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## **‘What a Pretty Man - or Girl!’:**

### **Male Cross-Dressing Performances in Early British Cinema, 1898-1918**

**Chris O’Rourke**

#### **Introduction**

A scene in the 1909 British Gaumont film *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition* shows the title character eyeing up the rows of wigs on display in the windows of Fox’s Theatrical Wig-maker and Costumier. The setting is a real street outside a shop in Covent Garden, which was well known among people working in London’s entertainment industry, and which also had a reputation for supplying ‘men of all classes’ with disguises that could make them unrecognisable even to their closest relations.<sup>1</sup> In the film, Percy enters the shop and emerges seconds later, changed out of his three-piece suit, flat cap, cigar and walking stick and into a smart, rather sporty woman’s jacket and skirt, a fur stole and muff, and a broad-brimmed hat decorated with feathers. Outside the shop, a small crowd has gathered to watch the scene, which comes to an end as a salesman escorts Percy into a waiting car. Percy, ladylike, smiles politely and bids him goodbye (Fig. 1).

As the film’s title suggests, Percy’s aim in effecting this transformation is to enter a beauty contest for women and pocket the cash prize. The crowd of curious pedestrians and shopkeepers leaning out of their doorways adds to the sense that this is a practical joke, in which Percy (played by the film’s director, Alfred Collins) is seeing how many people he can fool. This is underlined by the final shot of Collins, out of his wig and feathered hat, laughing as he shows off his winnings to the camera. The practical joke element was taken even further in another British comedy about beauty competitions produced by Cricks and Martin a year earlier, *Lord Algy’s Beauty Show* (1908), in which a troupe of male actors all decide to

dress as women to enter a similar contest, one of them wearing a monkey suit under his outfit - 'cutting a very grotesque figure', as one trade reviewer noted.<sup>2</sup>

In its use of men's cross-dressing for comic effect, *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition* is indicative of a widespread practice in early British cinema. In total, I have identified more than 80 British films made before 1918 that feature cross-dressing performances, and that survive either as archival prints or as records in early filmmakers' catalogues and magazine listings.<sup>3</sup> Like *Percy*, the majority of these films (around three quarters) involve men dressing as women. Also in common with *Percy*, most of these films narrativise gender-crossing as part of the plot, although there are some examples in which men are cast in women's roles without comment. Indeed, *Percy* fits into this category as well, as it includes two other male performers playing women in the line-up of beauty contestants alongside Collins, whose presence goes unremarked upon (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Most of these early British films are comedies, although male-to-female cross-dressing also features in a number of crime films, in which women's clothes are adopted for purposes of disguise, either by criminals on the run from the law or by detectives going undercover.

In 2017, *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition* was grouped into another tradition in British cinema, when it was included in the British Film Institute's extensive online collection 'LGBT Britain'. Launched to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which partially decriminalised male homosexuality in England and Wales, the collection set out to document British cinema's 'long history of carefully coded queerness', as well as showcasing more recent examples of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters on screen.<sup>5</sup> The BFI's decision to present *Percy* in this context can be seen as a recognition of the long-standing relationship between queer culture and forms of drag entertainment, which is amply documented elsewhere in the collection. It is also a deliberately playful invitation to look for signs of 'carefully coded queerness' in films made

well before the passing of the 1967 Act. A similar intention can be found in the repurposing of archival material in Daisy Asquith's film *Queerama*, also produced to mark the anniversary year of 2017, which includes scenes from a number of cross-dressing comedies as part of its impressionistic and often very moving survey of queer life in Britain across the twentieth century.

Arguably, the attempt to link early cross-dressing film comedies to historical narratives of LGBT or queer Britain is more provocative than historically grounded, forming part of a 'politically useful but historically problematic' effort to locate present-day queer experience within a longer tradition.<sup>6</sup> Laura Horak's rigorous analysis of cross-dressing women in early American cinema demonstrates the need for film historians to think carefully about the contexts in which such films were produced, distributed and received by audiences before making claims for their status as precocious examples of queer cinema.<sup>7</sup> This article argues that men's cross-dressing performances in early British films were closely linked to practices in music hall and stage farce, and that these, rather than ideas of same-sex desire or non-normative gender identities, were the frames of reference that the writers of promotional material and reviews generally adopted. In the British trade press, cross-dressing comedies were almost always presented as wholesome entertainment, even if they were sometimes seen to stray too far into the more 'spicy', or sexually overt, territory marked out by the Victorian and Edwardian popular theatre.

But, at the same time, it would be overly hasty to discount the queer possibilities of early cross-dressing comedies entirely. As I sketch out below, studies of cross-dressing in other areas of British culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have shown that the range of possible meanings generated by cross-dressing was highly variable and dependent on context. Although my argument in this article is that early British comedies involving men's cross-dressing were fairly conservative in their humour, tending to reinforce

dominant ideas of the differences between men and women, I also want to be alert to the ways in which male cross-dressing performances on screen may have resonated differently with different groups. In taking this approach, I am following Lisa Sigel's efforts, in her recent study of female impersonator acts staged behind the lines and in prisoner-of-war camps during the First World War, 'to capture the variety of ways that people saw impersonation, rather than privileging one set of meanings over another'.<sup>8</sup> For Sigel, examining the sentiments expressed in postcards and letters sent from the trenches and internment camps back to Britain, cross-dressing performances during wartime produced a wide range of responses, among both the men taking part in the shows and those in the audience. For some, these feelings included sexual attraction or yearning and, for others, pleasant memories of wives, girlfriends or family members, as well as enjoyment in the act of transformation itself, with its promise that it was possible 'to become someone else, someone radically different'.<sup>9</sup> While there is a lack of direct evidence to show how ordinary film-goers viewed early cross-dressing comedies, it is possible to draw on other kinds of sources, such as publicity material and trade reviews, to think about the range of meanings that these films could generate.

To begin with, in the following section, I outline some of the main ways in which men's cross-dressing has been thought about in relation to British popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, before expanding on the variety of cross-dressing performances to be found in early British cinema. My aim is not simply to show how difficult it is to map modern notions of gender and sexual identity onto early films and their audiences, but also to suggest that these films are a valuable resource for deepening our understanding of how competing definitions of masculinity and femininity were reworked in popular culture, providing an alternative perspective on the apparent 'crisis' in gender relations in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

## **The meanings of cross-dressing in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century**

Cross-dressing men and women in Victorian and Edwardian Britain have attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention, partly out of a wider interest, as Marjorie Garber suggests, in the perceived status of cross-dressing as ‘a sign of the constructedness of gender categories’.<sup>10</sup> From the wealth of evidence now gathered, it is clear that the meanings attributed to cross-dressing in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, both on and off the stage, were variable and complex. In her survey of historical scholarship on the topic, Alison Oram notes that, while accounts of cross-dressing individuals have often been used to illuminate the emergence of modern gay, lesbian or transgender identities, attitudes towards cross-dressing in the past are often equally useful for shedding light on the history of normative ideas of gendered behaviour and of the unstable relationship between gender presentation and sexual orientation. Depending on the social and cultural context in which it is encountered, cross-dressing, Oram writes, ‘may be seen as connected to same-sex desire, or as a completely unrelated activity’.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, because of the unequal power dynamics at play in modern Western societies, the meanings attached to male-to-female cross-dressing, versus female-to-male, have also developed in different ways.<sup>12</sup> Oram’s own investigation of early-twentieth century newspaper stories of women ‘passing’ as men in daily life suggests that, while medicalised notions of the ‘mannish woman’ as a lesbian, or female ‘invert’, were slowly filtering into elite culture from the field of sexology during this period, the British popular press did not link cross-dressing women - even those living with other women as ‘female husbands’ - to ideas of same-sex desire. Instead, newspaper stories were more likely to present cross-dressing women as adventurous tricksters, often employing the language

used to describe male impersonators in the music hall (performers like Vesta Tilley and Hetty King) to explain women's off-stage gender-crossing.<sup>13</sup>

