system once again allowed for the majority of working class women to rebel non-verbally against the structured ideals society had set out for them in the 1950s. A level playing field in the fashion world was one step closer to forming a larger, steady, middle class. For Chanel, this meant paying attention to the needs of everyday people as well. That is why she listened to the working class woman by offering clothing that was practical in style, color and material that looked expensive yet was still

comfortable. By the twentieth century, the socioeconomic gap between the wealthy and the poor closed drastically (Sessions, "What Clothing Cost in the 1920's"). Fake jewelry and real jewelry were indistinguishable and rayon looked like silk, only a close study of the garments could reveal their true value.

"Fashion equality did not blur the line between qualities of clothing, it blurred the line between qualities of people (classes). One couldn't tell the different just from looking at someone. Unless of course they had no fashion taste and were merely imitating what they thought the wealthy wore. Immigrants for example often wore brighter, clashing colors, in cheap flimsy materials, poor shoes and flippant hats – basically the extreme of a wealthy person." (Allen, 78)

Chanel made clothing for the middle and upper class, but was not able to cater to the lower class (Sessions, "What Clothing Cost in the 1920's"). That being said, this did not stop fashion from following her lead and allowing cheaper designers to imitate her styles. This gave the lower class the chance to endeavor to break gender norms. Her fashion allowed women to be liberated from previous gender constraints as well as reject new ones that were forming through other fashion designers in the 1950s.

E. Prelude to Alexander McQueen

In the next chapter the same theories and deconstruction of fashion garments will be applied to facilitate the translation of Alexander McQueen's three fashion garments, the feather dress, antler dress and spine corset. In the next chapter, McQueen does what

Chanel was not given the opportunity to exploit, due to her time period, utilize signs found in genderless beings and place them on women to help them break free from gender stereotypes of the twenty-first century. Rather than take masculine signs and solely place them on women's clothing to give them more power, McQueen will utilize women's genderless sexual power to create the femme fatale by creating hybrids and utilizing animal signs. Decoding these three garments will demonstrate how McQueen's transformation of women into a hybrid or creature that is genderless is a means of attaining a step closer to true androgyny.

CHAPTER 3

Alexander McQueen

Lee Alexander McQueen was one of the most influential, imaginative and provocative British designers of his generation. His clothing both challenged and expanded conventional parameters of fashion to express ideas about culture politics and identity. McQueen saw beyond clothing's physical constraints to its ideological and conceptual possibilities, addressing questions related to race, class, gender, religion, environment, fashion and of course, sexuality. Similar to women during Chanel's time, modern day women struggle against the social constructs of success. Gender inequality is defined as "the disparity in status, power and prestige between people who identify as women and men" (Mundy, "The Richer $ex: Women Are Overtaking Men as America's Breadwinner. Why That's Good for Everyone"). People should warn against declaring victory for women workers. Although women have made large strides in gender equality, there is still a large disparity between the number of women in the workforce and the wage gap. The strives are evident in the data that reveals that "Almost 40% of wives make more money than their husbands…Women today make up almost 60% of U.S. college students and earn the majority of doctorates and master's degrees…In the majority of the U.S. metro areas, single, childless women in their 20s make more per dollar than their male peers" (Mundy, "The Richer $ex: Women Are Overtaking Men as America's Breadwinner. Why That's Good for Everyone"). On the contrary however, gender inequality is still noted through the obvious wage gap that proves that between women and men working full time, women earn 81% of a man's weekly median wage

and through the very slow increase in percentage of women who are managers in the last twenty years, which has only risen from 35% to 38% (Mundy, "The Richer $ex: Women Are Overtaking Men as America's Breadwinner. Why That's Good for Everyone"). McQueen rebelled against the stigma towards feminine sex and sought to prove that women were strong without men around and that sex was not necessary to fulfill their lives. Unlike Chanel who begins to focus on masculine qualities in her clothing to give women strength, McQueen embraces the wide range of female qualities women are born with and utilizes them to give women strength, resolve and versatility.

In this chapter, this study will delve deeper into Alexander McQueen's empowerment of women through the creation of the femme fatale in his three garments, the feather dress, antler dress and spine corset. In the nineteenth century, according to society the femme fatale was a signified of female sexuality as perverse and deathly, due to the increasing social, economic and sexual emancipation of women (Dijkstra, 6) (Showalter, 23). McQueen revived the style of the femme fatale but changed its signified. Throughout all three of his designs, this study will explain how McQueen's garment codes change the sign of the femme fatale from fear of death to a fear of her strength and examine how McQueen utilized hybrid and animal signs to give women genderless power signs to get a step closer to true androgyny.

A. Accessibility of McQueen's Clothing

With this, the question of accessibility arises with whether all women are given the chance to become genderless and get one step closer to androgyny and gender equality. Most of McQueen's initial runway designs, which are examined in this chapter,

are extremely expensive and only a very few upper class people can afford them. Although at first only upper class women are given the liberty to express themselves as genderless through the use of McQueen's garments, the alternate means with which his designs reach the middle class and common folk are fast and plentiful. His inspirations and designs ultimately reach the middle and lower class through the trickle down theory or effect. One of the most important principles of fashion is the trickle-down theory, introduced by Thorstein Veblen in 1899, that theorized that new technologies and consumer goods begin in the upper class, until companies manufacture more affordable versions and they spread slowly downward through different classes till they arrive to the lower class (Veblen, 11). Georg Simmel, specifically applied Veblen's concept to the fashion industry and personal style stating that the lower class copies the clothing and signs that the upper class initially uses in an attempt to achieve upward socio-economic mobility and the same opportunities of the upper class (Simmel, 130 - 155). Although these theories came out in the early twentieth century, the affordability aspect is still highly applicable today in modern fashion as different lower end brands recreate the same concepts a year or two later at a more affordable price (Walmsley, "Trickle-Down Theory"). To support this claim, a quote was chosen from modern day Anna Wintour, Editor-in-Chief of American Vogue, who states that McQueen's "imagination had an extraordinary trickle-down effect, so what you may see looking very extreme on the runway would end up in people's closets in a much more understandable way" (Gompertz, "Anna Wintour on Alexander McQueen's Legacy"). Wintour's words mimic the same phrase spoken by Miranda Priestly, Editor-in-Chief of Vogue in the 2006 modern day film *The Devil Wears Prada*, a movie presumably based on the life of Anna

Wintour. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda Priestly speaks about the trickle-down

effects stating:

> "You go to your closet and you select . . . I don't know . . . that lumpy blue
>
> sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself
>
> too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is
>
> that that sweater is not just blue, it is not turquoise. It is not lapis. It is actually
>
> cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la
>
> Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint
>
> Laurent . . . was not it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean
>
> quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it, uh,
>
> filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some
>
> tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin.
>
> However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs, and it is sort
>
> of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the
>
> fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for
>
> you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff."

