

Art and Revolutionary Identities: The Dandyism of *Funny Girl*

At first glance, the connection between Barbra Streisand's portrayal of Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* and dandyism may not be apparent. However, upon closer examination, many of the dandy's defining traits are also those of Streisand as Brice. This paper delves into these intriguing overlaps. I assert that Barbra Streisand, in her role as Fanny Brice carries forward the traditions of dandyism into the modern era.

Understanding the social environment from which these two characters emerged is crucial to understanding the impact that they had. The figure of the first Dandy, Beau Brummel, emerged as the dust of the French Revolution settled; he came on the heels of the "Great Masculine Renunciation." The "Great Masculine Renunciation" is a phrase coined by psychologist John Flügel to describe the mass departure from participation in self-beautification that men across Europe took at the end of the eighteenth century (Chapin). Prior to this time, men and women were equally extravagant in their dress. The division in spectacle was between class, not gender, as it is today. Many historians and scholars have speculated about why men abandoned their spectacular garments, their makeup, heels, and especially wigs, or as one historian put it, "their century and a half of immunity to the crowning injustice of nature" (Hunt 237). Whatever the exact cause, the effect distinguished them from the ruling class, which the French had revolted against. At the turn of the century, men wore simple, military-inspired uniforms (Mansel) and no longer distinguished themselves by class. The dandy came along and disrupted this homogeny.

In *Fashion and the French Revolution*, Aileen Ribeiro writes, "No other time in history have politics and dress been so closely entwined as during the French Revolution" (23). Indeed, concurrent with the French Revolution was a fashion revolution. This is because people's sense

of identity was profoundly impacted during the French Revolution, and fashion is a tool for communicating identities, so it naturally responded.

After the French Revolution, when society rejected the idea of divinely ordered societies, individuals were suddenly valid on their own, because of their very existence. With this new understanding of themselves and the freedom that came along with it, men chose to fashion themselves simply and democratically. Men were expected to wear military-like uniforms to symbolize equality. Beau Brummell (Pictured in this sculpture by Irena Sedlecká and Paul Heath) did not fight against the expectation for him to wear a uniform. He simply, yet profoundly, improved upon it. For example,

Through collaboration with his tailors Brummell sculpted the basic woolen coat from something leaden and stiff into a carefully shaped and padded simulacrum of the lithe neo-classical male torso. The contrast of shining black boots, skin-tight buff breeches, and shapely navy coat was crowned at the neck by the whimsical burst of a white linen cravat. For jewelry, he possessed one plain ring and a watch-chain of “Venetian ducat gold” in an unusual design of which he only ever showed two links (Svelte 260).



There were many other details that Brummell donned which distinguished him among his peers. As we see here, Brummell also accessorized with canes and top hats. These details were revolutionary, a final act of the fashion revolution. The public perceived these finely tuned, carefully perfected details as an assertion of his unique individuality, and indeed, it was. This became a dividing line. Instead of wearing ordered fashion, one now realized the autonomy they had to express their unique individuality through what they wore. The effect of which still impacts us to this day. As one historian writes, “Dandyism marked the death of kings, and the dawn of modern concepts of self” (Kelly 469). The dandy changed what it meant to be an individual.

In the above picture, we see that through the placement of the buttons on Brummell’s coat, a six-pack is suggested. More references to a muscular stature are made by the extra fabric slightly bulging on his shoulders, adding to their breadth. His collar layers over his cravat, giving his neck the bulky appearance of well-attended trapezius muscles. Through attention to his clothes, Brummell suggests attention to his body. While extraordinary attention was paid to his body, it was paid to his clothed body. The tassel on his waist mirrors those at the tops of his boots. They add a taste of play to a refined ensemble. The fluffiness of the bow at his neck completes the subtle infusion of humor into his elegant presentation. His hat would have added height, were it on his head. Nevertheless, his rumpled hair still adds inches. His cane extends the space that he inhabits further. Beau Brummell’s style was so popular that it was widely imitated. Even the King of Wales copied the first dandy’s impeccable fashion (Svelte).

Barbra Streisand and Fanny Brice likewise came out of a time of sameness. The real Fanny Brice was a Jewish woman born in 1891. She had a successful career on stage, though she was limited by being a Jew. Because of her Jewish features and antiSemitic American beauty

standards, she was not seen as beautiful. Therefore, she was only allowed to get so far in show biz and was pigeonholed into comedic roles. When she died in 1951, she left behind a manuscript based on her life. The play-turned-movie: *Funny Girl*, brought the manuscript and a new incarnation of Fanny to life. It was a story that Barbra knew well (Gabler).

