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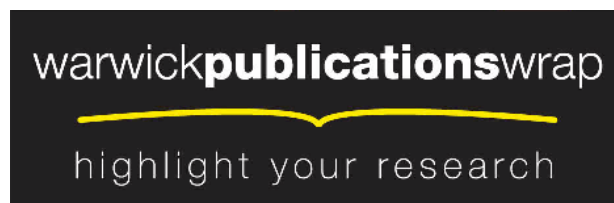
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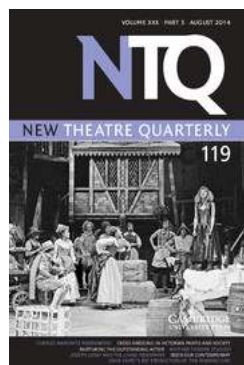
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'Slap On! Slap Ever!': Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing

In this article Jim Davis considers gender representation in Victorian pantomime alongside variance in Victorian life, examining male and female impersonation in pantomime within the context of cross-dressing (often a manifestation of gender variance) in everyday life. While accepting that male heterosexual, gay, and lesbian gazes may have informed the reception of Victorian pantomime, he argues for the existence of a transgendered gaze and a contextual awareness of gender variant behaviour, with a more nuanced view of cross-dressed performance. The principal boy role and its relationship to variant ways of seeing suggests its appeal goes beyond what Jacky Bratton calls the 'boy', a notion she applies to the dynamic androgyny of male impersonators in burlesque, music hall, and occasionally melodrama. For the principal 'boy' is clearly transmuting back into a girl, at least physically. Equally, while the dame role is usually unambiguously male, Dan Leno's late-Victorian dames seem based on observation of real women. There has been enormous scholarly interest in theatrical cross-dressing, but also a partial tendency to associate it with what Marjorie Garber calls 'an emerging gay and lesbian identity'. This is appropriate, but should not obscure the relevance of cross-dressed performances to an emerging transgender identity, even if such an identity has partially been hidden from history. Any discussion of cross-dressing in Victorian pantomime should heed the multifaceted functions of cross dressing in its society and the multiplicity of gendered perspectives and gazes that this elicited.

Keywords: transvestism, principal boy, pantomime dame, nineteenth-century theatre.

SO EARLY as some ten years of age he showed extreme fondness for appearing in female dress, sometimes putting on the dress of his mother, sometimes that of a servant, and showing a talent for the imitation of female characters, which he performed for the amusement of his friends and which won the admiration and applause of those who had the opportunity of seeing his performance. Year after year his taste improved. There was nothing in his early taste for these theatricals which caused any other than a feeling of admiration for the genius he had. . . . He grew gradually fond of assuming these female characters; sometimes when friends were at his father's house he would dress himself in the character of a parlour maid and come into the room and by his manner and appearance show at once a cleverness and ability in getting up female characters.¹

This is not a description of the ideal juvenile spectator for pantomime nor a quotation from 'The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Pantomime Dame', but a summary of evidence given by Ernest Boulton's mother in

1871 at the trial of Boulton and Park at the Old Bailey for conspiracy to 'incite others to commit an abominable offence'. The Boulton and Park case has been well documented and demonstrates that cross-dressing in public places was much less acceptable than cross-dressing on the stage (or perhaps in the safe haven of the family home).²

A case that originated from a very public flaunting of cross-dressing, an arrest that was followed by an unauthorized, very intimate, and highly flawed medical examination to ascertain whether Boulton and Park had been engaging in anal sex (on the assumption that such an invasive practice was justified by the fact that they were arrested while cross-dressed), and a very sensational trial inexorably stamped cross-dressing in the public consciousness as a potential or even indelible marker of male homosexuality. This was largely the result of the continuous insinu-

ations of the Prosecution (somewhat bizarrely undertaken on behalf of the Treasury), although Boulton and Park were found not guilty and thus escaped the ten-year sentence of hard labour or even life imprisonment to which they would have otherwise been subjected. (Fig. 1)

Boulton and Park provide only one of a number of contexts against which to examine cross-dressing in late Victorian pantomime. This discussion will attempt to locate more broadly what cross-dressing meant as a social and cultural phenomenon inside and outside the theatre. While acknowledging the excellent work that has been undertaken on this topic in relation to pantomime, the focus here will be on how spectators may have responded to the cross-dressed pantomime performer from a slightly different perspective.

