‘Dress Sense of a Queen’: Cecil Beaton’s Queering of Britain’s Royal Past

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Abstract

The origins of camp can be traced by exploring the ways in which the past was queered during the interwar period. Cecil Beaton was establishing himself as one of the world’s leading fashion photographers. He and many of his friends were fascinated by the styles of the period before 1914. That interest extended to cross-dressing and the construction of photographic collages that ironically juxtaposed the fashions of the past and the present. The effect of this was to make the dresses and aristocratic social mores of the *fin de siècle* appear amusingly excessive. In the process the image of royalty was reinvented through travesty and social life in Britain was invested with queer opportunity.

Biography

Dominic Janes is a cultural historian who studies texts and visual images relating to Britain in its local and international contexts since the eighteenth century. Within this sphere he focuses on the histories of gender, sexuality and religion. His most recent books are *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and *Freak to Chic: ‘Gay’ Men in and out of Fashion after Oscar Wilde* (Bloomsbury Visual, 2021).

Figure. 1: Cecil Beaton, *The Merry Widow'*, 1924. *Granta,* October 24, p. 37.

Figure 2: Cecil Beaton, *Pre-War and Post-War Hands,* 1928. 'What is Beauty?' *Vogue* (US edn), 72:11, November 24, p. 49. Cecil Beaton, Vogue © Conde Nast.

Figure 3: Cecil Beaton, *Brides, Bodybuilders, and Ladies in Edwardian Dress, and a Gentleman in the Apartment of Monsieur Charles de Beistegui, c*.1939. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, PH.195-1977, X980 box A, 2006BC4971, and reproduced courtesy of the Cecil Beaton Studio Archive, Sotheby's, London.

Figure 4: Detail, Cecil Beaton, *New York Impressions*, *c*.1937. © National Portrait Gallery London, NPG D3624.

Fig. 5. Arthur Wallis Mills, *Cocktails and Crinolines: That Victorian Revival*, 1929. *Sketch*, August 21, p. 309. Reproduced courtesy of Keele University Library.

Fig. 6, Cecil Beaton ['Baroness Von Bülop'], *Myself as Hostess*, 1939. *My Royal Past,* London: B. T. Batsford, p. 119.

Fig. 7. Angus McBean, *All the Best People Eat at the Pavilion Restaurant*, 1954. Reproduced courtesy of the School of Art, Aberystwyth University.

Little Britain (BBC 2003-2020) features sketches in which Matt Lucas and David Walliams impersonate a range of social types familiar to British audiences if in less exaggerated forms. Lucas identifies as gay, whilst Walliams has talked both about his relationships with women and his unwillingness to be sexually labelled. Many of their scenes involve various forms of queer characterization. One comic situation features 'Emily Howard' and 'Florence Rose', two masculine working-class 'transvestites', who fail to pass as upper-class 'ladies' (Poore 2012: 179). One of the reasons why they fail is that they wear costumes and hairstyles that might have been fashionable at some point before the outbreak of World War One. Parodic travesties of class and gender with sexual implications were popular with many queer men earlier in the twentieth century. One of these was Cecil Beaton who was one of that century's greatest celebrity photographers. He came from a middle-class background in north London and was predominantly, but not openly, homosexual. He combined a snobbish attachment to the British aristocracy with an ironic stance that was informed by his fascination with American modernity. He first visited New York in 1928 and went back regularly to work and socialize (Albrecht 2011: 13).

The term 'gay' was first used with reference to homosexuality in the United States and it started to come into limited use in Britain during the interwar period. Thus, it was that the actor, musician and wit Noël Coward played with the meaning of the word in his song 'Bright Young People' in a way that involved 'tilting it just slightly more toward sexuality':

> Gay to the utmost degree.
> We play funny jokes
> On more dignified folks
> And laugh with extravagant glee.
> We give lovely parties that last through the night,
> I dress as a woman and scream with delight... (Sinfield 1991: 53-54).

The British print media referred to a circle of 1920s socialites as the 'Bright Young People' or 'Bright Young Things'. They were notorious for their antics which frequently involved fancy dress parties with extravagant displays of cross-dressing. Beaton was one of these youths. He had honed his performances during his time at the University of Cambridge where, because the university was largely gender-segregated, most student plays were performed solely by young men. Beaton duly appeared on stage in a range of women's

costumes dating from the Renaissance through to the late Victorian period and on to creations derived from his own imagination.

