

OF BUSTLES AND BREECHES:  
CROSS-DRESSING ROMANCE NOVEL HEROINES AND THE PERFORMANCE OF  
GENDER IDEOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

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Critiqued by academics and feminists alike, romance novels have been disparaged for upholding patriarchal ideals such as heterosexuality, marriage, motherhood, and traditional gender ideologies. However, being such a large and varied genre, romance novels often serve as a locus for discussing all aspects of these issues. Particularly salient to discussing these issues are romance novels in which the heroine cross-dresses. In particular, this thesis examines three recent cross-dressing romance novels: *The Spy* by Celeste Bradley; *Duchess By Night* by Eloisa James; and *Almost a Gentleman* by Pam Rosenthal.

Through a close textual analysis, this thesis attempts to sort out the various threads and conversations surrounding issues of sexuality, gender fluidity, and gender performance. It is my assertion that authors employ a cross-dressing heroine not only as a tool for comedic effect, but as a plot device intended to aid the heroine in her discovery of self. In studying the cross-dressed heroine, one must examine the descriptions of both feminine and masculine clothing. In order to analyze the role of clothing in these novels, I draw on the theories of Stella Bruzzi, who writes about costuming in film, to argue that clothing is an active, performative force in these novels, aiding each heroine on her journey to self-discovery. Another important undertaking when examining the cross-dressed heroine is understanding how a love story is constructed when the heroine is disguised as a male for the majority of the novel. In order to analyze the homoerotics and homophobia present in these novels, I turn the recent scholarship of Lisa Fletcher, who writes on heterosexuality and performativity in historical romance fiction.

For my family, without whose love and support I would not be here today,  
and  
for my cohort, for being a source of stability and friendship.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines three historical romance novels written within the past decade that feature cross-dressed heroines. It is my assertion that cross-dressing a heroine is not merely a novelty, but is a plot device intended to aid the heroine in her discovery of self. The cross-dressed romance heroine brings questions of sexuality, gender fluidity, and gender performance to the forefront of the romance genre. I perform a close textual analysis of these three cross-dressing novels in order to expose and analyze the aforementioned aspects, focusing on the importance of clothing to both plot and character development. Drawing from Stella Bruzzi's work on costuming in films, I argue that clothing is an active, performative force in these novels, aiding each heroine on her journey to self-discovery.

In studying the cross-dressed heroine, one must examine the descriptions of both feminine and masculine clothing. Dressing in male clothing makes these heroines consider the actualities of male privilege in their lives. Important to theorizing about this concept are actual historical accounts of cross-dressing and critical cultural studies of fashion and how fashion has helped to shape gender ideologies both in the present and in the past. I incorporate these accounts and theories into my analysis to discuss to what extent femininity is essentialized in these novels. However, there are instances of exposing gender as constructed, and I believe these are crucial instances for examination as they represent the ways in which cross-dressing romance novels serve as a locus for discussing gender ideologies and roles, at times reinforcing them and at others challenging them.

In addition to bringing about a discussion of gender, cross-dressed heroines also initiate a discussion on sexuality. A cross-dressed heroine nearly always presents a struggle for the author of a romance novel in terms of developing a romantic relationship. Even in the twenty-first

century, it is rare to find a mainstream romance novel that features a couple of the same sex in its central love story. In this manner, cross-dressing romances open the romance genre to questions not only of homoerotics, but homosexuality as well. The cross-dressed heroine brings into question the hero's heretofore unquestioned straight masculinity. The hero often wrestles with his desire for another man, feeling that it is wrong and impossible for him to be attracted to another man. Of importance here is historical research done on homosexuality in the Georgian and Regency eras in order to discern whether or not the author presents an accurate representation. As such, it is my intention to scrutinize these novels for their depictions of homoeroticism and homosexuality in order to determine whether they are depicted fairly and not demonized.

This project is inherently feminist in nature. As there is much contention today as to what feminism is, I would like to explain how I have examined these novels. I have analyzed their depictions of the female heroine for varying representations of womanhood. Consequently, I have examined these novels for issues of choice and have asked whether or not the choices made by the characters are in line with their values and ideologies, and thus realistic choices. Additionally, I have looked for a romantic relationship grounded in equality, companionship, and love. If necessary, the relationship should require compromises from both parties rather than one partner exerting his or her will over the other. Overall, I have considered whether or not these novels have a theme of women triumphing over a patriarchal society and achieving their goals.

My project narrows the (extremely large and varied) romance genre down considerably in that it examines one small yet popular subgenre, the cross-dressing romance novel, of a larger subgenre, the historical romance novel. While this topic may seem extremely narrow to some, the theme of cross-dressing is one that has a long-standing history in the subgenre of historical



romance, dating back to the novels of Georgette Heyer. The contemporary historical novel continues in many of the traditions, such as humorous dialogue and lavish descriptions of clothing, set forth by Heyer, the mother of Regency romance. Heyer wrote several novels in which cross-dressing serves as a major plot device, and several romance authors acknowledge these novels as their inspiration for their own cross-dressing novels. So while this topic may seem obscure to some, it is one of romance's proud traditions.

The implications for this project are quite exciting, especially for the new field of romance scholarship. The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) was created in June of 2009, and the first issue of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (JPRS) will be published in the winter of 2010. While romance fiction scholarship has been conducted intermittently in a variety of disciplines, it must be acknowledged that a significant portion of the scholarship has focused on the negative aspects of romance fiction. However, with the establishment of the IASPR and the JPRS, romance (in all media forms) is being examined seriously on a major scale for the first time in history, which seems somewhat remiss to me on the part of academia. After all, according to 2008 statistics from the Romance Writers of America (RWA), women make up 90.5% of the readership (Romance Literature Statistics: Readership Statistics). While this would be interesting even if the sales of romance novels were small, I find this statistic fascinating in light of the fact that romance generates sales of over \$1.3 billion and that it is the only fiction category to have seen an increase in sales in spite of the recent economic recession (Romance Literature Statistics: Overview; Rich, Motoko). With this thesis, I hope to add a valuable piece of scholarship that is critical without being dismissive to the growing field of romance scholarship.

To narrow the scope of this project, I have decided to examine three historical romance novels published within the past decade. *The Spy* by Celeste Bradley was published in 2004; *Almost a Gentleman* by Pam Rosenthal was released in 2007, and *Duchess by Night* by Eloisa James came out in 2008. I chose to limit my primary texts to the 21<sup>st</sup> century because I have found that the romance genre is constantly changing and reinventing itself, partially through its immense, almost gluttonous, production of over 8,000 titles published each year (Romance Literature Statistics: Overview). Indeed, for a scholar who is not a fan of the genre, searching for primary texts to work with can be somewhat overwhelming. I have chosen these three novels for several other reasons as well. Both Bradley and James have been nominated for RITA awards, the highest award an author can receive from the industry. Additionally, these two women also have repeat appearances on the New York Times Bestseller List. I chose to consider Rosenthal's *Almost a Gentlemen* at the behest of other popular romance scholars as it has the longest running male masquerade out of the three novels. Perhaps most important is the fact that the three novels all share a common setting—Georgian and Regency era London. I have observed within the romance community that romance readers are more forgiving of typical patriarchal endings (marriage, children, and sacrifice of personal dreams and/or goals) when the novel is set in the past as the common thought seems to be that marriage and children were the standard goals in life for women in the 1700s and 1800s.

In order to analyze these primary sources, I first turned to popular romance scholarship. Primarily I am indebted to Lisa Fletcher's *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, which was published in April of 2008. In her work, Fletcher examines two aspects of historical romances: the speech act of "I love you" and the ways in which heterosexuality is constructed and presented as innate. Several chapters examine cross-dressing

heroines through the speech act of confession.. Utilizing the theories of J.L. Austin, Fletcher's work concentrates on the function of the romantic speech act "I love you" in historical romance fiction and how this speech act works within the cross-dressing romance novels of Georgette Heyer. Fletcher also analyzes a range of more contemporary cross-dressing romance novels—dating from 1980-2005—using Judith Butler's theories on the performance of gender and performativity to discuss how the modern cross-dressing heroine is "employed—and repeatedly employed—as a representative for the intrinsic stability and immutability" of gender and (hetero)sexuality (74). In her chapters on low-brow historical romance fiction, Fletcher argues that the cross-dressed heroine reinforces heterosexuality and heteronormativity in spite of the fact that the heroine serves as an embodiment for our culture's confusion over what, exactly, it means to be a woman or a man. Fletcher's work on the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in historical romance novels has given me a frame of reference to examine their use of homoeroticism and clothing

However, Fletcher expresses concern that "projects such as [her] own are defied by the genre they attempt to classify. These novels are too numerous and too fast-moving for scholarly researchers who are not themselves fans" (73). As a reader of romance novels, unlike Fletcher, I am very familiar with the subgenre of historical romance and its conventions. I am able to do a close textual analysis of the three selected novels while being aware of the larger trends in romance at the moment and taking them into consideration. In this project, I have chosen to analyze these novels in order to sort out what I see as points missed or glossed over in Fletcher's work. As a reader, I am aware that the RWA only recently changed its definition of romance to "a central love story," dropping any qualifications of the genders of the main couple although the majority of romance novels still end with an affirmation of heterosexuality, marriage, and

motherhood (The Romance Genre). Taking this into consideration, I am interested in how the cross-dressing masquerade affects the heroine and what messages about gender are presented after the masquerade is over. Fletcher, in my view, is not overly concerned with what happens after the masquerade ends. I argue that the experience of acting and living as a male for an extended period of time changes the heroine. As such, clothing plays an important role in all three novels. I have drawn upon Stella Bruzzi's theories of costuming in film and have adapted them for the study of a novel to serve as a counterpoint to Fletcher. Bruzzi's work on clothing as a performative force has helped me to decipher messages about gender fluidity in these novels.

At this point, I would like to discuss my positionality in regard to this project. I consider myself to be a feminist, an advocate for romance fiction, and an academic. As such, I feel it is my duty to study romance novels, as they often have been considered unworthy of critical scholarship. With all the times I have been dismissed and ridiculed for my love of so-called bodice rippers (considered a disparaging term in the world of romance fiction) in both my personal life and academic career, I have amassed a collection of research in defense of the romance genre over the years, some of which I would like to impart now. Scholar and former critic of the genre Kay Mussel has changed her view on romance novels, first seeing them as "a kind of backlash against the more aggressive and controversial aspects of feminism—something that reaffirmed traditional values and made women who hadn't bought into the feminist critique feel validated about their own choices" and now saying that she doesn't "know how you can read many romances today as anything but feminist... heroines today have a lot more independence and authority than their counterparts did in earlier romances" ("Are Feminism and Romance Novels Mutually Exclusive?" par. 12, 15). In her introduction to *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women*, romance author Jayne Ann Krentz makes an argument for feminism in romance novels

as the genre is often disparaged for reinforcing patriarchy and patriarchal ideals. Krentz writes that in relation to the theme of female empowerment, romance novels have “an inherently subversive nature...[r]omance novels invert the power structure of a patriarchal society because they show women exerting enormous power over men. The books also defy the masculine conventions of other forms of literature because they portray women as heroes” (5).

Though Janice Radway asserts that romance readers use the novels as a tool of agency in the drudgery of their everyday lives, many writers declare their intent and joy in writing what they consider to be feminist works. For example, Jennifer Crusie declares that writing romance novels is “the best antidote [she] know[s] for a graduate degree in literature,” and author Eileen Dreyer claims that even though she writes in other genres, she finds “[t]he genre of romance...endlessly interesting...[and] endlessly challenging” (“Glee and Sympathy par. 2; 76). While Radway must be acknowledged as one of the first scholars to conduct research on romance, it also must be acknowledged that much of her work was written in the period after Second Wave feminism and tends to view romance novels as reinforcing patriarchal ideals such as heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood as being fulfilling for women. The backlash against Second Wave feminism has also led to a decrease in women identifying as feminists as the term is equated with “hat[ing] sex and perpetuat[ing] Victorian sexual ideals” (Dicker and Piepmeier 15). Thus, it is intriguing that within the genre accused of supporting and enforcing patriarchy, both authors and readers of romance fiction self-identify as feminists. Krentz writes that “most [authors] consider themselves feminists, although they recognize that their definition of feminism may not coincide with that of all feminists” (3). This attitude towards feminism is consistent with the concepts of Third Wave feminism which, along with raunch culture (Girls Gone Wild, Playboy, etc.), has opened up a new arena for women to express their sexual

identities; whether this is beneficial or not, it must be acknowledged that the sexual revolution has played a large part in advocating female desire and agency in romance novels.

It is my hope that in critically investigating this small subgenre, I will contribute to the growing scholarship on popular romance, scholarship that takes into account Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's first axiom that "people are different from each other" and that not every text shares the same meaning for every person (386). Much has been written on the readers of romance or on how the texts themselves advance a patriarchal ideology, but little has been written on the construction of the narrative of romance novels. Additionally, I do not feel that the scholarship on romance has investigated romance thoroughly enough to claim that the whole genre advances a patriarchal ideology; in fact, I feel that scholars are somewhat at a disadvantage when it comes to studying romance novels as the genre is so overwhelmingly large. The need for a gatekeeper with inside knowledge (if one is not familiar with the genre already) is of utmost importance. And again, it should be taken into account that every romance reader's preferences are going to vary and so one will never experience the whole genre. These factors inherently complicate the scholarship of romance novels.

My contribution to this scholarship addresses these issues by exploring three novels in depth. In Chapter One, I examine the Regency romance novel *The Spy* by Celeste Bradley. In this section, I focus a great deal on clothing as a performative force and how Phillipa's tenure as a male brings about a greater self-awareness. Chapter Two revolves around *Duchess by Night*, set in the Georgian Era by Eloisa James. In this chapter, cross-dressing is revealed to be not merely about switching genders or switching clothing. Rather, crossing class lines is the major source of conflict in this novel. While crossing gendered clothing lines creates an exciting and erotic atmosphere for the main couple of the novel, the class boundaries threaten to undo their

relationship. For Chapter Three, I have chosen *Almost a Gentleman*, another Regency romance, by Pam Rosenthal. *Almost a Gentleman* is different from the previous two novels in that it is much darker in tone and subject matter. This novel wrestles with the heroine's desire to never feel like a woman again; as such I focus on messages of gender and privilege in this chapter.

In this thesis, I will argue that cross-dressing is used as a plot device by these authors to bring about a transformation in their heroines. In utilizing the cross-dressing plot, these authors must confront issues regarding ideologies of gender and sexuality. As this project is feminist and anti-homophobic in nature, it is my intention to analyze and critique how the novels treat these issues. Additionally, I am interested in how the cross-dressing heroines in these novels are portrayed, especially after their masquerades have come to an end; if romance novels are important because they are stories about women, written by women, for women then it follows that the portrayal of womanhood in these novels is something to be studied. I have analyzed these novels for their portrayals of femininity and womanhood and how the heroine's conception of womanhood is affected by experiencing male privilege.

CHAPTER I.  
IS MY CHEMISE SHOWING?:  
CLOTHING AND CROSS-DRESSING CONVENTIONS IN CELESTE BRADLEY'S *THE SPY*

In her 2004 novel *The Spy*, Celeste Bradley follows in the tradition of Georgette Heyer to write a historical romance novel in which the heroine cross-dresses. *The Spy* is a Regency romance that adheres closely to the conventions established for this subgenre of romance. Regency romances are “set against the Regency period of the British Empire,” a time when the aristocracy of England spent to excess during the Napoleonic wars (“Romance Literature Subgenres”). While the true Regency lasted from 1811-1820—when Prince George was crowned Prince Regent because his father was deemed mentally unfit to rule until the time when his father died and he was crowned King George IV—the years 1790-1837 are often used as the bookends for the era as the Regency was a matter of attitude and culture, not simply a matter of who was on the throne. Current images of the Regency era are found in televised remakes of Jane Austen’s (and other authors’) popular novels. For the aristocracy and the gentry, this was a time of well-dressed men and women picnicking on manicured lawns, or so we are led to believe. As such, Regency romances are sometimes referred to as costume dramas and period pieces, meaning that much attention is given to the elements of clothing and furnishings while historical events may or may not play a large role in the story. Regency romances tend to be popular settings for a cross-dressed character as the subgenre puts so much emphasis on clothing. While not all Regency romances focus on cross-dressing characters, it is true that this specific genre, and historical romances in general, allow for much more experimentation with cross-dressed characters, especially since the strict historical codes regarding dress for men and women make the cross-dressing a much more dangerous and thrilling escapade; it would be difficult to



achieve the same amount of humor and suspense in a contemporary novel using the same tropes of cross-dressing found in historical romance fiction.

