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“Boyish” Women and Female Soldiers: Cross-Dressing and Gender Disguise Comedies in British Cinema between the World Wars

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Introduction

Films that involve characters cross-dressing have been a common feature of cinema in Europe and beyond since the earliest years of filmmaking. As Laura Horak observes in her study of cross-dressing and transgender representations in Swedish cinema, the most conventional genre for cross-dressing on screen throughout much of this history has been comedy, especially romantic comedies about gender disguises (2017: 382). In this subgenre, male characters dress as women, or female characters dress as men, in order to find work, escape danger or simply for the purposes of a prank. Gender-crossing is usually framed as a playful and temporary “masquerade”, which ends when the character’s secret is discovered or when they reveal their true identity. Gender disguises sometimes involve characters moving across other kinds of social categories as well, such as those related to class, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or nationality, so that the intended humor derives from “the accumulated and exaggerated discrepancies between appearance and behavior, on the one hand, and the allegedly authentic identity, on the other hand” (Arnold-de Simone 2012: 379).

In addition to Horak’s work, scholars who have examined gender disguise comedies in depth (often using Hollywood examples) include Annette Kuhn (1985), who discusses them alongside other films of “sexual disguise”, and Chris Straayer (1996), who identifies them as

“temporary transvestite” films. This scholarship responds to feminist, queer and trans studies approaches, drawing especially on the work of Judith Butler (1993, 1999), which argues that gender and sex are not fixed states of being, but ongoing processes that are shaped by repeated social acts, uses of language and cultural representations. The different critical terms used to describe these films also register changes in the wider discourse around sex, sexuality and gender variance. In examining gender disguise films, scholars have asked, among other things: do the representations of cross-dressing reinforce or subvert existing gender stereotypes and gendered power dynamics? Do they endorse or trouble a binary sex and gender system? And do they celebrate the possibility of sexual fluidity and same sex-desire, or are they ultimately homophobic and heterosexist? The variety of answers produced to these questions suggests the difficulty in making conclusive statements about gender disguise films as a whole, especially those produced across very different historical and geographical contexts.

This chapter focuses on gender disguise comedies produced between the First and Second World Wars. In the scholarship on European cinema during this period, themes of gender-crossing have been especially associated with the cinema of Weimar Germany. Notable examples include Ernst Lubitsch’s *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (*I Wouldn’t Want to Be a Man*, 1918, released in 1920), Paul Czinner’s *Der Geiger von Florenz* (*The Violinist of Florence*, 1925/26), and Richard Eichberg’s farcical *Der Fürst von Pappenheim* (*The Duke of Pappenheim*, 1927). Richard Dyer (1990) and Alice Kuzniar (2000) have linked the Weimar cinema’s apparent preoccupation with themes of cross-dressing and gender variance to contemporary developments in the fields of sexology and homosexual law reform, as well as to the increasing visibility of Berlin’s queer subcultures. More broadly, these themes have been seen as part of a distinctive “Weimar modernity”, associated with “the increasing visibility and agency of women

and a heretofore unknown mobility of classes, races, and genders”, which, as Silke Arnold-de Simine argues, was then “exported” to other national film industries through the migration of German(-speaking) filmmakers (2012: 380).

But gender disguise comedies were also popular in other European cinemas during the 1920s and 1930s, including among filmmakers working in Britain. As historians of interwar European cinema have noted, and as this chapter further demonstrates, the German film industry certainly exercised an important influence on British cinema during this period, both in terms of offering a model of a successful rival to the dominance of Hollywood and in terms of the directors, stars, screenwriters and other workers who populated British studios. Yet, themes of gender-crossing were by no means a “foreign” element in British cinema, even if the narratives of gender disguise films sometimes frame the topic in this way. As discussed below, cross-dressing performance traditions were a longstanding part of British popular theatre. Moreover, some of the features of “Weimar modernity” were shared across multiple national contexts, including the UK. Steve Chibnall (2007) and Lawrence Napper (2009) have noted the British cinema’s interest during the interwar period in stories of mistaken identity and disguise. For Napper, these stories can be understood as responses to the rise in commercial culture and the expansion of the service economy, which opened up new possibilities for social mobility and personal reinvention (2009: 148-49, 167-68). These possibilities sometimes caused as much anxiety as excitement, and films about class and gender “masquerades” arguably allowed filmmakers and audiences to address some of the resulting questions about identity and authenticity in a comedic way.

