

1995

## "The Twentieth Century Way": Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America

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### Custom Citation

Ullman, Sharon R. "'The Twentieth Century Way': Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 4 (1995): 573-600.

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Sharon Ullman, "The Twentieth Century Way": Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America

When female impersonator Julian Eltinge appeared on stage before early twentieth-century vaudeville audiences, his artistry amazed them. To listen to contemporary critics, one might suspect that no one had ever effected so successful an artifice as Eltinge's remarkable portrayal of the female form. Swirling in a cascade of color and movement, Eltinge showcased his femininity while singing and dancing in a variety of "international" presentations. A flushed 1909 *Variety* critic noted that in Eltinge's "Incense Dance" with the "splendid setting, yellow predominating as the color," the impersonator "executes a dance while in feminine Oriental dress. His 'girl' is an artistic study, from the slippers to the coiffure."<sup>1</sup> Eltinge's popularity was legendary. After one performance the crowd went wild, refusing to leave for intermission until he had returned to the stage and spoken to them directly. It was Eltinge's artistry—the perfection of his mimicry—that signaled his audience that their most basic understanding of gender could be deceptive.

While Eltinge became increasingly celebrated, other men who dressed as women discovered a more sinister fame. Hounded by hired detectives, trapped in beachside comfort stations, members of the "queer" community in Long Beach, California, were forced into public view in 1914. These men often dressed in gorgeous female attire during grand private parties. The participants included some of the wealthiest and most respected residents of the resort town some thirty miles south of Los Angeles. The discovery of this thriving community elevated the same kinds of questions raised by the brilliant and beloved Eltinge. When the men of Long Beach dressed as women they playfully disguised their gender but ultimately revealed something equally imperative—their sexual practice.

This article explores the seeming contradiction between the admiring fascination with female impersonation as a performance form during the early years of the twentieth century, as embodied in the career of Julian Eltinge, and the simultaneous witch-hunt furiously pursued against those men who dressed similarly offstage in the privacy of their own homes and community. As this discussion demonstrates, this disjuncture reflects neither bizarre aberration nor inexplicable confusion. Instead, the public obsession with gender deception on stage and the offstage crackdown prove to be related phenomena that link questions of public gender presentation—how you tell a man from a woman—with concerns of a more symbolic nature. What were the ways in which public gender presentation marked private sexual practice? Further, what was the implication of "problematic" sexual practice for the cementing of gender definitions?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Variety* (April 24, 1909), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> This article is drawn from a larger study that looked at the ways in which sexuality was publicly discussed in national popular entertainment and in a prototypical smaller community well away from the urban centers. I looked at early films and reports of vaudeville performances and compared them against court records I surveyed from Sacramento, California—a community with approximately forty thousand residents in 1910. During the course of that research, documents surfaced that referred to an investigation of male homosexual activity in Long Beach, California, in 1914. Long Beach, located about twenty-five miles south of Los Angeles, was a resort town with roughly twenty thousand residents at this time. The rich detail present in the documents makes the Long Beach investigation an outstanding indicator of the southern California homosexual community and the police reaction to it. Because this community stands outside of the urban northeastern subcultures so well documented by recent historians (most notably George Chauncey's fine new book, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* [New York, 1994]), looking at Long Beach provides the opportunity to expand our knowledge of sexuality to reflect a more national scope and become less dependent on the

These concerns can be seen in the attempt to understand the gender "message" presented by impersonators such as Eltinge. Commentators expressed both fascination with impersonators and continuous surprise at their popularity. As critics and reviewers sought to explain or at least to address the public's affection, they initiated a series of interrogations designed to interpret the gender stories being told by impersonators. Newspaper accounts covering Eltinge detailed his offstage activities so as to clarify the onstage gender confusion. Reporters sought out markers of gender that might make sense to audiences—might explain how a man who so brilliantly embodied femininity could actually still be a man. This curiosity reflects a plaintive desire for certainty in a time when such certainty had become increasingly elusive.

Rapidly, the interrogations into Eltinge's life began to highlight social fears of unacceptable private sexual practice. Supportive investigators sought to demonstrate that the public sign of Eltinge's fame—his magnificent female portrayal—did not reflect a secret degeneracy. Eltinge, they insisted, was a "real man."<sup>3</sup> Though superficially his offstage equivalents, other men who dressed as women were deemed "abominations"<sup>4</sup> lacking the finer "qualities of manhood."<sup>5</sup> Proper manhood was at stake here, and hidden sexual practice could determine it. Here was an answer to the gender confusions of the period. If one could identify a man's private sexual behaviors, one could then establish his gender identity with certainty. Sexual practice could be "read" through public presentation, and gender could be ascertained.

Police agents in Long Beach faced a similar problem. They too sought to read sexual practice onto public gender presentation and learned, to their dismay, that such determinations were not so easy. The hidden universe of sexual practice revealed in Long Beach demonstrated the instability of gender categories. No one was who he seemed and the signs of "degeneracy" became increasingly diffuse. The discourse in Long Beach precisely echoed the vaudeville calls to certify manhood through the "sight" of hidden sexual practice, yet the realities in Long Beach reinforced the gender confusions witnessed simultaneously in theaters across the country. The interrelationship of gender presentation and sexual practice asserted itself with particular ferocity at this moment. As we look at the discussions enveloping Eltinge and the documents surrounding the Long Beach case, it becomes apparent that gender definition was deeply problematic at the turn of the century and that the connection between sexual practice and the nature of male and female occurred on the streets as well as on the stage.

The nature of male and female had already received serious attention in many parts of the country. Hastened by the pace of urbanization, immigration, and an emerging female public presence, gender structures came under increasing challenge in the early twentieth century. As women began to clamor for civil rights and engaged in more visible and confrontational civic activities during the Progressive Era, they forced a social discussion of appropriate gendered behavior. This discussion took place across a broad swath of American life and ranged from serious academic scholarship to witty ripostes in popular entertainments. Current historians of masculinity bring to our attention that gender reassessment affected men as well as women

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large city model. Population figures taken from *The Thirteenth Census to the United States, 1910, Population Reports by State* (Washington, DC, 1913), 2:148, 146.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Slide, *The Great Pretenders: A History of Female and Male Impersonators in the Performing Arts* (Lombard, IL, 1986), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Evening World* (March 10, 1914), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 129, New York Public Library, Billy Rose Collection.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Fisher to C. V. McClatchy, November 20, 1914, p. 2. Found in uncatalogued investigations file held by the Sacramento City Archives. Hereafter referred to as the Sacramento Bee Long Beach investigation. See n. 69 below.

during this period. Not only did the discussion about women inevitably affect men, but many commentators expressed concern that men had been stripped of their masculinity because of the "softness" in modern life. It became imperative to fashion a revised notion of masculinity to fit the times.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps not so surprising that this period produced such an interest in performance that called gender into question, but the linking of sexual practice and gender seems an unexpected response to this widespread social anxiety.