*The Spy* tells the story of a young woman named Phillipa Atwater who begins her masquerade as a man in order to find work and to hide from the villains pursuing her. At the beginning of the novel, the reader discovers that Phillipa's father Rupert has been abducted by Napoleon's army because he is a renowned code-breaker; Phillipa, hidden from the abductors by her father, has been given his code-breaking journal and told to go to a man named Upkirk in London who will give her safety and begin her father's rescue. However, upon reaching Upkirk's residence, Phillipa discovers that he has recently died, and she finds herself alone in London with Napoleon's men searching for her. While going through help wanted advertisements, she comes across a name mentioned in her father's journal—James Cunnington. The advertisement seeks a tutor for a young boy. Phillipa sees dressing as a male as a way to gain employment, to keep an eye on James, and to “completely disappear” from Napoleon's men (Bradley 10). Once she is employed, the plot thickens. James, a member of a British spy ring called the Liar's Club, is looking for Rupert Atwater to ask him to break letters coded by James' treasonous former lover Lavinia, Lady Winchell, who (previously in the series) imprisoned James and tortured him into revealing the names of his comrades who subsequently died. These threads begin to weave together as Phillipa realizes James is a spy and that he is looking for her father, who he believes to be a traitor to the British crown.

### **The Clothes Make the Man...and the Woman**

In her work on clothing in cinema, Stella Bruzzi writes that clothes often “function as signifiers for solidifying characters who...are completed and non-fluid entities,” meaning that clothing (and costumes in films) often serve as a shorthand introduction to the characters as the

script for these characters has already been written; the clothing a character wears helps to reveal his/her personality, motive, or character type (167). The costume worn gives a deeper meaning to the character. This is true of many romance novels, especially historical romances where lavish descriptions of clothing often give insight to the personalities of various characters. For instance, an innocent heroine may wear white to signify her purity, while a hoydenish heroine may wear rich colors deemed too fast for more modest women. And the interpretation of the heroine's moral character can change depending on who is doing the viewing. Phillipa's first appearance in *The Spy* is as a female and is described from James' point of view: "[Her thigh] was framed by a ruffle of underthings hiked high and the dark tease of stocking gartered low over the knee" while "[h]er fragrant hair spread across his chest and shoulder, draping him in a sensuous veil" (3, 6). We see that clothing defines and emphasizes Phillipa's femaleness and her (inherent?) heterosexuality. Here, the items of clothing worn by Phillipa assist in creating a discourse of desire. Traditionally in psychoanalysis, a fetish is considered to be an inanimate object that sparks sexual arousal, causing the individual to be sexually attracted to the object rather than to the (potential) sexual partner. Phillipa's thigh with its ruffled frame becomes an object of titillation and a symbol of feminine sensuality; indeed, James watches "mournfully as yards of petticoat, skirt, and dark cloak tumble back down over the most sexually satisfying experience...[for him] in months" (4). Stella Bruzzi explains that "[t]he power of clothes fetishism is that it exists on the cusp between display and denial, signaling as much a lack as a presence of sexual desire" (38). It is important to note that in this entire exchange, Phillipa is completely passive; her clothing acts for her. In this instance, the glimpse of Phillipa's thigh and its subsequent concealment illustrates the power of clothing to create desire. Phillipa's flash of skin is not intended to arouse James' desire. In fact, when described from Phillipa's point of

view, she is wearing “worn shoes” and uses her hair, described by James as a “sensuous veil,” to keep her face “well curtained” and hidden from James. Phillipa does not reflect on James’ attractiveness; rather, she is far more concerned with escaping from him. Phillipa does not intend to be erotic; rather, it is her clothing that makes her so. In its use as a convention of the genre, clothing can both conceal and reveal character traits, character flaws, and even the character’s inherent masculinity or femininity. Clothing, along with descriptions of furniture and housing has been dismissed by critic and scholar Janice Radway<sup>1</sup> as “almost never figur[ing] significantly in the developing action” (193). However, in *The Spy*, clothing (and the conflict brought about by it) forces the action of the plot to move forward.

It is not an accident that the majority of cross-dressing novels are set historically. In order for the cross-dressing plot to work, it should be set in an era governed by strict gendered clothing rules. As Bruzzi notes, “fashions of the nineteenth century not only accentuated but elaborated and constructed gender difference, and, as Elizabeth Wilson puts it, ‘woman and costumes together created femininity’” (40). The illusion of femininity is in part created by the clothing a woman wears. Fashion for women in this era was designed to emphasize ideals of femininity, from the focus on the hourglass figure (manufactured by corsets) to the seductive swaying of crinolines and petticoats as a woman walked. At the same time, this emphasis on femininity and sensuality was achieved through restricting the freedom of mobility, contributing to common ideas of upper-class women’s frailty and delicacy. Clothing served as an outward sign of inner grace, beauty, demureness, and other ideals of femininity. In their study on cross-dressing, Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough clarify the historical fetishization of women’s

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<sup>1</sup> Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, originally published in 1984, is considered to be the foundational scholarly text on popular romance. While they consider the text influential, many scholars of popular romance feel it is time to move beyond Radway and to look at popular romance with a more nuanced lens.

clothing saying that women in the Victorian era “were taught to regard at least some of their lingerie as sexy to males, because it was ‘the veiled, secret part, the desired indiscretion conjured up; the man in love expects silky thrills, caresses of satin, [and] charming rustles<sup>2</sup>’” (185). They also say that this fetishization of women’s clothing was aided by “the separate sphere concept” as it “made women less understandable and more mysterious to men” (184). The concept of separate spheres cemented traditional gender ideologies, clarified gender boundaries, and made it more difficult for these boundaries to be traversed.

Traditional gender ideologies and ideals are portrayed through Phillipa’s reflections on clothing, especially feminine clothing, which are a constant refrain through the rest of the novel. As Lisa Fletcher—author of *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*—notes, this is typical behavior for a cross-dressed heroine: “these novels are typically focalized through a heroine who is unhappy in disguise and longs to be properly dressed...[t]he unhappily dressed heroines are forever opening wardrobes and closets to run their eyes and hands over their beloved dresses and gowns” (87-8). Phillipa’s first reflections on her clothing are as a male, mourning the loss of her femininity. According to Phillipa, “the second worst thing [about dressing as a male is] the fact that she look[s] entirely too convincing as a male,” while referring to her cravat as a “bloody awful thing” (7, 42). In addition to her displeasure with male clothes, Phillipa’s longing for female garments makes clear that Phillipa conflates gender and clothing; for her, dressing in the wrong gender is a line she reluctantly crosses. During her masquerade, she dreams “wistfully of fine Batiste underthings and Belgian lace” and misses “being a girl” along with “the soft fabrics and the sweet scents,” coveting “the confections of lace and organza worn by the other girls” in the novel (39, 39, 113). These passages are full of longing, clearly

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Bullough and Bullough are quoting Octave Uzanne. This passage can be found in Valerie Steele’s *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age*, p. 207.

indicating that Phillipa, who experiences and enjoys the various privileges granted to men, would much rather live out her life according to the role assigned to her gender.

Bradley makes clear from the start that, for Phillipa, dressing as a male is an act of desperation, something “she would have scoffed at...and would have stoutly declared she would [rather] die” than dress as a man; that is, until the prospect of death becomes an actual reality (10). For Phillipa, cross-dressing is a means to an end and a way to ensure her safety, and perhaps most important of all, it is a temporary aberration; Phillipa only intends to act and to dress like a man until it is safe once more for her to act and dress as a female. Cross-dressing is not a lark, nor is it an ultimate act of rebellion against the strictures of gender. The knowledge that her disguise is temporary makes it easy for Phillipa to commit fully to her course of action once it is decided. She constantly reminds herself to “[s]peak *deeply*” and to imitate the body postures of the men she is around (13, emphasis in original). Phillipa cuts off her hair, considered to “ha[ve] been her best feature” and dyes it in an attempt to commit completely to her disguise and to throw her pursuers off track (11). She even receives tips on masculinity from Robbie, the young boy she tutors. Robbie schools Phillipa in the art of sitting like a man, scratching, and spitting, all parts of Phillipa’s education in masculinity and masculine pastimes in case her clothing should fail to act for her and *she* should have to act like a man.

As Phillipa adjusts to her disguise, she discovers that though she is “not a gentleman...she [is] no longer a lady either” (82). Her physical transformation into Phillip is aided by a master tailor named Button, and when he gifts her with a new male wardrobe, Phillipa finds that masquerading as a man is a matter of tricking the eye:

Button had taken care to fit her waistcoat perfectly and had reinforced the front of it to lie flat upon her bound breasts. The shoulders of the coat had been subtly padded to give her

some prominence, and the trousers were cut just a tad on the loose side to hide the curve of her bottom. She looked the very picture of a well-turned-out young fellow. (100)

According to Fletcher, in the cross-dressing romance genre, “[c]lothing [rather than the heroine] *performs* gender to the extent that the heroine can pass as a man” (87, emphasis in original). Though this is a legitimate critique of the novels, instances of successful cross-dressing are historically accurate. Bullugh and Bullough note in their account of cross-dressers that throughout history “[w]hat seems evident from these stories is how much clothing helped determine one’s gender. Once a person dressed passably as a man and adopted the proper posture and walk, few were questioned, even in the army” (159). Of course, it must be acknowledged that while *The Spy* is set in a historical framework, it was written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, making claims and critiques of historical accuracy somewhat shaky.

Yet, it can be said that clothing—especially clothing in which she feels better disguised and thus safely hidden—eases Phillipa’s transition into Phillip, and makes her more confident in her charade, enabling her to commit fully to *becoming* Phillip (also known as Flip to James and Robbie). In fact, as the newly dressed Phillipa is introduced as Phillip, she begins making pronouncements about fashions for women, reveling in her newfound power to declare certain trends “doomed” as “it seem[s] that when a man utter[s] a proclamation about fashion, his views [are] taken much more seriously than...[a] woman’s” (110, 113). It must be said that at the same time she is denouncing elements of women’s fashion, Phillipa also is envious of the gowns worn by the women at the ball. She “gaze[s] wistfully at the confections of lace and organza,” serving as yet another reminder that Phillipa still is uneasy in male attire and would prefer to be ‘true’ to her gender and dress as the other women do (113). Fletcher remarks that “cross-dressing romances insist upon a natural or causal relationship between anatomical sex and ‘true clothing,’

between femaleness and feminine frills and flounces, between maleness and strongly tailored lines and heavy fabrics” (88). However, this is contradicted by Phillipa’s reflections on losing her femininity and “forgett[ing] how to be a girl” (272). Without her clothing (male or female), what exactly is Phillipa? In the midst of her masquerade, she feels neither fully female, nor truly male, blurring the lines between Phillipa and Phillip.

Though Fletcher disputes that modern romance heroines can fully become men, it should be acknowledged that the clothing worn by Phillipa as Phillip certainly aids in Phillipa’s *becoming* Phillip as it is a performative force in its own right. In parts of the novel (namely those from James’ point of view) Phillipa disappears completely, leaving only Phillip in her stead. For example, upon seeing herself dressed as a male for the first time, Phillipa sees “[a] thin, badly dressed fellow...features gone bony with starvation,” while James sees a man who “look[s] as though he dresse[s] from the rubbish bin and cut[s] his hair with a hacksaw” (8, 18). In the beginning of the novel, Phillipa is clearly visible under Phillip’s clothing; however, as the novel progresses, Phillip becomes an entity unto himself. While most scenes flip between James’ and Phillipa’s perspectives—giving the scenes both masculine and feminine points of view—there are several in which Phillip alone speaks with James. These scenes often happen in moments of anger, usually directed at James for not behaving as Phillip believes he should. One instance occurs when James shirks his duty as an escort for a young woman, nearly resulting in sexual assault for the woman. Phillip, having witnessed and prevented the incident, takes James to task for failing in his role as protector. A similar, and more vocal, incident occurs when James does not behave as a father ought to (according to Phillip). Phillip calls James a “self-absorbed fool” and a “stupendous ass,” stunning James with his lack of inhibition and his ignorance of

class boundaries (177). James attempts to brush off his parenting mistake of not giving praise, making Phillip even angrier:

Phillip sprang to face him. ‘Now see here, James! I just watched you crush a little boy’s heart in one careless wave of your hand! I know you haven’t the least idea how to be a father, but that doesn’t give you the right to be cruel!’... [In response to James’ protest] ‘*Don’t* change the subject, James! You were cruel when you didn’t think to give Robbie the slightest bit of praise... You would likely praise a dog before you’d pass a kind word on your own child!’ Phillip’s face had reddened and his green eyes were bright with disdain and anger. (177-178)

Though Phillippa reflects on these scenes later, it is quite evident that anger, when not used for comedic effect, is depicted as a male emotion, even though Phillip is upset about something belonging to the domestic sphere of women. Though the reader knows it is Phillippa speaking the words, drawn from Phillippa’s experiences, their only possible outlet is via the masculine persona of Phillip. So while Phillippa has successfully transitioned into Phillip, it is less certain whether Phillip, with the freedom to speak his mind (though class barriers function here as well), will become part of Phillippa when the masquerade is over.

It is important to make clear that Phillippa is an unwilling pretender to her masquerade: this allows Bradley to play the gender politics of the novel quite safely and quite humorously without worrying about getting bogged down in them. To introduce an explicit agenda in the novel would run the risk of ruining the story and/or alienating her readers, which is the last thing a romance author would want to do. Though it is made quite clear that Phillippa does not feel that she is going against either nature or religion by masquerading as Phillip A. Walters, she feels strongly that she is not supposed to be taking on masculine qualities. And though, “survival [is]



her primary concern,” much of Phillipa’s worries come not from avoiding Napoleon’s spies, but from feeling that she is wrongly dressed (41). While these concerns are worrisome to Phillipa, they are humorous to the reader, allowing the narrative to brand itself as a comedy of manners as Phillipa struggles to become Phillip and to adapt to a masculine way of life. Thus the humor is based in irony, and it is easy to dismiss messages regarding gender as comic relief, rather than as establishing a division between the two genders via gendered clothing.

While Phillipa’s humorous frustrations with male attire serve in part to mask a meaningful discourse about the fluidity and constructed nature of gender, this discourse is veiled even further by her (often comic) inauguration into the male sphere. Phillipa is constantly confronted with situations in which she decides whether being a male or a female is better. For instance, she finds that, as a male, carrying packages on a busy street is troublesome as “she [is] expected to not only manage her own burdens, but to open doors for every lady who so much as twitch[s] her skirt in [her] direction” while as a female, she would “have had a footman with her to keep her safe and to carry her shopping. Even to carry Robbie if necessary. Even at that, every fellow she met would likely attempt to assist her” (52, 51). Yet, she later decides she is “grateful...for her masculine disguise” as “[m]en [are] allowed to truly enjoy their food, not simply to pick daintily as if too sensitive for such common fare” (56). This thrill of physical freedom is accompanied by the excitement felt when entering the “hallowed halls of masculine retreats” such as gaming clubs and boxing halls, though she often is shocked when asked to partake in masculine pursuits (54).

