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Continental Britons: Historical Facets of Male Effeminacy and Queer Influences from Abroad

Wolfgang NEDOBITY¹

Abstract

There is a long history and wide evidence of effeminate masculinities from dandies and fops through passivos and trannies – and on to fairies, sissies, queens and metrosexuals. Many of these phenomena are attributed to foreign models that could be found in Italy in the case of the macaroni or in France in the „ephebes“ in works of art. From the eighteenth century onwards the description of non-standard sexualities has been largely oriented towards the fact of external distinctiveness expressed by fashion, speech and taste. In many instances it was implied that such deviations are not just ridiculous, but also a liberalized provocation of sound British traditions. It was even thought that slavishly aping continental style and custom paved the way to instability in gender and sexual identity. Although the male crisis in representation is of continental origin, it nevertheless developed certain British ideosyncracies.

Keywords

Effeminacy, macaronis, ephebes, uranians, gender transition

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In 2009 a major film was on everybody's mind in Austria. It was "Bruno" by Sacha Baron Cohen. The discussion of the film in the media brought about a considerable number of questions, such as "is Bruno character-gay or just effeminate?"² or "why is Bruno an Austrian?". In order to answer these questions in a scientific way, it becomes evident, that neither queer theory nor the study of the history of sexuality have become redundant or deserve to fall into desuetude. It supports the claim that effeminacy is neither unprecedented nor exceptional, and, accordingly, that contemporary representations of queerness, either in elite or mass cultural forms, reveal significant correspondences to older visual paradigms and social conventions. No longer invisible and no longer ignored, contemporary effeminacy is now an entity to be investigated from different scholarly and theoretical perspectives, in particular, the exploration of effeminacy's latent as well as manifest meanings in the queer culture of the past may yield crucial insights for its current manifestations.

Carole Cadwalladr discovered Andreas Kronthaler as a possible model for Bruno: "It's impossible not to be put in mind of that other current Austrian fashion icon: Brūno, the latest creation of Sacha Baron Cohen. In the film he premieres such fashion firsts as the Velcro suit and wears, well, things that could quite easily have been plucked off these racks. I hesitate before asking Kronthaler about certain similarities, worried that he might be offended - needlessly, as it turns out. He hasn't seen it yet, he says, > but you know some of the people in the studio, they were saying it's based on me! But I don't know. I met him once, I think. Sacha Baron Cohen. He was good friends with Naomi. And they borrowed some of the clothes, I think. For the film. He may even have been at one of the shows once <." ³

When we look at Kronthaler's attire on the photo attached to the article the search for similar outfits in historical times is triggered. In particular 18th century British portraiture offers plenty of material for comparison, and it seems worthwhile to consider it in terms of its images of effeminacy. Mary Wollstonecraft for instance characterizes aristocracy in general as profligates of rank, emasculated by hereditary effeminacy.⁴ Being aware that this is a gross exaggeration, the attire of the macaroni may serve as a more pertinent example.

² See

http://www.associatecontent.com/article/1847005/is_bruno_characterGay_or_just_effeminate.html

³ Carole Cadwalladr: Vivienne's boy wonder. The Observer, Sunday 5 July 2009, online version <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jul/05/andreas-kronthaler-interview.html>

⁴ Quoted after Anna Clark: Scandal. The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution. Princeton and Oxford, 2006, p. 117

The Italian influence: effeminate attire

The first use of the term appears within David Garrick's play "The Male-Coquette" (1757) which includes the foppish character called "Marchese di Macaroni".⁵ It was with purpose that an Italian person was chosen for this role, as we can learn from Cloe Chard's observation: „During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, various concepts of travel to Italy as feminizing are formed; the rhetoric of emotional responsiveness, with its insistence that some versions of the feminine are compatible with manliness, proves useful in endorsing such concepts.“⁶ Jeremy Black is even more explicit about this: "Homosexuality was regarded in Britain as a foreign vice of Mediterranean origins, as indeed was sodomy. Homosexuality had long been particularly associated with Italy, was indeed sometimes called 'the Italian vice', and in some writings was linked to Catholicism. There was also a widespread conviction that Italy was, in the words of Adam Walker, an 'effeminate country'."⁷