That gay men have, or had, a distinctive culture is a key argument of David Halperin's (2012) *How to Be Gay*. One widespread element of gay culture is the appreciation of cross-dressing as gender pastiche rather than, for instance, as the expression of trans identity or transvestite desire. A large element of the humour of the Howard and Rose sketches in *Little Britain* derives from seeing their performance from a gay perspective as being high camp and bad drag. One of the important questions about camp is why it has become so tightly associated with homosexual men. This was noticed by Susan Sontag in her pioneering if problematic essay *Notes on Camp* (1964) which is divided into a series of numbered statements. In proposition 51 she argues that camp did not exist before modernity. It was a mode of enjoyment of stylized excess that acted as s solvent of morality. It was perhaps for this reason that 'homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp' (Sontag 1964: 529). It is interesting that Sontag, who was a closeted bisexual woman, specifically associated this camp sensibility with homosexual men.

In an article on the 'queer poetics of waste' Chris Philpot (2017) has advanced another reason why queers have been particularly interested in camp excess. This involves a critique of Lee Edeleman's argument in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) that queers (should) step aside from normative imperatives of reproduction through child rearing. Philpot, by contrast argues that (some) queers figuratively resurrect the dead. They create the future out of a bricolage of apparently useless old things. Camp represents the excessive detritus of the past to which new meaning and importance is given. This provides the childless homosexual with a reproductive role through cultural recuperation. Sontag (1964: 519) put the origins of camp in the eighteenth century's ironic appreciation of the past, gothic novels and artificial ruins. Some other writers have placed the origins of camp further back in time to when fake battles were fought in the fields (*les champs*) outside the palace of Versailles at the time of Louis the Sun King. The king's brother Philippe de France often attended such events, together with his retinue, cross-dressed (Zoberman 2008; compare R. Jones 1997). For Quentin Crisp (1968: 26), by contrast, writing in *The Naked Civil Servant*, '"camp" is set in the [nineteen-]twenties'. He argued that 'the whole set of stylizations that are known as 'camp' (a word that I was hearing then for the first time) was, in 1926, self-explanatory. Women moved and gesticulated in this way. Homosexuals wished, for obvious

reasons, to copy them. The strange thing about "camp" is that it has become fossilized' (Crisp 1968: 25).

One way of engaging with the emergence of homosexual camp is to think about the distinction between cross-dressing and dressing as queer. This first becomes clearly legible in the mid-nineteenth century as Laurence Senelick has evidenced in his key study *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (2000). What he terms 'glamour drag' and the 'drag queen' made their appearance at this time as 'an offshoot of a thriving transvestite *demi-monde* that impinged on the world of popular entertainment' (Senelick 2000: 295 and 302; Senelick 1993). Thomas Ernest Boulton ('Stella') and Frederick William Park ('Fanny') were two middle-class young men who cross-dressed in public and who were duly put on trial for sodomy in 1871. They also used to go out in men's clothes of a distinctively tight fit and with their faces tinged with make-up (Senelick 2000: 306). On such occasions they put on the attire of the homosexual 'queen' (or, in the United States, 'fairy") as opposed to full 'drag'. Heterosexual men might impersonate a girl for a joke but they were not likely to head out for an evening's entertainment in the guise of a sodomite.

The 'man with a powder puff' became a well-known figure in early twentieth-century Britain (Houlbrook 2007: 170; Houlbrook 2016b). Quentin Crisp was one such man who was remarkable not so much for his style as for the fact that he never changed it. *His* camp *was* set in the twenties. Following the queer subcultures of Britain back in time necessitates placing reliance on hostile testimony published in newspapers. Such fragmentary materials as survive do, however, suggest a tradition of queer transgression from that of a certain 'Queen of Camp' who hosted a queer ball in Manchester in 1874 back to the 'mollies' of the early eighteenth century who called each other 'saucy' queens (Norton 2019; Baker 2019: 40). Camp queer men ('queens') who cross-dressed as women ('drag queens') were, therefore, not a new creation of the 1920s, even though Quentin Crisp was hearing the term 'camp' for the first time in 1926. If it is impossible, therefore, precisely to pin-down the origins of gay culture, it is clear that the interwar period marked a crucial divide in that it was only then that the sexual connotations of the term 'gay' had begun to spread.

