Religion, Cross-Dressing and Sexual Desire in the Art of Simeon Solomon

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Same-sex desire arguably was an important element in the art of Simeon Solomon. His homosexuality made itself felt via coded references because of the criminalisation of sodomy in Britain. Religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, that British Protestants thought of as ‘oriental’, were often associated with transgressive desires. It was also asserted that Roman Catholicism was an orientalised form of religion because it allegedly combined worship of the true God with that of pagan deities many of which derived from the ancient cults not just of Rome, but also of Greece and Egypt. The bodies of Catholic priests and worshippers, therefore, could be depicted as implicitly redolent with sexual tastes that their own sects and churches condemned. For example, two of Solomon’s works from 1863, *A Deacon* (Fig. \_) and *Two Acolytes Censing: Pentecost* (Fig. \_), and his 1870 watercolour *The Mystery of Faith* (cover) were not quite the devotional works they might otherwise appear to be. These works all show participants in religious devotions but in each case the attention of the viewer is drawn more to the body of the worshipper and the gorgeous vestments that they are wearing than to what they are doing.

The contrast in colour between the clothing of the two young men in *Two Acolytes*, for instance,seems to tell us more about visual pleasure in tone and contrast than it does about Christian faith. That the figures depicted are handsome youths and young men will come as no surprise when Solomon’s sexual interests are borne in mind. All this was apparent to Algernon Charles Swinburne who had been intimate—how intimate we cannot be sure—with Solomon for several years. In 1871 the poet published a discussion of his friend’s work in *The Dark Blue.* He took specific notice of Solomon’s ‘gorgeous studies of eastern priests in church and synagogue, of young saint and rabbi and Greek bishop doing their divine service’.[[1]](#endnote-1) His genius, the reader is told, was ‘of east and west, of Greek and Hebrew’.[[2]](#endnote-2) That phrase confuses geographical location and cultural reference and almost implies that the twin foundations of western culture were intermingled. ‘No Venetian ever took truer delight in glorious vestures’, continued Swinburne, or ‘lusted more hotly after the solid splendours of metal and marble.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Heated desire for the material world was accompanied by androgynous figures that had a ‘supersexual beauty, in which the lineaments of woman and of man seem blended’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Once Swinburne has completed his discussion of Sappho, the Lesbian poet, and Antinous, the lover of Hadrian, the classically informed reader might have had cause to wonder about the nature of the artist’s sexual tastes.

That Swinburne recognised but did not feel desire for men is made clear in a letter he wrote to the homosexual poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds in December 1872. He wrote, responding to verses sent by Symonds, that,

with all his great qualities of freedom and harmony in spirit and speech I cannot as perhaps you know pretend to enter in full into the Whitmanolatry or Whitmania which seems to beset the esoteric disciples of the first American poet… I cannot wholly feel the drift and share the delight of the faith and rapture of heroic love between friends.

He preferred that portion of Symonds’s verse that did not ‘run the risk of becoming (like too much of [Walt] Whitman’s own work) what I would call blatant. A blare of excessive sound and expression in verse is as bad as a battle of colours that scream and swear … on the canvas’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Swinburne preferred homosexual allusions to be discreet:

my own palate does not always quite relish the strong sauce of semi-Christian sentiment in which <pagan or> heathenish emotions are stewed and served up by you in some of your finest verses, as by Solomon in some of his finest studies; but this after all is as much a mere matter of palate as a preference of nectarines or peaches.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Same-sex desire, expressed rather than concealed by Christian garb, was seemingly almost too much to stomach for a man who was sexually attracted to women.

