The ‘Curious Effects’ of Acting: Homosexuality, Theatre and Female Impersonation at the University of Cambridge, 1900-1939

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Abstract

The University of Cambridge educated a significant proportion of Britain’s elite in the early twentieth century. The homosocial environment of the colleges was similar in many ways to that of the single-sex public boarding schools which many of the undergraduates had attended. Student theatre was a popular activity and because such shows were acted by single-sex ensembles there was a strong tradition of female impersonation on stage. The interwar diaries of Cecil Beaton, who identified privately as a homosexual man, provide an unusually detailed source of information about a period when sexual controversy began to surround theatrical cross-dressing. In the 1930s, when moves were made to open previously men-only university drama clubs to women, the issue of male homosexuality and its alleged connections with student theatre came to be widely discussed. This reflected significant changes in the ways in which queerness was accommodated within the predominantly male environment of the University.

Key words

Cecil Beaton, Cross-Dressing, Homosexuality, Queer, Students

Female impersonation by students, on stage and off, was a frequent feature of student life at the University of Cambridge in the early twentieth century. It became increasingly controversial for its alleged associations with homosexuality. The extensive records of drama societies and reviews of their productions in student newspapers provide important sources of evidence for theatre practices and their public reception. The diaries of the future fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, who attended Cambridge from 1922 to 1925, provide a rare and detailed insight into the private lives of a circle of homosexually identified young men whose cultural interests focussed on the theatre. Together, these sources enable us to appreciate the changing ways in which cross-dressing, while being entrenched within the homosocial everyday life of the University, provided opportunities for homosexual encounters and queer play with gender. This can, in turn, help us to understand some of the ways in which same-sex desire was embedded within the predominantly masculine environment of Cambridge.

Since the late nineteenth century there had been rising public concern about queer sex and 'unhealthy' love affairs in public schools and expulsions for these offences were not infrequent.[1] Same-sex passions at single-sex public schools supposedly blossomed in the absence of the opposite sex and the same was sometimes said of Oxbridge where female students were few in number and lived separately from their male equivalents. These young men and women were expected to maintain celibacy and could be 'sent down' (i.e. expelled) for sexual indiscretions. The most detailed study of masculinity at Oxbridge during this period, Paul Deslandes' *Oxbridge Men* (1990), describes the homosocial culture of the University and the various attempts to reinforce ideals of manliness in connection with the

[1] Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford, 2015), 119-35.

founding of the colleges for women, Girton (1869) and Newnham (1871). However, he does not explore homosexuality except in the context of a brief discussion about university discipline and nor does he cover the interwar period.[2] There have been a few studies of the histories of same-sex desire at other universities, notably from the United States. Douglas Shand-Tucci's *The Crimson Letter* (2003) identified queer ideals of Harvard men as warriors/sportsmen or aesthetes/intellectuals that were inspired by Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde respectively.[3] A talk delivered in 1996 explored the history of homosexual students at Stanford. This identified the 1930s as the decade that saw the appearance of a widespread reading of homosocial intimacy as potentially homosexual. Student theatre, which had once unproblematically required men to play women's roles on stage was at the centre of changes in gender politics. Drag reviews, which had once been popular, disappeared in the 1920s and were only revived in the 'Gaities' of 1945 which included knowing references to homosexuality.[4]

The evidence for male cross-dressing in Cambridge is abundant but tricky to analyse. What is to one to make, for example, of Frederick Percival Farrar? Born into a prominent clerical family—his father was Archdeacon of Westminster—he matriculated at Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1894. The college magazine featured 'Ode to a Greek Maiden' in

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[2] Paul Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, 2005), 111-13.

[3] Douglas Shand-Tucci, *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality and the Shaping of American Culture* (New York, 2003), 11-92.

[4] Gerard Koskovich, 'Private Lives, Public Struggles: The History of Homosexual Students at Stanford University, 1891-1975', unpublished talk, presented at Stanford, 30 April 1996, 10-12 (with thanks to the author). The word 'gay' was in use to mean homosexual at this date, see G. Legman, 'The Language of Homosexuality: An American Glossary', in George William Henry, *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns,* volume 1 (of 2) (New York, 1941), 1149-79.

praise of his female impersonation at the end of his first term as a student:

> … the people their vows
> And their deity's worship forsaking
> Will acknowledge *thee* only as queen![5]

Three years later the magazine surveyed the highlights of his student career which included playing the role of the leading lady in a production of the University's Amateur Dramatic Club. He was a theological student with an artistic temperament whose 'favourite form of exercise is the Turkish bath… "I live for tea" is one of his favourite expressions'.[6] On leaving Cambridge he took up a series of teaching posts before becoming a clergyman in Norfolk and a chaplain to the royal family. A Cambridge alumni database last records him as serving with the French Foreign Legion in World War One.[7] By the interwar period both female impersonation and Turkish baths were starting to become associated with a homosexuality that might nicely fit his camp turn of phrase.[8] But even then this would only have told us about attitudes to Farrar's style rather than about his sexual proclivities.

The most detailed analysis of female impersonation among members of all-male clubs, whether at university or not in this period, has been written by Laurence Senelick. He argued that cross-dressing could be 'sanctioned as the *sine qua non* of unalloyed masculinity'.[9] This worked when the participants believed in their male privilege as

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[5] 'Ode to a Greek Maiden', *Pem,* 9, 6 December 1894, 21, emphasis in original.

[6] 'College Lights, 1', *Pem,* 1 (new series), 10 March 1897, 4-6.

[7] *ACAD: A Cambridge Alumni Database,* http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/, accessed 10 May 2020.

[8] John Potvin, 'Vapour and Steam: The Victorian Turkish Bath, Homosocial Health, and Male Bodies on Display', *Journal of Design History*, 18 (2005), 319-33.

[9] Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (Abingdon, 2000), 353.

extending even to the right to reproduce femininity as an artificial performance either as parody or as a work of theatrical art. That does not, of course, exclude the possibility that cross-dressing may also have been motivated by sexual desires whether they be a fetishistic enthusiasm for female costume or a homosexual impulse to make oneself attractive to other young men. Whatever Farrar's sexuality, he was not out of place in the homosocial environment of his Cambridge college. I shall argue that female impersonation held within it the potential to blur the supposedly binary opposition between male and female, and to create complex sexual responses. What I shall then go on to explain is why this queerly subversive potential became increasingly noticed (and criticised) by the 1930s.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word 'sexuality' first entered English language usage in 1879.[10] The idea of further distinctions between forms of sexuality such as heterosexuality and homosexuality was imported with the translation of works of German sexology. Modern sexuality is often understood to be distinctive because of its framing in the language of scientific, medical and psychological expertise.[11] Ross Brooks has commented on the late arrival in Britain of psychanalytic concepts of sexuality and concluded that 'such ideas had little apparent impact at Oxford prior to the 1930s; in the pages of [student newspapers such as] *The Cherwell* and *Isis*, the names of Freud and Jung were little more than jokes'.[12] This was not just true of university life since accounts by British homosexual men before 1939 tended to focus either on the concepts of idealised friendships (often based on those of the ancient Greeks combined with aestheticised forms of Christianity) or on

[10] Veronique Mottier, *Sexuality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), 31.

[11] H. G. Cocks, 'Historiographical Review: Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality', *Historical Journal* 49 (2006), 1211–27, 1212.

[12] Ross Brooks, 'Beyond Brideshead: The Male Homoerotics of 1930s Oxford', *Journal of British Studies* 59 (2020), 821-856, 828.

notions of a third or inter-sex that combined the characteristics of the other two.[13]

In his 1908 study *The Intersexes,* the American writer Edward Prime-Stevenson—who had left his native country for Europe at the turn of the century and never returned—claimed that 'universities, the world around, are centers of similisexual attraction and of "relations" between fine-natured young college-men'.[14] He highlighted the role of student theatricals in the development of same-sex desire by recounting the story of a young man who crossed-dressed for a university show having never thought about his own attractiveness before:

> 'some of my classmates, even the most masculine, began to "fall in love" with me when *en scène.* Some of them showed the same sentiment afterward… I saw a certain H— plainly in a state of suppressed sexual excitement. So I deliberately seduced him… I was for the time a woman, in my sexual nature, and H— was my victim. The relation lasted long after the play-giving was past'.[15]

What this account does not tell us is whether the speaker wanted to be a woman and, therefore, this account speaks potentially not only to homosexual but also to trans experience. After all, it appears that same-sex seduction was, in this case, not only enabled by the ability to pass as a woman but driven by *being* a woman 'in my sexual nature'.

