

The Varsity Drag: Gender, Sexuality and Cross-Dressing at the University of Cambridge, 1850-1950.

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Fig. 1. Owls Debating Society, Trinity Hall, *Mock Trial* (December 6, 1912). Reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity Hall, Cambridge; Trinity Hall Archives, THPH/2/1/4/OWL/1912.

Fig. 2. The Roosters, *In the Spring* (February 18, 1923). Reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge; Jesus College Archives, JCCS/4/8/1923/2. Copyright Jesus College, Cambridge.

Fig. 3. The *Delegation from Salt Lake City – Elder Ebenezer Pashpenny and His Mormon Wives* [sic], 9 June 1927, photograph album of Richard F. Henniker. Reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity Hall, Cambridge; Trinity Hall Archives, THPH/6/5. Copyright reserved. Anyone with information about the ownership of the estate of Richard F. Henniker should contact the author.

Fig. 4. *Women Throughout the Ages (Rag Group)* (1926). Reproduced by kind permission of The Master, Fellows, and Scholars of Downing College in the University of Cambridge; Downing College Archives, DCPH/2/4/10.

Fig. 5. *Alice Eleanor Chase (Girton 1911) and Florence Mary Tann (Girton 1911) in Costume for a Dramatic Production* (c.1911-14), photograph album of Margaret Postgate. Reproduced by kind permission of The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge; Girton College Library and Archives, GCPH 10/45/26.

Fig. 6. Tributes to H. B. le D. Tree as Kitty Delamore in *The Freshman* (1902). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; Footlights Dramatic Club Papers, Cambridge University Library Archives, GBR0265/FOOT 2.9.44, folio 1r.

Fig. 7. H. B. le D. Tree as Kitty Delamore in *The Freshman* (1902). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library; Footlights Dramatic Club Papers, Cambridge University Library Archives, GBR0265/FOOT 2.9.44, folio 20r.

Fig. 8. Anon. and “N.R.S,” “Election Fever at the Quinq, the Mummies and the A.D.C.,” *The Granta*, October 23, 1931, p. 44 (the bottom drawing is a reprint of an earlier cartoon by “N.R.S.”). Reproduced courtesy of *Granta Magazine* and the National Library of Scotland.

Fig. 9. Anon., “Hope,” “Footlights,” *The Granta*, November 1934, 156. Reproduced courtesy of *Granta Magazine* and the National Library of Scotland.

The social mores of the University of Cambridge have long been queerly out of step with everyday life in Britain. Until the mid-nineteenth century fellows of the colleges were not allowed to marry and the last men-only college only admitted women students in 1988. Within Cambridge there was nothing exceptional about the Martlets Society which was established in 1878 at Pembroke College. The set of society minute books that recorded the details of its events are similar in format to those kept by many societies at other Oxbridge colleges. Its official purpose was to host evening meetings at which a member would read an essay on some subject in the sciences or arts.¹ Like its counterparts in other colleges the Martlets also played an important social role in undergraduate life. It provided a venue not merely to think and discuss but also to relax and laugh. Pasted inside the cover of one of the later minute books are photos—one showing the committee alone, and the other also the guests—of the fancy dress dance that was held to inaugurate the club in May 1878.² That month in the university calendar was marked by sports races, especially rowing, and a range or more or less raucous social events. Female relatives might be invited up to town, but the social customs of the time forbade their easy mingling with students in an all-male college such as Pembroke. In the absence of real women some of the men cross-dressed.

Hundreds of photographs testify to the enthusiasm with which generations of male and female students took to gender impersonation. This behavior also came to widespread attention. The university played an important intellectual and social role in Britain because it educated a significant proportion of the country’s elite and the activities of its students were often reported in the national media. Cross-dressing in student drama was frequently discussed in newspapers before 1914, alongside intellectual and sporting exploits, as a further example of student excellence. The absence of the opposite sex from the stage was typically taken as a guarantor of moral purity. The purpose of this article is to explain why such cross-dressing had been socially acceptable but also why it did not remain so. For during the 1920s college theatrics became increasingly associated in both student periodicals and the national press with allegations of effeminacy and homosexuality. These insinuations became so persistent that they played an important role in decisions to progressively abandon the practice of single-sex theatrical performance.

This article uses the records of student clubs to understand gender impersonation in university life not only because these materials are abundant but also because they were written by the students themselves at the time. Cross-dressing was frequently required for the performance of plays that included roles for members of both sexes but it was also employed in a variety of more informal theatrical contexts including “mock trials” (in which students dressed up as the participants in a court case) and student “rags” (in which a range of performances took place, often in return for donations to charity). These materials are used to explain why cross-dressing began to lose the respectability that it had once enjoyed and the role that controversies over sexuality played in the movement to phase out single-sex performance on stage. Because men heavily outnumbered women in the university the evidence, and the ensuing discussion, is mostly focused on female impersonation.

¹ Martlets Society Minute Book 1879-1902, Pembroke College archives. Most of the society minute books, including this one, lack page or folio numbers.

² Martlets Society Minute Book 1927-1935, Pembroke College archives.

Laurence Senelick’s *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theater* (2000) is perhaps the most substantial and ambitious history of cross-dressing with sexual implications (“drag”). It explains that the theater has been the most frequent venue for such performances. Cross-dressed roles in the eighteenth century focused on the comedic and the burlesque, but it was from the mid-nineteenth century onward that “glamour drag” emerged as “an offshoot of a thriving transvestite *demi-monde* that impinged on the world of popular entertainment,” and which was associated with sex between men.³ He highlights the 1871 sodomy case of Boulton and Park in which cross-dressing in public was not found to be sufficient proof of intent to solicit men for sex—even though there was abundant circumstantial evidence that this was precisely what they were doing. Senelick makes the revealing comment that the two men dressed in an androgynous manner when *not* in drag. 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.”⁴ The more overtly female the cross-dressed performance, therefore, the less threatening it seemed because it appeared to reinforce the association of desirability with the opposite sex.

In his short section on “Varsity Drag” Senelick argues, primarily from American examples, that student cross-dressing could both express the private queer desire of individuals and bolster normative conceptions of gender as binary.⁵ To take the female role in all-male college groups in the nineteenth century was anything but abject since it was the privilege of empowered masculinity to be able to do such a thing without fear of disgrace. He thus contends that, in certain circumstances, “performing in drag was thus sanctioned as the *sine qua non* of unalloyed masculinity.”⁶ This helps us to understand why cross-dressing was widespread in university drama, but it could only operate in this manner if it was seen as being separate from same-sex desire. The distinction was that a cross-dressed performance could be read as the faking of femininity whereas homosexuals were widely seen as really being feminine.

It would hardly be surprising to find widespread evidence of same-sex desire at Cambridge. Most of the teenagers who joined the university had limited knowledge of the opposite sex because they had been educated in single-sex schools. Many of them did have experience of sexual acts with each other in those establishments.⁷ The environment of the university did little to change their perspectives because although women had been admitted to women-only colleges from 1869 they remained few in number, segregated from the men, and unable to graduate with degrees, as opposed to diplomas, until after World War Two.⁸ Carol Dyhouse in her study *Students: A Gendered History* (2006) pointed out that Oxford and

³ Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (Abingdon, 2000), 295 and 302.

⁴ Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 306; 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, no. 1 (2000): 127-57.

⁵ Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 355.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁷ Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford, 2015), 119-35.

⁸ Rita McWilliams Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1998), 182.

Cambridge were both “profoundly structured by sexual difference” when compared with England’s more recently founded universities, including London.⁹ The most comprehensive survey of masculinity at Oxford and Cambridge in the long-nineteenth century is Paul Deslandes’ *Oxbridge Men* (2005). This book documents the arrival of women as having precipitated a “crisis of university masculinity.”¹⁰ It became increasingly important for students to demonstrate not merely social status and intelligence but also their manliness and muscular prowess on and off the sports-field. This would imply that female impersonation was indeed often about asserting male superiority.