What is perhaps most startling about Swinburne’s views is the degree to which he found religious dress in art to be a vehicle for the expression as opposed to the concealment of same-sex desire. However, it is easier to understand this if we appreciate that costume and deportment had long been key elements in the coded expression of male same-sex desire on the part of members of queer sub-cultures who might, thereby, recognize each other in the street.[[7]](#endnote-7) The role of costume as a signifier in portraits has started to become better appreciated through studies such as Aileen Ribeiro’s *Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1915*, which begins by explaining that ‘this book is about the centrality of clothing in art as in life’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Andrew Stephenson has, likewise, drawn attention to this point in his study of John Singer Sargent’s 1894 study of the dandy W. Graham Robertson: ‘the coat is the picture’ said the painter.[[9]](#endnote-9)

It is notable that the most famous English literary critique of dandyism from the nineteenth century had a considerable amount to say about religious dress. Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (‘the tailor re-tailored’) was an influential if peculiar book that was first published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1833-34. He invented a German professor, *Herr Teufelsdröckh* (devil’s dung), who was as obsessed with the study of clothes as a well-brought up Calvinist, such as Carlyle, was not supposed to be. The professor reported that dandies have temples of which the chief is the London club Almack’s: ‘They worship principally by night; and have their Highpriests and Highpriestesses … The rites, by some supposed to be of the Menadic sort, or perhaps with an Eleusinian or Cabiric character, are held strictly secret. Nor are sacred books wanting to the Sect; these they call *Fashionable Novels*’.[[10]](#endnote-10) The orientalist satire of this passage finds its macabre gothic counterpart in the chapter on ‘Church-clothes’ which are seen as, amongst other things, ‘mere hollow Shapes, or Masks, under which no living Figure or Spirit any longer dwells; but only spiders and unclean beetles … [Look] and the mask still glares at you with its glass-eyes, in ghastly affectation of Life’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The idea that dandyism was an immoral practice especially in the case of ministers of religion was a key concept that underlay Protestant attacks on the use of vestments by Catholic clergy. Fear of idolatrous worship of visible objects combined with suspicions of clerical celibacy as the supposed cover for secret immorality. This meant that Roman Catholic priests and their sympathisers within the Church of England were increasingly being attacked as being ‘full of dubious sexual import and suggestive of a variety of “perversions”’ by the 1860s.[[12]](#endnote-12) It was at this very time that the term 'pervert' ceased to mean merely a convert to Catholicism but also began to take on connotations of sexual impropriety.[[13]](#endnote-13) A contemporary cartoon, ‘Next-Door Neighbours’(1869), makes clear, however, that whilst the unmarried Roman Catholic priest was seen as a threat to the virtue of wives and daughters his Anglo-Catholic ritualist counterpart was mocked for his imitative effeminacy.[[14]](#endnote-14) It was in this climate that *Punch* magazine launched a series of attacks which compared ritualist vicars and curates to stupidly vain young ladies in cartoons such as ‘Height of Fashion’(1866)—‘Oh, Athanasius, it’s charmingly becoming’ gasps one cleric at the sight of another in an ecclesiastical frock— and from the same year ‘Sweet Thing in Christmas Vestments’ (Fig. \_). This drawing shows a young clergyman posing as if he were a vain lady in front of her mirror. Ritualistically inclined priests had begun to adorn their churches with garlands at Christmas and this cartoon suggests that they extended this indulgence to their own ecclesiastical costumes.[[15]](#endnote-15) Such cartoons did not imply that such priests were homosexual but did call into doubt their manliness in more general terms.

Majorie Garber has argued in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*  that religious dress has often been gender ambiguous and can be employed in cross-dressing gender-play.[[16]](#endnote-16) Such queer potential was clearly appreciated by many Victorian Britons who were *not* Catholics and this helps us to understand Solomon’s interest in painting ‘sweet things’ in vestments. Moreover, we do know from his letters to Swinburne that the painter was intrigued by homosexual drag because they contain references to the trial in 1871 of the notorious cross-dressers Ernest Boulton (who also went by the name of Stella) and Frederick William Park (whose alias was Fanny):

after the morning trial when I left of course I was ravenous and went to the nearest restaurant where I found B[oulto]n, P[ar]k, and H[urt] at lunch with their solicitors Karslak the solicitor [and] I sat down with them, which, as it was a public crowded room I had no hesitation in doing. B[oulto]n is very remarkable, he is not quite beautiful but supremely pretty, a perfect figure, manner, and voice. Altogether I was agreeably surprised by him.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Whilst this letter says that Boulton was ‘pretty’ when dressed as a man, another letter, this time to George Powell, implies that Solomon may have also enjoyed an evening out with Stella:

Many thanks for your kind letter which I received yesterday at Manchester ^whither^ I return carrying with me a charming young lady of the name of Bolton to my friends, as we are all going this evening to the theatre to see Bluebeard. I shall return to London on Friday.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Carolyn Conroy suggests that this night on the town took place after the trial and should be dated to December 1871.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Boulton and Park were middle-class young men who regularly went about in London dressed as women. The prosecution alleged that the purpose of this was to solicit men for sex whilst the defence presented it as a harmless, if eccentric, pastime. Newspaper coverage of the trial was extensive and sensational. George Smith, the beadle of the Burlington Arcade in London’s fashionable West End, asserted that he regularly saw the young men there powdered and rouged, sometimes in drag and sometimes not. He testified that they ‘caused much commotion’ such that ‘everybody was looking at them’.[[20]](#endnote-20) It was, in fact, the very visibility of the accused that appears to have contributed to their acquittal. Digby Seymour, summing up for the defence, argued that men with a shameful secret would hardly have flaunted it in public but would rather ‘shrink and hide away and draw over themselves and their horrible deeds a pall of darkness’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Charles Upchurch has argued that the court was not in fact really won over by such arguments but that it was decided to look away from the obvious implications of these events: that homosexual style was being embraced as a lifestyle choice.[[22]](#endnote-22) The result, perhaps, ironically, was to make it more difficult for the police to regulate male street-prostitution since future defendants, if apprehended cross-dressed, could plead that they were simply out on a lark.

Laurence Senelick in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* identified the rise of ‘glamor drag’ on the mid-Victorian vaudeville and music hall stage. This, unlike older traditions of burlesque comedy, involved a young man who successfully impersonated a beautiful young lady. Discussing Boulton and Park he comments that this new phenomenon emerged as ‘an offshoot of a thriving transvestite *demi-monde* that impinged on the world of popular entertainment’ which was associated with sex between men.[[23]](#endnote-23) Some men may specifically have sought out male youths who resembled girls but others are likely to have been attracted to them because they really were men under the make-up. Solomon’s painted acolytes could, therefore, be seen as religious counterparts of the androgynous youths of the streets out and about in their gorgeous frocks.

It is notable that Solomon repeatedly represented an ideal of a rather blank-faced youth with suggestion of an adolescent’s moustache (Figs. \_ and \_). Desire for adolescents is as touchy a subject in the twenty-first century as homosexuality was in the nineteenth but there is no doubt that it was a prominent aspect of male same-sex desire in the earlier period. It is illuminating to compare Solomon’s imagery with that described in the so-called ‘Venice Letters’ which were written by the decadent writer Frederick Rolfe in the years between 1908 and his death in 1913. Writing to Charles Masson Fox, an unmarried businessman who lived in Falmouth in Cornwall, Rolfe described one of the gondoliers:

he was a lanky uninteresting wafer. Since then, the work of dancing up and down planks with heavy sacks has filled him out, clothed him with a most lovely pads of muscular sweet flesh … Then some great fat slow cow of a girl will just open herself wide, and lie quite still, and drain him dry. First, the rich bloom will go. Then he’ll get hard and hairy. And, by July, he’ll have a moustache … and be just the ordinary stevedore found by scores on the quays.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Solomon speculated on the subject of erotic desire between youths in his drawing *Love Amongst the Schoolboys* (1865, priv. coll.). He also teasingly inquired of the classics master, Oscar Browning, who was to be dismissed from his teaching post in 1875 in dubious circumstances, whether ‘you keep a thermometer for testing love at Eton.’[[25]](#endnote-25) The sweet things in religious frocks admired by Solomon were a little older than the youths doted on by Rolfe but not, perhaps, by much.

