



"For Some Queer Reason": The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain

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On February 28, 1929, Colonel Leslie Ivor Victor Gauntlett Bligh Barker was arrested for contempt of court, having failed to appear at a bankruptcy hearing the previous December. Removed to Brixton Prison, Barker was subjected to a routine medical inspection, during which he was discovered to be a woman and immediately transferred to the all-women Holloway prison.¹ By March 6, the news had leaked to the press and led to a series of sensational revelations that dominated the front pages of the press for a week. Barker, it was disclosed, had been born a biological female in 1895 and christened Lilia Irma Valerie Barker by her parents of independent means. In 1918 she had been married briefly to one Lieutenant Harold Arkell-Smith before having two children with her subsequent lover, Earnest Pearce-Crouch. Yet, after this relationship collapsed in 1923, Barker had begun life as a man and married Elfreda Haward. This marriage also had not lasted long and was followed by a series of relationships with other women, with whom Barker appeared to live as a common-law husband, earning a living variously as a farmer, actor, antique-shop owner, kennel manager, laborer, restaurateur, and gentleman of leisure.

As these revelations were investigated by the police, Barker was charged on two counts of perjury for having falsely signed the register at his marriage to Haward. The subsequent trial at the Old Bailey took place amid great publicity and resulted in Barker's being imprisoned as a woman for

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¹ Understanding gender as a performative category, I refer to Colonel Barker throughout as *he*, and to Valerie Arkell-Smith, née Barker, as *she*.

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nine months. When released, Barker continued to live and work as a man under different names. Twice arrested for petty theft, in 1934 as the kennel-man John Hill and in 1937 as the manservant James Hunt, Barker continued to make headlines and an increasingly precarious living. Capitalizing on the publicity surrounding the latter case, Barker agreed to make a “peep-show of myself” in Blackpool during the 1937 season, attracting over a million curious spectators. Thereafter, Barker appears to have returned to obscurity, eking out a living as a man through a succession of casual jobs, until he sold his story to the *Empire News and Chronicle* in 1956. He died in Suffolk in 1960.

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What sense can we make of this extraordinary story of “Colonel” Barker? The extant accounts provide contrasting ways of understanding Barker as, variously, a woman seeking to empower herself by passing as a man (Wheelwright 1990), a mannish lesbian radically fashioning herself as a desiring subject (Gurney 1997), or a transvestite (Doan 1998). However, in her immense and suggestive, if utterly unhistoricized, discussion of the cultural politics of cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber is rightfully critical of those who have looked “*through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser,” subsuming them “within one of the two traditional genders” and appropriating the “transvestite for particular political and critical aims” (1992, 9). Certainly this practice characterizes accounts that use Barker as an object of study whose gender and sexuality has to be fixed and explained away within a narrative of emancipation, of women’s empowerment, or of the emergence of lesbian or transvestite identity. For Garber, cross-dressing represents a “category crisis” that does not just disrupt the binary models of gender and sexuality (man-woman, homosexual-heterosexual) but also calls into question the very possibility of categorization itself. That is to say, cross-dressing always works at the metaphorical level of representation; it cannot be reduced simply to its effect.

This is, I think, a useful path on which to proceed. Despite Barker’s talent and financial need for publicity, despite the detailed interviews, life-stories, and recollections of friends and acquaintances, and despite the numerous press reports of his trials and tribulations, in a sense Barker’s sexual and gender orientation has to remain indeterminate, undecidable and unknowable. It is the very ambiguity of Barker’s story that makes it so interesting, for it enables one to shift attention away from the classification of Barker as an object with a “real” gender and sexuality to be discovered and revealed to a concern with how Barker was understood and made knowable by his own contemporaries.

Such an argument immediately enters the terrain of queer theory.² Although predominantly used as a way of reading or queering contemporary culture and identity politics, queer theory has also encouraged a deeply unhistorical rush to discover past identities, moments, and practices that “queer” essentialist notions of gender and sexuality — an approach that can simply replace the search for an ahistorical gay and lesbian subject with that for an equally ahistorical queer subject (Sinfield 1994). Whereas the former was founded on an understanding of a universal gay and lesbian “experience,” the latter, drawing on Judith Butler’s work on the performative nature of gender and sexuality, generally involves individuals’ autonomous self-fashioning (Butler 1990, 1993).

This understanding of performativity is itself deeply unhistorical. It assumes that, through each performative act, individuals can escape the discursive regimes that have constituted them and make the world anew.³ Yet, as Butler has argued, far from being an autonomous and ahistorical concept, performativity “‘works’ to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. . . . This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages” (1993, 227). For Butler, then, the job of queer history is to unravel “the complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which compose the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked” (1993, 228). It is into this space that I wish to insert the story of Colonel Barker’s encounter with the law, the press, the Blackpool public, and the social investigators known collectively as Mass Observation. I am interested in how contemporaries sought to make sense of Barker and how these discursive regimes in turn shaped Barker’s own presentation and understanding of his “masquerade.”

I I I

The law has long occupied a central position in histories of sexuality, not least because its processes have provided a rich and rare source for reclaiming the “experience” of subjugated “homosexual” subjects. Yet, as historians have become increasingly aware of the constraints of such sources, the law is now seen less as allowing the subaltern to speak than as defining

² In invoking queer theory in this way I do not mean to lend it a coherence, an impossible unity, that it does not possess. Often fuzzily defined, it has been appropriated and contested from a plethora of different positions. For early examples of a now-voluminous literature, see de Lauretis 1991; Butler 1993; Doty 1993; Warner 1993; Seidman 1996.

³ See, e.g., Garber’s (1992) reliance on a deeply ahistorical notion of an autonomous self-fashioning subject in which “clothes make a man.”

the limits both of what is spoken and of the very position of subalternity itself.⁴ I want to build on this work here by examining the law's encounter with Barker and the discursive limits of what could and could not be said in the various courtrooms Barker occupied under different guises and identities in 1929, 1934, and 1937.⁵ At each trial the ambiguous legal position of Barker's masquerade was dramatized, the law addressing it differently on each occasion as it struggled to remove the indeterminacy that surrounded Barker's gender and sexuality.

When passing sentence at Barker's 1929 trial, Sir Ernest Wild, the recorder of the Old Bailey, found it necessary to remind Barker, the court, and the public "that you and everybody else should understand exactly what offence it is to which you have pleaded guilty, and for which it is my duty to award adequate punishment. . . . You committed the crime of perjury, with which, and with which alone, I am dealing."⁶ This injunction merely served to emphasize that while the law had found no direct way of prosecuting Barker's masquerade, much of the trial revolved around not the actual charge of perjury (for Barker's having falsely signed the register in his male alias at his marriage to Elfreda Haward) but the nature of Barker's masquerade and, most sensationally, his relationship with Haward.