Queering the Victorians

In 1926 Cecil Beaton had just come down to London from Cambridge without a degree. His fame as a *Vogue* photographer lay a few years in the future. From his teenage years—around

the time of World War One, since he had been born in 1904—he had been fascinated by the women's dress of the pre-1914 era and was transfixed when, also in 1926, he saw the homosexual dancer Frederick Ashton impersonate Queen Alexandra (the wife of King Edward VII) who had just died—'conjuring up the entire aura of this Parma violet scented old Royal harridan' (Kavanagh 1996: 74). Beaton's taste was consistently for the flamboyance of the *belle époque* rather than the efficiency and 'industrial aesthetic' of interwar modernist design (Evans 2005: 141). Fashions for women, unlike those of men, had changed dramatically over the previous two decades. The favoured look of the mid-1920s was for women who were slim, flat-chested and boyish. This made the fashions of the gilded age, which accentuated a curvaceous female figure using such features as bustles and puffed sleeves, appear artificial and camply exaggerated. But it was these very features that delighted Beaton (1924: 37) as can be seen from his student cartoon 'The Merry Widow', 'as she was and as we would always see her' and 'as she is, alas'. (Fig. 1)

It was not only the clothes that had changed over these years it was also the way in which women moved and gestured. Accounts of fashion parades have helped us to understand that the fashionable mode of deportment before World War One —a glide with rolling hips—came to be replaced by an insouciant slouch (Evans 2013: 233). The 'stiff' posture of elderly ladies, therefore, betrayed the outdatedness of their ideas of fashion. Heterosexual young women saw them as an example of how not to dress and behave, but that was not quite how things appeared for this from a queer perspective. Hands, and the gestures they made, were the subject of particular attention during the interwar period as can be seen from articles such as *Vogue's* (1919: 74-75) 'The extreme importance of extremities", *The Sketch's* (1927: 415; 1933: 75) 'The aesthetic athlete's hands and their lovely language' and 'Say it with fingers—the personality of hands'. Hands had been the subject of erotic fascination in the nineteenth century (Adair 2017). People were attuned to scrutinizing hands for the presence of a wedding ring and hence of romantic availability. Beverley Nichols (1927: 224), writing in 'The Metropolitan' column in *The Sketch* in 1927, warned his readers to look out for 'tell-tale hands". They were the one part of the body where a woman could, supposedly, not hide her age—and where, incidentally, a man in drag could not hide the overly large hands of his sex). The handshake, it should also be remembered, was one of the few sanctioned modes through which men could touch each other in public.

Cecil Beaton was fascinated by hands. Guests stencilled around their hands on the wallpaper of the bathroom of his country residence, Ashcombe (Ginger 2016: 56-57). In *The Book of Beauty* (1930) Beaton reprinted drawings that had appeared in *Vogue* two years

earlier. These depicted what he referred to as pre- and post-war hands and show that he understood the limp-wrist to have been the epitome of Victorian and Edwardian style (Beaton 1928: 49; Beaton 1930: 3). (Fig. 2) Oscar Wilde was regularly shown in cartoons with his hand held in just this manner (Janes 2016: 181-83). Beaton (1928: 49) also expressed his regret that 'the art of quirking the little finger is a lost one'. Gestures—the limp wrist, the extended pinkie finger—which were to become mainstays of gay camp performance were, therefore, specifically attributed by Beaton to pre-war high society.

That Beaton was not alone in his pre-war preoccupations becomes clear by looking at scrapbooks kept by other queer men between the wars. The homosexual American photographer George Platt Lynes pasted images into his scrapbooks that alternated between the high society of pre-war Europe and the contemporary United States. One representative sample featured Mae West in the costume of the 1890s, boxers, Cecil Beaton and scenes from Richard Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910)—the leading male role of which was written for a woman to sing (Yale Collection of American Literature, undated). Platt Lynes took large numbers of homoerotic photographs in his spare time and Elspeth Brown (2017) has argued that the homosexual culture of cruising for sex informed the way in which he instilled desire into his fashion images. The aim of his scrapbooks was not, however, primarily to sexually titillate; instead, by dislocating images from their original contexts the dominant culture's visual language was—as Jonathan Weinberg (1994: 32) put it in another context—'made to speak sexual transgression'.

Cecil Beaton (1937: 140) wrote about his own interests in collage in *Vogue:*

> The juxtaposition of various pictures on the same page adds vitality; punctuation can be given to a page of dancers by a vignette of the Queen crossing a street, and endless pleasure can be had from the distortion or recomposition of pictures. Cigar-box pictures and pictures from 'Health and Strength' magazine are useful for montages, and a figure from 'The Nudist' carefully cut round and placed, unobtrusively, among the ladies of Their Majesties' Court, creates a surprise.

