THE EVOLUTION OF
THE MALE IMPERSONATOR
ON THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY
POPULAR STAGE

by

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Over the past few years, the male impersonator has been resuscitated as a kind of totem by feminist theatre groups. In Eve Merriam’s The Club, the all-woman company was costumed as Edwardian sports carolling period songs of sexual stereotype; there, apparently, the Vesta Tilley image of the toff best parodied the vested interests of male chauvinism. More recently, the Women’s Theatre Group of London in its production of New Anatomies by Timberlake Wertenbaker extolled music-hall impersonators who “switched sex according to need” in order to live “more interesting and creative lives.”¹ For all their historical distortion, both these permutations hint that the male impersonator may have been in her own day a hidden depth charge to be detonated in our own.

The male impersonator has never received as much attention from theatre historians as has her biologically masculine counterpart, the female impersonator. Perhaps this is because, from time immemorial, men portraying women on stage have been sanctified by religious tradition and by the impressive dramatic masterworks of the Athenians and Elizabethans, written to be performed by all-male casts. In contrast, female adoption of male prerogatives on stage has occurred as a novelty, a salacious turn, a secular Johnny-come-lately in the theatre. For the most part commentators give it short shrift. Peter Ackroyd declares

The male impersonator, the actress in trousers, seems . . . to lack depth and resonance . . . [and] is never anything more than what she pretends to be; a feminine, noble mind in boy’s body. It is a peculiarly sentimental, and therefore harmless reversal. The female impersonator, on the other hand, has more dramatic presence — the idea of a male mind and body underneath a female costume evokes memories and fears to which laughter is perhaps the best reaction.²

Traditionally, this had been the case, and it is a great irony that one of the few independent, male-behaving women in drama, Moll Frith of Middleton and Rowe’s The Roaring Girl, should have been created by a boy-actor. In a patriarchal society, the bacchanalian release triggered by men capering about as women, exposing their
“feminine” streak, is a necessary safety valve, especially if masculine and feminine roles in society are mutually exclusive. Such a society can see only subversion in the subservient sex wearing the pants, and female-to-male transvestism is condoned only in anodyne and neutral modes, or in ways which contradict the disguise by emphasizing female allure. In England the novelty of women on stage was rapidly succeeded by the novelty of women on stage in men’s clothes, the prime attraction being that cited by Pepys: “To the Theatre . . . where a woman acted Parthenia, and came afterwards on the stage in men’s clothes, and had the best legs that ever I saw, and I was very well pleased with it.”[3] *L’homme moyen sensuel* did not suspend his disbelief so far as to accept Nell Gwynn, Moll Davis and other shapely actresses as men simply because they donned breeches. It was the rare she-player, like Anne Bracegirdle, who could carry off a convincing impersonation; as Anthony Aston remarked, “her gait, or walk, was free, manlike, and modest, when in breeches.”[4] These breeches roles were often of breezy roisterers like Sir Harry Wildair in *The Constant Couple* and Macbeth in *The Beggar’s Opera*, presumably because lickerish amusement was to be derived from watching a woman swaggering around like a rakehell and courting other women. It was a mild form of the delectation stag audiences take in Lesbian pornography, and reached a sort of climax in Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) when Silvia, caparisoned as Jack Wilful, spends the night in bed with the unsatisfied country wench Rose.

Later, having established their artistic legitimacy on the English stage, actresses began to covet the scenic opportunities offered by Romeo and Hamlet. Certain tragic roles, like Talfourd’s Ion, became the exclusive property of star actresses. Popular forms of entertainment too seized on the convention. Equestrian drama had its female Mazeppas in fleshlings, and the first breeches roles entered English pantomime in 1815 and 1819, in the guise of androgynous adolescent characters. The institution of the principal boy, usually played by a mature actress of ripe charms, did not become entrenched until the mid-Victorian period.

