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S.C. Lucier

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“ONCE FAMOUS IN AN ODD WAY”  
CURIOSITY AND QUEERNESS IN LATE 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY AMERICAN MALE  
IMPERSONATION

by

S. C. LUCIER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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Curiosity and Queerness in Late 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Male Impersonation

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

“Once Famous in an Odd Way”  
Curiosity and Queerness in Late 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Male Impersonation

by

S. C. Lucier

Advisor: Christopher Schmidt

This thesis depicts the emergence of one particular iteration of the popular female actor within 19<sup>th</sup> century performance, the male impersonator, and identifies the ways in which this theatrical expression was related to and affected by similar amusements of the period. Public amusements of this period include a diversity of experiential entertainment that was primarily geared toward working and lower-middle class males. Included in these types of illegitimate theater is the variety hall. Male impersonators were the height of theatrical fashion not only in New York City, which is the focused landscape of this paper, but this type of act was also very popular in performance circuits around the United States and England. Female actors portraying men in this manner did not exist on the stage without context or meaning. They were both a result and a function of the time period and culture in which they performed. An overlooked piece of this influence was the genre of curiosity exhibition as it had developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

I will discuss the way in which the *curio* lens would be activated within the variety setting and explore how this lens may have functioned. The presences of curiosity culture affected the way in which the audience perceived a male impersonator on stage, but it also played a part in the public’s reception of the impersonator in her private life. Two of these

impersonators were women who pursued romantic relationships with other women throughout their lives: Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner. Hindle, the originator of American male impersonation, was even married to another woman on two occasions. The micro-transgressions that were committed by these two performers, both while acting on the stage and in their personal lives, are indicative of the ways in which the American audience would have received their act. This thesis serves to strengthen the connection between the curio object and female as an object on the stage. This curiosity obsession of Victorian culture is closely related to functions of recreational performance spaces in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and both of these institutional histories come together to form the arena in which the male impersonator enters the stage.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **ONCE FAMOUS IN AN ODD WAY**

There was a funeral on the Jersey City Heights the other day, and it brought together as mourner a dozen men and women who were once famous in an odd way on the American stage. They gathered in the little parlor of a pretty cottage; they sat for a little while around a handsome coffin; they talked in low and sad voices about the masses of flowers which were heaped upon the bier; they had a good word to say of the woman who lay dead among the palms, the roses and the smilax, and they seemed genuinely sorry for the chief mourner. The latter was a striking person in every way. Her face was masculine in all its lines; her eyes were gray, but lit with a kindly expression; her mouth was firmly cut, and though her lips quivered with emotion one could detect that this mourner was a woman of great mental fore and capabilities. She was probably between 45 and 50 years of age. Doubtless she had been in her prime an excellent type of what is called the dashing handsome girl. Once, indeed, audiences in every city in this country had gazed in wonderment and admiration upon her, and perhaps she is not yet entirely forgotten; but here she was a mourner by the side of her dead – that dead a pretty woman, and in life the wife of the woman who now shed tears over the coffin. That wife of a woman! The expression sounds absurd, yet it is absolutely, literally correct. Anny Ryan, the wife, was dead, and Annie Hindle, the female husband, was burying her. No stage romance is this, says the correspondent of the Chicago Herald, no fable of grotesque imagination, but simply proof anew that truth indeed is stranger than fiction. (“Wife of a Woman”)

Between the 1860s and 1890s, a popular theatrical expression emerged in which female actresses would dress as men and perform suggestive songs on the stage. The prospect alone is wildly exciting to imagine. But the reality of such performance becomes even more titillating as the subject is researched and details begin to unravel. The image of these female performers strutting about the stage in cropped hair and male attire, singing about women while smoking a cigar seems like it would have been far from an acceptable form of entertainment in the 19th century. But in fact, it was a staple of variety theater in the United States and England during the latter half of the 1800s (Rodger, *Male Impersonation* 4) And if you think that there couldn't possibly be elements of this story that are more unbelievable than the existence of respectable female cross dressing in 1870s America, then you'll be delighted to hear that the scandal you had firstly imagined may still come alive with our knowledge of select performer's personal lives. There were at least two of these male impersonators that were actively involved in romantic relationships with other women. In both cases, these relationships occurred quite publicly and consistently throughout their lives, based on their presence in newspaper articles and theatrical reviews of the period.

This introduction to the *Buffalo Evening News* article reporting the death of Annie Hindle's first wife (that's right, she had more than one) is a spectacular introduction to Hindle herself. It is written with a mysterious and engaging quality that sets the stage, so to speak, for the moment her name is finally revealed. This elaborate manner of writing solidly matches the grand and spectacular persona of Hindle. It helps illustrate the ways in which her stage presence and public persona often were conflated, ultimately forming what another article describes as this "strange figure on the American stage!" ("Wife of a Woman"). This was a figure that was

shrouded in the verbiage of the grotesque and was constantly in dialogue with the public through a lens of 19<sup>th</sup> century “curiosity.”

This exceptional area of exploration into those male impersonators who were, in fact, queer is centered around the two earliest and most famous performers of this period: Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner. Hindle (see fig.1) was notably the very first male impersonator to premiere on the New York stage and is largely responsible for the formation of the art form in its first iteration.



Fig. 1. Image of Annie Hindle from Rodger, Gillian M. *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010, p. 150.

She was very popular, and even published her own Song Book that was sold widely. Hindle was married to other women under the name Charles Hindle in two separate instances during her lifetime. She was written about in the newspapers on the basis of her private life with a newfound regularity in the late 1880s to early 1890s. However, her popularity as a performer and

the notoriety that came from her success as a male impersonator was nothing new. She had been mentioned repeatedly in *The New York Clipper* as the dominant performer in her field for the many years leading up to her first same-sex marriage (Rodger, *Just One* 50-53).

Ella Wesner (see fig.2) was another important figure of male impersonation in the 1870s, and like Hindle, participated in her own amount of same-sex scandal. She began her act after sharing a bill with Hindle as a ballet performer in New York. Wesner conducted a public affair with another woman by the name of Josie Mansfield.



Fig. 2. Image of Ella Wesner from; Sarony, Napoleon. *Ella Wesner*. c. 1880s. McClung Museum of Natural History, Knoxville. *McClung Museum of Natural History & Culture*, <https://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/1986-13-2-1/>. Accessed 17 March 2020.

The newspapers would use language that was hardly vague, reporting that “the only romance in her life was her well-known escapade with Josie Mansfield, the notorious” (Rodger, *Just One* 53). At one point, Wesner ran off to Europe with Mansfield and the gossip was reported on

explicitly. One reporter used the term “elopement” when describing the event, which certainly insinuates all elements of marital relations (55). Despite the similarities in Hindle and Wesner’s behavior, there is a distinct difference in how each of these performers were publicly treated in their stage careers despite the commonality they share in same-sex practices. The publicity that was generated from these same-sex affairs or marriages produced different effects in the lives of the impersonators. Wesner’s career continued rather unscathed after the elopement and she maintained praise and popularity. Hindle, on the other hand, was not as openly accepted for her commitments as a female husband. The reasons for this difference have been my driving inquiry throughout the investigation of the extraordinary lives of these two performing women.

### *Terminology*

The sensationalism of the verbiage surrounding Hindle’s persona, both in the advertisements for her acts and in the reporting of her identity as female husband, is notable. The aforementioned article reminds the reader of her successful career in very particular terms, stating that “audiences in every city in this country had gazed in wonderment and admiration upon her” when she was at the height of her career as a male impersonator. The reference to “wonderment” is specifically useful in identifying the kind of spectacle with which Hindle’s theatrical act was interpreted and referred to. And furthermore, language used to describe the scenario as “no fable of grotesque imagination” seems to continue this trend of hyperbolic flair. This last phrase may also contain a clue that signals the transgression of some kind of curio boundary with the use of the word “grotesque.” It strikes me that much of this heightened speech regarding her personal life is actually reflective of Hindle’s on-stage reputation, and it is being called upon because she occupied a similar persona in both realms. Hindle’s relationship with

society was consistently experienced through the way in which she had first been experienced on the stage. The novelty of her act had extended into the curiosity of her living style.

This connection that I am drawing between the male impersonator and novelty has much to do with what would have been learned behavior for an audience of the time period. The history of curio collection and public curiosity exhibition must be set as a foundation for this behavior. I turn to the work of Han-ying Liu, who has so comprehensively written about the development of this genre and speaks directly to the meaning of curiosity in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. I believe there are many elements of Liu's summary that compliment underlying themes of this thesis. The tradition of collecting special, rare, or strange objects became substantial in elite European culture by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The "cabinet of curiosities" develops due to the popularity of collecting. It is a phrase that elicits the image of imposing Victorian furniture, filled with unusual objects and taxidermized creatures (Liu 7). Curio cabinets exist with an important emphasis on the pleasure of *possessing*. Seemingly, the value that is placed on the object due to its otherness is transferred to its current owner through this possession. The object in this context is meant to inspire curiosity in others who are observing it. Another contributing factor in this trend is the rise of science in the public sphere, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This shift in societal consciousness fuels the curio interest as a means of dissection and classification of the natural world. Therefore, medical anomalies and other "monstrous" abnormalities in humans and animals were especially sought after. It is also important to note that female curiosities in particular could be highly sexualized, focusing on "abnormal" genitalia and other body parts (one might consider a link between curiosity and the objectification of the female body, which may contribute to the reception of male impersonation).

During this period, the private curio collection of the elite was transformed into exhibition for the public. This moment is an early ancestor of the modern-day history museum, though there are many differences in what the experience of such an institution would be like then and now. What I would identify as the strongest similarity is the use of diorama and setting of a complete natural environment that can still be witnessed in some modern institutions. The major difference is that the range of objects displayed in such a place as a curio exhibition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is much greater; there could be specimens or objects of curiosity in the same room as works of art, for instance. I would argue that the main purpose of the curio exhibition is public entertainment. People of the period would most likely be told the experience was primarily an edifying one. The intersection of education and entertainment is an important element of this story, which I will discuss in the first chapter more thoroughly.

