

# Trafficking in the Wrong Costume: Cross-dressing in “Circe”

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## *Abstract*

Transvestites in Joyce? As a cardinal project of high modernist art, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and “Circe” in particular, offer a series of changes of clothes which translate the experience of transvestism as one of Joyce’s obsessions. This paper traces the narratological, historical, and ideological implications of cross-dressing in Joyce’s novel with an eye to elucidating male and female cross-dressing in “Circe.” The purpose is to arrive at the function of cross-dressing, not only in “Circe’s” costumed-characters, but also in its language and style. As the episode’s representations of cross-dressing metamorphose through various linguistic inflections and tonalities, clothing becomes the distorting filter through which we see all the characters in the episode. I show how Joyce refashions cross-dressing deliberately into a powerful diagnosis of Ireland’s social, political, and cultural institutions through transvestism.

**Keywords:** Cross-dressing, cultural transvestism, linguistic texture, “Circe.”

Some of the most important questions Joyce asks about the absolute outside edge of the mind in “Circe” are “too

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beastly awfully weird for words,” (*U* 15.585) to quote *Ulysses* itself, but also lead to a curious interplay between the body and costume. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar feel that “one of the most dramatic transvestite episodes in modern literature appears [...] in Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (332). In characteristically Joycean fashion, the novel repeatedly alludes to the irresistible danger of transvestite activity. In the early “Proteus” episode, Stephen tries on a girl’s shoe in Paris: “But you were delighted when Esther Osvalt’s shoe went on you: girl I knew in Paris.

*Tiens, quel petit pied!*” (*U* 3.62). In the “Lestrygonians” chapter, we hear Bloom confess he bought from Mrs. Miriam Dandrade black underwear: “Mrs. Miriam Dandrade that sold me her old wraps and black underclothes” (*U* 8.203). Female cross-dressing in *Ulysses* occurs for the first time in “Nausikaa” with Cissy Caffrey: “will you ever forget the evening she dressed up in her father’s suit and hat and the burned cork moustache” (*U* 13.460) followed by Molly’s “opulent [...] scarlet trousers” (*U* 15.570).

Almost all Circean female characters (Molly, Mrs. Breen, Mrs. Mervyn Talboys, Mrs. Keogh, and Mrs. Dignam) appear dressed as men, while Bloom is accused by several women of a passion for (female) clothing. Mary Driscoll says that Bloom “interfered twice with my clothing” (*U* 15.587), Mrs. Bellingham points the finger and states, in court, that Bloom “eulogised glowingly my other hidden treasures in priceless lace” (*U* 15.592). He is also glaringly exposed by his grandfather as addicted to women’s underwear: “I always understood that [...] glimpses of lingerie appealed to you” (*U* 15.629). If these examples encapsulate nicely Bloom’s uninhibited dress-fetishism, his transvestism will be comfortably reaffirmed and equally exposed. Bloom sheds his male garments in front of us to “don the shot silk luxuriously over head and shoulders” (*U* 15.647).

Joyce spares no one in the chapter and Bloom’s transvestite transgression is extended to women. We not only learn about Bloom’s instances of cross-dressing, but discover

the correlative transvestite principle applied to the garments of the female characters. Most, if not all, women appear cross-dressed: Molly Bloom makes a ravishing trousered apparition “*in Turkish costume...her scarlet trousers and jacket slashed with gold*” (U 15.570), Mrs. Breen appears in “*man’s frieze overcoat*”(U15.572), Mrs. Mervyn Talboys “*in amazon costume, hard hat, jackboots*” (U 15.592), Mrs. Keogh has a beard and wears “*men’s grey and green socks and brogues*” (U 15.646), Mrs. Dignam wears beneath her skirt “*everyday trousers and turnedup boots*” (U 15.671).