The case studies that follow offer a close analysis of two British gender disguise films from the 1930s, *Girls Will Be Boys* (1934) and *Me and Marlborough* (1935), both of which tell

stories of women “masquerading” as men. Because of the unequal power relations between men and women in British society, and the different cultural values ascribed to masculinity and femininity, representations of cross-dressing women inevitably had different valences to those of men “masquerading” as women. Examining gender disguise films is one way of accessing these cultural assumptions around gender, and of better understanding how attitudes were changing. In particular, the interwar years saw a fascination with expressions and cultural representations of “female masculinity” - Jack Halberstam’s (1998) influential term for analyzing the ways in which masculinity has been constructed “without men”, or separately from the male body. This fascination was not limited to Britain, but was also notable in Germany, France and elsewhere (Sutton 2011; Roberts 1994). The films discussed below can both be seen as part of a tendency in popular representations of cross-dressing in this period to reinforce conventional notions of femininity and masculinity, and to reassure audiences that the relationship between “the sexes” remained fundamentally unchanged. But, as with other gender disguise comedies, they also make room for moments of subversive humor and queer pleasure that allow for alternative interpretations.

Girls Will Be Boys (1934)

Girls Will Be Boys was produced by Walter Mycroft for British International Pictures (BIP) in 1934. The film is in many ways a run-of-the-mill comedy; it was originally intended as a supporting feature, although it did well enough in some territories to be promoted to the status of main attraction (Chibnall 2007: 177). It was made at a time when producers in Britain were regularly looking to other European film industries for personnel and material. While the advent

of sound cinema made the earlier notion of a pan-continental “Film Europe” more difficult to sustain, producers in Britain continued to collaborate with their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, and British studios were increasingly home to European émigré talent (see Moor 2017 for an overview). *Girls Will Be Boys* reflects this: its director was the French-born Marcel Varnel, and it was co-written by the German screenwriter Kurt Siodmak. Siodmak is sometimes also credited as the author of the source play, but the actual inspiration was probably an Italian comedy by Ugo Falena that had been adapted for the screen twice before, first as *L’Ultimo Lord* (*The Last Lord*, 1926) and later as the French sound film *La Femme en homme* (*The Woman Dressed as a Man*, 1932), both starring the Italian actor Carmen Boni. For BIP’s version of the story, Mycroft cast the German actor Dolly Haas in the central gender-crossing role. Haas had experience in gender disguise comedies, having previously appeared in “Hosenrollen” (breeches roles) in German operetta films, including Géza von Bolvary’s *Liebeskommando* (*Love Commando*, 1931) and Victor Janson’s *Der Page vom Dalmasse-Hotel* (*The Page from the Dalmasse-Hotel*, 1933). Shortly before signing with BIP, screenings of Haas’s most recent film, Hermann Kosterlitz’s *Das häßlich Mädchen* (*The Ugly Girl*, 1933), had been disrupted by antisemitic protests, so the star was keen to find work away from Germany and the new National Socialist regime (Hake 2001: 24).

By the time Haas arrived in the UK to make *Girls Will Be Boys*, the fascination with masculine or “boyish” women was already well established in British popular culture. Gender-crossing female characters were the subject of several earlier films, including the shipwreck romance *Trousers* (1920), Adrian Brunel’s short comedy *A Temporary Lady* (1921) and the British-German co-production *Sir or Madam* (*Ossi hat die Hosen an*, 1928, released in the UK in 1930). In part, these films were responses to changing fashions. As Laura Doan (2000: 95-125)