For men dressing as women off-stage, the situation was somewhat different. Historians have tended to agree that men's cross-dressing caused considerably more concern in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period than was the case for women.<sup>14</sup> This has been linked to broader anxieties over the status of men in turn-of-the-century British society, when improvements in women's education and material circumstances (at least among the middle classes), along with calls for greater social and political roles for women, contributed to what some cultural historians have seen as a 'crisis' in masculinity.<sup>15</sup> Revising this view, and summarising longer-term changes in dominant ideas of masculinity across the nineteenth century, John Tosh nevertheless describes the emergence of 'an intensified discourse of sexual difference' in the late Victorian period, and a more thorough policing of the boundaries of acceptable masculine behaviour.<sup>16</sup> In this context, signs of effeminacy in men were increasingly understood as a social and, in some cases, a medical problem.<sup>17</sup> As with 'mannish' women, men exhibiting 'feminine' traits were the subject of numerous sexological works in this period, including early studies of 'transvestism', a term coined by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld for his 1910 publication, or 'Eonism', the term used in the following decade by Hirschfeld's British counterpart, Havelock Ellis.<sup>18</sup> Again, ideas about cross-dressing men derived from sexology seem to have had a limited currency in Britain before the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>19</sup> However, there were already popular discourses that associated 'effeminacy' in men with same-sex desire well before the interwar years. Harry Cocks has argued that, by the late nineteenth century, the authorities - at least those in London - tended to 'read' cross-dressed men found walking the streets as sodomites or male prostitutes (known colloquially as 'margeries' or 'mary-annes').<sup>20</sup> Cases involving men arrested under sodomy, gross indecency or vagrancy laws while wearing women's clothing or make-up

frequently made it into newspaper court reports. Although these reports tended to be heavily censored - so much so that some readers may have been under the impression that men's cross-dressing was itself a criminal offence - they contributed to an association between male-to-female cross-dressing and 'deviant' sexual practices, however vaguely defined.<sup>21</sup> The men involved in these cases also offered their own meanings for dressing as women, sometimes explaining it away as an extension of theatrical work, as in the trials of the 'female personators' Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park in the 1870s, or as the result of an innocent 'lark' gone too far.<sup>22</sup> As the example of *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition* suggests, and as I discuss in more detail below, the practical joke was one of the most common motivations given for men's gender-crossing in early films. Case studies compiled by Havelock Ellis also recorded the voices of people for whom cross-dressing was motivated not by a desire to "dress up" or masquerade' as women, as one of Ellis's respondents explained, but by an ambition 'to live as a woman'.<sup>23</sup> However, in general, these voices did not impact on mainstream discourse in this period.

Cross-dressing as part of a theatrical performance was a more generally acceptable activity for men in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain. As Charles Upchurch writes in his discussion of the Boulton and Park case, 'dominant groups perceived the gender transgressions of the stage actor as taking place in an exceptional space separated from the ordinary world of power relations'.<sup>24</sup> Forms of cross-dressing had been a common feature of theatrical practice since the early modern period. By the mid-nineteenth century, the practice was most evident in the music hall, where performers delivering comic songs in character began to support their characterisations through costume and make-up. Records of performances at the Canterbury Hall in London suggest that male singers were already including female characters in their repertory by the 1860s.<sup>25</sup> The most popular female character types for male comics in the music hall were usually older, working-class women,



such as downtrodden housewives, lodging-house landladies and domestic servants. Music hall practice also fed into pantomime, where the cross-dressed 'dame' role, typically played by a well-known music hall comedian in the larger venues, became a standard feature by the late nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Men's cross-dressing performances were also a common part of more informal working-class entertainments at this time, such as annual parades and fancy dress celebrations, which frequently involved men dressing as women.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, while the dominant interpretation of male cross-dressing performances on stage or in carnival settings bracketed them off from suggestions of transgressive sexuality or gender non-conformity, this division was never total. The practice of casting men in the dame role in pantomime, for instance, had its detractors, including the theatre critic William Davenport Adams, who objected in 1882, as part of a more general complaint about the infiltrating of pantomime by 'low' music hall comedians, that '[a] man in woman's clothes cannot be more or less vulgar'.<sup>28</sup> For the most part, middle-class theatre critics remained mystified as to the appeal of men's drag acts in music halls, continuing to worry that any female impersonator was invariably 'skating on thin ice', and that 'an indiscreet action' would see him fall 'into the muddy waters of vulgarity'.<sup>29</sup> As well as seeming to push the boundaries of good taste, the female impersonator act of the popular stage may have also offered opportunities for queer men to express themselves in socially sanctioned ways. Laurence Senelick argues that forms of glamorous female impersonation, or 'glamour drag', which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, had their origins partly in the 'thriving transvestite demi-monde' of the big European and North American cities (the kind of world occupied by London's male prostitutes), and continued to provide an arena for men 'longing for woman's colourful trappings' or otherwise looking to experiment with non-normative forms of masculinity, even as such acts were absorbed into the programmes of music halls and vaudeville theatres.<sup>30</sup> As we will see, versions of 'glamour drag' were also

making it onto British screens by the late 1910s, albeit in what Senelick might see as a more ‘neutralised’, mainstream form.<sup>31</sup> Before this, though, most cross-dressing performances in British films borrowed most heavily from traditions of music hall character comedy, which dealt not in illusionistic glamour but in down-to-earth and sometimes highly unflattering comic types.

### **Quick-change artists: male cross-dressing performances in early British films**

The first film shows in Britain took place in 1896, and British film production began in earnest that same year. The examples of cross-dressing in British films that I have been able to identify from the cinema’s earliest years all feature male performers playing women’s roles with little or no narrative explanation or commentary. As is to be expected of films from the 1890s and early 1900s, they are all extremely short, mostly consisting of a single shot and often including only a single performer. Although only one of the descriptions in the catalogues produced by filmmakers for exhibitors makes a direct link to theatrical precedents, they all have roots in other popular entertainment forms. In some ways, they could be usefully thought of as film versions of the ‘quick-change’ act in music hall - a genre that was undergoing a ‘boom’ in the late 1890s, according to one music hall critic - in which performers swapped costumes and identities in rapid succession.<sup>32</sup> More generally, they draw on styles of costuming and characterisation that would have been familiar to audiences from cross-dressing performances in music hall and pantomime. As music halls and variety theatres were important early venues for film exhibition in Britain, these films may have even been shown on the same bill as quick-change or female impersonation acts.

The earliest example, *Ally Sloper* (1898), a comedy by the Brighton filmmaker G.A. Smith, is listed in the catalogue for exhibitors as a ‘reversing’ film. Although now presumed

lost, the film showed the character of Ally Sloper in a theatre dressing-room ‘making up’ as a young woman. This transformation was apparently achieved through a reversing effect, in which the audience witnessed ‘the discarded clothes rise, one at a time, from the floor and return to the back of the actor’.<sup>33</sup> By the 1890s, Ally Sloper, the fast-living, larger-than-life cartoon character invented by Charles Ross, was already a feature of numerous authorised and unauthorised music hall acts and pantomimes, making him one of the most recognisable characters in British popular culture.<sup>34</sup> It is possible that Smith’s film was made to coincide with a particular theatrical performance, or he may have simply been trying to exploit the character’s well-known brand of carnivalesque humour. At the same time, the transformation from one character to another, heightened by the reversing effect, seems designed to show off the technical capabilities of the new medium of moving pictures.

