Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: Female Prostitution and Male Homosexuality in Early Twentieth-Century America

George Chauncey

DOI: 10.4000/books.pufr.4090
Publisher: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais
Place of publication: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais
Year of publication: 1997
Published on OpenEdition Books: 20 June 2017
Serie: GRAAT
Electronic ISBN: 9782869065024

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 10 May 2019. It is the result of an OCR (optical character recognition) scanning.
Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: Female Prostitution and Male Homosexuality in Early Twentieth-Century America

George Chauncey

1 This paper seeks to contribute to our collective rethinking of the ways in which we conceptualize, theorize, and historicize the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality by analyzing a particular historical problem that requires us to mobilize and conceptualize those categories in distinctly historicist ways. By exploring a particular problem in the history of gender, sexuality, and homosexuality in early twentieth-century American culture, I hope to demonstrate how radically different the understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality — and even the conceptual boundaries among them — were only three generations ago in American culture, and thus to argue for the importance of historicizing these categories.

2 The problem I will use to investigate these questions concerns one of the more curious paradoxes historians have discerned in studying the history of sexuality at the turn of the century: the frequent linkage made — in both the rhetoric of moral reformers and in the sexual culture of the streets — between female prostitutes and male homosexuals. (Not, I should add, between prostitutes and lesbians, which others have explored.) Although this linkage was common in the United States, as I will show, its best known manifestations were British. In 1885 Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which criminalized (and implicitly linked) both female prostitution and "acts of gross indecency" between males, and seventy years later, in 1954, it established a single body, the Wolfenden Commission, to study both "homosexual offenses and prostitution." The linkage was rarely codified so dramatically in the United States, but nonetheless underlay much of the legal and medical reasoning about both phenomena and the popular perceptions and rhetoric concerning male homosexuality.¹
Why should this linkage have been made? Both forms of behavior, to be sure, were regarded (depending on the observer's perspective) as immoral, abnormal, criminal and/or pathological, and some observers, ever mindful of the slippery slope of sexual perversity, thought that recourse to one could lead to the other: the frequent customer of the prostitute (not to mention the prostitute herself) might become sated with so-called "normal" sex, and thus need to turn to the more exotic thrills offered by lovers of the same sex. Moreover, reformers drew on the same panoply of sometimes contradictory theories to explain each form of behavior. Each was attributed variously to urbanization (and the attendant loss of family-based social control), male sexual aggression, the inequities of capitalist development, personal failure, or organic degeneration of the moral sensibility. They also attributed both phenomena to immigration. If the British blamed homosexuality on the French, and the French blamed it on the Italians, Americans in this era blamed it rather more indiscriminately on European immigration as a whole, which many feared had introduced foreign immorality to American shores.

But the linkage between male homosexuals and female prostitutes was more specific (and fundamental) than the similarity of these general explanations might suggest, and turns out to have had as much to do with the sexual culture of the streets as with the sexual imagination of elite reformers. Thus this paper focuses more on the dynamics of the working-class street culture in which most homosexually-active men participated than on the discursive practices of the reformers, although it concludes by returning to the latter.

As the early twentieth-century moral reformers who sought to investigate and eradicate prostitution and other illicit sexual practices in large American cities such as New York quickly discovered, gay male society was a highly visible part of the urban sexual underworld, and was much more fully and publicly integrated into working-class than middle-class male sexual culture. Reformers found that female prostitutes, working men, and the men they usually called "fairies" gathered in the same places (in saloons and cabarets, subway stations and dance halls, certain streets and parks), and that the prostitutes and fairies had developed similar tactics for evading surveillance, such as their use of their eyes to signal interest, and of coded phrases to confirm it. As one well-informed observer remarked in 1918, "a whole jargon unknown to many sexologists" was centered around the fairies, and "our streets and beaches are overrun by [them]... just as in such places the female prostitute, professional or clandestine, abounds." (Shepherd, 1918, 242, 245).