Most importantly to understand about what I have just defined as curiosity within this period of time is its proximity to, and perhaps even a reliance on, performance as entertainment. We are no longer talking explicitly about inanimate objects as curio, but there is a show quality that is employed to heighten the atmosphere. The experience of the audience (whom I have purposefully not named “the visitor”) inside a curio exhibition is paramount; the primary goal is to elicit wonder, awe, and excitement. “Hence, in the nineteenth century, ‘cabinets of curiosities’ entailed not merely a category of exhibition, but also specific forms of public performance in which the natural and the artificial overlapped, and in which anomaly was emphasized, eulogized, and eroticized” (Liu 8). Moving forward, we can view curiosity as specific to this culture and upholding certain qualities. In an exhibition or performance of such a nature, there is a function utilized that results in audience wonderment. This participation in curiosity is a learned response that was well established within the culture by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In this way, the collective history of curiosity as an experience must factor significantly into the public's interpretation of the of the variety hall stage. In the case of the male impersonator, curiosity may even be an element that is utilized by the performer to achieve success in her act. However, although there is a relationship between performer and audience, there may not be an equality in the exchange between the two. The experience is more one-sided, the viewer never leaving their own worldview and fundamentally classifying the subject (or, object) as "other." Indeed, in the construct of amusements that are built upon this premise of experiencing novelty, the lines between male impersonator as a subject and the object of the curio cabinet seem to blur. There is an active element of curiosity in which we are asked as an onlooker to identify, classify, or authenticate what we are experiencing. This framework of criticality separates the viewer and the subject into a nearly dialectic relationship, helping to define the audience in the ways in which they differ from the thing they are evaluating. It is a polarizing, yet self-defining experience and it is the lifeblood of "curiosity." I am identifying this specific, active interaction as one that is experienced through a *curio lens*. It is obviously that this lens is activated during the curiosity experience, such as the earliest exhibitions, but I argue that it can be used in settings outside of the exhibition also. What would it mean, for example, to identify the curio lens as being active in Hindle and Wesner's audience while on stage? What if the queer and curious nature of their private lives and same-sex behavior also activated this lens?

Firstly, Wesner and Hindle were women, the definition of which was bounded by the constructions of their time. There is obviously a connection between objects and women in the realm of curiosity. Interestingly, this relationship extends itself to theatrical performance as well. The evolution of women in the realm of theater has been complicated. In the beginning of the 19th century, women were not allowed to participate as audience members in performance



spaces. The development of women as patrons of public amusements had great effect on theatrical performance (Butsch 383-396). One can see how the relationship between viewer and subject can be challenged when the male gaze begins to lose dominance within the space. This friction within the theatrical realm is further complicated by class politics and morality battles as they play out throughout the century. All of these elements can begin to contextualize the complexities of the female actor in public amusement space.

Furthering that environmental understanding, one can begin to appreciate the especially rich layers at play when discussing the existence of a female actor who is portraying a male for public amusement. Was the male impersonator an anomaly in an otherwise dense history of theatre as a gymnasium for the minds of solo men? Since the majority of theatrical performances in New York City in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were exclusive for male audiences, the subject matter of the stage was geared toward their visual pleasure. It seems impossible to imagine that a female actor, even a male impersonator, would be excused from this history of gendered gaze. Could the impersonator be considered slightly more authentic as an artistic expression than her predecessors due to the gender complications presented by the act itself? The characteristic of the theater as a public sphere began to evolve into “respectable” houses with a mixed-gender audience in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps this gradual development of the arena into legitimization allowed for the male impersonator to occur in the first place. With these questions in mind, exploring the ways in which Hindle and Wesner satisfy the curio figure may help to illuminate how the male impersonator would have been interpreted by the public.

### *Existing Scholarship*

Authors who have examined the life of impersonators like Hindle have done well to contextualize her persona in multiple ways. Situating male impersonation within the culture of the period, as well as identifying the unique ways in which multiple layers of gender identity affect the profession, are imperative. In her work, *A Character Singer in Male Attire: Annie Hindle in America 1868-1886*, Rachel C. Ace thoroughly dissects the subject. She attempts to legitimize the same-sex relationships in Hindle's personal life by utilizing modern queer framework to assert that homosexuality was overtly present in the public act of male impersonation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ace's thesis builds upon the work of scholars who are musicologists as well as historians, such as Rodger. This area and method of study is congruent with the most potent primary sources available; typical analysis of Hindle and other male impersonators tends to occur through the reading of songs and lyrics that have survived through history. Information of this nature can be found in published songbooks of the period or contextually gleaned from contemporary reviews of the performance. It is easy to see why these scholars have done so much work through this channel and in conjunction with complex historical frameworks. However, the heavy influence that both the museum exhibition and its extension into the theatrical lecture have had on male impersonation has been overlooked.

My goal is to use the work already applied to women such as Wesner and the "strange life" of Hindle and complicate their public and private personas through the lens of queerness and curiosity. between the realms of theatre and museum. I agree with Ace that the public understanding of male impersonation and cross dressing could have been overtly suggestive of same-sex identity for the many women who chose to express themselves outwardly to the world in male clothing. However, I identify more strongly with Rodger's foundation in the public

consciousness of the period. When studying such a complex subject, it is important to keep front of mind that it is a difficult thing to accurately translate our contemporary language and understanding onto historical figures and their behaviors. There are layers of experience, culture and identity awareness that prevent full assimilation between historical fact and speculative accuracy. In addition to the ways in which these authors attempt to contextualize the subject of male impersonation (and Hindle/Wesner in particular), I turn to the theatrical history and museology traditions to explore another aspect of this experience. I argue that figures such as these – theatrical performers living a life in the public eye who also engaged in same-sex relationships in their personal lives – were subjected to an additional layer of public critique. A primary force behind that layer is the influence of cultural *curio* and its function as a lens through which Hindle and Wesner are experienced as both a character and an individual.

The female actor of this period seems to be used as an object, one which the male audience members may project complex intersections of class politics and male identity. Through the performance of specific characteristics, or the absence thereof, the impersonator could evoke a sense of belonging in the male audience. This might be accomplished by poking fun at a representative figure from a different class that the audience could collectively laugh at. The impersonator could also perform a song that would act as gender commentary by playing out characteristics that were manly or unmanly. Details of these roles and how they might function will be discussed in chapter two. One byproduct of these dynamic identities at play within the performance is awe. This is the same reaction in the experience of curiosity. In one instance, describing Annie Hindle, Rodger states that her success “lay in her ability to perform a kind of magic on the stage through her realistic portrayal of male characters and quick changes of costume. To the men in her audience who thought of women as the naturally weaker sex and as

being fundamentally different from men, Hindle's act elicited wonder and amazement" (Rodger, *Just One* 31). It is specifically the usage of words like "magic" and "wonder" that have led me to the understanding that there is a vital connection between the genre of curiosity and the performance of male impersonation.

As with anything spectacularly curious, there is a fine line between what may be considered harmless wonder and what is potentially dangerous. Once her queerness became a reality outside the realm of the theatrical, the tone with which Hindle was publicly regarded began to shift. Overall, it is the combination of these two aspects of her life, both public and private, and their intersection with her queer identity that allow for such an interesting case study. Hindle and Wesner's lives both on and off the American stage were lived in dialogue with the parameters of male impersonation and what that dominant piece of their identities allowed for in the context of mainstream culture. Rodger summates the type of character that was often portrayed and with complex relationship to the audience:

They were, if anything, the antithesis of middle-class masculinity. These men were sexually active and boasted about their conquests, they drank and smoked—often to excess—and if they mentioned work at all, it was depicted as being less important than the avid pursuit of leisure.... The men depicted by Hindle and Wesner represented a fantasy to the men in their audience, but sometimes Hindle and Wesner also spoke to them as equals, giving them advice in relation to courtship and life in general. (Rodger, *Just One* 37)

Male audience members of the lower- and working- class were fascinated, and indeed titillated, by the novelty of male impersonation. They were drawn to a kind of queering of the body in which their preconception, and perhaps even desires, were played out subversively. It is for this

reason I would say that the experience of witnessing male impersonation on the stage closely relates to the cabinets of curiosity exhibitions that were the main museum event of the time period. All of the same mechanisms are activated in both the audience that is viewing the male impersonator on stage and the participant at the curiosity exhibition. Within the audience of both kinds of performances, wonderment is elicited by means of sensational otherness; the female who is performing maleness is likened to a curio object observed with otherworldly excitement.

One of the most important reasons why the curio lens is so applicable to Hindle specifically is the way in which she seemingly transgressed it by publicly becoming a female husband. I will be citing the obvious changes in the language used by newspaper articles to describe her once her same-sex marriages were made public. (Hindle retired from her life on stage upon her first marriage to another woman, an action she may have felt necessary if this was indeed considered transgressive.) Wesner never fully committed that transgression with something as scandalous and conclusive as public female husbandry. She was written about with the name linguistic clues as Hindle: “Ella Wesner... As one writer has observed, ‘Miss Wesner is remarkable, and with every appearance she excites more and more the wonder of her audience...she appears to be a man, though after all only one of the gentler sex’” (“Cues”). These fluctuating similarities and differences make Wesner a noteworthy contrast to Hindle in both her personal and professional lives.

### *Scope*

There are a few ways in which I will examine Annie Hindle and Ella Wesner as an example of this curio lens. Articles from the last decade of Hindle’s life are a fascinating example of created identity. The repetitive way in which “facts” about her life are listed over

time and a focus on the oddity of her identity speak to the very specific way in which she was perceived by the public. There is also the fact that Hindle's and Wesner's onstage personas continued into their personal life, a duality that is particular to these two as male impersonators. This strange sameness between public/private experience is heightened by the ways in which Hindle's legend as a character actor was extended into articles regarding her personal life. In Wesner's case, the criticism of her personal life was less intense, perhaps due to her choices to avoid direct confrontation with societal norms. The curio lens also brings to life smaller aspects of their experiences. For Hindle, it is in the odd presence and repetition of an origin story and the performativity regarding personal information in news articles. For both, as expressed through newspaper articles and candid remarks, it is in the sub-textual presence of a hidden identity.