Catherine Robson, in *Men in Wonderland: the Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, reminds us that, until the age of six or seven, Victorian children, male and female, were clothed alike, when 'trousers and school' separated the boys from the girls. According to Robson, 'the first six years of male life in the nineteenth century carried a clear stamp of femininity, especially when reviewed in retrospect. While it may be a critical commonplace that the Victorians adhered to a rigid system of gender separation, in this particular instance it seems that young boyhood crossed the line, and actually looked more like girlhood'.³

Whereas Robson's subsequent discussion emphasizes a male preoccupation with childhood perfection as exemplified by young girls, as in the cases of Ruskin and Carroll for example, this essay considers cross-dressing as a quite different manifestation of this 'lost girlhood', whether as a social phenomenon in its own right or implicit in its presence on stage.

Fantasy or Authentication?

The underbelly of Victorian literature certainly provides examples of publications that ranged from fetishistic cross-dressing to its more homo-erotic manifestations. The out-



Figure 1. Detail from the cover of a penny magazine entitled *The Lives of Boulton and Park: Extraordinary Revelations*.

come of the Boulton and Park trial may have been ambiguous, but there is nothing ambiguous about their representation ten years later in Jack Saul's highly erotic *Sins of the Cities of the Plains; or, The Recollections of a Mary-Anne*. Saul, who was a key witness in the Cleveland Street scandal, is first introduced to us, in a preface written by an anonymous gentleman, as possessing 'small and elegant feet, set off by pretty patent leather boots, a fresh looking beardless face, and almost feminine features', enhanced further by auburn hair and sparkling blue eyes.⁴

Saul's own narrative includes a keyhole peep (literally) at Boulton (here referred to as Lady Laura) and her lover, Lord Arthur Clinton MP, after they have slipped away to a private room during a drag ball at Haxell's hotel in The Strand. Saul tells us about Boulton's 'beautiful pair of legs enveloped within lovely knickerbocker drawers. These

were prettily trimmed with the finest lace, and I could also see pink silk stockings and the most fascinating little shoes with silver buckles.' He then moves into an extremely explicit account of what happened next; but, of course,

His lordship's love was only a man in woman's clothes, as everyone now knows that it was Boulton's practice to make himself up as a lovely girl. There seems such a peculiar fascination to gentlemen in the idea of a beautiful creature, such as an ordinary observer would take for a beautiful lady, to dance and flirt with, knowing all the while that his innamorata is a youthful man in disguise.⁵

Today the transgendered community would define such gentlemen as 'admirers'. Later Saul makes Boulton's acquaintance and returns with him to his lodgings, Boulton telling him, 'I love to look like a girl, and to be thought one.'⁶

Whether this is fantasy literature or an authentication of Boulton's homosexuality or transexuality is still open to question, but at least Boulton (in particular) is a valuable source of inspiration for Saul. When not dressed as women, Boulton and Park often appeared in public with painted faces (indicative in women of female prostitution), looking very much like women dressed as men, to the everlasting confusion of John Reeve, the staff supervisor at the Alhambra Palace of Varieties, for example, and many other witnesses at their trial. Indeed, Boulton and Park's predilection for visiting theatres and music halls where cross-dressing might be a feature of the performance, as in burlesques featuring male impersonation, has already been noted and in many ways suggests that the focus of both homo-erotic desire and a more general nostalgia for a lost girlhood is not the cross-dressed male in burlesque and pantomime, but the travestie and principal boy roles played by women.⁷

