TEN

Turn-of-the-Century Male Impersonation
Rewriting the Romance Plot

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The study of women who dressed as men has become a very fashionable topic of late, especially among Renaissance scholars and theorists of homosexual identity. Much of this work has concentrated on the theater, with special reference to Shakespeare's heroines. Few critics have considered the nineteenth century. And yet the entire century is rife with cross-dressed heroines and heroes in theater, opera, and fiction, as well as numerous historical characters. In this chapter I will look at examples of male impersonation drawn from the pivotal years 1890-1914, in which notions of sexual identity were undergoing enormous changes in definition, attitude, and self-presentation. During these years the representation of the beautiful young man by women could be read in many different ways, depending upon the subjectivity of the viewer or reader. The male impersonator could represent both an eloquent and luxurious sexual undecidability and a threatening homosexual potential—depending not so much on the intentions of the impersonator herself, as those of her audience. Although the fin-de-siècle male impersonator was always placed within a heterosexual context, she became a visual icon of the possibility of alternative sexual desire.

In Vested Interests, Marjorie Garber argues that critics repeatedly "look through rather than at the cross-dresser, to turn away from a close encounter with the transvestite, and... instead to subsume that figure within one of the two traditional genders."1 For her, the cross-dresser is a "third," who must be recognized as a creature apart from either male or female—or even binary thinking, for "transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself."2 Garber's recuperation of the transvestite as a signifier in and of itself is valuable for forcing us to look directly at what we see, rather than comfortably remaining within the pre-existing categories of male and
female. But if we insist on the primacy of the category crisis, then we risk doing an injustice to the complex responses to the cross-dressed figure, and to the wide range of often contradictory readings he/she makes possible. While Garber privileges the cross-dresser’s own interpretive strategies, I believe that we need to focus on how observers/readers choose to see and then define this figure. In effect, gender meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

Queer theorists Sue-Ellen Case and Judith Butler have argued for a kind of theatrical display that calls into question any specific gender identity.\(^3\) While I am attracted to such arguments about gender fluidity and indeterminancy, we must beware of exaggerating the range of roles available to the stage male or female impersonator. In theory she or he could be anything, but in practice theatrical conventions dictate a narrow range of stereotypes. The actor in drag is virtually always either a salacious old hag or a libidinous beauty of doubtful character. Thinly veiled misogyny deflects, even destroys, sexual desire. Although the male impersonator will occasionally cross-dress as an older man, she is almost always dressed as a dandy—a young, beautiful man-about-town. Most often, echoing Shakespeare’s Viola and Rosalind, she feigns more sexual experience than she has, providing the audience with a frisson of pleasure as it watches a boy-like woman pretend to male experience that will confirm a sophistication she/he does not possess. Touches of femininity highlight her sexual charm for both men and women. The male impersonator attracts by means of her understated eroticism; the female impersonator repels by means of his overstated libidinal extravagance.

I will examine three examples drawn from the fin-de-siècle in order to show how male impersonation allowed multiple readings by both heterosexual and homosexual women and men. I will look first at two examples drawn from the stage, Vesta Tilley (1864–1952), the most popular male impersonator of the music hall, and Sarah Bernhardt (1845–1923), the most famous travesti actress of her day. One specialized in comic songs and the other in tragic heroes, but neither broke out of character on stage. The audience watched a woman play a male role, and judged her success accordingly. In contrast, I will then examine the feminist best-seller, Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins (1893), in which one of the heroines cross-dressed temporarily. The liberating effect of her utterly fantastic behavior opened a range of erotic possibilities for readers. Finally I will look briefly at the backlash against male impersonation in the attacks on the suffrage movement of the pre–World War I years. Throughout, I am especially interested in the ways in which an early generation of “out” lesbians selected images from the music halls, theater and fiction to compose their own public personae.

The late Victorian male impersonator could be found in the most apolitical of venues—the comic stage. The long tradition of theatrical transvestism in England normalized cross-dressing in such non-realistic genres as the pantomime and burlesque. Every winter the Christmas pantomime saw a beautiful actress play the principal boy in revealing tights and a well-known comedian cast as the homely dame; it continues to this day to be the most popular form of drama in Britain.
Pantomime functions as the comic equivalent to domestic melodrama; in both, heterosexual romance is the emotional core. The plot of pantomime is loosely based on a traditional folk tale, such as *Puss in Boots, Jack and the Beanstalk, Aladdin* or *Dick Whittington*. A selfish father plans to marry his daughter to a rich, ugly, or foolish man, whereas she wishes to marry the poor but honest hero. The hero and heroine escape the clutches of the father or the villain by using a bat, sword, or lamp—all obvious phallic symbols—given to the hero by a good fairy. Through carelessness, the hero loses the bat and then regains it. Roustabout adventures in which the principal boy is helped by the fairy godmother to defeat the heroine’s father are combined with topical songs. A grand finale celebrates the victorious, happy couple, now reunited with both the chastened father and the boy’s mother, often played by the dame. The curtain falls on the engagement or marriage of the principal boy and his beloved, thereby marking the entry of the liminal boy into adult maturity and active sexuality. Cross-dressing in this fantasy world provided an opportunity to express the feminine aspects of the boy-hero and the aggressive masculinity of the comic older woman. Audiences could have their cake and eat it too—they could laugh at the ugly dame, thrill at seeing the legs of the beautiful principal boy, and enjoy the restoration of order in the concluding marriage scene.4

The principal boy was and remains the single best-known male impersonator on the British stage. She did not seem to embody sexual ambiguity so much as sexual candor. At a time when both women and men wore layers upon layers of clothing, her relative undress was extraordinarily alluring. She began in the 1830s as a slim, almost prepubescent hero, but soon the Victorian preference for embonpoint brought to the stage full-bodied women displaying leg and buttocks in tights and glitter:

Ample-bosomed, small-waisted and with thighs—oh such thighs!—thighs that shone and glittered in the different coloured silk tights in which she continually appeared.

How she stood about the stage, proud and dominant, smacking those rounded limbs with a riding crop!5

E. H. Shepard, later to be A. A. Milne’s illustrator for *Winnie the Pooh*, remembered how “At every smack, a fresh dart was shot” into his young heart. As figure 1 shows, by the 1890s the principal boy could radiate rakish insouciance, with a cigarette, tipped hat, and full fleshlings.6 Tradition called for a kind of dashing femininity; the costume, like Ethel Earl’s trimming, often drew attention to the breasts and penis-free genitals. Nevertheless, “she” always won the heroine.