One important source discussed by Senelick is Edward Prime-Stevenson’s *The Intersexes* (1908) which details the “homosexual influences of certain types of university theatricals.”¹¹ Prime-Stevenson described an unnamed student drama society in the United States where several men came to identify themselves as women and adopted their sexual tastes. This account might imply that cross-dressing sometimes provided outlets for what we might term proto-trans interests in gender change. Important work has been carried out by Katie Sutton into trans individuals in Weimar Germany where, compared with Britain, there was a developed community of individuals who can be understood as being at least “transgender like” in identity, even if the term itself was not yet in use.¹² However, the evidence from Cambridge tells us far more about how individuals and their performances were viewed than it does about the personal motivations of the actors themselves. Furthermore, in the early twentieth century what we might separate into the categories of “gay” and “trans” were often understood together. A male “invert” was believed to be a person with a man’s body but a female brain or soul and who, therefore, desired persons of their own bodily sex.¹³ Male inverts were, thus, expected to be interested in female dress. Those who began to see sexual impropriety, rather than male entitlement, in student cross-dressing were thereby primed to suspect homosexual leanings rooted in gendered difference.

As students became increasingly used to seeing sexualized performances by actresses on the stage and at the cinema so the replication of those roles by men became to seem increasingly odd. The same reaction took place on the part of London theatre critics who became noticeably more critical of single-sex performances during the 1920s. The result was

⁹ Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London, 2006), 161.

¹⁰ Paul R. Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (Bloomington, 2005), 187.

¹¹ Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 358, and Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson [pseud. “Xavier Mayne”], *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexuality as a Problem in Social Life* (Rome, 1908), 178-79.

¹² Katie Sutton, “Sexology’s Photographic Turn: Visualizing Trans Identity in Interwar Germany,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (2018): 442-79, at 471–72; Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2015), 84 and 86, and Alison Oram, “Cross-Dressing and Transgender,” in *The Modern History of Sexuality*, eds. H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (Basingstoke, 2006), 256-85.

¹³ Joseph Bristow, “Symonds’s History, Ellis’s Heredity: Sexual Inversion,” in *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, eds. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge, 1998), 79-99.

that the queer potential of gender impersonation switched from being under-recognized to over-emphasized. This article is, therefore, not so much study of the overlap between homosexual lives and cross-dressing as it is an exploration of the different ways in which gender impersonation was sexualized. The changes that it will be exploring need to be understood in the light of research that has increasingly suggested that sexuality itself is a historical construct and that the sexual categories with which we are now familiar have their own complex histories.¹⁴ Laura Doan’s books *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern Lesbian Culture* (2001) and *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women’s Experience of Modern War* (2013) provide examples of a move from a search for lesbians (or other groups) in history to engagement with the queer otherness of past sexual lives.¹⁵ By “queer” I refer here not merely to same-sex desire but also to patterns of behavior that do not fit normative expectations of their and our times.¹⁶ The story I shall tell is one in which cross-dressing ceased to be a way to conceal queer impulses and became increasingly associated with their visible expression. By the mid-twentieth century it was believed, for the first time, that male and female students had to mingle in order that the queerness of Cambridge be put back in its closet.

Debating and Ragging

One of the most widespread types of student-run society at Cambridge was that which centered on debating. Although perhaps not as famous as its Oxford equivalent, the Cambridge Union, which was founded in 1815, holds claim to the title of the oldest continually running debating society in the country. Its practice, like those of its college-based imitators, was to replicate debates in the Houses of Parliament at Westminster. It provided training in public contestation which helped many young men to establish a career in politics. Women were not admitted as members until the mid-1960s. Debating societies were, as Dyhouse put it, “quintessentially arenas of masculine performance.”¹⁷ Their focus was on charismatic individuals but they also had a team-based ethos that related to taking sides for and against a motion. It is significant that the late Victorian and Edwardian campaigns for votes for women were accompanied at Oxford and Cambridge by the rise of debating societies in the women’s colleges. Moreover, in the years before World War One,

¹⁴ Harry G. Cocks, “Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality,” *Historical Journal* 49, no 4 (2006): 1211-1227.

¹⁵ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern Lesbian Culture* (New York, 2001); Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women’s Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, 2013).

¹⁶ Matt Houlbrook, “Thinking Queer: The Social and the Sexual in Interwar Britain,” in *British Queer History: New Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. Brian Lewis (Manchester, 2013), 135.

¹⁷ Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870-1939* (London, 1995), 206.

and increasingly thereafter, joint debates were held between the debating societies of men’s and women’s colleges.¹⁸

Debating societies played a particularly important role in the social life of colleges because they were in many cases the precursors of Junior Common Rooms and it was not unusual for membership to be, in effect, compulsory. They did not simply hold debates, they also typically maintained a members’ room, subscribed to periodicals and provided a range of events. One regular fixture was the mock trial. These shared with the practices of debate the notion that there were two sides to the case which had to be presented through eloquent and persuasive discourse. It was regarded as axiomatic that legal personnel would be male, but there was ample opportunity for cross-dressing roles in the form of female witnesses. These were either young and attractive or old and ridiculous. This was in congruence with contemporary forms of female impersonation on the music hall stage which fell into the categories of the glamour queen or the burlesque dame. Thus, in February 1904 the Emmanuel College Debating Society held a mock trial at which were called a certain “Violet Koko” (glamour drag) and Mrs. Anastasia Cumingser (dame) who was described as a bedmaker.¹⁹ Such college servants were of a lower social class than the students and were regularly parodied as stupid and unattractive. This helps to explain the appearance in an earlier mock trial of a “preternaturally attractive” bedmaker in a case of the discharging of firearms in the vicinity of the King’s highway.²⁰

Similar patterns of cross-dressing performance were found elsewhere including at, for instance, Selwyn College. There the debating society issued a program for one trial, as one would for a theatre production, and invited attendance at 8pm sharp. In the case of Plumblin v. Fairweather, tried on 2 March 1903, glamour was provided by Miss. Violet Plumblin and Miss. Sunflower of Royston; and laughter, we can assume, was produced by the appearance of Miss. Drylecker, lecturer at Oldenham College.²¹ Although the evidential record is imperfect it would appear that mock trials were a much anticipated annual event. The college newsletter, *The Selwyn College Calender*, claimed in March 1928 that “the great event of the year was the Mock Trial.” This was held in the dining hall as being the largest room available in college and was, therefore, a major and officially sanctioned event. It featured Mr. B. Roken Bottle who was being sued by Mrs. Hopkins, bedmaker, for breach of promise.²² Societies often paid for professional photographers to immortalize the cast of such events with results that ranged from the formal to the frisky. An example of the latter is a

¹⁸ Sarah Wiggins, “Gendered Spaces and Political Identity: Debating Societies in English Women’s Colleges, 1890–1914,” *Women’s History Review* 18, no. 5 (2009): 737-52, at 747.

¹⁹ Mock Trial, Crown v. U. Crowthere and H. Shan-Toy, photograph pasted in after entry for 20 February 1904, Emmanuel College Debating Society Minute Book 1895-1906, Soc. 1. 12, Emmanuel College archives.

²⁰ “The Debating Society,” *Emmanuel College Magazine* 15, no 1 (Michaelmas 1903-Lent 1904): 83-87, at 87.

²¹ Programme pasted inside front cover, Selwyn College Debating Society Minute Book 1901-1905, SECS 4/1/3, Selwyn College archives.