At the end of the 1890s, for instance, Paresis Hall, on the Bowery at Fifth Street (in the center of the city's major prostitution district, that is), was, by all accounts, the "principal resort in New York for degenerates" and well known as such to the public. An investigator who visited the place several times in 1899 (while in search of female prostitutes) noted that he had "heard of it constantly" and that it made no attempt to disguise its "well-known" character as a "resort for male prostitutes." Like other men, he found it easy to gain admittance to the Hall, despite the almost unbelievable spectacle to be found within:

These men... act effeminately; most of them are painted and powdered; they are called Princess this and Lady So and So and the Duchess of Marlboro, and get up and sing as women, and dance; ape the female character; call each other sisters and take people out for immoral purposes. I have had these propositions made to me, and made repeatedly.
An officer of the Reverend Charles Parkhurst's City Vigilance League, who said he had visited the place fully half a dozen times in April and May, added that the "male degenerates" there worked the tables in the same manner female prostitutes did: "[They] solicit men at the tables, and I believe they get a commission on all drinks that are purchased there." Paresis Hall was the principal such hall in the red light district centered in the working-class neighborhoods south of the Rialto (or Fourteenth Street) at the turn of the century, but it was hardly the only one. One well-informed investigator claimed in 1899 that there were at least six such "resorts" (by which he meant saloons or dance halls) on the Bowery alone, including one located directly across the street from Paresis. Five years later, just before a crackdown closed most of the most infamous resorts, the Jumbo and several other halls on the Bowery still functioned as "notorious degenerate resorts," according to the men who organized the crackdown, while the "chief attraction" of several places on Bleecker and Cornelia Streets was said to be "perversion."

The striking image of the "male degenerates" (or "fairies," as they were also called) on display at Paresis Hall forcefully undermines the familiar presumption that homosexuals were isolated from each other, and that homosexuality itself was all but invisible in turn-of-the-century New York. Indeed, as my book *Gay New York* shows, the Bowery resorts were only the most famous element of an extensive, organized, and remarkably visible gay subculture, with its own institutions, argot, cultural norms and traditions, and geographical enclaves. To the worried anti-vice investigators who reported on Paresis Hall, it represented the most egregious manifestation of urban disorder and degeneration. But to the men who gathered there, it was one of the key institutions sustaining their efforts to forge their own alternative social order.

The image of the "male degenerates" on display at Paresis Hall also presents us with a picture of early twentieth-century gay male culture and identities different from the one predominant at our end of the century. The men at Paresis Hall were not considered degenerate simply or even primarily on the basis of their sexual encounters with other men, what we would now call their homosexuality. And the so-called "normal" men at the Bowery were not considered "normal" because they avoided such sexual contacts, for they responded to — or even invited — the fairies' solicitations without being called fairies themselves. Homosexual activity was an insufficient basis for identifying a man as a fairy, that is, and exclusive heterosexuality was neither sufficient — nor a precondition — for a man's identification as "normal." A much more complex matrix of gender enactments, sexual practices, and identity claims was at work here.

So who, then, were these "fairies," why were they tolerated (and even solicited) in some working-class men's saloons, and — to return to the original (but closely related) question posed by this paper — what was their relationship to prostitutes? Understanding the highly visible subculture of the "fairies" will help us understand that relationship, as well as the sexual culture of the urban working class which tolerated their presence and in which their own identities were forged. Thus I begin with an analysis of their social world and cultural status, of the strategies of self-representation they developed to negotiate their relations with other men in the streets and saloons of working-class New York.

Although a full analysis of the social world "fairies" and other "gay" men built in the city in the early twentieth century is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to make a few observations about it because it provided essential support to such men as they forged their "deviant" identities, and because its prominence helped shape the terms by which male homosexual relations were understood.
As the investigative reports I’ve quoted make clear, gay or queer men had become part of the spectacle of the Bowery resorts by the 1890s. But they had also transformed such resorts into a haven. Other sources indicate that at Paresis Hall, for instance, a group of men had organized a social club, the Cercle Hermaphroditis, which rented private rooms where members could gather by themselves and store their personal effects. Their appropriation of the resources available at Paresis Hall was emblematic of the way in which gay men appropriated and transformed the cultural practices and institutions of their natal cultures as they forged their own. If some of the Bowery saloons became major centers of gay social life, such saloons were, after all, almost as central to the social lives of many other immigrant, working-class men. Gay men gathered on the same street corners and in the same saloons and dancehalls as their "normal" counterparts did, organized the same sort of social clubs that were popular among (other) immigrant youth, and sometimes, like the others, rented saloons or dance halls for parties or theatrical events. They also created cultural institutions and rituals that sustained and enhanced their communal ties and group identity, much as the ethnic theater and dances of their natal communities did.

