Edinburgh Research Explorer

State of Transformation: Drag Queen Masculinity in Two Scottish Texts

Issue 50   2009

State of Transformation

Drag Queen Masculinity in Two Scottish Texts

By **CAROLE JONES**

"Stop aw this homophobic shite: it's a total drag"

   --Welsh, 'A Smart Cunt' (245)

[1] 'Drag', the practice of cross-dressing and performing as the opposite gender, can be homophobic, suggests an against-the-grain reading of this quote from Irvine Welsh. Such a notion disturbs and complicates the stereotypical association of drag queens with homosexual men, ultimately disrupting the putative subversive nature of queer identities. This article explores the ambivalent representation of drag queens in two Scottish texts, and it was inspired by Sisters, Such Devoted Sisters, a 'one-man' show written and performed by Russell Barr about the exploits of a group of Glasgow drag queens [performance attended at the Drill Hall, London on 25 March 2004]. Flaunting the homosexuality and queer marginality of its characters, the show exposes the devastating fate of the feminine in this queer community, prompting questions concerning Scottishness and masculinity, a relationship fraught with responsibility and significance for the national image. I examine here the consequences of the representation of drag queens in the light of contemporary theorising on Scottish masculinity and with reference to two Scottish fictions, Barr's play and Irvine Welsh's 'A Smart Cunt: a novella', from his collection The Acid House (1994). These readings illuminate certain tensions in what has often been conceptualised as the masculinised images of Scottish national identity.

[2] Christopher Whyte, writing in 1998, observes that 'in the absence of an elected political authority, the task of representing the [Scottish] nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers' (Whyte, 284). Considering such a context, he is moved to regret what he perceives as the dominance of the 'hard man' in contemporary Scottish fiction. This is evident in the writing of Irvine Welsh (Begbie in Trainspotting [1993] is the obvious example) but also in the work of other popular Scottish authors, such as William McIlvanney in his more literary work (Docherty [1975], The Big Man [1985]) and his crime writing (Laidlaw [1977]), and also in the phenomenally successful crime novels of Ian Rankin (the Inspector Rebus narratives, for example). According to Whyte there exists a 'representational pact' in which:

> [O]ne may posit a demand on the part of the Scottish middle class for fictional representations from which it itself is excluded; a demand, in other words, for textual invisibility. This would connect with the widespread perception of the Scottish middle classes as 'denationalised', as less Scottish in terms of speech and social practice than the lower classes. The task of embodying and transmitting Scottishness is, as it were, devolved to the unemployed, the socially underprivileged. (Whyte, 275)

Whyte further argues that the dominance of the hard man is also premised on the 'invisibility of same-sex relations in the majority of texts' (280), or where they are figured, in Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting and Marabou Stork Nightmares (1995) for instance, on an insurance

that 'an ethnically pure Scottish male […] could never be in any real sense homosexual' (281).

[3] In fact, this wilful generalisation bypasses some of the more subtle aspects of Welsh's representations, particularly regarding his novella 'A Smart Cunt' in which the central male character is stirred to defend his friend, the 'queen' Denise, from a girlfriend's homophobia with the words which open this essay. The demand to 'stop aw this homophobic shite' from Brian, an 'ethnically pure', as far as we know, Scottish male, compromises Whyte's outright condemnation of Welsh's oeuvre on grounds of homophobic prejudice. Brian's heartfelt demand is an instance that complicates Whyte's scenario, as does the presence of the actively homosexual Denise in the text. But, disturbingly, rather than negating Whyte's charge, this narrative actually broadens and develops his argument.

[4] Whyte concludes his article by hypothesising that, 'perhaps the most effective way of fostering a solution to the crisis of (straight) masculinity is to offer it a context. To move beyond it and, quite simply, to pay it less attention' (281, parenthesis in the original). In effect, he is inciting us as artists and critics to make space for other masculinities, queer and marginal with respect to the dominant modes of representation. I was reminded of this when watching Sisters, Such Devoted Sisters, a show narrated by a drag queen, the sole subject of which is a community of drag queens, assertively and unapologetically living it up in Glasgow. It is an hysterically funny but menacingly unsettling monologue, the story involving, in the words of the press release, 'a sickening crime story from Glasgow's gay underworld' (Out of Joint media release). In this it is an intriguing complication of Whyte's image of representations of contemporary Scottish masculinity. I wish, here, to address these two depictions of Scottish drag queens in order to unravel their contradictions and the consequences they evoke for gender relations, and ultimately to pursue the fate of the feminine amidst these marginal masculinities. As I demonstrate, a subversion of a masculinised national identity is not necessarily the outcome of these representations of Scottish queerness.