Smith’s later film *Grandma Threading Her Needle* (1900), which belongs to the early cinematic genre of the comic facial expression film, or ‘facial’, also combines cross-dressing humour with camera trickery. In this case, the music hall comedian and sometime pantomime dame Tom Green is shown in a medium close-up shot as an old lady, struggling with a needle and thread. Advertising for the film makes clear that it was the quick change of facial expressions that was intended as the main attraction, while Green’s cross-dressing portrayal of the old lady is not mentioned at all.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the publicity material for R.W. Paul’s 1902 lost film *Facial Expressions* makes a feature of the film’s gender-crossing performance. In the film, an unnamed but apparently ‘well-known’ actor, filmed in a dressing-room setting, transformed his appearance from ‘a sanctimonious old man’ to a ‘comical’ old woman, ‘with a long black wig and large hat and shawl’.<sup>36</sup> Although the ‘facial’ was a relatively short-lived genre, quick-change acts like this one occasionally made it into later films, such as *Rigollo the Man of Many Faces* (1910), which showed a music hall performer depicting multiple characters, including a suffragette, with minimal props.<sup>37</sup> As I discuss in more detail below,

this was not the only British film to use men's cross-dressing to lampoon campaigners for women's suffrage.

By the mid-1900s, 'quick-change' cross-dressing films were joined by a series of longer crime films, some classed in filmmakers' catalogues as comedies, in which women's clothing was used by criminals as a disguise, often as part of a flurry of costume changes. In this respect, these story films absorbed and 'narrativised' features of the earlier single-shot comedies in a way that is indicative of the larger changes occurring in filmmaking at this time. Several of the films also draw on the sensationalist tone of the popular press in their depiction of gender-crossing as an exciting and entertaining part of modern life, providing parallels with the newspaper stories of 'passing' women discussed by Oram.<sup>38</sup> One of the films even features a gender-swapping husband and wife criminal partnership.

The most frequent protagonists of early British story films involving cross-dressing were criminals on the run from the police. The Hepworth Manufacturing Company's lost film *The 'Lady' Thief and the Baffled Bobbies* (1903) follows a character that the filmmaker's catalogue termed, in a nod to music hall practice, 'a quick-change burglar' as he 'eludes the vigilance of the local constables and escapes with the swag under their very noses'. The plot involves the thief, seemingly a woman, escaping by train, then undressing in the carriage to reveal that he is really a man in disguise, before getting out at the next station with a suitcase of diamonds, unnoticed by the waiting police. A prologue scene, depicting a 'knowing' policeman reading about the events in an evening paper, seems designed to frame the story as one more bizarre incident in a fast-paced news environment.<sup>39</sup> The Hepworth company returned to the theme of sensational cross-dressing crime stories for the 1905 film *The Interrupted Honeymoon, or 'Where There's a Will There's a Way'*, which survives in a more-or-less complete version. The film tells the story of a young man who steals from a jeweller to pay for his wedding, only to be tracked down by detectives on his wedding night. To fool

the law, he and his new bride swap clothes, which successfully confuses the policeman long enough for the cross-dressed husband to put a pillowcase over the policeman's head and tie him to the bed. The film ends with the policeman still tied up, while the resourceful couple escape.<sup>40</sup>

As suggested by these two examples from the Hepworth company, audiences for many early crime films were clearly being invited to sympathise with the quick-witted, gender-crossing criminal. The films thus tap into what Gillian Spraggs has discussed as the 'cult of the robber' in British popular culture, which was visible elsewhere in celebratory tales of folk figures such as Robin Hood, Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin.<sup>41</sup> Several other early British films incorporated scenes of robber heroes disguising themselves as women (often elderly beggars), in order to underline their ingenuity in evading the law. These include the Sheffield Photographic Company's 1903 film *The Convict's Escape*, which was offered to exhibitors as a sequel to the company's hugely popular chase film *Daring Daylight Burglary* (also 1903), and Walter Haggart's *The Life of Charles Peace* (1905), about the well-known burglar and murderer.<sup>42</sup> The trope continued to be popular in later films, such as the Warwick Trading Company's *A Pair of Desperate Swindlers* (1906), the Alpha Trading Company's *A Slippery Visitor* (1906) and Cricks and Martin's *The Robber's Ruse, or Foiled by Fido* (1909). Hepworth also continued to produce films in a similar vein, including *The Sharp-Witted Thief* (1910) and *The Badness of Burglar Bill* (1913). By this point, following the international vogue for detective films sparked by the French company Pathé's *Nick Carter* series from 1908, a series of British films were inviting viewers to switch their allegiances from criminals to their pursuers, by showing ingenious male crime fighters disguising themselves as women in order to track down fugitives or infiltrate criminal gangs. These include an instalment of the Clarendon Film Company's *Lieutenant Rose* series

(*Lieutenant Rose and the Gunrunners* [1910]), G&S's *Detective Ferris* (1912) and Cricks's *The Great Tiger Ruby* (1913), among others.

To recap, while the earliest examples of cross-dressing in British films focussed on the act of transformation itself as a spectacle, early crime films wove moments of gender-crossing into sensational stories about modern life, in which the cross-dressing criminal was typically the sympathetic protagonist, able to use disguise as a way of outwitting the authorities. In later crime films, male detectives also adopted female disguises as part of their investigations. In all three instances, cross-dressing was presented as a deliberate performance, whether undertaken by a skilled music hall entertainer or by equally skilled criminal and crime-fighting heroes.

It is possible that some viewers made a connection between films depicting cross-dressing criminals and news stories about men arrested while wearing women's clothing for supposedly 'immoral' sexual purposes, although this is not a link that is ever alluded to in the surviving films or in their publicity material. One exception to this might be the Hepworth comedy *The Lazy Boy* (1909), in which the protagonist dresses as a girl to avoid work and is subsequently picked up off the street by a young man, who flirts with him and buys him drinks.<sup>43</sup> Hepworth's film may have struck 'knowing' viewers as a veiled reference to male (or female) prostitution. However, it can more easily be seen as part of a substantial body of early British comedy films, popular from around this time, which used gender-crossing plots to joke about romantic misadventures between men and women. Many of them were derived from Victorian stage farce, which had already effectively mined this seam of comedy.

### **Charley's other aunts: British gender-crossing film comedies**

By far the highest frequency of male cross-dressing performances in British films made before 1918 occurred in comedies about romance and courtship. Most of them were produced during the 1910s, when story films were getting longer and filmmakers were experimenting with more complicated narratives. Cross-dressing in these films is used by male characters in order to get closer to female love interests, sometimes allowing men access to women-only environments, or else to thwart romantic relationships, either out of self-interest or to preserve a marriage. As in early crime films, gender-crossing in these comedies is invariably presented as a short-term expedient and is usually reversed by the end of the film. But, often, the films also exhibit a greater interest in exploring the misconceptions and confusion that gender-crossing characters can cause, as well as in seeing how far male characters are prepared to go in order to maintain their disguises.

Many of the early British cross-dressing comedies that deal with courtship can be seen as early versions of the ‘films of sexual disguise’ discussed by Annette Kuhn or the ‘temporary transvestite’ comedies analysed by Chris Straayer, who both use examples from later Hollywood cinema.<sup>44</sup> For instance, most of the early British examples that survive include moments in which characters purposely or inadvertently reveal their ‘true’ gender, and many of them end with conventional heterosexual couplings. Stories like these had been popular since Shakespeare’s time, at least. But a key point of reference for early British filmmakers was Brandon Thomas’s stage farce *Charley’s Aunt*, which was first performed in London in 1892, and which went on to become one of the biggest hits of the Victorian theatre.<sup>45</sup> The play was frequently revived by touring and provincial theatre companies in Britain during the decades that followed, and it was also staged around the world, eventually being adapted as a 1925 Hollywood feature film starring Sydney Chaplin. Well before this, British filmmakers were already pilfering elements of the play to structure their one-reel comedies.