Even if in today's mass-market someone is not able to buy a recreated garment inspired

by Alexander McQueen, the digital era has given women the possibility to experience

what it is like to be genderless. Today, websites such as *Rent the Runway*, allow women

who may not have the means to buy a designer dress to rent and order an Alexander

McQueen outfit for up to 90% off the retail dress. Due to the trickle-down effect that is

still present today, women of all social strata are given the ability to wear McQueen's genderless clothing and help break gender norms.

The reason behind the choice of the feather dress, antler dress and spine corset by Alexander McQueen is that each shows how he decides to use feminine power to a woman's advantage, rather than substitute it by using more masculine socially accepted connotations about strength. The notion that women do not need men can be seen as problematic, since McQueen himself, a man, is the one that aids in giving women power. This will be a topic that will be delved into in the next chapter. Each of the garments are an example of common materials he used to create his twenty-first century femme fatale as predatory, scary, powerful and half human. Rather than view a woman's femininity and sensuality as weak, McQueen endeavors to liberate women through all of his collections by shifting the signifieds of the exaggeration of the silhouette, nature, animal references and Victorian era garment codes that are present in these three designs. He was able to transfer each of these historical references from an earlier time period to a relevant novel signified for the twenty-first century. Much like Chanel, he creates a twenty-first century femme fatale that is allowed to attack and wound non-verbally should she need to protect herself from the imposing of gender cultural norms, while simultaneously exploiting the power of her sensuality. He elevates femininity from its currently disgraced state as weak and derogatory.

B. Feather Dress

The first of McQueen's ensemble to be decoded is the 2011 ready-to-wear feather dress (see Figure 3.1). The signs found within the feather dress are the duck feathers,

ostrich feathers, pale gray colors, ruffles, and baggy shape. Therefore the signs within this garment system are categorized as material, shape, accessory and color.

a. Silhouette

Beginning with the form, rather than create a straight cut silhouette that has no form, McQueen choses the signifier of a baggy design. Women in the twenty-first century are encouraged to seek beauty and attract men by exposing their bodies. Today, designers create fashion that shows more skin, is risqué and pushes consumers to purchase more promiscuous attire (Gray, "Alexander McQueen: Challenging Gender Norms in Fashion"). McQueen was against this idea and shook up the norm by defining beauty with the excess and the unusual, and drew attention to the womanly figure by covering it up (Suchy, "Alexander McQueen: Skirting Controversy – Nvate"). McQueen hoped to

3.1 Ready-to-wear 2011 Feather Dress.

make a splash by muddying the distinction between masculine and feminine, between soft and hard, and between what is preposterous and beautiful. The baggy design gives women more space for mobility rather than constraining their movements. Furthermore, by leaving certain areas of the body cached behind loose fabric, the emphasis is steered

away from the women's bodies and is fixated more on their face. The baggy silhouette's signified is therefore looking deeper into a woman's soul, into her personality and who she is rather than her appearance.

b. The Gray Area of Androgyny

Androgyny, also known as the third sex, is a natural mixing or combination of male and female signs. Androgyny is much like the color gray. Mixing black and white paint creates gray. Therefore, the color gray cannot be considered either black or white, but becomes a combination of both (Wilhelm, 5). Gray is the transition between the two colors. According to color historian Eva Heller, "Gris est trop faible pour être considéré comme masculin, mais trop menaçante pour être considéré comme une couleur féminine. Il n'est ni chaud ni froid, ni matérielle ou spirituelle. Avec gris, rien ne semble être décidé" ["Grey is too weak to be considered masculine, but it is too threatening to be considered a feminine color. It is neither cold nor hot, neither material nor spiritual. With grey, nothing seems to be decided."] (226). The signifier of the color gray in McQueen's feather dress is an unemotional color. Its signified is that of being detached, neutral and indecisive much like androgyny is neither male nor female but neutral, indecisive, a mix of both (Kemmis, "The Color Gray"). By utilizing the signified gray, McQueen gives way to gender bending by blurring shapes and colors making them indefinite and creating a sense of calm and composure as well as relief from this chaotic binary gendered imposed world.

c. Ruffles used as a Weapon rather than as a Form of Oppression

Ruffles, as noted before in Chanel's semiotic analysis, are a common feature of women's clothing. "Women were more likely to use undergarments to construct their fashionable figures – corsets to rearrange their flesh, petticoats and 'bums,' or crescent-shaped bustle pads, to enhance the hips. Their dresses served primarily as an outer covering, cut and trimmed to emphasize the form they had built" (Kidwell, 57). Much has not changed from the 1920s to today. Women still endeavor to achieve a look that society wants to see, one where waists appear tiny but still have a large bust and bottom area. This can be evidenced by Louis Vuitton's red tight fit dress made for Michelle William's grand debut on the Red Carpet at the 84th Annual Academy Awards in Hollywood in 2012. The strapless Louis Vuitton dress emphasizes the woman's shape of her body, keeps her body in place utilizing a corset, reduces mobility due to the tightness around the legs and creates a strong hourglass appearance through the ruffles surrounding her upper waist (see Figure 3.2 and 3.3). Women have historically been treated as inferior to men in many cultures and time periods. Highlighting feminine features in fashion can be used to objectify women and further instigate the notions of superiority and inferiority of men defined by gender norms (Gray, "Alexander McQueen: Challenging Gender Norms in Fashion"). When a man sees a woman revealing her feminine features and body, he immediately believes she has had prior sexual experience, which is almost never true. Viewing a woman as having sexual experience leads a man to believe she is less logical than a man because she gives herself away more often. This leads to the creation of a superiority and inferiority complex among different sexes and causes this gender binary and objectification.

In contrast, Alexander McQueen uses the signifier of ruffles to contest the norms of dress for women. Rather than accentuating women's curves, the woman's slim waist is cached under the signifier of the baggy ruffles, and rather than having straps that perfectly frame the bust area with defined cups that push up her breasts, the upper half is flat and the shoulders and neck are covered, hiding any female erogenous areas. The lack of skin showing from McQueen's design contrasts with the current trend of flesh that is seen in fashion. Society has taken advantage of skin as sexy, but McQueen utilizes the baggy ruffles, flat bust and slim waist as a signified of going against what society desires to see by covering up the body and making it seem more androgynous and equal to that of man. McQueen defines beauty as the personality and core of a woman, not her body and gender. For this reason, McQueen chose to cover up the woman with excess to hide her body and allow her to reveal her true self. Through this design, McQueen sends a message that women do not have to wear revealing clothes and continuously expose their body, but that they can be seen for who they are by confronting these gender norms.

3.2 2012 Louis Vuitton. Note the emphasis on the silhouette figure and

3.3 2012 Louis Vuitton. Note the signs of a corset seen on the back on the back of

d. Feathers

At the beginning, Ostriches and exotic birds were used for feathers. Today, the majority of feathers are imitations of exotic birds made from chicken, rooster and geese feathers. This is one of the many changes that the fashion world has experienced. While feathers have to this day remained a sign and language in clothing, over the years the signified has changed. The feather was first introduced in the Middle Ages, when men and women in elite social classes decorated their headdresses with plumes and jewelry to display their status (Goldstein Museum of Design, 1). The amount of feathers, typically exotic, commonly found on hats conveyed the high rank wearer (Goldstein Museum of Design, 1). In this case, feathers were used as an opulent way of garnering attention from others. This goes against what feathers were made to do, which is to attract attention or to intimidate.