[5] Further to Whyte's argument, Berthold Schoene addresses the question of masculinity and nationalism in his essay 'The Union and Jack: Pomophobia and the Post-nation'. While the nation itself is often figured as passively feminine, the identity of the representative of the nation consists, metaphorically speaking, of a 'soldierly masculinity […] summoned to form an impenetrable armour shielding the domestic body of all women's soft and vulnerable femininity within' ('Union and Jack', 84). Though Scottish nationalism does not defer from such images, its masculine essence is compromised by Scotland's lesser status with respect to England within the British state. Schoene argues that 'Scottish masculinity is caught up in continuous oscillation between the diametrically opposed sites of (post)colonial marginality on the one hand and patriarchal dominance on the other.' Inevitably, 'this simultaneous inferiority and superiority make an uneasy blend', but one that produces an intriguing possibility that Schoene goes on to sketch out:

> Due to the Scottish male's position of subordinate marginality, it seems tempting to speculate that, unlike his English counterpart, he would not be prone to lash out against his others […] but instead enter into a coalition with them […] The question to be asked now is whether contemporary Scottish masculinity could

possibly be described as a devolutionary kind of
masculinity that has embraced its feminine marginality
and is saying 'no' to power. ('Union and Jack', 95)

Here he is referring to Kaja Silverman's arguments in <u>Male Subjectivity
at the Margins</u> (1992), her renowned treatise on the importance of
recognising 'non-phallic' masculinities (that is, non-oppressive and
non-dominating male identities), especially evident in representations
of male masochism, that in her words say 'no' to power. And,
significantly, in this instance Schoene labels non-phallic masculinity
'devolutionary', tying such a development to Scotland's national
status; this is a reference to the reinstatement of the Scottish
parliament in an act of partial devolution from the British state in 1999.
His question is, then, whether Scotland's greater independence will
give rise to a new kind of nationalism, predicated on innovative
conceptions and representations of national identity not founded on a
traditional masculine image. For Schoene devolution presents an
opportunity to reject masculinism. So further to this, my question is
whether the queered characters of the selected texts present such a
rejection, and in doing so offer a new understanding of national
identity.

[6] Drag queens are obviously strong candidates for the demonstration
of a devolutionary masculinity, having very visibly embraced a
feminised marginality. Signified by the appropriation of an affected and
exaggerated feminine style and mannerisms, they typically embody a
queer camp sensibility. Camp is usually understood as gender
parody, particularly concerning femininity, and professional male drag
performers have often been criticised by women for the misogyny of
their burlesque of the excesses of female behaviour. For example,
Alison Laurie has written, 'Although women in male clothes usually
look like gentlemen, men who wear women's clothes, unless they are
genuine transsexuals, seem to imitate the most vulgar and
unattractive sort of female dress, as if in a spirit of deliberate and
hostile parody' (Laurie, 258. See also Marilyn Frye and Judith
Williamson). But on the contrary, it is often asserted that 'homosexual
effeminacy is less about wanting to be a woman, and more about
refusing to be a man', an approach that perceives drag not to be
targeting women, but to be the ultimate refusal of masculinity (Smith,
237). And inevitably, 'the evolution of modern drag goes hand in glove
with the increased visibility of those gay men who not only enjoy
debunking the traditional male image, but also enjoy doing it in public'
(Kirk and Heath, 8).

[7] Moe Meyer goes further than this and argues for the political and
critical importance of what he designates as the discourse of Camp.
'Camp is not simply a "style" or "sensibility" as is conventionally
accepted. Rather, what emerges is a suppressed and denied
oppositional critique embodied in the signifying practices that
processually constitute queer identities' (Meyer, 1) Moreover, he
argues that 'because the function of Camp is the production of queer
social visibility, then the relationship between Camp and queer identity
can be posited' (5). According to Meyer's thesis, then, drag queens
as radical camp subjects embody queer marginality, and the
possibility of a vital critique of the oppressive gender polarity on which
dominant social relations are founded.

[8] This radical potential of drag has long been embraced by activists
and theorists seeking to illustrate non-essential and non-binary
models of gender identity. In the 1970s, the Gay Liberation Front's
'Radical Drag Queens' found that 'there were ways of <u>using</u> drag [as]

a way of giving up the power of the male role' (James, 104). And most familiar is Judith Butler and her assertion in Gender Trouble (1990) that 'in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself − as well as its contingency' (Butler, 137). Though Butler later had to qualify her theory due to the deliberate reading by some critics of individual volition and agency into her notion of gender performativity based on her citing of drag, the radical potential of drag remains of interest to those working to disarm gender opposition and hierarchy. As Carole-Anne Tyler points out, 'female impersonation in particular has been theorized as progressive, partly because […] femininity, unlike masculinity, is thought to involve non-phallogocentric ways of relating to the body, to language, to desire, and to others' ('Boys Will Be Girls', 32). As asserted by Michael James above, female impersonation is a way of giving up the power, the phallogocentric authority, of masculinity and the male role. Drag queens appear to divest themselves of the phallus, and so it is certainly tempting to see them as illustrating the possibilities of Schoene's devolved masculinity.

