Built for the Kilt:
Gendered constructions of what "real men" wear

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Abstract

The Scottish kilt is an immediately recognisable garment of clothing representing not only a particular national icon, but a highly masculine form, seen by some as the only "male" garment left unconquered by women. In spite of being a non-bifurcated garment, it is rarely perceived as a "skirt" or part of transgressive behaviour.

The kilt has moved well beyond its supposed origins as a Scottish national costume, across the cultural diaspora and adapted into new forms, especially in punk and Goth fashion. Even in its more traditional form, the kilt invites varied reactions and expectations, especially from women.

Drawing on her experience in Scottish pipe bands, where the uniform is a combination of Scottish and military clothing, the author explores some of the constructs of masculinity surrounding the kilt and how these impact a female who is often confronted with public expectations, perceptions and assumptions the kilt invites.

"Clothes are inevitable. They are nothing less than the furniture of the mind made visible" – James Laver, Style in Costume (Lurie, 1992: 3).

Asking a complete stranger if they are wearing underwear is a bizarre and dangerous behaviour, breaking multiple social rules. Yet many believe this is acceptable practice if the other person is wearing a kilt; the skirt-like garment worn by men and strongly connected with the Scottish nation. The identity of Scotland is one of the most easily recognised in the world, with many icons making up its dramatic global image, such as the misty Highlands, the bagpipes and the kilt (Bicket, 1999: 3; Hermansson, 2003: 82; McCrone, 2001: 127; Munroe, 2000: 1; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 15). Cultural products of Scotland are readily accessible for consumption (Hermansson, 2003: 197), either through tangible objects or through concepts portrayed through the media (Bicket, 1999: 4; Munroe, 2000). This means that much of the iconography of Scotland now exists independently of everyday Scotland (Bicket, 1999: 4; Hermansson, 2003: 202), with invention of "traditions" such as 'Tartan Day' and the 'Kirking of the Tartan' emerging from overseas.

My own involvement with a Scottish pipe band proscribes that I join the ranks of kilt wearers, or the "Brotherhood of the Kilt". I have had the opportunity to wear a kilt on a regular basis for nearly eight years. I use the word "opportunity" for many reasons. Firstly, in Australia one must search to acquire a kilt. I also have the opportunity to wear a kilt in spite of being at least three generations removed from Scotland itself. Probably the most important way in which I am "fortunate" to wear a kilt is that I am female. It truly is conceived of as a "brotherhood", as wearing a kilt is a masculine practice. Although I find the kilt *physically* similar to wearing any other type of skirt, *socially* it draws a completely different and unique set of responses and behaviours from others.

The kilt is rarely afforded deep consideration, especially here in Australia. It could be the British migrant heritage of many Australians means that Scottishness is simply not exotic enough to be regarded as "ethnic." But the kilt is a fascinating garment of opposites and contradictions. It is common

enough a sight that people recognise what it is, and yet exotic to make a "statement" that trousers would not. It is the modern clothing made the traditional. It is the garb of peasants made the right of the gentry. It is the skirt-like, non-bifurcated garment made the statement of masculinity. It is the uniform made the choice of the free men. It is the anatomical freedom that becomes a sentence to be the sexual property of any woman. It is the Scottish icon developed and paraded through the Hanoverian monarchy. In truth, these contradictions could also reflect Scotland itself: a modern and industrial country typified by the rural minority of the Highlands.

It is important to explore and question these contradictions and the social practices surrounding the wearing and observing of a kilt. We must unpack our mental, social and cultural drawing-rooms to tease out this "furniture of the mind."

The history of the kilt as it is commonly known has come through a curious process of invention and reinvention, which deserves a more in-depth exploration than can be afforded here. Once a long piece of plaid wrapped around the body and torso before being secured with a belt (Chapman, 1995: 8; Murray, 2001: 69; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 20), the kilt has never been "just" a piece of clothing. Following many years of political unrest between England and Northern Scotland, the British monarchy attempted to limit the martial threat posed by certain Scots, such as the Jacobites. One major means of cultural control was the 1747 Act of the Proscription of Highland Dress. This Act stipulated that no man or boy in Scotland may wear the Highland dress, and punishment included imprisonment or deportation (McCrone, 2001: 133; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 24). However, Scottish men could wear tartan as long as they were members of the British army's Highland regiments, which had integrated tartan and kilts into a uniform Scottish men were willing to join to wear (McCrone, 2001: 133; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 25). While the ban on Scottish dress existed for a relatively short time (it was repealed in 1782), its impact as an example of cultural oppression by the British ruling class is still incited today through the celebration of 'Tartan Day' (curiously, invented and held entirely outside of Scotland.)