### *Organization*

Chapter 1 will lay out a brief history of the American Dime Museum and track the emergence of lecture hall theaters. This connection relates directly to the inclusion of women as consumers of these types of entertainment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The feminization of the theater, as explored by Allen and Butsch, is an important part of this transformation, which allowed for women to eventually become members of the theatrical audience in both legitimate (upper class) and illegitimate (working class) theatrical spaces (Snyder 26). Prior to this evolution, the theater was an environment strictly attended by men, where women were either actors on the stage or sex workers in the third gallery. Male impersonators come into existence in the variety hall setting, which has already begun the transition of this "re-gendering of theater" (Butsch 374).

Tangential to this environment is the existence of the Freak Show and Human Zoo, in which animals and non-white people were subject to being displayed as curiosities for the edutainment

of the audience (Allen 64).<sup>1</sup> All of these elements help to form a more complete image of what the experience between audience and performer may have been like, especially in the case of male impersonation on stage.

In the second chapter, I will explore the ways in which Hindle and Wesner were received by the American audience in the early portion of their careers. The language used to describe their acts and sometimes more personal details were very telling of their personas. These personas were both public characters on the stage and extensions of that character into their personal lives. I will examine the ways in which the male impersonation art form was unique to these performers and the ways in which they may have been experienced by the audience and also how they experienced the culture themselves. It is of course impossible to completely separate the figures that these women portrayed on the American stage and the queer expression that was documented in their private lives. Arguments from other scholars differ regarding the extent to which this queerness was overt and accepted within the popular culture. This chapter will conclude with the shift of perception that seems to have taken place, particularly for Hindle, after the curiosity of her public persona was overcome by the explicit queerness of her private life. After the marriage to her first wife, newspapers were eager to report the scandal that was her overt female husbandry. Hindle took a break from her life of variety performance to live with her new bride in the suburbs of New Jersey. It wasn't until her wife passed away that Hindle was once again a subject in the newspapers. This time, language and repetition were utilized to

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<sup>1</sup>There were a good number of skilled performers that were billed on the basis of their otherness. In her book *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima*, Rodger identifies this connection between the curiosity museum and the variety stage. "The presence of Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and other 'exotic' performers on the variety stage provides an early link to museum exhibits such as those presented by P.T. Barnum. A central part of the appeal of Barnum's show was that it challenged the audience to examine the item presented and determine its authenticity for themselves" (43). This otherness was often the only way in which performers who were not white would have been able to participate in theatrical expression. It is interesting to note that performers in these particular acts that require no vocalization facilitate a particularly potent method of objectification.

simultaneous harken to curiosity of her past and expose the boundary transgression that had transformed her mystique into the grotesque.



## CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORIES LEADING TO MALE IMPERSONATION AS CURIO

### *Part 1: The Dime Museum and The Variety Theater*

There is a strong historical connection that exists between the museum exhibition and the theater. It is within the space of museology and “curiosity” that theatre evolved into a respectable pastime. This transition has much to do with women, both as members of the audience and as performers on the stage. In order to understand the connection between museums, theaters, and women in 19th century New York City, one must examine these multiple histories. I will begin by examining the transformation of the curio cabinet, followed by the emergence of American museum exhibition as it intersects with, and then diverges from, theatrical performance. The most formative moment in this transition that happened within this period relates directly to the inclusion of women in the realm of live theater as audience, participant, and performer.

#### *The Dime Museum*

The relationship between museum exhibition and the general public has always possessed the potential for positive and powerful affection, whether or not that power has been used with pure intentions. The most common forms of public entertainment were perhaps the most precarious of these establishments. Known as Dime Museums, these institutions were one small step backwards on the evolutionary ladder from places like Barnum’s famous American Museum and even The American Museum of Natural History. They were the public exhibition expression of the Victorian Cabinet of Curiosities, and the most popular form of leisure for the middle class during its time (Canedo 25). Museums (and libraries) had originally been formed in the image of upper-class learning institutions for scholars. However, there was a shift in the goal of these organizations when the first museums and libraries are formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a civic

focus of educating the lower classes emerged. Notably, they were frequently visited and so would be considered a cornerstone of amusement activity of the period. In this segment from her book, *Weird and Wonderful: The Origin and Development of the Dime Museum in America*, Andrea Dennett notes the wide popularity of the Dime Museum. Dennett also describes the physical space itself, touching on important qualities of the audience experience that make the curiosity exhibition collectively performative.

No previous amusement had ever appealed to such a diversified audience or integrated so many diversions under one roof. The process of uniting individual amusements and marketing them as a single “walk-through” entertainment, suitable for the entire family, was what made the dime museum business novel. In a sense it was an environmental entertainment, with fixed exhibits but mobile spectators who could organize their own journey through the museum. The arrangement of space at a dime museum, with cabinets located along the periphery and in the center of the room, created an environment which made it impossible to view an exhibit without looking at other spectators. In such environmental entertainment spaces, the crowd becomes part of the performance, an important aspect of the experience. (2)

Beyond the literal description of space that Dennett gives here, evaluating the public experience at these establishments is best described with one word that was used heavily by P.T. Barnum and other owners of Dime Museums: “edutainment.” This word, a combination of education and entertainment, summarized the sentiment that the museum institution brings knowledge and worldly understanding to the middle-class public by making the experience of visiting and paying for the museum exhibition engaging and enticing. This term persists, whether or not the

“learning” is the truth, and obviously, in its originating period, at the devastatingly morbid exploitation of living beings and objects alike. The combination of these two things successfully defined the unique goal and purpose of the museum and continues to do so today. The specific makeup of edutainment is a balance that varies by time period and is also unique to each institution. The museums of the past being much more heavily dependent on the marketability of their entertainment, for example, rather than education. Here is where the connection between museum and theater begins.

New York City is unique in its robust history of edutainment. Unlike the other major cities of the North, New York did not have laws in place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that effectively limited theatrical performance and questionable entertainment. Warring class identities instigated a separation in forms of performance and entertainment. Naturally, the upper class wished to impose moralistic guidelines onto popular amusements like Dime Museums. In most cases, however, the press that voiced public disapproval served as free advertisement and tended to benefit the “showman” like Barnum more than discouraging the middle class from participating. And as the upper class began to more strictly identify themselves with opera, and legitimate theater, the live performances that were available for the masses at museums helped develop theatrical practices like variety and later vaudeville (Erdman 9-10).

In the early 1840s Moses Kimball was the first to open what was effectively a theatre in The Boston Museum, a geographical community that was sensitive to the immoralities that entertainment might easily attract. He was successful in this endeavor by calling the auditorium a “portrait gallery,” which served as an extension of the museum’s authoritative claim that depicted the space as “a collection of paintings, sculpture, and natural history artifacts and presented itself as an educational institution” (Allen 62). Barnum followed suit by opening a

theatre in his American Museum, and similarly called it a “lecture hall.” Opposition to the theatrical experience was skirted by use of this academic language, which served to perpetuate an inaccurate depiction of the museum as an institution based firmly in the innovative and nearly righteous field of modern science, in conjunction with a façade of moral dignity. Morality plays were the first to grace these types of halls, which helped to prove to audiences that attending such performances was respectable and, more importantly, secured female patrons.

If museums have a certain top-down power over the edutainment of the masses, it may be said that theater experiences an inverse relationship in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Variety halls and other spaces in which entertainment is the primary goal are formed as a direct response to the wants, beliefs, and experiences of the masses. Theaters are a public forum, or type of commons, in which the relationship between audience and performer is more lateral. This is especially true in theaters as they are described in the early 1800s, and the introduction of gradual respectability is a century-long process: “In the 1820s, theater was a male club...The men were boisterous and demanding; they drank, smoked, and met prostitutes. By the 1890s, however, women were the primary theatergoers at what had become the middle- and upper-class ‘legitimate’ theater...” (Butsch 374). Unlike museums, which tended to be produced by those with the most social power and then was handed in a downward motion to consumers of lower status, theater is a more circular exchange. With this concept in mind and considering the mass recreational dominance they had at the time, we can extract great meaning from the types of performances that were presented to the lower classes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What is most interesting is the portrayal of women on the Vaudevillian stage and the ways in which gender, class, and culture were expressed by the community via a projection onto the female body in this sphere.

In Barnum's American Museum, there was a significant range of objects and artifacts on display on any given day. The curiosity exhibition was not strictly defined, especially when it came to human exhibits or freaks: "In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the blurred distinction between species and freaks of nature became moot; all human exhibits, including tribal people of normal stature and body configuration, as well as people who performed unusual feats such as swallowing swords, fell under the generic term *freak*" (Bogdan 7). Barnum's freak show was renowned, and the monetization of this otherness made him quite rich. In fact, the first human curiosity that Barnum made money off of "showing" was an African American woman named Joice Heth. Barnum toured this woman as if she were his property, claiming that she was as old as 181 years of age and therefore a natural wonder. Reiss writes about the nauseating experience and reflects on Barnum's own words, saying, "He [Barnum] delights in contriving ingenious methods to compel her to work when she resists his control; he even pulls out all her teeth to make her look older (a claim he would later deny)" (Reiss 4). The worst indignity which befell this poor woman occurred after her death, which was monopolized into media coverage that would help propel Barnum further into stardom and monetize every step in the process. "In order to gratify public curiosity... Barnum arranged to have an autopsy performed in public (charging 50 cents admission, of course). Over a thousand spectators gathered around a surgical table... and watched as the respected surgeon David L. Rogers carved into her body" (Reiss 3). Here we see the familiar continuation of exploitation and can identify this way in which public edutainment could be perverted through the curio lens.