²² “The Debating Society,” *Selwyn College Calendar* (1928-29), 93.

photograph of a mock trial held by the Black and White Society, Trinity Hall, in 1908, which appears to show a cross-dressed witness sitting on the judge’s knee.²³

The minute books of some college debating societies give only basic details of debates and other events, such as the motion and names of the speakers and the result of the vote at the end of the evening. However, other sets of records offer extensive commentary on the part of the society’s secretary. An example of this is provided by the startling Edwardian minute books of the Owls Club, which was another Trinity Hall society. The surviving pre-war volumes start in 1901. As early as April of that year it was noted that one member “tried to provoke lewd grins and was tolerably successful in this pass-time.”²⁴ Sexual matters became a regular topic for debate. The question of whether to support the institution of the “Maison Publique” (i.e. licensed brothel) was debated in 1907 (lost), 1908 (won) and 1910 (narrowly lost).²⁵ In other debates there was discussion of “sexual intercourse” and “self-abuse.”²⁶ The question before the house one evening late in 1911 was whether “marriage with an actress is detrimental to a gentleman’s prospects.” Even if she started a virgin she would likely have been swiftly “corrupted” by her associates from “Leicester Square,” but on the positive side “actresses usually know all about preventatives.”²⁷

On 26 January 1912, when the annual dinner was held, the guests included members of what was termed its “sister club”—the Black and White. On 6 December of that year the two societies staged a mock trial in the Junior Common Room (fig. 1). One of the cases tried in the course of the evening provided dame roles since it centered on “two old ladies” who were accused of using “abusive and obscene language.” Glamour made its appearance in a case of “alleged procuration under the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1912,” featuring Miss. Stake, Miss. Violet Virgin and Miss. Letta Finder. The prisoner, accused of procuring Miss. Virgin by deceit for Mr. Greene, was found guilty and sentenced to two years penal servitude with hard labor and fifty lashes.²⁸

The Owls were, it seems, interested and informed on homosexual as well as heterosexual matters. In a debate on co-education held in January 1913 it was alleged that under the existing system of single-sex schools “boys and girls were getting too fond of their own sex... In our public schools buggery [crossed out in the minutes and replaced with “sodomy”] was a favorite pastime and among girls the delights of Venus were obtained in other ways than by the old Anglo-Saxon method of copulation.” One member, saying that he was co-educated, argued that it was “much better to let boys and girls get over their filthy

²³ Included in the photograph album of K. F. T. Caldwell, THPH/6/31, Trinity Hall archives.

²⁴ 28 April 1901, Owls Club Minute Book 1901-02, THCS/12/1/1/2, Trinity Hall archives. Quotations from these minute books are reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity Hall, Cambridge.

²⁵ 27 January 1907; 29 November 1908, and undated c. February 1910, Owls Club Minute Book 1906-1910, THCS/12/1/1/4, Trinity Hall archives.

²⁶ 10 February 1907 and 8 December 1907, Owls Club Minute Book 1906-1910, THCS/12/1/1/4, Trinity Hall, archives.

²⁷ Undated, Michaelmas Term, 1911, Owls Club Minute Book 1910-1914, THCS/12/1/1/5, Trinity Hall archives.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 December 1912.

age... allowing them to sate their youthful passions on each other.”²⁹ The topic appeared once more in a debate on the motion that man is for utility but woman to beauty. The proposer’s speech centered on the “conflicting natures of sodomy and grinding abuse [heterosexual intercourse?]”—the one being unnatural, the other natural. There was then an extensive discussion of male nudes such as the “discus thrower” (i.e. the Discobolos of Myron, which was an ancient Greek statue of a naked athlete).³⁰ All this suggests that homosexual lust was known about but, in public at least, disavowed by the members.

All this notwithstanding, it is quite clear that cross-dressed glamour roles were understood as sexualized performances. The Owls were only a small club and the number of students voting in many of their debates was under ten, however, it is perhaps precisely because they were a smaller and more homogenous group that they felt able to debate controversial issues and openly record their thoughts in a set of detailed minutes. An illuminating counterpart to the Owls for the interwar years was the Roosters Society at Jesus College, the name of which implies strutting masculinity. This was another debating and social society but one on a much larger scale. It had originally been founded in 1911 but like most college clubs fell into abeyance during World War One. On its refounding in 1919 the “jocular Roosters” decided that there should be a termly debate with one of the women’s colleges.³¹ This was, at the time, a liberal gesture and the (comparatively) enlightened views of the members might be inferred from the fact that the debate on 29 February 1920—that this house “disapproves of the of the Tendency of Women to assimilate the habits of men,” was lost by 8 to 9. On 6 March 1920 a mock trial was held at Girton (one of the women’s colleges) and, on 25 November 1922, a joint debate was held there at which the heads of both colleges were present.³²

On 18 February 1923, by dint of “diligent advertising,” a group of thirty-five members assembled to greet their guests for a debate on the necessity of distinctive forms of women’s academic dress. “The latter, nine in number, arrived a little late, after the manner of their sex; and were received with boundless enthusiasm.” The President paid “special tribute to the merits of Miss. Binney, who was acting as chaperone. She was a Doctor of Domestic Science in the Univ. of Chicago and had been President of the Newnham Coll. Deb. Soc. in 1753.” Miss. Binney corrected the date to 1872, said she was a “strong feminist” and that women should wear the same dress as men. Miss. Rowbotham then “expressed a hope that the Roosters would behave naturally, just as if there were no ladies present.” The true reason they were there, she revealed, was because they wanted to get married. She had been engaged to an Italian, but it was broken off because “there were no indications of her academic qualifications.” Mr. Salmon, seconding the opposition, said that there were three types of

²⁹ Ibid., 26 January 1913.

³⁰ Ibid., 2 November 1913.

³¹ Frederick Brittain, ed., *Notes on the First Twenty Years of the Roosters* (Cambridge: Roosters, 1928), 1 and 12; and 9 February 1919, Roosters Minute Book, 1919-1923, JCCS/4/1/2, Jesus College archives. Quotations from these minute books are reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Cambridge.

³² Ibid.

women, “graceful, ungraceful, and disgraceful.” Miss. Rowbotham, he alleged, was of the third type and “was ready to get off with anyone.”³³

Signorina Nitti, having only just learned the English language in three weeks of intimate tuition with the president, asked what the motion was about and sat down. Mr. Grayson said that as women were unnecessary at Cambridge so there was no need for women’s academic dress. Mlle. Petie-Curée “demonstrated, by displaying a well-turned leg and a pair of faulty suspenders, the need for efficient dress, academical or otherwise. She returned to the Vice-President, who received her with every sign of affection.” Mr. Rees, “whose moustache found favour with the fair visitors”, suggested that it might be useful to have distinctive colours for women, “e.g. red for danger + green for safety.” Miss. Cherry Hinton (the name of a local village) said that she had sat behind the President at a lecture—“What joy!” Miss. A. Merica fell over and several ladies fainted. Miss. Rose Crescent “rose, not to speak, but to take up a strategic position on the V[ice]. P[resident]’s knee.” Miss. Ida Down was wearing “+ 4s” (plus-fours, i.e. men’s golfing knickerbockers) and showed them off as an ideal. It was reported of Miss. McTarten and several “honourable members” that they were under the influence of “strong stimulants... for they repeatedly saw two meanings when obviously only one was intended.” She clung to the President’s neck before being escorted back to her seat. At the end of the evening Miss. Rowbotham, Signora Nitti and Mlle. Curée delighted us with their charming singing and playing. Stearn’s, the photographic firm, was fetched and arrived before 10.30pm with their usual equipment. “The assembly was arrayed in a tasteful group, and a flashlight photo taken... And so to bed; or, in the case of some of our guests, to further adventures” (fig. 2).³⁴

The College’s newsletter, *Chanticleer*, duly explained that this had been a “mock debate” led by the “inner ring of Roosters, who, dressed in feminine attire, painted and bewigged, presented themselves before their chivalrous, if somewhat incredulous fellow-members.”³⁵ The Roosters also staged mock trials at which the none-too-subtle sexual innuendo of the pre-war years was made yet more obvious. For example, the case of Sofleigh v. Cox was heard in October 1927: Miss. Ophelia Cox (!) Mistress of Girnham College, Cambridge, was sued by Rev. Theophilus Softleigh, Dean of Slaughterhouse College, for alleged breach of promise of marriage. The court was told that he went for walks with her, held hands, and that they took a trip in a punt where they were “intimate.” Cox then invited him to her rooms in order that he might give her French lessons (slang for oral sex). She then wrote various letters to him in that tongue and was given roses, chocolates and finally a steamy novel, “*The Sheik*” by Sam Hay.³⁶ But Softleigh did not—or could not—follow through. There is nothing to indicate that the college authorities were particularly worried about the Roosters bearing in mind that, unlike certain other social clubs, they seem not to have left a trail of drunkenness and destruction of property. The joke was clearly appreciated by the male students, but it is unfortunate that we do not have any evidence of women’s opinions.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “The Roosters,” *Chanticleer* 74 (1923): 26-27, 26.