This link is more commonly attributed to the determined efforts of fin de siècle sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Sigmund Freud, who are largely credited with the development of sexual pathology models based heavily on observable "symptomatology" such as dress and behavior. Male and female homosexuals—the sexual inverts described by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis—exhibited their "disease" primarily through inappropriate appearance or occupation, which signaled the "wrong" gender. Although historians have given the development of the discourse on sexual pathology important weight in the history of sexual transformation, the insights offered by the sexologists are by themselves insufficient explanation for the widespread and relatively rapid incorporation of the idea that a profound relationship existed between sexual behavior and gender identity. The professional drive to encode sexual pathology in gender activity was but one of many forces at work in this period of intense gender anxiety. As with many such contentious moments whose resolution is often credited to elite discourse, much of this struggle in fact took place on a significantly more popular level. The intense curiosity about gender that permeates the popular culture of the period indicates that we can only grant a limited authority to the sexologists.<sup>7</sup>

That curiosity is easily seen in gender impersonation, which, although grounded in earlier entertainment forms, emerged into surprising popularity at the turn of the century. The era from 1890 to World War I marked a heyday for entertainers who made their living impersonating members of the opposite sex.<sup>8</sup> Historian Robert C. Toll notes that impersonators were among

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); J. A. Mangin and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Manhood in Britain and America, 1800 to 1940* (Manchester, 1987); Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago, 1990); Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> See particularly Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1906; New York, 1933); and Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1906; New York, 1936). A spirited historical response to the power of the sexologists can be found in George Chauncey, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salamagundi*, nos. 58-59 (Fall/Winter 1982-83), pp. 114-46. Chauncey also addresses the problem of these complicated discourses in "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era," *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985): 189-211. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London, 1985). See Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985); Lillian Faderman, "The Morbidification of Love between Women by 19th Century Sexologists," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 (1978): 73-90; and Esther Newton, "The Myth of the Mannish Lesbian," in *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman et al. (Chicago, 1985), pp. 7-25, for discussions of the sexologists' impact on women.

<sup>8</sup> Both female and male impersonation hit a peak in this era. While this article limits its discussion to female impersonation, a parallel analysis can be made looking at male impersonation. Although female impersonation seemed more popular and generated more performers overall, significant female stars who impersonated men emerged as well. Such personalities as Vesta Tilly, Kitty Donner, Kathleen Clifford, Ella Shields, Bessie Bonehill, and Hetty King, to name a few, excelled in their field. The discourse surrounding their activity matched that which addressed their male counterparts to some degree but

the most successful and highly paid stars during the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Although England had a music hall tradition of drag comedy, female impersonation in America emerged from a different root—the immensely popular minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth century. Characterized by a grossly hyperstylized mocking portrayal of African-Americans, the minstrel shows provided many outside the South with their first and sometimes only imagery of black Americans. Minstrel shows may be more famous in memory for caricatures of African-American men, yet African-American women were hardly immune. Some white men specialized in impersonating romantic female characters known as the "yaller girl."<sup>10</sup> Employing racist stereotypes of the "tragic mulatto," these portrayals often called for a more serious tone than the ordinary vicious minstrel fare and helped to train white female impersonators.<sup>11</sup> The minstrel show began to decline in the early twentieth century, and female impersonators moved into vaudeville. Many of the famed female impersonators of the period got their start on the minstrel show circuit, and their characterizations of white women drew forth interesting comparisons. As one critic noted, "Just as a white man makes the best stage Negro, so a man gives a more photographic interpretation of femininity than the average woman is able to give."<sup>12</sup>

This extraordinary remark helps to explain some of the attraction provided by female impersonation. The "best stage Negro" was, by its very definition, an artificial production. The critic did not attempt to argue that white men made the best "real" Negroes. Similarly, femininity is presented, in this remark, as performative—something that could (and perhaps should) be properly produced through thoughtful artifice by one who best understands what the concept

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significant differences existed as well. While questions of sexual deviancy did arise, other issues not present in female impersonation appear as well—most particularly concerns over public politics and the relationship between, e.g., male impersonation and the highly contentious suffrage movement. Additionally, although female impersonators were judged by how well they presented the image of adult women, male impersonators were assessed by their production of "the boy." This diminution reinforces our understanding that much of the discourse surrounding gender impersonation in what was essentially a male-produced press focused primarily on notions of masculinity in one form or another. Commentators questioned whether female impersonators were really men and "permitted" male impersonators only the status of "boys." See Sharon Ullman, "Broken Silences: Sex and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century America" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1990), chap. 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert C. Toll, *On with the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America* (New York, 1976), chap. 9. See also Marybeth Hamilton, "'I'm the Queen of the Bitches': Female Impersonation and Mae West's *Pleasure Man*," in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross Dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (New York, 1993). Both Toll and Hamilton argue that female impersonation was perceived as a wholesome entertainment that specifically reiterated female norms and middle-class values. My own view is quite different: I think that impersonation pretended to reinforce such norms and values but actually undermined them. Hamilton also argues that it was only in the 1930s that impersonation came to be stigmatized as "queer." My research indicates that such stigmatization was widespread by 1913. Eltinge's gift, as this article suggests, was his ability to ride that particular tiger. Hamilton believes that Eltinge's popularity can be attributed to his magical capacity to cross the "unbridgeable divide" between male and female which she claims was seen as "fixed and immutable" (p. 111). My interpretation challenges this idea—it was precisely the fear that these boundaries were no longer fixed along with the desire to "re-orient" them that drove Eltinge's popularity. I believe that he provided his audiences an opportunity to work out their anxieties and to deploy another method for cementing gender: the incorporation of sexual practice into gender definition.

<sup>10</sup> Toll, *On with the Show*, p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> For a fine discussion of the relationship between class, gender, and minstrelsy, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993). For an earlier treatment, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Slide, *The Vaudevillians: A Dictionary of Vaudeville Performers* (Westport, CT, 1981), p. 51.

truly means.<sup>13</sup> This critic clearly believed that the performance of femininity was best designed by and for men, thereby underscoring that female impersonation was already marked by many as a conversation between and among men. Additionally, since most photographic images were posed in this period, the use of a photographic metaphor is telling. This commentator's support of "posed" femininity reinforces again its element of performance-the fact that femininity is indeed "staged." That female impersonators could be said to offer a more authentic representation of femininity indicates the degree to which illusion and performance had become paramount in the struggle over gender.

Julian Eltinge's deceptive prowess made such comments possible. One of the premier vaudeville entertainers prior to World War I, Eltinge traveled extensively throughout the country garnering enormous critical and financial success. His accurate, "perfect" replication of the female prompted awed expressions of appreciation from both critics and audience alike. Broadway's love affair with Eltinge began early, when the female impersonator traveled with the famed Cohan and Harris Minstrels. When Eltinge appeared for a solo act in 1909, *Variety* raved, "As an impersonator of girls, or 'the' impersonator of 'the' girl, Eltinge excels."<sup>14</sup> "This artist in female drawings" created a stampede at the box office when he introduced his 1910 season.<sup>15</sup> Audiences poured into the vaudeville houses around the country to witness "an artist of this young man's caliber" who was heralded to be "as great a performer as there stands on the stage today."<sup>16</sup> On September 11, 1912, the Julian Eltinge Theater opened on Forty-Second Street in New York to honor the wildly popular star.<sup>17</sup> Eltinge toured for many years with his comedy, "The Fascinating Widow." As he prepared for its Broadway debut in 1911, he smashed attendance records everywhere.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately he took the show on a national tour ending in San Francisco and Los Angeles. "The Fascinating Widow" spread his fame throughout the country and made him a very wealthy man.<sup>19</sup> Julian Eltinge reigned as a prince of vaudeville from 1909 to the early twenties and even made several early films.

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<sup>13</sup> Any reference to performativity in relationship to gender must call forward Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), which contributed heavily to the theoretical reconceptualization of gender currently under way in various disciplines. Butler introduced the now standard (and often misunderstood and misused) phrase "performative gender" to the theoretical vocabulary. In this more specific context, she notes that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself." Such impersonation provides the opportunity to "see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (pp. 137-38). In other words, impersonation performance does for gender what Toto did for the Wizard of Oz- unveiling the "man behind the curtain" (so to speak)-the public discourse that constructs the artificial coherency of gender. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, 1993). Butler is not alone in her interest. In the last few years, gender impersonation and cross dressing (not the same thing although often appearing in the same collections or analyses) have come to be seen as somewhat overdetermined sites of gender fluidity and subversion. See particularly Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992); and Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York, 1991), for more theoretical discussions. See Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia, 1993), for a historical review. For an earlier classic discussion, see Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> *Variety* (April 23, 1910), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Slide, *The Great Pretenders* (n. 3 above), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Variety* (February 4, 1911), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Variety* (June 1, 1912), p. 11, (November 8, 1912), p. 10.