The concept of sexual inversion, in which the body of a male 'invert' was understood

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[13] Chris Waters, 'Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud and the State: Discourses of Homosexual Identity in Interwar Britain', in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds, *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), 165–79, at 166.

[14] Edward Prime-Stevenson [writing as 'Xavier Mayne'], *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexualism as a Problem in Social Life* (Rome, 1908), 177.

[15] Prime-Stevenson, *The Intersexes*, 178-79; discussed in Senelick, *The Changing Room,* 358.

to contain the mind or soul of a female had been advanced in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century by the sexologist Havelock Ellis as an explanation for homosexuality.[16] He was later to develop a theory more attuned to trans experience in the form of 'Eonism'—the term derived from the eighteenth-century cross-dressing Chevalier D'Eon. Allegedly effeminate men, who wore make-up and sometimes cross-dressed, were noted as characteristic of queer sub-cultures in a number of major cities from New York to London and Berlin.[17] Richard Dyer has commented, therefore, that 'the third sex idea may well have been developed as a means of accounting for a predominant gay subcultural style rather than one imposed by science on gay people.'[18] Inversion did offer an explanatory framework for some instances of cross dressing, but the difference between privileged Cambridge undergraduates in frocks and those seemingly androgynous working-class men who were variously referred to as 'pansies', 'nancies' or 'fairies' was that the latter were seen to be expressing their true natures through femininity whereas the former were 'just putting on an act'.[19] Interwar awareness of homosexuality seen not just as a problem of sexual behaviour but also of gender performance led to new levels of suspicion being directed towards those who put on an effete show and attempted to rely on their social status as a defence against accusations of immorality. This marks a notable shift from popular attitudes at the turn of the century which were reflected in much of the sexological writing of the time. These often

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[16] Havelock Ellis [and John Addington Symonds], *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* vol. 1, *Inversion* (London, 1897); Joseph Bristow, 'Symonds's History, Ellis's Heredity: Sexual Inversion', in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds, *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), 79-99.

[17] Cocks, 'Historiographical Review', 1223.

[18] Richard Dyer, 'Less and More Than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany', *New German Critique,* 51 (1990), 5–60, at 21.

[19] Matt Houlbrook, '"The Man with the Powder Puff" in Interwar London', *Historical Journal* 50 (2007), 145–71.

understood male cross-dressing as being rooted in a fetishistic obsession with the opposite sex and their clothes.[20] A focus on material objects rather than gendered identities supported nineteenth-century understandings of female impersonation as being an—admittedly perverse—form of heterosexual desire.

Students did not typically read the works of sexologists, nor did they tend to provide theorised statements of their sexual or gender identity, but this is not necessarily a problem for historians. Rather than seeking to identify who was really 'lesbian' or 'gay' *avant la lettre* researchers have becoming increasingly interested in the ways in which discourses on sexual desire interacted with social practices. This helps us to engage with the otherness of past experiences lived prior to our contemporary understandings of gendered and sexualised identities.[21] The way in which cross-dressing at Cambridge sometimes operated as a queer practice needs to be viewed as the result of a complex pattern of development over time. Understanding student cross-dressing as queer does not rely on recovering the sexuality of particular individuals, although that does become apparent in the case study of Cecil Beaton. The methodology of this article, therefore, aligns with recent work on modern sexualities that focusses on specific contexts and is open to non-binary and ambiguous patterns of identity and desire.[22]

Tradition and Discretion, pre-1914

[20] Jann Matlock, 'Masquerading Women, Pathologized Men: Cross-Dressing, Fetishism, and the Theory of Perversion, 1882-1935', in Emily Apter and William Pietz, eds, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, 1993), 31–61, 37, 40 and 45.

[21] An example of such thinking can be seen in the work of Laura Doan from *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern Lesbian Culture* (New York, 2001) to *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, 2013).

[22] Cocks, 'Historiographical Review', 1213.

Female impersonation by members of theatre clubs at Cambridge was different from that seen on the commercial stage because women were not generally allowed to act alongside men by the University authorities. This stemmed from Christian suspicion of associations between the theatre, immorality and disorder. Official sanction for impersonation of female characters was regarded as the lesser of two evils. This viewpoint gained further legitimation from the fact that plays before the Restoration period had been performed single-sex. The shows undergraduates wanted to see, however, were often varieties of light entertainment that had much in common with the traditions of the music hall. The results were forms of cross-dressing that were inspired by comedy or sexual titillation. Burlesque female impersonation was intended to be unrealistic, exaggerated and ridiculous. One of the most frequent such roles was the 'dame' whose absurdity was rooted in the conceit that a young man was an old woman. Parody of such older women was frequently combined with that of individuals who were of lower social class or who were of colour. The aim of burlesque was to mock the kinds of person that you were not.

Glamourous female impersonation worked differently. The aim here was to enthral and flirt with the audience. Laurence Senelick argues that eighteenth-century male cross-dressing on stage was primarily comedic but that 'glamour drag' emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as 'an offshoot of a thriving transvestite *demi-monde* that impinged on the world of popular entertainment'.[23] This *demi-monde* in London was associated with sex between men from at least the time of the sensational sodomy trial of the cross-dressers Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park in 1871.[24] The jury in the case seemed

[23] Senelick, *The Changing Room,* 295 and 302.

[24] Ibid., 304; see also Charles Upchurch, 'Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others', *Gender and History,* 12 (2000), 127-57.

unsure what to make of them and the two were found not guilty even though they dressed suspiciously even when not in women's clothing. Their tight trousers, open-necked shirts and rouged cheeks at such times were seemingly more disturbing than the drag which 'seemed the proper uniform for effeminacy'.[25] They both continued careers on the stage after their acquittal, appearing in cross-dressed roles. Simon Joyce has argued that their story might best be interpreted as a trans narrative since it was, he contended, their aim to 'pass' as women.[26] The evidence of the trial, as summarised by *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, suggests something slightly different: that they had gone out 'not only disguised as females, but aping the manners, the affectations, and even the questionable looks and bearing of a certain class of woman'. In other words, they were not attempting to pass as ladies but to imitate prostitutes. They mingled burlesque and glamour with the result that they were perceived both to be men and as capable of arousing sexual desire in other men. This was a queer performance and one that, the newspaper continued, has 'become so common as to have a recognised slang term attached to it', namely 'going about in drag'.[27]

Queerness, therefore, was not an inherent but a potential quality of female impersonation. In order to avoid it as much as possible it was crucial to give a performance that was based on a single well-established stylistic stereotype (be that of scholarly attention to a classic text, burlesque or glamour). A realistic performance could be read as a serious display of thespian art and a burlesque performance might appear as a male parody of women and femininity. Even a glamorous performance could be understood as a display of male mastery that reinscribed sexual expectations based on the binary division between men and women. The distinction between such comparatively 'respectable' forms of cross-dressing

[25] Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 306.

[26] Simon Joyce, 'Two Women Walk into a Theatre Bathroom', *Victorian Review*, 44 (2018), 83-98, 84.

[27] Anon., 'The Last Vile Fashion', *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 4 June 1870, 354.

and queer drag was never clear cut and this helps us to understand the wariness with which even single-sex theatre was viewed by the University authorities. As a result, the survival of the Amateur Dramatic Club (commonly known as the A.D.C.) from its foundation 1855 was anything but a foregone conclusion, as its initial leading light the playwright F. C. Burnand attested.[28]

The Cambridge University Library preserves a remarkable set of minute books and photograph albums that date from the very first years of the society. These make clear that burlesque and glamour roles were common on the student stage. Moreover, even if the intention was to avoid blending the characteristics of these types of cross-dressing this was not always how these acts were received by their audience. A group of Magdalene men may have acted out of irony when they threw bunches of lilies of the valley at the young man playing Distaffina in the A.D.C.'s first production of William Rhodes' farce *Bombastes Furioso* (1822), but they were copying the tribute they would have offered to an actress on the commercial stage.[29] Intriguingly, two of the club's photographs of a couple embracing in the 1873 production of Tom Taylor's *The Overland Route* (1870) have been crossed-out (figure 1). The implication is that someone in the society believed that close physical contact on stage between a man dressed as a man and a man dressed as a woman was indecent, either because it evoked heterosexual passion or implied homosexual attraction, or perhaps both.

