

Introduction

On the evening of 6 February 1958, Ronald John Hill entered the Twentieth Century Theatre in Notting Hill and took his seat seven rows from the stage. Hill attended the theater that evening not as a patron, but in his capacity as secretary to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, Britain's state theater censor.¹ Hill's task that night—not an unusual one for those under the employ of the Lord Chamberlain—was to observe the “all-male revue” *We're No Ladies* (1958), which starred an ensemble of men dressed as women.² The secretary was to judge whether the content featured in that night's program constituted indecent material and to report his findings back to the Office.

Seated around him in the filled stalls of the theater, as he noted later, was an audience of “most respectable” people with “many accompanied by wives and girl-friends.”³ After the orchestra had struck up the overture and the curtain was raised, Hill must have made himself somewhat conspicuous to his neighbors in the seats close by as he anxiously struggled to take diligent notes in the darkness of the theater. The studiousness with which Hill carried out this task belied the frivolous content of his transcriptions.

Some of the gags the secretary observed were relatively wholesome:

CORAL: Well, it wasn't me who was appearing in that notorious
Seaweed Nightclub last Saturday.

MIRANDA: Well, as a matter of fact, I did a wonderful dance there,
wearing only twelve beads.

CORAL: Yes, and ten of those were perspiration.⁴

Yet Hill noted that, on this night, the cast of female impersonators uttered some raunchier gags that were not in the version of the script approved by the Lord Chamberlain's Office.⁵ Such dialogue included references to sex work:

[PERFORMER 1:] I [w]as standing on the corner of Bond Street
minding me own business.

[PERFORMER 2:] How's business?

[PERFORMER 1:] Dreadful⁶

References to homosexual subculture:

MAN: Is this the Gypsy Encampment

HAG: *It's Camp all right*⁷

And allusions to cruising for sex while cross-dressed:

She went out with a Pole and came back with a Czech [cheque]⁸

Hill was stubbornly unmoved by humor of this type, and he was surprised that the "large" and "most respectable" audience around him reacted to the jokes with great enthusiasm. "The introductory remark 'This is Camp all right' which is specialised actors' slang for a homosexual gathering was greeted with a roar of laughter from the whole audience," he recalled, "who must thus be more familiar with the phraseology of the perverted than appeared."⁹ Another source of

bemusement for Hill was the glamour on show that evening. “The show was very well dressed—how do they find the money,” the secretary wondered, adding that “some of the actors were so good they might have been thought to be women.”¹⁰

Hill left the theater concluding that the producers of *We’re No Ladies* were not only guilty of providing “mediocre revue/variety entertainment” but that they had also violated theater censorship laws by going off-script that night.¹¹ Nonetheless, Hill magnanimously suggested to his superiors in the Lord Chamberlain’s Office that the producers of the show be let off with a “stern warning” rather than being prosecuted.¹² As far as the act of female impersonation was concerned, Hill expressed discomfort but ultimate acquiescence. While he admitted euphemistically that “my impression as to the habits of some of the actors, whilst not given here, is pretty firmly formed in my own mind,” he surmised that he could find “no concrete evidence of the Twentieth Century Theatre becoming a focal point for pederasts.”¹³ Hill further conceded that drag performance enjoyed a privileged position within Britain’s theatrical heritage and he was thus resigned to the practice continuing unabated in general, despite its potentially immoral connotations. “There is no law which prevents female impersonation on the stage; it is in fact as old as the stage,” he noted.¹⁴