The effect of this queer aesthetic can be seen in Beaton's (*c.*1939a) collage, *Brides, Bodybuilders, and Ladies in Edwardian Dress, and a Gentleman in the Apartment of Monsieur Charles de Beistegui*. (Fig. 3) Don Carlos de Beistegui y de Yturbe, heir to a vast Mexican fortune, was a socialite and art-collector. What *Harper's Bazaar* referred to as his 'amazing penthouse' had been built by the modernist architect Le Corbusier (Charles-

Édouard Jeanneret) on the top of an apartment block on the Champs Elysées in Paris. Le Corbusier (1987: 90) had once talked of the 'abominable little perversion' of ornate decoration (Stevenson 2018: 8-9). De Beistegui, who was unmarried and sexually indeterminate, furnished his modernist space with such camp delights as 'a huge pouf of white wood covered in pale mauve chintz' (*Harper's Bazaar* 1938: 65). In his collage Beaton populated the interior with a scatter of pre-war ladies and gentlemen, a wrestler and a posing bodybuilder (Lord and Meyer 2013: 96). Beaton achieved closeted queer expression in his composition by juxtaposing figures from the past with those of the present. The seemingly over-dressed women humorously deflect attention from the homoerotic implications of the under-dressed men whilst at the same time drawing attention to their nakedness.

If Beaton's admiration for pre-war flamboyance focused on one individual it was on the person of the French actress and singer Gaby Deslys of whom he said:

> how well she realized the value of overdoing everything… She made herself sing, she taught herself to be an excellent dancer, she liked orchids and pearls and diamonds and emeralds and chinchilla furs, and she had more orchids than anyone, she had too much chinchilla, too many pearls, too many diamonds and emeralds, too much osprey, too many paradise plumes.

Her house in Kensington, Beaton (1930: 23) rhapsodized, was 'glutted with crucifixes' and marble steps led the devotee up to her bed as if to an altar (Dyhouse 2010: 12-13). He declared himself to be 'of the Gaby Deslys period' although, of course, he was not since she died in 1920 when he was sixteen (Gardiner 1986: 189-90). The extraordinary dresses that he designed for the film *My Fair Lady* (1964) were partly inspired by those worn by Deslys, as were many of those that he created for the fancy dress parties of the interwar period (Vickers 1985: 463).

In his drawing *New York Impressions* (*c.*1937) Beaton juxtaposed the muscled male body with a famously excessive actress of his own times, Mae West. (Fig. 4) Through her starring roles in a series of Hollywood movies—many set in the 1890s, including *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) and *Klondike Annie* (1936)—she had become a world-famous celebrity. Her figure fitted the clothes of that era better than it did the slim styles of her own day. She was also notorious for being sexually predatory. If her famously curvy physique was intensely female her strong sexual drives were often seen as vulgar or even masculine attributes. Seen from that perspective she could be read as an invert,

possessing a man's erotic drive and sensibility within a woman's body. Lower-class queens were, likewise, often thought of as being coarse and sexually voracious (Chauncey 1994: 61; compare Bailey 1990). Cecil Beaton was not to meet Mae West in person until 1970, but when he did so he referred to her as an 'old transvestite' (Vickers 2014: 95).

The performance of assertive female desire was a cornerstone of male cross-dressing performance at that time, as in the case of Bert Savoy who was famous for presenting himself as a 'brazen hussey' (Senelick 2000: 315). West's act had been honed in the context of the queer culture of 1920s New York as can be seen from her plays *The Drag* (1927) and *The Pleasure Man* (1928). Indeed, it can be argued that she (over)performed gender in a manner that evoked homosexual drag. Marybeth Hamilton (1993: 119) has argued that the moralists' campaign against West was instrumental in cementing the meaning of cross-dressing on stage as being associated with homosexual 'degeneracy'. Cecil Beaton was also not the only artist of the time to employ her as a queer icon—so did Edward Burra in his *Mae West* (1934-35) (Martin 2011: 110-12).

Beaton's admiration for the amply padded period before World War One helps us to understand his fascination with West. Her figure was extreme even in the 1930s when the ideal of the 'new Venus' promoted a more curvaceous look for women. Thus it was reported in 1937 that when Elsa Schiaparelli was to design the costumes for a new Paramount Studios vehicle for West, *Frivolous Sal*, 'a dummy of Miss West's sumptuous figure was shipped over from Hollywood and deposited, curves rampant, in Schiaparelli's workrooms' (*Harper's Bazaar* 1937: 19). The gradual filling out of the fashionable figure for women at this time seems to have fuelled fascination with the ample bodies of Victorian and Edwardian ladies. Viewing the mores of the previous century as an amusing and titillating spectacle became increasingly popular as can see seen from books such as Alan Bott's *Our Fathers (1870-1900): Manners and Customs and the Ancient Victorians: A Survey in Pictures and Text of Their History, Morals, Wars, Sports, Inventions and Politics* (1931).