The Erotic Allure of the Principal Boy

In an essay on Dan Leno, Caroline Radcliffe draws attention to the artist E. H. Shepard's first recognition of the principal boy's erotic allure:

I did not think it possible that such feminine charms existed as were displayed by the Principal Boy. Ample-bosomed, small waisted, and with thighs – oh, such thighs! – thighs that shone and glittered in the different coloured silk tights in which she continually appeared. How she strode about the stage, proud and dominant, smacking those rounded limbs with a riding crop! At every smack, a fresh dart was shot into the heart of at least one adorer.⁸

The young adorer may indeed be aroused by this overt display of female anatomy, but let us not forget that what he is watching is a woman enacting a certain form of masculinity, a performance that in effect proves that a woman can be 'more like a man', but that masculinity can also contain a sort of feminized charm. When Davenport Adams rants against 'the rows of infinitesimally clad damsels who crowd the pantomime stage and who are not the sort of spectacle to which it is judicious to introduce "the young idea",⁹ because of the curiosity it might engender, we might find ourselves wondering about the exact nature of this curiosity and whether it is being stimulated by girly boyishness or boyish girliness.

Interestingly, the critic James Agate, whose private inclinations certainly veered toward the homo-erotic, looked back nostalgically to the principal boys of the late Victorian period. He distinguishes between 'the fleshy [and] idyllic school of Principal-Boydism'.¹⁰ In Agate's view, 'Decay, or at any rate change, in the matter of the Principal Boy began when the curtain first rose on *Peter Pan*. Henceforth, the strapping thigh, sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, wilted to nothing.'¹¹ For Agate the pantomime had always centred on the principal boy, as embodied by such artists as Harriet Vernon, Ada Blanche, Marie Loftus and Maggie Duggan:

In the mind's eye I see these 'Principal Boys' as though it were but yesterday that they trod the boards, golden visions with their cockades and diadems, modish riding-whips and jewelled garters. I have loved them all, without distinction or faithfulness; captivated now by a bunch of lace pinned at the throat by a diamond the size of a pheasant's egg, now by an elegant phrase of the hand, now by a particularly handsome turn of the



Figure 2 (left). 'Miss Harriet Vernon, principal boy at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham', *The Sketch*, 2 January 1895 (author's collection).

Figure 3 (above). 'Pantomime in the Provinces: Miss Maggie Duggan', *The Sketch*, 26 December, 1894 (author's collection).

heel. About comedians there could be dispute. . . . All Principal Boys were adorable in their own right.

And then a change came over them which it is hard to define – a leaning to circumspection is, perhaps, the nearest. At any rate the boys became less dashing. They lost the art of slapping their thighs, and executed that spanking manoeuvre, when indeed they did not omit it altogether, with diffidence. They became introverted. . . .¹²

On one occasion Agate set out on a round of pantomime visits 'with the intention of re-discovering not only my lost youth but a lost young man, the Prince Charming of long ago', finally discovering in Kennington 'him whom I sought – the fair, the not too refrig-erative, the inexpressive he of long ago':

This was Ouida Macdermott . . . ruffling it with inimitable grace and swagger. . . . She, in short,

was Prince Charming. For all that, I fancied I detected a shade of uneasiness in Miss Macdermott's gesture. Might it not be out of date to slap a thigh? No, dear lady and dear boy! Slap on! Slap ever! One heart, at least, beats for you.¹³

Of course, the appeal of the principal boy to Agate may not have been homo-erotic, but then again it may well have been.

While many representations of the principal boys that Agate so admired emphatically illustrate a highly feminine appearance and figure, and androgynous rather than male attire, as is the case with the statuesque Harriet Vernon as Principal Boy at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham (Fig. 2), there are others that hint at something more ambivalent. Thus Marie Duggan (Fig. 3) is dressed in a way that emphasizes her femininity, yet her gesture and posture as she smokes a cigarette, while holding a glass in one hand and a champagne bottle in the other, indicate



Figure 4. Nina Boucicault as Peter Pan, 1904.

both a 'good-time' girl and a parody of male behaviour.