Others, however, saw the female impersonation in *We’re No Ladies* as a matter of much graver concern. One letter the Lord Chamberlain’s Office received regarding the show contended that the performance was “in fact a vehicle for the basest perversion—a smutty badly performed homosexual orgy, in which the ‘converted’ audience joins—it is not even funny.”¹⁵ The correspondent, H.C.R.A. Bennett, took particular exception to the singing of “God Save the Queen” at the show’s closing—a common practice in the contemporary theater—which some of the female impersonators had warbled in soprano voices. “That these men exist and that they

work their evil on each other we all know,” Bennett opined, “but to stand and sing the ‘National Anthem’ in both ‘soprano’ and normal male voices . . . is an insult to a gracious lady and a great position, and an affront to English people.”¹⁶ Other letters followed along similar lines. “I was appalled and amazed,” announced one Brian Boss, “that such a production as ‘We are no Ladies’ [*sic*] . . . should be allowed to take place publicly and even more that it should be open to youths and children. . . . [The Lord Chamberlain] should certainly pay a visit to this ‘show’ and see for himself the blatant and undisguised perversion which is displayed.”¹⁷ A. P. J. Rydekker, another complainant, surmised that “the entire performance was openly suggestive of homosexuality.”¹⁸ What constituted an evening of pleasurable light entertainment to the audience described in Hill’s report was clearly a profoundly distressing experience for others.

We’re No Ladies was a lowbrow drag show, cobbled together by dame comedians Phil Starr and Terry Dennis, which experienced a short run of only five nights in February 1958.¹⁹ Yet looking at the Lord Chamberlain’s file on this revue provides us with an edifying glimpse into what mid-twentieth-century British society made of men wearing women’s clothes onstage. That file records numerous examples of what drag represented in the minds of contemporary spectators: airy popular entertainment, a source of humor, second-rate comedy, tackiness, glamour, timeworn theatrical heritage, pederasty, perversity, homosexuality, evil, and a threat to the nation and national institutions.

Given that so many meanings have been, and continue to be, attached to drag, an objective sense of what constitutes drag can be elusive. Drag is readily defined, in the past and in the present, as a kind of performance that comments on gender, even if gender is not always a central theme. Historically and presently, drag has also been invoked as a synonym for cross-dressing, but, as this book is concerned with drag on stage, screen, radio, and record, I will use

drag to mean drag performance unless otherwise stated. During the century under consideration in this book, 1870 to 1970, drag artists were commonly referred to as “female impersonators”—men who wore women’s clothes in the context of a performance—with the act of performing drag referred to as “female impersonation.” Female impersonation and drag fall under the wider umbrella of cross-dressing (the wearing of clothes, in public or private, not typically associated with one’s sex) and of gender variance (gender presentations or gendered understandings of oneself, expressed through comportment, clothes, and other means, that are unconventional in a given cultural context). Drag performance has historically been linked to, though is not synonymous with, the phenomenon of transvestism, cross-dressing that is suggested to be habitual, compulsive, or generally done repeatedly.

It is not unusual for scholarly and popular analyses of drag to essentialize the medium as being a “homosexual” or queer art form.²⁰ Literary critic Marjorie Garber has acknowledged drag’s important place in queer culture while opining that a tendency among commentators to essentialize drag as a queer art form has obscured the medium’s broader cultural significance.²¹ *Drag: A British History* can be read in part as a queer history but, in focusing on the period from 1870 to 1970, when drag could comfortably lay claim to being a mass cultural form, the book asserts drag’s important place in the history of British popular culture more generally. Further, owing to its status as a mass cultural form, drag during this period offered a space for British people from all sorts of backgrounds—not just same-sex-desiring and gender-nonconforming people—to consider and discuss gender and sexuality.

Drag: A British History deals specifically with male drag performance. The histories of male and female cross-dressing performance are distinct, with different cultural meanings having been being attached to each. Thus, I feel that male and female drag histories are

not equatable enough to warrant a combined study in this case. Historical analyses of female drag have tended to focus on performers of the Victorian era and the early twentieth century like Vesta Tilley, Annie Hindle, and Sarah Bernhardt.²² Other examples have included an investigation of the phenomenon of women playing Peter Pan in Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992) and historian Jim Davis's research on women in the role of the principal boy in pantomime.²³ Yet the limited historiography on the subject leaves significant avenues of inquiry yet to be explored.²⁴ This book is not intended to be encyclopedic. The book will not provide a comprehensive account of all drag performers and performances. Instead, it focuses on representative case studies to reveal the varied renderings of drag and the manifold meanings associated with the art form between 1870 and 1970.