Absolute realism was by no means the norm in theatrical cross-dressing. Many music-hall male impersonators wore a variety of costumes that could range from impeccable male dress to a tie combined with a short skirt to a woman’s dress with a top hat and cane. Even Vesta Tilley, who prided herself on her accurate reproduction of male fashions, insisted, “I leave just enough of the woman in my impersonations to keep my work clean and make it remembered.”7 The rather stout
Sarah Bernhardt wore no wig and a costume reminiscent of the principal boy's when she played Hamlet (see fig. 4). Gender confusion that played on the attractive figure of the (often corsetted) actress was most common, as if to accentuate a range of sexual possibilities without losing sight of an essential womanliness. This femininity went hand in hand with a plot which focused on showing the various ways in which a young man could or could not find sexual success.

Gender indeterminancy is possible only in the realm of fantasy—when recreated off the stage and on the streets it becomes sexual deviance. Fin-de-siècle admirers of the male impersonator could use her gender ambiguity to imagine a different structure of sexual relations between women and men or to identify with her masculine freedoms. But when individual women began to make elements of this theatrical convention part of their own lives, male impersonation changed. It became expressive not of gender ambiguity, but of an increasingly well-defined sexual preference, namely homosexuality. The modern lesbian identity was formed from a bricolage of cultural sources, including theatrical images, utopian fiction, Greek and Roman literature, medical texts, male pornographic and semi-pornographic literature, the flourishing male homosexual culture of the times, and the inventiveness of confident women claiming a new public sexual identity. This
chapter examines in detail only one thread of this rich heritage, the important borrowings from the theatrical male impersonator.

**I. VESTA TILLEY’S STYLISH PRETENDERS**

The reign of the male impersonator in the music halls of Great Britain was shorter than the principal boy. Her heyday coincided with the most important years of the women’s movement, 1870 to the mid-1920s, as if to provide a slightly disreputable commentary on the legal and political demands of middle-class feminists. The music hall was rooted in men’s supper clubs, where drink and sexual jollity ruled. Even though the halls gradually became respectable, winning the praise of such literary snobs as T. S. Eliot, they never quite lost all traces of their raffish origins. Women performers in the 1860s and 1870s were noted for their ability to parry jibes with a drunken audience, and their power in belting out a song. All music hall artistes had to grab the attention of an audience quickly, for each turn was only fifteen to twenty minutes; three or four songs, with quick costume changes, a strong chorus and a catchy tune provided the formula for success for the adroit and attractive. Women worked in an aggressively heterosexual milieu, and yet they did not perform solely for men. As representatives of sexual freedom, they appealed to women as much as to men; indeed, women performers, whether cross-dressed or not, seldom lost an opportunity to joke at male sexual pretensions.

Unmarried clerks, skilled laborers, and salesmen attended night after night, so it is not surprising that one of the most popular male singers was the swell, or man about town, dedicated to fashion, drink, and nights with the boys. Class envy, pride, and satire jostled with sexual hints and broad asides. From the moment the *lion comique* George Leyburne sang the hit “Champagne Charlie” in 1868, male impersonators were parroting the upper-class swell.8 He remained their single most popular character (see fig. 2). The costume of this stylish representative of conspicuous consumption echoed the lavish fripperies of the principal boy in its extravagance, but the goal was to avoid marriage, and to enjoy the pleasures of city life. All of the successful male impersonators regularly played principal boys in Christmas pantomimes, welcoming the opportunity to show off their acting skills in a more romantic scenario.9

As if to provide some relief from their portraits of rich sophisticates, male impersonators also created mini-dramas about innocent young clerks on holiday or poor waifs starving in the streets.10 Vesta Tilley, Ella Shields, and Hetty King, whose careers peaked at the turn of the century, were highly successful in their portrayal of impudent boys and aspiring swells. Tilley, the epitome of turn-of-the-century respectability, brought young women and families into the halls.11 As she proudly claimed in her autobiography, “I made a point of cutting out the questionable lines, and I think this had a great deal to do with my success.”12 She became the most famous male impersonator on the English stage, and, as figure 2
shows, she prided herself on her perfect costuming and accurate imitation of a man’s stride. Her soprano voice then underscored the disjunction between appearance and gender.

The wealthy, retired Tilley, however, may have exaggerated her respectability. Thirty years earlier in an interview she sardonically commented on her imitators, “The good ones will survive and the poor ones—well, the Lord only knows what becomes of them.” The tacit assumption that theatrical failure meant prostitution simply underscores the ways in which male impersonation was designed to pique heterosexual desire. Certainly Tilly focused all of her sympathy on young men who flirt and spoon, but rarely get their girl. Many of her best-known songs were about the social difficulties of a young unmarried man who wished to attract a girl. A perennial favorite was Sidney, whose holidays were in September, and “He’s been saving up since November”; he had four different seaside outfits in which to dazzle the girls in the audience (see fig. 2). Women, and especially working women, were always hard to get, too independent, and likely to con a man.

Oh the girls are the ruin of man,
Since the days of Eve and Adam,
Nice little things, want little rings,
Want little diamonds and pearls.
Another of her songs ended with a chorus reminding the girls in the audience, “Don’t flirt with so many swells / Stick to one as you should, you should.”

Beneath Tilley’s relentlessly cheerful songs was a deep sense of male vulnerability. While the pantomime ended in sexual union and reconciliation, the male impersonator’s song ended in frustration; money spent on stylish clothes and girls did not bring happiness. Marriage proved an impossibility, and male camaraderie became the only reliable bond. Her young men lack the principal boy’s helpful fairy godmother. The underlying poignancy of Tilley’s vignettes is provided by the absent mother, which made her seem so boy-like to the men and so attractive to both women and men in the audience.

By the 1890s the beautiful youth was a complex image. An active male homosexual subculture gave a rather different look to sexual desire; while probably unacknowledged in the highly respectable circles in which Tilley traveled, some men in the audience would have recognized her creations as attractive boys. Her repertoire included not only the fashionable swell, but also messenger boys, midshipmen, and enlisted soldiers—all well-known “trade” for Oscar Wilde and other homosexuals. Moreover, the effeminate swell with his excessive interest in fashion had always been sexually suspect. Tilley’s ribald predecessors had poked fun at “midnight sons” and “Piccadilly Algies,” noting both their “lah-di-dah manners” and their preference for drinking with the boys to courting the girls. The fascination of the American press with Tilley’s costumes can also be interpreted as a fascination with male display, associated then as now with homosexual sophistication. Headlines such as “Vesta Tilley Kindly Shows Mere Men What to Wear and How to Wear It” and “How Men Ought to Dress” combined with photos of her and illustrations of well-dressed men gave said Americans permission to examine male fashion—and an attractive, slight figure—closely.