*Charley's Aunt* was originally commissioned as a vehicle for the comic actor W.S. Penley, who starred in the initial London run as Lord Fancourt Babberley, an Oxford undergraduate, who is coerced by his fellow students, Charley and Jack, into impersonating Charley's widowed aunt from Brazil, so that the two can spend the day with their sweethearts in the presence of a chaperone (see Fig. 4).<sup>46</sup> Some British filmmakers borrowed from the film's title to tell stories of young men cross-dressing as a prank. The Cricks and Martin film *Aunt Tabitha's Visit* (1911) begins with a house party, which is quickly disrupted by the news that the young host's aunt is paying a surprise visit from Australia, prompting one of the host's friends to impersonate Aunt Tabitha as a joke. The friend's appearance as the aunt, with a centre-parted wig and black bonnet, suggests how thoroughly Penley's original interpretation of Lord Fancourt had permeated popular culture. Allusions to the play's title can also be found in other British films from around this time, including the later Cricks and Martin effort *Oh! My Aunt!* (1913), the Piccadilly company's *Joey's Aunt* (1916) and the Martin's Films comedy *Oh Auntie!* (1916), all of which featured cross-dressing male characters.

As well as borrowing the title of *Charley's Aunt* and details from Penley's performance, a number of British filmmakers offered variations on the play's central storyline, in which a male character's cross-dressing disguise provides an alibi for young men and women to spend time with each other, without the supervision of an older chaperone. In *Oh! My Aunt!*, B&C's *The Sanctimonious Spinsters' Society* (1913) and the Clarendon Film Company's *Love and the 'Varsity* (1913) men dress as women in order to meet up with their sweethearts in all-female environments. In the first of these, a young lover disguises himself as 'Aunt Jane' to gain entry to a girls' boarding school, while, in the second, a group of men dress as 'old maids' to infiltrate a society for self-styled 'Bachelor Girls'.<sup>47</sup> In the Clarendon film, which survives, two undergraduates disguise themselves as female students in order to



elope with pupils at a Finishing School for Young Ladies. Although the film ends with a chase, much of the time is taken up with showing the confusion caused by the male interlopers. This includes scenes of the young men relishing the opportunity to kiss their sweethearts as ‘friends’, prompting quizzical looks from the other girls, and a scene in which the school’s headmistress spies on the new pupils through a keyhole, only to find them out of their wigs and smoking.

What is funny in such scenes is partly the incongruity of male characters appearing like women but still behaving in a manner expected of men, much in the same way as Penley’s performance in *Charley’s Aunt* derived humour from his repeated failures to impersonate a woman convincingly.<sup>48</sup> But scenes like these also show early filmmakers experimenting with the romantic and erotic possibilities opened up by gender-crossing, inviting what Sara Maitland describes, in a discussion of male impersonators on the stage, as a kind of ‘unfocused sexual curiosity’.<sup>49</sup> Gender-crossing scenarios seem to have given some filmmakers licence to put more intimate behaviour on display. The earlier comedy *Lord Algy’s Beauty Show* ends with a lengthy panning shot, referred to in the film’s trade synopsis as ‘a big view of the fellows making violent love to the ladies’, in which the male characters hug and kiss the female beauty contestants, and sometimes each other, as part of a general spirit of carnivalesque fun.<sup>50</sup>

The lasting influence of *Charley’s Aunt* can be seen in other films, which raid the play’s subplot. This involves a wicked guardian, who flirts with the cross-dressed Lord Fancourt, believing him to be a wealthy widow, and who is effectively punished by public humiliation once the disguise is revealed. The Cricks and Martin film *Bertie’s Bid for Bliss* (1911), Cosmopolitan’s *Uncle Dunn Done* (1912) and Clarendon’s *Dad Caught Napping* (1913) all feature male characters cross-dressing to fool (or extort money out of) flirtatious men. In Hepworth’s *In Love with an Actress* (1911), H.D.’s *Inkey and Co - Glad Eye* (1913)

and Motograph's *Inquisitive Ike* (1914), cross-dressing disguises are used to frustrate and humiliate rival suitors. The Kinematograph Trading Company's farce *The Importance of Being Another Man's Wife* (1914), based on a music hall sketch by Harry Pleon and starring the well-known comedian Arthur Roberts, provided yet another spin on the *Charley's Aunt* formula. Roberts, who had been acting in the music hall sketch for nearly a decade before it was adapted for film, played a man who accidentally climbs through the window of a married woman's bedroom, and has to disguise himself as the woman's sister to avoid causing a scandal in front of her husband. When the real sister arrives, she disguises herself as a man.<sup>51</sup> Similar double cross-dressing scenarios formed the basis for the Hepworth comedy *Mugwump's Paying Guest* (1911) and Cricks's *A Novel Wooing* (1914).

As I discuss below, cross-dressing comedies of courtship were the films that most clearly made reviewers uneasy about what was permissible in film, as opposed to music hall and theatre, and that most often prompted them to offer caveats about a film's suitability for cinema's broad, 'family' audience. But, before thinking in more detail about the reception of cross-dressing performances in early British cinema, there is one final strand of cross-dressing comedy left to examine, in which male performers portrayed female characters for purposes of satire or burlesque. Often, these films had the specific target of women's suffrage campaigners in mind.

### **Cross-dressing in anti-women's suffrage comedies**

Theatre historians writing about cross-dressed 'dame' roles on the late-Victorian and Edwardian stage, whether in music hall routines or pantomimes, have tended to see them as part of a misogynistic brand of humour that they argue was widespread in turn-of-the-century British popular culture. Jacky Bratton, for instance, distinguishes the roster of working-class

women performed by female ‘serio-comics’ like Jenny Hill from the ‘grotesque harridans’ performed in ‘burlesque drag’ by male comedians such as Harry Randall.<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere, Bratton has expanded on the hostility towards women that was often expressed in music hall songs and sketches, linking this to a broader concern over the idea that women were becoming more independent or even more dominant at home and in public life. In her view, much of the laughter to be found in the halls, including that generated by men’s cross-dressing acts, was at the expense of the ‘the old, the ugly, and the useless female’, with the implicit intention of ‘mocking disliked female traits and unattractive female assertion’.<sup>53</sup> Caroline Radcliffe has identified a similar dynamic at work in Dan Leno’s dame roles in the annual Drury Lane pantomime, which he undertook regularly from the late 1880s up to his death in 1904. For Radcliffe, Leno’s performance as Sister Anne in the 1901 Christmas production *Blue Beard* exemplified the way his dames held older women up to ridicule, in this case for exhibiting sexual desire and for wanting to attract a rich and powerful husband (see Fig. 5).<sup>54</sup>

While I would argue that the targets of humour in men’s cross-dressing acts, both in comic songs and pantomime, were more various than Bratton and Radcliffe’s examples suggest, it is undeniable that male cross-dressing performances were most often used in turn-of-the-century music hall comedy to represent older women, such as middle-aged widows, lodging-house proprietors or charladies. Malcolm Scott’s turn as the gullible housekeeper in the Magnet Film Company’s *How a Housekeeper Lost Her Character* (1913) is indicative of the sort of cross-dressed roles he and other music hall comedians regularly played on stage.<sup>55</sup> Writers and performers were also alert to debates about changing gender roles, and they often incorporated topical references to current concerns into their acts. For instance, the costume worn by Herbert Campbell for his dame role as the ‘masculine’-looking Eliza the cook in the 1894 Drury Lane pantomime, *Dick Whittington*, has been seen as a reference to the style of

the modern 'New Woman'.<sup>56</sup> By the 1900s, as Bratton notes, the women's suffrage campaign had also become a staple target of popular humour, and the suffragette was quickly added to music hall's comic repertory of 'dominating' female types.<sup>57</sup>