Eltinge's primary rival, Bothwell Browne, also toured with the Cohan and Harris Minstrels and worked primarily on the West Coast. Periodically he tried to break into big-time vaudeville, only to end up back on the road where he remained primarily a western small-time phenomenon. Although standards of fame, even prior to World War I, may have been set by New York success, Browne's celebrity as a regional figure was considerable and correctly reflected the national popularity of female impersonation as an entertainment form.<sup>20</sup>

Eltinge and Browne were the most prominent of a large group of female impersonators who filled vaudeville houses around the country. Impersonation became a national phenomenon whose extensive scope is attested to by the fact that most of these acts ended up on the "small time." Small-time theaters ranged from the less swanky stages on the outskirts of New York City to the vaudeville houses in small and medium-sized communities around the country.<sup>21</sup> One can see this broad popularity from regular newspaper accounts throughout the country that discussed the most recent impersonation act. *Variety* seemed to believe that most impersonators might be more successful in the "small time" since theatergoers in the major urban areas believed themselves too sophisticated for the basic nature of most such routines.<sup>22</sup> Impersonators relied on a world that was simultaneously familiar and yet special to audiences. The reviewers assumed that the audience was fascinated by the clothing worn by these stage heroes, an axiom occasionally mocked by those who found glorified fashion shows, seemingly aimed only at women, to be insufficient excuse for a stage presentation. Such curmudgeonly attitudes were not uniformly shared, a fact evidenced both by full theaters and the detailed descriptions of the costumes found in the commentary of the less carping reviewer. Whether noting the "beautiful black dress with a train ... gorgeously trimmed with beads and ribbons" worn by Bothwell Browne<sup>23</sup> or highlighting Julian Eltinge's "magnificent black gown" worn "draped from his right shoulder,"<sup>24</sup> the writers confirmed what some already suspected—that "no woman could have worn the dress to more perfect advantage."<sup>25</sup>

Impersonation performance seemed to offer men the opportunity to take power over representations of femininity. Eltinge could crystallize the essence of what it meant to be female and present it through specific surface details. In principle this could be reassuring. Eltinge's feminine characterizations offered to "fix" femininity at a straightforward and superficial level and reinforced male authority over that image. One critic snorted that "it takes a man after all to show women the path to beauty. Julian Eltinge has so developed female impersonation that today he is the glass of fashion for the thousands of women in search of beauty secrets."<sup>26</sup> The *New York Dramatic Mirror* marveled as early as 1907 at how he gave "great attention to the

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<sup>20</sup> See Slide, *The Great Pretenders*, pp. 29-30, for a general discussion of Browne's career. See also Toll, *On with the Show* (n. 9 above), chap. 9.

<sup>21</sup> See Toll, *On with the Show*, chap. 9. For a discussion of vaudeville theater circuits, see Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York, 1989); and John E. Dimeglio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green, OH, 1973). Simply dressing as a woman would not make it in the big time unless truly spectacular artistry was present. However, for those who valued the "style which is liked by small time audiences not too highly educated in what is best in vaudeville sketches"—in other words, virtually everyone outside the major New York City vaudeville halls—simple gender impersonation continued to hold fascination and delight as audiences flocked to the theater to watch these entertainers display their talents.

<sup>22</sup> *Variety* (September 20, 1912), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *New York Review* (October 1, 1910), Bothwell Browne Clipping File. All clipping files and scrapbooks found in the Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>24</sup> *Variety* (April 23, 1910), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Unmarked clipping, April 11, 1913, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks (n. 4 above), ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 78.

many details of apparel with which women are very familiar."<sup>27</sup> In the Midwest, an enterprising reporter for the Cincinnati Times Star, claiming to document "a few excerpts from conversations heard in the elongated line that awaited seat sale for the special matinee of Julian Eltinge," quoted the swooning young girls.<sup>28</sup> "I always love to see him because I think he is the loveliest girl," reported one with unconscious irony. To another Eltinge was "the prettiest woman I ever saw." Two of the young admirers in line looked to Eltinge for guidance on enhancing their femininity. "I'm a modiste," admitted one, "I want to see him just to get a few new ideas on the latest gowns."<sup>29</sup> According to another Cincinnati reporter, "To the ladies ... this female impersonator has become an idealized clothes horse. He takes the latest creations with which fashion would bedeck the female form and shows the opposite sex how they should be worn."<sup>30</sup> A wry reviewer for the St. Louis Globe clarified the ironies present in the accomplishments of performers such as Eltinge, chortling, "In these days of the feminism, when it is gradually dawning on many that 'mere man' is something more than 'mere man,' ... sardonic fun can be extracted from the circumstances that another 'mere man,' Julian Eltinge, is easily able to wear and disport himself in feminine togs in a manner that must cause the pangs of an entirely novel jealousy to rise in many a woman."<sup>31</sup>

This reporter may have wished to locate anxiety in female jealousy, but Eltinge's success began to provoke much greater concern elsewhere. What were men to make of the fact that Eltinge seemed so fascinated with the accoutrements of femininity? Eltinge continued his act after the curtain fell through the Julian Eltinge Magazine, published in 1912 and 1913, which shared makeup and beauty secrets as his publicity machine emphasized his fashion know-how and its appeal.<sup>32</sup> One 1912 press release trumpeted that "he has fans and combs, silk hosiery and French petticoats galore. His shoes are made to order and no society girl is more particular about her heels and the fit."<sup>33</sup> A man who flaunted his French petticoats and bragged that he was more particular about his heels than a society girl raised more gender questions than he answered.

These issues accelerated when male reviewers, emphasizing his skill, and demonstrating his appeal to men as well as women, elevated a troubling sexual specter. Men might find this figure attractive. The Cincinnati Times Star reporter included a male echo to the comments from Eltinge's enthusiastic female cadre. "'I want to see him,' said a man, 'because I think he's the swellest dame that ever wore down the boards.'"<sup>34</sup> Variety attempted to maneuver through the difficulty with careful wording. "As a girl on the stage any man would rave over the genuine

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<sup>27</sup> Slide, *The Great Pretenders* (n. 3 above), pp. 24-25.

<sup>28</sup> Cincinnati Times Star (March 7, 1912), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The enterprising historical reader should no doubt hold some skepticism about the veracity of these quotes. Making up pieces like this was a common activity among entertainment reporters. Nevertheless, even as fiction, the reporter obviously thought that he was correctly identifying Eltinge's appeal, and other comments from contemporary reviewers and critics support this particular journalist's understanding.

<sup>30</sup> Cincinnati Times Star (January 11, 1915), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 181.

<sup>31</sup> St. Louis Globe (March 11, 1912), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> There are three issues of the Julian Eltinge Magazine in the Townshend Walsh Collection. None is dated, although they appear to be from 1912-13. Two are entitled the Julian Eltinge Magazine. One of these has a "#3" on the cover; the other has the number 2 penciled on. A third issue is entitled the Julian Eltinge Magazine and Beauty Hints. "

<sup>33</sup> Unmarked typescript press release dated 1912, Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

<sup>34</sup> Cincinnati Times Star (March 7, 1912), Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

reproduction of Eltinge's impersonation. His 'Brinkley Girl' is a dream; his 'Bathing Girl' a gasp."<sup>35</sup>

Although *Variety* tried to emphasize that it was not Eltinge himself but his artistic creation that might produce a figure of male fantasy, this comment reveals the anxieties that impersonation provoked. Despite the outward discussion of femininity, the real issue at stake was the nature of masculinity. If Eltinge could be an object of heterosexual male fantasy, was he really a man? "Mere man," as the St. Louis reporter sarcastically phrased it, had indeed become the issue, and male response to female impersonation expressed great distress. The fascination with beautiful fashions and personal attractiveness can be read as both admiration and discomfort. The impersonators' beauty, as produced on stage, magnified not only their talents but also their capacity to undermine gender certainty.