Contemporaries could not, of course, openly express the homosexual attraction of Tilley’s creations. J. S. Bratton has pointed out how rarely a male impersonator’s actual act is described; she speculates that this deliberate silence may come from male journalists’ unwillingness to confront the anarchic gender bending of so many women performers. Instead, we have bland appreciations of specific routines or disquisitions on the accuracy of the clothes worn. A slightly later generation wrote of Tilley’s uncanny ability to capture their remembered feelings of adolescent insecurity. M. Willson Disher reminisced about how her portraits steadily improved over her long career. He carefully avoids too close an identification with Tilley’s characters, ignoring the erotic in favor of the emotional:

By pretending to be young men for so long, she had come to understand them as well as they did themselves. Now she went further, and understood them better than they
did themselves. That is why we saw them, not as we could see them in real life but as they were viewed through a clever woman’s eyes.\footnote{21}

Memoirs such as Disher’s express a kind of double nostalgia—for a lost innocence and for a lost cultural experience. An evening at the halls, laughing at a performer who gently imitated male foibles, recalled not the painful awkwardnesses of adolescence, but softened memories.

Men who had seen Tilley perform concentrated on her outward appearance, but Colin MacInnes, a modern historian of the music halls, can only look through her clothes to her body. For him, female admiration of a male impersonator can only be suppressed lesbian desire. He uneasily comments that when Tilley appealed to the girls in the audience with the chorus line, “If you’d like to love a soldier, you can all love me!” there must be “something slightly equivocal about this number.”\footnote{22} MacInnes cannot see youthful beauty and vulnerability as an attractive ideal of heterosexual maleness for women because he never forgets the body beneath the clothes. It is precisely this kind of literalization that Garber argues against in her privileging of the “third” element, which frees both cross-dresser and audience to dwell temporarily in fantasy, apart from sexual binaries. Yet repeatedly male historians and memoirists have seen gender commentary rather than gender instability in the male impersonator; for them the actress calls attention to the limitations of the masculine without undermining its authority.

Vesta Tilley’s keenest admirers were women, perhaps because they seem to have avoided construing her as a heterosexual woman. She described their adulation in her autobiography:

Girls of all ages would wait in crowds to see me enter or leave the theatre, and each post brought piles of letters, varying from an impassioned declaration of undying love to a request for an autograph, or a photograph, or a simple flower, or a piece of ribbon I had worn. . . . I still have a letter from a middle-aged woman who was a cook, in which she told me how very much she admired me, and what a dear little boy I made, and proceeded to assure me that it would give her the very greatest happiness to serve me. If I ever were ill and wanted special nursing, or wanted someone to look after me, I had only to let her know.\footnote{23}

We have yet to acknowledge the allure of the beautiful boy for both homosexual and heterosexual women.\footnote{24} While some women, like the cook, may have wanted to mother Vesta Tilley, many idolized her because she represented that fleeting youth so celebrated in Greek love. As the feminist critic Elaine Aston has argued, for female spectators Tilley could represent “a collectively recognized, mythical ideal of male beauty” in which “the threat of physical, sexual contact is absent.”\footnote{25} While women have generally been seen as seeking permanent love, perhaps Tilley enabled them to imagine a transitory moment that did not involve experience or consequences, but rather remained a fantasy of evanescent beauty. The women who sought an autograph, a flower or some other token from their favorite performer were privileging a phallus-free masculinity. The Freudian critic Sarah Kofman has argued that “what is pertinent to women in fetishism is the paradigm of undecidability that it offers.”\footnote{26} Women fans, unlike male theater critics, ignored
the body beneath the clothes, and celebrated the male impersonator's appearance. Tilley's sexual undecidability was the main source of her attractiveness for women.

Unfortunately we have no surviving comments by women about Tilley. But her immaculately attired dandies influenced the styles of both young men and women. She herself tells the story of having misplaced a cufflink one night; after she substituted a black ribbon, swells everywhere began to use ribbons instead of cufflinks. The connection between her and the nascent lesbian movement cannot be documented, but individual lesbians were fascinated with the stage. The large number of postcards, carte d'visite, and other memorabilia of Tilley and her many rivals testify to the widespread circulation of images of mannish women. Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943), the author of the infamous lesbian novel, The Well of Loneliness (1928), from a very early age began to wear men's jackets and ties and in 1920 she cut her hair short (fig. 3 dates from before 1910). Since Hall strongly disapproved of women passing as men, theatrical transvestism provided her with a model for the mannish lesbian. She obviously felt that the impeccable tailoring of Vesta Tilley's gentlemen best represented her own sense of belonging to the "third sex." Both women, for example, loved flowered silks as part of their male costume. By purchasing her clothes at a theatrical costumer's she even managed to capture some of Tilley's exaggerated stylishness. To many of her lovers, Hall seemed to embody the captivating aloofness and vulnerability of the male impersonator.

Radclyffe Hall's borrowings from the stage did not affect the impersonator herself, nor most of those who admired her. She remains an extreme example, but a dangerous sexual independence was implicit in the theater's transvestites. Principal boys, empowered by fairy godmothers, foiled predatory father-figures. Courting youths retaliated against paternal authority with sarcasm and parody. As Elaine Aston has pointed out, when Tilley sang, "How many 'lemoneades' we had—my word! I really couldn't tell / At two a.m. pa started off for home, like this, / And so did I!" she used her androgynous appearance as a satirical weapon. The audience heard the mischievous tune and saw a pubescent boy walking off stage exaggerating the absent father's angry gestures. Neither the male impersonator nor the principal boy inverted the male order; rather, each disrupted it, calling attention to all that remains unsatisfied, repressed, or disturbing. As Julia Kristeva has said, when women attempt male power, they do not overturn the male hierarchy, but bring it into question. The male impersonator can never be a boy, however skilled she might be in representing one, but she can draw attention to the follies of the male order—and provide an opening for fantasies of empowerment, sexual and otherwise.