David Mayer has accounted for this latter development both by Freudian reasoning — male audiences had to come to terms with the danger of feminine sexuality — and by socio-economic theory:

By bringing the principal boy into pantomime, arrangers (no doubt unconsciously) devised a fantasy means for coming to terms with the woman whose earning power equals or exceeds that of a man. Woman is a rival, and the pantomime offers a fantasy means of setting aside her threat. The role of principal boy, a creation of male anxiety, allows both men and women to confront and contemplate female power, to admit in fantasy that an aggressive woman rivals a man, even to the point of pursuing the girl . . .[5]

Attractive though this hypothesis is, the contention that women were an economic threat serious enough to provoke this retaliation, especially among the middle-classes who devised and patronized the panto, is difficult to sustain. A simpler explanation is that, in a period when the female torso was heavily upholstered, the Pepysian delight in viewing contours reasserted itself. If this is too innocuous, we might speculate that the meaty thighs and prominent calves of the Victorian principal boy satisfied the fascination with the buttocks, a facet of *le vice anglais*, the well-documented flagellomania rampant throughout nineteenth-century British culture.[6]
Whether the explanation be simplistic or far-fetched, the tradition of the breeches roles, on the legitimate stage and in pantomime, never required a convincing impersonation of a male; when such a thing did occur, it was rare enough to be remarked. Even Madame Vestris, whose fame "arose from the facility with which she could unsex herself, and the confident boldness with which made her bow to the audience, in breeches" was less mannish than boyish. Macbeth, in her interpretation, complained one critic, "diminishes into a smart boy, and the voice of the brave man is lost in the half-womanish notes of the stripling." The same held true for a popular portrayal such as Mrs. Keeley's Jack Sheppard, praised for its avoidance of vulgarity, where the hero's tender years could excuse whatever effeminacy crept into the characterization. These "hobbledehoydens," as they might be termed, were thought, in an era of increasing gentility, to be more capable of evoking pathos than were youths, and this led to the infestation of Shakespearean drama by girls playing Prince Arthur, Puck, and the Princes in the Tower at ages when they might be raising boys of their own.

Similar conventions were carried over into the embryonic music hall. A character singer like Jenny Hill, noted for her realism, was more memorable as city waifs than as the adult swells she also attempted. A serio-comic singer like Nellie Power, when impersonating a tar or a Tommy, was a somewhat amphibious creature, male in coiffure and costume to the waist, but wide-hipped and often encased in tight trousers. There was a tacit refusal on the part of the public to accept a woman on the popular stage as "a real man."

But the male impersonator in my definition is one who seeks to convey just such an illusion of masculinity. This phenomenon began to appear in the late 1860s, reached its greatest popularity with Vesta Tilley before World War I, and then died out, except for occasional nostalgic survivals. It was, as I hope to show, an American creation, not only directly tied to opportunities for women in the New World, but an expression of Lesbian wish-fulfillment as well.

The word "impersonator" was itself a neologism in the 1850s, and its usage argues the innovation of a performance that requires a label. J. Redding Ware, the lexicographer of Victorian neoterism, considered "female personator" as "a misnomer for the performer is a male who impersonates female appearance... while the male impersonator is a woman who dresses and acts like a man." He would have reversed the terminology, with the adjective clarifying the sex of the performer. There is, curiously, no exact lexical equivalent in any other language: although the Encyclopedia dello spettacolo offers the French l'homme-protéée and the Italian imitatore as translations, these more closely render "quick-change artist" and "impressionist." The usual term for sexual disguise, en travestí, relates ordinarily to the legitimate drama and opera. Therefore, the sexual impersonator in our sense first took stage in an Anglophone culture, originating along with the newest forms of variety entertainment.