The largest and most significant collective events of the gay subculture during this period were the transvestite balls (called drag balls) organized by gay social clubs. In the 1890s the clubs sometimes rented Walhalla Hall, which, significantly, was the single best known dance hall on New York’s lower east side and was also regularly hired by other immigrant youth clubs and ethnic societies for their own dances. By the 1920s gay groups were organizing drags on an almost weekly basis in small clubs and dance halls, and by the end of the decade they were organizing seven or eight enormous drags each year in some of the city’s most distinguished ballrooms and hotels, including Rockland Palace in Harlem and Madison Square Garden in midtown. The largest of these events attracted thousands of dancers and spectators, including numerous celebrities and representatives of respectable society as well as the notice of the tabloid press. As one tabloid headline screamed in 1932, "FAG BALLS EXPOSED. 6,000 CROWD HUGE HALL AS QUEER MEN AND WOMEN DANCE" (Chauncey, 1994, 257-63, 291-99) As the drag balls and the press headlines suggest, the men called queers or fairies had organized a more cohesive (and certainly a much more visible) subculture in the early twentieth century than we have generally imagined. More significant to my argument today, the very prominence of the fairy subculture helped shape the terms by which homosexual relations were understood. Part of the spectacle of the Bowery resorts, which were subject to searching examination by the metropolitan press and to crackdowns by the police throughout the 1890s and 1900s, showcased at the massive drag balls held in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, and highly visible in the streets of the city's working-class and amusement districts throughout this period, the effeminate "fairy" provided the predominant image of the "invert" in the public mind and stood at the center of the cultural system by which male sexual relations were interpreted. The fairy constituted the primary pejorative category in opposition to which male sexual "normality" was defined, and thus both influenced the culture and self-understanding of all sexually-active men and offers a key to the cultural archaeology of homosexual practices and mentalities in that era.

The fairies'sexual desire for men was not regarded as the singular characteristic that distinguished them from other men, as is generally the case for gay men today, but as simply one aspect of a more thorough-going gender role inversion (or reversal), which they were also expected to manifest through the adoption of "effeminate" dress and
mannerisms. They were thus often called "inverts" (who had "inverted" their gender) rather than "homosexuals" in technical language. In the dominant turn-of-the-century cultural system governing the interpretation of homosexual behavior, especially in working-class culture, one had a gender identity rather than a sexual identity, or even a "sexuality," one's sexual behavior was thought to be necessarily determined by one's gender identity. (Or, to put it in other words, since both the English and French languages are notoriously ambiguous here, one had an identity based on one's "sex" rather than one's "sexuality," which was not regarded as a distinct domain of personhood but as a pattern of practices and desires that followed inevitably from one's manhood or womanhood.) Sexual desire for men was held to be inescapably a woman's desire, and the "inverts" desire for men was thus not seen as an indication of their "homosexuality" but as simply one more manifestation of their fundamentally woman-like character.

Thus the heterosexual-homosexual binarism that governs our thinking about sexuality today, and which was already becoming hegemonic in American middle-class sexual ideology, did not yet constitute the taken-for-granted common-sense of working-class sexual ideology. The fundamental division of male sexual actors in turn-of-the century working-class thought was not between "heterosexual" and "homosexual" men, but between conventionally masculine males, who were regarded as "men," and "effeminate" males, known as "fairies" or "pansies," who were regarded as virtual "women," or, more precisely, as a kind of third sex, intermediate between men and women.