II. SARAH BERNHARDT'S EFFEMINATE HEROES

At the turn of the century, Sarah Bernhardt was one of the best-known actresses in Europe and America; her travesti roles were widely admired and imitated
by lesbians. This French-Jewish actress had revolutionized the French theater with her unconventional interpretations of the female leads in such famous French plays as Phèdre, Hernani, La Dame aux camélias, and Théodora. In the 1870s and 1880s she had taken Paris, London, and New York by storm; she never retired, bringing her lavish productions year after year to English-speaking audiences; the spectacle of this famous woman was sufficient to overcome any language barrier. Her well-publicized slim beauty, personal extravagance and sexual liaisons thrilled admirers everywhere; photos, postcards (including pornographic versions of her most famous roles), card games, commemorative plates, and other mementoes of the most famous actress of her time can still be found in antique markets. Bernhardt never feared controversy, publicly fighting with the Comédie Française, actively supporting Dreyfus, and openly praising the suffrage movement. She also included in her intimate circle the mannish artist, Louise Abbéma.31

At a time when most actresses retired or took supporting roles, Bernhardt shifted from her famous "femme fatales to portray a series of tragic heroes. She chose her roles carefully, specializing in men who had “a strong mind in a weak body,” claiming that only an older woman (she was in her fifties) was mature enough to interpret thought-wracked young men.32 Her best-known roles were “the Floren-
turne Hamlet,” the melodramatic, demented Lorenzo d’Medici in Alfred de Musset’s Lorenzaccio (1897), her self-consciously light-hearted “black Hamlet” (fig. 4) in Shakespeare’s play (1899) and her popular antihero, the Duke of Reichstadt, son of Napoleon, or her “white Hamlet,” after the color of his uniform (fig. 5), in Edmond Rostand’s L’Aiglon (1900).

Bernhardt’s three tragedies included a crucial twist in the pantomime plot. Her “Hamlets” were betrayed by their mothers and dominated by their fathers. The combination leaves them weak and cowardly. Gertrude marries the murderer of her husband; Reichstadt’s Austrian mother is disloyal to France; Lorenzo’s mother wishes to avoid her son at all costs, and admits that “like a noxious vapor, the defilement of his heart has mounted to his face.”33 Hamlet vacillates, the Duke of Reichstadt plays with toy soldiers, and Lorenzo faints at the sight of a sword, the very instrument that gave the principal boy masculine power. Not surprisingly, all three men are hopeless lovers on stage, where they either talk of off-stage debauchery, or fail to meet promised assignations. Obviously this meant that Bernhardt could largely avoid the awkwardness of love-making on stage, while under-scoring their emotional immaturity.34

Bernhardt’s “principal boys” are even more isolated than Vesta Tilley’s, for they can turn to neither mother nor father nor heroine for support. While obsessed
with their lost fathers, her heroes are forced to contend with powerful villains—Claudius, the Duke of Florence, and Metternich dominate the plots. In order to defeat these men, her young men must resort to feminine wiles, deception, and play-acting. Bernhardt’s mannered acting style and appearance accentuated their effeminacy. For many seeing her act, these heroes must have raised awkward questions about not only the impotence and folly of masculine heroics, but also about feminine guile. The defensive laughter of some male reviewers may have been their discomfort at seeing the deception and artifice practiced by a feminized hero.35

A single incident from Rostand’s L’Aiglon points to why lessons accepted under the guise of fantasy could become uncomfortably disturbing in tragedy. In pantomime the audience might admit the necessity of a female helper, such as the good fairy, but in tragedy such a figure underscored the cowardice of the hero. During a masquerade ball loyal French patriots, led by the Contessa Camerata, effect the Duke of Reichstadt’s escape from Austria; he is to lead Bonapartist forces against the repressive French monarchy and its Austrian allies. The forceful Contessa dresses as the Duke so that he (played by Bernhardt) may flee to the border. She then goes to an assignation the Duke has made with a female admirer. When the Duke learns that the disguised Contessa is in danger of being murdered by a jeal-
ous brother, he refuses to escape, and thereby betrays the troops waiting for him, and all possibility of a return to Bonapartist democracy. The Duke’s chivalry is undermined by the appearance of the Contessa, still dressed as him; she furiously declares, “After all I’ve done, I hoped / At least to find that you had gone!”36 But the Duke is not meant for leadership—he lacks his father’s ruthlessness, and his patriotism (which appealed mightily to the French audience, still smarting under the defeats of the Franco-Prussian War) is only rhetoric. As if to confirm feminine power, the would-be assassin swears, “I didn’t know / The Corsican’s brat was such a fighter!” And when he learns the identity of his adversary, he exclaims, “This woman’s a Napoleon!” (Rostand, 285–86). An actress in the role of a woman who dresses as a man has the courage of a Napoleon, while an actress in the role of a man personifies effeminate inaction. Only an actress as skilled as Bernhardt could keep an audience’s sympathy for the Duke, although a long death scene, as well as the expensive sets, and a large, well-trained cast helped.

All of the rewritings of pantomime’s romance plot insist upon the sexual attractiveness of the unsuccessful, isolated man who cannot fulfill the conventional masculine role. Like Vesta Tilley, Bernhardt’s fans idolized her. On one occasion she agreed to meet with a French girl who had refused to consider any of the presentable young men her parents introduced her to because none looked like the Duke of Reichstadt. Bernhardt persuaded the girl to forget her stage-hero by receiving her “in her oldest dressing-gown, no make-up, wrinkles and hollows showing up horribly.”37 Vesta Tilley reports a similar incident. But when she showed herself in post-performance disarray, the woman insisted that “the real you” was her stage persona, not the tired, thin-lipped woman before her.38

The fans who cannot distinguish between a stage persona and the actress are comic. But Bernhardt’s influence was more far-reaching; for many young women her impassioned acting expressed their inchoate yearnings for a dramatic passion or cause. The young Una Troubridge, Radclyffe Hall’s partner, had adored Bernhardt as the Duke of Reichstadt, and tried to imitate her; she longed “how utterly in vain, for dark, mysterious narrow eyes, a high-bridged nose, a questing, haunted expression and an interesting past.”39 Lady Emilia Dilke, a well-known art historian and feminist, found herself so disturbed by “Sarah Bernhardt in a male part” that she “could not sleep until she had disposed of her impression and dispelled nightmare by a sketch.”40 Her loving husband does not describe the nature of her nightmare, but we must ask why a happily married woman—whose first marriage had been a disaster—would find Bernhardt’s impersonation so troubling. Did she momentarily sense an erotic attraction to one of her many feminist friends? Or did she identify with the sexual possibilities implicit in Bernhardt’s characterizations? The frequency with which allusions to Bernhardt appear in memoirs of the time speaks to her enduring hold on the imagination of theatergoers.