Rolfe, who had attempted and failed to become a Roman Catholic priest, also painted images of beautiful young priests and saints.[[26]](#endnote-26) Rolfe and Solomon, therefore, seem much more like fellow-travellers than Swinburne and Solomon. So, what was the erotic link between the latter two men that enabled the one to intuit the other’s queer religious desires? A hint comes from the older figure in *A Jewish King and His Page* (Fig. \_). The king stares intently at the passive figure of the youth while gripping him hard at the wrist. One of the most persistent orientalist stereotypes, albeit often focussed on Islamic cultures, was that of the ruler as sexual predator. Mladen Dolar explains the logic of this fantasy in which, as in the Harem, there is ‘an infinite self-sacrifice of all subjects … for the sole enjoyment of the despot. Ultimately it is epitomised by the flux of “sexual goods” reserved for the exclusive use of the despot’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Rome in its imperial decadence was widely believed to have been another locale of such exotic excesses. Sadism was central to Solomon’s *Habet!* (1865, priv. coll.) as an attribute of masculinised aristocratic Roman women who enjoyed watching gladiators fight to the death.[[28]](#endnote-28) *Heliogobalus, High Priest of the Sun* (1866, priv. coll.) shows a feminised emperor but one who was also notorious for his insanity and cruelty.[[29]](#endnote-29) Various other images, notably the drawing *Mastigophorus* (‘one who bears a whip’) (1865, Victoria & Albert Museum) may imply interests in power and pain—which, along with the figure of the hermaphrodite, certainly were interests of Swinburne.[[30]](#endnote-30) A possible point of connection between the two men may have been a shared appreciation of anal intercourse as actually or potentially painful.

There are a variety of photographs of Solomon that show him in orientalist fancy dress complete with turban. This, like the exploits of Boulton and Park, might just have been larking about.[[31]](#endnote-31) Or it may be that his own practices of (cultural) cross-dressing were also expressive of sexual desires that would still be considered edgy and controversial today. In 1871 Swinburne wrote that if Solomon were ‘withdrawn from the roll of artists, his name would leave a void impossible to fill up’.[[32]](#endnote-32) With his arrest for a same-sex offence in 1873 Solomon did not simply vanish as Carolyn Conroy has ably shown, but his disgrace did arguably deflect attention from the apparently lesser transgressions of other artists, writers and aesthetes.[[33]](#endnote-33) It has been suggested that Boulton and Park inspired the Scottish poet and critic Robert Buchanan to launch a prominent attack in 1871 on what he termed the ‘fleshly school of poetry’ in general and at Swinburne as an ‘intellectual hermaphrodite’ in particular.[[34]](#endnote-34) Robert Browning, meanwhile, had written the year before (albeit in a private letter) of his hatred of Rossetti and of what he termed the ‘effeminacy of his school: the men that dress up like women’.[[35]](#endnote-35) In the 1860s vulgar comparisons were being made between brightly coloured ecclesiastical vestments and cross-dressing. At the same time men in women’s garments were becoming more visible on the streets of London as part of a developing queer demi-monde. The depiction of attractive young priests and acolytes provided Solomon in the years before his disgrace with opportunities to paint images that were ostensively devotional, but which played implicitly with contemporary notions of androgyny and perversity of an unspecified nature. It was most timely for Swinburne and many of his heterosexual admirers that same-sex desire became publicly legible after 1873 as the specific secret behind Solomon’s fascination with those who dressed up to worship the Almighty.

1. Algernon C. Swinburne, ‘Simeon Solomon: Notes on His “Vision of Love” and Other Studies’, *Dark Blue*, 1.5 (July 1871), pp. 568-76 (p. 577). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 569. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 572. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 574. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Letter of Algernon Charles Swinburne to John Addington Symonds, December 26, 1872, in

   Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Uncollected Letters,* ed. Terry L. Meyers (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), vol. 1, p. 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Aileen Ribeiro, *Clothing Art: The Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Andrew Stephenson, ‘“But the Coat Is the Picture”: Issues of Masculine Fashioning, Politics and Sexual Identity in Portraiture in England, *c*.1890–1905ʹ, in *Fashion in European Art: Dress and Identity, Politics and the Body 1775–1925,* ed. Justine de Young (Oxford: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 178-205. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), p. 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid.*,* p. 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Oliver S. Buckton, ‘“An Unnatural State”: Gender, “Perversion”, and Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*’, *Victorian Studies*, 35 (1992), pp. 359-83 (p. 380). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Dominic Janes, ‘When “Perverts” Were Religious: The Protestant Sexualisation of Asceticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain, India and Ireland’, *Cultural and Social History*, 11.3 (2014), pp. 425-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ### Anon., *The Echoes: Cartoons and Lyrics of the Time* (London: The Echoes, 1869), plate D and accompanying verse, ‘Next-Door Neighbours’; Dominic Janes, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 149-55; and Dominic Janes, ‘*The Catholic Florist*: Flowers and Deviance in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Church of England’, *Visual Culture in Britain*,12.1 (2011), pp. 77-96.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ‘Sweet thing in Christmas vestments’, *Punch,* January 6, 1866, p. 11, and ‘Height of fashion’, *Punch*, December 22, 1866, p. 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 210-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Letter from Simeon Solomon to Algernon Charles Swinburne, May 15, 1871, Ashley Collection, British Library 1871 (Ashley MS 1755), transcription by Carolyn Conroy. See also Carolyn Conroy, ‘“He Hath Mingled with the Ungodly”’: The Life of Simeon Solomon after 1873, with a Survey of the Extant Works’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2009), vol. 1, p. 172; and Carolyn Conroy, ‘Mingling with the Ungodly: Simeon Solomon in Queer Victorian London’, in *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c.1850 to the Present*, eds. Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 185-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Letter from Simeon Solomon to George Powell, undated, George Powell Collection, National Library of Wales, transcription by Carolyn Conroy based on photocopies provided by Robert Meyrick, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Conroy, ‘“He Hath Mingled”’, p. 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Anon., “Charge of Personating Women,” *Morning Post*, May 14, 1870, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *The Queen v Boulton and Others before the Lord Chief Justice and a Special Jury: Proceedings on the Trial of the Indictment,* National Archives DPP 4/6, quoted in Neil McKenna, *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), p. 331. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Charles Upchurch, ‘Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross‐Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others’, *Gender and History*, 12.1 (2000), pp. 127-57 (p. 149). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (Routledge: New York, 2000), p. 295 and 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Frederick Rolfe, *The Venice Letters [of] Fr. Rolfe, Baron Corvo,* ed. Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1974), pp. 36-7, letter 7, dated December 11, 1909. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Letter from Simeon Solomon to Oscar Browning, undated, Oscar Browning Collection MS#1/1531, King’s College Library and Archive, University of Cambridge, transcription by Roberto C. Ferrrari who drew my attention to this material. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mladen Dolar, ‘Introduction: The Subject Supposed to Enjoy’, in Alain Grosrichard,

    *The Sultan’s Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1998), pp. ix-xxvii (p. xvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Elizabeth Prettejohn, ‘The Monstrous Diversion of a Show of Gladiators: Simeon Solomon's *Habet!*', in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 157-72. See also Scott Thomas Buckle’s essay in this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Thaïs E. Morgan, ‘Perverse male bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne’, in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay* Sexualities and *Visual Cultures*, eds Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 73-97 (p. 79); and Prettejohn, ‘The Monstrous Diversion’, pp. 168-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. John Franceschina, *Homosexualities in the English Theatre from Lyly to Wilde*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies 79(Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), pp. 270-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Examples appear in Lionel Lambourne, ‘Abraham Solomon, Painter of Fashion, and Simeon Solomon, Decadent Artist’, *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 21 (1968), pp. 274-86, fig. 18, plate xxvii; and Conroy, ‘“He Hath Mingled”’, vol. 2, fig. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Swinburne, ‘Simeon Solomon’, p. 576. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Conroy, ‘Mingling with the Ungodly’. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Robert Buchanan, ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’, *Contemporary Review* 18 (October 1871), pp. 334-50 (p. 335). See also Thaïs E. Morgan, ‘Victorian Effeminacies’, in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence,* ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 109-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Browning quoted in Morgan, ‘Perverse Male Bodies’, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)