The prominence of the fairy and his consistency with the polarization of gender character presumed by the culture made him the dominant role model available to men trying to sort out vague feelings of sexual and gender difference and to form a coherent identity. Taking on the role of the fairy, that is, allowed men to reject the kind of masculinity ascribed to them by the dominant culture, but to do so without rejecting the basic tenets of their culture concerning the gender order. Many homosexually-interested men rejected the role of the fairy as inauthentic or too dangerous to their status as "men," but many others embraced it because it embodied a way of understanding how they, as "men," could have the feelings their culture ascribed exclusively to "women." The woman-like character ascribed to the fairies is evidenced most clearly by the highly gendered — and engendering — signs that others used to identify them. Although "fairies" were known as "female impersonators," transvestism was not central to their self-representation. Nonetheless, certain clothes were associated with fairies, and in the right context a man could signal his identity by appropriating even a single "feminine" — or unconventional — style or article of clothing, such as a colorful scarf, a green suit, swede shoes, or, most famously in the 1910s and 20s, a red tie. Some such cues would be recognized only by other gay men; others would be understood by everyone in the streets. Perhaps most commonly, and dramatically, men used unusual styles in personal grooming to signal their sexual character. As one man noted in 1933, "Plucked eyebrows, rouged lips, powdered face, and marcelled, blondined hair" were the essential attributes of the "fairy" (Potter, 1933, 184).

Moreover, as the investigator's description of Paresis Hall suggests, gay men reinforced the image conveyed by their dress and grooming by using a variety of other gender codes in their carriage, demeanor, and speech, which identified them to straight and gay men alike. As one government investigator explained in the late 1930s, after being asked how he identified homosexuals when he investigated bars suspected of serving them, "the most striking feature [of homosexuals] would be the fact that although they represent..."
and are dressed as one sex they act and impersonate the opposite sex... by gesture, voice inflection, manner or mode of speech, or walk, and in general [they] impersonate all of the other characteristics of a female that they can possibly assume." His use of such stereotypical signs might seem incredible — as well as dangerous, given his authority — but many gay men reported that they used them as well. A limp wrist or an exaggerated swivel-hipped, mincing walk — known as "swishing" in the gay world — was regularly caricatured on the vaudeville stage and occasionally seen on the street as a signifier of the "true" fairy, but more subtle stances were also read as gender specific. As a gay sailor explained, when pressed in 1919 to explain how he identified another man as "queer": "He acted sort of peculiar; walking around with his hands on his hips... [His] manner was not masculine... The expression with the eyes and the gestures... If a man was walking around and did not act real masculine, I would think [he was queer]" (Chauncey, 1985, 191-192).

To dismiss such signs as mere stereotypes is to misapprehend their significance. They were "stereotypes," to be sure, but the stereotypical — or conventional — association of such signifiers with "fairies" reveals much about the cultural construction and representation of gender in this period. The fact that men were identified as fairies on the basis of such minimal deviations from the conventions of masculine demeanor and dress indicates the narrow range of deviation from normative gender styles allowed most men, and suggests the extraordinary sensitivity of men to subtle markers of gender status, thus highlighting the pervasive character of gender surveillance in working class street culture. It also confirms what I've already suggested about the articulation of the boundaries of gender and sexuality in the era, for it indicates that an inversion of any one aspect — or at least selected aspects — of one's prescribed gender persona was presumed to be symptomatic of a much more comprehensive inversion, which inevitably would manifest itself in abnormal sexual object-choice as well.

More significantly, in this context, the effectiveness of such signifiers suggests the remarkable ease with which men could reconstruct their public personas as that of quasi-women or fairies, and the conventional association of such signifiers with fairies had enormous consequences for gay life precisely because of the manner in which it enabled men to manipulate their public personas. Many men switched the mannerisms on and off as easily as they changed from feminine to more masculine attire. This enabled them to manipulate such conventions to avoid being labelled as queer, since by wearing conventional masculine attire and carrying themselves with a "masculine" demeanor most men could pass as straight in hostile settings, even if they chose to camp it up when in a secure gay environment.