Female impersonation was both deeply threatening and an extremely important signifier of what it meant to be an adult male because female impersonators were, of course, actually men. The question of Eltinge's identity provoked significant distress. The concern over whether female impersonators were actually men, and how one could discover that, reflected a need to determine a male gender that was not open to interpretation. This concern played itself out in obsessive discussions of the ways in which the private star's behavior and dress either replicated or contradicted his performing persona. This search for the "private" star produced multiple gender presentations-in their own way equally, and even more desperately, performative.

Julian Eltinge's "maleness" took many forms. A notorious camera hound, most photos of Eltinge pointedly depicted him out of female attire as well (fig. 1: Julian Eltinge as the Bride and Groom. A classic publicity shot for the Julian Eltinge Magazine, ca. 1913. Online at [http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?psnypl\\_the\\_4246](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?psnypl_the_4246)). When he brought his touring hit play to Wisconsin, the *Milwaukee Journal*, for example, juxtaposed a photo of an aggressive, forceful-looking Eltinge, cigar in outreached hand, against a picture of Eltinge as "The Fascinating Widow."<sup>36</sup> Other well-circulated publicity photos superimposed images of his female characters engaged in activity with the undisguised star. One montage showed Eltinge in shirtsleeves athletically maneuvering a rowboat that contained four of his female creations coyly enjoying his vigorous masculinity.<sup>37</sup>

The popular press also emphasized Eltinge's virility. He was "a good looking fellow on the street; well built and perhaps a little beyond the ordinary attractive man to an impressionable young woman," remarked *Variety*.<sup>38</sup> Eltinge seemed more than simply well built to some. According to numerous reports, he resembled nothing less than a pugilistic marvel (fig. 2: Julian Eltinge, on the receiving end of a left hook, demonstrates his boxing skills (1917). Online at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1696484>). "I seen him fight once in Pittsburgh and I'm for him," growled a male supporter in Cincinnati, while others were reported to have confused him with "Jim Flynn, the white hope," when the "husky built chap, broad of shoulder and likewise of girth" strolled by. "'That's him,' squealed a girl. 'You're crazy,' answered another. 'Why Eltinge is a little bit of a chap. That looks like a prize fighter.'"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Variety* (April 24, 1909), p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Milwaukee Journal* (undated), Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

<sup>37</sup> *Julian Eltinge Magazine*, no. 3, Townshend Walsh Collection; Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library; also Slide, *The Great Pretenders* (n. 3 above), p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Variety* (April 24, 1909), p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Cincinnati Times Star*, Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

Eltinge worked tirelessly to promote an image of himself that reinforced traditional masculine norms. Virtually all publicity dealing with Eltinge (and reams were produced) highlighted his "manly" identity. One early article, dating from his initial foray into impersonation, took the direct approach. "Julian Eltinge Isn't Effeminate When He Gets His Corsets Off" ran the headline over a picture of Eltinge dressed in feminine garb. The story described Eltinge refusing to accept flowers handed him over the footlights and requesting instead the results of the first race at Belmont.<sup>40</sup> The Boston Traveler reassured its theatergoing readers with a headline insisting "Eltinge Really a Manly Chap, In Fact His Name Is Bill Dalton."<sup>41</sup> Male reporters brought in to watch Eltinge "become" a woman backstage always expressed some discomfort, ultimately alleviated by proper displays of gender. In Boston, reporter William Sage wrote of being overwhelmed by Eltinge's femininity as the impersonator dressed: "I presume I would have been flying down the street if Eltinge had not tipped over a tray of hairpins. The swear words that ripped so easily from his lips in a fine manly voice relieved us both. They soothed his anger and reassured me of his masculinity."<sup>42</sup>

Newspaper stories about Eltinge's private life often focused on traditionally masculine interests. Eltinge claimed to be a farmer with a "working" farm on Long Island. "There he gets right down to things masculine and earthy. He is an ardent amateur farmer; he has a handy way about him too and likes to putter about doing odd jobs of painting and plumbing," reported the Cincinnati Commercial.<sup>43</sup> The Toledo Blade reminded audiences in Ohio that Eltinge "has been known to hold his own in a boxing bout with Jim Corbet, is a winner in a rowing match and has always been in the front rank of many sports dear to manly men." The writer felt more secure "knowing these things, as Mr. Eltinge has been careful that they should be known."<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, Julian Eltinge was very careful that such things should not only be known but widely advertised in advance of all his performances. No one matched Eltinge's own continuous output of information identifying himself as genuinely male. His press release revealed that "the fluffy skirt and dainty bodice hide the figure of an athlete and more than one officious person has been taught a thing or two in upper cuts and strong blows."<sup>45</sup> In interviews Eltinge often told reporters of his affection for male attire and masculine activity. "The dame stuff doesn't appeal to me. When I retire I hope to get into overalls and duck the barber."<sup>46</sup>

Stars like Eltinge needed to prove their masculinity and avoid allegations of effeminacy at all costs. This clearly created problems for most female impersonators, whose careers often rose or fell on their capacity to successfully negotiate this contested terrain. Yet the territory itself seemed unstable and constantly shifting. Accusations of effeminacy were not simply evaluations of appropriately gendered public activity. Such discussions called into question the nature of private sexual behavior and the impact of those acts on the public understanding of the individual's gender. Julian Eltinge and his compatriots in impersonation found themselves surveyed not only for proof of a clearly readable and assignable gender but for the secret signs of "degeneracy" as well.

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<sup>40</sup> Unmarked clipping, Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

<sup>41</sup> Boston Traveler (May 18, 1912), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks (n. 4 above), ser. 2, vol. 160, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Cincinnati Commercial (February 28, 1912), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Toledo Blade (February 24, 1912), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Unmarked press release dated 1912 found in Julian Eltinge Clipping File.

<sup>46</sup> Unmarked clipping, June 6, 1913, Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 2, vol. 160, p. 108.

Concern over the issue of sexual "perversion" present in gender impersonation arose early and often. Eltinge claimed that his supposed dislike of female impersonation, referenced in a 1906 interview, emerged from his belief that "many of the impersonators have given the outsider good cause to believe all he hears of a man who wears women's clothes on stage." The soon-to-be star felt that he could win over his colleagues. "It is not pleasant to go into a house on a Monday morning and be regarded with suspicion by my fellow players, but I find that they soon learn that I am a real man, and by Wednesday I have gained their respect."<sup>47</sup>

Eltinge's complaint was quite typical of numerous remarks that appeared in reviews and interviews. To be a "real man" seemed to address, in order to deny, the possibility of male homosexuality. Critics used such characterizations both to clarify Eltinge's special status and to reassure the public. *Variety* directed attention to Eltinge's "fine manly self" even while praising his remarkable feminine characterizations.<sup>48</sup> *New York's Dramatic Mirror* thought Eltinge "the manliest man" and "the girliest girl."<sup>49</sup> But it was the *Boston Transcript* that perhaps stated people's true feelings with their carefully worded praise that Eltinge was "unique in being able to look like a mannish man and a convincing woman at different times," thus casting probably quite appropriate doubt as to which constituted the greater performance.<sup>50</sup>