Art could not imitate life in this respect, for despite clandestine "drag balls," most European cities had civil statutes prohibiting public cross-dressing. America offered more receptive scope for the growth of male impersonation because, historically, women were not only more conspicuous in active professions, but had more chance for upward mobility by means of transvestism. The gold rush and Western expansion prompted so great an influx of cross-dressers that advertisements in mining regions had to specify "No young woman in disguise need apply," and one memoirist recalled...
droves of prostitutes crossing the plains in masculine apparel in search of a new life. During the Civil War, the vivandières and even middle-class matrons serving in the Sanitary Commission adopted an “army costume” of loose trousers covered by a sashed kilt and kirtle. Encomiasts were swift to emphasize that the trappings of masculinity in no way detracted from a fundamentally tender and “womanly” nature, so long as their manly exteriors were confined to the field and the camp. It became cause for remonstrations, however, when Dr. Mary Walker continued to wear her kilts and pantaloons in the post-bellum period.

Social reformers in the early 1870s, when animadverting on the institution of the “fast man,” a gambling, tippling lounge-lizard who proliferated in the “get-rich-quick” atmosphere of the Grant Administration, also noted the advent of the “fast woman.”

These women possess very much the same characteristics... They indulge in all the “manly sports” which it is possible for women to indulge in, and their philosophy or belief... is to eat, drink and be merry... They are young widows of gay proclivities; they are wives who are tired of the married relation and who crave for excitement; they are young girls who are more or less addicted to reading sporting novels and the flash papers of the day, and who possess a large amount of masculinity in their natures; they are women of every age and any age, who have a large amount of vital and physical energy, and who in their early youth were known as being “wild,” and whose wildness has not been tamed or curbed by the advance of years or the varied experiences of life.

As papers like The Illustrated Police Gazette graphically pointed out, the fast woman often chose to dress as a young man-about-town and to attend primarily stag resorts, the concert-saloon and the variety hall. These theatres had burgeoned in the wake of the “leg shows,” ballet extravaganzas like The Black Crook and English burlesque as introduced by Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes. As these shows closed, their coryphees and back-row beauties sought employment as turns in the new variety houses. The result, moralists would complain, was fast women on the stage and, to a lesser degree, fast women in the audience. One of the earliest stars of the concert saloon, who may deserve the title of Mother (Father?) of Male Impersonation, was Annie Hindle.

Although many aspects of Annie Hindle’s life remain obscure, certain facts can be established. Born in England around 1847, she was adopted at the age of five by a woman who bestowed her own name on her and put her on stage in the pottery district of Hertfordshire to sing tender love songs. The child became a favorite of the working-class audience, and when she came to London, she tried male costume as a joke, when singing a rollicking ditty about wine, women and the races. A shrewd manager suggested that she concentrate on male impersonation, which won her immediate notoriety. There had been female singers who had included male types in their music-hall repertoires before: a Mrs. J. Taylor appeared at a benefit at Moy’s (the Royal Standard) on 9 July 1850 portraying “The Middy on the Shore,” “The Waggoner,” and “The Acting Schoolboy;” and in the 1860s Kate Harley sang Away Down Holborn Hill in male character dress. But Annie Hindle appears to be the first woman not only to specialize in male impersonation on the music hall, but to create a character clad in ordinary male street-wear, a flash young spark.
Annie Hindle in her make-up. Presumably taken from a photograph. (New York Sun)
In 1867 Hindle was brought to New York by an American manager, as “the first out-and-out male impersonator New York’s stage had ever seen,” and her triumph and financial rewards were considerable. At this time, she was a plump blonde, about five foot six, with small well-shaped feet and closely-cropped hair which she parted on one side, like a man. Her voice was deeper than an alto, but sweet and tuneful.

The next year she was courted by Charles Vivian, an English comic singer of the *bon vivant* ilk, the life of stage parties and smokers; he had just founded the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. He and Hindle were married after a brief courtship, on 16 September 1868, and set out for the West Coast. A few months later they separated at Denver, never to meet again. Vivian’s story was that the honeymoon had lasted but one night; Hindle bitterly reported her variant: “He lived with me several months — long enough to black both eyes and otherwise mark me, yet I was a good and true wife to him.”12 There is corroborative evidence of Vivian’s brutality in other situations, and it may be that his masculine pride was wounded by the sizeable salary his wife commanded. They never filed for divorce.

