Introduction

Although busy seducing Dorian Gray, Lord Henry proves quick with a *bon mot* when Sir Thomas chooses to defend the brute reason of "practical men":

> "I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable. There is something unfair about its use. It is hitting below the intellect."
>
> "I do not understand you," said Sir Thomas, growing rather red.
>
> "I do, Lord Henry," murmured Mr. Erskine, with a smile.[1]

Deftly splicing together the devaluation of a person's intellect and the image of being hit in that vital area below the belt, Lord Henry translates his flirtation with Dorian into an epigram that gives an eroticized tweak to Sir Thomas's desexualized and anaesthetized understanding of social intercourse. A faith in the practicality of reason, Lord Henry implies, hinders not only intellectual but also erotic pleasures. Dabbed with just a *soupçon* of erotic suggestion, this challenge to brute reason stimulates two quite different reactions. Sir Thomas's nervous blush communicates an impatience with, if not anxiety over, the epigram's tacit assertion, while Mr. Erskine's smile signals a sympathetic understanding. The mixed response during this brief exchange at Lady Agatha's dinner table makes it apparent that the constellation of cultural codes that demarcated the dandy-aesthete had, like Lord Henry himself, become familiar in the homes of a broad spectrum of Victorians. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, it seems that every other issue of *Punch* magazine carried a titillating parody of the persona or a cartoon of a couple of lower-class Londoners playing dress-up as dandies. Such comic representations demonstrate just how popular the image had become. Moreover, they suggest the important role that the mainstream itself played in the construction of the dandy-aesthete as a marker of a particular sexual-aesthetic philosophy and certain sexual identities.

Looking at British culture from roughly 1840 to 1940, this study addresses the ways in which aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete developed into sites for the engagement and embodiment of sexual parody itself.[2] To date, studies of aestheticism and sexuality have focused predominantly on canonical authors and artists, while the parodies of these figures have been referenced as little more than buttresses to their fame. Similarly, although there has been an increase of attention in cultural, gender, and queer studies to the decentered body as a potentially parodic text, this has not fostered a concomitant consideration of *literary* parodies' roles in the formation of marginalized bodies and identities. I hope to address both these lacunae by reconceptualizing the role of literary and cartoon parody in the formation of aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete, as well as its function as a temporally dynamic, multi-sided form of cultural interaction that contributed to the dissemination of dissident views.

Encouraged by the fact that authors such as Wilde offered up some of the wittiest morsels of parodic repartee in the English language, recent scholarly attention to sexual parodies has focused almost exclusively on contributions from the margins. The use of parody, however, is not one-directional. Supporters of dominant or established social institutions also use parody to challenge what they see as a burgeoning cultural threat in order to undermine its claims to legitimacy. Critics and parodists of aestheticism, for example, frequently took advantage of its seductive appeal in order to enhance the popularity of their own, contrary views. These reciprocal acts of appropriation go some distance in explaining why many members of a society predominantly antagonistic towards nonsanctioned sexual practices nevertheless encouraged a phenomenon like aestheticism that not only fleshed out new erotic codes, but also abetted the construction and definition of the homosexual and other identities. Even though parody underscores a text's and a narrator's moral or ideological distance from its subject, it still depends – because of what has come to be described as its parasitic nature – upon an audience knowing a sufficient amount about the generic and ideological context of that subject.[3] As the following chapters demonstrate, parodies that encouraged the formation of public, proscriptive homophobia would have also been responsible for popularizing its target of humor. Even if they fully believed in essential configurations of human desire and attraction, parodists who turned to a sexualized discourse to undermine aestheticism and the dandy-aesthetes were also catalysts for the denaturalization of gendered and sexual norms.