One episode that stands out in particular is Phillipa’s visit to Gentleman Jackson’s sports hall. James takes Phillip in order to “toughen [him] up a bit” and to “make a real man out of [him],” yet Phillip(a) finds the experience less than invigorating and more like a version of

“hell...where a woman who lied ha[s] to spend eternity staring at the chandelier” to avoid the sight of naked men (106, 127). James begins to spar in the ring with another man and mistakes Phillipa’s lustful fixation on him as “*intent*” desire for the sport and brings Phillip into the ring to spar with him (130, emphasis in original). This leads to an encounter in which Phillipa is very sexually aware of James’ body touching hers; however, since the scene is told from Phillipa’s point of view, it negates any potential homoeroticism, which is further negated when James begins hitting her. Suddenly the scene shifts from sensuality to physicality and anger as Phillip lands an uppercut on James. Thinking James has been severely injured, Phillip worries over him rather than “grandstanding” as a male ought to, which annoys James who wonders why he cannot make Phillip more manly and “adventurous” (133, 134). His questioning leads Phillipa to exasperation and disbelief as she thinks of all the stress she’s been under:

In addition to her escape from Spain and near starvation, she’d been forced to wear ridiculous, uncomfortable clothing, dance with girls, carry her own parcels, and open her own bloody doors. She’d been quite proud of the way she’d risen to such unfamiliar challenges. Yet here was James, discounting her ability to deal with adversity? (134)

While Phillipa’s anger comes across comically rather than forcefully, it is interesting to note how Phillipa views her gender transgression. In order to become Phillip, not only must she dress the part, but she must also *learn* the part. These educational moments are depicted as a series of “unfamiliar challenges” for which she rises to the occasion. Indeed, she even refers to acting feminine as “training;” as “[s]neaking into a gentleman’s bedchamber in the middle of the night was definitely on a young lady’s list of “don’ts.” The *power of her own training* nearly sent Phillipa scampering back to her own room” (171, emphasis mine). In her study of Georgette Heyer’s cross-dressing romances, Lisa Fletcher, building off Sandra Gilbert, notes that “the

stereotypical gestures and behaviors of ‘femininity,’ do not follow from femaleness, but rather are directly linked with the wearing of costume: “clothes wear us and not we them”” (64-5).

While the transformative power of clothing is undeniable, Bradley’s use of the word “training” implies a much stronger and not easily reversible truth of gender roles and behaviors; it hints at the constructedness of gender and the roles that follow from it. So, while gender roles are enhanced and aided by gendered clothing, the training involved in gendered behavior can be powerful enough that behaviors and actions are not dependent on the gendered clothing worn by the character. In this instance, Phillipa’s gender depends not on the clothing she wears, but on the behaviors she has learned in the course of a lifetime.

The difference in gender behaviors is reflected upon by Phillipa early on in the narrative as she attempts to reckon with her desire for James. She analyzes the difference regarding physical freedom between men and women, noting that “[s]he could flop, and stretch, and most probably *scratch* without reprisal. A lady could do none of those things. A lady must not touch her face or person, or adjust her clothing in the presence of others. A lady must never let her spine touch the back cushions” (81, emphasis in original). However, Bradley immediately negates Phillipa’s revelry by saying that “a lady had some recourse, subtle as it was. A lady knew the language of the fan and could spell out her attraction with the tiniest of gestures. A lady could flutter her lashes just a bit, or lean ever so slightly forward, or stroll and pose to flirtatiously show her figure to advantage” (82). Subtlety is portrayed as far more attractive than freedom, and it should be noted that women have had to learn to be subtle in getting what they desire as taking a more direct route is perceived to be unladylike. Sexual subtlety, for all its finesse and intricacies, cannot be held comparable to the physical freedom felt by Phillipa in her masculine guise, especially since there is no discussion of the ways in which men court women

or a discussion of the attractions of women's clothing. Rather than allow Phillipa to decide that being male is a better way of life, Bradley subverts the train of thought by including constant reminders of Phillipa's 'lost' femininity and her desire to enact femininity again, no matter the disadvantages. Stella Bruzzi, in *Undressing Cinema*, notes that this is commonplace in cross-dressing films. Using the film *Tootsie* as her example, she explains that "the enjoyment Michael derives from creating Dorothy...is habitually undermined by a vehement affirmation of Michael's masculinity" (156). In this case and in Bradley's as well, "[t]ransvestite clothes are...used as a comic prelude to the reinstatement of...[the cross-dresser's] true sex and heterosexuality" (156).

Phillipa's desire to return to feminine dress is validated not only by her own thoughts, but by others as well. In the near sexual assault scene mentioned earlier, punishment by women is depicted as harsher than the punishment that would come from men. In this scene, a young woman named Bitty Trapp (escorted to the ball by James) has nearly been forced into marriage by John Tuttle, a desperate fortune hunter who planned to be discovered in an 'inappropriate' situation with her, thus forcing marriage. Phillipa, stumbling upon the situation and realizing the witnesses are very near, pulls the disheveled Bitty from John and places her twin Kitty near John and joins the two on the darkened balcony, foiling John's plans. After the witnesses leave, Kitty rounds on John Tuttle after he claims that " '[t]here's no man [Kitty] can tell without ruining [her] sister and [her]self' " (118). Kitty responds:

'Who says I'm going to tell a man? Think you that men are the only ones with power in London? Have you not heard of Lady Etheridge, my own dear aunt? And what of Lady Raines, confidante of the Prince Regent himself?' ....'You'll be watched John Tuttle'...

‘Every ball, every musicale, every drive in the park. We’ll be watching you. . . .and we won’t ever stop.’ (118)

Kitty’s invocation of her highly placed relations brings not only class to the forefront of power, but gender as well. Here, gossip is seen as a woman’s recourse, especially if the woman is married to a powerful man, especially one belonging to nobility. And it is made out to be more powerful than the punishment meted out by men as the young woman’s reputation remains intact. The women’s blackballing is depicted as full of “wrath,” with the power to make John consider “a tour of the West Indies” (118). Gossip, traditionally viewed as something malicious done by women to other women, is depicted here as something that unifies all women, making them a force to be reckoned with. However, the effectiveness of the gossip is tied not to their being female, but to the class statuses occupied by these women. Gossip is the only tool available to these women without forcing Bitty to suffer consequences as well. Once again, subtlety, and by extension, femininity, are seen as the most desirable outcomes.

While female unity is a welcome revision of the purpose of gossip, I argue that Bradley is stretching historical accuracy in this instance. It is clear that Bradley is attempting to make the woman’s solution more desirable than a man’s in this instance. James, for example, desires to “[c]all [John] out. Have him arrested. [Given] [a] public flogging” (123). Kitty and Phillip(a) point out that this solution gives no thought to Bitty and what she would suffer if the assault were made public. The feminine solution to dealing with John Tuttle is depicted as the most desirable form of justice, and serves as another reason why Phillipa ought to transition back to her feminine self. James notes that Phillip’s “quite obviously delicate hands” wouldn’t “stand a chance” against a man like John Tuttle, reminding Phillipa that she has no claim to the world of men and its forms of justice (123).

## Playing With Conventions

In her work on cross-dressing historical romance novels, Lisa Fletcher notes that in addition to following the conventions of historical romance fiction, cross-dressing novels follow certain additional conventions as well. She writes: “[t]he signals of gender incongruity...are familiar from Heyer’s novels and remain typical in novels of the last twenty-five years: slenderness, delicate frame and face, expressive eyes, narrow waist and wrist, disguised hair, apparent youth belied by mature behavior” and notes that the hero of the novel tends to be described as the exact opposite; while the heroine can masquerade as a male, there is no mistaking that the hero is the epitome of masculinity (86). The hero is also smart enough to recognize the heroine’s masquerade, proving his masculinity and heterosexuality. Fletcher writes that the “heroine deceives everyone *except the hero*; it is precisely his ‘business to know’” (89). What is interesting about *The Spy* is the way Celeste Bradley reinvents these conventions. Phillipa’s tenure as a male encompasses all of these traits, yet she is made uniquely different through the ways in which Bradley plays with and pokes fun at the conventions of cross-dressing romance fiction.

Phillip, from James’ point of view, is an “odd duck” who James cannot believe is twenty years old as “[n]o fellow of that age was entirely beardless, no matter how fine his razor” (18). Despite this disbelief, he remains blind to the disguise despite the fact that several other characters throughout the course of the novel see easily through the clothing Phillipa uses to pass as a male. First to realize her deception is Robbie, the young boy Phillip is hired to tutor. Upon their first meeting, Robbie realizes Phillip is not what he claims to be and plans to use that knowledge to run the tutoring sessions his way; unfortunately for Robbie, Phillip(a) shares his

secret and asks Robbie to “help [her] stay hidden, just for a while” (48). Next is the tailor Button who, due to his familiarity with clothing bodies, recognizes Phillip’s deviant body immediately:

Mr. Button turned on her fiercely. ‘Who are you, young woman, and what do you mean by this charade?’... ‘Your chest is full, but your waist is narrow. Your hips aren’t terribly wide, but there is no hiding the set of your legs’.... ‘Eyes large, lips full, nose ridiculously tiny—dear me, is Mr. Cunningham blind?’ (93)

Fletcher remarks that sight and knowledge are often used in cross-dressing romance novels to elevate the *hero* of the novel, to show that despite the disguise, he recognizes the heroine as an ‘appropriate’ sex object, either from the very beginning of her masquerade or upon seeing her naked, which serves as a revelation of her ‘true’ and inescapable sex. “[T]he hero is never fooled. The heroine deceives everyone *except the hero*” (89, emphasis in original). However, in the case of *The Spy*, the only character for whom Phillip is real is the hero, James. This accounts for the very rare acknowledgements of Phillip as a character throughout the novel. Phillip is difficult to envision precisely because so many characters see through the masquerade. Phillipa cannot truly become male because too many people recognize her ‘true’ sex under the clothing, thus refusing to allow for gender fluidity.

Even when James sees Phillipa’s naked body, he never suspects a resemblance to Phillip because Phillipa engages in yet another masquerade with the help of Button. This time, she masquerades as a demi-rep, or courtesan. At a masquerade ball for the demimonde (which James has taken Phillip to in order to encourage his masculinity), Phillipa dresses as a harem dancer in order to entice James into revealing his secrets as a spy as he has told her (as Phillip) not to trust women as “‘a woman’s power is in her flesh. She can twist a man’s mind around until he is her willing plaything....You’ll tell her anything she wants to know’” (148). Believing

that James holds secrets about her father and his whereabouts, Phillipa, naively and comically, decides to seduce him without acknowledging her own lust for James. Phillipa christens her harem dancer persona Amilah, meaning dream in Arabic (a language Phillipa is familiar with due to her travels with her parents). And this, I think, is a very salient point regarding gender and sexuality in *The Spy*. Once again, clothes serve as the vehicle for Phillipa to change her gender, yet she does not meet James as herself. Rather, she chooses to become a different woman than usual; upon changing her clothes, Phillipa once again disappears and is subsumed into Amilah. In the love scene, there are three different people in the room when told from Phillipa's point of view: Phillipa, Amilah, and James. For Phillipa, Amilah exists as a separate, yet connected entity. They are the same and yet not. For example, the morning after seducing James, she sees him

clutch[ing] the wad of bedding she'd used to fill up her space [in the bed]. He was holding her still. No, not her. Amilah. Abruptly, she hated the dancer she had created. She was no Bedouin goddess. She was only thin and ordinary Phillipa, who had not even her own hair to boast of. James had been seduced by his own imagination, not by any real charms she possessed. If he were to meet her as herself, he likely wouldn't take a second look. (232)

Though Amilah is Phillipa's creation, and is indeed part of her, she is a separate entity just as Phillip is. I want to suggest that for Phillipa, gender, while perhaps not fluid, is a performance of sorts, whether she is taking on a male role or a female role. In this sense, Phillipa is an excellent example of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler writes that "performativity is not just about speech acts. It is also about bodily acts" (198). Through Phillip, masculinity is embodied and, through Amilah, femininity. Though Phillipa is



not a blank slate, we do get the extremes of gender roles and behaviors through her two creations, two characters performed by Phillipa. Phillip enables the outlet of emotions such as anger while Amilah gives Phillipa a chance to express the lust she feels for James. Like Phillip, Amilah exists outside Phillipa. She also appears more than once, which is significant because her reappearance establishes her as a subject rather than allowing for an easy dismissal based on the fact that she is a fantasy. In her first appearance, Amilah fails to have sex with James as Phillipa has second thoughts about “rolling about in the grass with [a man she believes to be] her father’s assassin” (203). Her second appearance is at James’ club, “dancin[g] for the marks” (216). Again, Amilah is dressed as a harem dancer, cementing her subjectivity and certainty as a separate entity from Phillipa.

Amilah is different from Phillipa; one could make the argument that Amilah is Phillipa in female drag. Drag (the impersonation of females, usually by males) relies on an exaggeration of femininity, an exaggeration of gestures, posture, behavior, and physical features. Amilah is all these things. Her eyes are “dark and alluring over her veil” and “lined exotically with kohl” (196). She uses her gaze to look at James “demurely,” yet issues a “challenge...[with] her captivating gaze” (196). Amilah is “catlike” and “inviting” and moves in a way that makes James “think of both hot aching sex and dark feminine mystery” (197, 197, 199). As a harem dancer, her body is made prominent through “a delightful amount of supple swaying” and “sinuous movements,” through her “willing tongue” and her “silken flesh” (199, 199, 220, 220). Her body becomes a vehicle for lust and desire. Amilah is all body, and all female, unlike Phillipa. Amilah is more sensual, more seductive, and more feminine than Phillipa. Marjorie Garber, in her defense of cross-dressing, uses the film *Tootsie* to explain the appeal of the transvestite figure. She explains that Dorothy is “more attractive, even [more] seductive, in

some ways, than any other character in the film....Dorothy is infinitely more appealing than the male entertainer...whose place she has taken” (7). The same is true of Amilah and Phillipa despite the fact that Amilah does not take the place of a male. Even Phillipa acknowledges that Amilah is much more alluring than she, saying that James “likely wouldn’t take a second look” at ordinary Phillipa (252).

As such, James does not make love to Phillipa; he spends a night of passion with Amilah. He thinks of her constantly after their night together, wondering why “she asked for no payment, and [why] she took nothing from” him (234). The “mystery of her tease[s] at his mind,” and he thinks of Amilah to distract himself from the stress of dealing with his traitorous ex-lover Lavinia, Lady Winchell and Phillip/Phillipa, whom he views as “a spy and a traitor” (274, 259). Even upon discovering that Phillip is Phillipa, James does not make the connection that Amilah is Phillipa, which stuns Phillipa out of her lust for James:

“She wished he were thinking what she was thinking, about how they had touched and pleased each other—A thought ripped through Phillipa’s heated daze. *He doesn’t know it was me.* Last night, James had made love to Amilah, not Phillipa Atwater....Suddenly Phillipa hated Amilah more than ever. She herself would be treated as a spy and a traitor, while Amilah would live on in James’s memory as a fantasy fulfilled. “Damn,” she muttered..., turning to pace the room as she pondered this new twist. (259, emphasis in original).

Often in cross-dressing romance novels the hero is depicted as “the truly ‘masculine’ man [who] can always tell the difference between boys and girls; heterosexual desire will always recognize its object” (Fletcher 89). Celeste Bradley deliberately breaks the convention of the all-knowing hero who is clever enough to recognize the heroine as an ‘appropriate’ sex object. This

may speak to the cleverness of Phillipa's disguise, yet also speaks to the establishment of James as a flawed and imperfect hero. Lisa Fletcher states that in "the contemporary cross-dressing novel, 'true' nakedness is opposed to false costume," and while this may be true in regards to cross-dressing as a male, it cannot be denied that Phillipa also cross-dresses as a female, further deceiving James (87). Bradley's inclusion of Amilah not only further disguises Phillip(a) but also firmly grounds the story in heterosexuality. Amilah helps to negate any homoerotic undertones to the story. James never feels any sexual attraction to Phillip. He thinks of him as an odd duck and as part of the motley family he has adopted.

Bradley further subverts the convention of the all-knowing hero by making James a member of a governmental spy ring called The Liar's Club; it is his duty to be able to see through secrets and lies and to suss out people's characters. It is his duty to see what others do not and to know what others don't. He is a master spy who goes by the code name of the Griffin, yet is astounded by his inability to see through Phillip: "[t]he extent of his own stupidity washed over him.... 'I am an ass,' he muttered furiously. 'Have I no judgment left at all?'" (255).

Phillipa reassures James that she worked very hard at being male. And upon discovering that Phillipa is Amilah as well, James feels a fury unlike any point before: "James went cold—then hot. Volcanic rage welled up inside him. Amilah had been another lie" (288). He takes his fury out on Phillipa physically and sexually, which she allows:

His mouth came down on hers, hard and punishing. He pulled her close with pitiless hands, ignoring her squirming and her muffled sounds of protest. She realized her struggles were only driving him farther down this unforgivable road. Instead, she gave in to her heart and kissed him back. (289)

James's fury comes from the fact that he has been made a fool of, not because he finds himself attracted to a male. Cross-dressing novels "invariably stage an erotic relationship between a man and a boy, a relationship which is conditioned as much by phobia as it is by desire" (Fletcher 84). Yet, Bradley's invention of Amilah safely grounds the narrative in heterosexuality, and Phillipa's feminine (and heterosexual) response to James proves to be the perfect antidote to his masculine fury.