As a cardinal project of high-modernist art, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in general, and “Circe,” in particular, clearly describe unusual changes and multiple transformations in its characters and their costumes. In fact, “Circe” displays a series of changes of clothes which translates the experience of transvestism as one of Joyce’s obsessions. Moreover, “Circe” not only gathers onto itself the energies of previous chapters, but also gives expression to a surrealistic sadomasochistic fantasy: “*He bares his arm and plunges it elbowdeep in Bloom’s vulva*” (U 15.651); represents political Dublin: “*they are followed by the Right Honorable Joseph Hutchinson, lord mayor of Dublin*” (U 15.602); sidesteps into a version of *Hamlet* through an encounter with Stephen’s mother: “*her face drawing nearer and nearer, sending out an ashen breath*” (U 15.682); and reflects the symbolic geography of the Freudian world of hallucination: “*from a corner the morning hours run out, goldhaired, slim*” (U 15.678).

In a letter to Nora Barnacle, dated 29 August 1904, Joyce writes: “Can you not see the simplicity which is at the back of all my disguises? We all wear masks” (Ellmann, *Selected Letters* 25-27). As a hard-core extravaganza of multiple disguises and masks, “Circe” seems to go against simplicity. I speculate on Joyce’s “stylistically extravagant” (Mahaffey 136) novel with an eye to elucidating “Circe” but also with the purpose of arriving at a question about the function of cross-dressing, not only in “Circe’s” costumed-characters, but also in its language and style. It is a question

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which arises from a critical analysis of the "purgatorial extremism" (Ellmann, *"Ulysses" on the Liffey* 144) and rhetorical composition of "Circe," but which also has implications at the level of language itself as the episode's representations of cross-dressing metamorphose through various linguistic inflections and tonalities. By that I mean that Joyce deploys transvestism on levels of content and technique at once. Transvestism, as one enormous Circean spectacle, becomes visible across the surface of the entire text while shaping systematically its characters and its language: "*The brothel cook, Mrs. Keogh, wrinkled, floursmeared, a rollingpin stuck with raw pastry in her bare red arm and hand*" (*U* 15.646). The most obvious result of such a discussion is to elucidate the fashionable glamour of Joyce's transvestites.

Adjusted and controlled by Circean magic, clothing is the distorting filter through which we see all the characters in the episode: "*Bloom, pleading not guilty and holding a fullblown water-lily, begins a long unintelligible speech*" (*U* 15.587). Joyce alludes repeatedly to the characters' clothing and structures brutally each characters' appearance through their costume: "*Mr. Philip Beaufoy...in accurate morning dress, outbreast pocket with peak of handkerchief showing, creased lavender trousers and patent boots*" (*U* 15.585). In fact, before we see any character act, we have to see them elaborately dressed. Dress thus constitutes the fundamental determinant of the characters' existence on the Circean stage, even if Joyce's obsessive drive to re-costume his characters also leaves them, firmly and incessantly, open to reinvention and re-negotiation.

Joyce's interest in dress is repeated as an absolute necessity with each character's appearance enacting what can only be described as a classic scenario of dress-fetishism. As it turns out, clothing carries for Joyce its own highly erotic current. Much of the energy (and pleasure) that comes from "Circe" depends on Joyce's unceasing traffic of costumes, of his dressing and undressing of characters, and of his

determination to spell out unambiguously the pleasures of transvestism: “she is not wearing those rather intimate garments of which you are a particular devotee” (*U* 15.628).

Because Circean themes, as well as stylistic techniques, tend to “develop in various directions” (Senn 66), Joyce’s initial descriptions of clothing are refined and modified by the magnified ornamentation of clothing itself: “*Florry Talbot, a blond feeble goosefat whore in a tatterdemalion gown of mildew strawberry*” (*U* 15.621). “Circe,” moreover, rejects realistic narration in order to simulate the erotics of transvestism (the overblown, almost grotesque accumulation of detail in Joyce’s depiction of dress), and calculates, at the same time, with surgical precision a description of its characters’ clothing. Mrs. Yelverton Barry, for example, appears “*wearing a sabletrimmed brick quilted dolman,*” with “*a comb of brilliants and panache of osprey in her hair*” (*U* 15.521.) Here, as elsewhere in the text, Joyce emphasizes the texture of clothing through language and the sensuality of language through the description of clothing. Throughout the chapter, and with increasing intensity, dress, and by implication transvestism, imply a literalized dialectic between Joyce’s description of clothing and “Circe’s” stylistic innovations: what Seamus Deane calls “the Dublin rouge on the faded cheek of the English language” (Deane 42).