My analysis of sexual identity formation hopefully demonstrates that literary and cartoon parodies of the marginal do not only offer the subjects of derision a potentially positive space within contemporary culture, but also are themselves dependent on those subjects for their own position, meaning, and value. The following chapters do deal extensively with canonical authors such as Alfred Tennyson, Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne, and of course Wilde, but they do so primarily with regard to the writers in relation to their critics and parodists, or as the products of their labour. This shift in focus reveals that parodists of aestheticism and the dandy-aesthetes did not, as is often assumed, try in some clumsy, hostile fashion to eradicate their subject. Rather, in many instances, they attempted to modify or revamp the subject while acknowledging its beneficial contributions to contemporary culture. If, as I argue, such an encouraging complicity is integral to parody as social critique, then the usual division between critics and advocates could be fruitfully reconfigured to place as much emphasis on their concordant motivations as on their different positions within the relationship. Toward this purpose, this study looks at parody as a continuum ranging from the scathing criticism of early-Victorian reviewers to the queer parody of camp.

QUEER PARODY AND THE DANDY-AESTHETE

Although parody is often recognized as a means of political maneuvering, conventional definitions of the term tend to downplay such social engagement. In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon articulates the standard view of parody as intramural, addressing "another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse."[4] This differentiates it from satire, which is seen as "extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind."[5] Satire, moreover, has been characterized by an orientation toward "a negative evaluation and a corrective intent" which is seen to be strongly lacking in the twentieth-century parody that Hutcheon takes as her main subject.[6] Hutcheon, however, is quick to point out the limitations of these distinctions. Early in her analysis, she refers to parody as imitating "art more than life," thus acknowledging that it does imitate both.[7] And she more than once demonstrates that parody, like satire, can have ameliorative, sociopolitical aims.

One particular aim for which parody has proven to be especially well suited is the undermining of normative idealizations by oppressed

groups and individuals trying to negotiate their own positions within society. Parody itself sanctions such maneuvering not simply through its structural dependence on the celebration of multiple interpretations, but also by leading its audience to consider the potential existence of still other ontological possibilities that may have remained unarticulated. Through its reliance on double meanings, parody effectively questions the possibility of any such thing as an "original," with the term coming across for many gender and queer scholars as a misnomer for the privileged codes of the dominant ideology.

According to Judith Butler, the parody of gender conventions from a marginalized position can lead to a revision of heterosexual ideology. Unlike our unacknowledged and often unrecognized performativity, these acts entail conscious repetitions of traditional performances in which "part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary."[8] The sexual parodist's aim is not to modify previous representations in order to bring them closer in line with some fundamental reality, but to evoke pleasure from challenging the idea of originality itself. This denaturalization of sex and gender, Butler argues, will introduce new areas of agency that had been closed down by essentialist regulatory systems: "the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed."[9] In Butler's theorization, gender and sexual identity are constructs communicated as texts written on and by the body through dress and performance. Parody is more appropriate here than satire as the analytical model precisely because its traditional association with the intramural realm of coded discourse, rather than social and moral concerns, emphasizes the queer constructionist challenge to the assumption that gender, sexuality, and identity exist exclusively within the extramural domain.

As Jonathan Dollimore and others have noted, however, Butler's formulation can lead to a slippage between conscious performances such as drag and unconventional sexualities in general. Dollimore also points out that, if Butler's model is applied transhistorically, it risks erasing the pre-sexological, pre-psychoanalytic conception of sexuality as a private act. The shift to this privacy took place in Europe during the nineteenth century and in the earlier historical period performance would have been more readily envisioned as a statement about society, rather than

one's self-identification.[10] Dollimore suggests that as early as the 1890s a form of parody akin to that articulated by Butler and other queer scholars had become an important component of British culture. In a discussion of Wilde, Joe Orton, and others, he describes homosexual culture as being highly dependent on artifice, image, and parody for its self-validating strategies and argues that a homosexual sensibility can be seen to exist, if at all, only as "a parodic critique of the essence of sensibility as conventionally understood."[11] Camp in particular, according to Dollimore, functions as a strategy of empowerment for marginalized people by undermining the depth model of identity "from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within."[12] He argues that Wilde's incorporation of diverse sexualities into the notion of subjectivity, for example, threatened to destabilize established *fin-de-siècle* ideas of what constitutes human nature and the individual. It is specifically because Wilde did not try to position himself and his sexuality outside of the dominant system that his claims were so threatening.