Bernhardt was a favorite among the growing coterie of fin-de-siècle Paris lesbians. The American heiress Natalie Barney (1876–1972), addressed a poem to Bernhardt after seeing her in L’Aiglon. The poem was published in 1900 as part of
a collection of lesbian verse; as if to highlight her close identification with the Duke, Barney included a portrait of herself as a page. Her outraged father had the plates and all copies destroyed, though Barney managed to save a few. But Albert Barney could not stop his daughter, who became one of the best-known lesbian hostesses and patrons of her day and was also notorious for her numerous affairs. The courtesan, Liane de Pougy published a roman à clef, L’Idylle saphique in 1901, describing her tumultuous affair with the young Barney. In one scene, clearly drawn directly from their relationship, the two lovers watch Bernhardt play Hamlet. Rather than falling in love with her Hamlet, as so many heterosexual women did, they identified with him. The Natalie-figure compares the frustrations of women with Hamlet’s impotent rage against tyranny, “For what is there for women who feel the passion for action when pitiless Destiny holds them in chains? Destiny made us women at a time when the law of men is the only law that is recognized.” The staginess of this speech echoes Bernhardt’s own grandiose style of expression.

But, like Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney and her friends took their identification with the male impersonator beyond literature and into the public domain. For Barney, however, cross-dressing was an erotic embellishment of lesbian play, and not the embodiment of her special nature; passing as male was bad form. Indeed, Liane de Pougy roundly declared in her memoir, “I shall never understand that kind of deviation: wanting to look like a man, sacrificing feminine grace, charm and sweetness. . . . And cutting off one’s hair when it can be a woman’s most beautiful adornment! It’s a ridiculous aberration, quite apart from the fact that it invites insult and scandal.” The attractiveness of Bernhardt was as much for her highly theatrical style as her portrayal of anguish of young men. Barney and her coterie took Bernhardt’s tragic heroes and turned them into romantic exponents of lesbian love. Barney dressed as Bernhardt’s Hamlet, but added a provocative garter, as if to draw attention to the erotic nature of her costume (fig. 6). She and her various lovers celebrated lesbian passion by photographing themselves in costumes that ranged from nudity in the woods of Maine to the britches and ruffles of eighteenth-century pages and the flowing gowns of Sappho’s Greece.

Bernhardt was also a cult figure among male homosexuals. The amateur actor, the Marquis of Anglesey, was photographed as the Duke of Reichstadt (fig. 7) in “a romantic pose and appropriate costume” in the gossip column of The Sketch in January 1902. H. Montgomery Hyde describes the Marquis as “the most notorious aristocratic homosexual” immediately following the Wilde trial; he was “an extreme example of the effeminate transvestite type, and was a gifted female impersonator.” He was well known for staging private pantomimes at Christmas; whatever role he played, the slight, girlish Marquis must often have looked like a principal boy. Within six years of coming into his inheritance the Marquis had to declare bankruptcy and flee to Monte Carlo. Vesta Tilley added to her male wardrobe by buying “dozens” of vests of “delicately flowered silk” at the sale of his personal effects. In the 1920s the lead role in L’Aiglon was taken over by a well-
known homosexual, Jean Weber. Weber was proud of his ability to play roles that had previously been exclusively *travesti* parts. He continued the tradition of exaggerated emotionalism and gender ambiguity in his portrayal of the Duke of Reichstadt, if a surviving publicity still is any guide.

It is not surprising to find a dense web of cross-references between the theater and lesbians and male homosexuals. The public expression of homosexuality among a small group of courageous (and wealthy) pioneers drew repeatedly from theatrical prototypes. Vesta Tilley’s almost fanatical realism attracted heterosexual men and appears to have been a model for women who thought of themselves as naturally male. For Radclyffe Hall, who thought she had a man’s soul trapped in a woman’s body, the closer she could come to masculinity the better; Vesta Tilley’s successful impersonation may well have been a model and a goad for her. Bernhardt’s effete characters, like the principal boy, were less essentialized and more open to varying constructions. She personified both the effeminate male and the sexual allure of a cross-dressed woman. Her affected acting style, so unlike the deft wit of Tilley, lent itself to camp imitations. Cabaret parodies of her most famous roles were legion—and so too were her homosexual admirers. As figures 3 and 6 show, no one would mistake Radclyffe Hall or Natalie Barney for men;

both are obviously in costumes in the sense of wearing nontraditional clothes that draw attention to themselves. But each portrays a different version of the third sex—one earnest and erotic, the other playful and sexy.

III. GRAND’S FEMINIST FANTASY

On stage the male impersonator was a long-accepted convention. But what happened when she walked off stage into realistic fiction? Or, more seriously, appeared on the streets, rivaling men? Nineteenth-century fiction abounds with scenes of cross-dressed women passionately declaring their love for a man; amateur theatricals invariably provided an occasion of truth-telling or heightened romance. But the implications of cross-dressing in fin-de-siècle fiction are less easy to unravel. Although few critics have seen any relationship between the sexually aware world of the theater and the rational New Woman novels of the 1890s, the connections cannot be avoided in Sarah Grand’s The Heavenly Twins (1893), with its explicit use of male impersonation and theatrical plotting.

The Heavenly Twins was a scandalous best-seller that catapulted its unknown author into fame and fortune. The reading public read with fascination Sarah
Grand's candid account of the horrors of male vice. The main plot focused on the educated Evadne, who refuses to consummate her marriage with a dissolute military officer, and barely survives to marry a good doctor. Her friend Edith foolishly believes she can save a fallen man, and herself falls into syphilitic dementia with astonishing speed after giving birth to a diseased son. The third plot, which gave the novel its title, recorded the pranks of Angelica and her twin brother, Diavolo. Although much admired at the time for their impish tricks and moral probity, critics of our day have largely ignored these tedious pranksters, preferring to concentrate on the author's diatribes against women's sexual ignorance or the plight of Evadne, whose life lacks purpose.

Contemporaries were especially taken with a portion of the novel labeled "An Interlude," in which a mysterious, handsome man arrives in town to become the cathedral's tenor. He falls in love with Angelica, who sits in the front row, admiring him at every service; the class difference is too great to bridge, but the Tenor is solaced by the visits of Angelica's brother, who teases him relentlessly about his idealistic love. The Boy, as he is dubbed, accompanies the Tenor brilliantly on the violin and consumes expensive food and fine wine. One evening while rowing on the river, their boat capsizes; the Tenor saves the drowning Boy, whose wig falls off, revealing Angelica in disguise. Both are humiliated and part in sorrow. The Tenor catches pneumonia and dies; Angelica returns to her elderly, kind husband. She is last seen writing his parliamentary speeches. Father-figures turn out to be necessary for women until the feminist revolution.