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, first staged in 1904 with Nina Boucicault in the title role, introduces a new element into this discussion, not only through its supposed impact on the shape and androgyny of the principal boy, but also because the title character never grows up, remaining a boy (or girl) for ever, which is hypothetically the lot of the principal boy as well. (Fig. 4.)

'The Best of Both Worlds'

The ambivalence of the principal boy was celebrated in various publications in the early 1890s. A verse published in *Judy* in 1890, 'A Psalm of Love' to a principal boy, could certainly be read in more than one way:

I love you! Although I am sorry to think
You have touched up your eyebrows with
Indian ink:

I dote on your blushes: I know they are rouge,
But passion can penetrate paint and gambooge;
You are forty years old; I'm a hobbledehoy:
But I love you, I love you, O principal boy!

I think, as I see you trip over the stage,
Thrice happy the court with so sprightly a page.
Your movements are swift as the swallow that
skims:

I am fain to enlarge on the shape of your limbs:
Your calves have no padding, your heart no
alloy:
How can I help loving you, principal boy?

The pantomime's over! To supper, then, come:
I'll treat you to Perrier, Jouet and Mumm:
The choicest confections I'll lay at your feet.
Ah me! What a number of oysters you eat.
But I'll pay for those oysters with infinite joy,
If only you'll love me, O principal boy!¹⁴

In effect the principal boy, whether eighteen or forty years old, offers the best of both worlds to his/her admirers.

In a short story by Israel Zangwill the ambivalence of the principal boy's sexual attraction again emerges, as also does the empowerment that the pink tights of pantomime can provide for women who take on the role of principal boy.¹⁵ In Zangwill's story a rather priggish young man called Frank gets secretly engaged to a woman in her late teens called Lucy. He leaves for Canada to practise farming and sends lots of advice on the improving literature she should be reading to Lucy, who meanwhile falls on hard times.

Frank returns unexpectedly from Canada (he has suddenly become heir to a peerage) and calls on his fiancée, Lucy, unannounced at her lodgings. At first Lucy is nowhere to be seen, then a pair of folding doors fly open and a vision of dazzling splendour appears to Frank – 'a beautiful glittering figure in tights and tinsel, the prancing prince of pantomime'. It is none other than Lucy, of course, and when Frank asks her the meaning of this 'masquerade', she touches her pink tights – Frank shudders at the touch – and says 'These are . . . These are the legs of Prince Prettytype.' She explains that the stage manager of the Oriental Theatre is shortly coming to inspect her in costume to decide whether to cast her as Principal Boy in the

Oriental's pantomime. Frank is shocked and says he would have fetched her over to Canada to live in poverty with him there rather than let her go on the stage:

'Yes,' the Prince said mockingly. 'E was werry good to me, 'e was. Do you think I could submit to government by a prig?'

He started as if stung. The little tinselled figure, looking taller in its swashbuckling habits, stared at him defiantly.

Frank tries to dissuade Lucy from seeing the stage manager, peeved that limbs, the shapelessness of which had never occurred to him previously, should be made a public spectacle:

'You are killing me, you whom I throned as an angel of light; you who were the *first woman* of the world.'

'And now I'm going to be the *Principal Boy*,' she laughed back.

Frank makes it clear that he still wants to marry her but that his father, now a peer, would not like a principal boy as a daughter-in-law, to which Lucy responds 'What about the Principal Boy? Do you think he'd cotton to the idea of marrying a peer in embryo?' and breaks off the engagement.