charts, since the First World War, masculinized styles for women, such as trousers, short haircuts and tailored jackets, had become increasingly fashionable, especially in aristocratic and avant-garde circles. In some contexts, as in the social world inhabited by the novelist Radclyffe Hall (author of the banned novel *The Well of Loneliness*), masculine clothing for women might signal lesbian identity or queer self-fashioning. But, in popular culture, “boyish” women could equally be interpreted as signs of modernity and women’s emancipation. In 1927, for instance, the *Daily Mail* noted with curiosity that a new “type of young emancipated female” described as the “Boyette” had been seen at various seaside resorts. This was a woman who “not only crops her hair close like a boy but [...] dresses in every way as a boy”, and who “revels in the freedom” that masculine clothing was said to provide (quoted in Doan 2000: 103). Such comments took place against the backdrop of women’s increasing agency in British public life, following the extension of voting rights (to some women aged over 30 in 1918 and to all women aged over 21 in 1928) and an expansion in the range of paid jobs open to women. Across Europe in this period, the topic of women’s social and economic freedoms was greeted with enthusiasm in some quarters. But it also prompted worries from more conservative commentators, who asked, among other things, whether dissatisfied wives would now abandon their husbands, whether young women were choosing careers over domestic duties and family life, or whether women were now gaining the upper hand over men (Søland 2000: 4-5).

Girls Will Be Boys thematizes some of the debates and anxieties surrounding the figure of the masculine or “boyish” woman. It is particularly concerned with the idea that women’s claims on supposedly masculine freedoms might be making men “effeminate”. Most of the film takes place in the country estate of the Duke of Bridgewater (Cyril Maude), who has sworn off women ever since his son eloped with an actress. Because of this, the estate is now populated exclusively

by men, who have been forced to take over the “women’s work” of mending socks, washing dishes and ironing, presided over by Bridgewater’s fussy, queer-coded private secretary, Mr Grey (Edward Chapman). The film thus recycles a well-worn joke: namely, as Maggie Hennefeld writes in reference to Alice Guy-Blaché’s satirical early comedy *Les Résultats du féminisme* (*The Consequences of Feminism*, 1906), the idea “that feminist liberation would be tantamount to gender role inversion: men dressing and acting like women, and women like men” (2017: 144-45). Here, though, it is Bridgewater’s misogyny that is to blame for upsetting what the film suggests is the natural order of things.

Bridgewater’s decision to disavow women also provides the context for the gender disguise plot. As Straayer argues, gender-crossing in films is rarely “pursued as a pleasure in and of itself”, but instead tends to be motivated by an external factor (1996: 44). A similar need to rationalize or “explain away” gender-crossing persists in more recent narratives about trans lives (Halberstam 2005: 54-55). In the case of *Girls Will Be Boys*, Haas plays Pat, Bridgewater’s estranged grandson, who is already well versed in performing masculinity at the start of the film because of her job as a male impersonator in the Parisian music halls. Having seen only photographs of Pat in costume for her stage act, Bridgewater believes her to be a young man, and Pat is willing to go along with the misunderstanding in order to teach him a lesson. Pat’s assumption of a masculine persona is thus doubly distanced from everyday life. Firstly, it is associated with the theatrical world of role-play. In this respect, the film is similar to Weimar gender disguise films, which, in Katie Sutton’s assessment, often used theatrical settings as a way to provide audiences “with a safe - and simultaneously titillating - brand of female masculinity that only rarely challenged the social order” (2011: 127). Secondly, Pat’s gender-crossing is linked to her foreignness. This is underlined by a scene showing Grey visiting Pat in

her glamorous Paris dressing-room, and it was also part of BIP's publicity campaign, which recommended that exhibitors advertise Haas as a star fresh from the German studios and Continental cabaret (Pressbook for *Girls Will Be Boys* 1934).