Like music hall entertainers, British filmmakers were quick to incorporate jibes at women's suffragists into their comedies. The Bamforth and Riley Bros film *Women's Rights* (1899) recycled a comic scenario that had been circulating in magic lantern slides since the 1880s, in which two women, played in the film by men, are shown engaging in a lively discussion, while their skirts are nailed to a fence by a couple of passing tradesmen.<sup>58</sup> Although the topic of their conversation is obscure, an accompanying postcard series made it clear that the women were meant to be discussing politics, with the suggestion being that they were therefore fair game for a prank.<sup>59</sup> The casting of cross-dressed men in the central roles may have been designed to heighten the physical humour, in a way that became fairly common practice in later French chase films.<sup>60</sup> But it also links the film to depictions of women's suffrage campaigners elsewhere in late-Victorian popular culture as 'mannish' harridans, who sacrificed their femininity by showing an interest in political issues.

Following the use of more militant tactics by the Women's Social and Political Union and other groups in the years before the First World War, a series of British films used cross-dressing performances to satirise or marginalise the women's suffrage campaign. The Hepworth comedy *When Women Rule* (1908) was part of a swathe of popular humour that imagined what would happen if men and women swapped roles. Krista Cowman points to similar jokes in picture postcards from this period, many of them depicting the domestic chaos that would apparently ensue if women abandoned men to look after households on their own.<sup>61</sup> This was also a topic that had been pursued by the French filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché in her 1906 comedy for Gaumont, *Les Résultats du Féminisme* (*The Consequences of Feminism*), which showed women smoking, drinking and enjoying nights out, while the men

were left to sew and look after the children.<sup>62</sup> In *When Women Rule*, wives force their husbands ‘to don skirts and set about the household tasks’, while the women drive coaches and run the fire station. Both men and women are shown to be hopeless at their new jobs, and the film ends with the men rejecting their skirts to ‘assume their rightful position’.<sup>63</sup> Here, men’s cross-dressing becomes a sign of their emasculation at the hands of overly assertive women. The idea of women being unfit to hold positions of authority was also taken up in Clarendon’s *If Women Were Policemen* (1908) made around the same time.

Jokes about women’s suffrage overlapped with cross-dressing film comedy in other ways. In Gaumont’s *The Woman Who Wasn’t* (1908), made by Alf Collins a year before *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition*, a man disguises himself as a suffragette for a bet, and proceeds to amass a large crowd of supporters by making ‘vehement’ speeches ‘in the usual Suffragette style’. Once his disguise is revealed, the women turn on him and physically attack him.<sup>64</sup> Although, to some extent, the women get the last laugh in the film, the ending reinforces the image of women’s suffrage campaigners as volatile and irrationally violent. Similar jokes appeared in that year’s Drury Lane pantomime, notably in Wilkie Bard’s comic song ‘Put Me on an Island’, delivered as his character is surrounded by a crowd of violent women, with its refrain ‘But don’t put me near a Suffragette’.<sup>65</sup> British filmmakers returned to the image of the violent women’s suffrage campaigner in the years that followed. In Hepworth’s *Petticoat Perfidy* (1913), a male prankster disguised as a ‘militant’ suffragist convinces his would-be suitor to smash a window.<sup>66</sup> Window-smashing featured prominently in another film produced in 1913, *Miss Pimple, ‘Suffragette’*, starring the popular film comedian Fred Evans, who often appeared in cross-dressing roles. Transformed into a ‘veritable suffragette’, Evans’s Pimple character was also shown stopping the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race and blowing up the Prime Minister, before threatening to go on hunger strike.<sup>67</sup>

While other types of male cross-dressing performance continued into the wartime British cinema, the changing social and political landscape seems to have made anti-suffrage comedies less popular with filmmakers after 1914. One indicator of the changing image of women's paid work in this period is provided by the Ideal Film Company's *Doing His Bit* (1917), which offered a variation on earlier comedies of gender role reversal. The film featured the music hall star George Robey, who was well known for his dame roles in pantomime, as a man who disguises himself as a woman in order to help with the war effort and prove himself fit for active duty. In some ways, it has more in common with earlier adventure films like B&C's *A Soldier's Sweetheart* (1911) or Urban's *The Flying Despatch* (1912), in which heroic women disguise themselves as men to undertake daring missions. However, while *Doing His Bit* partly paid tribute to women's wartime work, reviews suggest that much of the film's humour derived from scenes of Robey conspicuously failing in his attempts to take on traditionally 'feminine' roles.<sup>68</sup> In general, although gender-crossing comedies invited viewers to take pleasure in the mixing of conventionally masculine and feminine appearances and behaviours, they rarely troubled the underlying assumption that men and women should occupy distinctly separate positions in society.

### **The British reception of male cross-dressing performances on screen**

The large number of films produced in Britain in the years before 1918 that featured male cross-dressing performances suggest that British filmmakers saw gender-crossing as a reliable source of amusement or as a way of adding interest to sensational stories of crime and detection. As in music hall and stage farce, male performers in films often portrayed older 'aunt' figures, but they also disguised themselves as younger women to play tricks on flirtatious men or to gain access to all-female environments. Cross-dressing could also be

used to comment on contemporary debates about the extent of women's social and political independence, albeit in an irreverent and sometimes highly dismissive way, which tended to suggest that women campaigning for the vote were excessively masculine or else that traditional gender roles were in danger of being reversed, to the detriment of men.

Finding out how ordinary film audiences in Britain understood early gender-crossing performances and narratives is a more difficult task. Publicity material produced by filmmakers and distributors and the plot synopses published in film trade magazines give clues as to how exhibitors were encouraged to think about films and how they may have presented them to viewers. The earliest catalogue descriptions and newspaper advertisements suggest that 'quick-change' cross-dressing comedies were sold in terms of the novelty value of seeing skilled theatrical transformations up close and for the 'curious' or 'ludicrous' effects that the performers produced.<sup>69</sup> Publicity for early crime films emphasised the speed with which criminal heroes adopted and abandoned their cross-dressing disguises, sometimes insisting that such transformations were achieved without the use of camera 'tricks' or 'fakes', and were thus even more impressive.<sup>70</sup> Descriptions of later detective films encouraged viewers to enjoy the ingenious ways in which the protagonists used cross-dressing disguises to outwit thieves or to infiltrate the criminal underworld, while synopses of comedies invited audiences to laugh at the confusion and farcical situations caused by gender-crossing characters.

In the 1910s, as British trade magazines increasingly took on the role of arbiters of film quality, their editors began to publish more opinionated reviews of new releases, often commenting on their originality or their likely success with audiences. As with reviews of music hall acts in theatrical papers, cross-dressing performances were frequently discussed by film reviewers in terms of their skill, or 'cleverness'. Reviewing Clarendon's *Sentimental Tommy* (1915), a wartime variation on the gender-crossing-as-prank scenario, a writer for *The*

*Bioscope* praised its ‘clever’ plot and performances, as well as its topical value.<sup>71</sup>

Occasionally, however, reviewers expressed concern that the humour of cross-dressing comedies involving romance and courtship might be too ‘spicy’, or overtly sexual, for some film audiences. Rather than identifying any suggestion of homoeroticism, though, these reviews seem to have been more anxious about the depiction of romantic liaisons between men and women. Instead of being worried about cross-dressing per se, the concern was usually with plots that involved characters in various states of undress.