Frank subsequently turns up incognito at the Oriental to watch Lucy perform. She spots him and sends a message to him, inviting him to her dressing room after the show. Frank feels remorse for being so priggish and the upshot is marriage, but it looks like the relationship is now destined to be one in which the principal boy wears the trousers or at least the pink tights. And what makes Zangwill's story interesting is the way he keeps switching genders between the Lucy and principal boy personae, maintaining an undercurrent of gender ambivalence.

Taxonomies of Gender

The desire to create taxonomies through which to define gender and sexual norms and deviations escalated towards the end of the nineteenth century. In Germany Krafft-Ebing in 1886 defined homosexuality as an aspect of transgender identity, while Magnus Hirschfeld turned his attention to the topic

in 1899, subsequently coining the term that, in English, became known as transvestism.¹⁶ The use of cross-dressing as a male homosexual marker in *fin de siècle* Berlin was far more noticeable than in other European capital cities, so it is perhaps not surprising that early definitions emerged from Germany and strongly emphasized links between cross-dressing and homosexuality.

Havelock Ellis broadened definitions of transvestism in the early-twentieth century, arguing for a term such as 'eonism' that would give scope to identifications with the opposite sex that went deeper than clothes.¹⁷ Later, Michel Foucault attacked this overall need to categorize and define, both in *The Birth of the Clinic*¹⁸ and in his introduction to the memoirs of the nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin, who committed suicide after being forced to abandon a female identity and assume a male identity:

Do we *truly* need a *true* sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a 'true sex' in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures.¹⁹

For Foucault this urge to categorize and control is linked to an urge to prevent any form of immoral behaviour which might just materialize if gender categories become too blurred, exactly the unspoken premise underlying the Boulton and Park case.

Ambivalent Pantomime Dames

While my emphasis so far has been on the ambivalence and multiple encodings embodied in the principal boy, it is clear that the pantomime dame is also open to multiple interpretations. The Attorney General, in pursuing the prosecution of Boulton and Park, had made it clear that the wearing of female attire by men for theatrical purposes was entirely acceptable.²⁰ Nevertheless there were many who criticized the practice during the final decades of the nineteenth century, questioning its propriety within the theatre – perhaps, as Caroline Radcliffe has



asserted, because of a growing equation of cross-dressing with homosexuality.²¹

Radcliffe's fascinating discussion of Dan Leno in dame roles raises some interesting issues around male cross-dressing in pantomime. Leno is often credited with inventing the modern pantomime dame, although his androgynous, menopausal dames, worn down by childbirth and hard work, seem light years away from their current equivalent (Fig. 5). Leno's dames, drawing heavily on his experience of female impersonation as a music-hall performer, were relatively convincing, although (as Radcliffe points out) his most disturbing moment as a female im-



Figure 5 (left). 'Dan Leno', unidentified clipping, 1892 (author's collection).

Figure 6 (above). Dan Leno as Mother Goose, postcard, 1902 (National Portrait Gallery).

Figure 7 (opposite page). Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell as the Baroness and Baron in *Cinderella*, drawn by A. Boyd, *The Graphic*, 4 January 1896.

personator was his transformation as Mother Goose into a young, beautiful water nymph, a transformation that is quickly curtailed and brought back into the realms of the acceptable (Fig. 6).

The danger of Mother Goose (or any other female impersonator) looking too glamorous (and putting their gender in doubt) lay in the possibility of his arousing male desire. Male impersonation, on the other hand, was deemed less threatening or ambivalent, because the gender of the performer was assumed never to be in doubt, although such a view is open to question.