Accordingly, if “Circe” is a chapter of oscillating perspectives constantly shifting, then, transvestism incorporates this sense of the illogical and discontinuous, repeatedly fracturing the plot. This would establish a firm basis of comparison between Joyce’s episode and the act of *transvestire* by making them reversible and the same. A clarification of “Circe’s” linguistic and stylistic pyrotechnics via transvestism is accompanied by a conception of the episode itself as the climax to *Ulysses*. In short, the style of the chapter reflects and refracts the transformative energies of cross-dressing itself: “*Mrs Dignam...her snubnose and cheeks flushed with deathtalk...beneath her skirt appear her late husband’s everyday trousers*” (*U* 15.671).

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To navigate “Circe” by the map of transvestism is to see Joyce’s modernity as venturing into unknown, dark territory. The way Joyce re-costumes his characters’ minds through their bodies and undresses their psyche through their clothing is unusual. Bloom confesses: “It was dear Gerald. He got that kink, fascinated by his sister’s stays. Now dearest Gerald uses pinky greasepaint and gilds his eyelids. Cult of the beautiful” (*U* 15.649). In a linguistic space in which characters are dressed and undressed with incredible speed, adjust to different garments instantly, and masquerade in both genders, Bloom’s transvestite dress is described as “the scanty, daringly short skirt, riding up at the knee to show a peep of white pantalette” (*U* 15.652).

It would be possible (and tedious) to list in detail the series of changes of clothing that all the dramatis personae of “Circe” go through. It seems more productive to suggest that Joyce, sprinkling the text with imagery of sexual, political, religious, and historical transformations, also offers a metamorphosis in terms of stylistic trajectories. He achieves this on two levels. First, via a splitting of voices: “Whereas Leopold Bloom...is a well known dynamitard, forger, bigamist, bawd and cuckold and a public nuisance to the citizens of Dublin” (*U* 15.595). Second, through a multiplication of formal aspects of language that operates as a kind of cross-dressing of the style of the text itself. Contrast, for example, on the same page, the picturesque description of pastoral bliss, “*gazelles are leaping, feeding on the mountains. Near are the lakes...Aroma rises,*” with the oddly sensual representation of Zoe Higgins, “*she bites his ear gently with little goldstopped teeth sending him a cloying breath of stale garlic*” (*U* 15.600).

The scrupulous description of “Circe’s” costumed-characters, moreover, overflows with technical terms and vocabulary from the register of fashion. By repeating, clarifying, and intensifying the discourse of dress in the body of the text, Joyce inflects a fashionable glamour in all of his

characters" garments. Katie Wales is convinced that "so many and so detailed are the costume changes [...] that the episode resembles nothing so much as a fashion catalogue" (267). I want to push this further and suggest that each character in "Circe" is a fashion victim in the sense that they are exclusively constructed in and through their clothing.

Subsequently, as a prominent subject of the hallucinatory drama, it is important to conceptualize Bloom (and his Circean transvestism) as a development from, and simultaneous incorporation of, all the characters and costumes that populate *Ulysses*'s previous episodes (Molly Bloom and Blazes Boylan, Mrs. Dignam and her husband Paddy, Bloom's mother and father, Mrs. Breen, Bob Doran, Myles Crawford, Mary Driscoll, and others) who return to the stage of "Circe" to judge, elevate, accuse, torture, flirt with, and haunt Bloom.

Joyce's own description of the technique of "Circe" to Carlo Linati as "*visione animata fino allo scopio*"<sup>1</sup> (vision animated to bursting point), seems appropriate to describe, not only "Circe," but also the costume descriptions of the episode.

Joyce's straightforward investment in Bloom's cross-dressing is, from its flowering back to its roots, staked upon images of physical violence, abuse and humiliation. In short, Joyce establishes a subtle link between severe punishment and Bloom's quiet transvestite pleasure. It is not very difficult, therefore, for Bello to stir Bloom's cross-dressing tendencies:

"*With a piercing epileptic cry she [Bloom] sinks on all fours, grunting, snuffling, rooting at his [Bello] feet*" (*U* 15.644). In the Bloom-Bello encounter, the time of love, "I want a word with you, darling [...] Just a little heart to heart talk, sweetie," (*U* 15.645) is preceded by an earlier time of violence, "Bow, bonds slave, before the throne of your despot's glorious heels" (*U* 15.644).