Before the trial it had emerged in the press that Haward had first known Barker as a woman, a mother of two, and the common-law wife of Pearce Crouch. However, the prosecutor sought to establish that Barker had deceived Haward about his true biological sex and that Haward had therefore entered the marriage unwittingly. As he put it, although Haward had met Barker when "she was Mrs. Pearce Crouch in name, she dressed as what was then known as a 'land girl', in riding breeches and open necked shirt" and had therefore believed Barker when he later declared "that she was really Sir Victor Barker, Bt., that her father had died some years before, and it had been her mother's wish that she would dress as a woman."⁷ Haward claimed that she never discovered Barker was a woman "until I read it in the papers": "Because she courted me as a man, I believed she

⁴ See, e.g., Duggan 1993 and Waters 1998.

⁵ In 1927, before the discovery of his masquerade, Barker had also been charged and tried on two charges of uttering with intent to defraud for forging a firearms certificate and being in unauthorized possession of an automatic pistol following his involvement in a fight between rival groups of fascists. He was acquitted following an emotional display in court in which he appeared in full military attire, head bandaged and supported by a friend who had explained that, due to war wounds, Barker suffered temporary blindness that was aggravated by stress (PRO CRIM 4/1508, Central Criminal Court, June 28, 1927).

⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, April 25, 1929, 7.

⁷ *Daily Express*, April 25, 1929, 1.

was a man.” Although Barker had told her that he had suffered abdominal injuries during the war, they had lived together as man and wife, sleeping in the same bed and behaving “as far as I know” as a husband would behave to a wife.⁸

Although the defense effectively discredited Haward’s testimony by establishing that she had entered into the marriage knowing Barker to be a woman—a point accepted by Sir Ernest Wild in his judgment (Blackham 1935, 220)—a great deal of uncertainty still hung over the sexual nature of their relationship. What evidence existed was withheld from the public, as Wild insisted he did not want “anything prurient to be stated in court” in case it further inflamed what he called the “not unnatural, if somewhat morbid, interest” in the case.⁹ Barker, no less than Haward, was insistent that their relationship had been purely platonic and that he had only assumed his masquerade in order to make a living and support his son.

Despite the defense counsel’s final plea to Wild to put those “matters which cannot be dealt with by me . . . out of your mind,” Wild condemned Barker’s “perverted conduct” as having “profaned the House of God, outraged the decencies of nature, and broken the laws of man.”¹⁰ Although the vocabulary of lesbianism or sexual inversion was never used, it seems likely that many at the trial had made this association. Only four months earlier, the obscenity hearing for Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* had famously, and very unusually, brought the subject of sexual relations between women into the public domain (Brittain 1968; Baker 1985; Souhami 1998). Significantly, Wild had been at the center of the only previous public discussion of lesbianism, when as a conservative member of Parliament he had been cosponsor of the doomed clause outlawing gross indecency between female persons in the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill. In seconding the motion during the House of Commons debate, Wild had referred knowledgeably to the work of the sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, bemoaning “this very real evil . . . [that] saps the fundamental institutions of society . . . [and] must tend to cause our race to decline.”¹¹ Given his knowledge and sexual politics, there can be little doubt what Wild meant when he accused Barker of being “perverted” and having “outraged the decencies of nature.” However, just as in the nineteenth century, when sodomy existed as an open secret within the courts and the press, acknowledged but veiled in a language of euphemism,

⁸ This is an account of the trial culled from a variety of reports. See *Daily Telegraph*, April 25, 1929, 7; *Daily Sketch*, April 25, 1929, 2; *Daily Express*, April 25, 1929, 1.

⁹ Instead, the evidence was submitted in writing (*Daily Telegraph*, April 25, 1929, 7).

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, April 25–26, 1929, 7.

¹¹ *Hansard*, vol. 145, July 2–August 5, 1921, 1802–3.

the implied sexual relationship between Barker and Haward was not signified directly at the 1929 trial.¹² Which is not at all to say that such a relationship existed, but that is what many read into the silences and euphemisms of the trial.

If the trial assumed it had unveiled the secret of Barker's and Haward's sexuality, it decidedly refused to accept that any ambiguity could surround Barker's gender; hence the incredulity with which Haward's testimony was greeted. Although the court heard compelling evidence of Barker's successful masquerade as a man, the true identity of Barker's gendered body was apparent in its absent phallus. By accepting the assurances of Brixton Prison's medical officer that there was "nothing abnormal about her," the law sought to restore quickly and brutally the foundations of gender difference, insisting that Barker be remanded, tried, and imprisoned as Valerie Arkell-Smith and forced to dress as a woman throughout.¹³

In contrast, Barker's next brush with the law, for stealing-by-finding a purse from a phone box in 1934, saw him arrested, bailed, and tried dressed as a man under the alias John Hill. Although Barker's "real" identity was quickly disclosed by both the police witness and the defense, it was declared irrelevant by the chairman of the court, who declared that, "having been committed in the name of John Hill, the prisoner will be tried in that name, and furthermore for the purpose of this trial it does not matter what the sex, occupation or identity of the prisoner is."¹⁴

The defense deliberately flouted this ruling, explaining Hill's failure to return the purse as an attempt both to sustain his masquerade and to protect his fifteen-year-old son, with whom he had lived "quite openly" in the area for some time (it was claimed that Barker was scared the police would

¹² The open secret worked in parliament as it did in court. Macquisten, one of Wild's cosponsors of the 1921 clause against gross indecency between female persons, opened the debate in the House of Commons by asserting, "I do not wish to speak on the matter at any length. I know that to many Members of this House the mere idea of the suggestion for such a thing is entirely novel; they have never heard of it. But those who have had to engage either in medical or legal practice know that every now and again one comes across these horrors, and I believe that the time has come when . . . on account of its civil and sociological effects this horrid grossness of homosexual immorality should also be grappled with." The clause failed, largely on the grounds that it was a "beastly subject" and that the clause would "encourage the knowledge of that vice and the spread of it" (*Hansard*, vol. 145, July 2–August 5, 1921, 1802). For the dynamics of the open secret of sodomy in nineteenth-century England, see Cocks 1998.

¹³ Barker found this last requirement particularly humiliating: "I know that dressed as a man I did not, as I do now I am wearing skirts again, feel hopeless and helpless" (*Sunday Dispatch*, March 31, 1929, 18).