[figure 1 here]

Interest in the queer potential of cross-dressed performances may have surfaced in Cambridge because of students' prior experiences when at their public schools. Many such establishments ran their own (necessarily single-sex) drama and literary clubs such as the one

[28] F. C. Burnand, *The 'A. D. C.': Being Personal Reminiscences of the University Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge* (London, 1888).

[29] A.D.C. Minute Book 1855-58, Cambridge University Library Archives, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, CUADC 1/4/1; Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 107-8.

established by Oscar Browning during his time as a master at Eton College.[30] The headmaster, James Hornby put a stop to these activities, substituting them with athletics.[31] Shortly thereafter, in 1875, Browning was forced out of his post and, promptly becoming a fellow of King's College, Cambridge, continued his educational and social innovations. His autobiography, *Memories of Sixty Years at Eton, Cambridge, and Elsewhere* (1910) makes such a virtue of friendships between men that it takes them to the limits of what would then have been found acceptable. The frontispiece of the book is a portrait of Browning by Simeon Solomon, an (infamous) Pre-Raphaelite artist who was disgraced after being arrested for having sex with a man in London in 1873 and in Paris the following year. As the author put it, 'his life closed in darkness and misery. But I am proud to acknowledge that he was one of my friends'.[32] The epitaph to the volume takes the form of a poem:

> In youth we roamed, a merry band,
> Through mead and desert, hand in hand,
> With Dick and Harry, Charles and George,
> The fetters of our life to forge,
> We strove and quarrelled, fought and kissed,
> And not a fount of joy was missed.[33]

Whether these 'founts' might have been physical as well as metaphorical was left to the

[30] Mark McBeth, 'The Pleasure of Learning and the Tightrope of Desire: Teacher-Student Relationships and Victorian Pedagogy', in Joyce Goodman and Jane Martin, eds, *Gender, Colonialism and Education: An International Perspective* (London, 2002), 46-72, 54; Oscar Browning, *Memories of Sixty Years at Eton, Cambridge, and Elsewhere* (London, 1910), 207.

[31] Ian Anstruther, *Oscar Browning: A Biography* (London, 1983), 39.

[32] Oscar Browning, *Memories of Sixty Years*, iv and 107.

[33] Oscar Browning, *Memories of Sixty Years*, vii.

discretion of the reader.

Browning's memoir recounts his presidency of a wide range of clubs—it being a frequent requirement for undergraduate societies to have at least one senior member in order, it was reasoned, to ensure probity both financial and moral. Browning noted that his enthusiasm for such activities did not make him popular with his peers since one is not supposed to have 'any really intimate knowledge of the undergraduates.'[34] For much of the 1890s Browning was involved in running the Footlights Dramatic Club which had been formed in 1883 and specialised in end-of-the-year reviews and one-off evenings called 'Smokers'.[35] In March 1896 the committee turned from planning their current burlesque to a debate on the provision of subsidised visits on Sundays to Flack's Baths in St. Andrew Street—the advert enclosed in the minute book promised 'Hot, Cold, Shower, Sea Salt, and Vapour. Also is added the Turkish Bath'.[36] Another queer bachelor with similar interests to Browning was Charles Sayle, who worked for many years as under-librarian at the Cambridge University Library. When a student member of the Cicadas club he had invited Oscar Wilde to Cambridge to see the rehearsals of the Cambridge Greek Play society which had been founded two years previously in 1883.[37] Sayle enjoyed entertaining 'swans' at his house; these were young men, such as the poet Rupert Brooke, who were known for both

[34] Oscar Browning, *Memories of Sixty Years*, 253

[35] Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 4, *1870-1990* (Cambridge, 1993), 299; see also Robert Hewison, *Footlights!–A Hundred Years of Cambridge Comedy* (London, 1983).

[36] Footlights Dramatic Society Minute Book 1896-1899, f10r, Cambridge University Library Archives, Footlights Dramatic Society Papers, Foot 1/2/1.

[37] P. E. Easterling, 'The Early Years of the Cambridge Greek Play: 1883–1912', in Christopher Stray, ed., *Classics in 19th and 20th Century Cambridge: Curriculum, Culture and Community*, Cambridge Philological Society, Supplement 24 (Cambridge, 1998), 27-47; J. C. T. Oates, 'Charles Edward Sayle', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 8 (1982), 236-69, 242.

their intellectual and physical talents.[38]

The feminist literary scholar Jane Marcus excoriated Browning, and by implication those of his ilk, as a misogynist. She identified his participation in what she termed a 'Cambridge philosophy of homosexual privilege exchanged for service to institutions of repression' that were doing all they could to exclude women from higher education.[39] In her view male homosexuality was tolerated so long as it remained both discreet and wedded to the preservation of patriarchal entitlement. Open discussion of same-sex desire was restricted to salons given by men such as Browning and to meetings of invitation-only clubs such as the Apostles at King's College where, during their time as students, Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes had liked to discuss what they termed the 'higher sodomy'. This involved an idealised relationship which combined intellectual engagement with erotic entertainment.[40] It was partly inspired by Hellenic and Wildean concepts of master and pupil but was less structured around age difference. The minute books of the club give tantalizing glimpses of their discussions. The question for debate on 26 November 1904 was: 'The bedroom, brother?' to which the response was:

> 'Yes, Tomlinson!' Keynes and Strachey.
>
> 'No, Tomlinson!' Forster.
>
> Strachey, 'and I shall leave the door open, peeping Tomlinson!'[41]

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[38] Oates, 'Charles Edward Sayle', 236-69, at 260.

[39] Jane Marcus, 'Reviewed Work: *Oscar Browning: A Biography* by Ian Anstruther', *Victorian Studies,* 28 (1985), 556–58, at 557.

[40] Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Plato's Apostles: Edwardian Cambridge and the "New Style of Love"', *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* 8 (1997), 196-228, 225; see also William C. Lubenow, *The Cambridge Apostles, 1820-1914: Liberalism, Imagination, and Friendship in British Intellectual and Professional Life* (Cambridge, 1998).

[41] Apostles Minute Book 1902-1909, King's College Archives, Kings/KCAS/39/1/14.

Outside such environments open discussion of cross-dressing as queer was out of the question. Indeed, the scandal of same-sex desire could be disguised as an interest in the female performance as opposed to the male performer. Nevertheless, glamour roles relied upon evoking a degree of lustful admiration in single-sex environments. The late nineteenth century saw a rising fascination with the figure of the glamorous leading lady in student productions. She was often provided with larger photographic shots in the A.D.C. albums.[42] She was saluted in fervent terms in the student media: 'What secrets of feminine guile did Mr. Seward enquire into, so as to be able to make his eyes twinkle and flash, like a veritable evening star?'[43] The archives of the Footlights, also in the Cambridge University library, preserve, if in dried and crushed form, various floral tributes to H. B. le D. Tree in the character of Kitty Littlemore in the 1902 revival of *The Freshman* (1899) (figure 2).[44] This was the culture in which Frederick Farrar could be acclaimed as a temple maiden in his first term at the University without, it would appear, any reputational damage. However, female impersonation of this kind required both the performer and audience to remain discreet about the queer potential of sexual of attraction between the men in audience and the cross-dressed star on stage. This polite agreement proved impossible to uphold in the changed social conditions after 1918. [figure 2 here]

[42] See, for example, the November 1876 production of *She Stoops to Conquer*, A.D.C. Photograph Album 1874-82, Cambridge University Library Archives, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, CUADC 5/2/1/4.

[43] 'The A.D.C.', *Granta*, 10 June 1902, 359-60, 360.