For example, a trade review of the 1914 Arthur Roberts farce *The Importance of Being Another Man’s Wife* warned that the film contained ‘a certain element of what is commonly known as “spiciness”’. The review continued that, while the story, which was based on a ten-year-old music hall sketch, was hardly ‘risqué’, nevertheless, ‘in view of the unusually high moral standards nowadays obtaining in the picture theatres, its humour may be said to be at moments a trifle “strong”’.<sup>72</sup> While the film is lost, the plot of the music hall sketch, involving a man alone with a married woman in her bedroom, suggests jokes about adultery that may well have pushed at the boundaries of what was considered acceptable to show on screen. The previous year, the newly formed British Board of Film Censors had edited or rejected a number of films for containing ‘scenes suggestive of immorality’ or ‘situations accentuating delicate marital relations’, as trade reviewers would have no doubt been aware.<sup>73</sup>

A similar caveat was given in a review of the American film *The Sultan’s Wife*, produced by the Keystone company and released in Britain as *Caught in a Harem* (1918). The reviewer remarked that the film was ‘a trifle spicy at times’, but thought that the ‘cleverness’ of its farcical plot would stop it from causing offence.<sup>74</sup> From the evidence of the surviving film, in which Bobby Vernon and Gloria Swanson swap clothes in an attempt to escape from an Indian rajah’s palace, the ‘spiciest’ elements would appear to be the revealing



costumes worn by Swanson and the other harem girls. In this instance, the ‘clever’ cross-dressing plot may have actually made the film more palatable to exhibitors worried about the ‘high moral standards’ being brought to bear on the cinema by shifting the focus away from the film’s sexualisation of women.

Beyond warning about the ‘spiciness’ of some gender-crossing farces, trade reviewers also increasingly objected that British cross-dressing performances were simply too derivative or too broad in their humour. A review of Bamforth’s *That’s Done It* (1915) commented that the film utilised ‘the not very original idea of a youth being made up as a girl in order to entrap an unwary father into foolish amours’.<sup>75</sup> Discussing one of Fred Evans’s cross-dressing roles, in the burlesque crime comedy *Pimple as Mrs Raffles* (1915), *The Bioscope* remarked on the film’s ‘efficient’ but ‘broad humour’, while the same trade paper thought that *Joey’s Aunt* was ‘mildly amusing’, but ‘somewhat coarse’.<sup>76</sup> Lupino Lane’s cross-dressing role in *Nipper and the Curate* (1916) was greeted as ‘a first-rate female impersonation’, but the overall tone of the film was judged as ‘unnecessarily broad’.<sup>77</sup> The British trade press’s impatience with homegrown gender-crossing comedies can be interpreted partly as a response to the high bar set by imported American productions, with their highly publicised comic stars. Certainly, trade reviewers were full of praise for Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle’s cross-dressing performances in *Miss Fatty’s Seaside Lovers* (1915) and *The Butcher Boy* (1917), and thought that Charlie Chaplin’s excursion into cross-dressing comedy in the Essanay film *A Woman*, released in Britain as *Charlie the Perfect Lady* (1915), was among his best work to date.<sup>78</sup>

British reviewers were also enthusiastic about a series of films produced by the American firm Lasky and starring the female impersonator Julian Eltinge. These were released in Britain in quick succession in 1918, beginning with *The Countess Charming* and *The Clever Mrs. Carfax*, and followed by *The Widow’s Might* later in the year. Eltinge had

made a name for himself in America with a style of female impersonation that emphasised his glamorous feminine appearance, rather than conforming to comic character types.<sup>79</sup> This style of 'glamour drag' was also well represented in British music hall before the war by performers such as Kemsley Scott-Barrie and Bert Errol, but it had not yet been incorporated into British films.<sup>80</sup> In the absence of cinematic precedents, trade press reviewers welcomed Eltinge's cross-dressing screen performances as something new and original, combining the 'cleverness' of the quick-change artist with more illusionistic portrayals of female characters in a way that departed from earlier gender-crossing film comedies. Although, as Laurence Senelick has shown, Eltinge and his publicists often felt the need to stress his virile masculinity for the American public in order 'to avoid any suspicion of "abnormal" tendencies' - for instance, by spreading news stories about his physical strength and propensity to get into fights - British reviewers of his film work expressed their enjoyment at his ability to straddle the line between masculinity and femininity.<sup>81</sup> A reviewer for *The Bioscope* wrote that Eltinge was equally 'magnetic as the breezy masculine Temple Trask' in *The Clever Mrs. Carfax* as he was 'as the charming lady he impersonates'.<sup>82</sup> An enthusiastic review of the same film in *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* noted that Eltinge was appearing 'as a woman again, and a stunner, believe me', while the magazine's review of *The Countess Charming* began: 'What a pretty man - or girl! Upon my word, it was difficult to tell what Julian Eltinge is. But repute says that he is a man. If so he is the prettiest girl I have seen.'<sup>83</sup>

Remarks like these suggest that British film reviewers writing at the end of the First World War still viewed men's cross-dressing performances as entertaining, rather than as a sign of any particular transgressive sexuality or in-born 'inversion'. Even film performers who seemed to blur the lines between masculinity and femininity could be appreciated, as Eltinge was, for their skill in successfully transforming their appearance and mannerisms. At

the same time, there was also a sense by the late 1910s that that the film genres associated with male cross-dressing performances in the early British cinema had outstayed their welcome. Although British filmmakers continued to produce variations on the gender-crossing comedies and farces that they had been making before the war, trade reviews suggest that it was becoming increasingly difficult for filmmakers to compete with the higher production values and comic stars of the American cinema, meaning that cross-dressing performances derived from music hall comedy could look unsophisticated and perhaps old fashioned by comparison.

## **Conclusions**

As Alison Oram notes, popular entertainment has historically formed an important part of the discursive process through which ‘cultural knowledge about gender transgression’ has been presented and re-worked for a mass audience.<sup>84</sup> The films discussed in this article, along with their reception by British film commentators, contribute another layer to our understanding of the ways in which gender and gender-crossing were thought about in Britain at the start of the twentieth century. For the British authorities and middle-class commentators in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, men’s cross-dressing in the streets was seen as a cause for anxiety. Even before sexological ideas of male ‘inversion’ or ‘transvestism’ had entered into common use, men wearing women’s clothing or make-up in public could be arrested and charged as suspected sodomites or male prostitutes. However, in the early British cinema, as in the popular theatre, men’s cross-dressing was something to be amused by and often celebrated as a sign of ingenuity, remaining bracketed off from more transgressive associations. Although there were already popular discourses that associated male effeminacy and cross-dressing with ‘deviant’ sexual desires or behaviours, these discourses do not appear to have intersected

substantially with the cinema in Britain during this formative moment in the medium's history.

Early British filmmakers followed music hall practice in casting male performers as women for comic or satiric effect. Cross-dressing performances in early comedies and 'facial' films invited viewers to enjoy the rapid change of costumes, expressions and identities. In crime films, moments of gender-crossing were seen to add novelty or excitement to sensational stories of modern life. Despite occasional worries that some gender-crossing farces were too 'spicy' or 'strong' in their depiction of sexualised encounters between men and women, and thus might bring the fledgling film industry into disrepute, trade magazine reviewers in Britain mostly saw men donning skirts as a harmless, if somewhat 'broad' and unoriginal, part of moving-picture entertainment. As Laura Horak has observed of American film criticism in the 1910s in relation to cross-dressing women on screen, British film reviewers did not interpret men's cross-dressing performances as indicators of same-sex desire or pathological 'inversion'.<sup>85</sup> Even the advent of more glamorous female impersonations on screen towards the end of the war years, of the kind that Laurence Senelick traces back to the 'thriving transvestite demimonde' of the *fin-de-siècle* metropolis, did not outwardly disturb British critics.<sup>86</sup> Instead, it led them to express their admiration at the skill with which a performer like Julian Eltinge could oscillate between masculine and feminine appearance, generating a pleasurable sense of gender as a performance. As the use of cross-dressing in films parodying the women's suffrage movement suggests, this meaning sat alongside, rather than displaced, assumptions about the essential differences between men and women.