The following study pays close attention to the applicability of such a queer notion of parody to pre-1890s aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete persona which, not coincidentally, had their greatest impact during the same period in which the conceptualization of sexuality as part of a person's identity arose. During the mid-nineteenth century, sexologists were defining homosexuality as an inversion of, or deviation from, what they presented as natural standards. At the same time, the traditional family model was helping to essentialize the newly coined term "heterosexuality" through what Ed Cohen has called "the silent privilege of remaining unmarked."[13] This process of marginalization deterred men and women from developing sustained sexual identities situated within nonheteronormative communities, even as it demarcated such communities as a necessity for scientific and other official discourses.

In *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the way in which identities are constructed through macro-systems that influence processes of perception and communication within private or domestic spaces. But Foucault himself points out that this is only one perspective on the issue. It would be succumbing to monolithic notions of power not to recognize that, even within established institutions, dissident and disinterested elements continue to exist. Such an oversight would allow no discursive room for acknowledging sympathetic or affirming articulations of those acts and identities that have been debased. Marginalized communities, should

they begin to form, would be left with the options of either adopting terms derived from the antagonistic institutions themselves or, at best, developing counter-discourses that nevertheless, by their very act of resistance, help authenticate the dominant terms. Within the historical context of the formation of modern sexual identities, such an attribution of power runs the risk of inferring a false primacy to dominant taxonomies that were only coming into being at the same time as more ambivalent and sympathetic discourses such as that offered by aestheticism.[14]

Well before the Aesthetic Movement, there existed in England a community defined by male–male sexual interaction – complete with popular locales, a set of practices that were common and familiar (albeit not necessarily fully articulated), and a recognizably unique system of interaction.[15] But sustained human interaction for sexual purposes does not necessitate the formation of a collective identity. Despite the codes of homoerotic signification used by this community, not all participants identified themselves by their sexual pleasures. Nor did they necessarily derive the same sense of continuity from this cultural group as they did from others that were more pervasive and that erased or deprecated such identifications and pleasures. Through mainstream channels of entertainment, however, aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete would soon offer a sense of continuity that was sanctioned by parody's own structural reliance on comic insinuations of dissidence.

The British Aesthetic Movement was most popular from roughly 1880 to 1895, although aestheticist commodities, values, and styles appeared sooner and continued into the twentieth century.[16] During this time, the term "aestheticism" came to be associated with a multiplicity of both high-art and popular constructs and products including literary and visual works, artistic styles, household decor, personae, and philosophical views. Albeit strongly connected to John Ruskin's mid-century claims for art's importance to the spiritual value of everyday existence, aestheticism's most influential articulation can be found in Walter Pater's 1873 *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* which, generally speaking, advances the position that the appreciation of art and beauty is a worthier endeavour than an engagement with life's quotidian affairs. Following from this position, aesthetes were people who viewed, or claimed to view, life as art. Their effort to signal a disregard for society, however, was often seen as forced and their image quickly became conjoined to that of the dandy who, while also sensitive to issues of taste, acknowledged a distinctly intense level of social awareness. Because the

resultant cultural fusion of the dandy and aesthete is more often than not reproduced in the parodies that I address in the following chapters, I have chosen to follow Martin Green in referring to the hybrid persona as the dandy-aesthete.[17]

Dandies were people – primarily men – interested in fashioning themselves as art, with the process of artistic commodification leading to a major accord between presenting oneself as art and presenting oneself as valuable. To fashion oneself as a dandy was to claim membership in an elite class that possessed refined tastes and values – a class in many ways beyond the dictates of everyday society. Paradoxically, the very act of commodifying and advertising one's self for consumption by others reveals that self-dandification could offer only a partial liberation at best, since one remained dependent on bourgeois culture for an affirmation of one's end product.[18] Regardless, exclusiveness was a principal characteristic that helped ensure the dandy-aesthete's upper-class privileges. It was also a factor in determining whether people with unconventional sexual desires were likely to turn to those interests when formulating their identities.