Once the immediate threat of the Scottish Highlanders as a martial force had passed, the culture of the Highlands was free to be claimed through a process of Romanticism. Scottish people and ways that were once deplored as examples of cultural inferiority were soon recreated into a more accessible, highly fashionable form (Chapman, 1995: 8; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 25). The material evidence of this transition can be found in the modern kilt, which simplified the bigger plaid to just its skirt element, with pre-sewn pleats and brightly coloured weaves (Murray, 2001: 72; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 22). This made the kilt easier to maintain, cheaper to mass-produce and allowed the Scottish regiments to achieve uniformity of look (Murray, 2001: 71; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 25).

In order to make the Scottish culture more fashionable for Victorian tastes, the savage became noble (Bicket, 1999: 7; Chapman, 1995: 20; McCrone, 2001: 135; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 25), battles such as Culloden were recast as tragic defeats (Munroe, 2000: 7; Porter, 1998: 3), and the Scottish people portrayed as a dying culture, worthwhile of preservation (Chapman, 1995: 20; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 25). However, the Romantic revival of the Scottish nation came at a cost. Firstly, the whole of Scotland, a highly diverse and industrial country, came to be typified by the Highlands, the rural minority of Scotland (Porter, 1998: 2; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 16). The Scottish reinvention occurred in conjunction with a revival and glorification of other “Celtic” cultures, such as the Irish and Welsh (Chapman, 1995: 16). To better establish these cultures as distinct and separate to England, a curious dichotomy began to form, where the English became the inferior party in multiple binary oppositions (Bicket, 1999: 8; Chapman, 1995: 16; McCrone, 2001: 135; Munroe, 2000: 34). The Celts were retrospectively described as a noble, mystical and sophisticated race, forced into sublimation by the brutish, cruel English (McCrone, 2001: 135). Great liberties were taken in the recreation of Celtic cultures such as the Scottish, but, “ready access to symbols of unEnglishness was far more important than any consideration of the genuine authenticity of such symbols” (Chapman, 1995: 24). One was therefore Scottish to the extent

one was not English (Bicket, 1999: 8), and, “no amount of cold fact could douse the flame of cultural passion” (McCrone, 2001: 128).

The Scottish, Irish, Welsh and other “Celtic” groups are still seen as in communion against the English, as seen in the film “Braveheart” where the Scots and the Irish band together to defeat the English army (Munroe, 2000: 17). The anti-English sentiment impassioned by the film resulted in the “Braveheart Syndrome”: acts of violence and exclusion against English people, or those seen to be English (Munroe, 2000: 15). I witnessed this last year after a Christmas pageant as a member of another pipe band prevented a group of Morris Dancers from entering the Irish pub where the pipe bands were gathered.

The kilt, once the dress necessary for peasants to move about the landscape without a mount, became the special, ceremonial dress of the upper classes (Chapman, 1995: 8; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 24). An entire industry was created around the distribution of kilts and tartans, aided by tales of Highland clans using tartans to distinguish and identify themselves (McCrone, 2001: 132; Trevor-Roper, 1983: 23). Although the authenticity of this “tradition” is somewhat contested (McCrone, 2001: 132-135; Trevor-Roper, 1983), Scotland continues its love-hate relationship with being identified through ‘tartanry’, which can be both the source of national embarrassment and a vital tourist industry (Bicket, 1999: 6-8; McCrone, 2001: 136; Porter, 1998: 2).

Symbol of tradition

While much of what is considered “traditional” about Scotland may indeed be an invented tradition (Trevor-Roper, 1983), they are still important concepts of national identity for the Scottish and those who wish to be so (Bicket, 1999: 14; McCrone, 2001: 128). While the *historical* value and use of the kilt will continue to be contentious, its *symbolic* value is not to be underestimated.