In a culture in which this type of entertainment was so prevalent in museums and in lecture halls, it would be difficult for an audience to experience theater without the subconscious presence of this familiar, objectifying interaction. The experience of interacting with all things,

living and nonliving, as objects is therefore greatly influential. This history of objectifying people in the same manner as curio objects is extended into the experience of male impersonators. Audiences would have naturally interacted with a curiosity performance such as this with the same objectification; to witness the act of male impersonation would mean to experience the performer through “wonder” while actively attempting to authenticate the subject as if she were a curio object.

### ***Part 2: Theater in the United States Leading to the arrival of Hindle***

Victorian male impersonators are a fascinating performance tradition in the United States and Europe. Trouser roles could be witnessed as in performances of early variety theater, and later also in the vaudevillian tradition of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first iteration of the trouser role, or male impersonating “masher,” was performed by female actors in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s. Male impersonators are regarded as somewhat respectable acts that exist within an elevated, moralistic period of the American theater, even though they were considered to be on the “illegitimate” side of performance. It is difficult for a contemporary reader to conceptualize the context of a performance of this nature without a fuller understanding of its context.

Theatrical expression in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was still finding its footing, and disagreements surrounding the culture of the stage as a public spectacle were prevalent. Live performance as a form of entertainment was meant explicitly for the male audience member in the early 1800s and society did not allow for female participation as patrons. Women were allowed to occupy only two places in the theater at this time, either performing on the stage or conducting business as a sex worker in the third gallery (Allen 52). The installation of women in these two specific roles are actually similar to one another. In both cases, the woman is the

object. She is there as a peripheral participant in the world dominated by the male experience. This idea is enforced by the ways in which the theater business operated as an institution. Sex workers entered the theater via a side door about an hour before the public opening of the house. The presence of these women was regarded as though it was an expected service provided by the venue (Allen 52). With this atmospheric knowledge of the theatrical world, it is easy to understand the mental association between acting and prostitution that was generally believed by the public, a sentiment that sometimes persists to this day. On one hand, female actors were unique in the sense that they were allowed to speak within this sphere. On the other, the objectification of their bodies placed them in close consideration to the women on the other side of the theater.

Forcing women into domesticity and charging them with dominion over the private life left all interaction with the public space to the men. Considering this as reasonable justification to market entertainments and amusements solely to a male audience, it also stands to reason that women in this space would be immediately considered controversial to the order. It is for this reason that sex workers and female actors were thought of so similarly. In both professions that women occupied in the theater at this time, they are objectified primarily for their physical attributes. Additionally, female actors were not solely considered the same as sex workers because their profession was equated through similar action or interaction, but the two roles were also grouped together in public consciousness simply because of their existence in the public sphere dominated by men. One final consideration for the treatment and interpretation of women in this space is that the behavior of the female-bodied that occupied this space were atypical. They used their bodies in ways that were innately un-womanly, whether it was acting on a public stage or soliciting explicit sexual acts. In these ways, both figures exhibit an opposition to

respected female ideals of the time and the common elements of their existence categorize them together. Understanding the specific gender dynamics that were at play in the theater during the first half of the 19th century is crucial to evaluating the complexity with which the audience might interpret a male impersonator on the stage in the latter half.

An important moment in the conflicting and competing moralities of the time was the passing of legislation commonly referred to as the Anti-Concert Saloon Bill of 1862. This bill is significant in the historical shaping of the theatrical environment because it specifically targeted elements of the performance experiences available to New York City patrons that were objectifying women within that space. This bill sought to separate the performance from the saloon setting. It accomplished this by making it impossible for a single business to hold both a theatrical license and a liquor license. It also made it illegal to serve or consume alcohol in the theater's auditorium or any adjoining room of the property. Although this was specifically targeted at the concert saloon establishments, the bill also affected the business of many local theaters by removing their ability to serve alcohol and operate as a bar either in conjunction with or parallel to the theatrical experience. Rodgers has called this bill a "watershed moment in the history of variety entertainment" due to the repercussions of its enactment (*Champagne Charlie* 60). The most significant change that would occur within the structure of theatrical entertainment had to do with this refocusing of the space. By making the performance itself the sole activity that was legally allowed to take place within the theater, a new pressure was placed on the success of the acts. To combat this need for attractive entertainment that was liked by a good majority of the audience and available at all open hours, theaters shifted fully into the variety format.



With a glimpse of how performance spaces changed after the implementation of the Anti-Concert Saloon Bill, let us look at the spaces as they existed before the 1860s. There are two specific types of spaces in which performance was occurring in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the qualities of the audience experience within these spaces, both were critical in the formation and evolution of theater at this time. One influential predecessor of the variety theater is the concert saloon (see fig.3). Saloons were different from the theater as we might think of it today for a few reasons. Firstly, they are actually an evolution of a popular form of participatory entertainment that took place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, known as “free and easies.” These were male spaces in which working class participants could drink alcohol and join in communal singing.

Entertainment in the smaller resorts was often presented on a stage erected at one end of the room. Sometimes this stage was no more than a raised platform standing unadorned against the wall. Some of these places charged a general admission fee of from six to twelve cents. Other places charged no admission at all, making their profit strictly on the sale of drinks, smokes, food, and the operation of gambling tables. (Zellers 35)

Concert saloons served a similar purpose as this but with the addition of female entertainment and newly popular “waiter girls.” Performances spaces, such as ballet and tableau vivant. Ballets were an exciting act because ballet dancers typically wore tight costumes that showed their legs and the lines of their figures during movement. Tableau vivant, which is the living creation of popular still life paintings or scenes from history and mythology, was equally prone to portray the female form in various stages of undress.



Fig. 3. New York concert saloon. “A Broadway Sunday Sacred Concert In New York.” 1859.

Print. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-067b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>. Accessed 17 March 2020.

It is worth noting that amusements such as these, all of which focus primarily on anatomical exhibition, were considered disreputable amusement. This categorization is due to a moralistic problematizing of the female body in public, mostly put forth by the socially influential upper class. “The fact that the concert saloons featured a kind of particularly tawdry, low-end theatre as well as liquor and the new fad of “waiter girls” – and, in the minds of many, prostitution – was too much for many so-called respectable people to bear” (McNamara 12). The key components of a saloon experience were the participatory atmosphere and the collective female objectification, making it susceptible to being negatively affected by the Bill. Eliminating the sale of alcohol in such a space would be devastating unless a more substantial theatrical offering, made possible by the variety format, could be achieved.

The second type of performance that is directly contributory to the evolution of variety theater is that of the novelty act. It is difficult to successfully and definitively isolate one certain type of theatrical performance another in this period, because the entertainment experiences that were available were so interconnected. Performers were regularly moving between different kinds of halls and theaters to perform their acts, or sometimes they performed different genres of acts depending on the opportunities of the season. This kind of interconnectedness would have provided a commonality in all performance types, leading to similar relationships between audience and performer in each setting. Therefore, many different kinds of acts solicited a similar participation from the audience. Novelty acts cannot be explicitly separated from a variety act such as male impersonation. The kinds of performances that would be considered novelty acts were typically those based in circus including trapeze, acrobatics, tight rope walking, and various gymnasts, but really the term could be applied to many artforms. One frequent variation of such an act is the inclusion of animals, an element that is regularly shared with museum and curiosity exhibitions of the time. Unlike concert saloons, novelty acts attempted to hold the attention of an audience using a bit more theatrical substance and not as much explicit objectification. This made them the natural option for performance opportunities in concert saloons following the implementation of the Bill. The rise of the variety format meant that audiences of this period were witnessing all kinds of curio entertainments in the same physical theatrical space. The prevalence of these kinds of acts and the frequency with which they were encountered in late 19<sup>th</sup> century is imperative to the understanding of male impersonation. It would be difficult for the audience to relinquish that curio lens even when that curiosity interaction is not an explicit function of the experience (like it would be in a museum

exhibition, for instance). One can now see a strong connection between novelty acts or museum curio and male-impersonating actors on the variety stage.

Male impersonation does utilize the presence of language as a foundational method of performance, which is a key difference from curio acts or exhibitions. This does not necessarily mean that there is less objectification occurring between audience and subject. It does, however, indicate the potential for a more complex dialogic relationship in addition to objectification. As I have stated, there are multiple settings in which the curio lens was activated during public entertainment of this time. It would have been very difficult for an audience of this culture to have separated themselves from the history of curiosity in entertainment. I therefore believe the curio lens was a functioning aspect of audience participation for many, if not all, public amusements.

### ***Part 3: Male Impersonators***

The very first thing to note about the male impersonator are the basic understandings of what the act is. Notably, the performer is meant to be obviously female gendered in the eyes of the audience. During the early period, she usually portrays a male of lower or middle class, and the act consists of various songs and banter. Each song is divided by a quick change into another costume, and therefore character. The performer is judged on certain skills like singing ability, stage presence, and the quickness of her costume changes. Because she is not meant to be convincingly male, the impersonator exists in a land ripe with double entendre. This separation of projected gender from reality is immensely important for the palatability of the act. Today, this expression would be instantly synonymous with queer sub-culture; however, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the separation of a female performer from her gender was an obscuring device that

made the scenario safe. The divergence from female gender as it was being presented on stage helped to put some distance between this new kind of performance and the older concepts of women as actors and sex workers in the theatrical realm. This not only made the exchange more respectable; it also allowed the impersonator to portray a more complicated

This form of theater was safe in the sense that it was socially allowed, but that does not mean that it was not provocative. On the contrary! This type of performance was well documented in theatrical reviews and newspaper articles. Oftentimes the press, and therefore the public at large, expressed fervent opinions regarding male impersonators. The degree to which the general male population felt obligated to comment is eerily familiar. Throughout her research across multiple books and articles, Rodger has compiled a great amount of information on the lives and acts of these male impersonators. She includes examples of these strong responses, adding to the complexity of understanding the male impersonators relationship with society.

Style of performance and types of characters that were portrayed by mashers evolved over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The division of theatrical patronage between the middle/upper and working/lower-middle class greatly influenced the type of live entertainment that developed in New York City in general. Interestingly, early burlesque was one of the first forms of mass entertainment. This is true well into the 1860s, primarily due to the ease with which topical parody had the ability to transverse male cultural divides. That is why in the theater of the 1860s and 70s, female actors in early masher performances usually portrayed middle class men. Once there was a sufficient amount of tension between different ethnic groups of the working and lower-middle class, this depiction became more problematic.