He was a journalist who was to go on to found Pan Books. In *Our Fathers* he presented a selection of Victorian prints with his own commentary. In the first section of the book ('Manners and Morals') he explained his view of the modern reception of the previous century. He argued that Victorian exemplars had been lauded during the Edwardian period but that people had grown bored of this. Many of the old values were secretly doubted by those fighting in World War One, particularly because their experiences at the Front failed to match tired platitudes emanating from home. The next generation, which had not served in the war, openly derided the Victorians: 'a host of twittering young hedonists, alive with brave

rudeness and self-conscious complexes, settled upon London (here and there they even adopted perversion as a mode). The phase, for a while, was amusing' (Bott 1931: 4).

Bott, who had been born in 1893, was not a member of the post-war generation of these bright young things and, one assumes, did not 'adopt [homosexual] perversion as a mode'. He had, even so, been influenced by the decadence of the nineties. Speaking of his generation he said that 'aged about seventeen we wallowed in agnosticism and other doubtings. We went in for Whistler, and claimed to understand Meredith. A year or so later we caught up with the yellow aspect of the nineties and were everso Wilde and Dowson. A revival in Beardsley floated through our adolescence' (Bott 1931: 2). This means, in effect, that the teenage Bott had 'caught up' with late Victorian aestheticism in the years immediately before World War One. His experiences between 1914 and 1918, when he had been an RAF pilot, left him feeling cut off from both the previous and the subsequent generations. He seems to have observed queer sexual tendencies in both, as, albeit from an insider perspective, did Beaton.

Photography, the very medium which provided Beaton with his living, was itself essentially a Victorian technology, having been discovered, he maintained, 'two years after Queen Victoria ascended the throne' (Beaton 1951: 9). Moreover, the kind of photographic collage that fascinated Beaton had been a Victorian craze. Elizabeth Siegel (2010), in her study, *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, has demonstrated that composite imagery occupied a central place in popular culture in the nineteenth century. Moreover, such photo-collage was often seen as a whimsical practice carried out as a hobby by wealthier women. The parodic alter-ego for Beaton himself was, therefore, a witty and amusing lady of advanced age and high social position.

The economic uncertainties of the interwar period meant that the period before 1914 held an appeal for the upper and middle classes as an age of secure prosperity before the servant problem had become serious. Thus Vita Sackville-West (1931: 55) was able to wax nostalgic in British *Vogue* on the subject of 'The Edwardians below stairs' to the accompaniment of Beaton drawings of ladies being tight-laced in front of mirrors in vast bedrooms. As the photographer commented later in life, 'the Edwardian age was a period of gaiety, when life was so inexpensive that a dandy with four hundred pounds a year could go out dancing most nights of the week, wearing lavender gloves and a wired button-hole in the lapel of his tail-coat' (Beaton 1954: 6; Muir 2020: 14). But such preoccupation with the years before World War One did not extend to the re-adoption of outdated social attitudes. The ironic slant of interwar neo-Victorianism was made clear by Arthur Wallis Mills in his

cartoon in *The Sketch, Cocktails and Crinolines: That Victorian Revival* (1929). The top (mid-Victorian) section of the drawing shows a row of demure young ladies reading and sowing while the bottom (contemporary) section shows their identically dressed modern counterparts lounging, smoking and resting their feet on what appears to be a statue of a nineteenth-century male 'worthy'. (Fig. 5)

The members of the Bloomsbury Set were keen to distinguish themselves from their parents' generation, but they too developed many of their notions of queerness by ironic reference to the pre-war past (Taddeo 2012). Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) provided a series of biographical readings that relied on intimations of irregularities of gender and sexuality (Janes 2014; M. Jones 2014). In an age of high modernism a fascination with obsolescent styles and modes of life assumed almost counter-cultural significance (Abramson 2016). The result was that, in certain quarters, the modes of the nineteenth century came back into fashion precisely in so far as they were imagined as perverse, a process that Helen Davies (2015), in her book *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, has referred to as the 'enfreakment' of the Victorians. These processes were underway even before the end of World War One. *Vogue* (1916: 57) commented in 1916 that Victorianism seems to be the latest fashion, though few men will want to go 'the full freak of Victorian dress' daily. It was safest to assert a sense of humorous distance by restricting such outfits to fancy dress parties where they would be seen as obviously parodic. This was the case with the queer travel writer and critic Robert Byron who became noted for his appearances at parties in the guise of Queen Victoria (Taylor 2007: 151-55).