The kilt in itself is merely a piece of clothing, but has many socially constructed meanings for those who wear it, such as identification with Scotland, the need to stand out or belong, and as a powerful symbol of

masculinity. Many who find being Scottish or having a Scottish ancestor as important to their self-identity use the kilt to visually communicate this to others (see Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004), especially those whose opinion we value (Cheng, 1998: 26). Since symbolic behaviour is only possible when the observer shares those meanings (Cunningham & Voso Lab, 1991: 6; Lurie, 1992: 34), those wanting to portray a Scottish identity are fortunate that the icons of Scotland are so broadly recognised and available (Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004: 66; Hermansson, 2003: 201).

It is curious, though, which people use the kilt to assert their national identity, especially those who may not be Scottish but align themselves to their Scottish ancestry (Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004: 75) or some other form of affinity with the Scottish (Hermansson, 2003: 180). The kilt, the Scottish accent and other indicators of a relationship with Scotland are referred to as "identity markers" and these can be used in conjunction with one another to make one's claim to being Scottish more credible (Kiely, Bechhofer, Stewart & McCrone, 2001: 35-37). Identity markers of a culture can either be readily accessible to the observer (such as an accent or dress) or hidden (such as birthplace) (Kiely et al, 2001: 37).

In a study of Americans with Scottish ancestry, those with a more tenuous claim to the Scottish identity (being many generations removed, lack of accent, etc) tended to wear tartan and take part in Scottish activities more than those who did not need to rely so heavily on these markers of Scottish culture (Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004). Likewise, in a study of people with a "hybrid" Scottish identity, those with a greater overt claim to Scottishness hardly ever relied on markers such as kilts to construct their national identity (Kiely et al, 2001).

The people of Crane, Hamilton and Wilson's study were able to feel that they could physically "anchor" themselves with their Scottish ancestors, to have a connection with the past through physical symbols and the observations of these symbols by others. They may feel the need to stand out from other "Americans" by making themselves more exotic, as white, Anglo-Saxon

Americans are similar to the British in being the bland identity against which "other" ethnic cultures are highlighted.

However, these people may also be wearing the kilt in order to demonstrate belonging, rather than individuality, especially belonging to a certain clan through wearing a particular tartan. The practice of identifying people according to their tartan may have been a romantic oversimplification of the Highland clan-system of antiquity (Chapman, 1995: 11), fact followed fiction as tartans were created to identify regiments, groups and even used by colonial slave owners to dress their human "property" to better identify them in a crowd (Trevor-Roper, 1983: 30). However, this idea has been communicated globally and reinforced over time, so many people believe that a particular tartan can only be worn by members of the "clan." It is a way to connect not only with one's past, but to express feelings of kinship with others, who may otherwise be strangers (Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004: 68). The language of websites celebrating kilt-wearing certainly carry discourses of relationship, with "the Sporran Clan" and "the Brotherhood of the Kilt."

Tartan is also used by Scottish groups such as the Highland regiments and subsequently pipe bands internationally who dress their members in the same tartan. Within the pipe band, it is the reception of the kilt, not the instrument, which demonstrates acceptance as a member of the group. (There is likewise a less noble ritual of returning the kilt as a sign of leaving.) By wearing the kilt or a certain tartan, the individual is therefore willing to put on public, visual display their connection to the group and exercise its values (Crane, Hamilton & Wilson, 2004: 68; Cunningham & Voso Lab, 1991: 9).

A uniform can contain multiple symbols of an organisation's identity, particularly groups with a military influence. In his study of a quasi-military, voluntary organisation, Cheng (1998) discovered members placed great value in wearing military insignia. When faced with uniform changes that would remove some of these symbols, the members indicated they would rather leave the group than function without the recognition and respect they

believed the symbols provided. Cheng suggested that while members did not receive monetary gain from membership, they nonetheless received "payment" through being able to wear the symbols of a group with masculine military values, such as discipline, hierarchy and authority (Cheng, 1998: 24). Indeed, the promise of being given a kilt (and a legitimate reason to regularly wear the kilt) is a good recruitment tool for a pipe band.