James is not like traditional heroes of cross-dressing novels. He is not a paragon of masculinity; rather, he is a damaged hero, believing that he, under the influence of drugs and torture, gave up the names of several of his comrades. Several times throughout the novel, James is spoken of as being blinded by lust, anger and vengeance, once again bringing up the link between sight and knowledge. This issue of blindness is both interesting and important as it compensates for any loss in alpha male status for James. His lust effectively blinds him from recognizing that Amilah is Phillipa while his desire for vengeance blinds him to the Phillipa's 'inherent' goodness. James, unfortunately, has a habit of thinking of women as devious, deceitful spies, due to his kidnapping by his ex-lover Lavinia. He believes Lavinia "had [him] completely in her thrall. So much so that [he] told her things [he] should have died before revealing," which resulted in the deaths of several of his fellow spies (234-5). As a result, James suffers from immense guilt and believes that his sexual appetite should be sacrificed as he considers it his greatest weakness. His tryst with Amilah leaves him rattled, saying that his "honor, so recently, painfully rebuilt, [lies] in a rubble at the feet of yet another lying, faithless female" though he blames no one for it but himself (236). These instances cause him to feel fury when he realizes that Phillipa is Phillip, so that rather than "recogniz[ing] [her as] the object of his love and desire," he characterizes Phillipa as a "deceitful bitch" who "spied on [him],

infiltrated [his] home, and endangered [his] son” (Fletcher 87; Bradley 245, 265). Even after Phillipa has been redressed as a woman, James still does not recognize her as “the object of his love and desire,” instead lamenting the loss of “the last shred of honor [he] ever possessed” and rebutting Phillipa’s confession of love by telling her “ ‘Flip, you don’t love me. You do not even know me’ ” (292).

Phillipa’s redressing scene is an important one as well. Lisa Fletcher notes that cross-dressing heroines are often happy to be redressed in their “‘true clothing’ ” (88). While this is partly true of Phillipa, it is also true that her tenure as Phillip (and Amilah as well) has irrevocably changed her.

The end result [of her makeover] was unusual but entirely feminine....Phillipa stood before the mirror in her room, at long last clad in pretty underthings...reacquainting herself with the girl she had once been. ‘I don’t know if I can do this,’ she said.... ‘I don’t know if I can be Phillipa again.’ Or even if she wished to be. Phillipa had been a child-woman, willing to be held back from the world, to obey and tend her parents and to put her own dreams aside. ‘I’m not that girl anymore.’ (285).

As Phillip/Flip, she learned to embrace freedom and exercise agency over her own destiny while as Amilah, she “discovered that she...was a sexual creature” and rather than rejecting that part of her, she embraces it and exercises agency over her sexual(ity) life. The difficulty comes in reconciling these three aspects of a personality into one individual, Phillipa anew; Phillipa learns to navigate a new sexual and romantic relationship with James while also recognizing the value of her self-worth as an individual, refusing his marriage proposals until she feels he actually loves *her*, not the things that she has done or because he feels he must restore her honor: “‘I am but twenty years, James. Marriage is for life. Would you condemn me to threescore years of

existence with someone who cares not a whit for me?’” (313). Though Phillipa entered her masquerade reluctantly, she acknowledges that she has become a better person for it: she has more confidence, both sexually and in terms of her character, she is brave enough to face Lavinia and win, even in trousers, and she knows what she wants for her life. She has become a character of true agency.

## **Conclusion**

In *The Spy*, cross-dressing is used as a fundamental plot device to invoke humor for the reader and to create a thrill of danger. While the cross-dressing plot here does not introduce homoeroticism to the story, it does introduce ways of thinking about gender, even if they are not explicit. Clothing is used to construct a discourse surrounding gender, a discourse that is, at times, contradictory. Bradley uses both cross-dressing and clothing in this novel to discuss what are thought to be inherent gendered traits, but also expose the constructed nature of femininity. This discourse on clothing and cross-dressing both challenges and reinforces gender roles and ideologies. It remains problematic that in order for Phillipa to achieve agency she must masquerade as a man; however, the performative force of Phillipa’s male clothing lasts only as long as Phillipa is unsure of her capabilities as a human being. Her tenure as a male has changed her for the better by allowing her to assert her independence, both physically and mentally. Some may say that Phillipa’s reversion to feminine dress is a return to heteronormative gender standards. However, it is equally important to recognize that Phillipa has realized that agency and independence are not solely male characteristics and sets out to change her world to reflect this fact.

CHAPTER II.  
OF CORONETS AND MOLLIES:  
CLASS, HOMOEROTICS, AND HOMOPHOBIA IN ELOISA JAMES' *DUCHESS BY NIGHT*

Eloisa James's *Duchess By Night* most certainly is an homage to Georgette Heyer. In the dedication, James writes: "*This book is dedicated to Georgette Heyer. Though a few writers before her did dress women in male clothing (Shakespeare comes to mind), Ms. Heyer's brilliantly funny cross-dressed heroines set the standard for all modern romance novelists*" (emphasis in original). In terms of occupational identity, James herself could be considered to be cross-dressed at times. In academia, she is Mary Bly (daughter of poet Robert Bly), a Shakespeare scholar; in romance, she is Eloisa James, a novelist who "writes with a captivating blend of charm, style, and grace that never fails to leave the reader sighing and smiling and falling in love" (Quinn, Julia). She told no one in her department of her secret identity as a romance writer until after receiving tenure. In a way, she came out of the closet, just as her heroine Harriet, Duchess of Berrow, does in *Duchess By Night*.

This chapter will analyze the ways in which cross-dressing is used as a plot element in *Duchess By Night*. While *The Spy*'s use of cross-dressing focused mainly on transgressing gender boundaries, *Duchess By Night* crosses class lines as well. I focus on the intersection of class and gender, particularly in Harriet's situation as she is a woman of the aristocracy which comes both with certain freedoms and restrictions. Through the aid of historical accounts on the importance of class and gender, I argue that Harriet's relationship with Jem, Lord Strange—a man of significantly lower class status—is fraught with tension due to her unnamed rank as duchess. In accordance with these themes, I also examine the types of behavior expected from classed and gendered intersections: how Harriet behaves as a duchess and a woman and how she is expected to behave as a man and an untitled member of the peerage and the double standards

experienced by the characters in the novel when the truths of gender and class are confessed. The second half of this chapter focuses on the homoerotics present in the novel and the ways in which they are presented. In agreement with Lisa Fletcher, I argue that Harriet and Jem's initial attraction is "conditioned as much by phobia as it is by desire" (84). Jem's attraction to Harry Cope is concerned with turning an effeminate boy into a man; here, the markers of effeminacy that hint at Harry's homosexuality are thoroughly modern and not historical in nature. This anachronism comes from a choice James had to make as she wrote a novel set in a specific temporal space for a modern audience. I am concerned here with the author's intentions, especially being that James is a professor of Shakespeare at Fordham University and is aware of the problems that can arise when history and fiction are blended together.

*Duchess By Night* begins with Harriet as a widow, more than two years after her husband's suicide (due to a lost chess game). She finds that she is "lonely" and feels "invisible," "dumpy," and "[m]aternal" compared to her more scandalous and beautiful duchess friends (10, 12, 13). She decides to get herself out of her depression by transforming her life and thinking about her future: "She had to do something. Change her life! Start thinking about—About—Pleasure. The word popped into her mind unexpectedly and stayed there" (15-6). Harriet gets her chance when Isidore, Duchess of Cosway, decides to bring her explorer husband—whom she has met once—back to England from Africa by creating a scandal. Isadore intends to "impress upon [her] husband the possibility that [she] might birth a cuckoo to inherit his dukedom" by going to a scandalous house party during which she could possibly lose her virginity, allegedly "a woman's most valuable possession" (23, 23). Harriet decides to accompany Isidore as a chaperone of sorts to a house party given by Jem, Lord Strange, where the "scandal caused by [Isidore's] flirtation [with Strange] will undoubtedly be greater due to [his] low birth" (27).



However, their mutual friend the Duke of Villiers suggests that Harriet go dressed as a man since “Strange is not fond of titles and he wouldn’t welcome a duchess—or two—on his doorstep”

(30). The rest of the novel follows Harriet’s exploits at Strange’s house party, her erotic encounters with her host, and how their relationship is viewed by fellow guests.

**“If a Man Flirts with a Duchess, He Flirts with Her Rank”**

Like many heroines of cross-dressing novels, Harriet discovers that she has much more freedom in her male garb than in feminine dress. However, it must be admitted that in this particular novel, class intertwines with gender to give Harriet the freedom to do as she pleases. Early in the novel, it is made clear that as a duchess, second only to royalty in the aristocracy, Harriet enjoys more freedom than most women, yet at the same time remains bound to the strictures of her class. For example, when discussing the scandal Isidore plans to create by flirting with Lord Strange, she is cautioned by Jemma, Duchess of Beaumont: “‘The problem is more complicated than you present it, Isidore.’ ... ‘If a man flirts with a duchess, he flirts with her rank. When they feign affection, if you don’t see the foot-licking behind it, you are a fool. No man ever forgets your rank at the moment he kisses you—if your rank is the highest in the land’” (27). Class, just as much as gender, is (still) critical in maintaining the (unspoken) rules and regulations governing society. In fact, the scandal Isidore plans to create will come more from Strange’s being “the son of a mere baronet” than from the possibility that she will engage in an affair (27). Strange, due to his “low birth,” is not granted the same kinds of freedoms as those of a higher class. In addition to his lowly aristocratic title, Strange’s “‘reputation stems from the motley collection of loose people with whom he lives’” (24). It is said that he “‘host[s] an endless house party’” where people freely come and go at their leisure (25). However, it is pointed out that Strange’s scandalous house party is not so different from those given by people

of higher rank. Isidore criticizes this hypocrisy, saying to Jemma “‘*You, Jemma, you who set Paris on its ears with your parties of half-dressed satyrs, you cavil at the idea of Strange because he is not a duke!*’” (27, emphasis in original). Jemma is protected from scandal through her title while Strange is not. They host very similar types of parties, yet Strange, on the very fringe of the aristocracy, is the one who suffers for it.

Class holds nearly as much sway as gender does in the novel. The use of titles references a literal, legal, and named hierarchy. They announce the superiority of one being over another, regardless of gender. In *An Elegant Madness*, Venetia Murray observes that in the Georgian era, “[c]lass distinctions were a fact of life: aristocratic liberals might, and indeed did attempt to ameliorate the lives of the working classes, but they never for one moment thought of them as their equals” (243). Class, even more than gender, served as a marker between those who held power and those who did not. When considering this in a historical context, it must be acknowledged that a woman of the aristocracy had more power and recourse than a man involved in trade. In writing about Victorian aristocratic women and their influence in political society, historian K.D. Reynolds argues that it is important to look at history and take “gendered identity for granted, at least up to a point, and look[...] beyond it to the ways in which women operated in the external world as members of a privileged and social élite” (4). She notes that a

duchess had only as much in common with the wife of a factory worker as their respective husbands had with each other. In relation to their own families and, to an extent, their own class, aristocratic women were first and foremost women. In relation to the rest of the world, they were aristocrats first. (4)

And so, while it is tempting to examine the characters of *Duchess By Night* in terms of gender alone, I believe it is of utmost importance to consider class as well. As a duchess, Harriet is well

aware of the power that comes with her rank; for example, when she acts as judge in her county court in place of an alcoholic judge who ““sleeps off the brandy of the night before...[while Harriet] make[s] the rulings. Otherwise, he simply gives everyone hard labor, no matter the offense or the truth of it”” (43).

Strange, though a member of the nobility himself, is hostile towards titles as he “dislike[s] the way that titles, especially the higher-up ones, seem[...] to give their holders the right to behave like despicable fools” (53). There is no explanation given for Strange’s dislike of titles other than the hypocrisy that seems to abound among the aristocracy. Reynolds notes that in this era

[p]lenty of aristocrats paid only lip-service to their duties to their tenants, and many lived frivolous and exploitative lives....[so that the stereotype] of the aristocratic woman which had the greatest currency is that of the frivolous, selfish, ‘social butterfly’, without a serious thought or concern for anyone beyond her social circle, who might divert herself by playing the part of the ‘Lady Bountiful.’ (13)

Though Reynolds remarks that this image was largely used as propaganda by the middle-classes, it is quite apparent that Strange holds the same view of the aristocracy, especially of the women. For example, upon meeting Isidore for the first time, he notes that she is “not the sort of guest he enjoy[s],” believing that she “would be fussy, and shocked, and likely [to] stamp out in high dudgeon in a day or so” due to the scandalous nature of his house party (52, 53). His impression of Isidore changes once he decides that she is not “shockable” as she looks like a woman who enjoys the pursuit of pleasure, something Strange himself enjoys (53).

Strange’s scandalous reputation results from the fact that he invites actresses and other women with ‘loose’ reputations to his house parties not only to rehearse the plays he directs for

the theatre he owns, but also to serve as company to his more distinguished gentleman guests. Harriet at one point remarks that Strange's reputation comes not from the men he entertains or the going-ons of his household but from the reputations of the women who visit it. It should be mentioned that during this time actresses were considered to be little better than prostitutes. In her book on courtesans, Katie Hickman writes that by "the seventeenth century the term 'actress' was unequivocally synonymous with prostitute" and "whether or not they were technically prostitutes, [they] might just as well have been. The very nature of their work—exposing themselves to public view on a stage—was considered morally degenerate" (39, 39-40). The dual pressures of class and gender exacerbated the low statuses of actresses; the power of patriarchy combined with a strict class hierarchy contributed to the hostility they received from upper-class women. Strange, as a member of the nobility and as a male, is allowed to host parties and be considered scandalous; yet, he is also looked down upon by the aristocratic women who decide whether an individual is fit for Society. As we find out later, it is the treatment of his sister (who, through a series of unfortunate events, became a prostitute) that leads to much of Strange's outrage over the ways women of different classes are treated.

In the novel, these dynamics between class and gender play out in interesting ways. For instance, Strange seems to have a double standard when it comes to gender and class. He dislikes women of high rank and invites women of dubious repute into his home for long periods of time, yet wants his daughter to be raised as a lady. At the same time there seem to be only two types of men: gentlemen—men of science and the arts, often with ties to the peerage—and laboring men—those who work the fields for their livelihood. It seems that aristocratic men, or at least ones who dally in the scientific realm, escape Strange's prejudice regarding class. For

women, however, it is an entirely different matter; in conversation with his daughter Eugenia, Jem tries to explain the ambiguous markings of class:

‘Most men don’t do anything.’

Her brows knit. ‘I’m glad I’m not a man, then.’

‘Most women do less than nothing.’ ....

‘You are very cynical, Papa. From what I have observed, many women work hard, all day long. For example, my chambermaid’s name is Hannah. She works from the very moment of dawn until after dark’...

‘I didn’t mean the chambermaids.’

‘They are women, Papa. And they work very very hard, I assure you’...

‘I suppose I didn’t really mean women. I meant ladies. Ladies often don’t work terribly hard.’

‘I haven’t met very many,’ Eugenia said thoughtfully.... And then: ‘Papa, have I ever met a lady?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Your governess is a lady. And Mrs. Patton is a lady. She visited last year, do you remember?’ (106-7)

Eugenia, precocious young child that she is, makes very astute observations on the classification of women, noting that the women she is surrounded by do work, whether it be as a chambermaid or as an actress appearing in one of her father’s plays. It seems that being a lady is a tenuous position; being a lady is based not on work, but on some vague set of behaviors. To that mind, she is unsure what exactly constitutes a lady. This confusion highlights that historically what a woman did depended on either her father’s or husband’s profession or his rank. Reynolds writes that “[l]adies did not work, because work removed title to be called a lady,” thus women of

lower classes often aspired to do nothing since this would increase their social rank (21). So while not working meant that one was a lady, it remains a nebulous definition, especially since there were ladies, especially impoverished ones, who did work, either as companions to members of the aristocracy, or as governesses for their children.