This is mere speculation, but Hindle’s unfortunate experience of heterosexual romance may have confirmed latent Lesbian tendencies (or the latent Lesbianism may have undermined the marriage’s chance). In any case, Hindle’s male impersonations became more veristic from this point on: her physique thickened, her voice deepened, and she took to shaving regularly, so that the down on her upper lip blossomed into a moustache and her chin sprouted the stubble of a beard. In her act, she wore fashionable men’s wear and portrayed the standard “lion comique,” the bluff, high-living sport, a devil with the ladies but a decent chap at heart. Her repertoire included such undistinguished but characteristic numbers as “Do Not Put Your Foot on a Man When He’s Down,” “Racketty Jack,” and “Have You Seen My Nellie?,” in which the second and fourth verses contradict one another in their protestations of fickleness and domesticity.

I’m a regular dashing swell, to ev’ry dodge I’m down,
I’m admired by all the Boston sports and all the girls in town,
They call me their dear Charlie, and they vow they love me true,
To gain my young affections but, that caper doesn’t do.

I’m tired of single life and wish that I could find,
One to make a loving wife so gentle and so kind,
She’d always find love beaming in every smile and glance,
I’m sure that many a lady here, should jump at such a chance.19

Although ladies in the audience may not have leaped on stage in response, their attraction to this equivocal appeal was attested by the number of “mash notes” Hindle received. She once compared billets-doux with Henry J. Montague, the matinee idol of Wallack’s Theatre, and her admirers, all women, far outnumbered his. She was quite indifferent as to whether her correspondents addressed her as “Sir” or “Madam.” Her closest attachments were with her dressers, of whom she had half a dozen over a fifteen-year period, and one night in June 1886, she and her current dresser, a demure brunette named Annie Ryan, left the theatre in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to be married in Room 19 of the Barnard House. The groom wore a dress suit, the bride a travelling ensemble, and the best man was, appropriately, the female
impersonator Gilbert Saroney. When news leaked out the next day, there was a scandal but the minister insisted, "I know all the circumstances. The groom gave me her — I mean his — name as Charles Hindle and he assured me that he was a man. The bride is a sensible girl, and she was of age. I had no other course to pursue. I believe they love each other and that they will be happy." This statement led many to conclude, erroneously, that Hindle was indeed a man who had passed as a woman for twenty years.

As the clergyman predicted, the marriage was a happy one, and with her savings, Hindle retired and built a cottage in Jersey City, where husband and wife both dressed as women. Annie Ryan died in December 1891 and her funeral, sparsely attended by a dozen figures from the variety stage, was the occasion for reporters to descend on Hindle and review her curious career. She herself declared that "the best of her life is gone." I have been unable to establish a date for her death.

Annie Hindle's example spawned a number of stage imitators, whom she did not begrudge. The first and most influential of these was Ella Wesner (1841 - 1917) who had started as a ballet girl, performing pas de deux with her sister Mary in the later 1860s; she was Hindle's dresser for a while and, learning the tricks of the trade at first-hand, was hired by Tony Pastor as a trial turn in the male impersonator line. She received $30 for a week's engagement, but as her popularity grew, she earned as much as $200 a week. Wesner, like Hindle, recycled English music-hall material, her theme song the lion comique standby Captain Cuff; but she was best remembered for her portrayal of a tipsy dude getting a shave. A later commentator was unimpressed by her "dried up fascination [which] depends upon simulating inebriety, and turning her Callipygian prominences to the audience." The coarseness and dudility of Wesner's approach validated its pseudo-masculinity, and she too seems to have carried on a sapphic private life. She never married and her only reported romance was with Jim Fisk's notorious mistress Josie Mansfield; after the shooting of Fisk by another of Josie's lovers, Edward Stokes, the two women went abroad and presided over a louche salon at the Café Américain in Paris.