¹⁴ *Evening Standard*, September 27, 1934, 5.

ask too many probing personal questions).¹⁵ Barker's counsel reminded the jury that they were "not dealing with an ordinary kind of person. . . . You are dealing with a person who had something to hide, something that person did not want to come out; something, perhaps, that she was ashamed of for the sake of her son, *and perhaps for many other considerations*."¹⁶ Both the chairman and the prosecutor refused to be drawn into exploring these other considerations, concentrating instead on Hill's relationship with his son: the prosecutor began his cross-examination by asking Hill, "What does your son call you?" only to earn a rebuke from the chairman: "Obviously, if this defendant is a woman, her son would address her in a manner which would not be incongruous with her appearance when strangers were about."¹⁷

Eclipsed as it was by the concern over his relationship with Haward, Barker's relationship with his son had barely received a mention during the 1929 trial, yet in the 1934 trial it became the essential indicator of Hill's gender. Indeed, it appears to be on this basis that Hill was acquitted, the jury apparently accepting the defense's argument that Barker's failure to report the lost purse represented a suitably motherly attempt to protect the child from the inevitable consequences of having his masquerade rediscovered by either the law or the press.

Barker's last encounter with the law was in 1937 as the domestic servant James Hunt for the theft of five £1 notes from his employer, Mrs. Adrian Scott of London's Hanover Square. Although referred to as Valerie Arkell-Smith throughout the initial magistrate's hearing at Marlborough Street Police Court, Barker appeared dressed as a man.¹⁸ Evidently confused, the magistrate was forced to ask the prosecuting police officer not only whether "this is the case of a woman" but also whether "a medical report might be necessary."¹⁹ Remanded for a week, while Barker sought legal aid for his defense as Valerie Arkell-Smith, at the subsequent magistrate's hearing he pleaded guilty, "dressed in a man's blue overcoat, with a woman's dark felt hat and a brown tweed skirt."²⁰ However, the legal position of Barker's masquerade was again repeatedly raised, both by the magistrate and by the defense, who insisted that for "a woman to masquerade as a man is no offence at all. It is the other way about. It is one of the anomalies

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, September 28, 1934, 9. Barker's daughter was apparently adopted after the separation from Pearce Crouch.

¹⁶ *News of the World*, September 30, 1934, 18 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, September 28, 1934, 9.

¹⁸ *Daily Express*, March 16, 1937, 11.

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, March 16, 1937, 8.

²⁰ *Daily Express*, March 23, 1937, 17.

of the law. If she had been a man she could have been charged with an offence, but for a woman it is no offence at all and nothing whatever to do with the case" (*JPLGR* 1937, 1). It was an argument that appeared to carry weight with the magistrate, who responded that the "fact that she has masqueraded in male attire has no weight with me" and that "he dealt only with the charge of theft."²¹ Yet, even if Barker's masquerade was not on trial, in the eyes of the magistrate it still demanded explanation.²²

Unusually, and with no relevance at all to the case, the prosecution provided a detailed summary of Barker's personal history from birth. Barker's counsel sought to turn this to his advantage, claiming that Barker's masquerade had been thoroughly "unmasked," that there was nothing left to hide, and that the money had been stolen to settle a number of medical bills arising from recent illnesses.²³ Yet he was forced to admit, "It would be difficult for him to explain every matter. . . . Smith instructs me that she has a reason which she does not at the moment propose to divulge for wearing men's attire. If I could tell you the reason I am sure you would feel some sympathy with her. I merely say she has a reason which she has told me in confidence and which, if I mentioned it, would, I am sure, obtain your sympathy."²⁴ This revelation dominated the press coverage of the case and elicited a remarkably sympathetic judgment from the magistrate, who, in imposing a lenient fine of 20 shillings, described Barker as "a hard-working woman . . . in financial difficulties" who should "try to get some more honest work and do it as a woman and not masquerade as a man."²⁵ Once again, it was Barker's masquerade, not the charge for which he was arrested, that became the principal focus of the case. The law refused to accept the legitimacy of Barker's masquerade but could find no direct way to prosecute it.

In response to this case, the *Justice of the Peace and Local Government Review* (*JPLGR*) ran two editorials clarifying the legal position of "Masquerading" (1937 and 1938).²⁶ Much of the confusion, the editors confessed,

²¹ *Daily Telegraph*, March 23, 1937, 11.

²² As the magistrate put it, "Is her masquerade eccentricity, or what is behind it?" (*Daily Telegraph*, March 23, 1937, 11). A similar approach was taken at the hearing against a sixteen-year-old servant who had been found "masquerading in the Boston and Skegness area dressed as a man" and was charged with stealing a man's suit and bicycle. The court heard how she had received a serious head injury two years previously, and it was directed that her mental condition be examined while on remand in Nottingham jail (*Daily Herald*, April 25, 1929, 1).

²³ *News Chronicle*, March 23, 1937, 7; *Daily Sketch*, March 23, 1937, 11.

²⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, March 23, 1937, 11.

²⁵ *Daily Sketch*, March 23, 1937, 11.

²⁶ The first explicitly refuted the argument of Barker's counsel that it was "an offence *in itself* for a man to masquerade in woman's clothes" but not for a woman to do so in man's clothes (*JPLGR* 1937, 1).

arose from the association of cross-dressing with the practice of male sodomy, an association cemented by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and the 1889 Vagrancy Act, under which men found masquerading as women in public could be charged with soliciting for immoral purposes. What the *JPLGR* called “the shyness of the press about mentioning the real charge in these cases” (1938, 135) had created the erroneous impression that cross-dressing itself was a crime, at least for men.²⁷ Nonetheless, although there was no law against cross-dressing by either men or women, the *JPLGR* was anxious to reaffirm the importance of prosecuting those who masqueraded either to commit an immoral act punishable by law or to obtain material advantage.

It was in this context that Barker’s 1929 and 1937 cases were invoked (*JPLGR* 1938, 136), acknowledging that the publicity that they attracted had served as a catalyst in the attempt to clarify the law as regards cross-dressing. Greater clarity was essential, the *JPLGR* argued, not only for police forces and magistrates in large towns where such cases were apparently most common but also for the “modern medical or psychological practitioner [who] might often encourage the patient to give rein to what is in reality a harmless fancy, were it not for the erroneous impression of the law which is shared by the doctor and patient” (1938, 135). Although there had been no reference to the science of sexology during Barker’s trials, these editorials signified a growing awareness of its importance in such cases, albeit with typically xenophobic references to the “pseudo-Latin scientific jargon of German medical authorities” on transvestism and more favorable citations of Havelock Ellis’s work on Eonism (1938, 136). However, despite the *JPLGR*’s criticism of the press’s “shyness” about cases involving men who dressed as women for “immoral” purposes, it did not engage with sexologists’ discussions of the relationship between cross-dressing and sexual inversion in women (Ellis 1928a, 1928b; Hirschfeld 1938; Bland and Doan 1998). Given the collapse of the 1921 amendment outlawing gross indecency between women, there was no legal context in which cross-dressing women could be understood in this way. Instead, cross-dressing was presented as an “innocent foible” (*JPLGR* 1938, 136), an act empty of sexual significance for women.