Benjamin Poore has explored the widespread phenomenon of cross-dressing as Victoria in British theatre and television comedy. He suggests that the point of origin of this tradition may date from the 'dame' role played by Dan Leno in the late nineteenth century and from Lord Fancourt Babberly who cross-dresses unconvincingly in Brandon Thomas's hit comedy *Charley's Aunt* (1892). Unlike the glamorous drag queen who wishes to wow an audience 'the point of the dame is the unsuccessful transformation, the ineptly disguised masculinity' (Poore 2012: 181). Lucas and Walliams 'ladies' with which this article began are dames. Poore further suggests that the queen who emerges from Lytton Strachey's (1921) biography of Victoria also owes something to this tradition of parodic response. Today we might see late Victorian and Edwardian England as a repressive society in which homosexual men hid their desires in the wake of the downfall of Oscar Wilde. But to Beaton, and those who shared his views, it was to be celebrated and recuperated as a time of outrageous camp.

The years before 1914, thereby, became an amusement park of tight-lacing, comedy servants, swaggering ancestral portraits and toweringly theatrical bedroom décor.

Beaton's Royal Past

Beaton's initial inspiration for his vision of late Victorian and Edwardian camp appears to have been his mother's eldest sister, Aunt Jessie. According to Beaton this lady had been wont to appear at Court slathered in make-up and with her hair dyed to match her dress. She married a Bolivian and emigrated to South America where, he tells us, she 'succeeded in keeping her poise on a mule's back while moving through remote Andean mountain passes that were quite likely too narrow for her hat or her hair-do' (Beaton 1954: 19). In *The Glass of Fashion* (1954) he drew Jessie from a photograph of 1899 in a manner that directly matches the flamboyant styles with which he illustrated *My Royal Past* (1939). This book was written in the persona of an Austro-Hungarian Baroness of a certain age who was looking back to her pre-war youth (Beaton 1954: 18). It was based partly on the somewhat kitsch reminiscences, which Beaton had been reading at the time, of Queen Marie of Romania who had been born into the British royal family (Marie, Queen of Romania 1934-35).

Many of the images in *My Royal Past* were taken during a series of uproarious photo-shoots in which a group of Beaton's friends dressed (and in many cases cross-dressed) as members of spurious Continental aristocratic families. The bisexual playboy Antonio de Gandarillas posed as the supposed author, the Baroness Von Bülop (Beaton [1939b] 1960: 134; Vickers 1985: 230). (Fig. 6) Frederick Ashton had been Beaton's first choice to take the part of the Baroness but he preferred to assume minor roles with long titles such as the Grand Duchess Marie-Petroushka and the Margravine of Kulp-Kronstadt (Kavanagh 1996: 239). The glamorous Maria-Hedwig, Grand Duchess of Hansburg (who was not played by a man) was prefigured in a number of Beaton's earlier drawings including one of his Victorian 'carnival designs' published in *Vogue* (1934: 27) in 1934.

The illustrations in *My Royal Past* were intended to suggest the mannered style of pre-war royal photography (Beaton 1951: 89). Beaton also seemingly referenced the arch practice in 1920s *Vogue* of photographing elderly aristocratic ladies. One such example was 'The Princess Charles Bourdon del Monte San Faustino' who, the enchanted reader was informed, had a 'delightful house in Rome, The Palazzo Barberini, and is a wonderful hostess, very

witty, artistic and amusing' (Rehbinder 1924: 16). Another source of inspiration may have been Elizabeth, the widow of emperor Franz Joseph (nicknamed 'Sissi'), who attracted a camp following in German-speaking Europe (Tobin 2015: 114). Beaton may also have been inspired by his friend Stephen Tennant who, as reported in *The People* (1927: 5) in 1927, had assumed the character of the aforementioned Maria of Romania, Queen of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. He appeared at 'one of the queerest of all the freak parties ever given in London… Attired in the fashionable short skirt and other delectable garments which the versatile ruler usually affects… the Hon. Stephen [Tennant] smiled and bowed his way through crowds of his admiring friends, all of whom vowed that he looked every inch a Queen'.