Obviously Eugenia, due to her status as a daughter of a peer and her father's immense fortune, will grow up to be a lady. And yet, it seems contradictory that Strange can want this status for his daughter when he seems so set against the lifestyle of ladies. His attitude towards ladies is one of annoyance, but he often expresses concern that he hasn't raised Eugenia properly, wondering whether he ought to "provide a playmate for his daughter" (65). However, "an appropriate playmate...would mean sending Eugenia away, to school or to a relative. Parents of a properly brought up little gentlewoman would never allow their daughter to visit" his home due to its scandalous nature (65). So it seems that Strange's reputation could have negative repercussions on Eugenia being accepted as a lady and a woman of consequence.

### **Class Revelations**

Having seen how Strange treats women, it is no surprise that for the majority of the novel Harriet keeps her rank a secret from him, refusing to reveal that she is the type of aristocratic woman he loathes the most. Lisa Fletcher's work on concealment and revelation in cross-dressing romances is of utmost importance here. She writes that "[c]ross-dressing novels hinge on the representation of a redoubled scene of confession: the revelation of the heroine's true sex and the declaration of love" (49). Upon the first confession, the reactions of the heroes range from happiness to surprise to vindication to relief. Whatever the reaction, the revelation scene makes possible the confession of love, though Fletcher points out that "[h]ow and when the hero and heroine say 'I love you' is the key to unraveling the often contradictory and unsettling

erotics of historical romance novels. In the cross-dressing novel, this phrase becomes the meeting point for a quite confusing range of emotions and responses” (50). In *Duchess By Night*, however, the confession scenes go off without a hitch, and Harriet and Jem revel in their passion for one another. However, a third confession scene threatens to undo their happiness: Harriet’s revelation of her rank.

Working from Foucault, Fletcher writes that confession has been the “foundational ritual for the production of truth in the West” (38). Confession in fiction allows the author to reveal the true nature of individuals, whether the truth comes in the form of “I love you” or “I am a duchess.” In a confession scene, the person confessing holds the authority as he/she claims to know the proper truth. Fletcher also applies J.L. Austin’s theory that there are rules that determine speech acts and their success. For the purposes of this argument, the ones that are most relevant are (B.1) and (B.2) which state that for a successful speech act, “(B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants correctly and (B.2) completely” (qtd. in Fletcher 28). The first two confession scenes by Harriet and Jem were successful as they resulted in happiness for both individuals. The third confession scene destroys the happiness constructed by the previous two. Harriet’s confession that she is a duchess leads to Jem’s questioning of the truth of the second confession of “I love you.” Though Harriet has insisted time and time again to Jem that she is not who he thinks she is, Jem does not take her seriously, so the revelation of her rank stuns him. Harriet acknowledges her role in the deception: “‘I haven’t been honest with you. I played the doxy, and I’m not one. I—I frolicked with the Graces, and I led you to believe that I could live in such a way for my whole life....I lied to you by omission....My husband was a duke. And I am a duchess’” (324). Jem reacts predictably, but in a way that makes Harriet’s confession unsuccessful and her unhappy: “‘You pretended to be other than you are—why?’ But

he knew, he knew. ‘I’m not good enough for a duchess.... ‘You’re saying I fell in love with an illusion’” (324). And he says to her: “‘I loved you. I thought I knew you’” (327). Harriet’s confession that she is a duchess is unsuccessful because it has not been executed by all participants correctly; Jem does not accept this confession happily. Instead, he reacts angrily and displaces his humiliation onto Harriet. This unsuccessful confession leads to unhappy consequences for both Jem and Harriet, causing anger and anguish rather than a happily ever after.

While the anger and humiliation suffered by Jem blinds him to Harriet’s confession that she still loves him, it must be acknowledged that her reasons as to why she can no longer pretend to be Harry (Harriet) Cope are due in great part to their class differences. While we see the freedom and happiness that Jem’s way of life brings to Harriet, we are also told that his lifestyle is inappropriate and unacceptable for a duchess. She tells him she “can’t live like this” (317). When he pushes her to explain, she responds “‘I can’t live with people like the Graces, not for the long term. I don’t want to be in a house that is an inn for itinerant players and drunk jugglers, not to mention scientists and politicians. Yet I loved every moment of it. It’s changed me, changed my life’” (326). At first glance, it appears that Harriet is indeed “slumming” it. Harriet uses her class superiority to claim a moral superiority over Jem, telling him essentially that his lower class lifestyle with its prostitutes and actors and people of all sorts is not good enough for her, even though she has enjoyed it as a sort of vacation from the strictures of her life. She has used Strange, his reputation, and his class status to embark on an experience previously unavailable to her; Jem even accuses her of toying with him and his emotions, saying “‘it’s just the kind of twisted humor people of your rank appreciate’” (326).



However, love and class are complicated matters, especially when they intertwine. For Harriet, the problem is not that she is a duchess, it is that Jem does not love her enough to give up his way of life for her; after all, in her words, it is not because of her rank that she cannot be with Jem, it is that she is ““a staid person, at the heart....All [she] ever wanted, really, was to have some children and a husband who loved [her]”” (325). Yet, a duchess is not someone to be loved lightly. After leaving Strange’s residence, Jemma reminds Harriet that ““[p]eople always treat duchesses differently”” (334). To which Harriet responds ““[h]e just had to marry me! And then I wouldn’t be a duchess anymore. I’d be plain Lady Strange,”” revealing that she feels more burdened by her rank and is less attached to it than Strange believes (334).

And while the theme of love conquering all is a powerful and prevalent theme throughout literature, it is problematic that love here also brings about a reconciliation to traditional middle-class values of what a family ought to be and how it ought to conduct itself. When Jem and Harriet reconcile, he promises to change. He goes to her because being in “love meant that you didn’t let someone go home to an empty house and an aging dog, even if she did turn out to be a duchess. And even if she was infuriating, and holier-than-thou” (345). He has decided that love is far more important than building “his father’s version of Paradise” (346). This Paradise consisting of loose women and casual conversation is sacrificed for a life with one woman and taking his proper place in Society. In trying to convince Harriet that this is a permanent change, Jem details how he has changed his life since she left him: ““I sent everyone away. The Graces, the guests, everyone’.... ‘I told them to tear down the tower, and, Eugenia will tell you, I found a governess. Eugenia hates her’.... ‘You left, and there was no point to the Game anymore. I had no interest in riding....I dreamed only of you”” (353). He has reformed his life and gotten rid of

the things he enjoyed for Harriet's sake. He is making attempts to cleanse his "black" reputation in order to be worthy of a duchess (353).

In order to be worthy of a duchess, it is necessary that Jem mold his lifestyle to Harriet's and give up his previous life, a life that he enjoyed, in order to be accepted in Society. Though this is unfair to ask of anyone, it is not necessarily historically inaccurate. Reynolds notes that during the Victorian era defining aristocratic women was often difficult due to the fact that their rank changes upon marriage; she details two cases, one in which an actress married a duke and thus was elevated to the highest rank and "was always received at court, despite the reluctance of some section of Society to acknowledge her," and another in which the daughter of a marquess married her father's chaplain, far below her rank, resulting "in her being cast off by her family, and excluded from aristocratic society" (20). Thus, marriage of proper rank was quite important to the men and women of Society. And marriages that were not accepted often experienced hardship. Violations of class ideologies could be considered more grievous than violations of gender ideologies.

Thus, in order for Harriet to be accepted into Society as Lady Strange, it is necessary for Jem to become more mainstream as his rank and reputation will affect Harriet's as well, especially since she will no longer be a duchess. Harriet has little concept of what life is like without the protection of her rank. At several points in the novel, she commends Jem on his disregard for class, saying that it is "rather admirable" that "he doesn't decide who his guests should be simply on what kind of family they come from or what position they hold in society," revealing that she does not really understand the kinds of social punishment Jem has suffered for this infraction; Jem is "the most scandalous man in England" and pays the price for it (201, 24). This type of life would be difficult for Harriet because rank, with its ensuing responsibilities and

benefits, does matter to her. Though she has not exactly been scorned by her peers after her husband's death, she does remark that "most of her acquaintances still got a tragic sheen in their eyes and promptly moved away after greeting her, as if sadness was catching. Apparently, if one's husband committed suicide, one automatically became the unappealing type of widow;" yet, being a duchess, she is invited to every party as a courtesy (8). This status would be difficult for Harriet to give up. She values her friendships and enjoys the benefits that come with her rank, even if she chose—for the majority of her marriage—to remain in the country with her husband, rarely coming to town (29). So, in a somewhat reverse Cinderella tale, it is Jem who must change his life and adapt to fit a lifestyle befitting Harriet's higher rank.

### **"The Scandal! A Woman in Breeches"**

Unlike Celeste Bradley's *The Spy*, in which the hero feels no desire for the heroine whilst she is in male attire, the attraction between Jem and Harriet (Mr. Harry Cope) is immediate. They are thrown together by Villiers, who asks Jem to introduce Harry "to the pleasures of female company" and to help jumpstart his manhood as his "mother has kept him close by her side" (68, 54). Jem begins feeling protective of Cope, having been told by his butler that Cope has "a remarkably innocent face," and Jem vows that "no Mr. Cope [is] going to lose his wide-eyed purity unless he wished to" (50, 51). Upon meeting Cope, he is "surprised by a little surge of interest in himself—shamefully—for Mr. Cope....*For God's sake*, Jem thought with disgust. *If this is getting old, I want nothing to do with it*" (53, emphasis mine). Unlike *The Spy*, James's *Duchess By Night* fully explores the homoerotic tensions between Cope and Strange. Fletcher writes that cross-dressing romances "cannot help but picture, however fleetingly or accidentally, an erotic relationship between a man and a boy" and this is "a relationship which is conditioned as much by phobia as it is by desire" (75, 84). Jem reportedly has no problem with homosexual

men as “‘one of [his] closest friends from Oxford was of a different sort...[And] was a true friend. Not [his] lover, ... [though Jem’s] father couldn’t be bothered to see the difference’” (253). However, Jem’s response is quite typical of romance heroes who are baffled by their attraction to a male; that is to say his reaction is highly homophobic, which is clearly conveyed across the pages to the reader. Moments between Jem and Harry are laced alternately with eroticism and homophobia. For example, small clues are dropped each chapter that hint at Jem’s attraction to Harry. When they first embark on their quests of manliness (riding and fencing), Jem pushes Harry to the limits of physical exertion:

‘Tetchy about getting up so early? Worse and worse. I’m not so sure I *can* teach you to be a man.’

‘You sound as if you belong to some sort of exclusive club,’ she retorted. ‘As far as I can see, the definition of a man has nothing to do with whether he thinks it’s masculine to be out breathing ice and clopping around on a dangerously slick road.’ (100)

It appears that Jem is subtly punishing Harry for both his perceived lack of masculinity—and thus, heterosexuality—and the attraction to Harry which Jem feels is illicit and unwanted.

Harriet thinks that Strange is “cracked” for behaving the way he does, but brushes it off as his insistence that Harry live up to his standard of manliness, which includes waking before dawn, consuming rare beef and tankards of ale at each meal, punishing physical exercise, and flirting with the female company in the house and quite possibly even bedding them (101). This standard is too much for Harry/Harriet who decides instead that “[i]t would be good for Lord Strange to get to know someone—a man—who was a little different than he was. The man was set in his ways. Obsessed with manliness” (138). However, what Harry/Harriet does not realize is that Strange’s obsession with masculinity comes precisely because he fears the loss of his own.

In romance novels, gender-appropriate behavior for men is strongly tied to their heterosexuality. Fletcher (working from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) writes that “Western culture cannot resolve the question of an anxiety tempered by desire, or a desire tempered by anxiety. Pictured in these terms, the hero of the cross-dressing plot is troubled both by anxiety and desire, neither of which is reducible to the other” (84). Jem’s attraction to Harry is anxiety-inducing because it calls into question not only his sexuality, but also his masculinity. In both *The Spy* and *Duchess By Night*, the heroes are concerned with making their protégés into men, James because he wants to set an example for Phillip, who is on the cusp of manhood, and Jem because Leopald, Duke of Villiers, asks it of him as a favor, saying that he “trusts [Strange] to steer him the right direction” (54). This desire to turn boys into men, coupled with the unwanted attraction Jem feels for Harry Cope, reinforces a very homophobic tone in the novel.

The tension in the novel walks the line between homoerotic and homophobic; there is always an air of danger during the erotic scenes between Jem and Harry playing on the risk of exposure. For instance, Harriet and Jem’s first love scene has tones reminiscent of the convention of the forced seduction scene often found in romance novels of the 1980s in that he physically strips her clothing from her body with a rapier during one of their fencing lessons. Fletcher writes that it is the re-dressing scenes of heroines who “are cross-dressers by choice” that can be forceful in nature (90). She quotes a passage from Kathleen A. Woodiwiss’s *Ashes in the Wind* where the hero “is outraged by [the heroine’s] refusal to be well-dressed [in feminine clothing] and [he] literally cuts the clothes she is wearing from her, only to be aroused by her naked body” (87). This is very similar to Jem and Harriet’s first sexual encounter. Harry has a blister on his hand and wants to end their fencing lesson early, but Jem refuses and pricks at Harry’s masculinity and tolerance for pain:

‘You’re not worried about a little blister, are you? All we have to do is bind it up.’

‘We don’t have any cloth,’ she began but he was circling her, rapier in hand.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked, not really alarmed. There was a dancing light in his eyes, a deep sense of laughter that made her treacherous heart thump. ...

Flick! His rapier sang through the air and one of the buttons on her shirt skittered away across the floor.

Her mouth fell.

Flick! ...

And with one flicker of his rapier, he cut a slash down the front of her shirt. ...

‘How dare you!’ she shouted furiously. ... ‘Are you mad?’

He had two responses to that. First he threw back his head and laughed. And then, rather more ominously, he turned the key in the lock. (214-15)

Harry protests that he wants nothing to do with Jem, saying “ ‘*You* may wish to broaden your horizons, but I, sir, do not!’ ” and generally protesting Jem’s advances until Jem tears his shirt and Harry’s “true nakedness” is revealed (216; Fletcher 87). “The English linen failed her, fell into two pieces and off her shoulders as if it were nothing more than a rag” (217). Jem, of course, already knows Harriet is in disguise, as it is the hero’s “business to know” and is merely teasing her for he is sure she wants him just as much as he wants her (Fletcher 89). The exposure of Harriet’s secret is a source of pleasure for the both of them: “[h]er mouth fell open and then she saw the lines by his mouth deepen and realized with a giddy wave of pleasure that she, Harriet, knew what Lord Strange was feeling, even if no one else did. He was laughing” (217). Their mutual desire is legitimate, actual, and consummated upon the Strange’s discovery

of Harriet's "true" sex. His homoerotic feelings, like those of other cross-dressing romance novel heroes, are rewritten as "always already heterosexual" (Fletcher 88).

However, before discovering Harry is actually Harriet, Jem finds his desire for Harry troubling and somewhat repulsive. Turning Harry from boy to man becomes a test of Jem's masculinity and heterosexuality. If Jem can turn Harry into a man, the implication then is that both men will behave in a masculine fashion, and, as such, their sexual desires will then be heterosexual in nature. In order to achieve this, Jem composes a strict curriculum of masculinity and heterosexuality, thinking of the various ways in which Cope can become more masculine and less effeminate. For example, he believes that Cope "need[s] muscle. If Cope had more muscle, he would lose that effeminate look" (104). And, "The real problem was [Cope's] eyes. What man had eyes of burned velvet brown? Swallowing an oath, he turned around and went back up the stairs. Just when had he ever wasted time thinking about a man's eyes? He was truly losing his mind" (105). Cope's effeminacy has a strong effect on Jem and the only way to stop that is to stamp out his effeminate behaviors, making Jem a highly homophobic character. Harriet, on the other hand, sees nothing wrong with effeminate behavior, citing her mother's curate as an example:

So he didn't like her [Cope] because she was too effeminate? Rank prejudice. Why, her mother's curate, Mr. Periwinkle, was remarkably effeminate. He smelled like a flower and believed that life was always better with a cup of tea....Mr. Periwinkle enjoyed arranging dried flowers. And he gave lovely sermons about the lilies of the field. Everyone adored him. (138)

It is important to note here that the obvious stereotypes of homosexual behavior are contemporary markers. A love for flowers and being universally adored are code for the modern

stereotype of the gay best friend that every woman must have (i.e. Anthony and Sanford from *Sex and the City*, Jack from *Will and Grace*, etc.) And the markers of effeminacy are thoroughly modern. In fact, Jem at one point in the novel thinks that at least Cope doesn't "look *too* sissy in a riding jacket [though] [h]e look[s] delicate in some lights" (104). What is interesting here is that according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the use of the word sissy to describe an effeminate man did not come into use until 1887, approximately one hundred years after the time period in which *Duchess By Night* is set. It is also around the same time that the word homosexual was used to describe being attracted to one's own sex. Before this, homosexual men were referred to as sodomites and mollies.