And yet, as the *JPLGR* editorials implicitly acknowledged, Barker’s trials extended well beyond the legal parameters of the charges in question, their proceedings frequently circling around Barker’s sexuality and the nature of his masquerade. However much those presiding over Barker’s trials insisted that they “should be kept within reasonable limits,” they rarely

²⁷ On the uses of cross-dressing by nineteenth-century sodomites to exploit the punitive excesses of the clumsy and arcane sodomy laws, see Cocks 1998.

were.²⁸ This was a consequence not simply of confusion about the legal status of Barker's masquerade but also of the formative role played by the press in the legal process. Despite the attempts of lawyers and magistrates to maintain that the law operated in its own discrete discursive frame, Barker's encounters with the law were always shaped and mediated by the press. Following his initial arrest for contempt of court in 1929 and the discovery of his masquerade at Brixton Prison, it was the press that had exposed the marriage to Haward and therefore paved the way for the perjury charge. Thereafter, the press helped generate huge crowds at Barker's various trials and disseminated their most salacious details to a much broader national and international public.²⁹ Such publicity concerned the magistrates and lawyers involved because they believed it would prejudice the legal process. At each of his trials Barker's defense counsels argued that his trial by press had to be taken into account, because "the greatest punishment this woman has already had to suffer is that members of the public come to gaze on her wherever she goes."³⁰ In contrast, those presiding over the trials vainly sought to insulate the law from such publicity, as in 1934, when the chairman of the court reminded the jury, "If any of you have seen anything in any newspaper or heard any chatter about this case you will please forget it altogether, and decide this case solely upon the evidence brought in this case."³¹ Indeed, when attempting to clarify the law respecting Barker's masquerades, the *JPLGR* claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that it was "above all, journalists who are responsible for most of the misunderstanding which exists" (1938, 136). This was, of course, to credit the law with a level of coherence it sorely lacked, but it usefully demonstrates that lawyers and magistrates were forced to recognize that in such cases they could not control the interpretation or practice of legal knowledge.



The press, like the law, drew on the language of masquerade to characterize Barker's life as a man. A masquerade was understood as essentially unreal, a mask that hid a deeper reality, or, as in the other vocabularies that

²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, September 28, 1934, 9.

²⁹ For details of the remarkable reception of the 1929 trial in Britain and Germany, see Cannell 1932, 207–8. For accounts of crowded courtrooms and the prevalence of "fashionably dressed women" at Barker's trials, see *Daily Herald*, March 28, 1929, 5; *News of the World*, April 28, 1929, 6; *Daily Telegraph*, September 5, 1934, 5. No doubt fashionably dressed women had the most time to attend court, but it is hard not to imagine that they also came to allay their own anxieties that they too were married to a Colonel Barker or John Hill or to hear the illicit details of a marriage between two women.

³⁰ *Daily Express*, April 25, 1929, 1.

³¹ *Evening Standard*, September 27, 1934, 5.

were used, a pose or impersonation. It assumed that a woman could live, pose, or masquerade as a man, but could not *be* a man.³² In fact, once Barker's identity as Valerie Arkell-Smith, née Barker, was disclosed, the press tended to refer to Barker as a woman, although some papers adopted the more ambivalent label of the "man-woman."³³

This idea of the masquerade, of the cross-dressing man-woman, had a long history stretching back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Castle 1987; McCormick 1997). During the nineteenth century it became gendered in a particular way, as the uses of impersonation and cross-dressing by sodomites to avoid prosecution meant that for men it accrued sexual and criminal connotations (Cocks 1998), whereas for women it became associated with comedy and a romantic spirit of adventure, as illustrated by Vesta Tilly's celebrated music hall performances, as well as by the numerous cases of women passing as male soldiers during World War I.³⁴

The first three decades of the twentieth century saw renewed investment in this discourse of the masquerade. The apparent fluidity of gender and class roles following World War I and the greater uncertainty that consequently began to haunt social exchanges, especially in cities, may well help to explain the proliferation of cheap novels that plotted the adventures of those who masqueraded (usually) across class or occupational boundaries in pursuit of love.³⁵ Indeed, it was partly within this changing historical context that psychoanalyst Joan Riviere developed her now famous thesis "Womanliness as Masquerade," which outlined a performative notion of gender in which it was impossible to "draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'" ([1929] 1986, 38).³⁶ Published in 1929, the year of Barker's first trial, Riviere's thesis played no part in contemporaries' understandings of Barker's life as man, but, like the masquerade novels, it helps demonstrate the resonance of the discourse of masquerade in the regendering of social life between the wars.

³² On the prevalence and persistence of this conception of the masquerade within the press, see King 1996a, 1996b.

³³ This was a label first used by the *Daily Chronicle* on March 7, 1929, then picked up by the *News of the World* and *Reynold's Illustrated News* on March 10 and by the *Daily Sketch* the following week.

³⁴ See Tefler 1885; Vizetelly 1895; Senelick 1993; Wheelwright 1994.

³⁵ For the flavor of these masquerade novels, see Weston 1920; Bradley 1922; Hawke 1926; During 1928; Morton 1928; Sidgwick 1930; Gardner 1931; Clair 1937; Lancaster 1938; Brun 1939; and Risdon 1942.

³⁶ Rooted in a Freudian analysis of the Oedipus complex and the historical argument that by the late 1920s professional women no longer had to assume mannish roles to operate in the public world, Riviere argued that professional women who wish for masculinity construct "a mask of womanliness" ([1929] 1986, 34) as a defense against that desire and the retribution it may bring from men.

Histories of masquerades were also developed at this time through a series of commercial publications (e.g., Stoker 1910; Gilbert 1926, 1932; Thompson 1938) that charted the lives of cross-dressing men and women since the sixteenth century and demonstrated the longevity of “this curious phase of human abnormality [which] still exists and has never been eradicated” (Thompson 1938, 157). Significantly, while these books continued to use romantic tropes to represent cross-dressing women, they drew more heavily on contemporary sexological and psychiatric knowledges—principally those of Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Freud—in their sympathetic portrayal of the “severe mental anguish [of those whose] brain and heart belong to a sex which is not their own” (Gilbert 1926, ix). It has been suggested that the concept of the masquerade popularized by these works focuses overwhelmingly on the act of impersonation or posing rather than, as in sexology and psychoanalysis, on the congenital or psychic condition that lay beneath and supposedly explained such behavior (King 1996b, 80–81). Just as the sodomite became the homosexual in the late nineteenth century (Foucault 1981, 43), it is claimed, these medical discourses transposed the practice of masquerading onto the figure of the transvestite, which, as a species or type with its own pathology, could be analyzed, categorized, and cured (1981, 43). However, this account misrepresents the extent to which such publications drew upon medical explanations of cross-dressing in terms of human nature, hormonal secretions, and psychic states, as well as providing taxonomies of different types of cross-dressing (Stoker 1910, 227; Gilbert 1926, vii–ix; 1932, vii–ix; Thompson 1938, 12–14).³⁷ It also underestimates the degree to which the discourse of sexology reworked and appropriated many of the tropes of earlier understandings of cross-dressing, not least because, as Lisa Duggan has demonstrated (1992, 1993), many sexological case histories were lifted unproblematically from the press. The discourse of the masquerade was, then, a readily available language through which the press could represent Barker’s life as a man and the issues of gender and sexuality it raised. In its use of this discourse, while the press focused heavily on the act of impersonation, or masquerade, it also sought explanations for it.