Not only arrivistes such as Beaton but also some of the blue bloods with whom he socialized such as Michael Duff, 3rd baronet of Veynol in north Wales, shared his camp fascination with *grandes dames* (McMullin 1937: 124). In his slim novel *The Power of the Parasol* (which first appeared in the 1930s before being republished in a revised form as *The Power of a Parasol*) Duff introduced the figure of Lady Ellerdale who was based on Queen Mary, the wife of George V. Her Ladyship, 'although a typical Edwardian… was unlike any of her contemporaries because she gave the impression of being the only one' (M. Duff 1948: 5; C. Duff 2017). At one particularly melodramatic moment we see through the eyes of Lupin, an artist, as he 'became aware of a radiance that was so bright that it was nearly blinding. It seemed as though the whole room was lit by a million chandeliers. Lady Ellerdale, in ice-blue, smothered in diamonds, with a spiked coronet of the same stones, wearing many Orders pinned to her shoulders, advanced toward [him]… She carried herself like a festive chimney stack, not even the Queen of Sheba could have made a more magnificent entry' (Duff 1948: 34). That this was an effect that Duff personally admired is suggested by his frequent cross-dressed appearances as Queen Mary who, incidentally, was his godmother. He was photographed in this role by Cecil Beaton at his country home, Ashcombe, in 1936 (Muir 2020: 254).

What, apart from the amazing diamonds, did such women have that queer men did not? When Princess Pauline Metternich had appeared in 'masculine dress' at the Fiaker Bal in Vienna in 1893 she was associated by American *Vogue* with 'strange freaks and eccentricities' but, perhaps because of her high status as one of the 'Great Ladies of Europe', was also admired as being bold and daring rather than ridiculous or immoral. This was despite the fact that she was known—as was commented by the prominent writer and newspaper columnist Margaret Cunliffe-Owen (1900, vol. 2: 167), writing under the

pseudonym of the 'Marquise de Fontenoy'—for the 'boldest of flirtations of all kinds of men ranking from statesmen to circus-riders' (*Vogue* 1893: 4 and 6; Hutto 2017: 200, n. 52). It was this very kind of aristocratic license to transgress boundaries of gender, sexuality and class that men such as Beaton dreamed of securing for themselves. To see all this in terms merely of snobbery is to miss the subversive aspects of Beaton's refashioning of European aristocracy. To claim that one had a royal past when was one clearly did not was the class equivalent of cross-dressing. It could be dismissed as a joke, but it was one with powerfully queer implications.

In several of his articles on aristocrats and celebrities Beaton indulged his penchant for gender indeterminacy by presenting as 'beauties of our day' big-boned, heavy-featured aristocratic ladies such that they looked rather like men in drag (*Vogue* 1937: 114). It seems to have been obvious to him that it was only their high social status that made people pay attention to such women and think of them as 'beauties'. To burlesque the social order was, nevertheless, not at all the same thing as to renounce it. There was some irreverence behind Beaton's *My Royal Past* that bears comparison with, and perhaps gained transatlantic inspiration from, the dressing up in royal drag by the Roosevelts—this was reported as 'our royal family' in the American edition of *Vanity Fair* in 1933 (Chase 1933: 17-19). A similar anarchic spirit might be read into Beaton's posing of the American gossip columnist and media personality Elsa Maxwell the following year with a crown on her head (*Vanity Fair* 1934: 24), but his obsession with royalty was laced with genuine admiration.

A further clue to Beaton's motivations can be found in another *Vogue* (1939a: 60-61) article: 'Dress sense of a queen: H. M. Queen Elizabeth follows no tradition but a royal one'. Royal women, it appeared, offered a supreme example of self-fashioning since they could be held to be, in effect, *above* fashion. That very look of superiority had, however, been carefully orchestrated by a series of queer men of whom the most prominent were Beaton as royal photographer and Norman Hartnell as royal dress-designer. It was they who 'helped Her Majesty [Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, wife of George VI] to become the lovely legendary fairy-tale Queen who has captured all America with her charm and elegance' (*Vogue* 1939b: 41; S. Brown 2011: 296). Hartnell, like Beaton, had designed his own frocks for cross-dressed roles in student theatre at Cambridge University—although, unlike Beaton, he had the habit of assuming the role of one of his early drag personae, Miss Kitty, for sex scenes. Hartnell's early designs, however, were like those of Beaton in being flamboyantly 'at variance' with the mainstream modes of the 'flapper' era (Pick 2019: 55).