More importantly and, perhaps, more unexpectedly many men also deliberately used such markers in order to signal their sexual character to other gay men and to "straight" men in public contexts, because effeminacy was one of the few sure means they had to identify themselves to others. As a man who moved to New York from Michigan in the 1920s recalled, "back in the early twenties, people had to be quite effeminate to be identified, at least that was true in my case." His statement implied that he could avoid being identified by avoiding any sign of effeminacy, but his point was that he chose to be effeminate precisely because he wanted to identify himself to other men. Another gay man gave the same point a somewhat different emphasis when he commented in the 1920s that the men he knew "talk and act like women, have feminine ways,... [and] use rouge and powder... in order to attract men" (Kahn, 1937, 124, emphasis added).
For many men, then, adopting "effeminate" mannerisms represented a deliberate cultural strategy, as well as a way of making sense of their sense of sexual difference. It was a way to publicly declare a queer identity and to negotiate their relationships with other men. The fairies' effeminacy helped them attract men not only by signalling their interest but also by establishing the cultural script that would govern their interactions and reaffirm the cultural distance between them and the "men" they sought. By taking on the role of women and making their violation of gender conventions consistent — by insisting, for instance, that men refer to them with women's names and pronouns — they reaffirmed those conventions in a way that allowed "men' to interact with them as if they were women, even though all parties: understood that anatomically they were males.

One indication of the extent to which men became accustomed to thinking of fairies as pseudo-women was provided in 1939 by a State Liquor Authority investigator who casually referred to a fairy he had met at a suspected gay bar (who went by a woman's name but dressed in conventional male attire) as "she," even though he was testifying at a formal hearing of the Authority. "We did get in a conversation with Beverly," he boasted, "and she stated she liked us very much." When asked by an attorney whether he meant "she" or "he," he remonstrated that the fairies "address themselves by these effeminate names and refer to one another in the effeminate terms," and promptly continued that "She [the fairy] made a date with Mr. Van Wagner and myself for Saturday night." Indeed, much evidence suggests that the "fairy," so long as he abided by the conventions of this cultural script, was tolerated in working class society — regarded as an anomaly, certainly, but as more amusing than abhorrent, and only rarely as threatening to the gender order. He was so obviously a "third sexer," a different species of human being, that his very effeminacy served to confirm rather than threaten the masculinity of other men, particularly since it often exaggerated the conventions of gender difference and deference between men and women. The fairies reaffirmed the conventions of gender even as they violated them: they behaved as no man should, but as any man might wish a woman would. Their representation of themselves as "intermediate types" made it easier for "men" to interact with them (and even have sex with them) by making it clear who would play the so-called "man's part" in the relationship.

To argue that fairies were tolerated by working class men because they reconstituted themselves as pseudo-women, however, is not to argue that they were respected, for the men who became fairies did so at the cost of forfeiting their privileged status as men. Indeed, it took enormous bravery for men to carry themselves as fairies, and many men did so only in neighborhoods distant from their homes, where they constructed different, more "normal" identities. Mockery and contempt often colored the public interactions between fairies and other men in the working-class districts, even though gay men themselves sometimes contested the conventions of such ridicule. Moreover, the threat of more violent assaults was an abiding one, although in this the fairies' fate was little different from that of "other" women whom men considered sexually "available." If fairies were tolerated because they were regarded as women-like, they were also subject to the contempt and violence regularly directed against women. Fairies, like women who crossed certain lines — even such narrow ones as daring to walk down certain streets alone, without male guardianship — were considered fair game as targets of sexual violence by many gangs of youths, as the memoirs and recollections of gay men from this era make clear.
The mixture of tolerance, desire, and contempt with which men regarded "fairies" also resulted from the particular kind of gender persona they adopted. Although I have argued that fairies were considered woman-like in their behavior and self-presentation, that is really too imprecise a term. No single norm governing "feminine" (or "masculine") behavior existed in the early twentieth century; such normative gender injunctions varied along class lines and among immigrant groups. This returns us to our original question, for in crucial respects the fairies' style was comparable not so much to that of some ideal category of "woman" as to that of a particular sub-group of women or street cultural "type": namely, prostitutes and other so-called "tough girls." The fairy's sexual aggressiveness in his solicitation of men was certainly inconsistent with the sexual passivity expected of a respectable woman, but it was entirely commensurate with the sexual character ascribed to "tough girls" and prostitutes. (That gay men themselves shared this identification accounts, in part, for the popularity of "strong" or "tough" women, such as Mae West, as gay icons and drag personas: they were regarded as women who disdained convention, were determinedly and overtly sexual in character, and did what they needed to get what they wanted.) Moreover, both fairies and prostitutes congregated in many of the same locales and used some of the same techniques to attract attention; indeed, the fairy's most obvious attribute — his "painted" face — was the quintessential marker of the prostitute. And while fairies, like prostitutes, played the so-called "woman's part" in sexual relations with men, both groups were identified as engaging in certain forms of sexual behavior, particularly oral sex, which many working-class and middle-class women alike rejected as unbecoming to a woman, "dirty," and "perverted." (With this, I should add, anti-vice investigators readily agreed; they called female prostitutes who performed fellatio "perverts," the same term they applied to the men who performed it.) As a result, many men seem to have regarded fairies in the same terms they regarded prostitutes, and this conflation may have made it easier for them to distance themselves from the fairies — and to use them for sexual purposes in the same way they used female prostitutes.