[44] *The Freshman* (1902), Cambridge University Library Archives, Footlights Dramatic Club papers, FOOT 2/9/44.

Cecil Beaton's Cambridge, 1922-25

Female impersonation was not one of the casualties of World War One. Single-sex environments at the front, or in prisoner of war camps, were widely noted for theatrical shows that featured cross dressing. These were discussed at the time as light-hearted entertainments that had no greater significance than maintaining morale but, as was the case with Cambridge, they could also harbour opportunities for queer or trans self-expression.[45] Lisa Segal's reading of these shows is suggestive of the ways in which cross-dressing could connect with complex desires that cannot be reduced to the sexual categories of their time or, indeed, of our own day. In her view these shows were aligned with a 'broader yearning' which might encompass regret at the absence not just of girlfriends but also of mothers.[46] Travesty shows offered a form of escapist fantasy that appealed to men who felt themselves to be disempowered within the structures of army life. Student drama could likewise be interpreted as reflecting elements of homesickness or of yearning for the relatively unrestricted life of those no longer *in statu pupillari*. The activities of University clubs were severely restricted when they were not curtailed entirely by the outbreak of World War One, but they were swiftly resumed in 1919. War-time attitudes and experiences were brought to Cambridge by the men who returned from the front lines to form a substantial proportion of the undergraduate body in the immediate post-war period. They were joined, and in time replaced, by others who had been at school during the period of hostilities.

Boys with artistic, literary and theatrical interests continued to engage with these in their public schools during the war years, many of which possessed their own traditions of

[45] David Boxwell, 'The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-1918', *Modernism/Modernity*, 9 (2002), pp. 1-20.

[46] Lisa Segal, '"Best Love": Female Impersonation in the Great War', *Sexualities,* 19 (2016), 98-118, 109.

student drama. One such pupil was Cecil Beaton who attended Harrow School in north-west London where he was a member of Bradbys House. He was to have a glittering career as one of the twentieth century's most prominent photographers but he had also been interested in acting, costume and painting from an early age. He won a variety of awards including a Term Prize for his 'prolific and clever' work in colour.[47] In December 1921 he co-produced and acted in a set of five short plays staged by the Bradbys Dramatic Society.[48] His roles were those of Dame Quickly, Della, and Mrs Gubb. At some point during this time Beaton wrote down some ideas for an aesthetic novel—think Firbank, but more depressive—about a child called Paul who 'is far too effeminate, all the time dressing himself up, acting and dancing and drawing… He didn't particularly want to grow up into a man. He thought it would be rather exciting to remain as he was. He knew how to talk, but he couldn't shout,—he could dance, but he couldn't run'.[49] He is sad because he has a friendship with another boy but knew it would go nowhere and because 'it is impossible to look aesthetic when one is being beaten' [sic].[50] The wordplay connects his surname with the threat of—implicitly homophobic—violence. It implies that Beaton did not see himself as someone who took to the theatre as an occasional amusement but did so as an act of defiance in order to reinforce his identity as an aesthete.

From the time when he went up to St John's College, Cambridge, in 1922 Beaton kept

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[47] W. E. H., 'The Art School', *Harrovian*, 26 July 1919, 70.

[48] Bradbys Dramatic Society, *Five Short Plays, Produced by W. M. Vaughan and C.W.H. Beaton, Thursday, December 15, 1921 in Aid of the Harrow Mission Latimer Road*, programme, A2000-22, Harrow School Archives.

[49] Beaton Diary 17 (undated), 6, St John's College Library, Papers of Sir Cecil Beaton.

[50] Beaton Diary 17 (undated), 11 and 14. Beaton may have completed this novel since on 20 December 1923 he sorted out his old photographs and 'thoughts' and wrote that 'most of my Harrow writings will have to be burnt', Beaton Diary 18 (20 December 1923-14 January 1924).

a series of detailed diaries which are notable for their candour concerning same-sex desire. These document over-lapping circles of theatrical and homosexual life at the University. Their significance is that they document the practices of a stage performer who deliberately challenged conventional modes of cross-dressing on stage. This had the effect of making same-sex desire an increasingly acknowledged aspect of female impersonation. Selections from the original manuscripts, which are kept in the archives of his college, have been published in an edition by Hugo Vickers and can be read alongside his biography.[51] Beaton did little academic work and threw his energies into socialising, art and theatre. He self-identified as homosexual when he arrived at University but struggled to find a balance between his sexuality and distrust of what he saw as his friends' and his own effeminacy. He recorded, in an apparent act of internalised homophobia, that he was nearly sick at the sight of 'homo sexual [*sic*] young men' who were obviously 'affected'.[52] He was involved in unrequited passions but was more the observer of sexual activity in others than a participant in it himself. All of this set a pattern for his later life. He was involved in productions of the three most important university dramatic societies, the A.D.C., the Footlights and the Marlowe. This last society had been founded in 1907 in order that a play 'in accordance, so far as is possible and expedient, with the traditions of the Elizabethan stage' should be performed each year. It aspired to scholarly acting that eschewed burlesque and glamour and, thereby, evaded the queer dangers that lurked within those 'vulgar' traditions.[53] In their very first production, Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1592), they took this sensitivity to such extremes

[51] Cecil Beaton, *The Wandering Years: Diaries, 1922-1939,* ed. Hugo Vickers (London, 1961); Hugo Vickers, *Cecil Beaton: The Authorised Biography* (London, 1985).

[52] 24 June 1924, Beaton Diary 27 (10 July–3 August 1924).

[53] Typescript, 8 March 1907, Cambridge University Library Archives, A. S. F. Gow papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 8264/II/1; see also Tim Cribb, *Bloomsbury and British Theatre: The Marlowe Story* (Cambridge, 2007).

that they staged the scene in which A. R. Marshall played Helen of Troy—according to legend the most beautiful women of her age—completely in the dark.[54]

Beaton's theatre work at Cambridge went to the other extreme of indiscretion. He used lurid paint, bright make-up and daring fabrics to create extraordinary and unforgettable visual effects. 'I looked like a Rossetti picture' he recorded in November 1922. 'Everyone got a terrific shock when they saw me—especially the producer'.[55] These startling visual effects were not limited to the stage since Beaton and several of his friends wore cosmetics in their daily life, perhaps in imitation of silent-movie stars such as Rudolph Valentino.[56] On 13 February 1923 he was in a hurry to get to a dinner party and so 'simply coated my face in powder'. A week later Steven Runciman, who was to become a prominent historian of the Byzantine Empire, arrived for lunch in such heavy powder and lipstick that even Cecil thought the effect was over-done.[57] Remarkably Beaton had started wearing make-up when still a pupil at Harrow.[58] He reminisced about those days with his best friend Edward 'Boy' Le Bas: 'I showed Boy the photos of himself dressed up as a woman at Harrow. He was so thrilled. It was immensely funny.'[59]

After one cross-dressed performance by Beaton in May 1923 he was apparently flattered to be acclaimed as 'a gem of wantonness' and 'the most lecherous thing imaginable', but then deplored being 'surrounded by terrible hearties—asking a thousand

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[54] J. W. Clark, letter to A. S. F. Gow, 12 November 1907, Cambridge University Library Archives, A. S. F. Gow papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 8264/II/6/I.

[55] 25 November 1922, Beaton Diary 3 (20 November–13 December 1922).

[56] Richard Dyer, 'Less and More', 22.

[57] 13 and 21 February 1923, Beaton Diary 6 (31 January–25 February 1923).

[58] Vickers, *Cecil Beaton*, 23.

[59] 27 March 1923, Beaton Diary 8 (15 March–18 April 1923); Robin Muir, *Cecil Beaton's Bright Young Things* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2020), 51.

questions'.[60] He, perhaps, sensed he had aroused the desire of ostensibly heterosexual men ('hearties') by looking like a woman when what he wanted was a romance. He joked one night over dinner in February 1924 with another old friend, Cecil Tristram ('Tris') Bennett, about people being 'sacked' (i.e. expelled) from Harrow and one person being in bed with another on his first night there: 'I suggested he take his Public School for his honeymoon'.[61] On another occasion he laughed with Le Bas about the fact that the latter's room had been known as the 'married quarters'.[62] Yet he also reflected on how lovely it would be to go to bed with someone and just stroke their hair, or even just to sleep in the same room: 'I think it would be perfect.'[63] Sex had been on offer at Harrow but not, apparently, the kind of romantic love that Beaton craved. This implies that erotic connections amongst men were more readily available in both school and university settings than emotionally satisfying same-sex relationships.