Barbra Streisand had been an outsider all of her life. She was born in Brooklyn in 1942. As she grew up, she always wanted to be a star, though she received no support from her mother or stepdad (her father died when she was a baby) and very little support from anyone else in her community. Many told her that she did not have the looks to be a star. Barbra internalized these remarks. She talked about getting a nose job to make her Jewish nose conform to gentile beauty standards (Gabler). Even among her Jewish peers in her neighborhood and school, Babs still felt like she neither fit in nor was attractive. There was almost no representation of Jewish women with Jewish features in movies and in movies is where Barbra wanted to be.

Women faced much more pressure at this time to conform to beauty standards, beauty standards which favored white, not Jewish, women. Women's options in society were limited and to attract a husband, they were supposed to beautify themselves. Women's role in society and representation in movies seemed to suggest Barbra was a loser. However, Barb didn't let this stop her. She didn't even let it slow her down. She never touched her nose or toned down her Jewishness. On the contrary, she emphasized it. This emphasis led to the perception of her as authentic and kooky (Gabler); it got her foot in the door. Her talent swung the door wide open.

Barbra's unrelenting self-confidence and refusal to accept rejection, paired with her well-honed talents, led to her superstardom. As film critic Pauline Kael wrote, "She is like thousands of girls one sees in the subway, but more so; she is both archetype and an original, and that's what makes her a star." Barbra expanded America's conception of beauty and femininity. She

showed that talent is beautiful. She was a Jewish woman who did not conform and made it to the top. Not only did she not conform, but she embellished her Jewishness. Her success allowed a discriminatory nation to perceive Jews in a more positive light. She turned stereotypes and unfair judgements into her strength. Not only that but as a lifelong outsider, she made space for outsiders of all kinds. Both Barbra and Brummell expanded the parameters that society placed on identities.

As previously stated, Streisand and Brice had a lot in common. So much so that Streisand said, “This play is really about me, it simply happened to happen before to Fanny Brice” (Mann 423). Therefore, the story of Fanny Brice became the lore of Barbra Streisand. Audiences watch Barbra as Fanny struggle with rejection. They see her resilience. They cheer for her as she stumbles her way into the Ziegfeld follies. This combination of fact and fiction, of carefully constructed performance and apparent rawness or indifference, is what makes *Funny Girl* so much like the performed self that constitutes dandyism.

Another way that Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl* follows the traditions of dandyism has to do with the medium. Because *Funny Girl* is a film, it represents fashion in the way fashion was intended to be witnessed, on a moving



body. The way Streisand moves in her clothes is part of her meticulously crafted performance, like the dandy. Streisand, in real life and as Fanny Brice, wore clothing that was distinct from those around her. Her sense of humor is often communicated through her sartorial stylings. The dandy Oscar Wilde famously said, “One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art” (*Phrases and Philosophies* 8). In *Funny Girl*, Barbra not only is a work of art with her hilarity, acting and her exceptional voice, but her fashion completes her as a work of art. Not only are her clothes art in their perfect communication of character, but so too are her conspicuously long nails, her voluminous hair, and her Cleopatra makeup. All of this comprises the unique and not-at-all-natural fashion of Barbra/ Fanny, which follows the tradition of the original and hyperbolic fashion of the dandy. Therefore, not only in the effect of Babs’ performance as Fanny was the tradition upheld but so too by the encapsulation of her unique and perfected fashion in the medium of film.

The above picture shows Fanny singing “I’m the Greatest Star.” Here, we can see her long nails, painted a pale pink so that though they draw attention to themselves, they remain somewhat subtle. Her nails elongate her slender fingers and turn her hands into props, sights of intrigue and fascination. Fanny’s clothes are loose. Whereas earlier in the scene we see the other performers wear form-fitting clothing, Fanny displays her singularity. Her skirt balloons around her. The pleats ripple like stage curtains. This outfit was worn when only Fanny knew that she was the greatest star. This outfit reaffirms what we are figuring out about the character. She is unique; she does things her own way. Her outfit conveys authenticity. It says she’s not trying to be like the other girls: she’s not trying to be the most beautiful. She’s just being herself. And being herself means being the greatest star.