³⁶ 26 October 1927, Roosters, Minute Book, 1919-1923, JCCS/4/1/2, Jesus College archives.

Such events as the mock debate, more clearly than the mock trials, border on the student culture of ragging. During the first decades of the twentieth century this mostly changed from personalized bullying to general expressions of the carnivalesque which often featured cross-dressing. As a student newspaper, *The Cambridge Gownsmen*, explained in 1923, ragging of an unpopular person or event had been supplanted by organized events, often on a grand scale and in aid of charity.³⁷ An example is this is evidenced by the photograph album of Richard F. Henniker, who matriculated in 1924 at Trinity Hall. This presents a visual history of “the opening of Joanna Southcott’s box” in the Market Square, Cambridge, on 9 June 1927 at 12.15pm.³⁸ Southcott was a religious prophet who died in 1814 shortly after having failed to give birth to a promised new Messiah. She did leave a box which was to be opened in the hour of greatest national emergency in the presence of twenty-four bishops of the Church of England. In 1927 a psychical researcher opened a small box in the presence of the suffragan bishop of Grantham: but if it was Southcott’s she had not put anything interesting in it. Cambridge students claimed that they had the real box—and enough bishops. The national media had been tipped off and reporters from the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, amongst others, arrived to cover the event.

Henniker was one of those in charge of the arrival by lorry of a huge container which was stuffed full of bizarre things including a teddy bear with its bottom blacked. There was a procession of bishops from unlikely dioceses including the bishop of Swear and Wells, the bishop of Our Girl in the Wilds, and Bishop Stortford (Bishop’s Stortford was the name of another local town). The diminutive bishop of Tichfield—wordplay on the real bishopric of Lichfield and the slang term ‘tichy’ which meant small—arrived with his “wife” and “daughter” who claimed to be beauties from *The Sketch* (a high society magazine), “much to the delight of the paper.”³⁹ Elder Ebenezer Pashpenny from Salt Lake City with his “Mormon wives” [sic] made an appearance brandishing a notice saying “hands off the Mormon women” (fig. 3). Somewhat late in the day the shade of Joanna, complete with angel’s wings, stepped out of a car and flapped about for a while. There was a parade around the town and then a tomato fight. Henniker, meanwhile, had foiled an attempt to kidnap him and exhibit him in a second box as “the producer.” He claimed that some real clergy had got involved and “some of the ‘girls’ [i.e. cross-dressed men] were highly attractive.”⁴⁰ Proceeds from the event were donated to the Cambridge Fruiting Campaign which organized fruit-picking trips in East Anglia for the poor of the East End of London

Dyhouse has identified that student rag events of this sort, if not usually on this scale, had first appeared at universities in northern industrial cities and appear to have originated in excursions to the theatre and to pantomimes.⁴¹ She argued that ragging was socially conservative and this does seem to have been the effect of some of the Cambridge rags such one from Downing College in 1926 that parodied “women throughout the ages” (fig. 4).⁴²

³⁷ “Ragging—Old and New,” *Cambridge Gownsmen* 1, no. 4, 10 November 1923, 1.

³⁸ Photograph album, Richard F. Henniker, THPH/6/5, Trinity Hall archives.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Dyhouse, *Students*, 188.

⁴² Dyhouse, *Students*, 190 and 194-95.

The evidence of male debating societies and rag events suggests, therefore, that female impersonation acted to bolster pre-existing gender stereotypes. However, the parodic element in these performances was often combined with the impersonation by men of sexually attractive women. There was a degree of knowledge of same-sex activity but no evidence of open identification with it. This provides support for the notion that such performances may have sometimes enabled more or less closeted queer men to be regarded as erotically alluring by their peers. Something, however, appears to have changed after the mid-1920s because there are a declining number of references to cross-dressing at social events, as opposed to on the stage. Women were, throughout the period, mostly absent from such events, however they did often take part in cross-dressing within their own colleges. Were they also flirting with queer desire, but in contrast to the men, also challenging prevailing gender stereotypes?

Women Playing Men on Stage and off

As was the case with the men's colleges regular social events at the women's colleges, Newnham and Girton, were normally single sex. The first edition of the *Girton Review* (the College's newsletter) described a "fancy dress ball" given in the college hall that featured the Pied Piper of Hamelin who, we can assume, was played by a woman.⁴³ Or, to give another example, "the second-year entertainment" in the spring of 1893 featured *tableaux vivants* and minuets danced in eighteenth century dress with F. de Grasse Evans and E. J. Luker taking the parts of men.⁴⁴ Then there were the drama and operatic societies which, if they were not to have a sadly restricted repertoire, required women to take trouser roles, as in the 1896 production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* (1875) that must have required a very considerable quantity of fake facial hair.⁴⁵ The young ladies did not shy away from issues of love and marriage as can be seen from productions such as *One of You Must Marry*, which was a piece about two (male) bachelors that was performed at the end of Michaelmas Term 1897.⁴⁶

There is evidence that the students at Girton were self-aware about what we would term normative gender roles and were sometimes intent on transgressing and parodying them. The College had a student "fire brigade" in which the individuals, though female, were referred to as "men."⁴⁷ This appears to have been parodied in a Fancy Dress Dance in 1911 that featured "'The Foaming Fury' corps of firemen, resplendent in brass helmets."⁴⁸ This seems to have become something of a feature. A particularly ambitious "Fire-Brigade Dance" was given in February 1920 by the "officers and 'men' ... [At which] a notable feature was the life-like representation of charred corpses and gallant firemen effecting night rescues,

⁴³ "Fancy Dress Ball," *Girton Review* 1 (March 1882): 16.

⁴⁴ "The Second Year Entertainment," *Girton Review* 34 (March 1893): 7-8, at 7.

⁴⁵ "*Trial by Jury*," *Girton Review* 44 (August 1896): 2-3.

⁴⁶ "Dramatic Entertainment," *Girton Review* 48 (January 1898): 7-8.

⁴⁷ "Fire Brigade," *Girton Review* 13 (new series) (Lent 1905): 4.

⁴⁸ "Third Year Dance and Second Year Entertainment," *Girton Review* 33 (new series) (Michaelmas 1911): 7-8, at 7.

which constituted the most effective part of the decorations.⁴⁹ The use of quotation marks around the word "men" becomes a feature of social reports around this time. It appears, for instance in relation to a "Maids' Party" where the hostesses were not in fancy dress but the "various disreputable-looking 'men' were a great success."⁵⁰ By the interwar period changing social mores meant that chaperoning rules were slowly loosening and it became increasingly possible to consider that guests might conceivably *be* men. This meant that there was increasing self-consciousness about imitating the opposite sex.