The end of the Civil War and the subsequent economic depression that occurred in the 1870s disrupted this communal experience. An influx of immigrants to the city, combined with

the economic hardships newly prevalent in the depression, forced the emergence of a strata of socio-economic groups and it formed on cultural lines. The American-born, “white” males moved into managerial roles and attempted to separate themselves from incoming workers. Suddenly, the parody of the lower and middle-class trouser role was not a unifying trope. Instead of being the variety show everyone could enjoy, the middle-class masher was made uncomfortable by an audience who wanted to be identified as strictly separate from one another. It is for this reason that the masher began to portray male characters of the upper class beginning in the 1880s. The rich were still the one group that everyone else could agree to make fun of.

### *Songs*

Nearly all of the scholarship concerning male impersonation on the American variety stage has been conducted by musicologists. This route of historical exploration is fitting when you consider the materials available to be studied. It was common practice for character performers of this period to be the authors of their own songs. They would often carry a single book with them as they toured each theater which contained the lyrics to the numbers in their act. The performer would share this book with the musicians they would be playing with and take it away with them when the run was finished. Understanding the intimacy with which a performer interacted with her songs illustrates how incredible it would be to have such definitive primary source material to be working with. In 1870, *The Annie Hindle Songster* was published by F.A. Brady in New York. An important note about songster publications is that they often include monologue text that the performer would speak between verses. This text was a place for comical word play as well as a means by which to flesh out the narrative of this song. For this reason, reading between the lines of Hindle’s published songbook would theoretically be an

excellent source of information. Unfortunately, there are only about four published songs that have survived that may be attributed to Hindle, as there are no complete copies of the *Songster* known to exist today. Rodger has identified these four songs through circumstantial evidence: “one indicates she sang it on its cover, reviews indicate that she sang another, and two were dedicated to her by their composers, and while it is not clear that she performed them, they portray the right character type; advertising and review reference dozens of song titles that cannot be positively identified and probably did not survive” (*Just One* 226).

By analyzing lyrics in the songs we are aware of, we can deduct some information about the relationship between audience and performer within the subject of the male impersonator. Typically, the songs in Hindle’s songster portray a male character, most often the swell. The character of the swell is successful due to the elements that are his signatures, both in personality characteristics and physical props. The swell is upper class and is often illustrated using his commentary on activities that are theatrically inclined. The most common topic to be explored is that of female courtship, though the personal style and leisure activities like drinking and gambling are also portrayed.

This character that can be identified as the man about town is used to personify a particular fantasy for the men in the audience. Being working class, these men would have enjoyed such a depiction of wealth and leisure. In addition to being entertained by this caricature the audience could simultaneously experience envy and enact ridicule. Envy is obvious based on the differences in lifestyle between men of these two classes. Ultimately, it is a reaffirmation of the attractive attributes of the working-class male that would have been reinforced through the experience of the swell as depicted by a male impersonator. There seems to be something

decidedly not male about this character specifically in the eyes of the audience to which this was performed.

One example of this image as it was utilized by male impersonators is mentioned by Rodger; there is a swell song in Wesner's repertoire that exemplifies the core of the character very accurately. The title of the song is "I'm the Ladies beau ideal [sic]," which helps to easily summarize its genre. The first part of the song does well to illustrate the type of character that is being presented. Lyrics describe the way in which this man is dressed and also tell the audience how he perceives himself. Obviously, women's affection is the main focus of the song, followed by personal style and the chasing of a lavish lifestyle (*Just One* 41).

It is important to note that this particular song was first performed by a male comic before it was adopted by Wesner as one of her staples. In the case of a male performer presenting this male character the critique and the exploration of the swell is clearly more closely related to class experience than it is to gender. I would imagine that without this layer of male impersonation added to the performance of this song, elements of the swell's leisure would be a more dominant comment period this would be based on the understanding that physical labor and bodily strength is a foundational identity marker for men of the working class. Contrarily, when this character is being played by a female in men's attire, the subject matter is the same, but the nuances of the critique shift slightly. This character may suddenly be examined in a different way based on the gender of the performer. It would make sense that the comedy that could be found within the song would be amplified by this impersonation. The element at the forefront of the critique might then become the association of the swell with a kind of feminization. This way of interpreting the act is accessed not through the absence of physical strength but is not found to be associated with this well, but instead is ultimately drawing up on the dominance of feminine



ideals that could be found in the characters obsession with style, appearance, leisure, and even romance.

In the case that male impersonators would be participating in comedy and social critique by means of characters like the man about town, the audience must engage with the material through the curial lens. It is this lens that allows for the coexistence of multiple layers of meaning. The complexity of the performance is a driving force behind its success. This means that without activation of observation through the treatment of curiosity, the full potential of the act cannot be realized. the fact that this character was first portrayed by a male performer before being taken on by Wesner clearly points to the presence of this lens. It also reaffirms the critical influence of novelty when examining the complexities of male impersonation. The presence of both genders being held within the identity of both the performer and the character she is taking on, combined with the fact that the audience was aware of and also experiencing both of those genders simultaneously, places great importance on the presence of “otherness.”

There is another piece of evidence that supports the curio argument. In one song titled winking at me the character being performed is clearly meant to be read as female. Lyrics of this song indicate a few different elements for consideration. Foundationally, the general set up of the song relies on the fact that the performer is not only fundamentally female, but also that she is an object of desire. Shown here is reference to a male audience member actively desiring and flirting with the male impersonator during her performance on stage:

There's a gent sitting there,  
Dressed in elegant taste,  
By the side of a lady,  
His arm round her waist.  
An artful deceiver I fear he must be,  
For while he makes love to her,  
He keeps winking at me. (Ace 37)

It is interesting to think that an interaction of this manner would have taken place in the context of male impersonation. To base an entire song on the premise that the impersonator is sexually desirable by the man in the audience seems subversive to say the least. The way in which the impersonator is placed in an almost competitive position with the female audience member mentioned in these lyrics is also a captivating detail. The attraction to a female that is not presenting herself in traditional terms for example the male impersonator points to a prevalence of curio-inspired interests. The fact that the impersonator provides not only a contrast for feminine ideals but also a distortion of male aesthetic can only be explained with the understanding of the curious amusement. It is in fact this other ring that is the source of such a desire and the oddity of male impersonation fuses with cultural sexuality to create a subversive attraction.

A complication of this act is that the relationship between observer and objects is actually experienced in both directions. In another verse of the song the character references the way in which she is also distracted by the acknowledgement of desire, referencing the exchange of the wink as she sees it from the stage:

To sing to you nightly,  
is a pleasure, I see,  
for the gents in the house  
All keep winking at me.  
Winking at me, winking at me.  
now how can I sing,  
while they're winking at me? (Ace 37)

Here the performer is expressing a reversal in the relationship between objects and observers. Through use of the word pleasure and a reference to this winking being a distraction, she is expressing that there is a reciprocation of the desire being presented to her from the audience. Ace makes an excellent point that the portrait of Hindle that's being painted in context of this

particular song is clearly sexually charged. By extension, the relationship between viewer and male impersonator is also sexualized. If one acknowledges and accepts this relationship, then it is impossible to separate novelty and curiosity from the experience, when a relationship of this nature would normally be preserved for heteronormative exchanges within the context of a more active and dominant societal framework.

### *Dress*

It could be difficult for a contemporary reader to understand just how complete the transgression of gender would have been for a male impersonator. It is important to remember that the many factors leading to a strict adherence to societal norms were very much present in the background of this variety performance. When elements would be the standard ways in which the genders were expected to dress. The fact that performers would be dressing against their gender was not a common occurrence in the culture at the time. With this in mind, it is easier to understand the intense reaction that would have been triggered in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century audience. Seeing a female performer in pants, an article of clothing that would clearly show the outlines of her legs and as Roger notes a drawing of consciousness to what may happen between those legs must have elicited intense response. Even more permanent and substantial in the physical portrayal enacted by male impersonators would be the fact that this female actor had short, cropped hair in a man's style. The total image being presented to the audience clearly and strongly subversive.

In addition to the basic dressing of the male impersonator being so subversive is the way in which the performer would conduct herself on the stage. Not only did she wear a suit and a short hairstyle, but the qualities of her character were also decidedly masculine. Successful male impersonators were expected to and body the mannerisms of a male character and she was often

judged on her ability to do so. This includes the register and tone of her voice both in singing and in speaking. Impersonators also would partake in behaviors that were exclusively male much to the curious entertainment of their audience. These actions and behaviors include a variety of gendered expressions from an action as simple as smoking a cigar on stage to a gender dynamic as complex as the courtship of women. I call attention to this environmental fact because it is important to understand that the first impression that would have been experienced by the audience of the male impersonator is a response to the oddity of the subject which they are observing.

Furthermore, the queerness with which the male impersonator interacted with viewers in the audience begins with this initial presentation of her physical expression. In this context I use the word queerness to refer to the fact that the male impersonator on the stage is not representative of normative gender identity. She is in fact not male nor female but is a physical manifestation of gender nonconformity. This expression that is both a combination of elements as well as an illustrative dialogue of those elements is the first and most dominant attribute of the impersonator's act, made obvious from the moment she enters the stage. The audience is therefore immediately activated to interpret the act through the curio lens. In this initial moment the impersonator's physical self is closer to object than subject. The initiated mechanisms are more closely related to the curiosity exhibition in this way, especially when observing an act that is so gender transgressive.