Indeed, the strongest evidence that the relationship between "men" and "fairies" was represented symbolically as a male-female relationship and that gender behavior rather than homosexual behavior per se was the primary determinant of a man's classification as a "fairy" was that it enabled other men to engage in sexual activity with the fairies — and even to express publicly a strong interest in such contacts — without risking stigmatization and the undermining of their status as "normal men." So long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and played (or claimed to play) only the "masculine," or insertive role in the sexual encounter — so long, that is, as they eschewed the style of the fairy and did not allow their bodies to be sexually penetrated — neither they, the "fairies," nor the working-class public considered them to be queer. Thus a Mr. Farley, owner of a newsstand in the basement of the Times Square Building at Forty-second Street and Broadway, complained to a visitor in 1927 that "whenever the fleet comes into town, every sailor who wants his d[ick] licked comes to the Times Square Building. It seems to be common knowledge among the sailors that the Times Square Building is the place to go if they want to meet any fairies." He was unhappy about the commotion so many unruly sailors caused around his newsstand and disapproved of their actions. In no way, however, did he indicate that he thought the sailors looking for sex with the fairies were themselves fairies or otherwise different from most sailors. The visitor, a private investigator, himself observed "two sailors... in the company of three men who were
acting in an effeminate manner." He labelled the effeminate men "fairies" even though it was the sailors who were "making overtures to these men to go to their apartments [and the men] declined to go." Even men working for state policing agencies categorized men in these terms. New York State Liquor Authority agents investigating a sailors' bar in Brooklyn in October, 1938, reported that, shortly after midnight, "several males who were apparently' fags' enter[ed] the premises in groups of twos and threes." They later observed "sailors leaving with some girls, and some men in uniform leaving with the fags," the latter, they made clear, leaving for the same sexual reasons the former did. The investigators did not regard the marines who left with the fags as "fags" themselves, nor did they otherwise question the marines' status as men. Indeed, their final report recommended that the state close the bar precisely because it "permitt[ed] prostitutes to congregate with male customers... [and] permitt[ed]'fags' to congregate on the premises and solicit males for immoral purposes" (emphasis added). They gave no indication that they found it shocking or unusual that the "fags" should have as much success picking up sailors as prostitutes did. On the contrary, they regarded the sailors' response to the solicitations of "fags" as no different in kind from their responses to those of female prostitutes.

The sanctioning of men's relations with fairies as proper manifestations of the male quest for pleasure and power was indicated even more strikingly by the structure of male prostitution in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. By the 1910s and twenties, it was increasingly common or both gay- and straight-identified men to sell sexual services to gay-identified men. But before then the predominant form of male prostitution seems to have involved "fairies" selling sex to men who, despite the declaration of desire made by their willingness to pay for the encounters, identified themselves as normal, though they were sometimes called "trade," the term originally used for the customers of female prostitutes. Indeed, while the term "fairy" was widely used to denote a flamboyantly effeminate and homosexually-active man whose self-presentation resembled that of a prostitute, numerous references in the early twentieth century make it clear that the word was sometimes used more precisely to denote men who actually worked as prostitutes selling sexual services to "normal" men.