In the Georgian era, a conviction of sodomy was based on the sexual act, or on suspicions of the act, not on how the person behaved in society. In *Sex in Georgian England: Attitudes and Prejudices from the 1720s to the 1820s*, A.D. Harvey writes that

the hysteria of homosexuality was part of a process of hardening sexual stereotypes: they had been hard enough previously of course, but one of the key characteristics of better-class males, the readiness to resort to physical violence, and the routine carrying of weapons, went out of fashion in the eighteenth century, and may have required some compensatory assertion of masculinity. (150)

The stereotype of the alpha male often found in romance novels was in reality 'out of fashion' in the Georgian era, an era (along with the Regency) characterized by a devotion to the arts, along with a revival of Grecian ideals of culture in terms of manners, architecture, and beauty. The Regency era, after all, was the period when it was possible for Beau Brummel to dictate the vagaries of fashion. This is not to say that gender stereotypes were not firmly in place and that men who didn't adhere to the standard of masculinity weren't whispered about; however, it is



important to note that it was the act (or suggestion of the act) of sodomy that was perceived as “a passion which deserves the punishment not of the law only, but an exclusion from Society on the most light glance of just suspicion of it,” rather than a set of masculine tastes and behaviors (“Madge Culls,” par. 7).

What I mean to make clear here is that the clues used in *Duchess By Night* to hint to other characters that Jem and Harry are involved sexually are markers that are anachronistic. In writing for a modern audience, Eloisa James must have considered the impact that would be made by both historical and modern stereotypes of homosexuality. Paul Peuker, in his article on homosexuality and mysticism in the Georgian era, remarks that “what an eighteenth-century individual might have considered an example of close friendship that included physical contact and kissing might today be perceived as a homosexual relationship” (33). So when James writes of characters remarking that “[e]very time I look across the table, you have your heads together” or characters “decid[ing] [Cope is] a molly” based on his and Jem’s closeness, it is historically inaccurate (288, 246). While the use of the term “molly” is historically accurate—the OED defines it as “an effeminate man or boy; a male homosexual”—the ways in which Harry behaves are not consistent with the historical behaviors of men who identified or were labeled as a “molly.” Peuker lists several identifying behaviors that today we might identify as belonging instead to the subculture of drag queens:

Especially in London, where these so-called mollies met in special molly houses, ample evidence of the characteristics of this new type of man could be found: wearing extravagant clothes, greeting one another enthusiastically with kisses, addressing each other as “Madam” or “Your Ladyship,” dancing with one another, cross-dressing, and using women’s names as pseudonyms. They referred to their groups as “gangs” or

“clubs.” These men were also willing to play a passive role during sexual intimacy. (58-9)

While Harry may seem effeminate due to his eyes, hair, and unfamiliarity with masculine behavior, it must be acknowledged that he does not exhibit the aforementioned qualities of men who were persecuted for being mollies.

In fact, Harry’s awkwardness is explained by another modern stereotype of gay men: the over-bearing mother. Villiers is the first to perpetuate this rumor, telling Strange that “[h]is mother is eccentric,’ .... ‘She lives in the country and has kept him close by her side’” (54). Strange repeats this to Harry, saying “‘I know all about your mother and how close she kept you. The fact you’ve had no male companionship shows in the way you walk. And talk’” (74). He then insinuates that this closeness is responsible for the perception of Harry as a molly, saying that “‘You need to move like a man, not like a molly....And for God’s sake, remember that men don’t smile at each other the way you’re doing now’” (75). Harry’s lack of masculinity is because he has had no shining example.

It is implied that Harry’s relationship with his mother is somewhat Oedipal in nature (though it should be noted that Freud was the first to popularize this type of relationship, well after the Georgian era), and this has caused Harry to develop in a feminine, rather than masculine, fashion, thus explaining Harry’s effeminacy. David Halperin writes that in considering the history of male sexuality, “effeminacy deserves to be treated independently because it was for a long time defined as a symptom of an excess of what we would call *heterosexual* as well as homosexual desire. It is therefore a category unto itself [i.e. being too much of a Lothario makes you more like a woman]” (92). Effeminacy was thus not always considered a cultural marker of homosexuality. James, writing for a contemporary audience, has

chosen to fill her novel with contemporary markers of what we recognize as stereotypes and caricatures of gay culture as code for her readers. And I must confess here that James's use of modern markers and deliberate historical inaccuracies leaves me somewhat disappointed, though I understand the necessity of appealing to a broad contemporary audience; however, in her other life, James/Bly is a Shakespearean scholar who must be aware of not only the historical context of texts, but the construction of history through them. Additionally, James's use of these stereotypes only perpetuates them in contemporary popular imagination in addition to demonizing them through the other characters' disapproval of Jem and Harry's relationship.

In addition to modernizing the homosexual signifiers, James has also modernized the code of masculinity explicated in the novel. Before departing for Fonthill, Villiers makes sure to school Harriet in the ways of masculinity, saying that though most people see what they expect to see, it is important to act the part as well: " 'If a bystander appears doubtful, say you're going to take a piss. Men never expect women to know that word. Or say something about your pole'" (40). Men are allowed to be more vulgar and earthy. In fact, if Harriet "can manage vulgarity, [she is] half way to being male'" (41). Today, these stereotypes are easily recognizable as qualities of masculinity. Women today, though they can be vulgar, are still expected to behave politely and to be delicate about bodily functions and body parts. Masculinity is also defined as "[t]alk[ing] about yourself most of the time....For a man there is no nobler topic than himself'" (41). And Villiers reminds Harriet that masculinity isn't just about speech: "'You'll have to figure out how to walk like a man....walking is important;'" the way she comports herself will be under scrutiny as well (41). Later in the novel, masculinity is associated with knowledge, science, the advancement of technology, politics, and power, as evidenced by Jem inviting Harriet to join the Game, primero, which is "'a game of power. Of bluffing and lying'" (245).

While playing, Harriet realizes that the “bets [are] much larger than she had realized. For example...[one player stakes] the right to provision the pursers. For all of England” (247). Jem tells Harriet that the Game is “[c]entrally important to the governing of England” (248). It is a version of an “old boys” network where powerful decisions that affect all subjects of the kingdom are made, bypassing all laws, and most importantly, it is the province of men exclusively as Harriet (through in her guise as Harry Cope) is “the first woman ever invited” (244).

Harriet enjoys her furtive ascent into power politics: “It was a heady sensation. She, Harriet, had influenced the policy of England” (271). During her time as a male, she enjoys a type of power that is unavailable to her as a woman even though her rank as a duchess allows her many other types of freedoms. And she finds that she enjoys the actual “doing” of things as a male: “The heady pleasures of being male—of being able to ride freely, fence, and argue—grew more and more dear to Harriet. She found every conversation interesting. One night she got into an argument with one of the scientists about the recent discovery of a new planet” (271). This male realm of knowledge and the debating of knowledge is much more fascinating and comfortable for Harriet than her social interactions as a woman had been.

Early in the novel, she feels out of place as a female because she doesn’t feel attractive and flirtatious. She reflects that if she were in feminine dress, “a woman like Miss Gale [one of the Graces in the novel] would get terribly nervous talking to a duchess. Yet, if she happened to *look* at Harriet, she would instantly label her a woman who was neither a challenge nor a confidant....and flutter away to laugh with more interesting women” (77). Indeed, Harriet discovers that as a male without a title, she does not feel intimidated by other women as they spend their time trying to impress her or just laughing and talking with her. Being male enable

her to feel “beautiful and powerful and free—for the first time in her life” and opens doors previously closed to her based on both gender and class (71).

Yet, her foray into power and exclusivity and male privilege is only a temporary one, characterized by Jemma as “an occasional act of folly” (44). Harriet leaves Jem and resumes her life as Duchess of Berrow, a form of power much more familiar to her. She reflects on the ways her life has changed after her masquerade as Harry Cope:

she kept thinking that she deserved better....She deserved someone to love her. She *wasn't* second rate, she really wasn't....He'd seen her at her best. And she'd felt beautiful, those times when they'd made love....The crucial thing was that she had said—she had actually managed to say that she loved him....And he had still let her go. (335, emphasis in original)

She recognizes her confession of love as a triumph for herself, even though it was not returned by Jem; realizing this, she refuses to mourn him. Rather than finding fault in herself as she would have before living as Harry Cope, Harriet realizes the loss is Jem's. She is prepared to meet Jem on her own terms rather than allow him to dictate the course of their relationship. Her power comes not from her rank or from her gender, but from her belief that she gave as much of herself to the relationship as possible and her certainty in this fact.

### **Conclusion**

In *Duchess by Night*, cross-dressing is used as a plot device to remark upon gender and class and the complications that arise when the two intersect. While cross-dressing helps Harriet discover who she is as a person and what she truly values, the reverse Cinderella tale that results makes the novel problematic in that it reinforces a valuation of modern middle-class standards. Jem gives up nearly everything to be with Harriet, and though they live a happy and fruitful life

(as seen in the epilogue), I am troubled by the fact that there is no middle ground in the novel when it comes to class. Equally troubling is the depiction of homosexuality, which is remarked upon negatively in the novel and comes across as a flat stereotype. One must ask why James chose these historically inaccurate representations of gay culture. Was it to facilitate the audience's recognition of a character's potential homosexuality? Was it simply easier than conducting the historical research needed to portray mollies and their manners? There may be more than one answer to these questions. The hollowness that results from the flat portrayal of homosexuality and from Jem and Harriet's reunion causes a disbelief in the happily-ever-after. There are very few scenes of Jem interacting with Harriet as a woman or as a duchess, leaving the audience to doubt that they will be able to work out their differences and that love will conquer all.

CHAPTER III.  
DANDIES, TROPHY WIVES, AND LIES:  
FASHION, FEMININITY, AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN PAM ROSENTHAL'S *ALMOST A GENTLEMAN*

Pam Rosenthal's *Almost a Gentleman* is unlike other Regency romances in that it is much darker in tone. Rather than a light, comedic historical romance, *Almost a Gentleman* reflects on themes of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and a murder plot in an utterly serious manner.

Regency romances, when reflecting on these themes, tend to balance such serious matters with either comedy or passages reflecting on the healing power of love; more interesting is the fact that it is often the hero who has experienced these horrible tragedies and not the heroine. In romance, it is the heroine's job to save the soul of the hero, not the other way around.

Rosenthal's novel differs from the traditional Regency by establishing the heroine as an individual tortured by her past and attempts to balance the narrative of her difficult past with a narrative on the joy that results from sexual intercourse with the hero. In this novel, cross-dressing becomes a vehicle for independence, self-reliance, protection, and lust.

*Almost a Gentleman* begins with a prologue set three years before the action of the novel. Phoebe, Lady Claringworth, has just awoken after a carriage accident caused by her drunken husband. This accident has claimed the lives of her husband, their three-year-old son, and an unborn child. Devastated by her losses, Phoebe decides her life should be no more, cuts her hair, and rebuilds her life over the next three years as Phizz Marston, a London dandy with "a cold, unerring eye for style, [and] a deadly instinct for exclusivity" (15). Phizz Marston has many enemies in London society due to this desire for exclusivity and has been receiving threatening notes from anonymous sources over the years, though the letters have increased recently in vitriol. Marston meets David, Earl of Linsley, at one of Society's most exclusive gathering places, Almack's Assembly Rooms, and immediately catches Linsley's attention: "there was no

denying that he'd felt something—a bolt of strange cold lightning had flashed through him when he'd returned the young man's gaze" (22). Marston and Linsley spend a portion of the novel dancing around their attraction to each other and only embark on their passion after Linsley discovers Marston is actually a woman. The remainder of the novel is spent trying to solve the mystery of who means to do Phizz Marston harm while Phoebe attempts to negotiate a relationship with David.

### **Fashion and the Gaze**

It is important to note that like Phillipa/Phillip and Harriet/Harry, Phoebe/Phizz has her own life-altering reason for cross-dressing. Instead of doing it for protection or for folly, Phoebe takes on the persona of Phizz Marston in order to reclaim her agency. In an unhappy marriage with a physically abusive husband (Lord Henry Claringworth), being female and dressing as one became a symbol of enslavement for Phoebe as "it was terribly important to [her husband] that she be elegantly dressed. She owed it to herself and her beauty, he told her. And to him and his position as well" (59). After beating her for not meeting his standards of femininity, he would always apologize by giving her splendid jewels, what Phoebe comes to refer to as her "blood money;" Phoebe "loathe[s] most of the jewelry [obtained during the course of her marriage]: the dazzling wedding gifts, the heavy ancestral pieces, and especially the fabulously expensive offerings the sneering footman would deliver...after Henry had acted in some particularly abusive fashion" (237). Anything representing the feminine becomes abhorrent to Phoebe and so adopting the disguise of Phizz Marston is the only way she sees possible to never again be vulnerable or answerable to anyone:

And even...if her present life were in truth a bit of a farce, at least it was a farce of her own authoring and control. Phizz Marston moved about as he liked: no more riding



sidesaddle or following a man's lead on the dance floor. He was a master in his own house: no more sneers from cold-eyed footmen. He set styles rather than copied them: no more anxious perusal of an endless stream of fashion magazines....Phizz always won his arguments, making mincemeat of the stupid, stuffy, and pretentious alike. Phoebe had always needed to be on the lookout for one of her husband's rages, but Phizz only had Phizz to please. (61)

Power and control over her environment and over other people are what makes being Phizz Marston so satisfying to Phoebe. Being Phizz allows her to escape being Phoebe. Phoebe was a woman trapped by her husband through clothing, adornments, and Society's mores; Phizz achieves freedom through clothing and becomes a master at excluding or including people based on whether or not their clothing is acceptable.

In this vein, fashion serves as a weapon for Phizz. Many men have been refused access to certain clubs or have been given the cut direct by Marston, akin to social death. Marston blackballs people based on the vagaries of fashion. Even if the individual has "manners, horses, [and] money ....[and is] [w]ell connected, too," Marston cares only about the way a person presents himself; for example, if one "relies upon his valet to knot his cravat" instead of knowing how to do it himself, Marston will make sure the man is refused membership at the club (16). Only those on the very cusp of fashion are considered "up to the standard required for a member of White's" (16). Phizz's vast knowledge and expert opinion regarding fashion is power for Phoebe as it puts Phizz on a higher plane above the rest of London Society and makes both Phizz and Phoebe fearless:

Marston never worried about whether he'd gulled society people. *That* benighted class couldn't see anything but glamour and social position, style and confident

bearing....Their shortsightedness made him fearless. For whatever else he might be lacking as a gentleman, Marston knew he had quite enough *ton* to overwhelm any member of the Polite World. (29, emphasis in original)

Fearlessness lends itself to the feeling of power gained by carrying on a masquerade for three years. Phoebe has not just dressed in male clothing for a temporary period; she has been living as Phizz Marston and has attained great status in Society.