### *The Stage Persona*

One unique aspect of the on-stage persona of the variety actor in this time period and in this particular role of male impersonator is that the persona was often performed off-stage as

well. Contrary to the contemporary actor, persona was maintained in performance and outside of it, as both realms were public forums and therefore contributed to the creation of the actor persona. This extension could be said to exist for other performers of the period as well. One of most notorious instances of early Burlesque scandal was Lydia Thompson's response to one reviewer who was attacking the moral standards of her troupe. Thompson horse whipped him in public while two of her colleagues held him down, an act that most likely boosted not only her ticket sales but also the allure of her private/public persona (Millette 39). It was usual then, especially for a male impersonator, to live a life that was synonymous with their career. There could be a few reasons for this extension of the persona from public performance into private lifestyle. One potential factor is the nature of the on-stage character as portrayed on the late 19th century stage. The type of acting that was popular at the time would not be preferred in today's theater. It was much more presentational than a modern mastering of the artform. It relied on large gestures and heavy-handed expressions, mostly due to a lack of technology that we would consider essential to a theatrical experience today. This overt style of acting was necessary to be heard without amplification and seen amidst imprecise lighting. With this in mind, it makes it much easier to understand that the experience of the actor in public versus private life is nearly opposite in the late 19th century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the true nature of a famous actor as he/she/they exist in their private life is understood to be relatively inconsequential to their career as actors. More importantly, the quality of the actor is actually judged on the degree to which their private persona is not seen through the mask of the character played for the public.

The nature of onstage performance in the 19th century was a natural promoter of the presence of a stage persona extending into the private lives of the actors. If the characters that

one plays on the stage are not based in realism, the verisimilitude of the act falls on the performer themselves. As a result, it is almost as if the actor took on a stage persona in their offstage life as well. That persona would then be capable of donning different, much smaller and simpler characters on stage. More specifically to the male impersonators of the period is the nature of their onstage performances. The masher usually portrays a few different types of men within the same act, which consists of various songs and banter. Each song is divided by a quick change into another costume which marks the transition to a completely different character. The performer is judged on things like singing ability, stage presence, and the quickness of her costume changes. She is not, however, necessarily judged on the believability or realism of her male characters. Or more accurately, she may be judged on the realism of these characters within the very specific framework of on-stage performance.

In the same duality, stage performance and gender are similar in the sense that they are both based largely on the existing models of human behavior and experience. For example, Hindle would often perform songs that were meant to educate the male members of the audience on how to “get the girl,” which often came with carnal implications. This kind of mentorship in sexual education could be considered problematic if the transaction taking place was from a female actor to a male audience member. However, the gender curiosity that was activated by means of the male impersonator allowed male audience members to enter a suspended reality in which the exchange was harmless.

The ways in which the specifically female performer functions when taking on this role is twofold. Primarily, it is necessary that the performer be female to satisfy the male gaze. The audience, especially in the time period I am discussing, must be placed in a position of being the observer without any conflict attaching itself to that experience. The second layer of this

necessity occurs when the female performer takes on a male character. It is this female separation between the male audience member and the (performed) male character that allows for viewer comfortability. This obfuscation that occurs throughout the process of adding levels of gender serves to ease the anxiety of gender as a cultural factor. It is as if the separation provides the disassociation necessary to allow for a deeper critical examination to occur. Examination of spectacle is another method of the curio lens.

The element of male drag also provides a safe way in which to criticize or explore different aspects of the performance topic. In Allen's argument, for example, a dominant function of the male impersonator was to provide a forum in which to express the frustrations of masculine class struggles. This was facilitated in two ways. In the case that the male impersonator was playing a working-class fellow, the identity of that group was reinforced by collective characteristics. This could mostly be done by cautionary identity reinforcement, and the dominant character portrayed by male impersonators was the "dandy" or "swell about town." In witnessing this character, the audience was provided an experience through which the power dynamics of masculine class structure was reversed. This fop character was often too dainty to be considered threatening, and clearly had no association with the *true* male identifier: physical labor.

Another way in which the male impersonator evoked the confirmation of a group identity was through exclusion; the working-class men could identify themselves in opposition to characters that are failing at class behaviors. For example, in a song called "I'm on the Teetotal [sic]" the main character is made fun of by the audience for being a man who is unable to handle a high amount of drinking. Being able to drink in high amounts was a quality one was typically supposed to find in a working-class man (Rodger, *Champagne Charlie* 135). In another song,

“Gymnastic Wife,” the character laments the fact that he is scared of his strong (both in physicality and personality) wife (Rodger, *Just One* 46-47). The audience is collectively meant to recognize that a strong and assertive man is what is naturally needed, and in this identification of masculine ideals the group’s identity is reinforced.

The specificity of the expectations of the audience are also worth examining. The most obvious is the precarious nature of gender as it relates to public perception and acceptance. Performance of male impersonation is a learned art, much like gender is learned and performed in the public sphere. Male impersonation as a stage performance is a combination of the two. It is both learned in face-to-face interaction and then repurposed within this lens. The lens is itself complex, as the observer of this original interaction is female and therefore an outsider to the male “expressive forms, processes, and behaviors” that are being utilized. The masher is then interpreting this learned interaction, reforming it, and finally projecting it to a large audience. This audience has now entered into a multilayered interpretation of the performed male, ingesting it with their own understanding of gender and the performance of that gender. What is most interesting is the way in which these actors perpetuate a public persona by utilizing mythology about themselves.



## CHAPTER 2: HINDLE AND WESNER ON STAGE

### *Annie Hindle*

Annie Hindle was born somewhere in England in 1847, though there are many details about her early life that have been lost to history. She first arrived in New York City in 1868 with her mother, having passed through the immigration offices at Castle Garden on the southernmost tip of Manhattan. Her mother's name was Mrs. Ann Hindle, a woman who had adopted Annie Hindle at a young age and had named her. Handle had advertised for her arrival in New York city papers, preparing the public to receive her with excitement. If you believe the origin story that was published so often in the 1890s, Hindle had gotten her start in the specific performance act of male impersonation firstly in jest, but she had been performing in English halls since childhood. Upon discovery by a manager, she adopted the act in earnest and eventually made her way to New York and toured the rest of the United States. Hindle and her mother took residence in Jersey City, New Jersey, and Mrs. Hindle remained there until she passed away in 1884. It was with a shocking haste that Hindle married her first husband Charles Vivian. The two met while both performing in Philadelphia only two weeks after she had arrived in the country, and they were only living together as a couple for six weeks more than that. Vivian was known to drink to excess and it was claimed by Hindle that he was very violent. He moved to the West Coast to continue his career and the two rarely crossed paths again. Hindle would go on to sustain a healthy career in male impersonation until the late 1880s.

Hindle's performances were advertised and reported on consistently through the 1870s to 1890s. One could say that she is depicted in an almost legendary way, with language and anecdotes that imitate a nearly mythological structure. What is the nature of this mythology and is it unique to Hindle? What factors of her character specifically have led to its concoction? Part

of this character creation that Hindle participated in as a male impersonator could be seen as a helpful invocation of the curio lens. However, both the variety theater itself and the nature of male impersonation as a performance also add to the building of such a persona.

One aspect of the function of the legendary persona is concerned with the audience observing her on stage. In the public performance arena, the identity of Hindle as a character fit for public consumption existed within some implicit truths. One of these truths is the relationship of performer to audience in the context of gender. As discussed in my introduction, the audience of the variety halls in this period was dominantly male. It is important to consider this when looking at the content of the male impersonator performance as well as the function of that performance. The importance of such a persona can also be identified in the fact that Hindle's self-description altered over time, much like the growing aggrandizing that often happens over time in the repetition of mythology. In the early stages of her career, a breakdown of Hindle's skills and a taste of what her performance entailed were included with logistical information about the theater, including phrases like "The Great Annie Hindle in her Character Songs and Lightning Changes and Sketches" ("Amusements," *The New York Herald*). Eventually, all other descriptive language was dropped, and she began advertising herself as simply, "The Great Hindle" ("Amusements," *The Daily Whig*). This is only possible due to the careful building of her public persona to create a mythology that lasted in the public memory.

There are elements of created mythology that are evident when examining the public persona of Annie Hindle's character. She was written about in multiple papers when her first wife died. What was important for the journalist to include in the article was a lengthy explanation of who Hindle was and how she came to be. The detail of this "origin story" is included in nearly every publication, regardless of how much the story needed to be edited in

order to fit in the allotted amount of words. The contemporary “news” was edited far before Hindle’s personal history. In fact, the paragraphs describing Hindle’s rise to fame were included in their entirety. And furthermore, the origin story was included yet again in subsequent newspaper articles a full six months later, when Hindle married her second wife:

When Annie Hindle was five years old the woman who had adopted her, and who gave the protégé her own name, put her on the stage in the pottery district of Herfordshire, in England. The little girl sang well ever so early. There was a fearlessness in her manner that tickled her rough audiences, and they made a favorite of her from the very first. At the outset she sang tender songs, with love as their theme, but as she grew up and traveled to London she enlarged her repertory. One day, half in jest, she put on a man’s costume and sang a rollicking ditty about wine, women and the races. A shrewd manager who listened to her saw a new field open to her. In a week Annie Hindle was a “male impersonator” and all London was talking about the wonderful accuracy of her mimicry. (“Wife of a Woman”)

The importance of this created mythology pervades all mentions of Hindle in newspapers of the time and can be identified through included “facts.” These facts serve to add legitimacy to the legend. They are usually full of metaphor and larger than life, making Hindle’s character as memorable as possible.

The detail of this origin story, for example, is particular and purposeful. It is not enough that Hindle may be skilled at the craft of her performance. Additionally, there must be mentions of nearly supernatural influence included in this story. Hindle is nearly touched by fate in the language that is used. She was a “favorite” from the very first, a sign that she is practically meant to have begun impersonation as her craft. There is also an element of coincidence or, again, fate

at play in the way in which Hindle discovered male impersonation within the context of this story. The fact that it was merely by chance that she decided to dress in male clothing and sing a song in earshot of a, presumably male, manager who was smart enough to see what a great potential business venture this would be is highly amusing. It is quite incredible that this description of Hindle's very first "half in jest" attempt at the performance of male impersonation perfectly matches a typical act that could be witnessed at the height of the genre. The grand and spectacular nature of such a story aids in the facilitation of an application of curiosity to Hindle as a performer by legitimizing her otherness in the account of her very creation.