3.4 2009. An example of how Alexander McQueen ruffles up white swan feathers as a means of scaring anyone who tries to get close to the woman.

In other cases, as seen in the Moulin Rouge, feathers are an erotic sign. However, the main signified of the signifier of feathers is of emancipation, mobility, individuality and freedom. This signified was first introduced onto the signifier of feathers by Yves Saint Laurent's 1960 design to promote sexual liberation. He paralleled women to being as free as birds (Stratford, "Birds of Paradise. Plumes and Feathers in Fashion"). McQueen uses the signifier of feathers in his design as a protective purpose, just like

birds use feathers as a protective function. He uses the ruffling up of the feathers as a signified to protect women and scare away anyone who tries to place gender stereotypes on them or violate their right and to show men that women are fierce and intimidating (see Figure 3.4). His dramatic use of feathers gives the signified an even harsher and intimidating feel to women so as to not make them seem fragile. Birds had always fascinated McQueen and even more specifically birds of prey, "Birds in flight fascinate me. I admire eagles and falcons. I'm inspired by a feather but also its color, its graphics, its weightlessness and its engineering. It is so elaborate. In fact I try and transpose the beauty of a bird to women" (Bolton, 70). The woman therefore, is no longer a woman or a bird. She is a new creature, a hybrid, genderless, mysterious and unknown. Free to be perceived as she wishes.

i. Ostrich Feathers

McQueen specifically used the signifier of Ostrich feathers in his feather dress due to his close connection with the Prince of Wales. The Prince of Wales was one of Alexander McQueen's first customers as well as the first man to present McQueen with the award for British designer of the year in 2001 (The Telegraph, "Alexander McQueen"). Till the seventeenth century, Ostrich feathers were worn on hats of cavaliers to proclaim their social status as physically and sexually dominant males (Williams, 129-130). Although, Ostrich feathers have now become a commodity to the public, one of the sole aristocrats to still use it is the Prince of
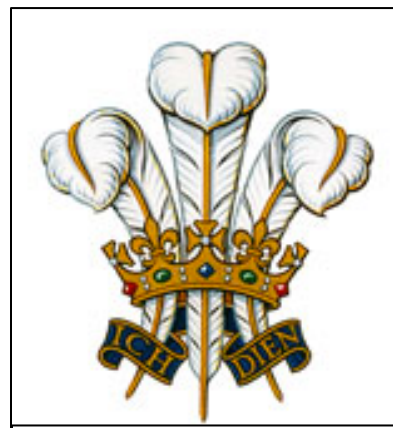
3.5 The emblem of the Prince of Wales' feathers.

Wales. The Prince of Wales wears a heraldic badge called the Prince of Wales's feathers that consists of three white ostrich feathers emerging from a gold coronet with multiple differing crosses (see Figure 3.5) (Prince of Wales, "Prince of Wales's Feathers"). Due to the hardness, toughness and durability of the feather, the ostrich feathers on the badge are a signified of a "shield for peace" that surrounds the aristocrat, in the old times a signified of a shield for jousting (Williams, 65). Due to McQueen's close connection to the Prince of Wales, McQueen's signifier of ostrich feathers is very similar in that its signified is that of a shield to protect women once again from imposed cultural gender norms and male dominant power.

ii. Duck Feathers

Being of Scottish origin, McQueen was known as a Romantic Nationalist. This was noted in his 1995 collection *Highland Rape* that spoke to the ethnic cleansing and rapes that the British forces committed in the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Bolton, 84). His collection was a powerful and heartfelt declaration of his Scottish national identity. His nationalism to his Scottish identity as well as Celtic is also seen through his choice of the signifier of duck feathers in the feather dress. Ducks can walk on land, swim and fly, therefore allowing them to roam the earth and sky. This allows the duck to be a signified of freedom and liberty, much like other birds. For the Celtics, whom McQueen felt close too, ducks symbolized a balance between the physical, emotional and spiritual worlds that can only come when freely expressing oneself, like ducks do (Morton, "Duck"). McQueen utilizes the signifier duck feathers as a signified for women to express themselves freely like ducks do to create a state of balance in the

world. This state of balance is further emphasized by the use of a feather's weight in old times as a scale of Balance and Order (Panek, "A Seeker's Thoughts").

e. Feather Dress Conclusion

Feathers and birds are a recurring motif in McQueen's collections. Although in the past feathers were generally a signified of value and refinement, it is evident that contemporary designers such as Yves Saint Laurent and Alexander McQueen have transformed the signified of feathers into freedom, spirituality, balance and strength. Rather than focus on the victimization of women through fashion, McQueen chose to focus on the predatory traits women behold. "These are clothes for strong women" (Hoare, 148).

C. Antler Dress

The next ensemble to be decoded is the 2006 ready-to-wear antler dress from *The Widows of Culloden* collection (see Figure 3.6). The signs found within the Gazelle dress are the resin antlers, lace, exaggerated forms, silk tulle bridal veil and ruffles. Therefore the signs within this garment system are categorized as form, accessory and fabric.

3.6 2006 Resin Antler Dress.

a. Silhouette

Unlike, Chanel who wanted to omit the natural form of the woman and many

unnecessary constricting frills; McQueen utilizes a woman's silhouette to exaggerate her

form, waist and hip lines and movements (Howes, 4). McQueen says, "I was interested in

the idea that there are no constraints on the silhouette. I wanted to exaggerate a woman's

form, almost along the lines of a classical statue" (Bolton, 105). McQueen chooses to

embrace femininity by utilizing its signifiers of exaggeration of the idealization of the

female form. McQueen wants to show that although women are restrained through the

exaggeration of their female form, the exaggeration of the body is a signified of

underlying strength of women and their utilization of sensuality as a form of attack, much

like the femme fatale. McQueen embraces the female form and tries to use the least

amount of male forms possible in his designs to show that women are strong even without men. They did not need male signifiers to be strong. Their sensuality as a signifier was already a signified of strength in its own. "When you see a woman wearing McQueen, there's a certain hardness to the clothing that makes her look powerful. It kind of fends people off" (Bolton, 60). In this case, women's fertility becomes a power and armor. In the antler dress, McQueen utilizes the silhouette to embrace the darker more primal power of women, rather than replacing their power with more masculine signifiers. "I try to push the silhouette. To change the silhouette is to change the thinking of how we look" (Bolton, 150). He further emphasizes women's power of sensuality through the use of the signifier of ruffles.

b. Ruffles

Ruffles always served as a symbol of higher class, however in this case, McQueen creates the signifier of ruffles by using exaggerating amounts of tulle to make incredible volume, further more exaggerating the signified of the power of the women and her place in society.

c. Lace

Lastly, McQueen creates an erotic effect through the use of the signifier of lace which creates a see-through effect that reveals the body beneath the clothing, therefore breaking through the masculinity of the body to portray their signified of the power of the sensuality of a woman.

d. Resin Antlers and Veil

The signifier of resin antlers represent a deer's antlers, which are only grown by male species. Placing the signifier on women is a signified of the strength and equal power females have to males. The signifier instills strength and protection to women who are more vulnerable. Antlers shed and grow ever year, therefore bearing a second signified of fertility and rebirth. This can be seen as sign of women being reborn as a something unknown and genderless, a hybrid.