Drag: A British History will uncover how performances and meanings of drag emerged, developed, and changed, all while the art form aroused controversy. The controversies surrounding drag were culturally and historically specific, defying categorizations that mark prominent present-day cultural understandings of sexuality and gender expression, such as hetero/homosexuality and "homophobia." For all the anxieties it provoked, however, drag endured as an intrinsic part of British popular culture between 1870 and 1970, valued and enjoyed by audiences from all walks of life. Drag has not only persisted as a national cultural institution but has, in many ways, been at the forefront of new developments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular culture.

In illuminating drag's important place in British culture, this book unsettles narratives of repression that so often preoccupy the history of sexuality. Drag performances created positive experiences for practitioners and observers, such as fun, kinship, fulfillment, and career success, that could operate alongside sexual and gender-based repression.²⁵ Moreover, perceptions of drag, and male gender

variance more widely, did not proceed linearly from a state of Victorian vilification to gradual acceptance. In studying the history of drag performance, we see that attitudes toward gender and sexuality do not fit neatly into a teleological narrative leading from subjugation to liberation. Culturally conservative Victorian attitudes did not seriously hinder the growth of drag as a theatrical form in the nineteenth century, nor did the liberalization of social and cultural attitudes in the 1950s and 1960s, usually associated with “permissiveness,” prompt a newfound acceptance of the art form.

It is tempting, from a present-day standpoint, to understand historical objections to gender-variant men as evidence that female impersonators, and cross-dressers more generally, were part of a long-oppressed group resisting and challenging heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality.²⁶ It is true that the state sometimes arrested, charged, and prosecuted men who wore women’s clothes on the street, in venues such as public houses, and at parties, though there was no law that specifically illegalized cross-dressing.²⁷ It is also true that drag performance faced varying degrees of criticism from cultural observers. However, there was never a pronounced effort to eradicate male cross-dressing generally, and certainly no such effort to eradicate female impersonation from the stage. In that sense, negative historical assessments of drag performance by the press, the courts, the police, and other agents cannot be solely read as signs of authoritarian censure and closure. As we saw in the case of Secretary Hill, for example, if an observer critiqued or expressed discomfort regarding a certain drag performance, those negative sentiments did not necessarily extend to the art form as a whole, nor did such opinions always lead an observer to argue that the offending performance should be stamped out entirely. Negative, as well as positive, reactions to drag existed on a spectrum.

Nonetheless, it was the case that sometimes when men performed as women onstage, and when men wore women’s clothes in

general, it was read as a statement on their sexuality. Early public discussions surrounding male gender variance and its connection to sexual immorality demonstrate that the link between the two concepts was, historically, not always straightforward or particularly pronounced. From the early eighteenth century, if not earlier, groups of men were cultivating visible social networks oriented around a shared identification with feminine gender presentation and same-sex desire.²⁸ The members of this “molly” subculture would refer to each other using feminine “maiden names,” exhibit effete behaviors, and engage in homosexual acts.²⁹ Contemporary observers were made aware of this subculture through firsthand experiences, court cases following raids on “molly houses” (public houses, inns, private residences, or other venues where mollies congregated), and published accounts.³⁰ For example, a 1709 pamphlet reported on groups of men who “are so far degenerated from all Masculine Deportment that they rather fancy themselves Women . . . affecting to speak, walk, talk, curtsy, cry, scold & mimic all manner of Effeminacy.”³¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, the London guidebook *Yokel’s Preceptor* (ca. 1855) was forcefully warning readers to beware of “the increase of these monsters in the shape of men, commonly called Margeries, Pooffs &c.”³² Other, less extreme expressions of unconventional masculinity were also increasingly deemed to be problematic by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ostentatiously fashionable men, known popularly as “macaronis” in the eighteenth century and “dandies” by the early nineteenth century, were regular subjects of mockery in the contemporary press due to their perceived effeminacy.³³

Despite the growing prevalence of the association between male gender variance and sexual immorality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gender-variant men were not ubiquitously or straightforwardly perceived as a societal threat. While contemporary press treatments of macaronis and dandies might have appeared