It takes a real man to wear a skirt

The men of Cheng's study not only felt their organisational identity at stake, but also their masculine identities, especially as they were so close to military culture, yet unable to serve (Cheng, 1998). The kilt is a powerful symbol of masculinity, connecting the wearer with constructions of the Scottish Highlander, who embodies aspects of masculinity: toughness, stoicism, courage and embracing a life outdoors (Munroe, 2000: 81). This is in addition to the mythology of the Highland threat to British law and order, reinforced by Romantic retellings.[i]

Since the Victorian redevelopment of the Highlander, popular media have continued to display, negotiate and reconstruct the identity of the Scottish male (Munroe, 2000). One of the more recent discourses to emerge from Scotland has been that of 'Clydesidism', named after the industrial district sent into rapid decline throughout the past two decades (Bicket, 1999: 6; McCrone, 2001: 138-140; Munroe, 2000: 9). It is a construction of masculinity in crisis, through urban decay and unemployment, where the middle-classes are held as deplorable as the (still maligned) English (Bicket, 1999: 6; Munroe, 2000: 59). The masculinity of Clydesidism evolves from a life of self-defeating cycles, embodied by the continued noble defeat of the national football team, alcoholism and violence (Munroe, 2000: 9)[ii]. This makes for a particularly tough image of the Scottish man, and this can be seen in men who combine wearing the kilt with boots, tattoos and the presence of alcohol.

The activities undertaken by men while wearing kilts are congruent with masculinity. Men wear the kilt at the football, when out to attract a partner, when getting married, while playing the loud and powerful bagpipes, to

compete in the “strong men” competitions at Highland Gatherings, where they lift and throw heavy objects. The practicalities of wearing the kilt also emphasise the masculinity. The kilt must be strapped on, not buttoned, tied or zipped. The kilt gives a man a sensuous awareness of his own body, how he moves and how he sits. The kilt itself is designed for a male body, in particular the fit, young male body of the army (Thompson, 1989: 40). It emphasises an ideal masculine form, but does not hang so well on a body that transgresses this body type: women, older men and the overweight.

The films “Braveheart” and “Rob Roy” continue to have a strong impact on the use of the kilt as a symbol of masculinity, more than a decade after their release. In her analysis of the two films, Munroe (2000) discovered a continuation the binary oppositions of England and Scotland begun in the eighteenth century, with the Scottish characters portrayed as honourable and noble, with the English as scheming and immoral. However, the two films created a new binary opposition, with the Scottish men constructed as embodying the heterosexual stereotypes of the rugged, outdoor man. The English, on the other hand, were sexually “other”; either effeminate or immoral in their sexual dalliances (Munroe, 2000: 34). Placed within the Hollywood need for a “good” guy and a “bad” guy, the good characters are easily identified through their kilts and the heterosexual behaviour that is supposed to go along with it (Munroe, 2000: 34).

A garment of clothing is neither male nor female; it must have a gendered meaning placed upon it and reinforced over time (Kasunik, 2002: 32). Because the kilt has always been constructed and communicated as a male garment, a man can wear a kilt without its skirt-like nature placing doubt on his sexuality or suggesting transvestism. This can be because the kilt is so “unambiguously masculine” (Kiltmen, 2007), in addition to skirt-like garments being acceptable so long as they are part of ethnic dress and may even further symbolise a, “certain pioneering and aggressive spirit (Glynn, 1982: 68). In the 1997 movie, “Ma vie en rose” (My life in pink) a little boy wishes to dress in girls’ clothing, much to the embarrassment of his parents. When the boy must attend a birthday party, he does so in a Scottish kilt. In this French

context, the kilt would have been exotic, but still more acceptable for the young boy to be seen in than the girls' skirts he wished to wear.

Surely the most fascinating and powerful element of wearing the kilt is not the garment, but rather what is underneath. Thompson (1989), Kiltmen (2007) and the like downplay the importance of underwear to attitudes towards kilts, but I feel this is very important. In my own experience, there are many men who wear the kilt without underwear, much to the curious surprise of those who find out. An entire culture of jokes about the lack of underwear has somehow left people doubting that the kilt is worn without underwear. It is easily forgotten that the modern kilt was developed at a time when neither men nor women wore underwear, with men wearing long shirts with tails that served the role modern underwear does now (Trevor-Roper, 1983: 19). Indeed the original kilt, the long plaid, when belted had a skirt that came to the mid-thigh, which made others wary of watching Scots wandering up hills and on windy days (Trevor-Roper, 1983: 20).