Pat's efforts to fool Bridgewater by posing as his grandson form one strand of the narrative. Another concerns the Duke's attempts to eliminate what he perceives as Pat's femininity. Early in the film, Pat is warned by Grey that she will inevitably give herself away "by doing something girlish". There is an opportunity for this at a dinner with her grandfather's friends, at which Pat is expected to join them in drinking alcohol, smoking cigars and swapping dirty jokes - all shorthands for gentlemanly behavior that recur in other gender disguise comedies. When Pat fails these tests, Bridgewater enlists the help of his groundskeeper, Geoffrey (Esmond Knight), to "make a man" of his grandson through a course of gymnastics, rowing, boxing, fishing, swimming and cold showers. These sequences recall the military training that Haas's character undergoes in *Liebeskommando*, as well as evoking contemporary British concerns around young men's physical education, which some commentators worried was producing "soft" and "effeminate" male bodies (Bourke 1996: 180-199). Like the dinner scene, they also draw attention to the way that the codes of masculinity must be learned, in a way that potentially cuts against the idea of fixed gender roles. Geoffrey, meanwhile, is presented as the athletic ideal of manhood, and Pat quickly falls in love with him. Scenes of Pat admiring Geoffrey's physique, or looking at him longingly across a room, serve to present Pat not just as a titillating spectacle, but also as a desiring subject in her own right. With Pat still in masculine persona, these moments also allow space for homoeroticism, although the film stops short of showing any physical intimacy between Pat and Geoffrey until the gender disguise plot is over.

As in several 1930s cross-dressing comedies, Pat's masquerade is eventually discovered by accident during a swimming scene. In this case, Geoffrey sees Pat undressed when he rescues her from drowning in a lake. So, while the film plays with conventional ideas of what it means to be a man or woman up to a point, it also appeals to what Straayer calls "biological authority" by presenting a character's body as the ultimate proof of their "true" gender (1996: 50). In the film's last act, in another undressing scene, the discovery moment is replayed with Pat's grandfather, forcing him to acknowledge, and eventually overcome, his hatred of women. Bridgewater also gets the last word, claiming to have known about Pat's disguise all along. Whether or not the audience believes him, this final twist frames the whole narrative as an extended joke, and reminds viewers that they, too, have never really been allowed to forget Pat's femininity. Still, in its presentation of Pat as a modern, relatively uninhibited young woman, the film acknowledges that acceptable notions of femininity were in the process of changing, and that the Duke's rigid views on gender relations were out of date.

Me and Marlborough (1935)

As noted earlier, filmmakers in Britain had already explored the theme of women's gender-crossing before *Girls Will Be Boys*. But the mid-1930s saw numerous gender disguise films produced in quick succession. A year after BIP's film, the rival studio Gaumont-British released the much more lavish musical *First a Girl* (1935), adapted from Reinhold Schünzel's successful German film *Viktor und Viktoria* (1933) as a vehicle for the star Jessie Matthews. This was followed by the Shakespearean gender-crossing comedy *As You Like It* (1936), starring Elisabeth Bergner, another émigré actor. The romance *Wings of the Morning* (1937) was an even more

international production, made with American financing, shot (in Technicolor) in the UK and Ireland, and featuring the French star Annabella in the lead role. The Gaumont-British film *Me and Marlborough* (1935) falls in the middle of this cycle. Like *First a Girl*, it was directed by Victor Saville, who remembered it unfavorably as a “flop” that was “doomed to failure” from the outset (Saville 1974: 100). The film is a costume drama, loosely based on an eighteenth-century prose narrative (*The Life & Adventures of Mrs. Christian Davies, Commonly Called Mother Ross* [1740]). But it also combines aspects of slapstick comedy, a spy plot and a musical number, making it “one of the strangest projects to emerge from [Michael] Balcon’s Gaumont-British” during the decade (Sutton 2000: 204).