Like Sarah Bernhardt, the Boy and his ambiguous night-time relationship with the Tenor provided readers with a dizzying array of contradictory options. Was Angelica only acting out an adolescent desire for action? Brighter and stronger than her brother, was she drawing attention to the social constraints imposed upon a woman? Did the freedom her husband gave her remind readers of the dangers of undisciplined feminism? Could man-boy love find a literary expression through the simple use of cross-dressing? Or can we see this situation as prefiguring lesbian love? Contemporaries may have wanted all of these possibilities, and found it easy to keep all options open.

We first meet the Boy after midnight, watching a "lady of mercy" save a prostitute on the market square. As a man, Angelica can safely see what is concealed from young respectable women. The female transvestite becomes a flâneuse—the observer rather than the observed—who sees all, records all, and yet remains detached from the passing scene. But the transvestite's power to look contains a paradox: like the flâneur, women look in order to be seen. We first encounter the Boy in the market square through the eyes of the Tenor; thereafter the point of view shifts to him whenever something important happens to the Boy. Male clothing liberates not only a woman's body, but also her other senses, all of which Angelica uses to draw attention to herself, just as if she were on stage. The Boy demands to be seen, "Like my new suit, Israfël?" He laughs heartily when told, "It looks as if you'd got it for private theatricals, and taken great care of it." (Grand, p. 418). He "wastes all of [his] supersitious life and energy" that he "jumped over the chairs instead...
of walking around them, and performed an occasional pas seul, or pirouette, in various parts of the room," unconventional behavior which the Tenor "humours" "good-naturedly" (Grand, p. 389).

Grand, however much she thought she was recording the lives of the ruling class, could not avoid images drawn from the theater when she created the Boy. One evening the Boy appears in a "spotless flannel boating suit, with a silk handkerchief of many colours, knotted picturesquely round his neck" (Grand, p. 378). The seaside dandy was one of Vesta Tilley’s most popular figures, for he was the archetypal flâneur in his determined promenade along the beach, ogling the girls and waiting to be noticed (fig. 2). The Tenor correctly labels his appearance as more suitable for the stage—there is something artificial in the Boy’s styliness; only someone in love would remain unsuspicious. The cover of a paperback edition beckons to potential readers with Angelica dressed as the Boy in “his” favorite boating suit, but to avoid the very confusion Grand so carefully built into her narrative, she is shown without her wig (fig. 8). Angelica’s successful transvestism is undermined, as if it were too daring to illustrate a cheap reprint.50

Nevertheless, within the narrative Angelica assumes that her suit and wig give her protection, that they are an assertion of autonomy, of bodily self-containment in the face of threats of invasion, either visual or physical. Disguise enables her to deny the patriarchal insistence that a woman is always already her body. Yet Angelica’s expectation of asexual neutrality proves false from the very beginning of her disguised life, for the Boy is accosted by a prostitute on his first night out. “He” steps back “with an unmistakeable gesture of disgust,” and stumbles into the Tenor. Even as a young man, Angelica is a sexual object—his choice is the delicate homoerotic admiration of the Tenor or the flagrant solicitation of the prostitute.

Yet in the feminist fantasy of The Heavenly Twins, Angelica is able to use her position to become a sexual subject without losing her purity or her self-respect. She is the silent observer of the male performer in the cathedral, and when she dresses as the Boy, she draws attention to herself and mocks the Tenor’s passivity. The aristocratic female gaze can inhabit but not disrupt the conservative male space of the church, but when gendered male, it rules the homoerotic space of the Tenor’s lodgings.51 In both situations Angelica actively courts the Tenor’s gaze; indeed, when their eyes meet for the first time, he falters and commits a musical error. The Boy’s unannounced visits and erratic hours keep the captivated Tenor constantly on the lookout. His life turns on seeing either Angelica or the Boy, while she writes the script of their drama, whatever she wears. Like Rosalind’s teasing of Orlando, the Boy’s chafing of the Tenor for his silent love is not to test that love, which is never in question, but rather is a form of erotic foreplay, or as Stephen Greenblatt has said about Shakespeare’s comedy, it is a symbolic enactment of their mutual desire.52

This desire, so graphically expressed in metaphors of music and food, is overtly homoerotic. Heterosexuality is reduced to descriptive gestures; the Boy is afraid of mice, cannot swim, loves flowers, all characteristics that remind the reader that
he is she, but also reinforce the erotic vulnerability of the liminal male adolescent. We have a militantly pro-marriage feminist who can only imagine a utopian world of male-female relations in terms of the burgeoning homosexual world around her. Had Sarah Grand known any homosexuals? She may have heard rumors of despised men in the barracks when she lived with her husband, an army doctor. How much did he teach her, besides the etiology of venereal disease? In 1890, when Grand left her husband and took her pseudonym, she covered her déclassé origins, and constructed a public persona of serene feminine rectitude. Whatever personal knowledge she may have had in regard to male homosexuality was scarcely likely to be made public in the years surrounding the Wilde trial.

And yet the beautiful choir boy was a cliché among homosexuals by the 1890s, and the Boy’s “pleasure in the Tenor’s beauty never tired” (Grand, p. 424). The mothering Tenor treats the Boy in a fashion recognized by every pedophile. He permits him to define the parameters of their relation, indulges him in everything he demands, and yet hopes to teach him a higher and more moral life. He constantly wants to touch the Boy, commenting at one juncture, “You put that remarkable head of yours under my hand, and then growl at me for touching it. And really it is a temptation” (Grand, p. 405). Until at least the eighteenth, and some would argue, into the nineteenth century, boys had been permitted, even encour-
aged, in a period of sexual passivity. Sexually experienced women, or older boys and men, initiated the adolescent male into sexual experience. The tradition of taking a young son to a brothel to be taught by an older woman has a long and hoary tradition; Greek love, of course, was based upon a pedagogic ideal.54

In this woman-authored work, however, the Boy insists "irritably" to the Tenor one moonlit night on the river:

I take my pleasures daintily, and this scene satisfies me heart and soul . . . the calm fellowship, the brotherly love undisturbed by a single violent emotion, which is the perfection of social intercourse to me. I say the scene is hallowed, and I'll have no sex in my paradise. (Grand, p. 423)