Other more or less noted followers in Hindle's footsteps were Blanche Selwyn, who usually sported a handle-bar moustache in her act; Maggie Weston (d.1926), wife of the vaudeville actor James Connors; and Lillie Western, who cropped her hair and played a dozen musical instruments in masculine travesty. However, the next phase in the evolution of the male impersonator was to take place in England. It is unclear whether Hindle ever played her perfected male routine in London (the Era Almanack for 1872 lists her simply as a serio-comic); but Wesner certainly did. The manager Michael Leavitt attested to being "present at the Oxford Music Hall when she made her London debut in the late Seventies. Her impersonations were a genuine surprise and her success was so pronounced that in a short period a host of imitators made their appearance." before examining the sea-change that male impersonation underwent on its introduction to the music hall, we should touch on the complexities of audience response. As a solo performer, the male impersonator never shocked public sensibilities by making love to a woman on stage; the sentiments expressed by the songs were so highly conventionalized that no realistic correlative was conceived. And in an age when publicity was still rudimentary, the private lives of Hindle and Wesner were not town topics. The personal masculinity of these women was, in fact, neutralized by their disguises.
The touchiness of this point later manifested itself in the furor over Archibald Claver- ing Gunter’s comedy _A Florida Enchantment_, produced at Hoyt’s Theatre, New York, in October 1896. The pivot of the action is a series of sex changes, effected by swallowing a magic seed: Marie Jansen, playing the heiress heroine, takes one in fit of jealousy and undergoes the transformation before the eyes of the audience. She exhibits, while still in women’s clothes, all the cliché behavior of a he-man, swearing, kissing everything in petticoats, growing a moustache, and demonstrating a strong desire to vote. What seems to have exacerbated Mrs. Grundy’s shock was that the heroine, in her teagown and Gibson-Girl upsweep, suddenly feels a penchant for her former girl-friend, a penchant portrayed not as sentiment but as passion. When Marie Jansen appeared in later scenes in trousers and a bulging shirt front, her swaggering about in male dress was far more acceptable than had been a masculine libido thrusting forth from feminine trappings worn by a woman. It was the equivocality of the love interest, more than the subsequent transformation of the black maid (played by a man) into a valet, and an interfering doctor into a comic nursemaid — both acceptable “dame” roles — that caused reviewers to speak of “this strange study of bad taste, impudent baldness of conception, unveiling of nude facts and general high-kicking audacity.”

But this bespeaks the willed refinement of the stage in the 1890s. The school of Hindle and Wesner, developed in the 1870s, could be only an anachronism then, with its raucous depictions of loose-living dudes. As variety sought respectability and family audiences, it had to forego the portrayal of intoxication and prodigality as prime attributes of a fashionable young man. The press came to follow the lead of performers themselves, portraying them as hard-working, clean-living fathers and wives. By the 1880s, the lion comique had died out, and swells were shown to be penniless fakes (“The Oofless Duke”), petty criminals (“Percy from Pimlico”) or brainless scions of an effete nobility (“Hildebrant Montrose”). Fops and sports were to be teased or pilloried. The male impersonator therefore had to expand her act beyond the mere representation of a gay blade to make it a display of skills. Ella Wesner added quick-change to her act, billing herself as “The Lightning Change Character Vocalist,” and used cord-releases to effect her metamorphoses; but no costumes with trick openings fit very well, and the illusion of masculinity became vitiated. Still, as late as 1887, she was appearing as The Captain.