The suffering that Eltinge endured because others cast aspersions on his manhood became the stuff of legend. When a stage hand aimed a "malignant grin" at Eltinge during a rehearsal in 1914, he was reported to have stopped work in order to inform one and all, "Now, I'm a man. I may be a female impersonator, but-the first guy that makes a crack about me is going to get a punch in the mush, do you get me?"<sup>51</sup> The report indicated that this was a typical occurrence for Eltinge. It quoted the star as complaining, "I'm a little sore. I have endured much. Things that you cannot punch a guy on the jaw for get my goat."<sup>52</sup> One reporter noted in 1912 that "like all outsiders, Eltinge didn't understand the contempt in which the man who plays a woman's part seriously is held by people off the stage" and quoted Eltinge in rueful response: "If I had known what they think, I would never have taken up the work seriously."<sup>53</sup> The author regaled his readers with even more stories of Eltinge fighting with sneering stagehands and critics, concluding that he enjoyed retelling such "fierce manly beserker things of Eltinge because he's too good a chap to be tarred with the stick that is applied with all propriety to the other fellows."<sup>54</sup>

This vehement dislike of female impersonators as a group seems to have become more pronounced as their prominence increased. While isolated comments appear prior to 1910, by 1913 virtually every article about Eltinge or his colleagues specifically addresses the potential "offensiveness" of the performer. "In spite of a well defined popular prejudice against female impersonators, the public seems to regard Eltinge as away from others in this class," noted the *Stage Pictorial* in 1913.<sup>55</sup> The *New York Evening World* offered an even more direct approach. "There are a host of female impersonators. And those who are not abominations are pests. Eltinge is the exception."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Slide, *The Great Pretenders* (n. 3 above), pp. 21, 24.

<sup>48</sup> *Variety* (September 16, 1911), p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Dramatic Mirror* (August 16, 1921), p. 663.

<sup>50</sup> *Boston Transcript* (April 30, 1912), *Robinson Locke Scrapbooks*, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> Unmarked clipping dated March 21, 1914, *Robinson Locke Scrapbooks* (n. 4 above), ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 127.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Boston Traveler* (May 18, 1912), *Robinson Locke Scrapbooks*, ser. 2, vol. 160, p. 91.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Stage Pictorial* (June 1913), *Robinson Locke Scrapbooks*, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 85.

<sup>56</sup> *New York Evening World* (March 10, 1914), *Robinson Locke Scrapbooks*, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 129.

Bothwell Browne's career difficulties make clear that the terms "manly" and "effeminate," official descriptions of gender, were codes for "deviant" sexuality. Browne could not escape being labeled as "offensive" because he forced questions of sexuality to the surface. Officially, Browne suffered in his career in New York for being too "female." Some critics found him loathsome. One called Browne's characterization of a young schoolgirl "insipid and disgusting."<sup>57</sup> Many seemed particularly offended by his exaggerated effeminacy combined with the erotic implications of his work. One 1910 critic described Browne's specialty road act, the "Serpent Dance," as "a wiggling dance with nothing but gauze over the pit of his stomach."<sup>58</sup> The Los Angeles Examiner offered the following, more detailed, description of the "Serpent of the Nile" from Browne's 1913 road tour. "Cleopatra, fondling the reptile, then holding it from her in horrible fascination of fear, determined upon death, yet putting it away from her, finally crushes the venomed head to her bosom and expires in ecstatic agony."<sup>59</sup> According to Browne's press releases, his snakes were live and dangerous and one can imagine the impact upon the stunned audience.

Visions of a writhing "venomed head" and an impersonator collapsed on stage in "ecstatic agony" provide the answer to why Browne emerged as such a controversial figure. He went further than Eltinge and played on erotic imagery calculated to arouse male members of the audience. Bothwell Browne clearly played the sexual edge in his work and intended to provoke his audience sexually. The Examiner reviewer expressed genuine sexual discomfort, despite his knowledge that Browne was not "actually" a potential sexual object, when he noted that the performance was "not less suggestive by reason of the sex of the performer."<sup>60</sup> This suggestive quality seems to have been an underlying issue whenever Browne or Eltinge took the stage. Reviewers' comments reflected a concern that male audiences might have been aroused by the female impersonator and a fear that the performer hoped for just such a possibility.

The sexual concerns that tarred Bothwell Browne trailed Julian Eltinge as an ever-present threat despite his greater fame. This concern is evidenced in a remarkable 1913 article by entertainment writer Amy Leslie that appeared in the Detroit News, reprinted in its entirety from the Chicago Daily News. Leslie clarified Eltinge's dilemma for her midwestern readers. She opened with praise of impersonation's main attraction, noting that Eltinge, "brawny, intensely masculine and carrying well his own name of Bill Dalton, has the objectionable and difficult field of female impersonation all to himself, because the age loathes the usual creeping male defective who warbles soprano and decks himself in the frocks and frills of womankind." Leslie excoriated commercial managers who had "swept Broadway of all its lispig gentlemen who walked from the waist up ... and put the delicatessen undesirables within reach of a paint and powder box and substituted them for a chorus."<sup>61</sup>

Leslie wanted to make sure that her readers understood exactly the subject of her assault, and she offered enough descriptive detail that there could be no mistake. While acknowledging that in earlier times and in other cultures there were places for effeminate men, she raged that "these freaks disporting themselves clammily before rather irritated audiences have nothing in common with talent ... and are a flaming insult to any intelligent, normally healthy and sane audience." She described them as "writhing, playing with time and fate, ignoring mind and

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<sup>57</sup> Unmarked source, Bothwell Browne Clipping File.

<sup>58</sup> Unmarked source, October 4, 1910, Bothwell Browne Clipping File.

<sup>59</sup> Los Angeles Examiner (May 24, 1913), Bothwell Browne Clipping File.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> The Detroit News (September 10, 1913), Robinson Locke Scrapbooks, ser. 3, vol. 431, p. 88.

morals and going about with hideous painted lips and extravagant clothes. ... They are nearly always full of irresponsible gayety and much quiet wit of the frivolous empty sort. . . . Their atmosphere is fetid and dank, cryptic or [sic] meaning and abominable." She pitied Eltinge, who was "brawling and stampeding out his fury half the time because these creatures who always flock together are 'crazy about him.'"<sup>62</sup> Leslie closed with the scandalous tale of a night when these "pariahs with the wristwatch" bribed a guard into letting them meet Eltinge at the stage door. "Eltinge stepped out, caught sight of their fanciful ensemble, and let a roar out of him that shook the scenery. His pretty wig was off, his black jet sleeves rolled up to fight, and he looked like a stricken bull in the arena. The prim gentles fled. One of them yelled 'Somebody throw her a fish; she's a sea lion.'"<sup>63</sup>

Leslie's rage is clearly marked and precisely aimed at the male homosexual subculture circling the entertainment industry in major urban areas. She rehearses numerous allusions to homosexuality that were either already slang usage or would shortly enter the lexicon. Perhaps the most telling information is the story at the end revealing a clearly "camp" sensibility among the "prim gentles" who refer to Eltinge with a comradely "she." The men running from the roaring Eltinge clearly saw him as one of their own.