The antlers as a signified of masculinity pierce through the silk tulle veil. "When we put the antlers on the model and then draped over it the lace embroidery that we had made, we had to poke them through a £2,000 piece of work. But then it worked because it looks like she's rammed the piece of lace with her antlers. There's always spontaneity. You've got to allow for that in my shows" (Bolton, 179). Throughout history, veils have been a signified of symbolism and status (Choron, 58). Throughout the years, the signified transformed to strength in women's sensuality. It came to be used to cover the face of women during special occasions such as weddings or funerals, so as to not kill men with their beauty (Choron, 63). This inhibition of a woman's power and sensuality disturbed McQueen. The antler dress was part of *The Widows of Culloden* Collection that was designed to tell the story of the countless widows that stemmed from the 1746 Battle of Culloden (MET, "Widows of Culloden"). Therefore, the utilization of a veil as a sign of mourning was a must since women were forced to shield their beauty from other men during their time of mourning. Thapan's theory of deconstruction of fashion to obliterate constructed societal norms comes into play here when McQueen utilizes the signifier to create an effect of romantic entrapment, but then deconstructs its signified by piercing it

with a fierce, masculine strength. This causes a shift in the veils signified from entrapment of feminine power and beauty to strength and sensuality. "I spent a long time learning how to construct clothes, which is important to do before you can deconstruct them" (Bolton, 30).

e. Antler Dress Conclusion

Unlike Chanel, who endeavors to strengthen women by chiefly making them equal to man, McQueen decides to utilize the social constructs of the idealized feminine form to his advantage to show that women do not need men or need to assimilate to masculine gender norms to be strong. McQueen has helped break down gender stereotypes for women and men even more so by helping to liberate, strengthen and free women from their sexuality by transforming them into genderless hybrid creatures with strong feminine and masculine signs of power. He uses what women were born with as a means of instilling them with a sense of power. Therefore, overcoming this sense of inferiority of the male body and making the features of the female body equally as powerful. In this case, rather than work against gender performativity, McQueen utilizes gender performativity to his advantage to instill fear of women's sensuality in society. McQueen goes on to say, "I try to modify fashion like scientists by offering what is relevant to today and what will continue to be so tomorrow. I do this to transform mentalities more than the body" (Numéro, "Alexander McQueen"). McQueen still manages to change society's reaction to this repetitive social act because he changes the context of the signs and symbols in a way to remove explicit difference between men and women.

D. Spine Corset

The last concept decoded by Alexander McQueen is that of the 1998 haute couture spine corset (see Figure 3.7). The signs found within the spine corset are the corset and the curled dog tail. Therefore, the signs within this garment system are categorized as form. McQueen believes the back to be the most androgynous part of the body, the most erotic and the most vulnerable (Tutter, "Gorgeous Metamorphoses: Alexander McQueen and Francesca Woodman"). To McQueen "the bottom of the spine – that's the most erotic part of anyone's body, man or woman" (Fisher, "Bright Star: The Rise and Rise of Alexander McQueen, the Bad Boy of

3.7 1997 modern aluminum corset with black leather.

British Fashion"). Many feminists consider corsets to this day "a product of patriarchy dominated sexual culture" that defines women's bodies as sexually desirable and encloses them in rigid positions that create a cultural sense of enslavement (MacNevin, "The Corset: Is It Feminist") (Workman, 70). Unlike Chanel, who viewed corsets as gender enslavement, McQueen utilizes the aluminum corset as a sign of female empowerment. Once again, he utilizes a woman's femininity as a valuable and powerful construct that should be exalted. He uses a woman's sexuality as a means for revenge in this world that has victimized her power and autonomy. He "wanted to create a femme fatale, a strong woman, a sexual woman, a dangerous woman" (Kunzle, 245). McQueen

utilizes the notion of the femme fatale once again to place a signified of sexual power on women's corsets.

a. Corset in S&M culture as Female Strength

To define the corset as a sign of sexual power, McQueen looked to the S&M culture he was known for portraying through his designs. In S&M, "the dominatrix wears her corset as armor," therefore controlling whoever is around her and protecting herself (Steele, "The Corset: A Cultural History," 116). The signifier of the corset in this sexual context shifts from a signified of "women's plight as 'exquisite slave" (Workman, 64) to a signified of "female sexual empowerment" (Steele, "The Corset: A Cultural History," 118). Although McQueen shifted the signified of the corset, the form of the corset that creates a small waist "remained a signifier of nubile femininity and fertility" (Steele, "The Corset: A Cultural History," 119).

b. Curled Dog Tail

An additional androgynous edge is added to the spine corset through the signifier of the curled dog tail at the end of lower back. The curled dog tail could be alluding to a signifier of a human animal hybrid or to a huntress wearing remains of her prey. In dogs with curly tails, the more aroused a dog gets the tighter its tail curls, this is also called a gay tail. The signifier's signified here is an erotic function of the androgynous area of the body that is felt by both man and women alike. The androgynous' of the signifier is furthermore emphasized through the placement of an erect tail, which can be seen as a signifier of an erect male erogenous zone, onto a socially deemed feminine product, such

as the corset. The signifier is transformed into a metamorphic hermaphrodite with a signified of male strength, allowing for women to defend their backs against predators. McQueen does not utilize male signifiers very often, but when he does it is to create a hybrid. He attempts to evoke women that instill fear by making them into an androgynous weapon. When utilizing the word weapon throughout this paper, it is not meant to denote the transformation of a woman into something that could inflict bodily harm to someone else. The use of the word weapon is used to represent the transformation of a woman into a weapon of defense as a means of contending against another cultural or societal force. The woman is neither man nor woman, but rather a creature. She is genderless.

c. Spine Corset Conclusion

McQueen makes it so "the modern-day woman wears a corset on the outside of her clothing as a sign of her sexual liberation, power and prowess rather than the traditional idea of the corset as a tool of repression and restriction" (Stover, "The Return of the Tight Squeeze"). McQueen breaks through gender boundaries by utilizing the tools gender performativity offers and bending them. Rather than see repetitive social acts and constructs that society imposes onto women to create a gender binary as a sign of weakness and limitation of gender expression, McQueen utilizes these gender cultural norms as a means of elevating femininity from its currently disgraced state as weak and derogatory. Essentially, McQueen is "valuing women for being women" (Shaw, 17).