However, it is not just fearlessness that lends itself to a feeling of power, and it is important to examine other contributing factors to this feeling of superiority and power. Note the language used in the quote above: “*That benighted class couldn’t see anything but glamour and social position, style and confident bearing....Their shortsightedness made him fearless.*” What is actually going on here concerns the controlling power of the gaze. Film critic Laura Mulvey first theorized about this concept in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey argues that one can derive both pleasure and power from looking and this is done through display of the female character: “[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (346, emphasis in original). The male gaze then comes from

the split between spectacle and narrative [which] supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator [...] (347)

As a young woman, Phoebe was considered a country bumpkin whose dazzling marriage into the upper echelons of the British peerage was “incapable of [being] describe[d] without reference to

the tale of Cinderella” (34). Everyone looked at Phoebe as having made the match of the Season, and her husband took pride in everyone looking at his “young, gay, [and] innocent” wife (58). Phoebe, then, can be said to have been valued for her to-be-looked-at-ness: in film, a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness complements her male partner’s heroism and masculinity, contributing to his overall appeal as an idealized male and speaking to the power he holds as a hero over all other individuals in the narrative. Additionally, several scholars of fashion have theorized that the power of the male gaze and a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness help contribute to constructing a woman’s femininity. For instance, Jennifer Craik in *The Face of Fashion* discusses how being a woman is fashioned through clothing:

According to Sawchuck (1987), the link between fashion and femaleness has three sources: explanations of capitalism that equate men with production and women with consumption (Veblen 1970); art history that associates the development of western art with the portraiture of the female nude (Berger 1972; Pollock 1977); and psychoanalytic accounts of the gaze as gender-coded (Mulvey 1975). (46)

These three factors work together to present the connection between women and fashion as entirely natural rather than constructed. In all three relationships, a gendered power dynamic emerges with men as the producers and bearers of the gaze while women are the consumers and recipients of the gaze; this contributes to the production of femininity and its natural-seeming relation to being female. Learning about fashion was learning femininity, and dressing at the height of fashion was to be the most desirable female in the room. As a girl, Phoebe had “been gawky, coltish, and far too tall: funny-looking really, with her heavy eyebrows, square jaw, and too-thick hair” (33). She did not receive the attention of suitors until her teens and did not have a Season until her early twenties, an age most would consider advanced to be on the marriage mart

in London (33). Upon her marriage, she had to learn femininity with the aid of “several fashionable lady’s magazines;” these were “fancy London magazines, treasured for their elegant fashion plates...with evocative titles: *La Belle Assemblée*; or *Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine* and *The New Bon Ton Magazine*” (Rosenthal 59; Moers 51, emphasis in original). Craik writes that these magazines aimed at women delivered guides for ‘womanly’ concerns such as “moral conduct, steps to realizing feminine ‘nature’, information about clothing conduct and fashion, deportment and social etiquette, as well as guides to fertility, family and domestic management” though there were certain magazines that “appealed to the social snobbery of the upper echelons” (47-8; 48). Phoebe’s lack of knowledge of femininity was perceived as an insult to her husband as she did not play to the male gaze nor to his power as a peer.

In *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*, Diana Crane looks historically at the intersection of class, gender, and fashion in the United States, England, and France. Particularly useful for my argument are her sections focused on England. Overall, Crane argues that fashion can be used to interpret identity, especially in societies in which one is primarily identified on the basis of gender and/or class. She states that “[t]he ideal role of the upper-class woman, who was not expected to work either inside or outside the home, was reflected in the ornamental and impractical nature of fashionable clothing styles” (16). In the case of Phoebe and Lord Claringworth, the draping of Phoebe in jewels and expensive silks spoke to the power of Lord Claringworth as a peer. Though her husband had “the worst absentee voting record in the House of Lords,” political power and respect meant nothing so long as he could make his influence felt through his wealth. And, he exerted this power through reducing Phoebe to a mere object to be dressed in finery and carted about “like a show pony in satin and kid gloves with twenty vicious little pearl buttons up [her] arms, [and] diamond bracelets like

manacles on [her] wrists” (11). Phoebe was objectified through her clothing and forced to take on a role that did not suit her. “During the years of her marriage, she’d labored to present herself as an elegant, expensive object, proof of Henry’s wealth and position, graceful and empty...” (111). Her feminine clothing was akin to a prison, managed by her husband’s desires. Confined by class and gender strictures, Phoebe had little power over her wardrobe, her body, and her life.

However, as a male, it is Phizz Marston who now looks at Society and fashion and decides whether or not something or someone is up to scratch. Through changing her clothing, Phizz has appropriated the power of the gaze in terms of both class and gender. Now, his mission in life is to “*beat snobbish, selfish, fashionable London at its own game*—the game that had destroyed Phoebe and Bryan [her son who died in the carriage accident]” (98, emphasis in original). This need for revenge stems from the lack of power and control Phoebe felt during her own marriage. She explains to Linsley: “‘It wasn’t the pain or the violence....It was the *humiliation*....And having achieved [the Society life she had wanted] , having woken up one morning and understood how much I’d given away to get it, I was resolved to keep the devil’s bargain I’d made’” (261, emphasis in original). And so, becoming Marston was a way of reasserting the agency she had lost and thought she had deserved to lose during the course of her disastrous marriage.

Becoming Marston involved not only removing herself from London’s gender and class focused gaze, but also mastering that gaze and then performing to it. As a woman, Phoebe was forced by her husband to pay more attention to fashion than to the politics that interested her: “she’d given up newspapers and political conversations at breakfast....[and instead] spent many weary breakfast hours poring over fashion plates while Henry monopolized the newspaper” (59). However, Phoebe chooses for Phizz to be one of London’s most elegant dandies rather than a

political reformer in the House of Commons. Phizz spends his days at his club in front of “the bow window overlooking the street, where an Olympian race of dandies hurl [...] verbal thunderbolts at the everyday run of humanity passing below” (15-6). Fashion, not politics, is Phizz’s weapon and entrance into Society. Phizz is “[r]eed-slim and elegant, dressed only in the deepest of blues and blacks, his narrow trousers the palest of fawns, his boots or dancing pumps glowing like flawless tropical ebony” (15). Over the course of three years, our heroine goes from not being interested in fashion as a female to proclaiming the up and coming trends for both men and women as a male.

As a male, Phizz holds more power than Phoebe, and though his origins are “frightfully common” and “horribly boring,” they do not seem to mitigate his power (17). Phizz’s power can be attributed not only to his gender, but in the way he enacts his gender through clothing as well. In her book *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress*, Ann Hollander interrogates the history and long-standing power of the modern suit, which dates back to the Regency era and the Masculine Renunciation. She argues that “the staying power of male tailoring shows how visual form can have its own authority, its own self-perpetuating symbolic and emotional force” (4). We can take this to mean that formal male dress is always referencing a historical power. She attributes the staying power of suits to their “erotic appeal” in that the “modern design suggest[s] that all lines, shapes and volumes...produce a visual model of dynamic coherence and integrity....For really effective impact, all ornament should form part of the total composition” (5). The suit, with its longevity and clean lines, grants its wearer a certain aura of power. She argues additionally that the suit is a male uniform that connotes “brotherhood” and “harmony,” yet also emphasizes the “individual character of each man” (97; 98; 98). A single male uniform

also emphasizes masculine solidarity and thus, gendered power. By donning a suit, Phizz is immediately identified as a member of this brotherhood.

Phizz is identified even further as a certain subset of man who holds great power and influence in the fashionable world of London, even though he is not involved in politics. Phizz is a dandy, which has a greater significance than just fashionable clothing. According to Ellen Moers, in her book *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, dandyism was a “social, even political” result of the class struggles during the Regency era (12). The dandy was

a creature perfect in externals and careless of anything below the surface, a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste. The epitome of selfish irresponsibility, he was ideally free of all human commitments that conflict with taste: passions, moralities, ambitions, politics or occupations. (13)

However, dandies were also admired for actively scorning and disavowing the habits of the rising middle classes, and this admiration was held even by those who were “outraged at the thought of squandering talent, energy and money on such achievements” (14). The dandy was an important figure for society to reflect upon. He served as both a symbol of a forgotten era and a figure for contempt. He was “elegantly idle” and considered fashionable for not knowing “the extent of [his] resources” (47). In short, the dandy was admired for his capability to be blasé and bored while dressing in the highest of fashions and being entertaining to the more mature members of London Society. While Phizz is not “the richest or most notorious of London’s dandies,” he is by far the most fashionable, and that makes him indispensable to the *ton* and cements his place in society (15).

Phoebe makes the conscious choice to shape Phizz as a London dandy. As a man, it is not unusual that Phizz, who is not a member of the peerage, would have knowledge of the

political intrigues going on around him, whereas as for a woman, this kind of knowledge would only be acceptable if one was well-connected by blood or if the woman were married to a man of political importance. And as a woman, Phoebe has had no political training, which could make her masquerade difficult if she had decided to create a more politically-concerned persona. Becoming a dandy is the perfect disguise as no one expects a dandy to do or be interested in any matter of consequence. Furthermore, becoming a dandy is proof to Phoebe of how much better she is than the rest of London at playing at the game of *ennui*, a sort of fashionable boredom. While Phizz is able to beat “*snobbish, selfish, fashionable London at its own game*,” Phoebe does not acknowledge that she is living a life that based more on revenge than it is on actual freedom (98, emphasis in original). After attaining a relationship with Linsley, Phizz Marston seems more and more a hollow construction Phoebe uses to hide behind. After being thoroughly rattled by an emotional discussion with her best friend Lady Kate, Phoebe focuses on Phizz to regain her emotional and mental equilibrium: “Gossip, style, and gambling, she thought—in the end they were all a matter of standing firm behind a good bluff” (351). Phizz is the familiar, and playing the role allows Phoebe to avoid dealing with her strong emotions for Linsley. Living the life of a dandy allows one to be fashionably shallow and to avoid feeling too deeply. Phoebe, who dreads feeling, would never be able to take on the idealized womanhood so prevalent during the era.

### **Femininity and Its Failings**

Throughout the course of the novel, the truth of Phoebe’s abusive marriage and the reasons behind her masquerade are revealed in small increments. However, it is clear that rather than allowing her to heal and be at peace with her past, being Phizz enables Phoebe to become a different person entirely, a person who is not and has never been Phoebe, Lady Claringworth.



Phizz Marston has no association with Lady Claringworth in Society. In fact, upon the birth of Phizz Marston, Lady Claringworth dies: “It only took four swift cuts. The thick, shining hair fell to the coverlet like the curtain dropping after a tragedy. ‘So simple,’ Phoebe murmured, ‘to effect the death of that sham creature, an elegant lady of the *ton*.’... ‘Rest in peace, Lady Claringworth’” (13). The symbolic death of Lady Claringworth allows Phoebe and her tragic, and oftentimes humiliating, past to be left behind, never to be acknowledged again. Phoebe almost never regrets the course of her masquerade. She finds the freedoms of being a man intoxicating: “It was invigorating, enlivening, this power to do and say anything he liked. And best of all was the risk and danger of the late-night gaslit streets” (29). The agency that comes with being a man of privilege is stimulating in that Phizz has been freed from the rules and strictures of society Lady Claringworth needed to be constantly, incessantly mindful of. Phizz can partake in nearly every aspect of societal life that he desires and be rewarded for it, not condemned. He can make his livelihood through gambling, drink the finest champagne, and go where he pleases. Dressed in feminine clothing, this is all but impossible.

This trope of women dressing as men in order to gain access to male privileges has antecedents in both history and in popular culture across cultures. For example, Bullough and Bullough write that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “Dutch women who cross dressed seemed to want to escape the restrictions of the woman’s role,” recounting several (international) individual historical cases of importance (notably, Eleno/Elena de Cespedes, Queen Christina of Sweden, Catalina de Erauso, and Christian Davis) (99). Stella Bruzzi analyzes the film *The Ballad of Little Jo*, which is loosely based on an actual historical account. In *Little Jo*, the “most obvious statement being made through Jo’s transvestism is the rejection of the frailty associated with femininity and the adoption of a male disguise as social protection” (179). These women, in

both history and fiction, carry on a tradition of donning masculinity in order to gain access to male privilege. In the case of *Almost a Gentleman*, however, a disturbing attitude towards femininity arises.

Throughout the course of the novel, femininity is explicitly made out to be something that is not safe, that is weak, and thus to be despised. Early in the novel, Phoebe reflects on why her disguise works so well: “The success of this past three years’ masquerade lay precisely in the fact that she *didn’t* feel like a woman. She didn’t stand or sit or act like a woman because she didn’t *want* to feel like a woman. Not ever again” (36, emphasis in original). The idea of being a woman and once again enacting femininity is unsettling for Phoebe because being female has brought her nothing but pain. One could go so far as to say that to be a woman means to give up one’s agency and to submit to one’s husband.

This association of femininity and womanhood with pain continues throughout the novel. Again and again, Phoebe associates her femininity and womanhood with the “humiliation of having submitted to a spoiled, stupid husband” and with a lack of power and agency, saying that “*she* would never again give up any measure of her inner self to any man. She’d been too deeply hurt, too absolutely emptied of trust and innocence” (36, 51, emphasis in original). This pain results in a sharp divide between Phoebe’s feminine and masculine personalities: Lady Claringworth is weak and “a woman ...[of] servility and gratitude” while Phizz has “only [has] Phizz to please” (53, 61).

When Phoebe accompanies Linsley to his home for the Christmas holidays, she dresses as a woman in order to help preserve Linsley’s reputation; after all, he cannot be perceived as a “Nancy-boy” among his own people (92). Additionally, she wants it to be a “surprise” for Linsley as she knows his greatest fantasy is for her “*masculine garments* [to] *undergo a total*

*metamorphosis, reshaping themselves into a gauzy rose-pink gown with an exceedingly low neckline and little puffed sleeves*” (200, 192, emphasis in original). However, the longer she stays in feminine clothing, the more the associations of femininity with weakness, stupidity, and powerlessness become more stringent. For example, when Linsley’s adventurous sexual history is revealed to her, Phoebe feels more and more like “another stupid, simpering, overdressed, pretty woman” and would prefer to “confront the earl of Linsley from behind a buttoned shirtfront and high cravat” for his hypocritical shaming regarding her one hired lover (212, emphasis in original).

Though Phoebe does confront him in feminine clothing and he later apologizes for his double standard, the associations remain during her tenure in feminine dress as she is forced to confront the fears wrought by the tragedies of her past: the prospect of being with one man for the rest of her life and having children with him. The idea of a life in the country, away from the city and all its inane diversions, fills Phoebe with dread: “*she* didn’t want [the life he offered]. She wanted her London life: smooth, stylish, and elegant; unencumbered by responsibility or obligation; answerable to no one but herself” (249, emphasis in original). She is uneasy even in the room she is placed in (the room of the countesses of Linsley), as she feels it demands some kind of response on her part, a response she is unable to give. It would be realistic to call Phoebe skittish and nervous, fearful that her next romantic relationship will be a reproduction of her abusive marriage, and we should not hold Rosenthal at fault as it is a reasonable fear. However, this fear becomes essentially associated with femininity and being a woman. It reproduces the myth that women can never be safe, whether it be from rape or from any form of abuse.

Childbirth and motherhood are essentialized as part of womanhood and femininity. Upon leaving Linsley’s estate, Phoebe reveals that after the carriage accident in which her son and

unborn daughter died, the doctor pronounced her to be infertile. This pronouncement fueled her decision to become Phizz: “*if I couldn’t have a woman’s greatest happiness, I told myself, I would bloody well enjoy a man’s privileges and prerogatives*” (319, emphasis in original). This essentialization seems quite deliberate and apparent, and one could hope that this is Rosenthal’s attempt to stay true to the historical setting in which her novel is set. However, at the same time, one must consider that effect of such rigid expressions of gender and sexuality. Though Phoebe cross-dresses, she does so in order to not feel like a woman because she feels that due to her infertility, she can never experience “a woman’s greatest happiness” ever again. For women, the inability to have children, when they are desired, can feel like a crushing rejection even in modern times. In her book *Embryo Culture*, Beth Kohl writes that “research confirms that infertile women are twice as likely to have depressive symptoms as fertile women....Studies show that women experiencing infertility are as depressed as women with AIDS, HIV, and cancer” (75). Additionally,

clinicians say that patients, adamant in their desire for pregnancy, can be aggressive.

Often they’ve put aside a career to pursue it, temporarily moved to be near a particular clinic, borrowed money or refinanced their home, and they resent, or downright reject, any limits placed on their treatment. (199)

The difficulties of conceiving can create an untold burden on women who are physically unable to fulfill this biological and cultural role. Indeed, it can leave one feeling as if she is the antithesis of femininity. The desire to realize this role plays out in reality and in popular culture, not only through romance novels, but through celebrities in the media and their miracle babies, through movies such as *The Back-up Plan*, and through popular television shows such as *Sex and the City*. Popular culture is overflowing with women being mothers or attempting to become

mothers. Very rarely is it that a woman is depicted as not desiring children or not being able to have them and at peace with her body. Such peace can only be achieved by the arrival of a child.