There are other instances of her legitimization contained within the article. For example, this anecdote is included as a tool to argue Hindle's powerful curiosity: "It is a fact that this dashing singer was the recipient of as many 'mash' notes as ever went to a stage favorite in this country. Once she compared notes with H. J. Montague, that carelessly handsome actor, at whose shrine so many silly women had worshiped, but Hindle's admirers outnumbered his, and they were all women, strange as it may seem" ("Wife of a Woman"). This "fact" illustrates the degree to which Hindle was notorious, and therefore adds to her novelty. It is particularly interesting that this is accomplished by placing her in competition with a male counterpart. This is another expression of the manner in which Hindle's persona is being portrayed as "other" by calling on factors of oddity and scandal.

### *Ella Wesner*

Ella Wesner was born in New Jersey to parents Charles and Emmeline. She was raised alongside four sisters and one brother. Her parents decided to move to Pennsylvania in the late 1840s, but only took Ella and one of her sisters, Sarah, with them. Life was tumultuous for the

Wesner family, as Charles and Emmeline were consistently in trouble with the authorities. Multiple arrests can be found on record for Charles in the 70s and 80s including a three-year prison sentence which left the rest of his family to make ends meet on their own. Ella's mother found employment for her and her sister and the juvenile ballet corps. Both girls were under the age of 10 at the time of the move. The women of the Wesner family all reunited in Philadelphia by 1860 and the dominant means of income for the group was performance. This foundation in dance would be a skill set that continued to affect and influence Wesner's performance style throughout her career and is commented on by some reviewers of her male impersonation acts. Ballet performers of this time period, as well as many other types of acts, were generally migrating between many of the available kinds of performance spaces. Ella appeared in theaters with a range of respectability, and it was in the 1850s that she first appeared in variety. She was involved in a couple of different troops and ensembles that would perform in Philadelphia as well as New York city, finding work in both places. It was in 1869 that the paths of our two main characters seemed to have crossed for the first time. Ella was billed as a dancer in a variety show that also showcased Annie Hindle, so the two may have met or at least seen one another perform during the three-week listing. The very next year, Wesner expanded her performance abilities by taking a job in Texas in which she would begin to tackle speaking roles on the stage. This was the start of the same decade in which Wesner would rise to the forefront of the variety stage as a male impersonator. Actually, she was advertised as "The Greatest Combination in the World" just three years later in 1873 ("Theatre Comique").

During the three weeks that Wesner and Hindle shared a bill, it is believed that there was a transfer of material. Wesner's later reviews would mention the performance of songs that were once sung by Annie Hindle's ex-husband, Charles Vivian. It would make sense that Hindle may

have given those songs away to Wesner and did not desire to perform them herself, given the painful nature of her history with Vivian. Ella Wesner also published a songbook a few years after Hindle's, in 1875, which provides some information about her acts. Two copies of this book are still in existence today, so the songs in her repertoire survive.

I am the swell of the day - as you see-  
All other swells are but models of me;  
You must have heard of the names which I bear,  
Surely you must, for I'm known everywhere;  
Girls are enchanted when I am in view,  
Gents are bewildered, and gaze at me too;  
Some criticize me and stare, while they say,  
"Oh, ain't he nobby, that swell of the day!" (Rodger, *Champagne Charlie* 127)

Textual evidence suggests that Wesner's off-stage life was well known by the public, even prior to a known same-sex relationship, similar to Hindle's. When Wesner began her affair with Mansfield, this gossip-like mention of the relationship was published: "Ella Wesner, the young protean actress who performed recently at Chicago, in Tony Pastor's troupe, has become the object of Josie Mansfield's affection. Let the friends of the gentle Ella order their mournin'" ("Scraps"). What is interesting about this quotation is firstly that the overtly queer relationship between Mansfield and Wesner is seemingly announced in the public newspaper, through use of the phrase "object of affection." Secondly, Wesner's identity as a queer woman is also reinforced. By suggesting that the "friends of gentle Ella" should be so sad that she has been essentially "taken" that they should mourn is hardly subtext.

#### *After the Transgression of Curiosity*

When Ryan died, the newspapers printed articles exhibiting a deep empathy for this "female husband." When Hindle marries her second wife shortly thereafter, the papers are less

understanding. What exactly was the trespass that could have contributed to the slow alteration in the tone of public response? Perhaps it was the practically public same-sex marriage. Or had Hindle always been treated as “other” and it was all catching up to her? After reading many articles in which Hindle’s marriages and performance history were spoken of simultaneously (1890s), it occurred to me that there was a very specific way in which this public figure was being written about by the press. I wondered to what degree the oddity of both her onstage performance and the non-traditional way in which she lived her personal life were the main contributing factors to this language and portrayal. Investigating the articles that were printed in the early 1890s regarding Hindle’s personal life provided an interesting glimpse into her character.

When Annie Hindle decided to take her on-stage male impersonator character roles and live them out in her real life, the reaction from the public was confusing to say the least. On one hand, there was clearly a comical element that was present in the news stories that were published regarding Hindle’s first marriage. More dominantly in the press, the subversive nature of the female husband caused a reaction that served to neutralize the threat of gender inversion. Therefore, the reporting of such transgression was often conflated with both oddity/novelty language and it was always depicted firmly as a rare outlier to proper social order. There are a few contributing factors that led to the public report being one of strangeness. One thing to consider is that Hindle was the first male impersonator to perform the artform in New York City, about a year after her arrival in the United States (1869). In fact, there was no name for the act that she premiered in that year, and it was some time before Hindle advertised herself in the press as something other than “the great London sensation.” The public was captivated by Hindle’s performance, but it clearly took a while for a cultural understanding of the artform to develop.

This active forming of opinion about the male impersonator and the boundaries that should be placed on a public character and private actor of such a nature may help to explain some of the confusion a contemporary reader may experience.

Another important consideration is the fact that homosexuality had not yet been identified in the collective consciousness of pre-modern culture. Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* was published in Germany in 1886. For the first time, homosexuality was identified and written about in serious consideration. Identified as a mental illness, the naming of this condition as something concretely defined had various effects on the existing culture. In one sense, it coerced the mainstream consciousness to polarize their understanding of relationships into aggressively "natural" and "unnatural" classifications for the first time (405-409). However, although the publication of these writings was simultaneous, Kraft-Ebing's theories were not fully adopted into the broad cultural consciousness until about the turn of the century, and therefore cannot be too heavily considered as a foundational understanding.

Regardless of the contextual language and conceptualization of homosexuality being available colloquially, Ace has illustrated that an understanding of same-sex romantic relationships was still common knowledge. This especially becomes clear when comparing the language used to describe Hindle before and after the most serious transgression of her lifetime: "From 1886 on, the question of Hindle's gender was intrinsic to her act and foregrounded in advertisements and reviews; before then, she read both onstage and in writing as definitively female" (Ace 55). When Hindle made the decision to marry her female dresser, Annie Ryan, the gossip columns in American newspapers were obviously engrossed in the story. There were suddenly mentions in the newspapers that alluded to the fact that Hindle's history had always been one of queerness in regard to the women who were close to her. One article mentions this



about Hindle: “In all her travels she had carried a dresser” (“A Woman’s Wife”). The implication here is that homosexual relationships were prominent in Hindle’s past. Interestingly, the first time this line is used is in 1891. When Hindle’s remarries, the narrative of her life is repeated in the newspapers and this line possesses an important addition in 1892: “In all her travels she had carried a ‘dresser’” (“Annie Hindle Weds”). The implication is made even more clear by the careful use of quotations around ‘dresser.’ These articles make it sound as if Hindle’s queerness was commonly experienced by others in the theatrical world through unique intimacies shared with dressers such as Ryan. Such an allusion makes this fact appear as common knowledge, which would support the belief such queer behavior was at least sub-textually acknowledged at this time. What was not allowed, however, was the crossing of such a line as committing a same sex marriage. Once this event took place and it was made public that Hindle was indeed a female husband, her career declined to non-existent shortly after.

The language that was used in relation to Hindle in all of her years of performance as a male impersonator leading up to the reports of her first same-sex marriage were clearly feminized. She was given accolades for the ways in which she was decidedly female even when playing a male character on stage. Ace points out that the use of the words “subdued and quiet” appear in an early (1868) advertisement of Hindle, a while before the marriage (Ace 54). Decidedly female attributes are described in order to add to the mystery of her as a subject for viewing. This is paired with purposefully contrasting language and use of typically male words such as “handsome.” These language choices facilitated the necessity for multiple-gendered presentation to exist simultaneously in the performance of the act. It was in this dualism that impersonation was successful as a curiosity amusement. After the marriage, Hindle began to be referred to with a lot of gender confusion. This was manifested in the lack of clarity surrounding

pronoun usage in newspaper articles (Ace 55). It is commonly thought that this confusion was actually the results of something Hindle had said directly to a reporter in the hotel that she and Ryan were staying in after the ceremony. This reporter was apparently harassing the pair in an attempt to legitimize his notion that Hindle was indeed male. The idea had been solidified for him upon knowledge of Hindle's transformation into a female husband. Her success in the field of male impersonation up until this point was suddenly made out to be a biological tendency rather than the combination of talent and skill. In an attempt to be left alone, Hindle apparently confirmed to the reporter that she had indeed been male this entire time. Although this seems they could be a reasonable explanation for the stark contrast with which this character is written about after this moment, I would be remiss if I did not consider the ways in which the scenario was influenced through the understanding of Hindle as a curio object.

The article printed at the beginning of this paper is present in dozens of newspapers in the northeast United States in January of 1892. Most of the articles are edited copies of this original. I refer to this as the original because it is the longest of the articles to have been published on this date and the text of all other publications seem derivative. Hindle appears in the paper, *The New York Sun*, only a few months later in a significantly more scandalized report of her second marriage. Interestingly, the introductory pieces of her origin stories are repeated, practically in full. Three paragraphs of the article above are printed verbatim, and the remaining text from the first article has been edited down for space. The article ends with a small paragraph of new information. "Miss Hindle did not reappear on the stage until some months after her wife's death. Then she accepted several engagements, and it was during one of these engagements that she met Miss Spanghl, whom she has just married" ("Annie Hindle Weds Anew"). This addition is the only new piece of information that is being reported here.