Taken together, these films also offer an alternative perspective on the tensions in gender relations in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, and the ways in which these tensions were expressed in popular culture. Studies examining cultural responses to the

anxieties surrounding British masculinity in this period have tended to focus on the growth of the ‘masculine’ adventure story, seeing this genre as a reaction against the stifling, feminising atmosphere of the late-Victorian home. In mass-market print fiction aimed at boys and young men, male protagonists regularly escaped the company of women into the supposedly freer spaces of empire and fantasy, or else retreated into the homosocial world of the public school. Such stories, it is argued, provided readers, especially among the professional middle classes, with an imaginative flight from the day-to-day pressures of marriage and domesticity.<sup>87</sup> The examples I have discussed from early cinema also register concerns about the challenges posed to dominant ideas of masculinity, although they suggest a different response to this threat. Rather than running away from feminine spaces, the men in these films often go to great lengths to bluff their way into arenas dominated by women, ranging from beauty contests to finishing schools, either with romantic and sexual intentions, or with the more general aim of causing havoc, and in the process, reasserting their masculine privileges. Across early cross-dressing films, the model of masculinity celebrated most often is that of the comic trickster, like Alfred Collins’s Percy, who is adaptable and enterprising enough to move between masculine and feminine worlds. This figure also seems to cut across class boundaries, appearing in stories featuring escaped convicts, university undergraduates and upper-class men about town. As a type of masculinity appearing frequently in early cinema – a medium that increasingly appealed to a broad audience in Britain, comprised especially of working- and lower-middle-class men, women and children – the cross-dressing male trickster offered another way for audiences to think through the changing dynamics of gender in British society, even as he playfully tested the boundaries of acceptable manly behaviour.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘How Disguises Are Effected: A Chat with Mr. Charles H. Fox the Wigmaker, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 June 1890, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Very Latest’, *The Bioscope*, 9 October 1908, pp. 10-12, here p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> The number of films is based on a survey of the brief synopses collected in Dennis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue: Volume 1: Fiction Film, 1895–1994*, third edition (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000). These were checked against the details recorded in early filmmakers’ catalogues, film and theatre magazine listings, as well as other sources listed below. For an earlier, suggestive account of cross-dressing in early British films, see Amy Sargeant, ‘Funny Peculiar and Funny Ha-Ha: Some Preliminary Observations on Men in Frocks in Early British Cinema’, in Alan Burton and Laraine Porter (eds), *Pimple, Pranks and Pratfalls: British Film Comedy before 1930* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), pp. 96–100.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Collins’s brother, George, was a music hall comedian, who included female characters in his repertory, so it is possible that one of the unknown performers in *How Percy Won the Beauty Competition* may be him. See Barry Anthony, ‘Alfred Collins: Britain’s Forgotten Filmmaker’, in Burton and Porter (eds), *Pimple, Pranks and Pratfalls*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> ‘LGBT Britain’, BFI Player <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/lgbt-britain> [accessed 18 September 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Katie Hindmarch-Watson, ‘Lois Schwich, the Female Errand Boy: Narratives of Female Cross-Dressing in Late-Victorian London’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14:1 (2007), p. 72. See also James Vernon, “‘For Some Queer Reason’”: The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker’s Masquerade in Interwar Britain’, *Signs*, 26:11 (2000), pp. 37-62, here p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

- <sup>8</sup> Lisa Z. Sigel, 'Best Love: Female Impersonation in the Great War', *Sexualities*, 19:1/2 (2016), pp. 98-118, here p. 99.
- <sup>9</sup> Sigel, 'Best Love', p. 107.
- <sup>10</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 9. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>11</sup> Alison Oram, 'Cross-Dressing and Transgender', in H.G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (eds), *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 256-285, here p. 259.
- <sup>12</sup> Oram, 'Cross-Dressing and Transgender', p. 261.
- <sup>13</sup> Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Oram, 'Cross-Dressing and Transgender'.
- <sup>15</sup> Bram Djisktra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991).
- <sup>16</sup> John Tosh, 'Masculinities in an Industrializing Society: Britain, 1800-1914', *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005), pp. 330-42, here p. 337. See also Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- <sup>17</sup> Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994).
- <sup>18</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910), translated by Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1991); Havelock Ellis, *Studies*

*in the Psychology of Sex: Volume VII: Eonism and Other Supplementary Studies*

(Philadelphia: Davis, 1928).

<sup>19</sup> McLaren, *Trials of Masculinity*, pp. 221-229.

<sup>20</sup> H.G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2003), pp. 90-114.

<sup>21</sup> Cocks, *Nameless Offences*; McLaren, *Trials of Masculinity*, p. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Liu Carriger, “‘The Unnatural History and Petticoat Mystery of Boulton and Park’: A Victorian Sex Scandal and the Theatre Defense”, *TDR: The Drama Review*, 57:4 (2013), pp. 135-156; Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Upchurch, ‘Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others’, *Gender & History*, 12:1 (2000), pp. 127–157, here p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *British Music Hall: A Story in Pictures* (London: Studio Vista, 1965), note to illustrations 48-49; Roy Busby, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated Who’s Who from 1850 to the Present Day* (London: Elek, 1976), pp. 79-80.

<sup>26</sup> David Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime, 1806-1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 320; Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (London: Cassell, 1994), pp. 161-171.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Smith, *Masculinities, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 66, 85.

<sup>28</sup> W. Davenport Adams, ‘The Decline of Pantomime’, *The Theatre*, 1 February 1882, pp. 85-90: p. 89. See also Jim Davis, “‘Slap on! Slap ever!’: Victorian Pantomime, Gender Variance, and Cross-Dressing”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 30:3 (2014), pp. 218-230.



<sup>29</sup> ‘The London Music Halls’, *The Era*, 14 April 1900, p. 17. Writing about female impersonator acts, another critic warned that, ‘[u]nless the men are very careful, a vulgar element is bound to creep in’: Harry Harper, ‘Notes & Comments’, *London and Provincial Entr’acte*, 20 July 1906, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Laurence Senelick, ‘Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage’, in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 80-95, here pp. 85, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Senelick, ‘Boys and Girls Together’, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> ‘The Quick-Change Boom’, *The Sketch*, 28 April 1897, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Warwick Trading Company catalogue 1901, p. 143, reproduced in *Early British Film-makers’ Catalogues, 1896-1913*, reel 5, British Film Institute Reuben Library. See also John Barnes, *Pioneers of the British Film 1898: The Rise of the Photoplay* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1988), p. 151.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> ‘The Latest Warwick Film Subjects’, *The Era*, 15 September 1900, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> *1903 List of Paul’s Films* (London: Robt. W. Paul, 1903), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Films of the Week’, *The Bioscope*, 9 June 1910, pp. 33-47, here p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!*

<sup>39</sup> *A Selected Catalogue of the Best and Most Interesting ‘Hepwix’ Films* (London: Hepworth Manufacturing Co., 1903), p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> Plot details are clarified in *A Selected Catalogue of the Best and Most Interesting ‘Hepwix’ Films* (London: Hepworth Manufacturing Co., 1906), pp. 100–1. For a discussion of the film in the context of late Victorian and Edwardian images of female criminality, see Elizabeth

Carolyn Miller, *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press and University of Michigan Library, 2008), pp. 128–30.