Patricia Fara wrote a book about the "Macaroni" Joseph Banks and includes the following definition: „The term ‚Macaroni‘ was originally coined to denigrate the aristocratic youths who had acquired continental manners during their Grand Tour to Italy, but it became a more general term of abuse for deriding foppish young gentlemen who adopted ridiculous extremes of stylish clothing. The label was laden with sexual contempt.“⁸ Already in Renaissance England, the qualification of a courtier as effeminate depended upon the misuse of status symbols such as clothing, which did not correspond with the actual social standing. In the Age of Enlightenment then, the most important attribute to the macaroni fashion were the extravagant wigs made of women's hair. In 1770 the Oxford Magazine described these insolent fops thus: "There is indeed a kind of animal, neither male nor female, a thing of the neuter gender, lately started up amongst us. It is called a Macaroni. It talks without meaning, it smiles without pleasantry, it eats without appetite, it rides without exercise, it wenches without passion."⁹

In spite of their seemingly harmless character, they caused quite a number of scandals which acquired a wider political meaning, as Anna Clark

⁵ Peter McNeil: Courtier or Macaroni? An Eighteenth-Century Man's Waistcoat at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. In: Regine Falkenberg et al. (eds.): On Men. Masculine Dress Code from the Ancient Greeks to Cowboys. Berlin, 2005, p.19

⁶ Cloe Chard: Pleasure and guilt on the Grand Tour. Manchester/New York, 1999, p.36

⁷ Jeremy Black: Italy and the Grand Tour. New Haven and London, 2003, p.130

⁸ Patricia Fara: Sex, Botany and Empire. Cambridge, 2003, p. 9

⁹ Quoted after Ben Scott: Schott's Food and Drink Miscellany. London, 2003, p.13

points out: “Classical republicans celebrated the masculinity of independent radicals who defied the court. Conversely, they accused their enemies of 'effeminacy', one of the most common political insults of the eighteenth century.”¹⁰ This applies most of all to the enemies abroad. According to the philosopher Edmund Burke effeminacy was not only widespread on the European continent, but also in Asia: “Burke ratified the orientalist stereotype that Indians combined the worst of masculine and feminine vices. He feared that oriental vices would contaminate the British, who would become enmeshed in the sexual confusion and corruption of the East. ...By portraying Indians as effeminate and corrupt, Burke undermined the possibility that they could rule themselves.”¹¹

The foreignness of the macaroni was also made evident by the so-called 'macaroni prints' published by Matthew Darly, as the titles of the figures such as 'Monsieur le Medicin' or 'Monsieur le Friseur' as well as their fashion mark them as continental. The macaroni was a favoured subject of caricature, another import from Italy. It allowed to convey hidden codes, in particular those of sexual orientation: “...while the Pantheon¹² Macaroni, with his mirrored dressing table, pots of cosmetics, and corsage, certainly seems intended to be read as 'effeminate', the cat carved into the chair behind him may provide specific evidence for the claim that the macaroni was associated with homosexual practices; it might mark the man as a 'catamite', a young male lover of an older man.”¹³

The French influence: the effeminate body

In “various European cultural traditions,” David Halperin claims, “those men who refused to rise to the challenge of masculinity, who abandoned the competitive society of men for the amorous society of women, who pursued a life of pleasure, who made love instead of war – they incarnated the classical stereotype of effeminacy.”¹⁴ There was a shift of perception taking place, however, from the effeminate outfit to the effeminate body which evolved first of all in the French culture.

Already during the 1750s, effeminacy in Britain was associated with the French influence over the British aristocracy and the fear of French power.