[9] In his article Schoene sets out 'two – admittedly utopianist – epistemic preliminaries whose fulfilment would be absolutely crucial' for a devolved national image that is able to incorporate into the post-national state 'the nation's vast repertoire of different narratives of national belonging'. This would be an image, then, that undermines the dominance of masculinised values of difference and domination as fundamental to the conception of national identity. 'First, the people would have to communally unlearn the concept of "otherness" […] Secondly, the people would have to say a collective "no" to power' ('Union and Jack', 97). As a group, drag queens have the potential to fulfil these conditions, in embracing the otherness of a feminised identity, and therefore saying 'no' to automatically conferred male power. Further, it is pertinent to note that they are, in fact, doubly marginalised, from the mainstream as part of the queer community, but also within that community, as Esther Newton observed in her 1972 study Mother Camp: 'The drag queen is an ambivalent figure in the gay world [and] symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear the most in themselves, all that they say they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, the stigma' (Newton, 103). More recently, Tyler posits that 'the drag queen may bear the brunt of misogyny within the gay male subculture, as the myth of the "homosexual" is debunked by denigrating drag in order to put as much distance as possible between the "deviant role" (the effeminate invert) and the "real thing" (the gay-identified masculine man)' ('Boys Will Be Girls', 36). Feminised and doubly marginalised, the drag queen would indeed present a novel and captivating representation of Scottish national identity.

[10] Such a remarkable image is contemplated in Irvine Welsh's novella 'A Smart Cunt' when the narrator, Brian, conjures up the following picture:

> One thing about hard cunts that I've never understood: why do they all have to be such big sensitive blouses? The Scottish Hardman ladders his tights so he rips open the face of a passer-by. The Scottish Hardman chips a nail, so he head-butts some poor fucker. Some other guy is wearing the same patterned dress as the Scottish Hardman, and gets a glass in his face for his troubles. ('A Smart Cunt', 276)

This blasphemous portrait figures the Scottish Hardman as a

transvestite, a feminised figure of fun. Whyte perfectly echoes this impression when he later writes that '[the hard man's] status as victim and loser makes him the focus of a surprising but persistent pathos, a pathos that oddly "feminises" a figure who wants to be so resolutely and absolutely masculine' (274). Welsh's narrator posits that the Hardman is ruled by what amounts to a feminine concern with image, and that any threat to his carefully groomed façade is met with hysterical violence, an inherently feminising defence of his fragile ego since hysteria is traditionally associated with women. Notorious for his fear of feminisation and repulsion of the feminine, here the Hardman's masculinity is compromised by the extent of his hysterical disavowal. One prefers not to imagine the reaction of the resident Hardman of Trainspotting, Frank Begbie, to such an indictment.

[11] Brian's metaphor can also be read as an example of a self-deprecating expression of a particularly Scottish inferiority complex, in similar vein to Renton's famous rant in Trainspotting: 'Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the low' (Trainspotting, 78). Or the most feminised of the emasculated. In the circumstances, feminisation signifies the ultimate weakness and submission, a grave accusation and insult to national (figured masculine) pride. But in the novella Brian takes a different tone in his parody of the Scottish Hardman. He is playful, less angry and accusatory, less personally threatened by the implications of his metaphor. If the masculine masquerade of the Hardman is a fragile and unstable front, susceptible to outbursts of dangerous and self-destructive hysteria, Brian is much more comfortable and accepting of his own putative feminisation. In this the text invites us to read him as an example of Schoene's devolved masculinity.

[12] It is clear from the opening of the narrative that Brian is not a dominating character but a man who enjoys giving up power. He is a park keeper, his personal location echoing Scotland's position within the British state: 'Inverleith was an okay park, dead central like. I couldn't have crashed in a park on the ootside of the city, that would've been a drag' ('A Smart Cunt', 179). 'Dead central' is close to the centre of power but with no access to it for a pre-devolutionary Scotland, a situation figured by the boredom of Brian's job where 'you become so inactive that even thinking of doing anything feels threatening' (180). Brian's passivity permeates the narrative and is referenced in several ways. He demurs from the political activism promoted by his friend Donny, proclaiming 'I think I'll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism' (240). He takes a beating three times: 'I've no resentment, no thoughts of revenge' (223) he exclaims after one nasty incident, and after another he masochistically claims an attack 'seems to have cleared the mind a bit. Thanks, boys' (287). Similarly, with regard to sex Brian does not fit the macho stereotype, willing to please women when they proposition him, like his older colleague May, but maintaining 'I dinnae like shagging just for the sake of it; I like to make love. That means with somebody I love' (247).