It may have been pure coincidence that



Cinderella, the Drury Lane pantomime for 1895–6, the year of Oscar Wilde’s trial and imprisonment, dispensed with the conventional casting of male actors as the ugly sis-

ters and used actresses instead. Admittedly, Leno was cast as the Baroness to Herbert Campbell’s Baron (Fig. 7), but *The Times* was quick to note that

It is changed times, indeed, when the two wicked sisters are represented by performers of their own sex. Propriety gains, and the effect of contrast is not lessened; for these accomplished actresses and old stagers know how to make the sisters as vixenish and disagreeable as any nursery commentator could wish.²²

The *Era* found the ugly sisters in this production were funny without vulgarity, but considered that Leno was simply irresistible, giving a performance that was 'not a caricature, but a genuine, if highly eccentric, impersonation'.²³ Leno's dames were thought to transcend charges of vulgarity or impropriety perhaps because he was, as J. Hickory Wood commented, 'not so much a picture of Dan Leno playing the part of a woman in a particular walk of life as the picture of what Dan Leno would have been if he had actually been that particular woman'.²⁴ This in itself asks for a more complex reading of Dan Leno's cross-dressed performances within the context of contemporary Victorian attitudes to cross-dressing and gender variance.

Yet Davenport Adams's much quoted critique of male and female cross-dressing sums up a clearly adversarial attitude to this aspect of pantomime. 'A man in woman's clothes', he writes, 'cannot be but more or less than vulgar, and a woman in male attire, of the pantomime and burlesque description, cannot but appear indelicate to those who have not been hardened to such sights.'²⁵

The Complexity of Gender Variance

Dan Leno's dames and the multiple readings possible of all cross-dressed performance in pantomime require a sophisticated response which, while acknowledging the underlying and unspoken fear of homosexuality colouring some accounts, also comprehends the complexity of gender variance. As Marjorie Garber argues:

No analysis of 'cross-dressing' that wants to investigate the phenomenon seriously from a cultural, political, or even aesthetic vantage point can fail to take into account the foundational role of gay identity and gay style. Yet as important as gay culture is to transvestism – and transvestism to gay culture – there are other major areas in

which transvestism has also been a defining, and disconcerting, element, an element largely untheorized. . . . Just as to ignore the role played by homosexuality would be to risk radical misunderstanding of the social and cultural implications of cross-dressing, so to restrict cross-dressing to the context of an emerging gay and lesbian identity is to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display.²⁶

Garber gives minimal attention to cross-dressing in pantomime, but David Mayer,²⁷ Laurence Senelick, Tracy Davis, and Jacky Bratton have usefully discussed this phenomenon. Senelick considers that both dame and principal boy are relatively unerotic, the dame because she is played as a menopausal older woman, the principal boy because he is pre-pubescent. But such categorization seems too easy and unnecessary a form of closure.²⁸ In *Actresses as Working Women* Tracy Davis suggests that, usually, the purpose of men's cross-dressing was comic, frequently negating female sexuality, while that of women's cross-dressing was allure. She also suggests that in Victorian theatre, but not in society, cross-dressers had a sanctioned role within a tightly delineated range: 'Men could parody sexless women, and women could glorify what they could not suppress. In the latter case neither convincing impersonation nor sexual ambiguity was possible.'²⁹

Davis goes on to highlight the fact that, by and large, the female body, however clothed, was hardly ever sexless in Victorian theatre. But might there not also be, in the way the principal boy or travestie actress is perceived, a fetishizing of the feminized male body? The principal boys and male impersonators of the late-Victorian era were obviously not equivalent to contemporary female impersonators – such as the Thai ladyboy performers, whose bodies, marked yet unmarked, are feminized by hormones and surgery – but we should certainly consider broadening the scope of the principal boy's appeal, erotic or otherwise (or that of Dan Leno's beautified Mother Goose for that matter) to allow for more gender-ambivalent and gender-variant gazes and responses.



Figure 8. Mary Anne Keeley as Jack Sheppard, from Walter Goodman, *The Keeleys on the Stage and at Home* (London: Richard Bentley, 1859).



Figure 9. Mary Anne Keeley as Smike, detail from Walter Goodman, *The Keeleys on the Stage and at Home* (London: Richard Bentley, 1859).