Contemporary male critics considered Angelica's sexual purity in the face of the Tenor's love a silly fantasy. As F. W. Barry commented, "This unimpeachable Mignon, who breaks bounds at night and dares the police and the perils of a Cathedral close, bears no small resemblance to Dodo, with virtue added. Would not so flighty a temper, trained by itself to Epicurean notions of the Highest Good, often leave out the virtue, which spoils the cup of pleasantness?"55 But Grand, like Vesta Tilley's many admirers, found the beautiful young man—the pious, self-controlled Tenor—more attractive than any available model of masculinity. She dared to imagine female erotic pleasure in terms of two beautiful, androgynous youths coming together for music and intellectual talk. Moreover, Angelica was not as sexless as obtuse critics assumed; a few nights after her declaration in favor of dainty pleasures, emotions erupt metaphorically with the capsizing of their boat.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has suggested that Sarah Grand is wooing the Boy-Angelica through the Tenor as a means of speaking her own homosexual desire.56 Grand thereby displaces the phallus, and the requirement of fixed gender identity for sexual pleasure. Since Grand had already destabilized gender in her passive Tenor and active heroine, further gender switching obviously becomes possible. The delights of food, warmth, conversation, and the Tenor's moral pedagogy repeat and subtly enlarge upon a Sapphic romance. Both the Tenor and the Boy are mysterious creatures of the night, without a past or a future; their love flourishes apart from the eyes of society, a thing unto itself. The Tenor's almost suicidal death prefigures countless lesbian novels which end tragically. The entire Interlude is suffused with an unfocused eroticism that finally gathers to a climactic moment on, and in, moonlit water—images that confirm a purely feminine desire writ upon Nature. The Tenor saves the Boy from drowning, reviving him through the heat of his own body, in a scene strongly reminiscent of a sexual climax:

. . . he clasped the lad in his arms and pressed his cheek to his in a burst of grief and tenderness not to be controlled. He held him so for a few seconds, and it seemed as if in that close embrace, his whole being had expressed itself in love and prayer, for all at once he felt the Boy's limbs quiver through their clumsy wrappings, and then he
heard him sigh. Oh, the relief of it! The sudden reaction made him feel sick and faint.  
(Grand, p. 445)

What looks like a form of man-boy love can be read as a groping toward an expression of lesbian love. The Tenor and the Boy have a stereotypical male homosexual relationship which serves to cover the pervasive lesbian eroticism of the situation. At a time when a modern lesbian culture was just beginning to define itself publicly, the well-established contemporary male culture could have been a source of inspiration, however indirectly.

Notoriety had sold her books, but Sarah Grand craved respectability and social acceptance. Around 1900, accompanied by a Miss Harling, she moved into her stepson’s home in the elegant spa of Tunbridge Wells. During her years there she headed a moderate suffrage society and lectured widely. She became well known for her ultra-feminine hats and stylish clothing.57 Although several women were devoted to “Madame Grand,” she left no evidence of reciprocating their passion; her public cause was sexually pure marriages. She insisted that her notorious novel was only intended to draw the public’s attention to venereal disease; she did not comment on the Tenor and the Boy. She also claimed to have coined the phrase “New Woman,” in an article written for the North American Review, “All I meant by the term ‘new woman’ was one who, while retaining all the grace of manner and feminine charm, had thrown off all the silliness and hysterical feebleness of her sex . . . I never could have meant the vulgar creature who now passes for the approved type of new woman. Woman was never meant to be developed man.”58 But what of the “silliness” of Angelica’s cross-dressing? In the heady days of press attention, had she forgotten the death of her immaculate hero, the Tenor? Did a woman’s unappeased desire for love and freedom bring only death?

Sarah Grand’s charming women and refined marriages had little appeal to young suffragists determined to gain women’s political rights during the years 1903–1913. These women, however, acted upon Angelica’s dreams, both in their politics and their attire. Although the dominant image projected by such leaders as Emmeline Pankhurst, her daughter, Christabel, and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, was of unimpeachable high style, many of their followers adopted a more practical—more masculine—dress. Photographs of women who sold suffrage newspapers on the street show them dressed in tweed suits, sturdy boots and neat bow ties. Male impersonators had appropriated specific male symbols as short-hand for masculinity; they invariably sported such obvious phallic accoutrements as a cigarette or cigar, sword or walking stick, or, at the very least, a tie. Now suffragists all seemed to be wearing a version of a man’s tie. Photos and illustrations of suffragists invariably include a woman with a tie. It spoke of political and sexual independence—and made a woman fair game for lewd jostling and obscenities.59

In the eyes of male journalists, medical men and most politicians, suffragists were assumed to be usurping male power, both in the bedroom and Parliament.
Lesbian innuendo was pervasive. Rumors abounded about Emmeline Pankhurst’s close relationship with the mannish composer, Ethel Smyth. Commentators spoke darkly of the undue influence of the “female celibate pedagogue” and medical men warned against the contagion of inversion. To outsiders, some women flaunted their sexual preference. Ethel Smyth was the most egregious example, but Cecily Hamilton and Edy Craig, known for their lesbian proclivities, also wore tweed skirts, shirts, jackets, and flowing bow ties. Theirs was a softer version of Radclyffe Hall’s more elaborate masculinity (fig. 3), but just as obviously drew attention to their sexual independence. Both women contributed their theater expertise to the Cause, writing and producing suffrage plays, training volunteers for numerous events, and master-minding vast, colorful pageants and marches. These women and others provided confirmation of pre-existing assumptions about politically active women. The popular novelist, Marie Corelli, dismissed the suffragists with the comment “No man likes to be libellously caricatured and a masculine woman is nothing more than a libellous caricature of an effeminate man.” What an earlier generation had left implicit was now explicit: the effeminate male homosexual (fig. 7) and the ravening lesbian harridan (fig. 9) endangered society.

Lisa Ticknor has described how long-standing iconographic shorthand, familiar from Punch, the music halls, and comics, was used to portray the suffragist as an older, unattractive spinster with either a vindictive or excitable nature. Anti-suffragists rewrote theatrical male impersonation, turning fantasy into a savage burlesque. Young women in particular needed male protection, lest they fall victim to a coarse, man-hating virago. The womanly woman could be saved only by the intervention of paternal authority. As figure 9 shows, this could be an open attack on the suffragist, portraying her as a heftily, ugly “dame,” in danger of leading astray the vulnerable “principal boy” girl in the background. The alluring principal girl with her whip in hand, so attractive to the young, heterosexual E. H. Shepard, became a domineering deviant or an endangered girl in need of male guidance.