Fairy prostitutes were widely recognized figures in the working class districts of New York. There were well-known resorts such as Paresis Hall where men and fairies openly interacted, as well as numerous saloons in the Italian Lower East Side where neighborhood men knew they could go to meet young fairy prostitutes. Other fairy prostitutes pried their trade along the Bowery, Fourteenth Street, Forty second Street and other major thoroughfares, as well as in the city's major parks, where they used their hair, make-up, and demeanor (and in some cases women's clothes) to signal their sexual character. One "fairy," a female impersonator from a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn where he was known as "Loop-the-loop," reported to a doctor in 1906 that he often worked in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. His efforts at female impersonation would not have persuaded any of his clients that they were having sex with a woman, given the inartfulness of his costume and the heavy growth of hair on his legs and arms (he complained of the hair himself, but added that "most of the boys don't mind it"). But his costume and demeanor — like that of the fairies at Paresis Hall — did signify to "the boys" that he was not a normal man, either, but rather a third sexer, with whom they could have sex without complicating their understanding of their own sexual character (Shufeldt, 1917, 451-60).
The ability of many working men to alternate between male and female sexual partners provides powerful evidence that the heterohomosexual axis — the dichotomy between the "homosexual" and the "heterosexual" — governed neither their thinking about sexuality nor their sexual practices. While "fairies," "trade," and other "men" all engaged in what we would define as homosexual behavior, they and the people who observed them were careful to draw distinctions between different modes of such behavior: between "feminine" and "masculine" behavior, between "passive" and "active" roles, between desire for sex with a man and desire for sex. The organization of the relationships between fairies and their husbands, trade, and customers all serve to highlight the cultural presumption that the men in such relationships were defined by their differences — manifested in their different sexual roles or their differently gendered modes of self-presentation — rather than by their similarities — their shared "homosexuality." While today we might regard all of them equally as "homosexuals," in other words, they recognized no "homosexual" category in which they all could be placed. To classify their behavior and identities using the simple polarities of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" would be to misunderstand the complexity of their sexual system, the realities of their lived experience.

The rhetoric of middle-class reformers sometimes equated male homosexuals with female prostitutes, then, in no small part because they were so closely linked in the culture of the streets. The most visible gay men in the city worked as prostitutes — or had adopted the styles of dress and bodily presentation that marked women as prostitutes. They related to men as if they were women — particularly those "tough" women who dared venture into the social spaces dominated by "rough" men — and in a manner that confirmed the complex social conventions of gender difference, deference, and inequality characteristic of that culture.

Some of the middle-class medical men who investigated that culture, who were determined to construct models of human nature that reified normative injunctions as the demands of biological "normalcy," linked the inverts and prostitutes even more closely. In their minds, both the women who worked as prostitutes and the men who behaved as fairies not only had flaunted the demands of respectability but had thereby evidenced their moral (and hence physical) degeneration. Not only had the fairy displayed his inverted character through his womanlike behavior, but prostitutes, too, according to some doctors, must suffer from a partial, organic inversion, since only this could explain their masculine assertiveness and their utter lack of feminine honor. Female prostitutes were "lewd, degenerate, and promiscuous by nature," as one man wrote in 1913, for they lacked "the instinctive and inherent purity of mind of the normal woman" (Hall, 1913, in Rosen, 1982, 48; Chauncey, 1982-1983, 114-46). This was said of lesbians, too, and was one of the reasons lesbians and prostitutes were also often linked, although prostitutes received more attention from reformers and played a greater role in the sexual culture of the streets, especially before the 1920s, when, in a changed political and cultural context, the "lesbian" emerged as a more potent cultural symbol.

Middle-class moral reformers also often condemned the working class social conventions that countenanced forms of sexual interactions they considered immoral by imposing their own definitions of prostitution and perversion on them. Such reformers were likely, for instance, to label any woman who had sex with a man outside of marriage, not just those who charged for the encounters, as a kind of prostitute. As Kathy Peiss has shown, they frequently interpreted working-class conventions of treating in these terms,
labelling women who were willing to offer sexual favors to men in exchange for a night on the town, or even as part of an ongoing relationship, as "amateur prostitutes" (or "charity girls") (Peiss in Peiss and Simmons, 1989, 57-69; Connelly, 1980, 17-21, 40-41).