[13] If his devolved masculinity makes Brian less aggressive and domineering than the typical Scottish Hardman, he is also associated with marginality throughout the narrative. He often jokingly refers to himself as a transvestite, and one friend mockingly imitates him 'using a voice that sounds more like Denise's than ma own' (229). Moreover, not only does he defend Denise from homophobic prejudice but is a victim of queer bashing merely by being associated with the queen: '—

if ye hing aboot wi poofs, that makes you a poof, that's the wey ah see it. What dae ye say tae that then, mate? I look at the guy, and manage to ask, – Any chance ay a gam? They look at me incredulously for a few seconds, then one says, – Smart cunt!' (287). Brian's quick wit, repeatedly commented on, earns him this unwanted nickname, and further distances him from his peers. Verbal dexterity, and his abiding interest in reading biographies, associates Brian with a Scottish middle-class sensibility, the class perceived as 'denationalised' by its association with a dominating Englishness. Intelligence here is feminising, alienating Brian from the physicality and aggression of the working-class maleness so often laden with 'the task of embodying and transmitting Scottishness' (Whyte, 275). In light of his difference, then, he is a potential non-phallic man who says 'no' to power.

[14] Brian's association with Denise certainly enhances his devolved status, but it is Denise, as a practising, effeminate homosexual, a 'queen', who truly embraces a feminine marginality, who appears most completely divested of the phallus. Perhaps not committed to drag, but undoubtedly camp, 'Denise is in a state of transformation from one queen stereotype into another' ('A Smart Cunt', 241) observes Brian. And he adds, signalling other parallels between the two of them, 'Denise never really fitted in back there [the scheme or housing project]. Too camp; too much of a superiority complex. Most people hated that, but I loved him for it' (241-42). Marginal and feminised, Denise's is the ultimate devolved masculinity here. Could he be read, then, against the grain of Scottish men's writing as the representative in this text of a new conception of Scottish national identity?

[15] If we do focus on Denise we actually find an embodiment of Brian's transvestite travesty of the Scottish Hardman. In defiance of Schoene's utopian scheme, this queen does not give up power readily. Not only is Denise controlling, for instance, 'always [deciding] what will be the appropriate drink for his friends' ('A Smart Cunt', 241), he is also aggressive and violent, threatening to 'BATTER YIR FUCKIN CUNT IN, SON!' when a young hanger-on puts his favourite record on the juke box without his permission. Brian recalls making him a tape which he 'crushed under the heel of his boot' merely because Brian wrote the track titles on the cover against Denise's wishes. Denise appears to be just as hysterically violent as the more typical Scottish Hardman, effectively more traditionally masculine than Brian in his appropriation of personal authority and dominance in his own social circle. His embracing of a camp feminised style does not detract from his ability to play the Hardman role effectively.

[16] This portrait of Denise is an instance illustrating that drag or a camp style can work towards distancing the man from the feminine he appears to be positively embracing. In her essay on the politics of gay drag, Tyler argues that, 'identification with the man in drag is possible and may not subvert masculine phallic identities' ('Boys will be Girls', 45). For instance, she brings attention to observations by analysts that 'the transvestite has feminized himself only in order to "masculinize" (phallicize) himself, attempting to better secure a masculine or phallic and "whole" identity through cross-dressing' (40). Here the presence of the penis beneath the women's clothes takes on a powerful, masculinising significance. Certainly the professional drag performer's routine often moves towards 'revealing the body beneath the clothes', by devices such as strategically lowering the voice at key moments and concluding by throwing off the wig. Tyler relates such actions to what she terms a 'defence against the feminization

our culture has persistently linked to homosexuality', a reaction she understands to be persistent in parts of the gay community:

> The insistence of gay and lesbian writers on their 'straight' gender identity but 'deviant' object choice makes homosexuality a matter of sexual rather than gender difference from what culture assumes to be (and legislates as) the norm, heterosexuality […] Such anxiety about being 'normal' with respect to gender can be consistent with patriarchal gynaephobia when it takes the form of the repudiation of femininity, as when apparently woman-identified drag queens […] insist they really are men and have no wish to be mistaken for women. ('Boys Will Be Girls', 36)