E. Prelude to Analysis

In the next chapter, we will do a quick compare and contrast of the two methods in which Alexander McQueen and Coco Chanel went about endeavoring to break the gender norms of their relative time period. Analyzing the methods in which the two designers utilized the power of their signs during their respective time periods will allow me to uncover whether there was an evolution of gender stereotypes and whether signs are being used to break down gender norms in a different manner today. An analysis will be done on the utilization of signifiers as a way of constructing and deconstructing societal gender norms of the time, the utilization of objects that are close to designers in their garments as statements of women's strength against brutal forces of society, the utilization of male or female signs to make the female stronger, and the evolution of female signifiers from the early twentieth century to today. An accumulation of all the data in the next chapter will help us infer whether there has been an evolution of gender stereotypes, signs and methodologies between the two designers and their respective eras and will help us uncover where were revolve around the question of the breaking or reinforcing of gender norms through fashion today.

CHAPTER 4

Is there Evidence of An Evolution?

After decoding some of the signs found within Alexander McQueen and Coco Chanel's designs, one can infer that they both helped break gender norms through two very different yet similar means. McQueen and Chanel both utilized similar signifiers to construct and deconstruct gender identity but differed in their approach and methodology. In this chapter, this study will compare and contrast the signs utilized by both designers in order to allow me to uncover whether there was an evolution of gender stereotypes and whether signs are being used to liberate gender norms in a different manner today.

A. Accessibility

The first matter that will be discussed is the similarity and evolution in the accessibility of Alexander McQueen and Chanel's clothing from the twentieth century to today. As aforementioned, in the earlier twentieth century, Chanel's clothing was available to the upper and middle class, but not to the lower class. Although, her clothing was not available to the lower class, her accessories, such as her costume jewelry, was accessible to all classes. Much like Chanel, McQueen too believed in the idea of creating designs that were accessible to all classes. He too deems that "the idea of mixing luxury and mass-market fashion is very modern, very now – no one wears head-to-toe designer any more" (Bolton, 102). The inspiration of her clothing on the other hand was accessible to all classes through the trickle-down effect. Her inspiration would be taken and recreated by different designers into garments that were more affordable for the lower

class. This allowed the lower class to rebel against cultural norms and endeavor to break gender norms as well. The same is seen today with McQueen's designs. The difference herein lies in that there has been an evolution in the number of mediums clothing can be sold through now. With the creation of the Internet, websites now allow ordinary every day people to rent or purchase McQueen clothing at discounted prices. This gives the lower class the opportunity to wear the haute couture and ready-to-wear outfits designed by McQueen himself allowing them to experience what it feels like to break through gender norms through the creators who started the movement themselves. This digital era has allowed luxury designers to cater to an even vaster audience then a century ago, therefore allowing the breaking of gender norms through their own designs to permeate even lower in the social strata.

B. Manipulating Culturally Gendered Constructed Signs

It is clear from the last two analyses that both designers utilized many signs to go against how society defined gender. In the 1920s and 1950s, society imposed this ideal of women as constricted, refrained from doing manual labor and impelled to do domestic labor which was mirrored in the clothing designed for women by male designers. Their clothing was revealing of the erotic feminine areas and over-emphasized the naturalness of the female body. Men on the other hand, were free to work, fight in the war and dress comfortably. Chanel reacted by allowing women to move more freely, take a more authoritative non-verbal stance and allow them to feel empowered to take action through her dress and designs. She did this by mainly creating designs that were loose, covered up the natural shape of a woman's body and did not emphasize physical gender differences,

with the exception of a couple of designs such as the Camellia dress. Although to this day women have made huge strides, society is still trying to contain women to their limited domestic role. To support this claim, recall the data presented in chapter three. Today women are being limited from excelling in the workforce through the lingering wage gap between genders and the lack of qualified women who are not being placed in executive level positions. However, the difference lies in the designs. Unlike the 1920s and 1950s that over emphasized women's bodies by covering them up with frills and ruffles, clothing designs imposed by society today revolve around tight and revealing clothing. This causes a reversal in McQueen's reaction to society's imposed gender norms. Unlike Chanel, who chooses to make women's clothing more revealing and loose and deemphasize women's physical features, McQueen chooses to cover up women's body's by adding extra ruffles and frills, while still leaving plenty of space for women to move freely, and emphasizes a woman's natural features. This way caching the skin that society so fervently wants to see, while simultaneously going against society by using a woman's body and sexuality as a weapon rather then allowing it to be seen as weak and derogatory. The similarity herein lays in the designer's transformation of societal gender constructed signs to go against how society wants to view women. The difference is in the method in which the designers had to attack these novel gender stereotypes. It is clear that there has been an evolution of gender stereotypes, but this will be delved into even deeper in the next chapter.

C. Silhouettes

During Chanel's era, women's busts and curves were emphasized to make it difficult for them to labor in the workplace, to eroticize the female figure in a derogatory manner and to further emphasize the physical gender differences between male and female bodies. Chanel blurred gender boundaries by freeing women from curved bodies by flattening the bust, therefore creating an androgynous body shape. This allowed women to feel equal to men. McQueen utilizes the same signs today as a means of freeing women from similar gender constraints. He makes women's bodies more androgynous and equal to man by flattening women's chests and hiding their female erogenous areas to go against what society desires to see. This androgyny is further explored in both eras by both designers through the exploitation of the back, or the bottom of the spine, as an erotic yet androgynous area. Once again blurring gender lines through their designs in similar manners across a century.

D. Can a Male Designer be a Feminist?

The most evident difference between the methodology of the two designers that could be seen as problematic is the fact that Chanel is a woman endeavoring to break gender norms for women, while McQueen is a man endeavoring to break gender norms for women. In a recent 1994 headline of an article in the *New Straits Times*, Chanel is remembered stating that when she "first banished corsets in favor of comfort, she argued that women know best what women want." The article went on to elaborate on how Chanel claimed that:

"Men were not meant to dress women, Coco Chanel once said of her right to design for her own sex. "Was he mad, this man?" she said of Christian Dior and his exaggerated New Look of the Fifties. "Was he making fun of women? How, dressed in 'that old thing' could they come and go, live or anything?" (New Straits Times, "Sex In the Wardrobe")

Chanel makes a sound argument. What actually lies behind what seems to be male feminism is misogyny. Most men feel that by standing up for women they are ultimately saving them, which is simply just another version of misogyny. However, this does not mean that men cannot deem themselves feminists. To be a feminist a man needs to want to help women without the idea in mind that he is saving them (Berlatsky, "Can Men Really Be Feminists?"). A true male feminist acknowledges that as long as women are free, men will not be either, which is exactly what McQueen does (Berlatsky, "Can Men Really Be Feminists?"). McQueen is quoted speaking about being aware of the difference between what it means to be a feminist and misogyny stating:

"I design clothes because I don't want women to look innocent and naïve, I want women to look stronger! I don't like women being taken advantage of. I don't like men whistling at women in the street. They deserve more respect. I like men to keep their distance from women. I like men to be stunned by an entrance. I've seen a woman get nearly beaten to death by her husband. I now what misogyny is. I want people to be afraid of the women I dress." (McQueen)

Questioning femininity is essentially questioning what it is to be a woman and a man, because women are inescapably associated with femininity and men with masculinity. This ideology of misogyny "is a cage for everyone, as long as women aren't free, men won't be either" (Berlatsky, "Can Men Really Be Feminists?").