¹⁰ Anna Clark, loc.cit., p.11

¹¹ Anna Clarke, loc.cit., p.101

¹² The Pantheon in London was famed for its masquerade balls

¹³ Amelia Rausser: Hair, authenticity, and the self-made macaroni. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.38, no.1 (2004), p.105

¹⁴ David Halperin: How to do the history of male homosexuality. *GLQ* 6 (2000), p.93

Following the French revolution, towards the end of the century, republican culture required a stand-in for an eroticized femininity deemed inimical to republican and civic values. Androgynous and effeminate ephebes functioned as an appropriation of the femininity banished elsewhere from political and cultural spheres. To some extent, however, this incorporation of femininity was also a response to the threat of female power as it was described by Edmund Burke in his account of rioting and massacring women attending the imprisonment of King Louis and Queen Marie-Antoinette.¹⁵

On the basis of these social developments, one of the most striking characteristics of the Neoclassical art that emerged in Rome in the 1770s, and which subsequently became the official style of French and British academies of fine arts, is the effeminate male body. The first woman who was to become a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in London was Angelica Kauffman, a paintress of Austrian origin. Her naked male bodies with their rounded and undulating forms resembled to a great extent female bodies, a fact which was attributed by art historians to the circumstance that she was not allowed any access to nude male models. The columniar thighs, between which not even the barest hint of genitalia is suggested, serve as a visual code evocative of femininity, which permits it to function as a surrogate for sexual difference. The effeminate Neoclassical ephebe marks the vacated space of a discredited femininity associated with pleasure and eroticism. Ganymede's effeminacy, for instance, derives not from his exuberant clothing, but from his youth, beauty, and tender body devoid of body hair. According to the opinion of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, it is obvious "that the imagery of feminized and vulnerable manhood is as much an index of the resilience of patriarchy as it is a sign of its fragility,"¹⁶

The German influence: the effeminate soul

In the 19th century when psychology came about as a new science, new definitions of „effeminacy“ were developed. One of them was that of the German activist Ulrichs who spoke of „a female soul trapped in a male body“. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was born at the Westerfeld Estate near Hanover on the 28th of August 1825. Between 1864 and 1879 he prepared twelve publications containing his theory, which is now available also in an English translation.¹⁷ In order to protect his family, he used the pseudonym Numa Numantius in 1864,

¹⁵ Edmund Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France. Garden City, 1961, p.85

¹⁶ Abigail Solomon-Godeau: Male trouble – a crisis in representation. London, 1997, p.41

¹⁷ Karl Heinrich Ulrichs: The Riddle of „Man-Manly“ Love. The Pioneering Work on Male Homosexuality. Translated by Michael R. Lombardi-Nash. 2 vols., Buffalo, N.Y., 1994

but dropped it in 1868 when he came out. With reference to Venus Urania, the mythical Greek goddess of inverts, Ulrichs coined the term Uranism ("Uranismus"), his word for homosexuality, which included Lesbians ("Urninds"), Gay men, ("Urnings"), Bisexuals ("Uranodionings"), and intersexual persons ("Zwitter"). Aphrodite Urania was thought to inspire love between males, and was held both to be stronger and more intelligent than Common Love (Aphrodite Pandemos), and to be spiritual rather than physical. Ulrichs started the modern queer movement by being the first to say publicly that Uranians are natural and neither sinful, diseased, nor criminal. He set a new standard for everyone who followed by bringing a new, positive approach to bear on what he called the riddle of nature. By means of public addresses he began to change the way people thought about what is today called same-sex love.

In January 1891 Ulrichs started to correspond with John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) who had studied his works intensively in his later years of life. In a letter to one of his friends Symonds comments on his relationship with Ulrichs: "Is it not funny for me and Ulrichs, me only interested in him because he championed the slave-cause of the Urnings, and him mainly interested in me because I can expound Tennyson's odd English – is it not funny, I say, for us to be brought together upon this extraordinarily trivial trifle – the Master of Trinity's Latin translation of the Poet Laureate's 'Vale' to the public – when our original rapport was in the hearts and viscera and potent needs of thousands of our fellow-creatures."¹⁸

There were two papers that Symonds circulated only among his friends: 'A Problem in Greek Ethics' (1873) and 'A Problem in Modern Ethics' (1891). These were followed by his memoirs¹⁹, a concise version of which was presented in one of the case histories he collected for the collaborative study of sexual inversion begun in 1892 with Havelock Ellis and put first on the German market only in 1896.