It was Bessie Bonehill, an English performer with a strong mezzo-soprano voice, who accomplished the necessary transition by bringing to the Hindle/Wesner impersonation the freshness of the principal boy. In London, she attracted the praise of George Moore (then going through a phase in which he exalted the music hall as regenerator of the British theatre) and was brought to New York by Tony Pastor in 1881. Her real American triumph came in 1889, when she doubled with Millie Hylton for five weeks at Pastor’s and then closed out an engagement of three hundred and sixty consecutive sellouts at the high pay of $450 a week. Bonehill’s durable success and popularity in America was greater than what she had achieved at home because of the originality of the principal-boy approach. All the reviewers, while praising her “manliness,” also cited the intelligence and skill of her portrayal. “She is never vulgar either in phrase or gesture,” was one significant comment. Aware that the genre itself lacked novelty, they were fascinated by her style and an ambivalence that appealed to both sexes: “The women who see her are charmed because she remains such a delicious young girl.” For the sexually-mixed houses of turn-of-the-century vaudeville, androgyny was a potent charm.
Bonehill danced an elaborate sailor’s hornpipe in her act and played a pageboy of the Restoration, but it was as a contemporary youth that she had her strongest impact; and it is characteristic of the would-be gentility of her times that she and Millie Hylton were touted as patterns for the man of the future:

They wear their clothes better than most men, yea, than most leading men; there is less self-consciousness in their backs and their well-fitting trousers seem to give them no concern. There is neither foppishness nor exaggeration in their attire, and their good loud voices are hearty and natural... Their movements are free and unrestrained, yet their masculine curves and angles fall within the lines of good taste. The value of these two young Englishwomen is that they reveal the aesthetic possibilities of man in architecture, dress and manner.29

It would have been unthinkable for a newspaper of the 1870s, railing against fast women and Dr. Walker’s trousers, to promote Hindle or Wesner as sartorial or behavioural paragons. But Oscar Wilde had campaigned throughout America seven years before, preaching the gospel of aestheticism and, in his own person, introducing a “most intense young man,” a languid swell of indeterminate sexuality.

Bonehill’s fame was eclipsed by that of Vesta Tilley, who sticks in the popular imagination as the male impersonator par excellence. Tilley modified the Hindle type even further towards the Vestris tradition for, unlike her precursors, she had a soprano voice and, however convincing her entrance on stage in elegant, well-cut men’s wear, once she opened her mouth, the illusion was dispelled. Her decision to take to breeches had been made when a child prodigy, for “young as I was I had, in song, run through the whole gamut of female characters from baby songs to old maid’s ditties, and I concluded that female costume was rather a drag [sic]. I felt that I could express myself better if I were dressed as a boy.”30 Boyishness was the keynote. Although her range extended to judges and vicars and she occasionally slapped on a moustache (e.g., for “The Newmarket Coat”), her forte was striplings, Berties and Algies of the West End, vivacious young swells, cheeky lads down from Eton and raw recruits bursting with chauvinism. “The boys she characterised were likeable, even when they were conceited,” noted St. John Ervine, who added, enunciating the aesthetics of a new era, “she never strained or shouted. There was no coarseness of any kind in her performance.”31 A feminine winsomeness kept breaking through:

...for all her truth to masculine type, you get a sense of the feminine — not as with those clumsy imitators of her who are giggling women in a thin disguise, but just so much that the truth of the male gesture is made the more piquant by that hint of curving shape. And yet her soul is the soul of a boy — perhaps, shall I say? of a girl, at the age when girls and boys are very much alike.32

This ambiguity evidently proved more exciting for both English and American audiences of the mauve decade than did the more straightforward bucks of earlier impersonators; however obnoxious epicene young men might be to the common spectator in real life, youths professing red-blooded virility, yet effeminate because played by a woman, were intriguing. Gone was the frontier “butchness” of Hindle and Wesner. Peter Pan hovered just around the corner. Moreover, there was nothing irregular about the private lives of the new breed of impersonators, made known through the newly-
invented journalistic ploy, the interview: Bessie Bonehill was the mother of three, and Vesta Tilley wed the successful manager Walter de Frece, later to be knighted. A cross-dresser could reign over charity bazaars and race meetings as Lady de Frece.