Kasunik described three functions of clothing as being protection, modesty and adornment (2002). The curious nature of the kilt may be due to the wearer being safely wrapped in nearly three metres of tartan, covered to the knee, and yet so easily and quickly exposed. It is the, "double weapon of exposure and decoration" (Kasunik, 2002: 18) where, "parts concealed by all other nations are but loosely covered" (Trevor-Roper, 1983: 28). The kilt provides, "ready access to Highland masculine sexuality, and so to passion" (Chapman, 1995: 20); unbridled virility available at the flick of a hem.

In *Delta of Venus*, a collection of the erotic stories by Anaïs Nin, a woman becomes fascinated by a passing Scottish regiment having heard they were not wearing underwear. "Heads high, strong naked legs and skirts - why, it made them as vulnerable as a woman. Big lusty men, tempting as a woman and naked underneath" (Nin, 1969: 153). She continues to describe watching the swinging of the sporrans, imagining the "hidden sporran" underneath (Nin, 1969: 153). These wild imaginings and desires have so great an effect on the woman she literally swoons to the ground, hoping the Scottish soldiers would

simply walk over her. Some of the shock of this character's behaviour stems from the men becoming the objects of desire and spectacle, no longer active subjects (Glynn, 1982: 83; Horrocks, 1995: 54).

For the Kiltmen, the kilt does not just mean "freedom" in the sense of Scottish independence, but anatomical freedom[iii]. They even invoke the idea that the "restriction" of trousers would reduce a man's reproductive abilities (Kiltmen, 2007), reminiscent of the Victorian concerns for women wearing trousers and riding bicycles. While women have had significant revolutions freeing them from the bonds of restrictive clothing, the Kiltmen advocate a similar freedom from the restriction of trousers (Kiltmen, 2007). This is fascinating because the kilt is promoted as a garment for men of the future, whereas the kilt and other traditional skirt-like garments are usually considered ancient relics of the past (Glynn, 1982: 68-75).

What freedom can mean

Men are beginning to discover that freedom of dress may be a double-edged sword. While men become a sexually potent physical presence, it also means they are in the public space, and collective "property." As women discovered they can wear clothing that is unintentionally sexually alluring (Lurie, 1992: 230), men may wear the kilt to gain amorous attention, or gain amorous attention regardless. Put simply, "He's wearing a kilt, he's asking for it", as said to me by a woman I caught trying to lift someone's kilt. While literature about dress and gender places emphasis on the visual, many do not simply observe a kilt; they approach and interact with the kilt-wearer.

This can be beneficial for those who are shy, as people readily greet them, ask about the tartan, or simply smile and nod (Thompson, 1989: 1). Both men and women can be very forward in their comments and actions toward somebody in a kilt. Often this is pleasant, but sometimes it can be quite rude. Although one does get used to this behaviour over time, it takes little abstraction to see these behaviours as unacceptable. In truth, I may be more sensitive to the questions, comments and hands not just because I am female, but my partner is also in my pipe band, and I encounter women who

think it is their right to lift his kilt. (If anything, I think people are ruder to a woman in a kilt than a man. I wear the kilt in conjunction with carrying a set of bagpipes, so I not only have comments about my kilt, but the allusions to "blowing" as well.[iv]) For the pipe band member, wearing the kilt puts the group on display, which means that behaviour such as deliberately lifting the kilt is strongly frowned upon, and can result in expulsion from the group. The intention between exhibitionist and victim of the voyeur can be the difference between exclusion and protection from the group.

The invention of mobile telephones with in-built cameras has certainly become the bane of kilt-wearing in public. Legislation has recently been passed in Victoria banning the practice of "up-skirting"; the photography of a person's intimate parts and its further distribution through media such as email. Most conceive of women being the only victims of this practice, and some have raised the issue of men in kilts almost as trite comment. There is a double standard as emailing a picture of an unsuspecting woman's body is a perverted practice, and yet pictures of men whose kilts have blown up are sent readily as jokes. In truth, some deliberately pose or ensure the kilt will be raised (such as recreating Marilyn Monroe's famous subway-vent scene), but others have simply been victims of a strong wind and photographic opportunity.