Barker’s story was by no means the only one of a cross-dressing woman to appear in the press at this time, but it was the most infamous. As the journalist J. C. Cannell, who reported Barker’s 1929 trial for the *Daily Sketch*, recalled, “The case of ‘Colonel’ Barker was one of the few stories that really have astonished Fleet Street. . . . Like many other journalists, I had to spend days and nights on the work of collecting every obtainable

³⁷ See, e.g., Thompson’s (1938, 18) explicit use of Ellis.

scrap of information regarding the ‘Colonel’ and ‘his’ life as a man” (1932, 204–5). Certainly in the week following Barker’s arrest in 1929, journalists such as Cannell carefully retraced the steps of Barker’s masquerade and seemingly interviewed anyone who had come into contact with him. They reported that, thanks to a small private income and a talent for running businesses at a loss, Barker had been many men in many places. He had toured the country as an actor; owned an antique-furniture business in Andover; owned and managed farms; run a dog kennel in Dudley; worked as a laborer in a brick works; and been the private secretary to the head of the National Fascisti, a restaurateur, an aspiring film actor, a gentleman of leisure in Mayfair, and a reception clerk at Regents Park Hotel. The account was updated in 1934 and 1937 to include Barker’s equally unsuccessful attempts at being a car salesman, a chef and servant in London, and a kennelman in Sussex. Even the *Daily Telegraph* marvelled at the way the “masquerade was carried through in various centres, extending as far north as Staffordshire, and in many fields of social activity.”³⁸

The press was fascinated by not just the geographical and occupational diversity of Barker’s life as a man but the range of masculine roles he had successfully adopted. In interviews, fellow members of the National Fascisti and Mons veterans testified to Barker’s manliness, his propensity at the manly sports of boxing and cricket, and his capacity for alcohol.³⁹ Most gripping of all were the revelations of Barker’s private life and his relationships with his son and “wives,” especially Barker’s marriage to Elfreda Haward, which the *News of the World* reported as “the crowning exploit” of his masquerade.⁴⁰ Haward was besieged by journalists seeking interviews with “the bewildered bride” who told them a variety of often conflicting stories about how she had first met Barker and praised him as “the soul of courtesy and chivalry and an ideal lover.”⁴¹

It was, then, the authenticity of Barker’s masquerade, especially his success at being a husband and a father, that most intrigued the press—the fact that “she may quite easily be the man who lives next door to you, someone you know very little, a good chap, but somewhat reserved.”⁴² In 1929, as well as on subsequent occasions, most of those interviewed by the press, from employers and employees to lovers and acquaintances, were

³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, March 7, 1929, 14.

³⁹ *Daily Express*, March 6, 1929, 2; *Daily Sketch*, March 6, 1929, 2.

⁴⁰ *Daily Mail*, March 7, 1929, 14. Despite “intensive efforts,” Fleet Street never tracked down Barker’s so-called second wife, who was believed to have fled to Canada (Cannell 1932, 206).

⁴¹ *News of the World*, March 10, 1929, 9.

⁴² *Empire News and Chronicle*, April 22, 1956, 9.

incredulous at the revelation that Barker was a woman and had, like Barker's first solicitor, "never at any time suspected that she was anything but a man."⁴³ There seemed to be a genuine respect for what was described as Barker's "masterpiece of sex impersonation," his "long and amazing masquerade," his "audacious change of identity, which, with almost unparalleled daring, challenged and defied detection though openly flaunted in the faces of those who might easily have had their suspicions aroused."⁴⁴ As the *Daily Herald* put it, "Whatever the final verdict on her romantic escapade may be, it should be placed on record that no breath of scandal ever attached to the name she temporarily bore."⁴⁵ At one level, then, it seems that the press was happier than the law to disassociate Barker's masquerade from any taint of criminality or homosexuality, representing it instead as a romantic adventure — although by 1937, when Barker had faced two further criminal proceedings, the romance had turned somewhat sour.

However, if the press delighted in the bravado and authenticity of Barker's masquerade, the extensive investigative reports of papers such as the *Daily Sketch*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *News of the World* also promised to unmask it, with headlines such as "Masquerading Woman's Identity Disclosed, Barker's Identity Revealed."⁴⁶ The press made much of those who claimed to have seen through Barker's masquerade and recognized the womanliness of his body and emotional behavior.⁴⁷ So when Barker collapsed in tears at the end of the initial magistrate's hearing in 1929, some of the press reports indicated that justice had been done, that the founda-

⁴³ *Daily Sketch*, March 6, 1929, 3. See the headline following Barker's 1937 trial: "Colonel Barker Fined for Theft. No One Suspected That She Was a Woman" (*Daily Telegraph*, March 23, 1937, 11).

⁴⁴ *News of the World*, March 10, 1929, 9; *News of the World*, March 28, 1937, 8. There was also admiration for the warmth with which Barker was apparently regarded by his peers. See, e.g., the letter written by a member of the Fellowship of Mons: "Although 'he' has revealed her identity . . . I assure you she is a great loss to the ex-servicemen she came in contact with. We still maintain and have the greatest respect and admiration for her, now as ever" (*Sunday Dispatch*, March 31, 1929, 18).

⁴⁵ *Daily Herald*, March 6, 1929, 1. See also the *Daily Sketch*'s remarkable editorial: "Having read of the astonishing exploits of 'Captain Barker', some of us may now feel less inclined to scoff at, even while delighting in, the fantastic facility with which Shakespearean heroines pass themselves off as men . . . [and] can associate themselves on terms of equality with ex-Service men, and even succeed in being, if not a hero, at least a soldier to her valet" (*Daily Sketch*, March 8, 1929, 5).

⁴⁶ *Daily Sketch*, March 7, 1929, 1.