<sup>41</sup> Gillian Spraggs, *Outlaws and Highwaymen: The Cult of the Robber in England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> *Catalogue of S.P.C. Films and Cinematograph Apparatus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Photographic Company, 1906), p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> ‘The Very Latest’, *The Bioscope*, 30 December 1909, pp. 37-52, here p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Annette Kuhn, *The Power of Images: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 48-73; Chris Straayer, ‘Redressing the “Natural”’: The Temporary Transvestite Film’, *Wide Angle*, 14:1 (1992), reprinted in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 402-427.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey H. Huberman, *Late Victorian Farce* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp. 117-121.

<sup>46</sup> Jevan Brandon-Thomas, *Charley’s Aunt’s Father: A Life of Brandon Thomas* (London: Douglas Saunders with Macgibbon and Kee, 1955), pp. 147-157.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Films – Week by Week’, *The Bioscope*, 20 February 1913, supplement, pp. iii-xxxiii, here p. xxxi; ‘Films – Week by Week’, *The Bioscope*, 24 April 1913, supplement, pp. iii-xxxi, here p. xxix.

<sup>48</sup> Huberman, *Late Victorian Farce*, p. 124.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Maitland, *Vesta Tilley* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> ‘The Very Latest’, *The Bioscope*, 9 October 1908, pp. 10-12, here p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> ‘New Sketches at Manchester’, *The Era*, 7 October 1905, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> J.S. Bratton, 'Jenny Hill: Sex and Sexism in the Victorian Music Hall', in J.S. Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 93-110, here p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> J.S. Bratton, 'Beating the Bounds: Gender Play and Role Reversal in the Edwardian Music Hall', in Michael R. Booth and Joel H. Kaplan (eds), *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 86-110, here p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> Caroline Radcliffe, 'Dan Leno: Dame of Drury Lane', in Jim Davis (ed.), *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 118-134.

<sup>55</sup> 'Cinema House, Edinburgh', *Fifeshire Advertiser*, 24 January 1914, p. 7; Busby, *British Music Hall*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>56</sup> 'Our Captious Critic: "Dick Whittington"', *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 12 January 1895, p. 25. See also Jim Davis, "'Only an Undisciplined [Nation] would have done it": Drury Lane Pantomime in the Late Nineteenth Century', in Jim Davis (ed.), *Victorian Pantomime: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 100-117, here p. 110.

<sup>57</sup> Bratton, 'Beating the Bounds', p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> For an example of an earlier magic lantern slide set, see *Women's Rights* (Bamforth & Co. 6 slides, 1883-1888), Lucerna Magic Lantern Web Resource <https://www.slides.uni-trier.de/set/index.php?id=3000486&language=EN> [accessed 18 September 2018].

<sup>59</sup> Richard Brown, 'Film and Postcards – Cross Media Symbiosis in Early Bamforth Films', in Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple (eds), *Visual Delights – Two: Exhibition and Reception* (Eastleigh: Libbey, 2005), pp. 236-252.

- <sup>60</sup> Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 112.
- <sup>61</sup> Krista Cowman, “‘Doing Something Silly’: The Uses of Humour by the Women’s Social and Political Union, 1903-1914’, *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007), pp. 259-274, here 262-266.
- <sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the film in the context of other French cross-dressing comedies, see Alison McMahan, *Alice Guy-Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 234–42.
- <sup>63</sup> ‘Review of Latest Productions’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 18 June 1908, pp. 115-119: p. 119.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Elge List, 10 April 1908* (London: Gaumont, 1908), pp. 16-17.
- <sup>65</sup> B.W. Findon, ‘Drury Lane’, *Daily Mail*, 28 December 1908, p. 6.
- <sup>66</sup> ‘Films – Week by Week’, *The Bioscope*, 12 June 1913, supplement, pp. iii-xxxvii, here p. vii.
- <sup>67</sup> ‘Films – Week by Week’, *The Bioscope*, 19 June 1913, supplement, pp. iii-xxxviii, here p. ix. Evans’s other cross-dressing performances included the title roles in *The Adventures of Pimple - Trilby* (1914) and the spoof crime film *Pimple’s a Woman in the Case* (1916).
- <sup>68</sup> ‘Filmland: News and Reviews of the Picture World’, *The Era*, 13 December 1916, p. 18.
- <sup>69</sup> Warwick Trading Company catalogue, 1901, p. 143; ‘The Latest Warwick Film Subjects’, *The Era*, 15 September 1900, p. 27; *1903 List of Paul’s Films* (London: Robt. W. Paul, 1903), p. 18.
- <sup>70</sup> *A Selected Catalogue of the Best and Most Interesting ‘Hepwix’ Films* (London: Hepworth Manufacturing Co., 1903), p. 58.
- <sup>71</sup> ‘Comments on the Films’, *The Bioscope*, 14 Jan 1915, supplement, pp. i-xi, here p. i.

<sup>72</sup> ‘The Pick of the Programmes: What We Think of Them’, *The Bioscope*, 16 July 1914, pp. 295-300, here p. 300.

<sup>73</sup> James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 7-8.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Caught in a Harem’, *The Bioscope*, 17 January 1918, p. 43.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Comments on the Films’, *The Bioscope*, 8 April 1915, supplement, pp. i-x, here p. x.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Comments on the Films’, *The Bioscope*, 7 January 1915, supplement, pp. i-x, here p. vii; ‘Comments on the Films’, *The Bioscope*, 30 December 1915, supplement, pp. i-viii, here p. i.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Comments on the Films’, *The Bioscope*, 30 December 1915, supplement, pp. i-viii, here p. i.

<sup>78</sup> ‘The Story of the Films’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 9 December 1915, supplement, pp. xi-xx, here p. xiv; ‘A Comedy with Sparkle’, *The Bioscope*, 16 August 1917, p. 188; ‘Essanay Art in Many Aspects’, *The Bioscope*, 7 October 1915, pp. 102-103, here p. 103.

<sup>79</sup> Laurence Senelick, ‘Lady and the Tramp: Drag Differentials in the Progressive Era’, in Laurence Senelick (ed.), *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 26-45.

<sup>80</sup> Baker, *Drag*, pp. 184-198; Frances Gray, ‘Errol, Bert [real name Isaac Whitehouse] (1883–1949)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition

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<sup>81</sup> Senelick, ‘Lady and the Tramp’, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup> ‘The Clever Mrs. Carfax’, *The Bioscope*, 14 April 1918, p. 33.

<sup>83</sup> L.K., “‘The Clever Mrs. Carfax’ (Lasky) and ‘The Secret Game.’ (Walker)”, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 4 April 1918, p. 56; L.K., ‘The Countess Charming’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 14 February 1918, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> Oram, ‘Cross-Dressing and Transgender’, p. 260.

<sup>85</sup> Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys*, p. 117.

<sup>86</sup> Senelick, ‘Boys and Girls Together’, p. 85.

<sup>87</sup> Tosh, ‘Masculinities in an Industrializing Society’, p. 340; Martin Francis, ‘The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity’, *Historical Journal* 45 (2002), pp. 637–52, here pp. 640–1; Jeffrey Richards, ‘With Henty to Africa’, in Jeffrey Richards (ed.), *Imperialism and Juvenile Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 72–106; Kelly Boyd, *Manliness and the Boys’ Story Paper in Britain: A Cultural History, 1855–1940* (London: Palgrave, 2003).