As Jeffrey Weeks has shown, the relatively immobile, poor lower-classes were less suited to the formation of marginal identities. A lack of the power that arises from financial security inhibited their acceptance of identities defined by same-sex desires or other less familiar attractions.[19] Adding to the difficulties, during the Victorian period culturally privileged males' sexual transgressions were institutionally defined in such a way as to direct punishment for these transgressions at women and lower-class men.[20] Many people did not simply tolerate but admired the male dandy-aesthete for his assumed prowess with women. The secretive womanizing dandy-aesthetes, those who found pleasure in same-sex intimacy, and those with other proclivities were united by the freedoms bestowed upon them as a result of their actual or assumed class, wealth, lack of a traditional partner, and higher proportion of discretionary income than men who supported wives and children.[21] And even if not all dandy-aesthetes were wealthy or upper-class–Wilde himself at times lived beyond his means – this did not hinder their dominant image from becoming a signifier of elitism that included the right to a relatively high level of secrecy about sexual affairs. The persona offered those involved in unsanctioned relations an excellent guise for what they might have felt was their actual, albeit clandestine, identity. In the eyes of most of the public, they could pass as "ladies' men." And yet, the aura of sexual mystery that surrounded the dandy-aesthete also

encouraged them to sustain some representation of what they saw as a crucial difference. Sexual ambiguity became inscribed upon the persona as a characteristic hyper-awareness of performed and assumedly actual identities.[22]

The general social acceptance, even encouragement, of this potentially dissident quality of the dandy-aesthete reflects the complicity of the mainstream in some marginalized sexual groups' formation of self-defining discourses and identities. In a study of masculinity and the writings of Pater and Swinburne, Thaïs Morgan describes an "aesthetic minoritizing discourse" in terms that are also appropriate for discussing the emergence of a *sexual* minoritizing discourse. Morgan refers to such a language as one in which "the solidarity – and the essential alikeness – of a group that perceives itself to be in a minority position is presupposed and invoked at the same time as it is being constructed in the discourse itself."[23] As Morgan's emphasis on the formative character of the process suggests, although certain people may not directly invent a particular coded system, they can nevertheless still participate in its gradual recognition and reinforcement. Similarly, people who are seen as external to the group that defines itself by a unique language can partake in its construction. Critics and parodists of aestheticism, for example, played an important role in solidifying the double-coded discourse that conveyed unconventional sexual proclivities through the dandy-aesthetes' speech and actions.

As Lord Henry coyly demonstrates in the remark that opened this chapter, a single discursive system can be used simultaneously to address two or more levels of comprehension. Pater employed such a technique when he used a Hellenic language of male–male friendship in his discussion of aesthetics, incorporating an erotic subtext that only certain people would recognize. Notwithstanding the fact that *The Renaissance* and other works contained positive representations of non-normative desire, literature that is fully supportive of aestheticist values offers little proof in itself that such works gave affirmation of personal desires to many people beyond a fairly select group of educated, class-privileged men and some poseurs of the type. The codes were not only unclear in their implications, but also often relatively obscure in their classical and historical references. A broader spectrum of British society, however, was engaged by the less serious manifestations of aestheticism – its jumble of popular terms and images, its fans and *flâneurs*, its decorative sunflowers and decadent sons and daughters.