⁴⁷ *Daily Mail*, March 6, 1929, 14; *Daily Sketch*, March 6, 1929, 27. Barker's propensity to glamorize his male life, not just by changing titles and names at will — from Sir to Captain to Major to Colonel Victor Barker, and then to Sir John Hill and James Hunt — but by inventing a decorated military career, also raised suspicion (see *Daily Mail*, March 7, 1929, 14).

tions of sexual difference had been successfully reestablished: "It was a pathetic and humiliating sequel to the exciting years of masquerade when 'Colonel Barker', the woman who had posed as an Army officer, had ridden to hounds, boxed and engaged in other masculine pursuits, broke down and showed that she was, indeed, a woman."⁴⁸ Yet, in making such great play of Barker's awkward appearances in court as a woman in 1929 and 1937, as well as his convincing appearance as a man in 1934, not all the press were so sure of the moral of the story. Indeed, by far the majority of papers appeared impressed by Barker's stoicism, echoing the *Reynold's Illustrated News* headline "'Colonel Barker' Takes Her Sentence Like a Man."⁴⁹ Indeed, throughout Barker's trials and tribulations the press remained undecided as to whether it should emphasize the success or failure of his masquerade, his apparent masculinity or his flawed femininity.

Although much of the reporting focused on the performance of Barker's masquerade, it also increasingly searched for explanations of it by constructing elaborate case histories of Barker's life from its own exhaustive investigations. Although seemingly uninformed by developments within sexology, these case histories suggested that Barker's masquerade could be rendered comprehensible by discovering its origins in his peculiar childhood and early adulthood.⁵⁰ Although there were minor variations in the histories recounted by different papers, the *News of the World's* "Life Story of Man-Woman" was typical in its focus on the tomboyish ways of Valerie Barker's childhood, her mannish adolescence, and the disintegration of her marriage and subsequent relationship with Pearce Crouch.⁵¹ Combining melodramatic and pseudoscientific tropes, these narratives, as Lisa Duggan has argued, were not simply products of the prejudices of newspaper editors, reporters, and their readers but were informed and shaped by interviews with the participants; in that sense, they were "not simply impositions but appropriations" (1993, 800). Indeed, in large measure these case histories were culled from Barker's own story—or, more accurately, stories—which he had sold to the press. As we shall see, the appeal of these

⁴⁸ *Daily Sketch*, March 28, 1929, 2. See also *Daily Mirror*, March 28, 1929, 4.

⁴⁹ *Reynold's Illustrated News*, April 28, 1929, 17. For instance, see the report on how, when sentenced to prison in 1929, "her face quivered with emotion, and, womanlike, she almost burst into tears, but manlike she just managed to restrain herself, although she could not control the quivering of her lips" (*Daily Express*, April 26, 1929, 11). For a very similar account of the 1934 case, see *Daily Mail*, September 28, 1934, 13.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., a 1929 editorial in the *Daily Sketch*, which concluded that Barker's "masquerade may be suspected of a psychological inspiration, such as is often revealed by little girls, who, envying the opportunity for dashing pranks enjoyed by their brothers, wish they had been born boys" (March 8, 5).

⁵¹ *News of the World*, March 10, 1929, 9.

stories owed much to the press's failure to explain Barker's masquerade fully; only his own "exclusive" life story could promise a full revelatory explanation. Yet, if the press could neither resolve the questions surrounding Barker's gender and sexuality nor explain the cause of his masquerade, they were able to present Barker's life as a tragedy, concluding each episode or telling of Barker's story with images of him alone, frightened, hopeless, and facing death, a pointed reminder to their readers of the doomed nature of all such masquerades.⁵²



Yet, for all the attempts of the law and the press, Barker's masquerade continued to resist classification or explanation. Nowhere was this more apparent than at Blackpool, where, following the publicity that surrounded his conviction in March, Barker was hired by the impresario Luke Gannon to appear in a "show" throughout the summer season of 1937. Reputedly the "most notorious and profitable sideshow" of that season (Cross 1990, 193), it attracted not only "more than a million people" (Harrison 1961, 148) but also the attentions of the social investigators Mass Observation as part of their "Worktown" study of northern working-class culture.

Set back some fifty feet from Blackpool's Central Beach on the Promenade were a series of billboards announcing the Colonel Barker show. A Mass Observer described the scene:

ON A STRANGE HONEYMOON
LOVE CALLING
COLONEL BARKER
ADMISSION TWOPENCE.
COLONEL BARKER AND HIS OR HER BRIDE
HOW LONG CAN A LOVING COUPLE REMAIN UNDER THESE
CONDITIONS?

Small posters say, 'He's the secret hero in many women's lives'; 'A woman marrying a woman! Incredible! Yet it is true'; and 'From a woman to a man'. Other signs inform us: 'Served in the Army and was not discovered to be a woman. Married a man and now on honeymoon.' And 'I am taking this step for the woman I love.' (Cross 1990, 193)

⁵² *Sunday Dispatch*, March 31, 1929, 18; *Leader*, October 9, 1937, 9; *Empire News and Chronicle*, April 22, 1956, 9. On the tragic mode of such life stories, see Duggan 1993, 808.

The show depicted Barker and his newlywed wife on their honeymoon in a cellar below a glass ceiling and circular public gallery. The two lay on single beds separated by a zebra crossing and a Belisha beacon. The story was that Barker had accepted a £200 wager that he would not consummate the marriage before the end of Blackpool's twenty-one-week summer season; until then the two were not allowed out of the cellar and were watched night and day by attendants.

Despite Barker's bewilderment as to what "sort of thrill people could get out of this set up," Mass Observation recorded that during peak periods "several thousand people an hour paid to walk around the pit for an average of one minute each."⁵³ The enormous popularity of the show testified to the continuing fascination with Barker. The fact that the show played upon Barker's mysterious marriage to Haward and its subsequent dissection by the law and press almost a decade earlier indicated how powerfully this story had gripped and perplexed the popular imagination. The show's entire purpose was to satisfy this continuing curiosity about Barker's gender and sexuality.

Whereas the law and the press had sought to remove any ambiguity about Barker's gender and sexuality, the Blackpool public remained unconvinced, enchanted precisely by those ambiguities. This was reflected in the crisis of classification that attended Barker's presence in Blackpool. The billboards publicizing the show contributed to the confusion, referring to Barker variously as "his or her," "A woman marrying a woman," "From a woman to a man," while a Mass Observer noted that even the attendants running the show spoke contradictorily "only about HE" or of Barker as the "first person in the world to have the now famous operation changing her sex from that of a man to a woman [*sic*]" (Mass Observation, n.d., 3–4). Unlike the explicit classifications and display of the body parts of pregnant men, hermaphrodites, idiotic masturbators, and those with venereal disease in Tussaud's Waxwork's Museum of Anatomy during the 1938 season, the gender of Barker's body, let alone his sexuality, had, in the words of another member of the viewing public, "never been proved" (4).