The viciousness of this attack on suffrage women in Parliament, the press, and cartoons is a reminder that the positive expression of women’s sexual desire, and specifically lesbian desire, was a dangerous imaginative act with potentially explosive political and personal consequences. Although early twentieth-century lesbians and suffragists successfully recuperated the theatrical transvestite as an expression of sexual independence, they did so at a price. Women who made political demands were identified as lesbians; the expression of lesbian desire evoked calls for political repression. On stage and in fiction tastes changed as mannish women became associated with homosexuality. By 1920, when Vesta Tilley retired, the music hall was losing ground to cinema; she blamed the reluctance of young performers to train as hard as she had, but audiences preferred the realism of film to the natty exaggerations of the male impersonator. Sarah Bernhardt’s style of acting had given way to Naturalism, which emphasized unaffected gestures and a subdued voice. Special effects, grandiose sets, and spectacle were out of place; theater-goers still went to see Bernhardt perform, but more as an icon of French
culture than for the content of the play. Sarah Grand's books drifted out of print. Modernism brought a new set of images—and new definitions of deviance. 6

NOTES

2. Garber, p. 17.

7. Quoted in Charles N. Young, "Vesta Tilley Wears Masculine Attire Like a Seasoned Veteran," the *Boston Traveler* (Saturday, June 12, 1900), n.p. Vesta Tilley Clipping Files, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center. I am indebted to Geri Maschio for this reference.


9. George Bernard Shaw felt that the principal boy retained too much of the male impersonator in her, complaining that he could not understand why she was "expected to be more vulgar than the principal girl, when she does not want to, and where there is not the slightest reason to suppose that anyone else wants her to." See his review of the 1897 Drury Lane production of *Aladdin*, reprinted in *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (London: Constable, 1932), III, 24.


11. Bratton has argued that Vesta Tilley is an unrepresentative example of the male impersonator in "Irrational Dress," *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre, 1850–1914*, edited by Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 82. She also cautions against interpreting male impersonators as either lesbians or as a source for lesbian self-presentation.


18. See Bailey, pp. 64–65 for a discussion of Nelly Power’s career parodying George Leybourne.

19. See the Vesta Tilley Clipping Files, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center. The illustrations of fashionable men are in the style of Charles Dana Gibson’s "Gibson Girls."


27. De Frece, p. 126.
30. See Lorraine Gamman, "Watching the Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze," in Gamman and Marshmont, p. 17.
33. Alfred de Musset, *Lorenzaccio*, in *The Complete Writings of Alfred de Musset*, trans. Edmund Burke Thompson (New York: privately printed, 1905), IV, 37. The play was considered closet drama until Bernhardt shortened it and altered the ending, so that it concludes by turning the immoral anti-hero Lorenzo's assassination of the Duke of Florence into a heroic call for republican liberty. De Musset's pessimistic ending concludes with the death of Lorenzo and the re-establishment of tyranny. It is unclear whether Bernhardt's acting version survives.
34. In *Pelleas and Melisande* (1904) she played opposite the leading English star of the time, Mrs. Patrick Campbell; this performance was more acceptable because the dream-like quality of the play made courtship both more romantic and less offensive to the prudish. See Elaine Aston, *Sarah Bernhardt: A French Actress on the English Stage* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), pp. 124–26.
35. Max Beerbohm and George Bernard Shaw, both passive young men anxious to make their own names, poked fun at Bernhardt's travesti heroes. See the former's *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1924), pp. 34–37, 151–54, 331–33. For the latter, see *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, I, 147–54, III, 170–77.
38. De Frece, pp. 234–35.
42. Quoted and translated in Wickes, p. 40.
43. Liane de Pougy, *My Blue Notebooks*, trans. Diana Athish (London: André Deutsch, 1979), p. 111. She also mentions another connection between Bernhardt and lesbians: "Sarah Bernhardt, with her passion and determination to tear a beloved niece away from those circles and those
habits, she reasoned with her, she gave her an allowance, she took her to America, she put her into plays. Nothing worked. Dinner jackets and love nests, short hair and the style of an invert” (pp. 110–11).

44. See page 403. The Sketch does not identify whom the Marquis is imitating, but theater-goers of the day would never have missed the visual reference.


46. De Freee, p. 125. According to Hyde, p. 154, the sale of his jewelry and clothes (mostly women’s or, like his vests, effeminate) raised £88,000 for his creditors, but he had debts of over £500,000.


48. Tarnow, p. 221, cites nine parodies of L'Aiglon alone, with at least a dozen more based on her other successes.

49. The reviewer in the Quarterly Review tempered his diatribe against the novel long enough to praise “its single artistic episode, the friendship between the Tenor and the supposed Boy.” As offended as he was by Grand’s frank discussion of venereal disease, her strong-minded women and tirades against the male order, he praised this section as the only one containing true sentiment. Of course, a middle-class theater audience preferred sentimental love over sexual conquest, so his praise is not surprising after a century of pantomimes. See “The Strike of Sex,” Quarterly Review, 179 (1894), 295.


51. See Lorraine Gamman’s reading of Cagney and Lacey in “Watching the Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze,” in Gamman and Marshmont, pp. 15–17.


53. These characteristics are described by Edward Bronergera, “Boy-Lovers and Their Influence on Boys: Distorted Research and Anecdotal Observations,” Journal of Homosexuality, 20 (1990), 145–71. This is a special double issue on male intergenerational intimacy.


57. Gillian Kersley, Darling Madame: Sarah Grand and Devoted Friend (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 99–100, 111. Her “devoted friend” is Gladys Singers-Bigger, whom she met in 1925, after she had moved to Bath. It is a classic example of an unrequited romantic friendship.


59. Policemen often stuck their nightsticks up women’s skirts, both to expose them and to hurt them. These and similar incidents are described in Martha Vicinus, Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 262–68.

also Sir Almroth E. Wright, *The Unexpurgated Case against Woman Suffrage* (London: Constable, 1913), which argues that women could not lead the country because they suffered temporary monthly insanity.


63. Ticknor, pp. 162–74. See especially her astute discussion of the hysterical.


65. Special thanks to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who critiqued an early version of this essay in detail, and who has contributed so much to my thinking about the construction of the modern lesbian, and to Claire G. Moses who read a later version and suggested ways to recast it. I am also indebted to Nina Auerbach, Robyn Cooper, Anne Herrmann, Phyllis Rackin, Marlon Ross, and Laurence Senelick, and my NEH Summer Seminar (1992). I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a fellowship that gave me time to write the final draft.