Beaton's frustration at this state of affairs helps to explain why he reacted so badly to being told by another friend that he had a reputation at school for 'being naughty':

> It makes me so annoyed. I was quiet and weak and rather effeminate at Harrow. I never played football or anything like that. I dressed nicely and wanted to look nice because it pleased me—and wretched people thought that because I was frightfully pretty and luscious that I must be a little tart and got dressed up nicely to get off with people.[64]

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[60] '*Dr. Faustus* at the Guildhall', *Granta*, 11 May 1923, 428; 10 May 1923, Beaton Diary 9 (19 April–11 May 1923).

[61] 22 February 1924, Beaton Diary 21 (16 February–3 March 1924).

[62] 8 June 1924, Beaton Diary 25 (18 May–20 June 1924).

[63] 15 January 1924, Beaton Diary 19 (14 January–26 January 1924).

[64] 27 February 1924, Beaton Diary 21 (16 February–3 March 1924).

All this was more true of one of Beaton's compatriots at Cambridge, the future clothes designer to the royal family, Norman Hartnell. Le Bas, while deploring the crude humour of the 1923 Footlights May Week review reported that Hartnell 'seems to wear the most marvellous creations. One every ten minutes.'[65] The student media was equally impressed saying that outstanding points were the Klu Klux Klan chorus (the racist flippancy of which went unremarked) and 'Mr. Hartnell as *Gwendolin Bentley,* [who] was a most surprising Dean's daughter. He wore some gorgeous gowns of his own designing, which he displayed with the skill of a practised mannequin' (i.e. model).[66] In later life Hartnell reprised this role, complete with costume, in private parties at which he designated a favoured man to come upstairs and ravish him whilst still in character and corsets.[67]

Beaton's aim, by contrast, was neither to 'get off with people', nor to mock nor pass as a woman. He rejected wearing corsets or artificial breasts.[68] What he wanted was to amuse himself and his friends by parodying the conventional and, to him, old-fashioned styles of female impersonation at Cambridge. Not everyone admired the way in which he explored the destabilising potential of moving between glamour and burlesque roles. He, therefore, attempted to bolster his rapport with the more reactionary elements of his audience though the use of snobbery and anti-Semitism. Thus, at a Smoker in February 1924 he made himself up 'all very common' as Clapham's Colossal Comedienne Cecil, singing 'I Want a Boy': 'giggly and naughty making eyes at the audience and kicking as high as imaginable. I looked

[65] 5 June 1923, Beaton Diary 10 (11 May-6 June 1923); see also Robert Hewison, *Footlights!–A Hundred Years of Cambridge Comedy.* London: Methuen, 1983, 52.

[66] R. A. P., 'Footlights Dramatic Club in *Folly*', *Granta,* 8 June 1923, 515, emphasis in original.

[67] Michael Pick, *Norman Hartnell: The Biography* (London: Zuleika, 2019).

[68] 30 November 1930, Beaton Diary 16 (1 November–30 November 1923).

like a common Zeigfeld Fol[lies]s [sic] girl'. He then rushed off to change into a silver outfit as Berthe the Jewess, complete with a giant hooked nose, so that he and Boy could do a double act 'straight from their phenomenal success at the Kilburn Empire'.[69] Clapham and Kilburn were working-class suburbs of London whereas Beaton had grown up in middle-class Hampstead, but in contrast to boys from the shires he was very familiar with London's theatre scene in both its respectable and more risqué manifestations.

Beaton was not very interested in scholarship, nor in the attempts at authentic performance that had been pioneered at the Marlowe Dramatic Society and which George Rylands was trying to promote at the A.D.C. Academic study of plays at the university was as literature and neither Cambridge nor Oxford followed Yale's lead in establishing a department of drama in 1918.[70] Rylands was to become a fellow of King's College in 1927 and a leading figure in student theatre at Cambridge for decades thereafter. He was at the centre of a complex set of homosocial and homosexual friendship networks and was widely known, in his youth, as a particularly handsome blond.[71] Beaton was not impressed, thinking him so pale as to be 'almost an albino'.[72] They were rival candidates for the title role in the A.D.C.'s 1924 production of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). Ryland's nickname was 'Dadie', which was how he had pronounced 'baby' when he had been a child. Beaton waspishly noted that at a casting meeting 'Dédé Rylands, the perfect lady, talked a lot… I think it is a wonderful Play, so melodramatic and bloody and so exotic. I should love

[69] 19 February 1924, Beaton Diary 21 (16 Feb–3 March 1924).

[70] Glynne Wickham, 'A Revolution in Attitudes to the Dramatic Arts in British Universities, 1880-1980', *Oxford Review of Education,* 3 (1977), 115-121, 116-117.

[71] Michael Cordner, 'George Rylands and Cambridge University Shakespeare', in Andrew J. Hartley, ed., *Shakespeare on the University Stage* (Cambridge, 2015), 43-59.

[72] 12 November 1922, Beaton Diary 2 (23 October–19 November 1922).

to be the Duchess'.[73] Rylands, however, was chosen and Le Bas was allotted work on the designs.[74] The reviewer in the leading student newspaper *The Granta* was impressed by the leading lady: 'We forgot we were listening to the voice of a mere man, and here at least restraint bred sympathy and horror in the hearts of the audience'.[75] It is safe to assume that Beaton had had other ideas for the role.

The cast were in the mood to party after the final performance on 12 March. Beaton recorded with displeasure that the hated Rylands was 'all over' his friend Le Bas but thought that he would have welcomed the man's attentions if only for reasons of social prominence. People were scattered about having 'ten minute kisses with one another'. 'The Duchess' rushed about, kissing everyone and very drunk. Rylands then said to Wase, who had played the Second Executioner, that he was very beautiful and kissed him in a corner 'for a quarter of an hour'. Beaton adds that he thought it extraordinary that the 'un homo' Wase would behave like this since he was ordinarily 'so quiet and the straightforward Britisher having no nonsense'.[76] Two nights later another equally queer party—at which all but two attendees 'lay' with someone or other—was given by Arthur Jeffress, the future gallery owner and art collector, who had been also been at Harrow with Beaton.[77] Jeffress spread a rumour that Boy and Beaton were sleeping together so often that the servant had to leave food at the door which was often locked: Beaton was shocked—this is 'just so disgusting'. Ben Thomas, who earlier in the year was recorded by Beaton as 'horribly [and unrequitedly] in love with me', slapped another man, Collier, on the back and expressed astonishment that he would sleep

[73] 19 January 1924, Beaton Diary 19 (14 January–26 January 1924).

[74] Muir, *Cecil Beaton's*, 43.

[75] 'D.', 'The Duchess of Malfi', *Granta,* 7 March 1924, 337.

[76] 13 March 1924 (i.e. recorded the day after), Beaton Diary 22 (4 March–22 March 1924).

[77] Ibid., 14 March 1924; Gill Hedley, *Arthur Jeffress: A Life in Art* (London, 2020), 25-26.

with Jeffress.[78] Collier went a 'dull mauve' and said '"Oh God does everyone know?"' Beaton wondered at the situation: 'It's the most extraordinary thing, Collier is so hearty and the all-time woman worshipper!... Acting does seem to have curious effects on people' and 'nearly all [the cast of the *Duchess of*] *Malfi* have been completely turned over the last few days'.[79]

Students often joined clubs, not only to take part in an enjoyable pastime, but also in order to socialise with others of like mind. The evidence of these diaries shows that sexual encounters between men took place at, and after, events such as cast parties at which more discreet homosexuals such as Rylands mingled with more overt ones such as Beaton and even 'un homo' men would participate. It is important to note that the aforementioned parties did not take place in connection with plays in which Beaton played the leading role. This might imply that more conventional acting also facilitated 'curious' sexual encounters before 1914, but that the difference was that no participant has left records behind of what happened. But leaving aside the dangers of arguing from an absence in the documentary record it is important to note that social and sexual attitudes across society were changing rapidly. Laura Doan highlighted what she terms the 'cultural topsy-turvydom' of the postwar years, which extended to what she calls an 'utter confusion about gender'.[80] By the early 1920s student culture was more open to displays of overt queerness which could even be seen as fashionably risqué.