With their usual zeal to unearth "the real" behind the illusory surface of a corrupting mass culture, Mass Observation discovered that not only did Barker and his "bride" Eva escape their cellar every night, they slept in the same bed. Their landlady, Mrs. Gallimore, recalled that when she and her husband had challenged Barker "to prove that he was either a man or a woman," he had "asked them all to go upstairs and he would show them."

⁵³ *Empire News and Chronicle*, April 8, 1956, 4; see also Cross 1990, 195.

As Mrs. Gallimore recounted to a *Mass Observer*, it was an experience that left them no wiser: “I don’t know its a mystery, he’s a man and a woman. You know he’s got all that a woman has, big-busted, and he’s gettan one o them theer that a mon cant do without.’ Here she giggled and looked at the *Observer*. . . . ‘I cant tell what he is, I call him a Gene, Jack [her husband] calls him a Moxphrodite, Jack says he can be a man one minute and then be a woman, Christ knows how he does it. They should lock up that sort of person, they’re no use to anybody’” (*Mass Observation*, n.d., 20–21). Even at such close quarters, it seems, Barker’s body defied classification. While “one o them theer that a mon cant do without” could be read as either male or female genitalia, the categories of “Gene” and “Moxphrodite” seem to equate with hermaphrodite, a category that, even among sexologists, was notoriously slippery. One of the others present at this late-night inspection was equally appalled and confused, declaring, “He’s not a proper man, he’s a bloody Gene. He should be stitched up so every body would know whether he weer one thing or the other” (21).

If Barker’s gendered body remained indeterminate to those at the Gallimores’, his sexuality, or rather that of his partner Eva, was no less ambiguous. Having fled her husband in Manchester, Eva had arrived in Blackpool with another man, whom she subsequently left for Barker, suggesting to Mrs. Gallimore that she was “one of those women who like women you know what I mean . . . but I don’t know for certain” (19–20). Similarly, one of the male guests recounted how Eva “made eyes at me one night and I got hold of her, she bloody well laughed at me and said that I was no use to her. She told me another time that Colonel Barker was good for it any time” (20).

Mass Observation’s determination to discover what they called “the real Colonel Barker” was tempered by their interest in Barker as a symbol of Blackpool’s moral law and “the most famous intersexual character of our time” (Cross 1990, 192). While for the members of *Mass Observation*, Blackpool represented a licensed space in which holiday makers could “change the routine, the restrictions, the laws of everyday, and even the laws of nature,” they noted how in the sexual domain few such transgressions were made. *Mass Observation* made much of the representation of sex in Blackpool’s amusements and the lack of its actual practice—a paradox they sought to explain through the prevalence of intersexual shows such as Barker’s. If, they suggested, such shows promised a transgression of moral and natural law, they also reinforced them by symbolizing what happens to those who transgress.

Of course, *Mass Observation*’s understanding of Barker arguably tells us more about the cultural politics of its middle-class observers than about

the working-class Blackpool public whom they expected to be heterosexually overactive (Gurney 1997). Nonetheless, it is surely significant that, given their failure to determine Barker's gender and sexuality, Mass Observation could represent Barker only in terms of his social function: as a "freak" who reinforced and renaturalized those very categories he appeared to question and queer. Significantly, Luke Gannon, the creator of the Barker show, had a similar interpretation. Clearly the show was situated firmly within a bawdy tradition of seaside humor, one largely invented at Blackpool, but for Gannon it also dramatized more serious concerns about the nature of sexual relations between the wars. Both elements were signified by the Belisha beacon that separated Barker from his bride. As Gannon well knew, these new traffic signals were figures of mirth, widely taken to resemble erect and throbbing penises. Yet for Gannon the beacon in Barker's nuptial cellar bedroom also represented a warning signal: "People go so fast now in their courting, and the beacon is a sign for them to pull up and go a bit slower" (Cross 1990, 196). Ultimately, then, Mass Observation, Luke Gannon, and the Blackpool public shared a similar fascination with the ambiguities of Barker's gender and sexuality—the ambiguities that enabled Barker to be represented as a freak who defied classification.



So far, my concern has been with the discursive regimes that made Barker knowable to contemporaries, the narratives through which they rendered his extraordinary life legible. Yet Barker was not a silent observer of the machinations of the law, the press, and the Blackpool public. Not only did he give evidence in court, he voluntarily sold his story to the press on three occasions, in 1929, 1937, and 1956. However, we should not be beguiled by the confessional mode of Barker's life stories, their insistence to establish his authorial voice through what the *Leader* billed as Barker's "Exclusive Self-Written Life-Story," or their promises to reveal the truth behind the masquerade. Although they helped Barker elicit public sympathy by using the language of revelation, shame, and atonement and presenting his life as a tragedy for which he was not responsible, they were also journalistic devices that conformed to the demands of the genre and helped sell what the press presented as a sensational case history in which Barker would make "candid confessions" and "tell the whole truth about everything."⁵⁴ In fact, these life stories had to strike a delicate balance between satisfying feature editors and the reading public and Barker's own ends.

⁵⁴ *Empire News and Chronicle*, April 22, 1956, 9; *Empire News and Chronicle*, February 19, 1956, 2. See also *Sunday Dispatch*, March 10, 1929, 1; *Leader*, September 11, 1937, 6.

This helps explain why each rendition of Barker's life story in the press differed significantly. Each version not only reflected contemporaries' changing conceptions of Barker's masquerade but also served immediate strategic purposes for Barker: refuting Haward's claim after his arrest in 1929 that she had known Barker only as a man; cashing in on the publicity surrounding his Blackpool show during the 1937 summer season in the wake of his trial in March earlier that year; and improving his cash flow in 1956 following the apparent diagnosis of a terminal disease. In short, far from articulating an autonomous self-fashioning queer subject, playfully appropriating and subverting different identities, Barker's stories demonstrate a subject struggling to represent his life through the limited discursive resources available.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Barker's discussion of his own gender and sexuality. In 1929, given the assumptions and innuendo that had surrounded the discovery of his marriage to Haward and subsequent affairs with women, Barker was most adamant to deny the implied charge of lesbianism: he insisted that, while "a censorious world will never understand," he had "lived an honourable, straightforward life" and that his relationship with Haward and other women had been "purely platonic."⁵⁵ Despite having explicitly denied, in his 1937 life story, Sir Ernest Wild's judgment on Barker's presumed lesbian sexuality at the 1929 trial ("I never 'outraged the decencies of nature'"⁵⁶), the question of Barker's sexuality was not raised again in 1956. The diminishing priority that Barker afforded to this issue reflects its declining role in public understandings of his masquerade. While in 1929 Barker's masquerade was widely seen simply as a cover for lesbian sexuality, after 1937 the focus had shifted to the medical status of Barker's sex.