Leslie's article reveals the connection between the subtextual concerns present in discussions of how the impersonator performed his gender both on and offstage and the real issues of sexuality at stake.<sup>64</sup> Critics, through ongoing interest in how Eltinge and others either distinguished themselves or fell into the "trap" of effeminacy, demonstrated anxiety over sexual practice and its relationship to an anchored, visible, and impermeable notion of masculinity. "Male defectives" may have "decked themselves in the frocks and frills of womankind," but surely they could be differentiated from the "brawny, intensely masculine" female impersonator Julian Eltinge. Manliness may have been the term, but sexual perversity was the issue. The two came together in critical discussions of Eltinge and other impersonators. As reviewers forced this question, they situated themselves within a debate that was ongoing in communities around the country. Newspaper and court records from towns far from New York (or Detroit and Chicago) clearly indicate that homosexuality was not only well known, but the subject of precisely the kind of controversy present in the rhetoric surrounding impersonators. Police activity in various parts of the country inadvertently alerted residents to a pre-Kinseyan recognition: homosexual activity was everywhere. Proclaiming an assault on the vice that had somehow escaped the city, police and prosecutors sought out male "perverts," only to discover that these were men who also defied definition. Somehow their prey remained indistinguishable from themselves. It was a confusion familiar to those who witnessed impersonation on stage, fearing but unable to be sure of what lay hidden under the beautiful costumes. In a world unprotected by a reassuring final curtain, the chaos played itself out with even greater uncertainty and for much higher stakes.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> As historian Robert Toll noted in his 1976 survey of American popular entertainment, numerous contemporary commentators subjected Eltinge and his like to similar bitter criticism that specifically called forth images of "degeneracy" in Europe and the Middle East. Toll concluded that "whether impersonators were homosexuals ... and ... disqualified from being performers were the underlying questions in the controversy surrounding" them. See Toll, *On with the Show* (n. 9 above), p. 249.

After fifty men in Long Beach, California, were arrested as "social vagrants" in November 1914,<sup>65</sup> C. V. McClatchy, the powerful publisher of the Sacramento Bee and noted scandalmonger, swung into action. McClatchy became fascinated with the Long Beach raids and hired an undercover reporter to get the inside scoop. He was enraged that some defended these seemingly respectable individuals against "scandal papers" and "character assassins." McClatchy took a nasty swipe at Progressive reformers who focused on prostitution but ignored homosexuality and howled that "common sense cannot conceive how intelligent people who would lash the Hagars of modern society from city to city ... could ask the sanctuary of silence for men who would have defiled Sodom and Gomorrah."<sup>66</sup>

McClatchy hired reporter Eugene Fisher as an undercover operative to get inside the Long Beach vice squad investigation and dig out as much information on the scandal as possible. Fisher responded with extensive and explicit information about the police attack against male homosexuals in southern California. He also forwarded remarkably detailed reports on sexual practice. His investigations revealed a large community of self-consciously identified individuals, both male and female, who engaged in homosexual relations. Based in Long Beach, the community extended throughout the Los Angeles County area. Other homosexuals in the state gravitated there, indicating that a relatively wide communications network may have existed among California homosexuals.<sup>67</sup> Fisher's reports provide fascinating insights into this early twentieth-century community and reveal the complexity present in the heterosexual response. Before the story Fisher told had wound to a close, the connections between gender and sexual practice would be drawn sharply as Long Beach authorities searched in vain for a way to distinguish the "guilty" from the "innocent."

Fisher's prime source, a young man named L. L. Rollins, who had himself been arrested, offered a wealth of tales. While both Fisher and the police seemed to believe him, Rollins's journalistic veracity is less important than his story. Rollins told of a homosexual community with robust, complex sexual experiences that saw itself as quintessentially modern and progressive. Rollins's self-described world strongly resembles that of the "pariahs with the wrist watch" who flocked together and were "just crazy" for Eltinge—an important similarity and one that is not coincidental.<sup>68</sup>

The "society of queers" who held their "drags" at sites known as "96 clubs"<sup>69</sup> were some of approximately two to five thousand homosexuals in the Los Angeles area in 1914.<sup>70</sup> Rollins claimed to know two hundred "queers" personally and described long-standing couples and

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<sup>65</sup> Social vagrancy was a "catch-all" charge used to arrest a large variety of community offenders. People who seemed to have no visible means of support, traveling salesmen, "loose women," and generally "unpleasant" characters found themselves subject to arrest as social vagrants.

<sup>66</sup> Sacramento Bee (November 23, 1914), as reprinted in an unmarked clipping. Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>67</sup> Although McClatchy's obsession with the case is never explained, it may have something to do with the fact that a former Sacramento minister was netted in the Long Beach raid. A Reverend Baker, forced out of his Sacramento church for unstated reasons in 1907, somehow found his way to Long Beach.

McClatchy asked Fisher to find out any specific details that he could concerning Baker's circumstances.

<sup>68</sup> I want to thank Eric Lott for encouraging me to try to uncover whether Eltinge had particular fan support in the homosexual community. Although I was initially somewhat skeptical of my capacity to find such proof, Leslie's article makes clear that such connections were indeed made by contemporaries.

<sup>69</sup> Testimony of Herbert N. Lowe at his trial for social vagrancy as reported in a transmittal from Fisher to the Sacramento Bee dated December 11, 1914, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>70</sup> Rollins claimed five thousand. The police assumed he was exaggerating and speculated two thousand. Fisher to McClatchy, December 5, 1914, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

community institutions.<sup>71</sup> In addition to the "96 clubs," both police and Rollins confirmed that parties generally took place in scattered private homes throughout the area, rather than specific unchanging locations.

The Sacramento newspaper magnate obsessively demanded details, and Fisher obliged his fascinated boss. McClatchy clamored for the gossip on an apparently famous party given by two Venice millionaires who had lived together for some years. Fisher retold Rollins's account claiming that "about thirty prominent young men" had attended. "Each guest, when welcomed at the door was given a silk kimono, wig and pair of slippers." An orgy of "unnatural practices" followed.<sup>72</sup> Rollins told of another party that had taken place only a few nights before his arrest. Fisher related that "fourteen young men were invited . . . with the premise that they would have the opportunity of meeting some of the prominent 'queers,' . . . and the further attraction that some 'chickens' as the new recruits in the vice are called, would be available."<sup>73</sup> The party continued in unprintable fashion for the Bee's family newspaper. "They were served an elegant repast. . . . Instead of placecards, at each place was a candy representation of a man's private which was sucked and enjoyed by each guest to the evident amusement of all."<sup>74</sup> Rollins concluded with the information that "one or two of the young men were clad in women's clothing and entertained the gathering with music and song."<sup>75</sup>

Fisher acknowledged the widespread nature of the activities being addressed. He commented in an aside to his boss that "almost every man or boy seems to have encountered it in some phase or other during his life."<sup>76</sup> In recognition, Fisher snarled that boys and girls were now at risk nationwide from "a form of vice that is more insidious in its operation, more diabolical in its effect and more degrading withal than any that hitherto have engaged the attention of delinquent and depraved men and women. It has now fastened its roots in these United States and threatens to sap the very lifeblood of society."<sup>77</sup> While such hyperbole smacks of traditional Progressive flamboyance, we should not overlook Fisher's sense that homosexuality was widespread and entrenched. Fisher noted, as did the contemporary sexologists with whom he had familiarized himself, that "once used for this immoral purpose, boys and girls also are said to like the sensation and readily fall for it the second, third, and fourth times."<sup>78</sup>

Fisher and the police made an important distinction between the "sensation" so pleurably discovered by threatened American youth and the gender of those with whom they shared that experience. The individuals arrested were charged with "social vagrancy"—not sodomy or "crimes against nature." Both of the latter charges specifically identified male-to-male sexual activity that involved anal penetration. No laws existed in California to address the behavior testified to by these men.<sup>79</sup> In noting that the men were guilty of "nothing more nor less than

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<sup>71</sup> Transmittal from Eugene Fisher to Sacramento Bee, undated but appears to be late November 1914. The quoted passage appears on p. 13 of the transmittal, which opens with the following quote from Shakespeare: "Such an act that blurs the blush and grace of Modesty, takes off the rose from the fair forehead of innocent youth and sets a blister there." (Hereafter referred to as Shakespeare Transmittal.)