Because Beaton had established such a transgressive persona at Cambridge his very presence at these events implied a degree of endorsement of theatrical and sexual experimentation. When Beaton wrote that his friends were being 'aesthetic and naughty looking' he did not mean that they were essentially feminine, or wished to pass as women,

[78] 22 January 1924, Beaton Diary 19 (14 January–26 January 1924).

[79] 14 March 1924, Beaton Diary 22 (4 March–22 March 1924).

[80] Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 133.

but were queerly transgressive, even if they did not go so far as publicly to say that they were homosexual.[81] Rather than impersonating women in the traditional ways he favoured parodying the sexual icons of yesteryear. This had the effect of undermining the reputation for respectability of the pre-war generation. The glamour pusses of Edwardian Cambridge had appeared in the high fashion of their own age but Beaton chose costumes for himself that were inspired by that self-same era. When H. B. le D. Tree as Kitty Delamore leaned against a pillar in 1902 his performance was seen as a tribute to contemporary ideals of female beauty; but when Beaton did the same thing, as in his final Cambridge stage appearance, he placed it into ironic quote marks. (compare figures 2 and 3) [Figure 3 here]

In Beaton's cross-dressed appearances in *All the Vogue,* the Footlights May Week review of 1925, he was not so much impersonating women as presenting female glamour as an artificial performance.[82] He also played a male character who was, however, dressed in a costume of tight jacket and floppy hat that looked back to the off-duty styles of Boulton and Park and forward to the 'pansy' look that returned to public attention through the writings and television appearances of Quentin Crisp.[83] All this represented a rejection of the conservative modes of student drama practised at the A.D.C. In December 1924 *The Granta* published a vicious sketch by Beaton of Rylands in *The Duchess of Malfi* (figure 4). In the background are dozens of rules that, for Cecil, were there to be flouted: 'no self-advertisement', 'no blatant truths' and 'no large pearls'. In *All the Vogue* he shamelessly self-advertised, flirted with the sexual truth and decked himself in as many massive strings of pearls as he could find. [Figure 4 here]

The publicly transgressive aspects of his cross-dressing did not simply disturb less

[81] 16 February 1924, Beaton Diary 21 (16 February–3 March 1924).

[82] Footlights, *All the Vogue*, *New Theatre Cambridge* (1925), programme, Cambridge University Library Archives, Footlights Dramatic Club papers, FOOT 2/825.

[83] Muir, *Cecil Beaton's*, 41.

flamboyant queer men but also created waves in the press. National newspapers and magazines regularly covered events at Oxford and Cambridge, and Beaton, who was intent on trying to launch a career as a photographer, regularly wrote to them with ideas and images. In June 1924 he reported that the London press had been snide about his performances: 'it was unnatural that I should be so good and it made people uneasy'.[84] The youthful audience was, by contrast, delighted by the queer originality of his performances.[85] On his last night in 1925 he was showered with bouquets, whilst the other 'leading lady', Alcock got just one.[86] *The Granta's* reviewer had already expressed his devotion at the dress rehearsal:

> Inevitably, Cecil Beaton is the most brilliant feature of the whole production… marvellous in everything that he does, from 'Vivacious Vi' to the 'female acrobat': he wears a series of dresses—diamanté, enormous pearls, a bustle and whatnot—which must be seen to be disbelieved. In *Not Half* it is surprising to find that he can cope with a male role; and his pseudo-Tallulah in the Coward Sketch was unexpectedly good. I love his Casalisque knickers.[87]

The mood had swing in his favour. A piece in another student publication, *The Cambridge Gownsman*, compared 'grandfathers' unfavourably to modern 'aesthetes' since only the latter expressed their individuality and refused to be mocked into conformity.[88] Beaton left Cambridge without a degree but having achieved an aesthetic triumph—he was saluted by

[84] 9 June 1924, Beaton Diary 25 (18 May-20 June 1924).

[85] 8 June 1925, Beaton Diary 37 (27 May–6 July 1925).

[86] Vickers, *Cecil Beaton,* 48.

[87] A. R. McPhail., 'Theatre Notes: The New Theatre, *All the Vogue*', *Granta,* 10 June 1925, 514.

[88] A. Rex Knight, 'Grandfathers and Aesthetes', *Cambridge Gownsman,* 13 June 1925, 6.

The Granta as 'Cecil Unbeaten' (see fig. 3).[89]

Fashion, Innuendo and Prejudice, 1925-1939

The behaviour of students at Cambridge was often reported in the national press because it was regarded as a place that trained many of Britain's future leaders. The shift in student attitudes was duly noticed and attacked by social conservatives outside the University. At the beginning of Michaelmas Term 1925 the story inside the front cover of *The Granta* was headlined 'Girl-Men of Cambridge'. This was an extract from a story that had run in the *Daily Sketch* on 5 October. This paper had given its reporter's 'professional friend' the space to opine that 'some of these youths have played women's parts in University theatricals, and I think that has encouraged their loathly [sic] effeminacy… games do not appeal to them. They seem to have no normal healthy tastes… Sometimes one longs for a gun.'[90] The potential for such responses is demonstrated in Jacob Bloomfield's case-study of the career and reception of 'Splinters', a cross-dressing troupe of ex-soldiers in interwar Britain. The fact that they had been in military service initially reassured reviewers that what was on offer was 'jolly, honest fun'.[91] However, as knowledge of homosexuality as an alleged feminine perversion in men became more widespread so cross-dressed theatrics increasingly became seen as sexually suspect.[92] The experience of World War One had partially undermined faith in traditional

[89] Scott and Wilkinson, 'Cecil Unbeaten', *Granta,* 10 June 1925, 507

[90] 'Girl-Men of Cambridge', *Granta,* 16 October 1925, 2.

[91] Jacob Bloomfield, '"Splinters": Cross-Dressing Ex-Servicemen on the Interwar Stage', *Twentieth-Century British History,* 30 (2019), 1-28, 12.

[92] Bloomfield, '"Splinters"', 25.

masculinity and led to a panic over the appearance of weakness in men.[93] Female impersonation had, it seemed, been no threat to the manly youth of yesteryear but was perilous to a young generation that was lacking in character. *The Granta* mocked this conservative stance in an editorial and held a pretend photo-shoot in which they posed as if being made-up for the stage.[94]

Public attention was particularly intense because visible signs of deviance had also become apparent at Oxford. There, professional actresses were allowed to act in productions of the Oxford University Dramatic Society (commonly known as O.U.D.S and which was the equivalent of the A.D.C.) and alleged effeminacy was associated less with cross-dressing than with innovations in male attire. These had spread to Cambridge as we can see from another *The Granta* article, 'The Aesthete's Lament', in which R. H. R. Church, presumably tongue-in-cheek, deplored that his outrageous dress no longer had any power to shock: 'My lavender Oxford trousers, thirty inches around the bottoms, now pass unnoticed'.[95] A cartoon of these so-called 'Oxford bags' by Arthur Jeffress that made them look like a skirt had been published in *The Cambridge Gownsman* at the end of the previous term.[96] This indicates that queer men were not simply being satirised but were also contributing to their own androgynous image in the student media. Such aestheticism, for many of this generation of students, was perhaps a little ridiculous when taken to extremes, but at least it delighted and amused unlike the diatribes of its opponents. Arthur Jeffress spent the next academic year involved in various theatre projects, one of which involved playing the part of Isabella of

[93] Sonja Levsen, 'Constructing Elite Identities: University Students, Military Masculinity and the Consequences of the Great War in Britain and Germany', *Past and Present,* 198 (2008), 147–183, 164.