Whether Chanel would consent to what McQueen is doing or not, he is still helping women break through gender norms, and not necessarily saving them. What further supports this statement is the fact that he himself was openly gay. In 2005, a New York Times article revealed statistics regarding awards given by the Council of Fashion Designers of America. The data showed that out of the thirty-seven prizes awarded by the Council of Fashion Designers of America since 1986, eight went to women and twenty-nine to men (De Castella, "Fashion Week: Why Are Women Finally Designing Women's Clothes?"). What made this statistic even more interesting was the fact that twenty of those men were openly gay (De Castella, "Fashion Week: Why Are Women Finally Designing Women's Clothes?"). Ever since this article was posted, a younger generation of female designers has arisen such as Isabel Marant, Stella McCartney, Miuccia Prada and Sarah Burton. This raises the question of whether men are still trying to control women by designing clothing for women themselves and if they are giving women the permission to change gender norms only on their command. Further analysis shows that in the twenty-first century this is not the case. Twenty of the male designers who won the award were gay, which shows that the majority of the designers also come from a marginalized community much like that of women. Women and the gay community are similar in that after decades of hiding and being ashamed of who they are and what they

want to be, they finally are accepting their sexuality and beginning to endeavor to live how they choose. Gay males related to women because they too have suffered through similar levels of oppression such as women. McQueen states, "I came to terms with not fitting in a long time ago. I never really fit in. I don't want to fit in" (Bolton, 35). Through this close relationship with women, the gay community represents another piece of the marginalized community that is trying to break gender norms as well and overcome the gender stereotypes society imposes on them.

The argument that women design for themselves while men design for women as an object is also misleading. As a gay designer, typically "men design what they would wear if they were a woman" (New Straits Times, "Sex In the Wardrobe"). When designing for his female alter ego, McQueen is endeavoring to bring himself closer to the female species. McQueen elaborates on this notion by explaining how when designing for women on the runway he either was designing for his female alter ego or for his powerless, sexually, physically and mentally abused sister. This was his image of women and he did not want that. That is why "Janet became "the blueprint" for his clothes, a woman who was "vulnerable but strong." Sometimes the woman on the runway was McQueen himself, other times it was Janet" (Wilson, "Fierce, Feathered and Fragile"). There has been an evolution in the last century in that as the attempt to blur gender lines evolved, women were no longer the only ones who felt marginalized in society. It was no longer men versus women, but it now was a multitude of smaller marginalized groups that felt genderless as well that understood women's constraint of gender norms. Women are no longer the only beings who know what women want to wear, but the gay marginalized group who has also experienced the same suffering as women in the last

century feels the need to break through the gender norms imposed on them. This is why McQueen designing for women in the twenty-first century does not make him a misogynist but makes him a feminist.

E. Extent to which Signs are emphasized

Both designers utilize an object that is very close to them in many of their garments as a statement of a woman's strength against the brutal forces of society. Chanel utilizes the sign of the Camellia flower in her clothing as a signified of strength of women both physically and sexually. Birds and feathers are a signifier of the same ideas of eroticism and intimidation that are reflected as a signified onto women of their freedom and power. In both cases, these powerful erotic signs are used as a means to protect women, scare away anyone who tries to place gender stereotypes on them and show that they are fierce and intimidating. This allows the designers to remove the derogatory ideology that has been stereotyped on women both of the twentieth and twenty-first century as week and fragile and allow society to see women as a beautiful force to be reckoned with. The difference herein lies in the designer's choice of the object. Chanel's use of the Camellia is more subtle and enchanting. She doesn't necessary utilize it is powers to the fullest extent, still allowing some leeway for female gender stereotypes to seep through her designs due to the era in which she lived. McQueen on the other hand, doesn't hold back in his utilization of the birds and feathers, consequently creating a full-blown androgynous creature. It is neither male nor female, neither bird nor woman. We will reintroduce the extent to which each designer could use their skills in culture in the conclusion, which will examine even the use of male

signifiers.

F. Obscuring Masculine or Feminine Text

Chanel pushes the liberation of women further by using signifiers from male garments in women's to blur gender lines. Wool, three quarter sleeves, black and bowties were all signifiers that were worn more often by men than women as a signified of authority and labor. Today, McQueen refuses to solely use male signifiers to empower women, but rather, he decides to utilize more feminine sensual characteristics and mix male and female signs as signifiers instead as a signified of their equal strength to men and make the human body more androgynous. Unlike Chanel, who endeavors to strengthen women by chiefly making them equal to man, McQueen decides to utilize the social constructs of the idealized feminine form more often than Chanel to his advantage to show that women do not need men to be strong. Although McQueen embraced more of the female form then male signifiers, he too occasionally used male signifiers such as Ostrich feathers and antlers to create a "creature" or "hybrid." Both designers use male signifiers to make woman more equal to men and they both go one step further and use male signifiers to completely blur gender lines, turning humans into an androgynous weapon, neither male nor female. However, there has been a clear evolution in the visibility of male signifieds in garments from the 1920s to today. Chanel used to obscure masculine text through the use of finishing touches so as to avoid making extremely harsh gender statements and sidestep some gender controversies. McQueen on the other hand refused to obscure any masculine text and decided to set it free.

G. Evolution of Femininity

It is evident that Chanel placed an emphasis on the incorporation of male signifiers in women's garments and was critical of the construction of feminine signifiers. This is noted by her view of the corset as a means of gender enslavement. To Chanel, corsets were a female signifier used to restrict movements and construct an over exaggerated feminine body with artificial curves that ignored the natural lines. Today, there has been a drastic evolution of the female signifier of the corset and in the definition of femininity. The corset is no longer a signified of an artificial restricted woman but it is seen as a signified of female empowerment, sexual power and modern femininity. The evolution of female signifiers, such as the corset, and their impact on the modern day connotation of femininity, will be further analyzed in the subsequent chapter.

H. Conclusion

In this chapter we have compared and contrasted the ways in which Chanel and McQueen utilized similar signifiers as a way of constructing and deconstructing gender identity. We also uncovered the way in which both designers have utilized similar signifiers and evolved or transformed their signifieds over the years. Lastly, we examined the methods both designers used in constructing gender through their garment systems and evaluated how they were relevant to their time periods. In the last chapter, we will explore in more depth the evolution of gender stereotypes, signs and methodologies the designers used and attempt to uncover where we stand on the question of gender liberation through fashion today.