If "Circe" both provokes and soothes our critical paranoia, it also takes transvestism apart into its sexual components and shows its source in Bloom's dramatic and unsettling fantasy-punishment: "Bloom: (*Mumbles*) Awaiting your further orders...Bello:...Hound of dishonour! Bloom:

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(*Infatuated*) Empress!” (U 15.644). Because Joyce decomposes Bloom into his several selves through costume, the episode is about the way the individual – fashioned by clothing – in turn fashions dress into a sort of personal drama: “Bello: Down! (*He taps her [Bloom] on the shoulder with his fan*)” (U 15.644). In all, Joyce portrays the unconscious only to say that the mind dresses and undresses itself up in dramatic scenes immediately reflected on the body and clothing.<sup>2</sup> One is thus justified in suspecting a deep structural interdependence between cross-dressing and “Circe’s” multiple states of (un)consciousness. Viewed from this standpoint, in this turn and return of costumed-characters, transvestism offers itself no longer as an effect of meaning (it frames the body and defines the subject) but as the site where meaning imitates the unconscious (it mirrors the mind and reflects the perverse).

Bloom’s transvestism takes on a particularly explosive form by diverting, displacing, and virtually obliterating a repertoire of male stereotypical roles. Joyce distorts or disguises Bloom’s masculinity by staging a dissolution of his power and his privilege: “*All the people cast soft pantomime stones at Bloom...ownerless dogs come near him and defile him*” (U 15.617). Joyce orchestrates gender crossings and mocks male political and religious power through Bloom’s incarnations as dental surgeon “*wearing a false badge of the Legion of Honour*” (U 15.582); as “*emperor president and king chairman...in dalmatic and purple mantle*” (U 15.604); as King of Ireland with “*a mantle of cloth of gold*” (U 15.605); and by being pronounced “*the funniest man on earth*” (U 15.612). Despite the obvious appeal to his dress-fetishist tendencies, Bloom plays a more complex role in these scenes than that of the transvestite alone. He crosses the paths of male entitlement, mapping its precise social and historical coordinates, and in the process, deflates and dismantles masculinity by collapsing into ridicule male forms of authority.

“Circe” is “a kind of male drag show” Colleen Lamos assures us (95). It is much more than that. Joyce deals with



passivity: “It overpowers me...So womanly full. It fills me full” (*U* 15.661); bisexuality: “Bloom is bisexually abnormal” (*U* 15.613); autoerotism: “He is prematurely bald from selfabuse” (*U* 15.613); sadism: “No insubordination...I gave you strict instructions” (*U* 15.649); fetishism: “the darling joys of sweet buttonhooking” (*U* 15.643); and, of course, transvestism: Bloom’s obsession with “pretty petticoats” (*U* 15.634), “stockingette gusseted knickers” (*U* 15.631), “footwear satinlined” (*U* 15.643) just as he also tries on Molly’s “short trunk leg naughties” (*U* 15.648) make it clear. Moreover, his grandfather alludes to Bloom’s abnormal passion for (female) clothing and tempts him: “From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step. Pyjamas, let us say?” (*U* 15.631). Bloom is a masochist, but when Bello orders him “On the hands down!” he exclaims “Truffles!” (*U* 15.644). Bloom is a transvestite, but at the sight of a silk dress, shouts “Silk, mistress said! O crinkly! Scrapy!” (*U* 15.647).

Bloom’s transvestism mirrors all that precedes it, distorts it out of shape, plunging the reader headlong into a realm where “all knowledge, all religious doctrines and philosophical positions” (Boheemen-Saaf 88) are put forward, splintered, and reversed. To read the dramatics of “Circe” as psychodrama is to understand that Bloom’s ambiguous transformations are at the mercy of unconscious hallucination. The point is that if transvestism dramatizes the experience of Bloom’s dissolution, it also creates a seductive space that camouflages a gratifying acting-out of Bloom’s femininity.<sup>3</sup> Bloom is a conglomerate soul composed of an indefinite number of *personae* that threaten to disintegrate immediately as they reassemble. Bloom as mayor, as emperor, as Ruby Pride of the Ring, therefore, entails not only a mode of speech, vocabulary, and clothing appropriate to each of his roles, but also the debunking of any stable costume-adopted identity. In Bloom’s vertiginous transformations, Joyce’s writing is at its most corrosive since the speaking of Bloom’s desire is also the annihilation of himself as conscious subject in the system of language: “*In babylinen and pelisse, bigheaded [...] his moist*

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*tongue tolling and lispig* One two tlee: tlee ttwo tlonge" (*U* 15.619).