All this might suggest that the college authorities were as enthusiastic about cross-dressing theatrics as were the students, but that was not always the case. A. I. Richards recalled the role that she had played in 1919 in the establishment of the Newnham College Dramatic Society: "Miss Clough, then Principal, decreed that only brothers or fiancés could attend because it was not suitable for other men to see women in men's clothes!" Richards put a tongue-in-cheek message about this in a publicity notice and was duly ticked off over a "disciplinary breakfast."⁵¹ Plays were performed, significantly, in suffrage week; one such was Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894), which was produced in 1924 in the college hall and featured roles for two majors and a captain, all of which were played by women.⁵²

Thersites, the Newnham College newsletter, was named after an ugly and buffoonish soldier who appears in Homer's *Iliad* and is mentioned in a couple of Shakespeare's plays. It provides an interesting overview of changing attitudes to cross-dressed roles. In 1921 it commented on the role of Mr. Devenish in A. A. Milne's *Belinda* (1918) that "Miss Wedgewood played a man's part remarkably well. Her acting was natural and her love-making was very pleasant."⁵³ By 1928 a modern-dress production of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895) was "greeted with riotous mirth on the part of the audience" and was "probably one of the most successful [performances] given by the Dramatic Society," but a comment was added on the challenges presented by same-sex performance.⁵⁴ By 1931 *Thersites* was complaining of the performance of *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) by Beaumont and Fletcher that "this most masculine of Elizabethan plays needed a fuller-blooded treatment, a swagger that Newnham could not supply."⁵⁵ This last review was pasted into the scrapbook kept by Alison Graham-Campbell who matriculated at Newnham in 1929. She also added programs from the Mummings. This had been established as a university drama society in 1928 by Charles Shope of Queens' and Alistair Cooke of Jesus, who was a British-born American who was to become a prominent journalist. It broke ranks with the other university theatrical societies which were for men only and admitted students at Newnham and Girton College to membership and to participation on the committee from the

⁴⁹ "The Fire-Brigade Dance," *Girton Review* 58 (new series) (Lent, 1920): 3.

⁵⁰ "The Maids' Party," *Girton Review* 60 (new series) (Michaelmas 1920).

⁵¹ A. I. Richards, "An Isolated Community," in *A Newnham Anthology*, ed. Ann Phillips, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1988), 131-35, at 134.

⁵² 26 January 1924, Newnham College Dramatic Society Minute Book 1919-36, CS/8 Dramatic Society, Newnham College archives.

⁵³ "The Dramatic Society," *Thersites* 64 (March 8, 1921).

⁵⁴ "The Importance of Being Ernest," *Thersites* 86 (May 1928).

⁵⁵ J. L. L.-0., "The Knight of the Burning Pestle," *Thersites* 95 (May 1931): 11.

start.⁵⁶ It no longer seemed important for a woman to play the role of an assertive man once her ambition had changed to sharing the stage with one.

A similar pattern can be seen at Newnham’s sister college where the *Girton Review* noted that “the producer was faced with the old problem of how to make a girl look like a man.” This was even more difficult for modern-dress productions since “a woman in flowing robes and beard and moustache may look a little like a man, but no amount of beard and moustache will make a long woman dressed in a short tunic look masculine.”⁵⁷ In 1930 it was accounted a positive feature of Weaver and Leycester’s *The Rising Generation* (1923) that “there is no [adult] hero to provide the inevitable stumbling block to an entirely female cast,” but only parts for boys.⁵⁸ Such newly apparent problems notwithstanding, all-women plays continued through the 1930s albeit with an apparent attempt to choose ones with limited numbers of male parts.⁵⁹ Acting butch was clearly not impossible, however, as when Miss. Penrose Hammond was acclaimed in 1936 for her “virile soldierly demeanour” in Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898).⁶⁰ Surviving photographs of Newnham and Girton productions do support the view that many of the women students paid more attention to applying their fake whiskers than they did to aping contemporary modes of masculine stance and expression; but there are exceptions: Miss. A. Williams, as Lord Alfred Lindsay in *The Dowager Duchess* (1896), struck a fine swagger pose with hand on hip.⁶¹ Equally striking, if enigmatic, is an undated photograph that appears to show two students dressed as a farmer and wife (fig. 5). It is tempting, if unproveable, to see this and similar images as evidence of female self-confidence and empowerment.

Yu Jin Ko has explored the history of the Shakespeare Society at Wellesley College, USA. It continues to this day and is the oldest society still active, having been founded in 1877, two years after the opening of the college itself. Starting in 1887 it has regularly staged all-female performances. Issues such as the challenge of passing for male regularly surfaced there but because Wellesley was not part of a predominantly male institution the women were not expected to judge their performances by the standards of men.⁶² Interestingly, a review of a 1924 production at Girton of *The Importance of Being Ernest* said that “it is more difficult for a women to act a man’s part than for a man to act a woman’s” and drew attention to the cast’s reluctance to kiss each other on the lips.⁶³ Feminine decorum placed strict limits on women’s evocation of sexual desire both conventional and otherwise. Male privilege, by

⁵⁶ Mummers Minute Book 1933-34, University/Soc. XXXV.1, Cambridge University Library archives.

⁵⁷ J. O. McL., “G.C.D.S,” *Girton Review* 87-88 (new series) (Michaelmas 1931-Lent 1932): 15-17.

⁵⁸ M.G. and E. J. B., “W.U.S.S. Play,” *Girton Review* 82 (new series) (Lent 1930): 8-9, at 8.

⁵⁹ A. M. Whyte, “First Year Play,” *Girton Review* 110 (new series) (Easter 1939): 10-11, at 10.

⁶⁰ “G.C. Dramatic Society,” *Girton Review* 100 (new series) (Lent 1936): 7-10, at 10.

⁶¹ *The Dowager Duchess* (1896), photograph, GCPH 10/3/12, Girton College archives.

⁶² Yu Jin Ko, “Women Who Will Make a Difference: Shakespeare at Wellesley College,” in *Shakespeare on the University Stage*, ed. Andrew James Hartley (Cambridge, 2015), 60-74.

⁶³ M. G. J., “G.C.D.C,” *Girton Review* 69 (new series) (Michaelmas 1924): 9-10, at 9.

contrast, facilitated sexualized cross-dressing, albeit only when it was performed in conventional ways. Nevertheless, there was some similarity between cross-dressing in men’s and women’s colleges in that it took place in a very wide range of contexts from parties to theater shows. The latter, however, are particularly well evidenced not only through society records but also through review articles in the student media. Evidence for female impersonation by men on the student stage will, therefore, now be the focus of attention.

Cross-Dressing and Men’s Drama Societies

Perhaps because they were isolated from the rest of the university the women’s colleges had a particularly lively and well-documented set of clubs and societies. Equivalent drama organizations in the men’s colleges were less well established because students with theatrical ambitions had access to societies that operated across the university. Since commercial photography was not cheap a drama society’s photograph album would have been the product of not inconsiderable expenditure and less likely to have been left to the next generation of students or placed in the college’s library. But there are a few survivals. St. John’s College preserves an album recording the work of the Thespids from the 1880s which featured such delights as an 1881 production of Edward Bulmer-Lytton’s *Money* (1840) in contemporary aesthetic dress, complete with Japanese parasols and sunflowers.⁶⁴

The first of the university drama societies to be established was the Amateur Dramatic Club (or A.D.C. as it was usually known) in 1855 by the comic playwright F. C. Burnand and a group of his friends. Before this date there had been a variety of short-lived clubs or ad hoc productions which had been impeded by the general disapproval of the university authorities towards the theatre in general and to actresses in particular. It was, therefore, as a result of moral strictures that men were required to play women’s roles. Women first appeared on the A.D.C. stage in the mid-1930s but it was not until after World War Two that they were permitted to join as members.⁶⁵ Cross-dressing roles were enthusiastically embraced from the start.⁶⁶ These parts were not merely in well-known and serious plays but also in comic burlesques which featured such stereotypes as the foolish young lady and the bad-tempered old woman.

Light entertainment was offered by the Footlights Dramatic Club whose first production took place in May Week 1883. Early shows were pre-existing musical comedies and farces but from 1892 the Club began an unbroken tradition of presenting an original show for May Week composed of a combination of burlesque, comedy sketches, satirical songs and instrumental music.⁶⁷ At other times of the year more modest versions of the same

⁶⁴ Thespids Photograph Album 1881-1887, St John’s College, archives, album 28.

⁶⁵ D. J. Hall, *The A.D.C., the First 120 Years: An Exhibition at the University Library, Cambridge, July-November 1975* (Cambridge: University Library, 1975), 4.

⁶⁶ F. C. Burnand, *The “A. D. C.”: Being Personal Reminiscences of the University Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge* (London, 1888), 40.