World War I put paid to the male impersonator. Disgusted by the futile carnage, many resented Vesta Tilley’s activities on behalf of the War Office, and the idle dandy she portrayed was now definitely viewed as a parasite. If one traces the careers of male impersonators begun in the 1890s, a pattern of adaptation can be seen: Truly Shattuck and Claire Romaine continued to play principal boys in Christmas panto but female roles in musical comedy the rest of the year; Kathleen Clifford made her vaudeville debut as a male impersonator but settled into female roles; Della Fox made no attempts at masculine authenticity in the travesti leads of musical burlesque which grew fewer and fewer. Ella Shields and Hetty King continued to present their alto Edwardians well into the 1950s, but always as relics of a more naïve age, welcomed as memorabilia. In pantomime, the principal boy’s legs became shapelier as fashions changed, and by now she has also been pre-empted by male pop stars; in the era of hot pants and designer jeans, a svelte Dick Whittington can provide few frissons. Only in black vaudeville did Gladys Fergusson, a close friend of Bessie Smith, carry on the tradition as handed down by Hindle and Wesner.

“Why were women less popular than men as impersonators?” Robert C. Toll has asked, and answered by stating that since women were accepted in serious male dramatic roles on the nineteenth century stage, male impersonators were more familiar, less sensational. Historically, this makes little sense; by the time male impersonators appeared on the variety stage, the female Hamlet was the rare exception, regarded by most as a sideshow attraction, while actors like Neil Burgess carried on the dame tradition, unsensationally, on the legitimate stage. Toll goes on to say that women were on the nineteenth century stage for men to admire, and therefore impersonation had never to lose sight of the original sex of the performer. “They never wore moustaches and beards,” he claims, which is untrue not only of Hindle, Selwyn and even Vesta Tilley, but of those actresses like Helen Western who essayed melodramatic male roles. “They portrayed only boyish young men,” yet this, as we have seen, was the case only in the latter stage of the phenomenon, and even then a popular character like Ella Shields’ “Burlington Bertie from Bow” was meant to be a mature scavenger. And Toll concluded, “Since Americans, especially men, were much more ‘hung up’ on manhood than on womanhood, women dressed as men created much less taboo-violating sensationalism than did men dressed up as women.”

But is not the reverse the case? Female impersonation was hallowed by tradition, a sanctioned violation of taboo; hence it could be safely engaged in by college students, naval cadets and Rotarians alike. It was society’s anodyne endorsement of bisexual tensions. But male impersonation, when seriously intended, was a dangerous infringement of patriarchal right. Tough customers like Hindle and Wesner came on the scene at a time when aggressive values were to the fore in American life; they would not be stomached by the more genteel culture of the 1890s. Even delicate Vesta Tilley caused offense in some conservative quarters, for at the Royal Command Performance for British variety in 1912, Queen Mary and the Grand Duchess George of Russia looked away from the stage throughout her turn. Male impersonation was one of the most highly-charged and disturbing of theatrical devices, its lack of “popularity” due to the ambivalence of the audience’s attitude and the absence of a cultural consensus for its reception. No wonder the feminist movement has recovered it as a valuable shock tactic, to disconcert and undermine the preconceptions of the men the impersonators ape.
NOTES


8. Walter Goodman, The Keeleys on Stage and at Home (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1895) p. 3-28. The substitution of pathos for verisimilitude in male impersonation is evident in the critical comment on her Smike in 1838: “Her small and pretty figure did not suit well for the representation of the overgrown boy of nineteen, but her dress was perfect, her look was unexpressibly wretched, and her voice and nuances heart rending.” (p. 35)

9. A contemporary program for Jenny Hill’s American performances indicates that her act included impersonations of a West-end Swell, “A London East-end Swell of the Costermonger Type,” “the daughter of a retired Soap Merchant, a 'parvenu,'” “A London Street Arab,” “a Boy Selling Cards of the Races,” “a girl who sells vestas or wax matches in the streets,” “female low-comedy character,” and “a waitress at an East-end coffee shop.” From a repertory of thirteen songs, only four were of males, and two of those, boys. European counterparts to these transvestite proletarian portrayals were presented by Vernet in Paris and Josephine Dora and Hansi Niese in Vienna.