Jacky Bratton has come closest to an in-depth exploration of male impersonation in the late-nineteenth century with her notion of the 'boy'. Eschewing the application to male impersonation of Judith Butler's phrase 'a monstrous ascent into phallicism', and abandoning radical feminism for cultural materialism, Bratton argues that 'Female to male cross-dressing became important in

offering an on-stage exploration of the meanings, not of being a man or a woman, but of being a boy.'³⁰ She also suggests that in some nineteenth-century farces and comedies male impersonations began to 'test the assumptions of the binary they crossed', even 'resetting the boundaries of acceptably gendered behaviour'.³¹

The Notion of the 'Boy'

In some instances, through this exploration of gender uncertainty the actress was actually playing 'boy', something Bratton emphasizes in some of the more androgynous impersonations of the Victorian stage and music hall, but not so much in the principal boy of pantomime. Thus Walter Goodman's eulogies over the androgynous performances of Mary Anne Keeley as Smike or Jack Sheppard (Figs. 8, 9), or Dickens's similar response to Marie Wilton as a boy in the burlesque of *The Maid and the Magpie* – 'so stupendously like a boy, and unlike a

woman³² – or the subsequent appeal of Vesta Tilley as a male impersonator are all rooted, as Bratton suggests, in their boyishness and animal spirits.³³

Yet if the 'boy' was at the root of this appeal to both men and women, could it not be argued that, especially in the case of pantomime principal boys, this was because the 'boy' already seemed to be passing as a 'girl' impersonating a very feminized version of what it was to be a 'boy'? And, if that was the case, should we not also argue that even the principal boy might have appealed to a gender-variant gaze as well?

Bratton's discussion of the 'boy' is part of a larger discourse which is succinctly summarized by Tina O'Toole:

The figure of the Boy, or the attribute of 'boyishness', is one that comes up time and again in *fin-de-siècle* narratives. Scholars have paid much attention to the Boy, particularly in the context of Wilde's work, where a priority value is placed on youthfulness, but also on impermanence, and where there is disaffection with nineteenth-century materialism and the adherence to 'progress'. The Boy is located at the centre of these discourses: the Boy who loses his youth by growing up or by dying young or, in contrast, those Peter Pan-like figures of the 1890s such as Dorian Gray. We also find the Boy in some New Woman fiction.³⁴

Principal boys, just like Peter Pan, can never really grow up: they are fixed in time, trapped, for all their male assurance and assertion, in an ambiguous state of feminized masculinity. As Marjorie Garber writes: 'Why is Peter Pan played by a woman? Because a woman will never grow up to be a man.'³⁵ Garber also cites Andrew Birkin's comment, in relation to Peter Pan's emphasis on youth and to initial performances of Barrie's play, that 'the ambiguity of his sex stimulated a confusion of sexual responses'.³⁶

Cross-Dressing in Everyday Life

The Bulloughs' seminal study of cross-dressing makes it quite clear that there was a considerable market for transvestite fantasy literature in the nineteenth century and the expanding scholarly interest in the Boulton and Park case should not be allowed to occu-

lude the considerable number of other court cases arising from the arrest of men and women apprehended in the clothes of the opposite sex. The Bulloughs claim that there were an increasing number of men who lived as women during the nineteenth century and were only discovered to be men when they died, citing the case of Lavinia Edwards, an 'actress' who died aged only twenty-four in London in 1833:

The post-mortem revealed that Edwards was a man of very feminine appearance who had removed any evidence of his beard by plucking the hairs with tweezers. H[er] roommate, Maria Edwards, indicated that they had been travelling around the British Isles making their living on the stage, with both playing female characters. Other than the fact Lavinia had been born in Dublin, little else was known about h[er].³⁷

In London Lavinia Edwards was not employed, but she and Maria lived under the protection of a Mr Thomas Smith. Her hair was light brown, of a soft, glossy texture and she was described by her doctor as having 'a kind of cracked voice not unlike a female'.³⁸