⁶⁷ Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 4, 1870-1990 (Cambridge, 1993), 299.

fare were offered in the form of “smoking concerts” at which the young gentlemen attending were expected to wear “the smoking jacket or a dinner jacket.”⁶⁸ The Cambridge Greek Play, which was founded by senior members of the university in 1883 to produce plays in the original language, was an altogether more serious undertaking.⁶⁹ Two years later Miss. J. E. Case appeared as Athena, but no other woman was to be involved until 1950.

As was the case with the mock trials, the fact that men could, on occasion, pass for glamorous and attractive women seemingly offered titillation to both homosexually- and heterosexually-inclined audience members. The former could identify with male-cross dressing that had been chosen not so much as a theatrical necessity but as a perverse pleasure. The former, starved of easy contact with attractive girls by the rules of the university, were offered a spectacle that was uncannily similar. The high point of the glamour role at Cambridge was during the Edwardian period when the leading “lady” in a drama was sometimes treated to a similar barrage of bouquets and cards as might have greeted an actress on the commercial stage. Dried flowers and fragments of fern are, for example, preserved in the Footlights archive as dedications to H. B. le D. Tree as Kitty Delamore, in the 1902 revival of *The Freshman* (1899). At the center of one folio is a photograph—apparently of a woman and presumably sent by her, although in this context things cannot be taken for granted—signed “Violet” (fig. 6 and 7).⁷⁰ This secures an *appearance* of sexual normality, but even if this is a testament of cross-sex admiration it implies that Mr. Tree had a fan who admired him *as* a woman. This is not evidence of homosexuality, but it does suggest that even normative modes of female impersonation were freighted with what might be termed queer potential. Erotic desire on the part of male fans might effectively be concealed by claims that their adulation was ironic.

The Marlowe Dramatic Society was founded in 1907 with the aim of taking a more academic approach to theatre and one that avoided such “vulgar” titillation.⁷¹ It is notable that it struggled in its very first production, Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (1592), with how best to present glamorous roles. Amongst other things the script required the appearance of Helen of Troy, not merely as a famously beautiful woman but as the love and lust object of Faustus. The poet Rupert Brooke appeared as Mephistopheles, but A. R. Marshall did not as Helen because the decision was taken to play his/her scene entirely in the dark.⁷² Those who took drama seriously would have paid close attention to the London theatre and the increasingly hostile views of its critics to cross-dressed performances. George Rylands’ photograph as

⁶⁸ Footlights Dramatic Club, *Rules* (Cambridge, 1930), 8; copy in Footlights Dramatic Club papers, GBR0265/Foot 1/1, Cambridge University Library archives.

⁶⁹ P. E. Easterling, “The Early Years of the Cambridge Greek Play: 1883–1912,” in *Classics in 19th and 20th Century Cambridge: Curriculum, Culture and Community*, ed. Christopher Stray, Cambridge Philological Society, Supplement 24 (Cambridge, 1998), 27–47.

⁷⁰ Robert Hewison, *Footlights!—A Hundred Years of Cambridge Comedy* (London, 1983), 29.

⁷¹ Typescript, 8 March 1907, A. S. F. Gow papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 8264/II/1, Cambridge University Library archives; see also Tim Cribb, *Bloomsbury and British Theatre: The Marlowe Story* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁷² J. W. Clark, letter to A. S. F. Gow, 12 November 1907, A. S. F. Gow papers, GBR/0012/8264/II/6/I, Cambridge University Library archives.

Electra in the spring of 1921 Cambridge Greek Play *Oresteia* appeared in the national press captioned “The Woman who Wasn’t.”⁷³ The *Westminster Gazette* was rather more generous, saying that Rylands “surmounted very well the obvious difficulties of playing a feminine part.”⁷⁴ And *The Telegraph*’s review of the production of *The Bacchae* in the autumn of the same year pointed out that, like the plays of Shakespeare, those from ancient Greece had been written to be performed by men. The problem lay, therefore, not with the players but with contemporary viewers who expected to see women on the stage.⁷⁵

Rylands was to have a long and successful career at King’s College as a literary scholar but he was also at the center of a network of homosexual friendships.⁷⁶ It is, therefore, notable that Arnold Bennett, writing in the *New Statesman*, argued that the 1921 *Oresteia* was no mere exercise in academic unworldliness. He alleged that men (convincingly) disguised as women were selling the programs: “I addressed a programme-girl in fancy-dress in those deferential tones which one employs towards a society woman who is graciously helping a charity matinée.” The play itself was a piece of “futile decadence” in comparison with which “the spirit of Aubrey Beardsley was robust and ingenuous sanity” and the audience were but “willing victims of a vast hetero-suggestion of beauty.”⁷⁷ Bennett had made his name as a writer of realist novels of working-class life in the Staffordshire Potteries so he might have been expected to cast a wary eye over the antics of the Cambridge elite, but it is striking that he specifically identified female impersonation in this Cambridge Greek Play with queer arts of deception.

Remarks by London critics referring to the presence of elements of glamour and burlesque in what were intended to be serious plays became frequent in the interwar period. In 1931 E. A. Baughan asked in *The News Chronicle* “Should men play women’s roles?” In his review of that year’s Marlowe production of John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612) he wrote that

I cannot get accustomed to women’s parts being played by men. In Elizabethan days the boys no doubt passed muster. The Vittoria would have been splendid in a silent film—but when she talked!... Much of it aroused laughter in the wrong place. This is partly due to Webster’s quaint naïveté, but largely to the acting and production.⁷⁸

⁷³ Quoted in L. P. Wilkinson, “A Hundred Years of the Cambridge Greek Play (Excerpt),” *The Cambridge Greek Play*: <https://www.cambridgegreekplay.com/the-history-of-the-cambridge-greek-play>, accessed 7 May 2020; and “The Woman who Wasn’t,” *Sunday Pictorial*, 20 March 1921, Greek Play Committee papers, GB 12 MS.GreekPlay album 1921, item 85, Cambridge University Library.

⁷⁴ Newspaper clipping, *Westminster Gazette*, 17 March 1921, *ibid.*, item 66.

⁷⁵ “The *Bacchae*,” *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 1921, *ibid.*, item 110.

⁷⁶ Michael Cordner, ‘George Rylands and Cambridge University Shakespeare’, in *Shakespeare on the University Stage*, ed. Andrew James Hartley (Cambridge, 2015), 43-59.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, item 77, Arnold Bennett, “The Greek Play at Cambridge,” *New Statesman*, 12 March 1921.

⁷⁸ E. A. Baughan, “Should Men Play Women’s Roles?” *News Chronicle*, 9 March 1931, clipping in Marlowe Society Papers, SOC.78.2.1, Cambridge University Library archives.

He specifically compared this spectacle unfavorably with a recent Mummer’s production of Congreve’s *Way of the World* (1700). Rather than being in thrall to the amateurism this new troupe (introduced in the previous section) allowed women students to act and employed a professional producer. For the reviewer this was an obvious step to take since, in its absence, serious drama constantly threatened to tip into glamor drag or burlesque with potentially queer consequences. However, the development of mixed-sex performances was bitterly contested in Cambridge during the 1930s and I shall now explore why this was the case.

Homophobia and the Decline of Cross-Dressing

At Oxford women students had long been banned from acting in university societies but the authorities did allow the Oxford University Dramatic Society (O.U.D.S.) to employ commercial actresses. On 25 February 1923 Rylands brought forward a motion to allow women to act at the A.D.C. This was passed by a committee vote of six to three and was taken forward to a general meeting of the membership on 11 March. At that date it was proposed to amend the rules of the club to allow “women, not being professional or paid actresses” to act, after consultation with the Senior Proctor (who was in charge of university discipline).⁷⁹ The proposal was only to allow this in one production per year. Seventeen members were in favor and eleven against. But since a two-thirds majority was required the motion was lost by one vote.