Brian, in the Welsh narrative, is observing such attitudes when he says of Denise, 'his stereotypical queen stuff embarrasses most homosexuals' ('A Smart Cunt', 243). But for all that, in his relations with others Denise refuses the disempowerment associated with the feminine; he performs a hysterical masculinity, 'signalling he has what women lack: the phallus'. He is, in effect, 'the phallic woman' ('Boys will be Girls', 41). Significantly, he is not denied access to traditional male narratives, of control, superiority, and adventure. He does, after all, insist that he has had sex with the woman who later becomes Brian's girlfriend ('A Smart Cunt', 222-23). Far from indicating an emancipatory gender identity, in the manner of Schoene's utopian model, Denise's appropriation of femininity centres attention on himself while condemning women to a marginal significance in the text. This is an effective repudiation of the feminine that is not an impossible outcome of such queering cultural identities and activities.

[17] Russell Barr's Sisters, Such Devoted Sisters bravely exposes just such a scenario in its engaging comedic tale of drag queens in a seedy Glasgow underworld. Performed by Barr in drag, the 'one-man' show fixes itself firmly on the margins of the mainstream. The characters in the narrative, like Denise, embrace a feminine style that contains the possibility of radically realigning masculine identity, a collective refusal of power. The narrator indicates, however, that this process is undermined from the beginning. She assumes the drag identity of Bernice Hindley, 'Myra's niece', an association with the convicted 1960s child killer Myra Hindley that instils from the outset a brutal rejection of a maternal femininity.

[18] In this set up Sisters echoes aspects of contemporary culture notable for a similar repudiation of the feminine. For instance, Susan Fraiman, in her book Cool Men and the Second Sex (2003), investigates the work of individual contemporary cultural theorists and artists where, despite the advances of feminism, she detects 'incredibly, a lingering, systematic masculinism among some of the best-known, left-leaning, evidently "cool" cultural workers, many of whom explicitly ally themselves with women's concerns' (Fraiman, xi, xii). Not only men, but women too (such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Halberstam) succumb to a mode of self-presentation in their work that is a cool 'male' style, 'affirming a kind of dissident, hip masculinity, which typically phrases itself over against a more conventional "feminine"' that is characteristically 'maternalized and hopelessly linked to stasis, tedium, constraint, even domination', and a rigid domesticity. Fluid postmodern identities are often theorised against this notion of the feminine, according to Fraiman.

[19] Newton observes a similar dismissal of a maternal and nurturing femininity in the ideals at work in the drag queen community. In this view, women 'oppose male strength through manipulativeness and beauty', and so a drag persona combines glamour with manipulation 'that has a hostile and distinctly nasty manifestation: bitchiness' (Newton, 127). The often aggressive humour of the drag show illustrates this, another strategy that effectively distances the feminine, and more specifically a maternalised, nurturing feminine, from the man in drag. This is a situation, then, where men's appropriation of femininity can fail to foster an 'unlearning of otherness' in the positive manner that Schoene hypothesises. The very characteristics of femininity that constitute its otherness in a male dominated social reality are not automatically assimilated by camp subjects; they remain other.

[20] This is no more evident than in the shocking climactic conclusion of the Sisters narrative. The drag queens assault and probably leave for dead a male-to-female transsexual, a familiar local character they encounter in a club who has incurred the wrath of one of the drag queens in particular, ostensibly just for being a transsexual. The narrator herself admits that she is reticent to join in the attack but gives in to peer pressure and the fear of violence against herself. A final image is that of a drag queen's heavy, platform, metal-inlaid boot stamping on the stricken transsexual and kicking her in the groin. A vicious hatred directs this action, signalling the drag queens' construction of the transsexual as an 'other' against which they can define and assert themselves. If this is a negation of any solidarity the two groups might experience due to the feminisation they appear to have in common, there is a disturbing rationalization for it. That is, as Tyler explains, of all the queer community 'only the [male-to-female] transsexual compromises his masculinity with respect to both [sexual] object choice and [gender] identification, apparently wholly embracing femininity and the lack it symbolises in our culture' (Female Impersonation, 119). Notwithstanding the male-to-female transsexuals who do, in fact, desire women, according to this argument the murderous attack at the end of Sisters constitutes a severe rejection of the feminine as signified here by the transsexual. These drag queens, like Denise in the Welsh narrative, opt for a performance of hysterical violence that lays legitimate claim to the mantel of the Hardman, as commonly represented in contemporary Scottish fiction.