Michael Kaylor talks of a proper "Uranian movement", the beginning of which is dated by him with 1888: "For the Uranians and those who shared their desires, there were primarily two forms of erotic positioning in relation to this 'boy-worship' – as well as the fulfilment and outcome of such an erotic attachment – one 'conciliatory to social orthodoxies', the other 'pervasively dissident'.²⁰

¹⁸Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters (eds.): *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*. Detroit, 1967-69, vol. 3, p.548

¹⁹John Addington Symonds: *Memoirs*. Ed. by Phyllis Grosskurth. Chicago, 1984

²⁰Michael Matthew Kaylor: *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians*: Hopkins, Pater and Wilde. Brno, 2006, p.xvii

“John Addington Symonds, the finest scholar of the lot, later united all these groups – from artists to psychologists to historians (including scholars in Germany) – while Oscar Wilde 'the martyr' was busy dividing the 19th-century Uranians from their 20th-century continuators.”²¹ One of the last Uranians in the 20th century was the American born scholar Edward Perry Warren (1860-1928) who established a community of like-minded aesthetes in East Sussex, known as the Lewes House Brotherhood. Educated at Harvard and Oxford, he organised his queer life according to the Ancient Greek model. He modified the Uranian ideas to some extent by rejecting the concept of the feminine soul and replacing it by the 'paedomorphic' soul as well as by exploring the feminized and feminizing qualities of Christianity. The differences in terminology, however, should not distract us from their common cause, as we learn from Bristow's study on effeminacy in the Victorian age: “But the most significant point to note is that the 'Uranian' and the 'Urning' – for all their diversity of sources and inflections – would become entwined by the mid-1890s in a particular notion of the effeminate man.”²²

Besides his activity as an arts collector, Warren began work in 1910 on what he called his 'magnum opus' with the title “A Defence of Uranian Love”. The three volumes of it were written under his pseudonym Arthur Lyon Raile and privately printed in 1928-1930 by Hazell, Watson & Viney, Ltd., of London and Aylesbury. It is an extraordinary work, a sort of final confession that complements his earlier lyric poems. His theory includes the explication of a number of effeminate qualities. In the chapter on “gentleness” Warren writes: “No cultivated person likes a man to overdo his part: to be less gentle, quiet, and in manner, weak than the conventions demand. But a boy lover, if normal in other respects, is peculiarly averse from immoderate self-assertion. In manners his ideal is the Italian, whose softness is a matter of pride. He does not see why a man should be less delicate than a woman, though he does not judge of delicacy like a woman...A boy-lover is certainly less manly than those whose manliness is ungentleness.”²³ Warren ends this chapter with two questions: “Is this direction effeminate? Is it immoral?”²⁴ This brings us back to Bruno, who as an artificial figure, triggered similar questions. The perception of effeminacy as a prerogative quality depends to a great extent on the evaluation of femininity in general. Changes in this respect went hand in hand as Bristow points out in his profound study: “The reconfiguration of the effeminate man as a

²¹William Armstrong Percy III: Foreword. In: Edward Perry Warren: A Defence of Uranian Love. Ed. by Michael Matthew Kaylor. Kansas City, 2009, p. vii

²²Joseph Bristow: Effeminate England. New York, 1995, p.4

²³Warren, loc.cit., p.50

²⁴Warren, loc.cit., p.66

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perceptively deviant sexual type occurred at the same time as ideas of femininity were themselves undergoing radical change, as the sphere of literary production clearly attests. Just as the 'Uranian' poets fashioned their innovative, eminently Hellenic, poems on boy-love, so too were feminist writers seeking alternative models for sexual relations."²⁵

Seeking such models abroad added considerably to the versatility of British history of sexuality and to the globalisation of effeminacy at large.

²⁵ Bristow, loc.cit., p.8