Lipoti Virag, Bloom's "granpapachi," offers several clues to Bloom's taste and tendency to fetishize female garments. At the brothel, the house of climaxes, Virag, talking to Bloom, notes one of the women "is not wearing those rather intimate garments of which you are a particular devotee" (*U* 15.628). Combining intimate confession and sexual revelation, Virag makes a daring exposition of Bloom's passionate fetish for female undergarments that shapes his equally powerful secret love of female dress. "Correct me but I always understood that...glimpses of lingerie appealed to you in virtue of its exhibitionistiscicity [*sic*]" (*U* 15.629). Thus, we learn that Bloom's sexual perversion, exhibitionism, and extreme sensitivity to and fascination with particular articles of female attire, encode a tension-generating exchange bred by "glimpses of lingerie" and his own propensity to don women's clothing.

Virag wisely advises Bloom to "Never put on you tomorrow what you can wear today" (*U* 15.629) and asks him "have you made up your mind whether you like or dislike women in male habiliments?" (*U* 15.631).

If Virag translates Bloom's fetish for pretty petticoats, we hear Bloom himself confess, not once but twice, a gratifying acting-out of cross-dressing. First, when he dons Molly's clothing, "I tried her things on only once, a small prank, in Holles street" (*U* 15.648) and then, as a young boy "It was Gerald converted me to be a true corset lover when I was female impersonator in the High School play *Vice Versa*" (*U* 15.648-49).

In "Circe," costume-changes replace narrative (at the level of language and signification). Subtly interwoven into "Circe's" dream-like labyrinth is a demand for surgical exactness which emanates largely, if not entirely, from Joyce's rigorous concentration and disciplined attention to fabric and the function of dress. In short, "Circe" functions as a site for exhibitionism: of characters, of language, and of dress.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*, Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> This argument, as well as similar arguments of other scholars who have maintained that such a notion is dominant in Joyce's novel, are certainly compelling. One of the most obvious reasons for critical consensus is succinctly explained in the following examples. Cheryl Herr suggests that “Circe is a script, a dramatization of events, based on *Ulysses*” (Herr, *Joyce's Anatomy* 150). Andrew Gibson points out that this view is still prevalent and feels that “The view of Circe as central to the book is still current, as seems logical enough, given the extent to which the rest of the book is actually recycled in the episode” (Gibson, *Reading Joyce's "Circe"* 9). L. Platt argues similarly that “the collective unconscious imaged through ritual and magic serving as a metaphor for a kind of id/ego interface are the essentials of Circe” (Platt, in *Reading Joyce's "Circe"* 38). Fritz Senn goes a step further and suggests that “Circe” is not only a recycling of preceding chapters of *Ulysses* but also “a distortive escalation of all preceding Joycean

texts” (Fritz Senn, in *Reading Joyce’s “Circe”* 67). Richard Brown, in a similar vein, believes that “Circe” is not about Stephen or Bloom: “the hallucinations cannot be fully understood as the fantasies of either Stephen or Bloom but represent the book’s rewriting of itself” (Richard Brown, in *Reading Joyce’s “Circe”* 232).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note, in this context, the importance of women in Joyce’s own life and work. Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier published the first English and French versions of *Ulysses*, respectively in Shakespeare and Company and La Maison des Amis des Livres. Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap published *Ulysses* in the *Little Review*. Djuna

Barnes became Joyce’s confidante and colleague in 1920s Paris. Joyce also attended Natalie Barney’s and Gertrude Stein’s literary salons and received Harriet Weaver’s unfailing financial back-up while writing *Ulysses*, and even paying for Joyce’s funeral in 1941.