[21] With this in mind, I am arguing that Sisters' concluding violent scene is not simply a gratuitously sensational finale that unjustly represents a whole queer community. It is an event that, along with the sometimes comical violence that runs throughout the narrative, promotes critical examination of the potential of queer representation to subvert the dominant. The violent assault is a graphic illustration of what Meyer describes as the potential doubleness of Camp, how it 'appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the spectre of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order' (Meyer, 11). In the performance I witnessed, Barr encouraged the audience to consider this deeply problematic aspect of camp by incorporating strategic gaps into the flow of the monologue. These noticeable silences occur after the narration of particularly disturbing events that contrast dramatically with the raucous humour of the piece, such as an asthma attack experienced by the storyteller or her assault at the hands of the violent cohorts of a flatmate. During these gaps the narrator sits perfectly still, gazing into the audience, for perhaps a whole minute or more, evoking a sense of

disturbing desolation and vulnerability at the centre of the narrative, before moving on in the familiar irreverent, anecdotal style. These gaps allow the audience to reflect on the shocking events perhaps more critically than they would normally have chance to do during the full onward stream of a live performance. They are alienating and defamiliarising, and evoke a sense of moral vacancy that questions the effectiveness of drag in undermining the epistemological injustices of the mainstream. [I subsequently saw a further performance of Sisters in November 2004, a much more 'naturalistic' production in which these gaps were no longer present. The effect on the piece was striking; for me it lost a great deal of its potential to disturb and cause reflection in the audience which was overridden by the focus on the comic and sensational effects of the monologue.]

[22] Such a violently irrational reaction as that of Barr's drag queens, though perhaps from an unexpected quarter in this instance, alas is not unusual. Jay Prosser argues that often it is not fear of the same or of the other that presents a danger, but fear of bodily crossing, or what he terms 'transphobia' (Prosser, 47). The apparent stability of physical boundaries constitutes a limit to these drag queens' own crossing and passing, beyond which they will not go. This signals their reluctance to give up the penis, the physical sign of masculinity, and, by association, phallic male power, substantiating the claims of some feminist critics that the man in drag is the phallic woman. As well as transphobia, it could also be argued that the drag queens are subjects of 'pomophobia', a term coined by Thomas Byers that Schoene defines as 'traditional masculinity's existential fear and rejection of all kinds of postmodern destabilisation' ('Union and Jack', 88). Their violent reaction to the ultimate destabilising of gender marks the drag queens as pomophobic, and, ironically, aligns them with the traditional masculinity they appear so spectacularly to reject.

[23] Ultimately, there is an ejection of the feminine, in the form of the transsexual, from the narrative of Sisters. Similarly, Brian's mother and previous longstanding girlfriend are absent from 'A Smart Cunt', though the circumstances are somewhat different. At first it appears his mother ruthlessly abandoned her family, but we learn at the very end of the narrative that she has effectively lived in exile from her sons in Australia until a fatal accident five years before. Brian finds a box full of her letters, and in each one she begs his father to let them get in touch, a fact he kept from his sons in order to cultivate their feelings of rejection and resentment towards her. We never know her side of the story, but Brian's sense of loss is palpable throughout the narrative. So here too the ejection of the feminine takes place amidst undercurrents of violence, considering the mother's exile and death, though the agent of this is Brian's father, a representative of an older, more traditional generation. Significantly, the drag queens of the more recent text carry on this oppression in their own way.

[24] What does the feminine style of the drag queens signify in these circumstances? With women expunged from the text, their conduct looks more like an appropriation of the feminine, a 'colonization of femininity' in Abigail Soloman-Godeau's words, 'so that what has been rendered peripheral and marginal in the social and cultural realm, or actively devalued, is effectively incorporated within the compass of masculinity' (Soloman-Godeau, 73). Soloman-Godeau is referring in her essay to the representation of the feminised masculinities of the post-revolutionary culture in classical French painting which she asserts was 'contemporaneous with a heightened misogyny'. Perhaps an analogous process can be identified in these two contemporary Scottish texts, where the absent feminine is similarly 'reinscribed and

recuperated within a masculine representation'. In eighteenth-century painting this was achieved through images of beautiful and idealized masculinity, justified by the equivalence of spiritual and moral beauty with physical beauty. In the contemporary texts, the figure of the drag queen or female impersonator stands in for the absent women, in recognition, perhaps, of the power of female glamour and the 'supposed competitive advantage of femininity in today's display culture' (Krimmer, 42). Whereas the classical paintings mark a time when women were being expelled from the public sphere, in the contemporary period men are threatened by women's social gains, due to the successes of feminism as well as technological changes in the realm of production, generating an anxiety that has given rise to a discourse of 'masculinity in crisis' over the last few decades. The expulsion of women in contemporary representation allays this anxiety but leaves vacant the space they occupied. It is this gap that is veiled by men's appropriation of the feminine, and as these violent drag queens illustrate, their aim is not to completely give up their male power.