The film’s origins also reflect the continuing influence of theatrical images of gender-crossing. The film stars Cicely Courtneidge, who began her career in musical theatre before appearing in several comedies of disguise and mistaken identity in the early British sound cinema. Courtneidge had starred in a gender disguise film of sorts before *Me and Marlborough*. This was Maurice Elvey’s musical *Soldiers of the King* (1933), in which she plays the dual role of Jenny Marvello and her daughter, Maisy, both of whom, like Haas’s Pat, perform male impersonator acts on stage. The film drew on sketches that Courtneidge had developed in theatrical revues, but it also tapped into the nostalgia for the “golden age” of the Victorian and Edwardian music hall. As Jenny Marvello (shown in flashback sequences), Courtneidge performs as a guardsman, singing jingoistic songs about the British army. Maisy has updated the act somewhat, performing love songs in a more modern evening suit, although, as reviewers of the film noted, both characters allude fondly to the turn-of-the-century performances of male impersonators such as Vesta Tilley. Like *Girls Will Be Boys*, *Soldiers of the King* is concerned with the notion that women’s increasing involvement in public life was upsetting gender

relations. Maisy spends her time rehearsing and managing the family theatrical troupe, ignoring the romantic advances of her stage manager, Sebastian (played by the American actor Edward Everett Horton). By the end of the film, Sebastian has learned to assert himself, and a romance blossoms between them. But it is not clear that Maisy will have to relinquish any of her independence or abandon her career. Indeed, the final moments of the film show Maisy, dressed in a guardsman's uniform in honor of her mother, breaking off a kiss with Sebastian to salute the applauding music hall audience.

Me and Marlborough offers a variation on the version of military masculinity that Courtneidge performed in *Soldiers of the King*. Courtneidge plays Kit, an eighteenth-century pub landlady, who adopts a masculine disguise in order to join the Duke of Marlborough's army, so that she can bring her husband back from Flanders. While this was a common plot in stories of "warrior women" going back several centuries, its revival in the 1930s also evoked the more recent memory of women's service during the First World War. Disguised as the young recruit Simon – nicknamed "Sparrow" because of his small stature – Kit proves herself to be a brave and resourceful soldier. As in *Soldiers of the King*, there is some indication that Kit's independence may be a symptom of a larger imbalance in gender relations. Her husband, Dick (Barry Mackay), is shown to be gullible and ineffectual, easily fooled into joining the army, and later tricked again into betraying secrets to a French spy. In contrast, Kit is a capable addition to the army, who quickly wins the respect of Marlborough (Tom Walls) through her enthusiasm. In her ability to adapt and improvise, Kit resembles the boundary-crossing "trickster" figures discussed by Alison Oram in her study of female masculinity in the British popular press at the time. As Oram shows, newspaper stories about gender non-conforming people who "passed" as men in everyday life, despite being assigned female at birth, regularly expressed admiration for

their ingenuity and skill in “successfully following what were quite conservative ideals of masculine behaviour”, usually involving hard work, camaraderie and flirting with women (2007: 17). Kit’s “trickster” status is further demonstrated when she transforms again, this time into a French serving-woman, in order to rescue Marlborough from the clutches of the enemy - a scheme that also involves the Duke disguising himself as a maid.

In other gender disguise comedies of this time, female masculinity is associated with modernity and “Continental” sophistication. However, *Me and Marlborough* is less interested in making this link. Unlike *Girls Will Be Boys*, and similar films about gender-crossing in aristocratic or bohemian circles, Kit’s gender disguise is not eroticized, and there is much less emphasis on the character or star’s body as a marker of “true” identity. Although Courtneidge’s masculine style in the film may have invited a homoerotic gaze - just as Vesta Tilley’s male impersonations in the music hall won her ardent female fans and queer admirers (Vicinus 1996: 195) - she does not play Kit as a sexy or “knowing” androgyne. Instead, as Sparrow, she embodies the idealized British soldier, or “Tommy Atkins” figure, who might grumble about long marches and low wages, as Kit does in the film’s one musical number “All for a Shilling a Day”, but who is nevertheless willing to do his duty to defend the nation or the empire. In order to make Kit fit this mold, though, the narrative has to smooth over some of her rough edges. At the beginning of the film, she is firmly anti-authoritarian, willing to spend time in the stocks in order to help an army deserter evade the law. By the end, she has become a successful part of Marlborough’s army, turning her energies against the forces of the French King. The final sequence shows Kit being honored by the court of Queen Anne as a brave “woman soldier”, restored to her feminine clothing and curtsying to the Duke. In common with *Girls Will Be Boys*, the film is alert to the idea that definitions of femininity were changing and that women