On 18 November of the same year the issue was raised again; it came back before another general meeting on 27 January but was rejected once more by fifteen votes to thirteen. The future celebrity photographer Cecil Beaton, who hardly concealed his homosexuality at Cambridge—he often wore make-up off stage as well as on—was present at this event although he says he was too frightened to speak.⁸⁰ When he arrived someone was saying that “men could be much more amusing as women in some parts and everyone shrieked with laughter.” Two pompous “old men” came along to stop women getting in but they made “good remarks.” Half the room voted against. Frank Birch, who was a fellow of King’s College and was to leave academia for a career on the stage, was “livid in a corner,” saying that those who voted against either had little to do with the club, or had played women’s parts and were “just a set.”⁸¹ Beaton does not record how he voted but the implication is that he may have voted against. However, since Rylands had lined up on the

⁷⁹ A.D.C. Minute Book 1912-1924, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 7675/1/9*, Cambridge University Library, archives. Quotations from these minute books are reproduced by kind permission of the Cambridge University Amateur Dramatic Club.

⁸⁰ 13 February 1923, Cecil Beaton, Diary 6 (31 January–25 February 1923), St John’s College, archives. Quotations from these diaries are reproduced by kind permission of the literary estate of Cecil Beaton and of the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge.

⁸¹ 28 January 1924 [i.e. Beaton recorded the event the following day] Cecil Beaton, Diary 20 (28 January–16 February 1924).

other side there is no clear evidence here that sexual object choice played a public role in these votes.

In the autumn of 1928, the A.D.C. effectively satirized its own dilemma by staging Benn Levy's 1925 play *This Woman Business* which was about five misogynistic men and their consternation when faced with an attractive young lady. It was duly reported in *Granta*, which was one of the leading student periodicals in Cambridge, that "inside and outside the Club there is a feeling that it about time women's parts were played by women."⁸² However, attitudes at the A.D.C. seemed to have been hardening since, on 3 March 1929, yet another general meeting was held at which the question of women as members of the club was "rejected by an overwhelming majority."⁸³ A range of motions explored the possibility that women of various origins (college, town, professional, etc.) might be able to act, and also that they be admitted as members. It was argued that "some plays become slightly ludicrous with female impersonations." Even the most hardened of the opposition did not attempt to deny this, but they felt that conditions such as chaperoning imposed on "undergradettes" (derogatory male slang for female students which compared them to "suffragettes") were too onerous and that local ladies were not an adequate substitute for students. In October 1932 the committee voted unanimously in favor of women and the issue of acting (as opposed to membership) came back to a general meeting at the end of the month. This time fears were raised for the lively tradition of "back-stage repartee" and it was asked if female impersonation would now be banned.⁸⁴ Twenty-three voted for the motion and twenty-two against, so it was once more lost.

It is quite clear in all of this that it was not the leadership of the A.D.C., which included a number of homosexual men, that was frustrating change but its membership, many of whom were former students who retained fond memories of their own homosocial youth. Yet even here things finally shifted. On 11 February 1935 Dr. Nourse reported to the committee that some old members had changed their minds, albeit with certain reservations. In the light of a "dearth of female impersonators" support was found for allowing the participation of women from Newnham and Girton. One in four plays would continue to be men only and women were still to be excluded from the club room. Conservatives were preparing themselves for what now seemed inevitable. The previous month the new A.D.C. theatre, paid for by financial support from King's College, had opened complete with both men's and women's dressing rooms.

The admission of women to the A.D.C stage was finally sanctioned by a general meeting held in February 1935. In all these debates arguments for the equal rights of women were notable by their absence. The question uppermost in members' minds was what would make for the most successful show. Interestingly this final debate turned into an intense discussion of the rights and wrongs of female impersonation by men. The club, it was said, had been founded "without much thought for public opinion" but times had changed. The tradition of "Burnand and his merry boys" belonged to the past, for today being a female

⁸² J. H. P. M., "A.D.C. *This Woman Business*," *Granta*, 30 November 1928, 198.

⁸³ A.D.C. Minute Book 1929-1933, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 7675/I/11, Cambridge University Library, archives.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

impersonator would hamper one's future career on the stage. D. W. Alexander, as a player of female roles, mistrusted the word "impersonator" saying it was not impersonation but an integral part of period plays; but another member complained that he was "tired of unpleasantness and innuendoes attendant upon female roles being played by men. Admitting women would stop antagonism in certain quarters." What seems to lie behind these comments is a fear that male cross-dressing was now being read as evidence of homosexuality and was bringing the respectability of the club into question. The result was a decided victory for change: forty-four votes for and only four against.⁸⁵

Reviews of all-women productions in Cambridge prior to World War Two, as has been seen, repeatedly returned to the supposedly greater challenge of effective male impersonation for women than of female impersonation for men and there was no chorus of insistent erotic innuendo concerning female masculinity. This is in line with Laurence Senelick's conclusion on the American evidence that "women's colleges were never assailed for promoting sapphism through all-female performances... The danger for women was not that they would become lesbians, but that they would become actresses."⁸⁶ The situation in relation to men's cross-dressing was quite different; it was sexualized from the start and, by the 1920s, was increasingly associated with a perverse lack of interest in women and, slightly later, with male homosexuality.

That something changed radically either side of World War One can be seen by contrasting the profiles of leading students published in *Granta's* "Those in Authority" column. In 1911 G. F. P. Boulton was acclaimed as a star of both the A.D.C and the Marlowe Dramatic Society and as "without doubt the finest female impersonator of either sex at present in Cambridge."⁸⁷ Whereas in 1928 J. Y. Smart, then president of the A.D.C. was satirized in a mock interview as having claimed that "'I have never played with women.'... His conservative principles found admirable expression in a discussion on the vital importance of preserving the traditions of the A.D.C, never yet tainted by the acting abilities of females."⁸⁸ The following year the corresponding article on another president of the A.D.C., R. L. Eddison, simply replaced his photograph with that of a woman.⁸⁹

In an unpublished talk presented at Stanford University in 1996 Gerard Koskovich presented one of the rare histories of homosexuality to focus on a specific university. He argued that the cross-dressing employed in early rag and burlesques at Stanford was sexuality normative in that it reinforced expected gender roles. Sexual desire was seen as requiring a male/female dynamic and this facilitated a substantial degree of homosocial intimacy. This began to change in the 1930s but drag revues ceased as early as 1926. Later revivals, such as a 1945 production of "Gaieties," were done with knowing references to male

⁸⁵ A.D.C. Minute Book 1934-1935, 230-46, Amateur Dramatic Club papers, GBR/0012/MS Add. 7675/I/12, Cambridge University Library archives.

⁸⁶ Senelick, *Crossing the Stage*, 359.

⁸⁷ "Those in Authority, G. F. P. Boulton," *Granta*, 4 March 1911, 285.

⁸⁸ "Those in Authority, J. Y. Smart, President of the A.D.C.," *Granta*, 26 October 1928, 53-54, at 54.

⁸⁹ "Those in Authority, R. L. Eddison (Trinity), President of the A.D.C.," *Granta*, *1929, 47.

homosexuality.⁹⁰ Jacob Bloomfield has identified similar if slightly earlier patterns of the reception of male cross-dressing in interwar Britain in his study of the “Splinters” troupe of cross-dressing ex-service men. The fact that they were former soldiers reassured the audience of the actors’ masculinity and their shows were greeted by *The Daily Telegraph* in 1919 as “jolly, honest fun.”⁹¹ Yet there were notes of unease from other papers such as *The London Mail* which opined in the same year: “How they have managed to eliminate all trace of that subtle unpleasantness *so often associated with this type of thing* [my emphasis] I know not, but it has been done.”⁹²

By the mid-1920s the student readers of Cambridge’s magazines had begun to understand men’s drama as stereotypically queer. In 1927 *Granta* printed an unsigned piece entitled “Just Between Us Boys” of which the following is representative:

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 pajamas... Arundell LIVING on aspirin and one egg in brandy, well NATURALLY, he will do EVERYthing, and not EVEN the Chorus’ parts are safe.