<sup>72</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 10, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Transmittal from Fisher to McClatchy, November 20, 1914, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, pp. 3-4.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>79</sup> Convictions for "crimes against nature" (a statute on the California books since 1850) were repeatedly challenged on the grounds that the statute was too vague because it did not specify whether oral sex could be included. The California legislature responded in 1915 and enacted sec. 288a of the penal code,

'cocksucking,'" Fisher's matter-of-fact tone belied his fury.<sup>80</sup> The offensiveness of oral sex seemed almost to rival the fact that the partner was of the same gender.

The reporter explained the crime to McClatchy. "Historically, this is not a new form of vice," noted Fisher, referencing "the royalty and nobility of France, Italy, and other European countries in the time of Marie Antoinette."<sup>81</sup> Pointing out that "homosexualism" was a parallel but apparently not identical sexual practice, Fisher wrote, "It resembles homosexualism in the respect that men find their sexual pleasure and gratification with men and boys rather than women and women on the other hand are attracted sexually toward girls and women instead of the opposite sex."<sup>82</sup> Recalling Oscar Wilde's trial, Fisher reminded McClatchy of the "group of so called literary men and artists" engaged in "the practice of sodomy" and went on to clarify that "these creatures . . . are not even satisfied with this unnatural and degrading practice.... Their passion and desire still is for young boys and girls but they take their pleasure in the still more loathsome and disgusting way of applying their mouths to the private parts of their companions in crime."<sup>83</sup>

In Fisher's numerous reports he described incidents of oral sex extensively. Fellatio was clearly the focus of both police action and his own investigation. While the homosexuality of the participants was not irrelevant, it is important to note that the fact of oral sex itself was absolutely crucial to the sense of moral crisis that surrounded the Long Beach case. The reporter described one defendant with the temerity to go to court rather than kill himself as one who was "said to have practiced the infamy for more than nine years, being one who will 'go down' on another or will himself willingly and gladly submit to the outrage."<sup>84</sup> Quoting Rollins directly at one point Fisher relayed the following tale: "I have seen men ... at a function of that kind ... go around on their knees to various other persons present and attempt to 'go down' on them right before the crowd and seemingly they have no shame about it."<sup>85</sup> Fisher went on to further clarify the separation between "homosexualism" and the practice under discussion citing a local attorney who specialized in defending social vagrants to verify it as a "vice as old as sodomy . . . practiced by both men and women for centuries."<sup>86</sup>

While those engaged in oral sex seemed, according to Fisher's information, to be well aware of its timeless quality, these individuals contextualized their activities with a phrase that must have horrified Fisher and his police friends. In a final outrage, members of the homosexual community in southern California identified this sexual practice with a pet name. They referred to oral sex as the "Twentieth Century Way."<sup>87</sup>

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which specifically declared fellatio and cunnilingus to be felonies punishable by up to fifteen years in prison. See Allan Bérubé, "Sodomy and Sex Perversion Laws in California since 1850" (paper presented to the Bay Area Lawyers for Individual Freedom, San Francisco, January 30, 1986). Interestingly, Bérubé points out that the law was overturned by the California Supreme Court a few years later because it violated a new anti-Spanish amendment to the state constitution that required all laws to be written in English. Apparently cunnilingus and fellatio could not be found in an English-language dictionary. The California legislature rectified their linguistic oversight in 1921 and made oral sex a felony in English as well as in Latin.

<sup>80</sup> Fisher to McClatchy, November 20, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Fisher to McClatchy, November 20, 1914, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 10, and 12.

With the intonation of a "twentieth century way," homosexuals, or "queers" as they called themselves, firmly and knowingly associated themselves with visions of progress and affirmative good. Americans saw the new century as the apotheosis of modernity and national ascendancy. The twentieth century offered the promise of great things: new technologies, a rising standard of living, and a vision of a glorious tomorrow. To incorporate this vision of positive modernity into a marginalized sexual practice demonstrates a remarkably self-conscious use of language. Whether offered in camp irony or merely boastful wit, the individuals using this phrase clearly saw themselves as a connected community tied by forms of sexual practice that they viewed as the wave of the future. The "twentieth century way" reinforces the findings of important new studies documenting complex homosexual subcultures in major urban areas while simultaneously pointing out that such subcultures flourished outside urban America as well.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps in fear that the name was too apt, the "twentieth century way" came to be prosecuted with a new vigor in those dawning years. In Long Beach, two men hired themselves out with the specific purpose of trapping and catching men engaged in oral sex with one another. According to Eugene Fisher, Detectives B. C. Brown and W. H. Warren made the hunt a personal mission and plied their trade around the country. Fisher claimed that the two came from Chicago, where Brown had worked for a private detective agency and Warren for the Chicago Star in a promotional capacity. On salary in Los Angeles, they requested and received permission to carry the regular police badge. In Long Beach, the police commission originally scoffed at the possibility that such a vice existed in their town. The police would only pay Brown and Warren if they could produce results and offered them ten dollars per conviction, undoubtedly contributing to the high number of arrests for such a small community.<sup>89</sup>

The two detectives prowled public parks and restrooms searching for potential transgressors. According to the information given Fisher, most men were caught at the "comfort station" of the Long Beach Bathhouse. Fisher described in detail the tactics used by the detectives. "They would watch until they saw a man whom they thought to be given to this sort of thing and would attract his attention by putting their fingers through a hole in the board partition dividing the toilet walls. Upon looking through he would see a man's mouth close to the aperture and if [he] were that kind of man and the suspicions of the officers correct, would stick his penis through the hole whereupon the officers would stamp in some way, sometimes with indelible pencil and frequently with marker, and then rush in upon him."<sup>90</sup> Warren and Brown's enterprise may have netted them some positive publicity, yet it raised troubling questions as well. In one portion of Fisher's story, he noted that one particular targeted individual had been "arrested while attempting to go down on Officer Warren."<sup>91</sup> This placement of Warren as a more active

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<sup>88</sup> See Chauncey, *Gay New York* (n. 2 above). See also Estelle B. Freedman and John D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, 1988), for an overview; and, more particularly, Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York, 1989), pp. 318-31.

<sup>89</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, pp. 2 and 18. Also letter from Fisher to McClatchy dated December 5, 1914. Fisher claimed that Brown and Warren were also negotiating with San Diego authorities and that they planned to continue their work in San Francisco, Sacramento, Portland, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, and New York. I have found no further trace of them, however.

<sup>90</sup> Fisher to McClatchy, November 20, 1914, pp. 2-3. For an extended discussion of early twentieth-century police surveillance tactics in cases of homosexual prosecution, see Steven J. Maynard, "Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance, and the Dialectics of Discovery, Toronto, 1890-1930," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 207-42.

<sup>91</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 20. This paragraph was specifically slashed by an editor.

participant offers evidence that the two detectives engaged in entrapping sexual relations at least some of the time. This is a likely outcome given the context of the trap set by the detectives, but obviously a more troubling one when the public attempted to assess whether Warren and Brown were "on the square," as the local police phrased it.<sup>92</sup>

The question is not an idle one but instead reflects the problem faced both by those enjoying female impersonation on stage and by those attempting to determine gender in the world around them. The world of the visible, so important in the production of gender knowledge, was under assault by a new belief that the hidden-the veiled universe of sexual practice-could be just as determinant. When Warren and Brown sat waiting in a Long Beach comfort station, how did they determine that a man would be "given to this sort of thing"? How were the southern California police, appropriately suspicious of two traveling detectives, to know if they were "on the square"?