Performance is important to the role of the Dandy. Brummell performed his persona. He spouted witticisms and feigned indifference. He was a work of art. So, the performance of Fanny Brice and the lasting legacy is a modern form of Dandyism. Further proving that performance and the act of ease lie at the heart of dandyism, Wilde argues that Jesus Christ is the ultimate Dandy. “He completely resembles a perfect work of art. He really does not teach us anything at all; but by coming into his presence, by associating with Him, we become something” (*De Profundis* 75). Wilde characterizes Christ as not working even though Jesus preached many sermons, traveled constantly, performed miracles, and if the Bible is to be believed, died for the sins of the world then rose again on the third day. He reveals his definition of dandyism. A dandy is a complete work of art, and high art no less. A dandy profoundly impacts people by their performance of self. And a dandy is an original who many imitate.

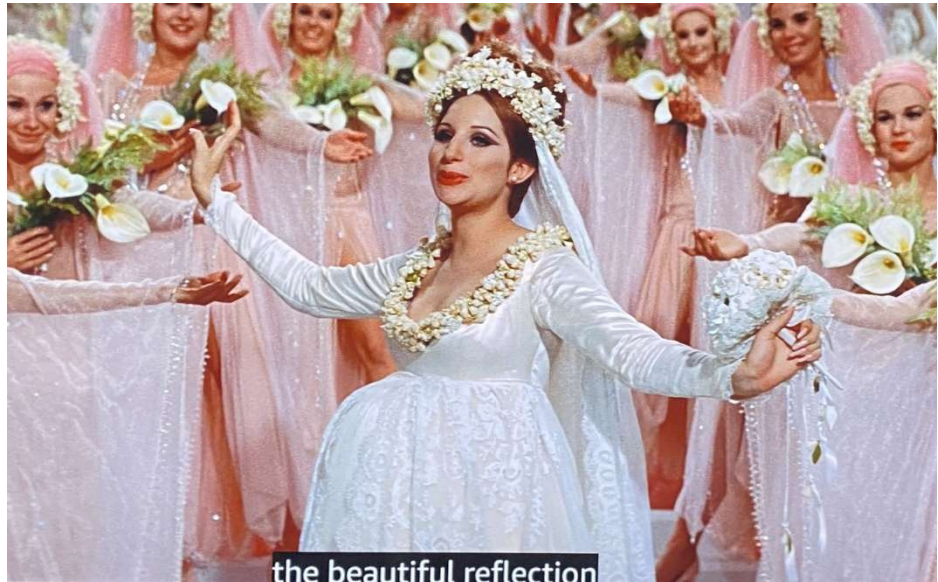
Queerness is an important part of the dandy. Many, if not all dandies were queer. Oscar Wilde was arrested because on sodomy charges in 1895, the same year as the first moving picture. Though neither Streisand nor Brice was queer, *Funny Girl* subverted gender norms. Fanny Brice was successful on her own without a man. When she did get married, she was the breadwinner. When Fanny first meets Nicky, she utters in shock, “You’re gorgeous.”



Typically, that would have been his line. Through her Jewishness, she subverts gender norms further. As Stacy Wolf writes in “Barbra’s ‘Funny Girl’ Body,” “Streisand’s inappropriate femininity was seen not only to be a sign of her ‘Jewishness’ but to be caused by it... her body was evidence of that Jewishness: ...a general lack of feminine appeal” (260). Because she was Jewish, she was seen as other. She was not viewed as a feminine woman. People perceived her body to be flawed. The heteronormalcy of Fanny’s relationship with Nick is thus further subverted because Fanny was not seen as womanly. Queer audiences recognized themselves in Fanny and her relationship because of her difference, and because of their gay sensibility. Fabio Cleto defines gay sensibility in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* as “a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness” (118). Fanny’s social oppression because of her Jewish identity made her a relatable hero to the queer community.

Above is pictured Oscar Wilde, photographed by famed portrait photographer Napoleon Sarony in 1882. The tights on his calves glisten emphasize how lean his legs are. The material of his clothing stands out. Even from this picture, an observer can tell it is of high quality. Wilde’s cravat is less dramatic than Brummel’s. His appearance conveys ennui. It was no doubt carefully constructed to appear that way.

Contrasting with Wilde, Brice sings her comedic number, “His Love Makes Me Beautiful.” Here we see her clothing is different from the other performers. Like the Dandy, her wardrobe surprises the viewer. Unlike the words she sings, Fanny is



demonstrating that skill can make one beautiful. That is a gift one gives oneself through dedication and determination. It is not the reflection of a man’s affection. Barbra, like the dandy, was self-constructed. She decided she would be a star, that she was beautiful, and she did not listen to anything to the contrary. As Wilde said, “Life imitates art much more than art imitates life” (*Intentions* 31-32). Barbra did not settle for the life laid out in front of her. Rather, she reached for the impossible. She transformed herself personally and sartorially into art and became someone who helped to transform society.

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