This is an ingenious attempt to represent camp intonation via capital letters and a stew of smutty innuendo. Dennis Arundell was a fellow of St. John’s College who acted, directed, produced, and if the article were believed, chased around after the male cast members. Another, earlier, *Granta* article insinuated that “at the age of seven Dennis began to show signs of polygamous tendencies... Mr Arundell adds that he is no longer polygamous.”⁹³ In case the reader still did not get the point the later article was accompanied by a cartoon of two fey young men, one of whom is holding an A.D.C. program booklet.⁹⁴ That this pair were intended to be read as more than homosocial chums is illustrated by the reuse of this cartoon in 1931 where it appeared below images illustrating the Qinq[ennial] and the Mummings (fig. 8). The first was a flashy social club that organized Friday night dances and was illustrated by a smart car—only very rich students could afford one—and the second was the aforementioned pioneer of men and women on the Cambridge stage. It was represented by a recognizably heterosexual couple in contrast to that obviously queer pair standing in for the A.D.C.

The homophobic pressure that had been building up against the A.D.C.’s maintenance of the single-sex tradition was also felt by the Footlights. On 4 March 1932, a motion to allow participation by “undergraduettes” was passed by a single vote. P. E. Lyon of

⁹⁰ Gerard Koskovich, “Private Lives, Public Struggles: the History of Homosexual Students at Stanford University, 1891-1975,” unpublished talk presented at Stanford, 30 April 1996, 6 and 10-12 (with thanks to the author).

⁹¹ Quoted in Jacob Bloomfield, “*Splinters*: Cross-Dressing Ex-Servicemen on the Interwar Stage,” *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 1-28, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹³ “Those in Authority, Dennis Arundell (St. Johns),” *Granta*, 3 June 1927, 473.

⁹⁴ Anon., “N. R. S.,” “Just Between Us Boys,” *Granta*, 18 November 1927, 116.

Magdalene argued that change was needed “owing to the unfashionability of burlesque and the change in humour during the last five or six years.”⁹⁵ The result was clearly highly divisive since on 24 April, when Lyon was elected president, the rest of the committee resigned: “The president then walked out of the club and accepting this as a sign that the meeting was adjourned, members then rose.”⁹⁶ The minute book in which this was recorded was then left unused. A counter revolution, recorded in a new minute book, saw the Footlights present *No More Women!* as their 1933 May Week review.⁹⁷

Female impersonation was presented with openly queer innuendo in 1934’s *Sir or Madam*. This featured such delights as the Les Girls chorus, “Boat Club Boys” and “Against the Law” which featured two young men, a police constable and the landlord of a Bloomsbury boarding house. Cross-dressed roles included Princess Spirella, Poppy (a waitress), Beatrix, A Buxom Lady, “She,” Dare-Devil Doris and the chorus of “Les Girls.”⁹⁸ The conservative *Cambridge Review* was very positive about the return to an all-male cast.⁹⁹ But it was hardly a surprise when *Granta* picked up on the increasingly visible queer element: “I am a Footlights Fairy... 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?” [emphases in original] (fig. 9)¹⁰⁰ This references the *fin de siècle* social circles of Oscar Wilde in which the androgynous figure of the “new man” was distinguished from the hearty sportsman.¹⁰¹ “Fairy,” like “pansy,” was contemporary slang for an effeminate homosexual who was associated with wearing make-up.¹⁰² The evocation of Wildean posing was most conspicuous in cartoons and caricatures of Cambridge thespians, but it also appeared in mockery of debating societies. In 1926 *Granta* published a piece that attacked “flowery speech” at the Cambridge Union. Mr. Brown of Trinity, the reader was told, “wore a gardenia in his buttonhole and a rose in his hair, while he held a bunch of chrysanthemums gracefully aloft...[before] casting these blossoms aside he displayed a single lily. The House wept.”¹⁰³ Mr. Smith of Emmanuel was, meanwhile, admired for his pansies.

⁹⁵ Footlights Minute Book 1927-1932, fol. 138r, Footlights Dramatic Club Papers, GBR0265/FOOT 1/2/3, Cambridge University Library, archives. Quotations from these minute books are reproduced by kind permission of the Cambridge Footlights.

⁹⁶ Ibid, fol. 142r.

⁹⁷ *No More Women! The Footlights 1933 Review*, programme, Footlights Dramatic Club Papers, GBR0265/FOOT 2/8/33, Cambridge University Library, archives.

⁹⁸ *Sir or Madam, The Footlights 1934 Review*, programme, Footlights Dramatic Club Papers, GBR0265/FOOT 2/8/34, Cambridge University Library archives.

⁹⁹ “Footlights, *No More Women*,” *Cambridge Review*, 8 June 1933, 498.

¹⁰⁰ “Footlights,” *Granta*, *November 1934, 156; the cartoon, signed “Hope” is discussed in Hewison, *Footlights!*, 77.

¹⁰¹ Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature* (Chicago, 2016), 191-226.

¹⁰² Matt Houlbrook, “‘The Man with the Powder Puff’ in Interwar London,” *Historical Journal* 50, no. 1 (2007): 145-71.

¹⁰³ T. O. Williams, “Flowery Speech,” *Granta*, 30 April 1926, 358.

The wave of knowing innuendo that swept through the student media in the 1920s disturbed the equilibrium of an institution that admired same-sex intellectual and emotional connections but (publicly at least) denied their sexual expression. The youth cultures of Cambridge, in line with those of the public schools, had long been queer in so far as they had provided specific opportunities, such as on the student stage, for play with gender transformation and covert flirtation with same-sex desire. Men were allowed to perform sexualized roles on stage that were not permissible to women because it was assumed that this was a way of confirming cross-sex attraction without incurring sexual scandal. Women, by contrast, were not given the social license to perform sexualized masculinity. Male homosexuality had become increasingly visible in Britain from the time of Oscar Wilde’s disgrace in 1895 while its female equivalent began to be publicly debated in a similar way in the aftermath of the banning of Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928.¹⁰⁴ The relative slowness with which lesbianism came to public attention compared with its male equivalent meant that university women might be mocked for being unfeminine, as they struggled for self-empowerment, but they did not face the same homophobic allegations of sexual and gender deviance.

Student audiences increasingly recognized and sometimes endorsed cross-dressed performances by men that knowingly played with gender performance and openly implied same-sex attraction. The result was that by the 1920s there was a growing awareness on the part of both performer and audience that the object of their admiration was not the female performance but the male actor. Cross-dressed roles on stage were increasingly greeted with the expectation that they were not simply the result of the requirements of the script but had been chosen for queer effect. It seems likely that cross-dressing at debating society social events also declined at this time because of the changing connotations of drag. The public queering of female impersonation represented something of a crisis not just for student drama but also for the wider homosocial and gender-segregated life of the university since that too began to appear queer as women were increasingly admitted to the British public realm. Visibly homosexual men duly replaced women as the immediate threat to traditional male privilege.

Some queer men in Cambridge such as George Rylands sought to distance themselves from scandal by seeking to admit women to clubs that would, thereby, no longer risk being publicly perceived as bastions of sexual and gender deviance. They were resisted by more daring individuals who relished the queer potential of cross-dressing and who were in an uneasy alliance with conservatives whose misogyny was greater than their homophobia and who wished to cling to traditional male prerogatives, including that of impersonating the opposite sex. The admission of women to clubs such as the A.D.C. reduced opportunities for queer performance and created the appearance of heterosexual normality. Cross-dressing, therefore, became less widespread as student life became more co-educational. It increasingly came to be seen as a queer and quaint relic of an era that had focused on sexual desire between young men and women as the greatest threat to college life. Female impersonation survived the longest in burlesque reviews where it might be supposed that the performer was parodying, as opposed to embodying, effeminate homosexuality. It is, therefore, no surprise

¹⁰⁴ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xii.

that the Footlights was one society that long resisted change —its first woman member was the feminist Germaine Greer who joined in October 1964.