In each rendition of his life story, Barker painted a similar backdrop to his masquerade as a man—the tomboyish childhood, the adoring father, the failed heterosexual relationships with men, the highly strung nature, the humiliation suffered when wearing women's clothing—which could have been lifted straight from the sexologists' case histories of the mannish lesbian (Ellis 1928a; Hirschfield 1938; Bland and Doan 1998). Yet, unlike Radclyffe Hall, who defined herself through Ellis's work in the 1920s (Newton 1984; Baker 1985; Souhami 1998), or Peter Wildeblood, who drew on both Ellis and Freud in the construction of his homosexual identity in the 1950s (Waters 1999), Barker did not seek a medical explanation for his masquerade. Instead, he presented it as primarily a practical eco-

⁵⁵ *Sunday Dispatch*, March 17, 1929, 9; March 10, 1929, 1, 5.

⁵⁶ *Leader*, September 25, 1937, 5.

conomic decision: "I had to keep not only myself but also my boy. And it would be far easier to get a job as a man."⁵⁷ This became an increasingly less convincing explanation, since the 1937 and 1956 life stories recounted not only Barker's increasing poverty and his struggle to find and keep work as a man but also the death of his son during World War II. In the absence of a convincing explanation, Barker's life stories focused overwhelmingly on the performance of his masquerade, on the nature of his gender, not on its origin or cause.

In 1929 Barker shifted uneasily from presenting himself as androgynous ("I have both the man's and the woman's outlook on life . . . [and] am without sex nowadays") to a performative view of gender in which the masquerade was all ("I feel more a man than a woman. . . . I actually felt that I was a man, and there is no-one who can say that I ever failed to act as a man").⁵⁸ By 1937, this tension appears to have been resolved through Barker's understanding that it was possible "to change my sex . . . [by] embark[ing] on my masquerade as a man," even if that entailed recognizing that "I have had to strive against nature and must go on striving."⁵⁹ What is novel here and allows for the possibility of a resolution not available in 1929 is the concept of a change of sex. Although early experiments with hormonal treatments and surgical procedures began between the wars, the first full sex-change operations were the widely reported cases of Christine Jorgensen in 1951 and Roberta Cowell in 1954.⁶⁰ Barker merely appropriated the language of sex change to describe his masquerade and the possibility of transforming one's biological sex.

In 1956, two years after Roberta Cowell's sex change in Britain, Barker explicitly declared that there had been no "'change of sex' in the physiological sense as sometimes happens. I have undergone no surgical operation to turn me from woman into man, and physically I am, as I started out in life to be 100 per cent woman. But so long have I lived as a man, that I have come to think as one, behave as one, and be accepted as one."⁶¹ Although the journalist interviewing Barker drew on the now standard medical tropes to describe how there "was no physical change or glandular disorder . . . her mother's pre-natal desires created a male mind long after the female sex had been determined," Barker resolutely refuted such analyses.⁶² His

⁵⁷ *Leader*, September 11, 1937, 7.

⁵⁸ *Sunday Dispatch*, March 17, 1929, 9; March 31, 1929, 18.

⁵⁹ *Leader*, September 11, 1937, 7; October 9, 1937, 13.

⁶⁰ Cauldwell 1951; Cowell 1954; Benjamin 1966; Jorgenson 1968; Serlin 1995; King 1996b.

⁶¹ *Empire News and Chronicle*, February 19, 1956, 2.

⁶² *Empire News and Chronicle*, April 22, 1956, 9.

masquerade had been neither the consequence of “some form of perversion” nor “some ‘complex’ or ‘phobia’ beloved of the modern psychiatrist. . . . Again I must insist that I suffered no ‘tendency’ to become a ‘man.’”⁶³ Barker adamantly refused to use the categories provided by medical discourse—the mannish lesbian, the transvestite, the eonist, the transsexual—preferring instead to describe his life as a man through the more elastic notion of the masquerade with which it had been first represented between the wars.



For two years I have pursued the traces of Colonel Barker’s life—with all its attendant bravery and bravado, misery and deceit—around the archives of London, Brighton, and Blackpool, one thing leading to another until I had to tell this story. Indeed, the story of the figure known as Colonel Barker is also a story about the archive, its absences and silences, and the politics of forgetting; it is a story of how to write a history of that which largely has been erased, to retrace subject positions that were never supposed to be possible. The closer I got to Barker and the more material I found, the further the subject receded. Consequently, this has been a determinedly discursive history of the ways Barker’s life was rendered legible to his contemporaries.

Chief among these is the discourse of the masquerade, which, contested and stretched in different ways, was sufficiently elastic to represent Barker’s life as a man as variously an innocent adventure (with romantic or tragic overtones), the knowing ploy of a lesbian subject, or, increasingly, the unconscious response of a man trapped within a woman’s body. Instead of critically interrogating this discourse and its histories, previous accounts of Barker’s life have reproduced its representations in order to position Barker as an acting subject within histories of feminism, lesbianism, transvestism, or transsexuality. In contrast, I have sought to establish how the discourse of the masquerade was used in these differing ways to suggest—to insist—that Barker’s gender and sexuality could be secured and understood within an essentialist framework. And against this insistence of impossibility, Barker appropriated, inhabited, and subverted this discourse of the masquerade from its margins, disrupting its essentialist definitions of gender and sexuality by demonstrating their failure to encompass his life as a man.

Although the title of this piece is taken from an apparently casual sentence in one of Barker’s own life stories, it is worth reemphasizing that I am not presenting Barker as a self-fashioning queer subject self-reflexively

⁶³ *Empire News and Chronicle*, February 19, 1956, 2.

subverting established notions of gender and sexuality. If essentialist histories fail to step outside the discursive conditions that frame the agency of their subjects, much queer history blithely insinuates that there are no discursive limits of possibility, that queer subject positions are and were forged by autonomous acts of individual will. In contrast, I have tried to demonstrate that Colonel Barker's sense of self was inescapably shaped by the limited discursive resources available to him. Barker did not disrupt essentialist notions of gender and sexuality by force of will; rather, he was forced to work with the discourse of the masquerade and the narrative forms through which others had sought to render him knowable.

His is a history that demonstrates not only how regulation of the sexual domain helps constitute individual subjects but also how these subjects inform the policing of the sexual itself. Yet that history also suggests that, insofar as we can retrace a historically situated queer subjectivity, such an account must begin from the recognition that it was forged from the very discursive regimes that sought to disqualify it.

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