[25] These ambivalent representations of masculine identities are perfectly summarised by David Savran when he writes, 'modern white masculinities are deeply contradictory, eroticizing submission and victimization while trying to retain a certain aggressively virile edge, offering subject positions that have been marked historically as being both masculine and feminine, white and black' (Savran, 9). In their 'double' position as both glamorously feminised and aggressively masculine, the Scottish drag queens appear to affirm Judith Butler's reflection that divestiture of the phallus 'could be a strategy of phallic self-aggrandizement' (Kotz, 51). In this they represent a reassertion of the dominant Scottish masculinity of the hard man that Whyte and Schoene fear. Efforts to re-conceive national identity in the light of devolved masculinities would appear to be stalled at this juncture, hijacked by old models of masculine domination. Such representations put into question Schoene's claim in a later essay that, due to 'their disenfranchisement and representational elision by an anachronistic politics of Anglo-British homogeneity', Scottish people developed a 'morally superior sense of national identity' ('Going Cosmopolitan', 7). If not to Scottish queers, where else can we look for evidence of this?

[26] If the drag queens fail to fulfil Schoene's hopes for the emancipation of a gendered national identity then perhaps Brian represents a kind of 'straight white hope' that change can be achieved. This argument is undermined, however, by his admission of his part in a murder: 'I hadn't booted snow in Blind Cunt's face that night. I'd booted him in the face. The decisive blow was as likely to have been mine as it was Roxy's' ('A Smart Cunt', 278-79). This is a brutal and cold-blooded action, and it echoes with further significance. The murdered man is a kind of doppelganger for Brian, an infamously irritating know-it-all with a more than similar nickname: 'The Blind Cunt and the Smart Cunt; a tale of two cunts' (279) is how Brian articulates their entwined lives. Schoene notes that the doppelganger is prominent in the Scottish literary tradition, especially in Scottish men's writing, and he argues that it is possible to interpret it as a feminine other for the male character in question. He asks, 'would it be legitimate to read the doppelgänger motif as a gender-specific obsession with difference, not so much with what Adrienne Scullion has described as "society's fear of the unheimlich aspects of the feminine" as, more specifically, the Scottish male's fear of his own intrinsic self-and-otherness, or "effeminacy"?' ('Union and Jack', 94). If

this is the case, Brian, like the drag queens in <u>Sisters</u>, kills this other, once again expelling the feminine from the narrative.

[27] Both Whyte and Schoene hypothesise on the value of representing marginal masculine identities, and the opportunity they represent to reject masculinism and the hierarchic power relations and domination it produces, especially in relation to the representation of Scottish national identity. These two narratives complicate those arguments and give us marginalised men, homosexuals and drag queens, who are unable to completely, in Schoene's words, unlearn otherness or say 'no' to power. Ultimately, they fall back on a Hardman masculinity to assert and maintain their power within their own communities. And this results in an ejection of the feminine from the text and its appropriation into a masculine representation. <u>Sisters</u> in particular, a post-devolution text, illustrates the difficulty of effecting change in power relations.

[28] As I have been arguing, this reassertion of oppressive masculinised power signals implications for our conception of the national situation where for observers like Schoene the changing state of the nation creates opportunities for transforming our idea of national identity. Whereas within the United Kingdom Scots continued to define themselves in terms of a defensive nationalism grounded in the old oppositional and hierarchical relationship with England, the new partially devolved Scotland has a wider vision of itself as a small nation within Europe, and welcomes this entrance onto a more international stage. But just how emancipatory is this devolution process? According to Aaron Kelly:

> [T]he devolution of political institutions within Britain can be understood in terms of a fundamental reterritorialisation of power via free-market economics, underpinning the creation of a European superstate portioned into highly rarefied new-regional units. The perpetual de- and re-centring of the global economy according to the reifications of finance capital and its continual scrambling of cores and peripheries represent an unsettling dynamic that problematises any straightforwardly affirmative interpretation of spatial and political reorganisation. (Kelly, 179)

As global institutions and structures resist and contain any transformation in the relations of power, they ultimately promote 'a reterritorialisation of that most mainstream of things, the individual, the formative ideological building block of bourgeois society' (183). That particular masculinised model, reflected in traditional Enlightenment notions of both self-contained men and nation, reiterates a patriarchal paradigm in which they each sustain themselves through domination of usually feminised others. Therefore, although Scots argue for their difference from the English these representations signal the danger of defining Scottish identity in the same masculinised hierarchical terms as before. The ejection of the feminine from these literary texts symbolises its marginalisation in terms of Scottish national identity, where the enthusiastic turn towards European and international political and commercial platforms signals an attempt to reject the old relationship with England in which Scotland interpreted its inferiorisation as feminising. The consequences are a new 'MacChismo' suited to the reterritorialising globalising forces of international capital.

