

A History of Gay Literature

The Male Tradition

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Bacarisse never treats sexuality as having any crucial bearing on the nature of camp, she never has to consider Hispanic sexual mores in Cervantes' day in justification of her apparently anachronistic use of 'camp' as a critical term in relation to Cervantes' work (published in 1605 and 1615). Instead, she performs a sketchy comparison of Cervantes with the Argentine novelist Manuel Puig on the grounds that 'both of them are parodying themselves, and that this is the essence of "Camp"'. In fact, it looks as though the word she is seeking throughout her essay is the somewhat unfashionable term 'irony'. For irony to become camp a further dimension is required, to do with gender roles and sexuality; and Bacarisse shows no sign of believing that such a dimension exists in Cervantes. This may, indeed, be the major *difference* between the parodic modes of Cervantes and Puig.²

There are times when one feels an overwhelming urge to expand the boundaries of what is meant when one speaks of 'gay literature', or the 'gay novel', at least as far as to include not only representations of queer people by writers of whichever sexual orientation, but also characters who are merely regarded by others as being, even slightly, 'strange' in ways related if not to sexuality itself, then to gender identity or marital status. Let me try to clarify this point in relation to one example, that of Henry Tilney, in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (finished in 1803 but not published until 1818).³

It seems to have been clear to Austen that there are two branches of discourse, the male – which regarded itself as the serious mainstream – and the female – which men regarded as trivial and marginal. There is a men's way of talking and a women's. What makes Henry Tilney perfect in the role of suitor to Catherine Morland is that he does not fit the pattern; and what makes John Thorpe odious is that he does. When Thorpe takes Catherine out for a drive, his conversation ('or rather talk') is completely taken up with dreary anecdotes about horse races and boasts about his own prowess at betting, shooting and hunting (p. 85). Catherine is bored. On the other hand, what makes Henry Tilney such pleasant company is that he is not so single-mindedly wrapped up in what Jane Austen sees as entirely male concerns. He is both able and willing to meet women on their own ground. Thus, when Mrs Allen asks him, apropos of the gown she is wearing, 'Do you understand muslins, sir?', he is able to give an informed reply about both quality and cost. Mrs Allen is impressed by the extent to which he differs in this respect from her husband ('I can never get Mr Allen to know one of my gowns from another'). Wanting to hear more of this prodigy of approachable masculinity, she asks him what he thinks of Catherine's dress. His reply – 'It is very pretty, madam . . . but I do not think it will wash well; I am afraid it will fray' – is so unusual that, for all the equanimity of her lightheartedness, Catherine appears to be a bit shocked by it: "How can you," said Catherine, laughing, "be so –" she had almost said, strange'.

While not wishing to make too much of this scene (pp. 49–50), I do feel that it betrays a slight shudder of anxiety, in Catherine, of course, but also, perhaps, in Jane Austen herself. To be sure, Catherine respects the aspect of Henry which this conversation reveals, partly because she too has experience of not fitting snugly into her gender role. (We know that, as a child, she was a tomboy – p. 37.) But by virtue of the fact that she is almost rude enough to call him 'strange' – and that the rudeness of the epithet is proven by her suppression of it – we can see that Henry has come close to a point of true strangeness, where eccentricity threatens to become transgressive. Why, he is so strange that he is almost . . . not the marrying kind.

Remember that in Austen's world a single man above a certain age – a bachelor, though, not a widower – is a very strange figure indeed, particularly if he has chosen to live in that condition. It may be that the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), so famous for its irony, is not ironic at all. Or rather, it is ironic only at a superficial level. 'It is a truth

universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' The hyperbole of the first six words does not undo the fact that the rest of the sentence is meant in earnest. While I admit that the scene in *Northanger Abbey* may not quite conjure up the extreme of homosexuality, it certainly does raise the issue of effeminacy in men. Probably, Austen is thinking of that eighteenth-century brand of effeminacy which involved liking women's company too much, rather than not enough; but what matters – both in the scene in question and at this stage in my argument – is that, allowed to become extreme, such effeminacy might make a man unmarriedable. Briefly, subliminally, Jane Austen has conjured up the spectacle of Henry Tilney *dressed in drag*.

Jane Austen does refer to buggery at least once, however. There is a moment in *Mansfield Park* (1814) when Mary Crawford, a relatively worldly woman brought up among naval folk, lets slip an obscene joke while genteelly disclaiming responsibility for doing so. She says: 'Certainly, my home at my uncle's brought me acquainted with a circle of admirals. Of *Rears* and *Vices*, I saw enough. Now do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat.' All Edmund can gravely say in reply is 'It is a noble profession.'⁴ This joke – Mary Crawford's and Jane Austen's – should be appreciated in the context of the fact that, after the 1797 mutinies at the Nore and the Spithead, executions for buggery were greatly increased by the Navy.⁵ Mary's crude remark has a degree of topicality.

Perhaps the narrative moment at which anxieties about insecure manifestations of masculinity are most commonly aired (and more and more so later, as the homosexual *Bildungsroman* begins to flourish in the twentieth century) is when a boy begins to arouse the suspicions of his elders, that he is failing to attain the virile goals demanded of him by the mere fact of his sex. The spectre of the over-protected boy is conjured up in the third chapter of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) in the person of Arthur Graham, a child in danger of being permanently weakened by his excessively solicitous mother.⁶ That, at least, is the opinion of Mrs Markham, the mother of the narrator. When little Arthur's mother says she does not like to leave him alone at home when she goes out, Mrs Markham replies: 'You should try to suppress such foolish fondness, as well to save your son from ruin as yourself from ridicule.' Clearly, ruin is a somewhat extreme extrapolation from close parenting, and Mrs Markham does not specify what kind of ruin it is that she is predicting as the outcome of 'spoiling the child'; but the main point here appears to be the one which would be made more explicit and become a matter of even greater popular anxiety in the twentieth century: boys with over-loving mothers are liable to end up leading unmanly manhoods.

The two mothers' opposed views develop into a discussion or, as the chapter's title has it, 'A Controversy'. When it transpires that Mrs Graham has been nurturing in her son a distaste for wine – so as to save him from at least one 'degrading vice' in adulthood – Mrs Markham is reduced to tears of laughter. Wiping her eyes, she says: 'I really gave you credit for having more sense – The poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him, if you persist in –'. Mrs Graham interrupts at this point, but it is the first half of Mrs Markham's last sentence that is of interest. The over-protected boy's upbringing appears to be raising the possibility that his mother will 'make of him' a man who is flawed.

As their argument continues, Mrs Markham makes her point for a third time, now more explicitly: 'Well, but you will treat him like a girl – you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him – you will indeed, Mrs Graham, whatever you may think.' This is the crux of the issue. The suitable upbringing for a boy is different from that for a girl: less interventive at the parenting stage, but more so at the schooling. If a boy is treated 'like a girl' – narrowly, in the context of this chapter, if his mother refuses to leave him at home