At the time that Pater's essays were published, many Victorians were

feeling devalued or homogenized by industrialization and cultural streamlining. Aestheticism was, in Jonathan Freedman's words, a "strategic response" that "helped middle-class men and women claim authority for themselves in that world."[24] In addition, the growing interest in self-commodification enhanced the challenge to moral constrictions on bourgeois culture, leading to a broader audience being attracted by the titillating and the *outré*. Thriving on aestheticism's semiotic ambiguities, authors less subtle than Pater were able to take advantage of its sexually coded discourse to spice up their parodies without immediately raising anxieties regarding the stability of the *status quo*. This technique had a high resiliency because it was not aimed at intimidation and did not operate in direct opposition to institutional taxonomies. Despite their notable differences, writers such as W. H. Mallock, Vernon Lee, W. S. Gilbert, and Robert Hichens all based part of their humor on erotically inflected rhetoric and images of apparent deviancy – such as male effeminacy and overt female sexuality – intended to evoke the hidden depths of unconventional attractions. By doing so, these writers encouraged people to read texts (including noncomic and nonverbal ones) against the grain in search of those moments when the subtexts so entertainingly derailed the normative narrative line. In partial concord with advocates of aestheticism such as Pater, Swinburne, and Wilde, parodists helped establish havens of ambiguity in which marginalized sexual identities were given room to develop.

CONTENTS

Parodists were not the first people to use a sexualized discourse to associate aestheticism publicly with amorality, irresponsibility, and subversive sexuality. My first chapter tracks aestheticism's gradual incorporation into the sexual-aesthetic anxieties of literary critics from the 1830s to the 1890s, loosely weaving an analysis of the popularization of this language around the career of the very public poet Alfred Tennyson. The next chapter explores the ways in which two novels – W. H. Mallock's *New Republic* and Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, which appeared in 1877 and 1884 respectively – offer some of the most potent contemporary criticisms of aestheticism and the dandy-aesthete, even as both authors strove to position themselves within the main current of the Aesthetic Movement. Taken together, Mallock's masculinist anxieties and Lee's same-sex desires and concerns about misogyny demonstrate that even such early parodists – both of whom were scathing in their use

of images of uncommon sexuality to insult aestheticism – did not constitute a unified front. I am especially interested here in the way in which lesbianism becomes a signifier of both aestheticism's deviancy and its liberating potential. Having suggested the diversity of early negative responses to aestheticism, I then turn in chapter 3 to the notion of parodic complicity. Examining W. S. Gilbert's 1877 play *Engaged* and his 1881 libretto for the comic opera *Patience*, I explore the ways in which class and capital led his parody to offer perhaps the earliest accepting visions of the dandy-aesthete's slippery sexuality. In Gilbert's work, I argue, economics overrides sexual attraction as the basis of relationships such that his parody sanctions, in part inadvertently, forms of same-sex devotion. I then consider in the following chapter the importance of parody's mutability over time, analyzing changes in one person's views and representations of aestheticism. Taking a look at George Du Maurier's *oeuvre* from his early *Punch* cartoons to his last two novels–*Trilby* and *The Martian*, published in 1894 and 1897 – the chapter shows his investment in a burgeoning heterosexual identity and his growing need to imbue his career as author and cartoonist with a "masculine" vitality. This situation led him to fight more and more vehemently against the pose of the artist preferred by the dandy-aesthetes, even though their views were not entirely anathema to him.

At this point, my study shifts from its focus on mainstream parody to a consideration of its connection to the more specific strategy of camp. While the recent surge in camp scholarship has focused on twentieth-century works, especially in the spheres of cinema and theatre, my interest lies in literary camp from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as it relates to aestheticism. Moreover, while camp has been theorized most frequently as a strategy of the marginalized, I hope to demonstrate that it has also been successfully deployed by people wishing to critique and to interact positively with the marginalized. Some people who basically supported aestheticism such as Robert Hichens and Ada Leverson nevertheless mocked the dandy-aesthete's image. Regardless, their representations of aestheticism support to varying degrees Pater's earlier conception of sympathy. In my fifth chapter, I consider this quality as it appears in early aestheticist camp. I have chosen to address writing by Leverson and Hichens because of their notably different relations to aestheticism. Leverson's sympathy is coupled with a vehement disrespect for the misogynistic bent of aestheticism's self-representation, while Hichens finds it difficult to support its isolationist elitism, despite his position within its homosexual community.