[94] 'Under-Exposed', *Granta,* 16 October, 3, and 'The *Granta* Make-up', *Granta,* 16 October 1925, 15.

[95]R. H. R. Church, 'The Aesthete's Lament', *Granta,* 16 October 1925, 15.

[96] Arthur Jeffress, 'Then and Now', *Cambridge Gownsman,* 13 June 1925, 17.

Valois, wife of Edward II in Marlowe's play of 1592, which explored the same-sex relationship between the king and his 'favourite' Piers Gaveston (figure 5). There was none of the coyness on display when the Grave-Diggers Society at Corpus Christi had approached a reading of the text three years earlier; the minute book record for that occasion is lacking the expected cast details as set down by the secretary and in their place the president simply wrote the word shame.[97] *The Times* reported, disapprovingly, of the 1926 production, that 'the audience was frequently rocking with laughter on occasions which gave no textual justification for merriment'.[98] It would appear that the boundaries between scholarly interpretation, burlesque and glamour, which the Marlowe Society had been founded to reinforce, had, in its latest production, collapsed. Discretion on the subject of sodomy had given way to fascination. [Figure 5 here]

Around this time student theatre in general, and not just practices of cross-dressing, began to be associated with a mixture of sexual and gender deviance. In June 1927 *The Granta'*s regular column on prominent university personalities—'Those in Authority', who were often, but not always, undergraduates—featured Dennis Arundell, who was a fellow of St Johns: 'At the age of seven Dennis began to show signs of polygamous tendencies,* [*Mr Arundell adds that he is no longer polygamous] and, after eloping with the local girls school, he was hastily despatched to a school for boys… He is positively the only University don who has ever appeared upon the revue stage'.[99] He was also mentioned in an unsigned piece, 'Just Between Us Boys', published the following November:

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[97] 21 November 1922, Grave-Diggers Society Minute Book 1912-1930, Corpus Christi College Archives, OA 12A, box 1.

[98] 'Marlowe Dramatic Society', *Times,* 8 March 1926, 12; discussed in Hedley, *Arthur Jeffress,* 34.

[99] 'Those in Authority, Dennis Arundell (St. Johns)', *Granta,* 3 June 1927, 473.

> Lionel, my Dear, may I sort of STRUGgle across to you? My DEAR, I AM so glad you ARE up again, I mean a sort of horrid rumour DID get about they'd taken it SERIOUSLY about the pyjamas… Arundell LIVING on aspirin and one egg in brandy, well NATURALLY, he will do EVERYthing, and not EVEN the [all male] Chorus' parts are safe.[100]

Innuendo concerning him regularly surfaced in the student media. The editor of *The Cambridge Gownsman* versified in 1927 concerning its (male) art editor, Francis Baker-Smith, that 'He's dined with Dennis Arundell / And nearly lost his heart'.[101]

The Granta's piece combines innuendo about Arundell's alleged (homo)sexual promiscuity with an attempt to represent camp speech intonation using capital letters. Another queer writer, Robert Byron, had tried to do much the same through the use of italics in a satirical piece about the O.U.D.S. in 1925: 'my dear-*and* my dear, knows Harold Acton-oh! my dear-… Harry Kendal, my dear, too marvellous-yes, my dear, *quite* marvellous, my dear'.[102] Just in case the reader had still not got the point *The Granta* accompanied its article with a cartoon showing two effete young men, one of whom was holding an A.D.C. programme. They evoke the slim and camp mien of J. Fraser of Magdalene as Gaveston in the 1926 *Edward II* (compare figures 5 and 6) and were depicted in a style that was to become widely understood as referring to pansies.[103] It is hard to read the degree to which these representations were supportive of queerness by making its presence visible or,

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[100] 'Just Between Us Boys' *Granta,* 18 November 1927, 116, emphases in original.

[101] 'The Editor Tenders His Best Thanks', *Cambridge Gownsman*, 11 June 1927, 6.

[102] Robert Byron, 'Oxford's Young Pretenders', *Cherwell*, 21 February 1925, 150-55, 153, emphases in original.

[103] Matt Houlbrook, '"The Man with the Powder Puff" in Interwar London', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 145–71; Justin Bengry, 'Courting the Pink Pound: *Men Only* and the Queer Consumer, 1935–39', *History Workshop Journal*, 68 (2009), 122–48.

conversely, were phobic caricatures.[104] It is clear, however, that they relate not simply to issues of sexuality but also to the personalities involved in running student clubs. Byron's squib, for example, was not a self-hating squib about camp homosexuals but a satirical response to what he saw as social exclusivity. A stereotype was emerging in which queerness was associated with social climbers (of whom Beaton was one) and men from top boarding schools. [Figure 6 here]

In 1928 *The Granta* published 'Strait is the Way', a satirical poem about an amoral social climber:

> His public school gave him leisure
> To deal with things in fuller measure;
> Indeed he found it rather nice
> To probe the deepest depths of vice…
> Aesthetics then attracted him
> As they appeased his passing whim.
> He came up here and went to King's
> Because he heard they liked such things.[105]

Queer sexual behaviour at school and cultural interests at university soon bored him and the poem ends with him eyeing up a young woman. The implication was that some young men were dabbling in same-sex behaviour and associated styles not because they were inherently interested in them but because it was *the thing to do*. This notwithstanding, the ode was also a piece of social critique and appeared to reinforce the view that queerness was more a fad to

[104] This topic is explored for the period before 1900 in Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature* (Chicago, 2016).

[105] 'Eiber', 'Strait is the Way', *Granta*, 30 November 1928, 175-6 at 175.

be observed than a fashion to be emulated. It also tied into well-established attitudes towards same-sex activity as a vice that was most prevalent amongst adolescent boys.

The equation of student theatre with homosexuality appears to have solidified into something of a cliché. The cartoon that accompanied 'Just Between Us Boys' was republished in 1931 below another showing a male and female couple indicating The Mummers. This was a new and ground-breaking university drama society that allowed both men and women to act on stage together.[106] By the 1930s older rules of strict segregation between men and women in the university were starting the break down and the smart-set increasingly expected to mingle with members of the opposite sex. Homosexuality for men remained a topic of fascination for many in the early 1930s but it became more an amusing and stereotyped diversion than an exotic lifestyle choice.[107] At around this time the so-called 'pansy craze' saw crowds flocking to nightclubs in cities such as New York to watch queer performances.[108] This seems to be the spirit in which an A.D.C. 'Smoking Concert' in 1932 promised 'fairies, fairies, fairies'. One item was sung by a certain Miss Nancy Buoy and the final item was 'Peter Pansy'.[109] It is not clear whether these displays were celebrating queerness or parodying it, but similar antics in the Footlights May Week reviews, such as the 1933 one called *No More Women!,* were the subject of mockery in *The Granta* in November 1934:

I am a Footlights Fairy…

[106] The Quinq[ennial] was a social club that held Friday night dances.

[107] This is a key theme of Dominic Janes, *Freak to Chic: 'Gay' Men in and out of Fashion after Oscar Wilde* (London, 2021).

[108] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994), 235.

[109] A.D.C., *Smoking Concert,* 20 February 1932, programme, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge Uncatalogued Printed Ephemera Collection, Cam Papers J. 1381.

You wish to join Sir? Are you tastes aesthetic

Have you long hair, or do you use cosmetic?...

Or do you shine at *intime* little parties

From which are kept all trace of *horrid* hearties?'[110] [Figure 7 here]

The Wildean references to aestheticism and long hair, together with the appearance in the cartoon of Debrett's Peerage suggested that theatrical homosexuality was no longer seen as fashionably risqué but as an outdated custom associated with social snobs (figure 7). Interestingly, Ross Brooks has identified a hardening of attitudes towards homosexuality at the University of Oxford at around this time. There he identifies the O.U.D.S. as functioning as something of a queer refuge.[111]

These controversies were even exploited by big business. Beer was widely marketed to men as a product that contributed to the development of a manly physique and persona. In May and June 1933 the Guinness brewing company placed an advertisement in student magazines and theatre programmes at both Oxford and Cambridge, including those of the O.U.D.S., that aped the literary style and spelling of early modern drama (figure 8). The verse put the onus on girlfriends to save their male partners from queer misadventure as, supposedly, had '*Hebe…* the celestial Bar-Maid' when she served the god Jove (i.e. Jupiter) the corporation's brand of beer:

Great *Jove* himself, draining his glass with zest

Declares this Drink of all to be the Best,

[110] 'Hope', 'Footlights', *Granta,* 28 November 1934, 156, emphases in original; Hewison, *Footlights!*, 77; Programme, *No More Women!, The Footlights 1933 Review,* Cambridge University Library Archives, Footlights Dramatic Society Papers, Foot 2/8/33.