were playing a more active role in public life. But the final scene seems designed to reassure audiences that both the gender system and the British class system were resilient enough to accommodate such outliers without being fundamentally changed.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the cross-dressed woman was a recurring figure in European cinema between the wars, including in Britain. British films borrowed gender-crossing plots, motifs and stars from filmmakers elsewhere in Europe, but they also drew on local theatrical traditions, such as music hall. In common with other areas of popular culture, female masculinity in films was typically imagined as an exciting and temporary “masquerade”. In some cases, as in *Girls Will Be Boys*, it signaled a sophisticated and alluring modernity, designed to provide a titillating spectacle. In other cases, including *Me and Marlborough*, representations of female masculinity could also be a way to symbolically accommodate unruly women within prevailing national myths. In that film, and in *Soldiers of the King*, Courtneidge’s portrayal of the female soldier is closely tied to a nostalgic and conservative construction of Britishness, rooted in romanticized notions of a national past.

Yet, even as they worked to reassure audiences that women who defied conventional ideas of femininity were not threatening, gender disguise films also provide images of masculine self-fashioning and homoeroticism that make them available to a lesbian, queer or trans gaze. There is some indication that queer audiences did indeed respond to these images at the time. In Weimar Germany, for instance, actors who appeared in cross-dressing roles were often discussed appreciatively in the lesbian press (Kuzniar 2000: 52-53; Sutton 2011: 130-131). Unearthing

more evidence of how gender disguise films were interpreted by audiences in Britain and elsewhere in Europe would provide a fuller picture of the pleasures offered by gender-crossing narratives and performances.

Gender disguise comedies remained part of European cinema well after the interwar period. But, after the 1930s, the popular fascination with female masculinity seems to have abated somewhat. Arnold-de Simine argues that this was a result of changing fashions: as “masculinized” clothing for women became more common and acceptable, “female-to-male crossdressing accrued a certain quotidian banality and thereby lost much of its sex appeal and/or comic potential” (2012: 381). For a woman to wear trousers or cut her hair short was no longer shocking, and thus no longer something that could be readily exploited by filmmakers. At the same time, female masculinity may have also become less attractive or aspirational for audiences. In Britain, there was a shift away from masculinized fashions, “boyish” figures and short hair for women, and towards styles that accentuated gender differences. This seems to have become more pronounced during the Second World War, despite, or perhaps because of, the large number of women who were enlisted into what were previously thought of as “men’s jobs”. During the war, the “utility” clothing issued to British women who were conscripted into the armed services or munitions work was often designed to appear as feminine as possible, and women often accessorized them with hair-scarves and make-up. In general, women were increasingly expected to take an active part in the war effort, while also embodying a domestic ideal, and these competing pressures are visible in the images of women in wartime cinema (Lant 1991).

Attitudes towards people who blurred or crossed gender boundaries also continued to change after the interwar period. By the end of the 1940s, stories about female-to-male gender-

crossing in the British popular press became less light-hearted, and were instead, as Oram argues, “often associated with the pathologising discourse of deviance - homosexuality and transsexuality” (2007: 132). These new ways of understanding gender variance undoubtedly affected the way gender-crossing was represented in film. Such developments were not uniform across European contexts, though. Comparing the stories that were told about cross-dressing and transgender experiences across different European cinemas would help to shed further light on the ways in which images of female masculinity, and the meanings they generated, continued to change.

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Further Reading

C. Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) contains an extended discussion of gender disguise films that draws on queer theory. A. Oram (2007) *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007) discusses gender disguise films alongside newspaper stories about women "passing" as men. K. Sutton, *The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2011) examines images of female masculinity in Weimar popular culture, including cinema. L. Horak, "Cross-Dressing and

Transgender in Swedish Cinema, 1908-2017,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 47(2), pp. 377-397, is a recent study that makes a link between gender disguise films and later representations of trans lives.