Phoebe is quite obviously not at peace with her infertility, masking her feelings behind Phizz Marston's life as a dandy, in which he has no cares other than the cut of his suit. Even during her erotic escapades with Linsley, Phoebe is unable to come to terms with her infertility, especially when she realizes that Linsley "cherish[es] the image of her with *his* child in her arms" (321, emphasis mine). The fact that she cannot fulfill this desire for him is heartbreaking and causes her to leave like a thief in the night. Interestingly enough, Phoebe's reckoning with her infertility is never really explained; one could argue that the scene in which she nearly dies forces her to reevaluate her life and realize that life is too short to deny herself the love and passion of Linsley. However, in juxtaposition to Phoebe's emphatic desire to enjoy a man's privileges throughout the entire novel, the brevity of the scene fails to convince this reader that all issues between Phoebe and Linsley are or will be happily resolved. The requisite happily ever after, achieved with Linsley's proposal of marriage, feels false. As they stroll off arm in arm after the night's chaos, nothing has been resolved: not Phoebe's love of London and discomfort in the country; not her infertility; not her enjoyment of male privilege and her abhorrence of femininity. Rather, we are to believe that in this case, love will find a way, even when there are serious ideological issues to be resolved.

### **Sexuality and Sins**

Like Eloisa James' *Duchess by Night, Almost a Gentleman* begins with the always straight hero being attracted to an effeminate male. Like James' novel, physical intimacy begins only after the hero has triumphantly restored his heterosexuality by deducing that the man he is attracted to is actually a woman, rewriting the homoeroticism felt previously as always-already

heterosexual. Adding to the similarities, Phoebe keeps her identity a secret. The mutual attraction shared between her and Linsley comes in part because of her secret identity; Linsley relishes any knowledge that comes of knowing the female side of Phizz/Phoebe. Upon learning her name, Linsley builds elaborate fantasies that envision the rest of their lives together, turning her from “a mystery” to “his future (148). The slow and subtle revealing of Phoebe’s femininity, the stripping away of her masculinity, is the primary erotic drive in their relationship, for Linsley is quite certainly disturbed by his attraction to Phizz Marston. Phizz Marston unsettles Linsley. The first shock of attraction between the two men leaves Linsley “astonished and rather shaken by the feelings that...[seize] him” (21).

As in *Duchess By Night*, Lisa Fletcher’s claim that cross-dressing romance novels depict “a relationship...conditioned as much by phobia as it is by desire” holds true in *Almost a Gentleman* (84). Linsley is just as frightened by Phizz Marston as he desires him. A man with a healthy sexual appetite, he maintains that he is not “the sort of man for an exotic passion” and tells himself to “[s]top this idiocy at once. For he would certainly lose his oldest friend if John Wolfe caught the merest whiff of suspicion that David hadn’t been in any way drawn to the young lady [dancing with Phizz Marston]” (23, emphasis in original). Linsley is disturbed by Marston based only on his physical attraction to the man and clearly feels that this attraction could ruin him and his social reputation.

Linsley’s feelings regarding this attraction are confusing. While he rejects (and fears) the possibility of being homosexual, he also views his attraction to Marston as something that can be controlled: “life presents many opportunities for desire. One simply learns to control one’s feelings and move on” (43). This rigid control of sexuality forces one to squelch natural curiosities about sex and sexuality in favor of the reigning values of the culture of the time. The

“sinful desires” Linsley feels for Marston should thus be despised and controlled in favor of heterosexual desires as they “*could both burn in hell for it*” (43, emphasis in original).

Homosexuality is thus quite clearly portrayed as sinful and to be avoided at all costs.

Homosexuality is further demonized as the only sexual relationship between two males in the novel is shown as a transaction fraught with abuse. Billy, Phoebe’s male lover who is aware of her secret, is a prostitute procured from a man named Mr. Talbot who supplies men of the *ton* with “boys [who] [are] clean and healthy” and can ““be trusted with one’s silly secrets—those absurd tastes and habits...that make life bearable”” (46). The business of prostitution is not seen as sinful; rather, it is seen as a way to indulge one’s pleasures. Both Linsley and Phoebe have hired sexual companions in their respective pasts before meeting one another. Even though their partners may not be in the business by choice, sex for hire is not seen as problematic. Billy is not a prostitute

by choice or preference. Mr. Talbot had a standing arrangement with the constabulary to inform him when they’d picked up a likely candidate. And so a pretty young pickpocket or street tough might avoid prison if he were willing to be of regular service to wealthy gentleman of a certain persuasion. (47)

Linsley attempts to rationalize his history with prostitution and make it more amenable, believing that it was a mutual exchange of services rather than a monetary transaction: “[the girls] had been good at what they did and of course he’d tried to make things agreeable for them in return....it seemed to him they’d rather liked him” (41). And his attempts to find them respectable positions after their interludes is seen as noble and heroic, rather than problematic.

However, prostitution is seen as an indulgence for sexual curiosity so long as the relationship is heterosexual; once the relationship becomes one between two men, the depiction

of sexual transaction changes drastically. As Phoebe discovers when Billy comes “to her with welts and bruises on his body,” the homosexual sexual relationships are fraught with abuse.

Billy explains that

‘that’s what lots of ‘em wants....Them that don’t want to be punished themselves....[T]hey enjoy it, you see....Ain’t nothing wrong with enjoying a thing, if the other fellow does too....[Though there] ain’t no thrill to me when somebody takes a whip to my back.’ (49)

It can be inferred that these men who experience homosexual desires are punishing their partners for the feelings this desire inspires in them. What makes this depiction problematic is that we never hear of any relationships Billy has with men that are not abusive. All the homosexual men in this novel are abusive sociopaths who are unable to come to terms with their sexuality.

One such abusive partner is Lord Crashaw who ““used to like to take a riding crop to [Billy]—and *hard*, too” and makes Billy polish his boots with his tongue” (53, emphasis in original). Crashaw is portrayed as one of the most villainous men in the book due to his abuse of his sexual partners. I cannot help but think that this abuse is intrinsically tied to Crashaw’s homosexuality. The fact that he abuses his partners comes from the fact that he cannot sublimate his sexual desires into the cultural and historical mores of heterosexuality. The conflation of homosexuality with subversive and abject sexual practices has a long history—especially in popular culture, from the conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia (for example, teachers who are fired once their sexuality is revealed because they are thought to pose a threat to children) to the conflation of homosexuality with sadistic and/or masochistic sexual practices, as we see in *Almost a Gentleman*. It is this common association of homosexuality with evil and villainy that I wish to make clear.



Crashaw is not a villain only because of his sexual cruelty, but also because he symbolizes industrialization and capitalism; he supports and helps to pass the Enclosure Acts, which turn over common farming lands in the English countryside to “private ownership....The opportunities for quick profit [will] be stupendous...with the vast majority of the benefits going to a few large landowners, chiefly Crashaw himself” (56). This association with industrialism and capitalism sets him up as a direct foil to Linsley, whose aristocratic bearing is marred by the fact that he actually takes his responsibility to his tenants seriously and works the lands with them to produce crops and cares for the livestock. Linsley’s masculinity and sexuality encompass the earthiness of the land—it is innocent, pure, earthy, and natural. Crashaw’s masculinity and sexuality is shameful, wrong, cruel, secret, and obsessive. Even Crashaw, believing Linsley to be gay, describes him as ““one of those rugged handsome sorts. Vigorous, not at all nancy on the outside”” (331). Linsley represents the very picture of ideal masculinity, while Crashaw is a “crude, selfish gentleman willing to sell England’s soul in order to subsidize his own under-funded estates” (334). Rosenthal sets up this dichotomy between the two men and even comments on it, perhaps to give the reader further insight into Crashaw’s character. He tells Linsley:

‘A man like you makes such a splendid chivalrous, knightly sort of...of *image* for England, don’t you know. Helps us keep up appearances, makes us look less like those money-loving Yanks across the ocean. Oh yes, man, fight your fight by all means—while grubbier, less noble-spirited types like myself turn our shoulders to the wheel of history, enclosing fields and building factories.’ (335, emphasis in original)

Linsley is a knight in shining armor while Crashaw is a man involved in industrializing the nation, thus corrupting her innocent, bucolic spirit. This kind of commentary solidifies Linsley

as the hero of the novel, and in turn, places Crashaw firmly into the villain category. And if his grubby industrialist, capitalist ways do not secure that position enough, his sadistic attitude toward his male sexual partners is further remarked upon. After establishing that Crashaw is not the villain out to kill Phoebe, Linsley extracts from him a promise in exchange for promising to “prevail upon Phizz” to help Crashaw secure a membership at White’s (336). This promise requires Crashaw to “‘promise faithfully not to inflict physical pain upon...[his] partners. Unless [he can] find one who’s willing—one who enjoys it as much’” as Crashaw does (336-7). However, it is still acceptable for the “boys to give [Crashaw’s] boots a good polish” with their tongues; so long as no physical harm comes to them, Crashaw is allowed to do as he pleases with whomever he can afford to buy (337).

## Conclusion

In *Almost a Gentleman*, cross-dressing is used to escape a prior life. However, in this escape, it is quite clear that one gender is privileged over the other. Rarely is manhood portrayed as something undesirable; indeed, Phoebe waxes on and on about how much she enjoys the privileges she gains via her masculine disguise. And this regard for male privilege in turn creates a disregard, and at times even a hatred, for womanhood. In Phoebe’s eyes, to be a woman is to be weak, as evidenced by her inability to fight back against her husband, to be shallow, as evidenced by her desire for “[g]lamour. Compliments....Exclusivity and distinction. The heady sense that when you ascended the staircase at Carlton House, you were at the absolute center of the world” (261). And with the death of her children and later infertility, Phoebe sees herself as ultimately failing at being a woman; this failure spurs her to cross-dress in order to never feel like a failure again, which is why her masculine disguise is so convincing. However, the sharp divide set up between the two genders makes it impossible to believe that Phoebe will

be happy in her new life as Linsley's countess, given that she has despised everything about being a woman for nearly the entire novel. It may be more apt to say that Phoebe will be crossing as a woman once married to Linsley as she has been so at ease as a man. Phoebe's cross-dressing as a male has made her an agent of her own life, but at the expense of not dealing with the tragedies of her past. With her subsequent reversion to living as a woman, it is difficult to believe that Phoebe will be able to incorporate all aspects of herself into one woman, and an aristocratic one at that. And without hearing from Phoebe in the epilogue, the idea that Phoebe is happy in her new life—all she never wanted—is even more disingenuous.

#### CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSIONS

The cross-dressing novel, on one level, is meant to be comedic. However, its use of humor masks sharp dichotomies between genders and sexualities, often to the point of disparaging one and privileging the other. This phenomenon occurs even in novels where cross-dressing is not used in order to invoke humor. Of the three novels I analyzed, only one, *The Spy*, brought about a satisfactory resolution to the heroine's cross-dressing and her love story. In the other two novels, the happily-ever-after rang false as final decisions made by various characters were not in line with the characters' motivations throughout their respective works. While I feel *The Spy* brings about a satisfactory and even feminist resolution, it is not without its faults. While *The Spy* reveals the constructed nature of gender and the performance of gender, there are many instances in the novel where Phillipa, despite enjoying the male privilege her disguise brings, desperately longs to return to acting as a woman. However, I would also argue that Phillipa's cross-dressing brings about faith and confidence in her own agency and facilitates a change in her. The fact that Phillipa saves the day as herself, but in trousers, is significant. It shows that the clothing she wears no longer defines her; concern over bringing about justice overrides her beliefs about the limitations of her gender.

In *Duchess by Night*, while Harriet enjoys the freedoms her masquerade brings, she acknowledges that she is incapable of maintaining the masquerade in the long-term while in *Almost a Gentleman* it is Linsley who decides that he cannot sustain Phoebe's wish to continue the masquerade. These novels create an impasse between their respective heroines and heroes as one partner wants to continue the masquerade and the other does not. Jem wants Harriet to give up (what he believes to be) her "little estate" and life mourning her "country squire" in order to live with him on his estate, and Phoebe would rather steal a few days away with Linsley here and

there while maintaining her life as a dandy in London (260). This desire to maintain the cross-dressing creates a situation in which neither partner is accepting the reality of the other. After all, Jem and Linsley only know Harriet and Phoebe as their cross-dressed personas; in order to fulfill the heterosexual happily-ever-after, it is necessary that the women give up their male clothing. When Harriet wants to, Jem won't let her, and Phoebe does not want to give up her life in London to fulfill Linsley's dream of bucolic domestic bliss. And the subsequent acquiescence to the other partner's wishes rings hollow because both happen late in the novels.

*Duchess by Night* presents a conflict that is solved by Jem changing to fit Harriet's life, after she has already made the decision to return to her life as the Duchess of Berrow. *Almost a Gentleman*, on the other hand, is even more problematic as the transformation from Phizz into Phoebe is never seen. The sort of adjustments that Phillipa and Harriet undergo when they try to reconcile their previous lives with their masquerade are not detailed in *Almost a Gentleman*. In fact, we never see Phoebe speak after the final change of clothes. In the last chapter of the novel, Linsley proposes marriage while they are both in suits and "[l]aughing, they [shake] hands on it, in a completely gentleman-like manner" (375). This marriage proposal does not include an honest discussion of their past and Phoebe's issues with being a woman. Rather, as we find in the epilogue, they must have been cured by Linsley's extreme virility as Phoebe writes to her friend Lady Kate that "when she [Phoebe] and the earl [are] busy [attending to the earl's lands], little Kathy [will] have to entertain her godparents [Lady Kate and her husband Admiral Wolfe]" (377). A return to the natural—femininity and the natural world—has granted Phoebe and Linsley's desire for a child, even though Phoebe, throughout the entire novel, has either denied a wish to return or has had issues with returning to her 'natural state of being.'

My textual analysis of these three novels suggests that using cross-dressing as a plot device enables romance authors to bring about a transformation in the heroine, one that claims to be feminist in nature. By putting the heroine of the novel in male clothing, the author can claim that s/he is using her/his heroine to address both historical and contemporary sexism. By dressing as a male, the heroine is forced to confront the discrepancies between her life as a woman and her life as a man. The differences addressed can be small or large, comical or serious, yet the heroine must weigh the benefits and disadvantages of performing both genders. In the cases I examined, the heroines from *Duchess By Night* and *Almost a Gentleman* (Harriet and Phoebe, respectively) find that they enjoy life as men much more than they do as women, yet both revert back to feminine dress, Harriet because of class restrictions and Phoebe because Linsley (her lover) desires it. The transformation wrought by their male disguises is disingenuous, however, as sacrifices are required in order for them to be with the men they love: Harriet requires Jem to give up his hedonist lifestyle while Linsley requires Phoebe to give up her beloved life in London in order to be with him.

While both heroines have experienced male privilege and enjoyed their tenure as men, the independence and agency gained from these experiences is not incorporated in their lives after the masquerade. After her masquerade, Phoebe marries Linsley and works with him on his estate out in the country, something she swore she would never do. The final image of Phoebe is of “Lord and Lady Linsley, alone in the field..., beg[inning] to dance: a slow waltz, under a darkening purple sky” (379). While the requisite (heterosexual) happy ending has been achieved, it has come at the cost of Phoebe’s life and adventures in London. In *Duchess by Night*, Harriet marries Strange and resumes her place in society after Jem rehabilitates his reputation, and though she says that giving up her breeches “wasn’t hard once [she] realized that

everything [she] learned in breeches [she] could simply employ in [her] gowns,” there is no real evidence of this (364). Rather than seeing this new Harriet, she is shown as a wife and mother, pregnant with her second child. There is no Phoebe anew or Harriet anew as there is with Phillipa, the heroine of *The Spy*. Phoebe and Harriet have been returned to the domestic sphere, with no indication that their adventures will be allowed to continue now that their restoration to womanhood and motherhood is complete. Though Phillipa’s story ends in a similar manner and she tells James that their new “mission is to repopulate the Liar’s Club,” her marriage and pregnancy do not negate the fact that she, through her masquerade, has become a stronger and more independent person (357). The reader is assured the Phillipa is secure in her identity as an individual; because of this, she meets James as an equal in their life together. Her identity as a person is not dependent on James’ love for her or hers for him. They meet as two equals, deciding to share their lives together in mutual respect, admiration, and love.

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