[111] Ross Brooks, 'Beyond Brideshead', at 832.

And sacks forthwith his *Ganymede*….[112] [Figure 8 here]

Since an education in the Greek and Latin classics remained a cornerstone of the public-school curriculum the intended readership is likely to have been aware that Ganymede was the boy lover of Jupiter even if it failed to notice the innuendo produced by the typographic use of the archaic 'long s' and the resultant word-play on 'sacks', 'sucks' and 'fucks'.

Around this time calls were increasingly made to allow women to act on the stage of the A.D.C. and female impersonation was a key issue in the debate that secured this change in 1935 (formal membership rights were not granted until after World War Two). It was asserted that cross-dressing would now hamper one's future stage career and, as one member put it, simply led to 'unpleasantness and innuendoes attendant upon female roles being played by men. Admitting women would stop antagonism'. The tradition of 'Burnand and his merry boys' (the phrase recalls Browning's 'merry band') belonged to the past.[113] Such arguments were repeatedly defeated at the Footlights by traditionalists and misogynists of whatever sexual persuasion. They admitted their first female member in 1964. She was the Australian feminist Germaine Greer.

Conclusions

The patterns of sexual and theatrical behaviour at Cambridge were developed by generations of students most of whom had recently transferred from single-sex public-schools. The sexual

[112] Advertisement, 'Guinness is Good for You', *Cambridge Gownsman,* 20 May 1933, 7.

[113] A.D.C. Minute Book 1934-1935, 230-46, Cambridge University Library Archives, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, CUADC 1/4/12; Oscar Browning, *Memories of Sixty Years*, vii.

behaviour of such adolescents was popularly thought to be rooted in indiscipline and bad character rather than in modern identity categories. Anecdotes such as that of the bisexual John Addington Symonds (who collaborated with Havelock Ellis in his studies of inversion) in relation to his years at Harrow in the 1850s imply that pupils attempted to reproduce the gender system of the outside world: 'Every boy of good looks had a female name, and was recognized either as a public prostitute or as some bigger fellow's "bitch"'.[114] Such a framework of sexual relations did not require the appreciation of what we would term homosexual identities. Female impersonation (of the glamorous variety) in school plays could be seen as reinforcing conventional notions of gender as binary and sexual desire as requiring a masculine and feminine component. Appreciating the normative potential of cross-dressing is not, however, incompatible with also recognising the queerness of a school environment in which there was extensive homo sex and where the roles of women were played by boys both on stage and off.

School authorities made increasing efforts to halt sexual behaviour such that the young gentlemen who progressed to university were deemed to possess the self-control to save them from sexual temptation of whatever sort. It seems unlikely, however, that university students would have simply forgotten the patterns of behaviour characteristic of their younger selves. The single-sex environment of the Cambridge colleges extended the adolescence of university students during a period when popular attitudes to sexual mores and gender roles were rapidly evolving. The surviving source material does not enable us to assess the degree to which men had sex with men in Cambridge before 1914 but it is clear that public discussion of same-sex desire was rare. The comparative openness to public experimentation with sexualised and gendered identities during the 1920s was accompanied

[114] John Addington Symonds, *Memoirs,* ed. Phyllis Grosskurth (Chicago, 1984), quoted and discussed in Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times* (Ithaca, 2005), 106.

by rising popular awareness of—as well as prejudice against—homosexuality. The diaries of Cecil Beaton provide a rare glimpse into the ways in which female impersonation operated as both a normative and a queer practice in the interwar period. However, the status of stage cross-dressing as an attainment was diminished in proportion to the degree to which it became openly associated with homosexuality rather than with confirmation of the gender binary. This closed down avenues for the creation of innovative theatrical spectacles that queerly destabilised conventional expectations of gender performance.

On 11 March 1939 the question for debate by the Apostles at King's College was: 'Should we sleep with our friends'. The vote was close: five yeses, and four noes. Two of those voting in favour would sleep not only with women but also with men, while the moderator would sleep only with men. 'Sleep', it was pointed out, by one member, referred to 'all forms of ecstatic physical enjoyment, buggery, fucking, canoodling'.[115] The entries from this period in the Apostles minute books at King's College show that it maintained its Edwardian traditions of sexual non-conformity, but such frank discussion of same-sex relations was no longer restricted to small coteries. Across the University there were widespread signs of a new public familiarity, if not always great enthusiasm, with not just homosexual acts but also identities. To give just one example, *Chanticleer*, which was the student-edited Jesus College magazine, published mock book reviews. One such purported to be of '*The Rise and Development of Nancyism'* (with photos). What will happen to the 'nancies' of the future, it asked? The answer was hidden in the subconsciousness of boys currently at 'Eton and Harrods' (i.e. Harrow).[116] The error was supposedly because this pretend volume of sexology was a bad translation from the German. Student theatricals continued to be a place where same-sex desire was evoked, although mainly through mocking

[115] 11 March 1939, Apostles Minute Book 1928-1947, King's College Archives, Kings/KCAS/39/1/17.

[116] 'Forthcoming Books', *Chanticleer,* 94 (Lent 1930), 16-18, 18.

and burlesquing it. At a Smoker given by a Jesus Club called the Roosters in 1933 it was recorded that a certain Mr Byng-Dickinson (this innuendo-laden name evoked the actor and female impersonator Douglas Byng) sang a 'soft Lesbian air, gave a Sidney Howard flick to his fanny, and told positively revolting revelations of the back-sides of New York'.[117] And at another smoking concert in 1939 the entertainment was led by Frederick Brittain, a newly elected fellow who had joined the college as a student in 1919 and had performed with the Footlights. He led them in singing all the 'old favourites' including 'Pansy Faces'.[118]

It is hardly surprising that acting provided an avenue to explore same-sex desire in an environment where its physical expression was officially forbidden. Those involved could claim, if challenged, that they were simply putting on an act. The burlesque jokes, the female costumes and the salty innuendo provided cover, sanctioned by convention, for homoerotic admiration of the young male body itself. Cross-dressed performance distracted attention from the tacit admiration of young men when they were *not* dressed as women. One of the few occasions when social contact between the young ladies and gentlemen of the University was expected was May Week at the end of the academic year, when the Footlights performed its annual burlesque review. All this notwithstanding it was, as one Roosters member joked in 1933, 'the season for natural phenomena in dogs and unnatural behaviour of undergraduates in punts' (i.e. on boating excursions).[119] Student magazines typically showed an elegantly-dressed male and female couple on the cover of their May Week editions. Look carefully and you will see this is the case with *The Cambridge Gownsman*'s cover from 1928 which was reused in 1934 after that publication had been renamed *The Gownsman* (figure 9). However, the woman in the punt is all but invisible and what catches the eye is the sinuously elegant line of the young man as he poses in the lingering summer sunlight. The theatrical queerness

[117] 22 October 1933, Roosters Minute Book 1932-1936, Jesus College Archives, JCCS/4/1/6.

[118] R. P. M. Bell, 'The Roosters', *Chanticleer,* 119 (Lent 1939), pp 53-54.

[119] 29 May 1933, Roosters Minute Book 1932-1936, Jesus College Archives, JCCS/4/1/6.

of the University of Cambridge in the early twentieth century similarly displaced real women from view and focussed on the male undergraduate as the worthy object of desire. The significance of this was not restricted to campus. Just as college culture was influenced by that of school, so queer experiences at University should be understood as shaping the homosocial lives of men as they matured not just into professional actors but also into statesmen, military officers, lawyers, churchmen, schoolteachers and the next generation of dons. [Figure 9 here]

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