It was exactly this problem that forced the acquittal of Herbert Lowe, a Long Beach defendant who brazenly demanded a trial. Despite the testimony of five witnesses to his guilt and four who claimed to hear him confess, the jury refused to convict Lowe of social vagrancy. Attacking Brown and Warren, Lowe's attorney played upon precisely the same fears that had led to their hiring in the first place. "You don't know these stool pigeons who came here to 'get' our citizens; you do know Lowe. We don't need strangers to come here to ferret out crime." Attorney Swaffield raged that "the hands of Special Officers Brown and Warren dripped with the blood of John Lamb," a Long Beach druggist who had committed suicide following the publication of his name. News accounts told how the clever attorney got to the heart of the matter. "'Look at this man who asks you to believe his testimony,' he said, pointing to Warren. 'See the puffs beneath the eyes, the sallow complexion, the sleek combed and oiled hair, the pink manicured finger nails-there is the degenerate.'"<sup>93</sup>

The telltale "signs" of degeneracy presented a fundamental obstacle. Everyone was suspect and each had a list of traits by which to identify those who would engage in unmanly sexual practices. As the theatrical audience had struggled to identify the impersonator on stage, so too did members of the community search for some definition by which to mark the face of such perversity. Swaffield used the twin themes of effeminacy, demonstrated by pink manicures, and ill health as seen in a sallow complexion and puffy eyes. Just as erotic femininity marked Bothwell Browne as offensive onstage and robust physicality identified Eltinge as "manly" offstage, this particular attorney demanded that these traits be searched for in the community at large.

Yet it was precisely the failure to find a comprehensive set of identifying characteristics that underscored the crisis in Long Beach. A smart attorney may have turned the tide for Lowe, but other homosexuals found themselves suddenly exposed as their heterosexual neighbors expressed shock at the presence of such an unmarked vice. As Fisher noted with concern, many of those in attendance at raided parties included "some of the wealthy and prominent men of the city, politicians, prominent business men, and even prominent churchmen."<sup>94</sup> Even those who agreed with Fisher that suicide in the face of accusations demonstrated proof of appropriate masculinity must have found cold comfort in such verification. Commenting on Lamb's death, the investigator declared that he "must still have some manhood and decency," while scowling that "the degenerate, as a finished product, I understand, is utterly wanting in

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<sup>92</sup> Fisher to McClatchy, December 5, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>93</sup> Unmarked news clipping, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 11.

any of the finer qualities of manhood."<sup>95</sup> Manhood and degeneracy were completely incompatible. If suicide was the only solid evidence for manhood, such proof after the fact would not assist in the process of discovery and proper gender identification.

Attorney Swaffield successfully turned the fear of the secret outsider onto an actual stranger in the community. He could do so by playing upon the notion of a hidden truth of degeneracy that nevertheless remained fundamentally mysterious. A simple check of the prominent arrest list reinforced that fact for the jury and, despite Lowe's acquittal, undoubtedly intensified their sense of anxiety. If maleness was coded onto specific public presentation and yet undermined by transgressive sexual practice, how could gender be finally ascertained? If one was no longer truly a male by virtue of a private act, it was essential that the act be known. The citizens of Long Beach looked for a way to see this pivotal hidden moment—a mark on the body that could testify to the transgression. Yet, as the Long Beach investigation exemplified, such marks could not in fact be anchored to any certainties at all.

While the public face masked "degeneracy" through shifting visible signs, the private details unearthed in the Long Beach scandal provided images remarkably familiar to audiences anywhere in the country. The prominent men in Long Beach dressed in a female finery that would have turned Julian Eltinge green with envy. One man, boasting "one of the finest wardrobes among the 'queer' people"<sup>96</sup> carried a photograph of himself dressed in a gorgeous frock and a plumed hat sniffing flowers in front of his bungalow.<sup>97</sup> From the silk kimonos at the party in Venice to the southern California sheriff's son caught with a group of friends "undressed, and all ... painted and powdered [sic]," male homosexuality was celebrated in "drags" that mimicked female form.<sup>98</sup> The offense lay in the trappings of female presentation, but even more profoundly in the form of sexual practice that such trappings represented. When the authorities looked at silk kimonos they saw "the twentieth century way."

The depth of the new concern can be seen in profoundly complicated images that ran simultaneously in turn-of-the-century America. In the same historical window we find Julian Eltinge at the height of his career alongside police raiding the homes of men who "call each other by endearing names and dress in women's clothing at their balls and parties."<sup>99</sup> We see theaters filled with awed audiences swept up by the illusion of gender impersonation while roving detectives lurk in the shadows hoping to trap those whose sexual practices underscored the inability to identify gender with certitude. These are not oppositional images but pieces of the same puzzle. Oral sex and homosexuality, separate but aligned symbols, became the focus of serious concern precisely because they could not be seen and therefore could not be known for certain. "Seeing" them had become essential to verifying gender, but really seeing them proved virtually impossible. Any goal of absolute knowability was completely elusive and instead came to be replaced by competing theories of sexual signification. Anyone could offer up a different clearly visible "mark" of sexual activity by which a person's gender could be ascertained—and many did. Attorney Swaffield could secure Herbert Lowe's acquittal by calling Detective Warren's "sallow complexion" to the jury's attention; theater critic Amy Leslie could

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<sup>95</sup> Fisher to McClatchy, November 20, 1914, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> Unmarked news clipping, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>97</sup> Loose photograph, Sacramento Bee Long Beach Investigation.

<sup>98</sup> Shakespeare Transmittal, p. 22. The context clearly denotes the word "powdered."

<sup>99</sup> Loose transmittal sheet from Fisher to Sacramento Bee labeled "p. 2. Begins with phrase "Startling disclosures have been made." Appears to be either an earlier draft or rewrite of a portion of the Shakespeare Transmittal.

point with equal ferocity to "lispig gentlemen full of irresponsible gayety" in order to defend Julian Eltinge. Who could privilege which sign? And how was anyone to know for certain?

The echoes of this struggle reverberated between the Long Beach courtroom and the vaudeville stage. The highly public debate over Eltinge and his colleagues helped verify the relationship between sexual practice and gender definition. Commentators covering Eltinge for the popular press also sought out the mark of "degenerate" sexual activity that could distinguish the "warbling male defective" from the "mannish" Julian Eltinge. Indeed, female impersonation onstage may have provided the opportunity to develop the codings by which to identify these secret signs of gender dislocation. Such a widespread discussion in newspapers around the country may well have helped disperse the syntax necessary to produce a common language addressing sexual practice and gender identity to the society at large. Certainly the obsessive concern to properly code and categorize such entertainers as Eltinge and Browne reappeared in Long Beach with the tormented attempt to decide which neighbor still retained the qualities of manhood and which friend was utterly lacking in them. These anxieties may have played themselves out more safely under the protection of illusions that danced in the footlights, but the fears that drove them remained. There is, of course, an ultimate irony in this moment. Open to constant reassessment and individual interpretation, visual cues that supposedly marked sexual practice became disturbing reminders that such gender "definitions" could not in fact guarantee certainty. Far from providing reassurance in a troubled era, the ongoing argument produced by the inclusion of sexual practice in gender definition instead highlighted the potential for continuous disruption and eternal instability.

I am indebted to Steven Aron, Allan Bérubé, Jane Caplan, Brian Collins, Carolyn Dean, Lynda Hart, Pieter Judson, John Kasson, Jim Krippner-Martinez, Eric Lott, Rajeswari Mohan, Mary Ryan, the anonymous readers for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, and members of the Penn Mid Atlantic Seminar on Women in Society for their critical assistance in the development of this article. Additionally, I want to thank Bob Moeller on general principles, and Hannah Schwarzschild for her sharp eye and constant encouragement.