They were also likely to impose more severe restrictions on homosexual behavior than many working-class men were. Most understood the distinctions working men drew between "fairies" and their "normal" partners or "trade," and they sometimes replicated such distinctions in their own sexual typologies by calling the fairies "inverts" (whose sexual inclinations were inverted and beyond their control) and their partners "perverts" (who had willfully "perverted" their natural sexual inclinations). But as the appellation "pervert" suggests, they were less willing to countenance homosexual behavior on the part of a so-called normal man than many working-class men were. As the chief physician of the New York City Prison wrote in 1921, "Let us punish most severely the man who yields to the advances of these individuals [or inverts], for such as he are worse than the [invert] and deserve no sympathy" (Lichtenstein, 1921, 369-74).

Even as middle-class activists sought to reform working-class sexual conventions, sexually-active working-class men and women had to contend with the effects of those conventions. Women had constantly to attend to their reputations, carefully negotiating their relationships with men lest they be branded charity girls, bad women, or prostitutes, and homosexually-active men, as we have seen, generally had to abide by widely-understood social conventions lest they be branded as fairies. For the fairy and the prostitute served as the standards by which all homosexually-active men and heterosexually-active women had to measure themselves, the stigmatized images they had to reject, or embrace — but certainly contend with — as they organized their own ways of living, negotiated their own relationships with others, and constructed their own public personas and more private self-identities. By no means did all men and women who ventured beyond the boundaries of normative heterosexuality identify or carry themselves as fairies or prostitutes. But the centrality of those images to their culture, which was dramatically reinforced in the early twentieth century by the intensification of state efforts to regulate urban sexual life, forced them to situate themselves in relation to them.

The stigmatized images of the invert and of the prostitute worked in similar ways, then, to mark boundaries of reputable gender and sexual behavior, just as the cultures created by men labelled fairies and women known as prostitutes offered them support in the face of social disapprobation. But the association of homosexuals with prostitutes was based on more than such structural affinities. Gay men were equated with prostitutes because they were equated with women. But not just any kind of women. As Mae West, whose appeal to gay men as a camp persona should now be more understandable, might have put it, they weren't no ladies.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY
WORKS CITED


NOTES

2. Report of the Special [Mazet] Committee of the Assembly appointed to investigate the Public Offices and Departments of the City of New York and of the Counties Therein Included (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1900), George P. Hammond, Jr., testimony, 1431.
3. Bulletin 1480, November 12, 1921, box 88, Committee of Fourteen papers, NYPL (hereinafter cited as COF); Committee of Fourteen Annual Report for 1914 (New York: Committee of Fourteen, 1915), 12.
4. For a fuller analysis of gay male culture and identities, see my book (Chauncey, 1994, French trans., 1998). Fuller documentation and explication of the arguments made in this article may be found in that book.
5. According to Potter, the "platinum blond hair" worn by many gay men had been "made popular by one of our motion picture actresses a few years ago" (188).
6. Gloria Bar & Grill, Inc., v. Bruckman, et al., 259 A. D. 706 (1st Dep't 1940), testimony of Walter R. Van Wagner, contained in Record on Review (hereinafter cited as Gloria Record on Review [1940]), 229, 232. The government's efforts to discourage bars from serving homosexuals and to close those which did are analyzed in Gay New York, ch. 12.
7. The sailor was questioned at the Newport (Rhode Island) naval training station, but had spent time in New York and was involved in a gay world not unlike that of the city.
8. Gloria Record on Review (1940), testimony of Mr. McLlhargy, questioned by Atty. Goldberg, 373.
10. Report on Times Square Building by J. K., May 2, 1927, COF.
12. E. S. Shepherd, e. g., specifically referred to "fairies" as "the male prostitute of the streets" (1918, 245).
13. Although the interview was only reported in 1917, it took place in 1906. "Looping the loop" had become a generic slang expression for such amusement park rides in the 1910s; see Jane Addam's reference to "looping the loop" in The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets [New York: Macmillan, 1909], 69, as quoted in Kasson, Amusing the Million, 100, (who also discusses the ride on pp. 81-82).

AUTHOR

GEORGE CHAUNCEY

Associate Professor of American History at the University of Chicago, is the author of Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (Basic Books, 1994; to be Sexualités américaines
published in France by Fayard in 1998), which won the Frederick Jackson Turner and Merle Curti Prizes from the Organization of American Historians and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in History. He is currently at work on his next book, *The Strange Career of the Closet: Gay Culture, Consciousness, and Politics from the Second World War to the Stonewall Era*, with the support of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Humanities Center.