271
11. The archaeologist Mme. Dienlafoy was accorded by the French government the privilege of wearing male attire fashioned by her husband’s tailor, at a time when transvestite women in Berlin and St. Petersburg were regularly arrested.


13. For female Civil War outfits, see the portrait of Kady Brownell in Frank Moore, Women of the War; Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice (Hartford, Conn.: S. S. Scranton, 1866) opp. p. 54; for comment on tenderness and toughness, p. 112. The Phunny Phellow, a pro-Union humor paper published in New York, often ran cartoons about women in uniform; e.g., see the issue for Dec. 1862, p. 4. For adverse comment on Mary Walker’s civilian clothes, see George Ellington, The Women of New York or Social Life in the Great City (New York: New York Book Co., 1870) p. 30.


17. New York Sun.

18. New York Sun. Vivian seems, by all accounts, to have been a nasty character. In 1872 he collected a group of friends to vandalize the shop of a San Francisco tailor who had advertised Vivian’s nonpayment of bills. (See “Sensation by a Comic Singer,” Dexter Smith’s, May 1872.) He died in Leadville, penniless, in March 1880, and was buried in an unmarked grave; it took seven years for the Elks to decide to erect a monument over it.


21. New York Sun. For female homoeroticism in the nineteenth century English theatre, see Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex (New York: Random House, 1936) II, 214-15. His informant naively believed that most relationships were non-sexual: “the fact is that the English girl, especially of the lower and middle classes, whether she has lost her virtue or not, is extremely fettered by conventional notions. Ignorance and habit are two restraining influences from the carrying out of this particular kind of perversion to its logical conclusions.”

22. Town Topics (14 Nov. 1889).
23. Other isolated cases crop up, suggesting a strong undercurrent of lesbianism in the American theatre. In 1876, a French-born actress working in San Francisco and who affected masculine attire was shot and killed by a Frenchman who found her in bed with his fiancée at the San Miguel Hotel. ("A Woman’s Mania for Wearing Male Attire Ends in Death," New York Clipper, 7 Oct. 1876, p. 221). As for transvestism, the death of Tammany Hall politician and man-about-town Murray Hall revealed that he had died of cancer of the breast and was in fact a Scotswoman named Mary Anderson, who, as a man, had been twice married and frequently seen in the company of pretty girls. (The Weekly Scotsman, 9 Feb. 1901.)


27. Town Topics (14 Nov. 1889). See also "A London Concert Hall Vocalist Makes a Hit," New York Sun (5 Nov. 1889); New York Sun (12 Dec. 1889); and New York Dramatic Mirror (14 Dec. 1890).

28. The Black Cat (15 Nov. 1889).


30. Recollections of Lady de Frece (London: Hutchinson, 1934) p. 25. In her first professional attempt at male costume, the chairman of a music-hall in Leicester refused to let her come on. For the etymology of "drag," see Laurence Senelick, "Origin of ‘Drag’," Call Boy (Winter 1979) p. 5.

31. St. John Ervine, "Vesta Tilley," Observer (22 Apr. 1934). He claims that she was one of the first music-hall performers to be liked by women. Because her costume changes were "full," her clothes fit extremely well, and she tried to eschew hackneyed "masculine" poses and gestures. See "Vesta Tilley, Idol of the 'Alls," New York Sun (29 Nov. 1903).


34. New York Times (2 July 1912). Cf. Macy Mapp's response to a new neighbor in E. F. Benson's The Male Impersonator (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1929) p. 13-14: "Lady Deal was Helena Herman. I remember seeing her at a music hall... And she was a male impersonator. That's the end of her; naturally we can have nothing to do with her... To think that a male impersonator should come to Tilling and take one of the best houses in the place! Why, it might as well have remained empty."

Correction: in the last footnote, "Macy Mapp" should read "Miss Mapp." Since writing this essay I have turned up more information about Annie Hindle and revised a number of my conclusions. These second thoughts can be found in my essay "Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the 19th-century Stage," in Crossing the Stage, ed. Leslie Ferris (New York: Routledge, 1992).