CHAPTER 5

Evolution Conclusion

Fashion of the 1920s, 1950s and today have a critical impact on self-expression. Each era used similar signs with an altered signified or different signs to aid in the breaking of gender norms and stereotypes. From these reflections, an evolution of gender stereotypes was drawn from a difference in the extent to which Chanel and McQueen used their signs as powers of gender bending in society and an evolution of female signifiers from the 1920s to today. In this final chapter, this study will expound on the evolution of signifieds and signifiers in the breaking of gender norms from the early twentieth century to today. Finally, this study will aim to emphasize that if we can better articulate the meaning behind fashion designs as a means to influence our own gender understanding, we can better recognize the importance of the power that fashion has on societal gender views and its influence over not only individuality, but culture as well.

A. Evolution of Gender Stereotypes of Femininity and Masculinity

From the 1920s to today, there has been an evolution of gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. In the early twentieth century, women were compelled to cover up their body with frills and extra fabric while simultaneously over emphasizing and over exaggerating their female body features making them seem weak and fragile. There sexuality was confined, as it was inappropriate for women to show skin because it was fetishized by culture. Exposing skin or fetish fashions, which always started at lower class levels, was perceived as the costume of "perverts and prostitutes" (Lunning, 109).

Rather than crave women's flesh, men were threatened by it, a concept that is very different from what culture perceives as attractive today. The response to gender stereotypes taken by both Chanel and McQueen was more of a feminist protest antifashion against the patriarchy that has managed over the centuries to oppress women and to relegate them to inferior roles through their fashion garments. Chanel endeavored to close the gap between classes and gender roles employing a utilitarian antifashion outrage strategy. She created a counterculture that distanced women from cultural norms, weakened them and scandalized its dominant culture group.

Chanel attacked these gender stereotypes by deconstructing the societal norm of femininity and masculinity by uncovering women's bodies, streamlining and erasing the waist from the silhouette, emphasizing plunging necklines and backs and exposing arms and lower legs. She essentially created an "androgynous dress code that would broaden the discussion of the relationship between the sexes" (Buxbaum, 32). The signifier of exposing neck, back, arms and calves was assigned a signified of female liberation. As women began to smoke, drink and become more promiscuous and blunt about their sexual attractiveness they began to expose their sexuality even more, therefore signifying their freedom to utilize their sexuality as they please in society. We can see Chanel's attack on this gender stereotype take an even more modern stance in the 1950s, when the hemlines rose even more, consequently bearing more skin around the calf area. As time progressed however, women's body exposure lost its signified of female liberation and challenging social convention. As more women began adopting the fashion of exposing their bodies through their clothing, the signified of less clothing adorning the body shifted to the signified it is today.

To back up my inference that the revealing of skin through clothing became inefficient as a signifier of female liberation and that its signified changed, this study will call upon historian James Laver's 1969 theory of Shifting Erogenous Zones (Reilly, 40). The naked body as a whole is anti-erotic because it leaves nothing to the imagination. Therefore, when adorning clothing, over time different parts of the body are exposed consequentially becoming eroticized (Reilly, 40). When a particular body becomes overexposed, it is no longer sexually enticing, so a new area of the body needs to be exposed. This explains why styles of women's fashion change in order to reveal different body parts (Reilly, 45). In Chanel's case, in the 1920s the legs, arms, back and neck became eroticized through her clothing as she covered and flattened the breasts. However, as the years progressed, the signifier of exposed calves and back no longer threatened men as the erogenous zones changed from the back in the 1930s, the shoulders in the 1940s and 1950s and again the legs in the 1960s (Reilly, 47). Psychologist John Flugel writes about how the fashion industry tends to fixate on one particular body part until its exhausted all of its erotic potential (Nasrulla, 73). Chanel's eroticized signified wore off as men began to deconstruct and reconstruct the signifier's meaning to fit society's ideals. Men had gotten so used to seeing this scandalous erogenous zone that they became disinterested in its and it lost its effect. It normalized into society's cultural norms and no longer emphasized the power of a woman's sensuality. In response, Chanel deconstructed her fashion garments and reconstructed them, shifting the eroticized zone over time, allowing it to remain a signified of women liberating their sexuality against what society's norms were at the time.

The continuous shift in erogenous zones through fashion has led to women's

bodies being extremely exposed in society today. This continuous shift in women's fashion has allowed men to manipulate the tool women were using as a mediator of gender power to their own advantage. Men have deconstructed and reconstructed the signified of exposing skin in fashion from a signified of female liberation from societal constraints to a signified of objectifying women. They have transformed women's exposure of skin in fashion into a tool that makes women feel weak, exploited and akin to sex objects that are just pretty to look at. Once again, women are being dumbed down to what they could actually contribute to society. Unlike Chanel who was trying to uncover women's bodies to go against the gender stereotypes of her époque that forced women to cover up, today McQueen goes against the gender norm of women exposing their bodies by covering them up. David Wolfe, creative director of The Doneger Group, a fashion merchandising and consulting firm in New York claims, "you can get shocked for only so long, we are reaching the saturation point with extremism" (Nasrulla, 24). McQueen expresses women's femininity and female power without showing skin. In the early twentieth century, there was a utilitarian outrage at the fashion garments being created with extra layers of fabric. In the twenty-first century there is a reimplementation of extra fabric and frills placed over the body that is utilized to make a mockery of societies own tool to make women inferior. McQueen realizes that no matter what women endeavor to do to break free from these gender norms, society will always manage to deconstruct and reconstruct their signifier's signified. That's why he decides to use women's own bodies, sexuality, and femininity as a weapon of defense while simultaneously making a mockery of any form of oppression society tries to inflict on women by deconstructing and reconstructing their signifieds.

B. Evolution in the Extent to which the Fetish Culture is accentuated

Aside from the evolution of gender stereotypes and different ways in which Chanel and McQueen tackle the breaking of their époque's gender norms, there has also been an evolution in the magnitude with which designers use their signs to break gender stereotypes. In the early twentieth century, Chanel did not accentuate female and male signifieds as strongly as her counterparts today. In fact, fashion was by no means masculine as noted by her obscuring of male signifieds with female signifieds. What arose during this time was a shift from the focus of what lied underneath the feminine body to the female being herself adorning clothes. The reinforcement of female sexuality had its limits. Although Chanel managed to bind women's breasts, straighten the silhouette and create a boyish look, she suggested more of a remote sophistication or sporty independence rather than overt eroticism, which is noted today. Unquestionably, women no longer had to mold to the traditional standard of beauty of the time, which was a big bust and small hips, because they could hide their bodies under their clothing. This allowed them to liberate themselves both physically and socially and created a new era of feminine independence (Blackman, 11). What Chanel managed to give women through her signifier of the straight silhouette was a signified of *respectable* freedom of sexuality. She gave women the liberty to enjoy physical freedom, but the eligibility and appearance of a woman were still important. She created the early twentieth century signified of androgyny that gave women greater independence and merged genders signifying a desire to inscribe masculine power upon the female body.