[29] The radical potential of drag in its seeming divesting of the phallus

is somehow reversed in Welsh's and Barr's texts, and men and dominant masculinity are re-centred, reterritorialised, a process of phallic self-aggrandisement in Butler's words. These certainly are innovative representations of Scottish men but they do not reject masculinism. They remind us that radical change of social relations and identities is not effected by simply cross-dressing, or coming out as homosexual, or, in the national context, appropriating for the nation an outward-looking internationalism. These actions alone do not negate the possibility of re-instating and re-affirming traditional masculinised identity, often murderous in its rejection of the feminine.

[30] As a counter-culture, and in their radical opposition to the straight mainstream, queer individuals more and more command respect and attention. As Brian says of Denise's camp queendom, 'Most people hated that, but I loved him for it' ('A Smart Cunt', 242). The point though, as Sisters demonstrates, is to question and develop a process of continual critique in our relations with others, of the mainstream or the margins, in a personal and national context. Barr bravely promotes this in his play and its performance, effectively demonstrating that Whyte's hopes and Schoene's conditions are not such straight-forward agendas for change. These particular drag queens epitomise in a single compounded image what Schoene describes as Scottish masculinity's 'continuous oscillation between the diametrically opposed sites of (post)colonial marginality on the one hand and patriarchal dominance on the other', an infuriatingly knotted national trope not easily unravelled. In such an anxious context, 'others', usually of the feminine kind, continue to be found and dominated, and power is still embraced and brutally exercised, even by men in frocks.

WORKS CITED

Barr, Russell. Sisters, Such Devoted Sisters. London: Oberon, 2005.

Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge, 1990.

Fraiman, Susan. Cool Men and the Second Sex. New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Frye, Marilyn. The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory. Trumansburg: The Crossing Press 1983.

James, Michael. interviewed in Kris Kirk and Ed Heath, Men in Frocks. London: GMP, 1984.

Kelly, Aaron. 'James Kelman and the Deterritorialisation of Power'. In Berthold Schoene (ed.), Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 175-183.

Kirk, Kris and Ed Heath, Men in Frocks. London: GMP, 1984.

Krimmer, Elizabeth. 'Nobody Wants to be a Man Anymore? Cross-dressing in American Movies of the 90s'. In Russell West and Frank Lay (eds), Subverting Masculinity: Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture. Amsterdam: Rodopi BV, 2000: 29-43.

Kotz, Liz. 'The Body you Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler'. In Artforum (November 1993).

Laurie, Alison. The Language of Clothes. New York: Random House,

1983.

Meyer, Moe. 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp'. In Moe Meyer (ed.) The Politics and Poetics of Camp. London/New York: Routledge, 1994: 1-22.

Newton, Esther. Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979.

Out of Joint Edinburgh Festival Media Release, 2004. <www.edfringe.com>.

Prosser, Jay. Second Skin: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality.New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Savran, David. Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Schoene, Berthold. 'The Union and Jack: British Masculinities, Pomophobia, and the Post-nation'. In Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth (eds), Across the Margins: Cultural Identity and Change in the Atlantic Archipelago. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002: 83-98.

Schoene, Berthold. 'Going Cosmopolitan: Reconstituting "Scottishness" in Post-devolution Criticism'. In Berthold Schoene (ed.), Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007: 7-16.

Smith, Richard. 'Frock Tactics'. In Roger Baker, Drag. London: Cassell, 1994.

Soloman-Godeau, Abigail. 'Male Trouble'. In Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, Simon Watson (eds), Constructing Masculinity. New York: Routledge, 1995: 69-76.

Tyler, Carole-Anne. 'Boys Will be Girls: the Politics of Gay Drag'. In Diana Fuss (ed.), Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories.London/New York: Routledge, 1991: 32-70.

Tyler, Carole-Anne. Female Impersonation. New York/London: Routledge, 2003.

Welsh, Irvine. Trainspotting. London: Minerva, 1994.

Welsh, Irvine. 'A Smart Cunt: a novella', in The Acid House. London: Vintage, 1995 [1994].

Whyte, Christopher. 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', Forum for Modern Language Studies. 34:3 (1998): 274-85.

Williamson, Judith. Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture. London: Marion Boyas, 1986.

Contributor's Note:

CAROLE JONES teaches literature at the University of Edinburgh. She is author of Disappearing Men: Gender Disorientation in Scottish Fiction 1979-1999 (Rodopi, 2009) and has previously published on gender and sexuality in contemporary Scottish writing in various journals and edited collections.

Genders Journal
226 UCB
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309
http://www.Genders.org