When the call came from the Palace in July 1939 Beaton responded with a visual style that was directly inspired by the fantasy world of *My Royal Past*. He photographed the seemingly dowdy wife of George VI wearing recreations of Victorian dresses the designs of which were inspired by examples in royal portraits by Franz Winterhalter. The result was an ensemble which, ‘thanks to the tireless efforts of Walt Disney, remains the defining image of ‘a beautiful princess’ (Stevenson 2018: 237). Perhaps the campest move in the British war effort was then to send dolls of the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret dressed by Hartnell and another designer Edward Molyneux on a tour of the United States in aid of the Anglo-American War Charity ‘The Refugees of England’. Beaton’s photographs of them duly appeared as ‘*Vogue’s*-eye view of Her Majesty in miniature’ (*Vogue* 1941: 29). Never had the queer art of drag been so socially exalted.

Conclusions

The term ‘retrosexuality’ is often used to refer to a conservative reaction on the part of some heterosexual men against the achievements of modern feminism. The queer retrosexuality of Cecil Beaton and his fellow travellers was also conservative in so far as it was predicated on the maintenance of an arguably outdated social order. On the other hand, by focussing on social privilege as a means by which to escape rigid sexual codes, Beaton queered his country’s aristocratic past and provided the opportunity for men of lower social rank to imagine inheriting the freedoms of the social elite. His work can, thereby, be understood as reparative in relation to life in a country that continued to criminalise gay sex (Shahani 2012).

The late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were, for all their aristocratic glitter, the first periods in British history to be dominated by democratic politics. The stripping of veto powers from the House of Lords with the passing of the Parliament Act (1911) made this obvious. One response of the Establishment was to maintain royalty and aristocracy as an imperial pose. The decadent flavour of British high society on the eve of World War One suffuses articles such as this one describing a gala night in London. The event,

> lingers in the mind of those of us who were there as something that stands out in beauty and in brilliance and interest from all other entertainments. It is one of those occasions when we realize the stateliness and dignity of our Court with a true

> democratic relish. The democracy loves its royalty and its aristocracy with a deep-down, ineradicable love, born of the charm of contrast felt with the power of a really imaginative people (*Sketch,* 'The Woman about Town' 1914: 223).

An imaginative person would, of course, have found this as camply funny as they would such effusions as those advanced in *Vogue* by Princess Marthe Bibesco of Romania in her 1932 excursus on the subject of 'Democracy in dress' (Bibesco 1932: 69 and 84). Modern monarchy could, therefore, be reimagined in a way that mingled adulation with condescension as the epitome of artificial performance. It is possible to dismiss male cross-dressing as female royalty as an exercise in men's privilege over women, but it did have significant social implications. When various young Scottish socialites were photographed in 1932 in the 'progressive dress' of the late nineteenth century— 'New Women' in 'biking bloomers', 'sports girls' of the 1880s and the Earl of Hopetoun as a Victorian lady in hunting kit—they were implicitly relativizing the styles and values on which their own gendered and hierarchical status depended (Smith 1932: 4). The cultural politics of his times meant that Cecil Beaton could not work as an openly homosexual man. For that reason, the queerness of many of his later photographs of the British monarchy, some of which were modelled on the images from *My Royal Past,* escaped popular recognition (Janes 2015: 164-69). His queering of aristocratic mores did not, however, go unnoticed by other homosexual artists.

In 1948 another queer photographer, Angus McBean, photographed Beaton holding a pair of scissors and surrounded by photographs, prints and books—one of which was a copy of *My Royal Past* (Pepper 2006: 69, 146 and plate 34). McBean employed a closely related visual language in his *All the Best People Eat at the Pavilion Restaurant* (1954). (Fig. 7) In this composition David Ball, who was McBean's lover, played all the characters dressed in period costumes similar to those which Beaton would design for *My Fair Lady* (1964).[1] Ball, like Eliza Doolittle in that film, was from a poor background in the East End of London (Woodhouse 2006: 221). Photographic montage magicked him from man to women, from working to upper class, and away from the pressures of postwar modernity into a queer fantasy of the past. McBean and Ball also enjoyed cross-dressing at fancy dress balls in London after World War Two, the former sometimes in the character of Queen Victoria and the latter as a Hapsburg Grand Duchess (Woodhouse 2020). Cecil Beaton's queering of Britain's royal past appealed to many other gay men because it reimagined the past, and by implication the future, as a place of queer opportunity rather than of oppression.

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[1] Thank you to Jane Brocket for bringing this picture to my attention.

[2] Periodicals are the UK edition unless indicated otherwise.