As well as those men who lived permanently as women, not to mention the women who lived permanently as men, there were no doubt a number of outwardly masculine Victorian patriachs who relived their lost girlhood behind the closed doors and drawn curtains of the family home. There were also opportunities for both men and women from less affluent backgrounds to attend masquerades cross-dressed, as Arthur J. Munby's diary entry for 13 April 1864 attests. His curiosity had been aroused by an advertisement for a masked ball in a pleasure gardens in Camberwell at an admission price of only one shilling, and he was determined to find out who attended such balls. These turned out to be young artisans and work-girls:

Several of the girls were drest [*sic*] in men's clothing, as sailors and so on: one, as a volunteer in uniform, I took for a man until someone called her Jenny. Moreover, not a few of the youths were elaborately disguised *as women* of various kinds, and some so well, that only their voices showed they were not girls – and pretty girls. This is a new thing to me, and is simply disgusting. Nevertheless it was clearly 'only a lark'; and the youths affected a quiet and feminine behaviour.³⁹

Munby noted that no indecency took place while he was looking on.

The Bulloughs also draw attention to an obsession with corsetry and tight lacing, commenting that even in domestic journals it was not uncommon for men to write in with opinions on the topic or even with accounts of their own personal experiences of tight lacing – in fact male cross-dressers were often referred to as ‘tight lacers’ during this period. Thus a correspondent calling himself ‘Science and Art’ told the *English Woman’s Domestic Magazine* in March 1871 that he had frequently played female parts in amateur theatricals in his late teens and always ‘insisted on being laced as tight as possible and thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of it’.⁴⁰

In 1892 a correspondent informed *The Family Doctor and People’s Medical Adviser* that his mother had made him spend two weeks tight-laced in petticoats and a dress in preparation for a girl’s part in a school play’, an experience he too had thoroughly enjoyed.⁴¹ Four years previously a correspondent had asked of these tight-lacing males:

Why don’t they, if tired of masquerading as men, have the courage of their convictions and lay aside their trousers, and other disturbing articles of the sex they *misrepresent* and boldly assume the petticoats etc. of the opposite sex that they so appear to envy, and for which Nature, perhaps, originally intended them, having perhaps permitted their appearance as men only by accident.⁴²

There were also letters that suggested that cross-dressing by both men and women was common in English country houses and that upper-class men in both France and England occasionally swapped gender to perform the then popular skirt dance.⁴³ Even allowing for a certain degree of fictive and fetishistic fantasy, the very existence of such accounts, which include examples of men dressing as women to gain employment as waitresses and maidservants, suggests a fascination with non-theatrical cross-dressing.

It is within these contexts as well that we need to consider gender variance in relation to Victorian pantomime. I am not suggesting that every Christmas droves of fetishistic, tight-laced cross-dressers rushed off to the annual pantomime, but I am asking that we

discuss the representation of gender in Victorian pantomime (or other Victorian forms of entertainment for that matter) with a full understanding of the different ways in which gender variance operated in Victorian society.

A Gender-Variant Gaze

An exploration of gender representation in Victorian pantomime through cross-dressing should not fail to consider its equivalent in both burlesque and music hall, on which Jacky Bratton has written eloquently.⁴⁴ Nor should it occur without a thorough and diverse perception of the multifaceted function of cross-dressing in Victorian society and the multiple-gendered perspectives that this engendered. While the politics of gay and lesbian identity have quite correctly figured or been hinted at in many discussions of cross-dressing on stage and off, gender variance (in the form of cross dressing) and transgendered identities and gazes have been less prominent in discussions of Victorian theatre.

Admittedly, while cross-dressing itself is only one facet of gender variance, it is perhaps its most predominant marker. Moreover, circumstances in which cross-dressing occurred in late-Victorian and Edwardian England varied across both class and amateur and professional theatrical performances. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made that cross-dressed performance in Victorian pantomime might be even more effectively contextualized by a closer examination of its relationship to gender-variant behaviour in Victorian society.

Notes and References

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