Wearing the kilt is a deliberate and purposeful action, and many who have worn the kilt for years are experienced and prepared for the attention their dress receives. But even if the double standard of those in kilts "asking" for confrontation were acceptable, this validates a questionable practice and leaves other kilt wearers vulnerable. Given my own group includes teenagers, women and the intellectually disabled, I am constantly guarding against wandering hands.

What you looking at?

Although I am unable to offer insight into how it feels to be a man in a kilt, I have certainly experienced being mistaken for a man in a kilt. The kilt is so masculine and hides my body so well that observers do not realise what they

are truly looking at, and I embarrass many women who make comments or attempt to lift my kilt. People are surprised to find a girl playing the bagpipes and wearing the kilt, despite a long tradition of female pipers throughout history.

I only wear the kilt when I am performing with the band, choosing to wear a tartan skirt instead when performing solo at funerals and weddings. I therefore prove myself worthy to wear a kilt by being able to play the bagpipes. The fact I am willing to dedicate years to learning the pipes demonstrates a legitimate right to wear a kilt in spite of being female and Australian. As pipe bands continue to give their leaders military rank, I have the additional military insignia of sergeant stripes to add to a demonstration of toughness and dedication to the pipes. The strength and endurance needed to play the "manly" instrument of the bagpipes and the symbols of leadership show that I am strong enough and indeed "built" for the kilt.

As a kilt-wearer, I truly am the marginal of the marginal. Even amongst the women who wear a kilt, I am in the minority because I am not a highland dancer. Highland dancing is an activity that began as a male, martial practice and gradually found itself appropriated by little girls. This dance form rewards lightness of movement, emulating the leaping of a stag. A virile male animal is therefore personified by girls as young as three. While there are male highland dancers, they are very much in the minority. Last year I had the chance to marshal a highland dancing competition and faced girls of nine chided for outgrowing their kilts. I suddenly felt sad that these girls were going to soon learn that their new woman's body would not be accommodated by the male design of the kilt.

Conclusion

Wearing the kilt is certainly a "state of mind" (Kiltmen, 2007; Thompson, 1989: 1), as choosing to publicly connect oneself with all the kilt symbolises is a very deliberate act. As the kilt continues its global journey independent of its mother nation, people attempt to modify it for daily use. Here in Australia, there has been a preference for lighter-weight tartan better suited to the

climate. Others are attempting to distinguish kilts worn by women by having the kilt wrap right over left (Thompson, 1989: 41), mimicking the difference in buttons between shirts and blouses. It is therefore difficult to join the chorus of people who reject the Gothic leather kilts and the American invention of the "utilikilt" (a camouflage "kilt" with pockets). The kilt may indeed become "frozen" (Chapman, 1995) and unable to evolve, as it is used for its symbolic rather than utilitarian value (Cunningham & Voso Lab, 1991: 6) and some feel the need to continue a "tradition", regardless how tenuous that tradition may be (Glynn, 1982: 80). While a deeper understanding of the origins of the kilt would be beneficial to some, many more invest a great deal in continuing the currently held constructions of national identity and gender it can provide.

There *is* something under the kilt: a person who chooses to wear it, to be what it means and to perform its part in a culturally diverse society. Unfortunately, this is all hidden by social expectation and understanding. It is only by "lifting" the kilt can we truly see and understand what lies beneath.

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[i] Maybe the fascinating history of tartan as a material so feared by "the establishment" as to be banned has led to its appropriation by punk and other anti-establishment cultures? Somewhat ironically, the tartan most used by punks is the "Royal Stewart."

[ii] This discourse is hardly monopolised by Scotland, with other cultures portraying the masculine disillusionment and powerlessness through film, such as the English in "the Full Monty" and Americans in "Fight Club".

[iii] Perhaps it is this freedom from restriction that draws so many young men to wear baggy, low-sitting trousers?

[iv] "Blowing" used as a euphemism for fellatio.