There is something to be said about the relationship between the existence of curiosity such as male impersonators on the variety stage and what we see can potentially happen when that curiosity is not only extended into the private life of the performer but it is taken so far as to corrupt the nature of the curiosity object. There is a delicate balance between the mystique of the curio object and that which has become a grotesque transgression. This can also be seen as being true simply because of the existence of the twilight space. The delineation of a sphere in which the curiosity object may exist, in this case the male impersonator within the theater, is a telling element of the curio lens and the rules it may be operating under. Curiosity may not survive outside of these identified spheres; the fact that Hindle chose to act male outside of the theater environment ultimately led to the disintegration of her reputation. She may not have been in control of the sensational press that surrounded her, but she did commit the transgression of same-sex marriage in public society. As we can see in the article published at the top of this paper, the word grotesque is actually used in the description of Annie Ryan's funeral scene. This word usage comes after five years of the two being publicly married; for the last half of the 1880s, Hindle was living a married, suburban life with her wife. However, due to Hindle's lack of stage performance during this time, it is as if the public memory of her had not changed very much since gossip of the marriage had been published in the first place. She had seemingly retired from the stage during these years in New Jersey. This time that had passed with Hindle's name out of the papers could have contributed to the inclusion of the origin story in the articles, as a kind of reminder to the public about her persona. More likely, the inclusion of the origin story alongside the report of Hindle is a female husband in mourning creates a dramatic pairing and a stronger story of spectacle. The way in which Hindle is written about in this subject matter

is particularly worth dissecting, especially because it comes after the transgression of curiosity had happened (the same-sex public marriage).

Another aspect of her public persona that may have contributed to this negative response is that fact that Hindle was publicly explicit about her same-sex experiences in her own words. She wrote and published poems in *The New York Clipper* between years of 1870 and 1879 (Rodger, *Just One* 52). These poems were overtly romantic in nature, containing blatant reference to love affairs with women. The female pronouns and lesbian subtext reported by Rodger is quite shocking. One reason that this could have been allowed is due to the all-encompassing presence of Hindle's stage persona in her private life. If her identity was homogenous within these two realms, it would make sense that The Great Hindle would be writing a poem of this nature.

The cultural power that Hindle seemed to be able to exert in this instance is an explanation of the publication of the poetry. It also sheds light on the transformation of her image in the 1890s into something less tolerable. It is as if Hindle continuously parlayed this cultural celebrity throughout and eventually it was reversed. I found this particular wordage interesting regarding her experience as a poet: "She has in later years been a student of literature, and she has written many fugitive poems" ("Tale of Two Marriages"). The use of the term "fugitive" alludes to the sentiment that these expressions were in hiding, or perhaps that they should have been. It is confusing as a contemporary reader to understand the usage of these terms within the context of their time. For this reason, it is important to remember that there was no common vernacular for a person of alternate gender expression such as Hindle. This is made quite clear by the wide variation with which news reporters convey Hindle's story. For instance, this article portrays a confusion regarding Hindle's gender pronouns by the end. "But the New

York 'Sun' has delved into Hindle's past history and finds that this is her (his) third matrimonial venture, and that he (she) has been once before a husband and once a wife" ("Twice a Husband"). As if the author has given up on the gender complexities of the matrimonial history, this sentence reads like a surrender. Alternatively, one could interpret the purposeful reversal of pronoun usages as a direct evocation of curiosity.

Some articles seem to blatantly refer to Hindle as male, like this statement referring to the separation of Hindle and her first husband, Charles Vivian: "So they traveled apart, each in his own way, busy enough, yet unhappy..." ("Wife of a Woman"). There are also articles that either switch back and forth between female and male pronouns, or state both simultaneously in a seemingly random way. Here is an example of both of those things happening in the same paragraph:

Hindle adds that he and Vivian traveled to California and back together. As a lady Annie Hindle may be described as a blonde about five feet in height, not stout nor slender, very attractive, not particularly stylish in dress, but very neat. She had a peculiar way of singing. Her voice is sweet and feminine. As a male he (or she) is quite gentlemanly and refined in manner. ("Woman Marries Woman")

There is an interesting balance in the masculine and feminine language that is being used to refer to Hindle in this example. This balance is acknowledged by the author in some cases, when "he (or she)" is used, for example.

Despite the seemingly respectful tones of the article discussing the death of Hindle's first wife, there is a clear shift in language used by publications over the course of her career. This shift could indicate a shift in the ways in which Hindle's personal gender is being understood. For example, an early sketch of her in the newspapers displays her in a suit, standing in a

distinctly masculine lean, and even sporting a long mustache (see fig.4). The caption to this image reads, “ANNIE HINDLE IN HER MAKE-UP.” The text is very careful to contextualize what the reader is looking at in this sketch. It is Hindle, yes, but the clarifying explanation of her being “in” make-up (i.e. “character”) is needed. Later in her life, after the public is confronted with Hindle’s identity as a “female husband,” this qualifying language of assumed identity is taken away. One article includes an illustration of Hindle’s bust, in which she is wearing a soldier’s uniform. Although this made-up as male once again, the caption of the image here reads only, “ANNIE HINDLE.” Even in this small detail, Hindle’s gender has been solidified (see fig.5).



Fig. 4. Print of Annie Hindle in make-up from: “Tale of Two Marriages.” *Elmire Telegram*, 3 January 1892, p. 3.



Fig. 5. Print of Annie Hindle from: “Annie Hindle.” *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. Accessed 17 March 2020.

Contrasting to Hindle’s experience is that of Ella Wesner, who was the subject of mostly positive press. The only time in which Wesner was publicly ridiculed for her private life is when she decided to break contract and eloped to Europe with another woman. Wesner had been embroiled in her love affair with Mansfield and decided very suddenly to run away to Paris with her. The scandal was reported in a way that prioritized the betrayal Wesner had enacted as a performer, not the same-sex relationship. It was the breaking her contract at the very last minute that was so unacceptable, which meant essentially leaving the theater without an act. The *Clipper* wrote that “she took no pains to inform the manager of her departure. On the contrary, we are reliably informed that she visited that theatre on Friday P.N. last, and assured the management that she would be ready for her engagement on Monday. Such conduct is highly reprehensible...” (Rodger, *Just One* 55). The disapproving language is notably harsh.

At the end of the week’s engagement that she has missed so suddenly, the *Clipper* published a review that explicitly brought to light what had apparently happened to Wesner. It is as if the gossip has finally made its way back to the press: “Notwithstanding the elopement of

Miss Ella Wesner to Europe with Miss Josephine Mansfield, the business at the Theatre Comique did not suffer in the least during the past week” (Rodger, *Just One* 55). Wesner even returned to New York and had no trouble booking future work. By the following month, newspapers had even lavished the story with positivity, and expressed excitement to witness whatever new material she would certainly premier upon her return to the States. There was only one mention of the broken contract alluded to in one of the early reviews of her following act, showing that her same-sex transgression not fully forgotten but was certainly forgiven. This was a far different experience than was had by Hindle, but then again Wesner never fully committed to such severe transgression as marriage.

Even in her death Wesner remained on the respectable side of male impersonation as a curiosity. This is notable in reports of her death. One paper included an article with the headline “Ella Wesner Lies in Man’s Garb,” which eulogizes her with kindness and respect:

Complying with her request expressed several months before her death, members of the Actors’ Fund yesterday caused the body of Ella Wesner, one of the first women to win recognition on the stage as a male impersonator, to lie in state at the Campbell Funeral Church, Broadway and Sixty-Sixth Street, dressed as a man. It was said that throughout her life Miss Wesner had preferred man’s apparel. She was 76 years old when she died on Sunday. Her first and only act, which she played in vaudeville throughout the country, was a male impersonation.

(“Ella Wesner”)

Even in the way in which this eulogy is not completely factual, it is appropriately so. Male impersonation was definitely not Wesner’s “first and only act,” as she was a ballet dancer first in the years before she performed on the same bill as Hindle in 1869. It is, however, telling and



important that this is the way in which she is publicly memorialized. This is a fitting final aggrandizement of character in a familiar style, adjusting Wesner's origin in hindsight to be more absolute in her fateful propensity for male impersonation. It truly completes the tribute in my mind.

## CONCLUSION

The performance artform of male impersonation was a staple in American variety theatre history of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This expression emerged alongside the feminization and legitimization of theater and performance spaces, especially related to the inclusion of women in these spaces and in which capacities. One heavy influence on the audience perception of the male impersonator was the dominance of curiosity as it functioned in a wide range of public amusements available in the period. The curio lens that was activated within the relationship between audience and subject was greatly influential in the success of the act. Partnered with gender dynamics at play, both on an interpersonal level and within society at large, these factors provide a great depth of exploration into the implications contained within the figure of the male impersonator. The fact that both Hindle and Wesner participated in publically-reported, atypical behavior outside of their on-stage persona only adds to their intrigue. In both women, the image of their character was heavily affected by the way in which queerness and curiosity lenses were working in unique conjunction.

Hindle and Wesner experienced publicity and general interaction with the mainstream culture in subtly different ways. What exactly were the differences between the two and what can we learn about the transgression of curiosity by comparing them? Both women were male impersonators who participated in same-sex relationships in their personal lives. The significant difference between them seems to be that Hindle was more aggressively overt about her lifestyle. She transgressed the boundaries of her sex and profession on multiple occasions by dressing in a masculine fashion off of the stage, publishing obviously lesbian poetry, and occupying the role of female husband on two occasions. Wesner did not commit the same level of transgressions, even though she participated in a publicly acknowledged same-sex relationship. She did not, for

example, marry a same-sex lover, and she generally kept the nuances of her queer private life sub-textual. Despite their differences, the language of curiosity was exercised on both women as they embodied this wonderful figure of the male impersonator: “is she not a strange figure on the American stage!” (“Wife of a Woman”).

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