However, the fetish culture Chanel instilled in a few of her garments the majority of the time remained underground. Chanel played with the vocabulary of the fetish

female by removing key signs such as the corset to flatten the chest and replaced it with leather accessories, such as the belt from her boyish look ensemble, or silk in her dresses; however, she never made a strong long lasting statement regarding the fetish culture of the time. Much like exposing ones skin, fetish fashions, which started at lower class levels, were known as the costumes of "perverts and prostitutes" (Lunning, 109). As aforementioned, women were still constrained to their appearance and eligibility if they wished to survive in their society. Since Chanel was restrained in the magnitude with which she could use her vestimentary signs, individualism and difference became the prime focus of fashion in the twentieth century. Fashion garments signified power, specifically relating to gender and social class.

This study assumes that today's fashion has come to signify disenchantments with the world. Due to the deconstruction of fashion as a cultural response to social and political unrest, growing recognition of both heterosexual and homosexual male standing in today's society, and fashion turning into a visual arts tool that communicates sociopolitical ideas and incites revolution, today's fashion garments have become a global symbol. The use of fashion garments as global signs that are globally manufactured, globally marketed and globally distributed, have forced the individual to become a homogenized citizen of the world (Bonnie, 214). This homogenization has led to a blurring of gender stereotypes and an evolution in the cultural norms of femininity and masculinity within the dominant Western culture. This globalization has led to a pastiche of multiple classes, decades, cultures, statuses from eighteenth and nineteenth century and today (Bonnie, 214). The fetish culture has now infused its way into fashion and its tool has been utilized to erase help the marginalization of social classes. By

utilizing the reverse of the trickle-down theory, the trickle-up theory that takes the fetish culture from a lower marginalized class and makes its way up into upper class fashion, designers have strived to create a more homogenized culture (Simmel, 130 - 155). Garment codes that initially differentiated marginalized groups such as the fetishists, queers, and women from the main culture are now slowly entering mainstream societal norms.

The second deduction is that while female and male signified were underplayed during Chanel's era, today female and male signifieds are overemphasized. McQueen takes on a more aggressive embrace of sensual passion than Chanel did in the earlier twentieth century. Today McQueen manipulates a woman's full figure to convey a full range of powerful sexual appetite, freely indulged and shamelessly savored (Segal, 90). Today McQueen over exaggerates female and male signifieds and makes a mockery of old constraints, therefore rendering them fictive. By utilizing the full force of the female fetish culture and not caching it behind male signified, McQueen has managed to break gender barriers. Through the utilization of female fetishist culture the line dividing what is being aroused and what causes the arousal is ambiguous (Steele, "Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power", 12). This is an indicator that fetishism overlaps different sexual variants (Steele, "Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power", 12).

C. Evolution in Female Signifiers

Lastly, there has been an evolution in female signifiers. We can very evidently see the change in female signifieds of certain signifiers from the twentieth century to today by utilizing the commutation test. The commutation test, mentioned in chapter one, is a

test that allows us to spot if there is a change in the signified, or plane of content, by introducing a change to the signifier, or plane of expression (Barthes, "Elements of Semiology," 65 – 66). By combining different signifiers within the syntagm, the user can generate a change in meaning from the substitution that changes the expression but not the content. In this case, the signifier of the corset will be used to show the evolution of female signifieds. As the commutation test explains, the corset has a fixed element, the corset itself, so the variation is seen in the change of the signified, or the adversary of wearing the corset under garment rather than over garments. When the signifier, or the corset, is worn under garments it is a signified of liberation constraint or women forced to were corsets to meet the ideal beauty of the time and look attractive. However, when the signifier is worn on the outside as it is in the twentieth century, the corset becomes a signified of sexual power. Obviously, in today's corsets designed by McQueen, other elements of the garment participate in the signification as well, such as the hybrid tail found at the end of the corset. Without the tail, the change in signification would be impossible (Barthes, "The Fashion System," 61).

Female signifiers have also evolved within the female fetish culture. When Chanel created signifiers that exposed more skin, she deconstructed the female fetish of the fashionable Victorian world and constructed women as alluring sexual objects to be desired by men since it was something, which was frowned upon during her era. Today, female fetish is deconstructed and conventional prettiness is left behind. A tough, menacing and threatening woman is created instead (Lynch, 108).

D. Evolution in Cultural Norms of Femininity and Masculinity

Each and every one of these evolutions culminates in an evolution in both the cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. Since the twentieth century, the definition of femininity has evolved. Although its signified is still associated with traits such as being weak and dependent, we are beginning to see a shift in the signified to embracing one's own identity. Today, femininity is not about being weak, submissive and afraid of revealing and using one's own body, but it is about harnessing one's body's strength, power and sexuality. The shift in the signified of femininity has respectively caused a shift in the signified of masculinity. When women chose to wear male signs in their clothing, they chose to redefine not only what it meant to be feminine but what it meant to be masculine as well. By wearing male signs, women managed to feminize masculine clothing. The deconstruction of these gender norms has allowed women and men to get one step closer to gender equality. It has now become more acceptable for men to perform duties previously performed by women, such as cleaning and cooking, and for women to enter the workforce that was solely carried out by men in the past.

Nevertheless, until women's fashion with masculine signs compromises men's power, and men's fashion with masculine signs gives women more power and equality, will androgyny ever truly exist? Until designers continue taking what is thought of as powerful and respectable from males and applying it to women because they do not want it to be viewed as erratic, emotional and frivolous, we continue to emphasize the gender roles of men and women. By blurring the cultural norms of femininity and masculinity through fashion, designers have come a long way and are getting closer to creating a genderless hybrid. Designers need to continue to challenge gender stereotypes and gender

performativity before society ceases assigning power based on gender and reaches true androgyny, something that McQueen got really close to accomplishing through his use of animal characteristics rather than gender characteristics to place power.

E. Conclusion

The lasting footprints of the twentieth century movements are remarkable. Since the 1920s, women have steadily been obtaining greater independence in choosing what they should wear, when they could wear it, and in front of whom. With the help of Chanel and McQueen, women have gained more power in their gender liberation and more control over their bodies. Instead of using their voices to help change the political status of women, Chanel and McQueen use their clothing designs to give women greater freedom of choice in what they wore and how they presented themselves. They encouraged women to go against societal norms and stand up for their wants and desires. As aforesaid, McQueen was aware that clothes, no matter how sharply tailored, ultimately could not protect women from the societies imposed constraints. That is why both designers adorned their garments with controversial signs, accessories, specific fabrics and animal parts. The signifieds that are constructed that liberate women, will continue to be torn apart, deconstructed and remodeled by society as they try and keep control over a woman's gender role in society. However, with the help of designers such as Chanel and McQueen, new methods of overcoming this reinforcing of gender norms will arise until these gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are diluted into androgyny. By having designers such as Chanel and McQueen create designs for women to wear that do not restrict them to society's standard gender norms, Chanel and

McQueen have given women the chance to have their cultural values to shine through throughout history.

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