

Elaine Aston

## Male Impersonation in the Music Hall: the Case of Vesta Tilley

Music hall has only recently been treated to 'serious' as distinct from anecdotal study, and the 'turns' of its leading performers remain largely unexplored. Particularly revealing, perhaps, are the acts of the male impersonators – whose ancestry in 'legit' performance had been a long one, yet whose particular approach to cross-dressing had a special social and sexual significance during the ascendancy of music hall, with its curious mixture of working-class directness, commercial knowingness, and 'pre-Freudian innocence'. The most successful of the male impersonators was Vesta Tilley, whose various disguises, the nature of their hidden appeal, and the 'messages' they delivered are here analyzed by Elaine Aston.

THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGY of Victorian and Edwardian England supported the conservative image of women as 'angels in the house': as beautiful, chaste, domestic creatures. However, stereotyped femininity did not go unchallenged, and among those dissenters who promoted an image of 'unwomanly women' were the male impersonators of the music hall, who, in male guise, assumed the values of the 'dominant' sex and undermined them, with satirical lyrics and a parody of male mannerisms. The most successful of these male impersonators was Vesta Tilley, and the purpose of this brief study is to re-evaluate her contribution to the tradition of cross-dressing, which in the popular theatre of her time was a significant challenge to the 'womanly' stereotype.<sup>1</sup>

### History of the Breeches Role

Compared to the tradition of the female impersonator, the male impersonator has attracted little interest, though the tradition of the breeches role, as it was first called, began on the English stage as soon as the Drury Lane patent allowed women into the acting profession in the 1660s. The tradition of men playing all roles, male and female, had gradually caused unease, as some actors chose to carry on their female roles outside the confines of the theatre. Once this theatrical convention was broken and it became customary for women to appear on stage, they immediately reversed tradition by

taking on comic male roles, one of the best exponents of these being Nell Gwyn. Primarily, such roles existed as part of a plot mechanism, the action of the play demanding that the heroine assume male guise.

As breeches roles became popular, they set a trend in society fashions. For instance, as a consequence of Nell Gwyn's performance as Florimel in Dryden's *Secret Love; or, The Maiden Queen*, many ladies turned up at court in male attire.<sup>2</sup> Such fashions served to reinforce femininity rather than to appear 'unwomanly', and on stage the wearing of breeches provided ample opportunity for a titillating demonstration equivalent to the nineteenth-century cancan, as Nell and her greatest rival, Moll Davis, increased their repertoires by dancing jigs as afterpieces to the main performance.

The following century saw the success of the 'Lovely Peggy' Woffington, who took several breeches parts, including those in *The Female Officer*, *The Recruiting Officer*, and, most successful of all, Sir Harry Wildair in Farquhar's *The Constant Couple*. A shapely leg and the heightening of female beauty by the severity of masculine attire established Peggy as a popular eighteenth-century entertainer, whose fame was recreated in the nineteenth century in Charles Reade's play based on her celebrity.<sup>3</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, the tradition flourished in entertainment forms such as comic opera, burlesque, extravaganza, and pantomime. Amongst some of these early nineteenth-

century impersonators were Betty Bonehill and the most popular of all, Madame Vestris. She achieved her first success in the burlesque *Giovanni in London*, was popularly nick-named 'Adonis', and henceforth prohibited by demanding and adoring audiences from changing to more serious roles.

Unlike her eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century predecessors, the late nineteenth-century male impersonator did not use masculine attire to heighten femininity. Whereas Peggy Woffington or Madame Vestris exploited male costume to reveal an expanse of shapely thigh, and so to underline their sexuality, Vesta Tilley and her Victorian and Edwardian contemporaries (the most famous of these, after Tilley herself, being Ella Shields and Hetty King) suppressed their femininity in order to perfect the illusion of being male. If successful, male disguise could prove a powerful subversion of gender power roles and identities.

## Gender Play

To understand how this gender play arises is to understand how western society has coded the biological difference between the sexes as gender difference. It is precisely because western society insists on what Foucault terms the 'true sex'<sup>4</sup> that the possibility of gender play arises. Established medically and legally, a person's private sex is publicly masked in the appropriate male and female dress codes, designating gender identity and coding social behaviour. To upset the boundaries of masculine and feminine constructs by means of trans-sexual dress codes is to challenge the 'fixed' identities of male and female.

In the 'real' world, 'reading' the masks of the dress codes as the 'true sex' upsets the 'order of things', as in the case of Balzac's *La Zambinella* or Foucault's *Herculine Barbin(e)*.<sup>5</sup> Yet if the immediate threat to the 'order' is removed by an artificial framework, such as theatre, then temporary abolition of the 'true sex' is granted. Only the voyeuristic pleasure of sexual ambiguity remains, and one sex, seen as two, is permitted to pass unpunished.

Vesta Tilley drew very definite boundaries between her performance and her own life style. In the one she opened up the play on sexual

ambiguity: in the other, she was always, unequivocally and irrevocably, a 'lady'. Born into a music-hall environment, playing her first London engagement at the age of ten, her slight, androgynous, Peter Pan physique was a youthful spirit which 'grew' with her. The presence of youth, in its dual connotations of age and boyhood, was the key to the success and pleasure of her act:

*a dapper young man in an exquisite purple holiday costume strolls from the wings leaning on his bending cane. He comes to the centre of the footlights, and poses with crossed legs and staring monocle, the features deliciously quizzical and inane. A perfect picture ... the picture speaks and the illusion is piquantly broken, or, rather, the optical illusion continues only there is another person present – the woman artist who unfolds the tale.*<sup>6</sup>

The gender semiotics in the performance context are pleasurably mixed and complex. The voice code and audience foreknowledge signify the 'true sex'. Signs of masculinity are based on dress, body movement, and gesture. But there are also the facial and physical codes signifying androgyny. The interplay of male and female codes is located in a 'neutered' body, and whether masculine or feminine codes are foregrounded will depend largely on their reception by the spectator.

Yet, off-stage, Vesta Tilley kept to her 'true sex' and even chose female dress for some of her publicity posters or illustrated song sheets. Her chief weakness with regard to the impersonations was never to have her hair cropped, but to conceal its feminine lustre and length under a cleverly designed wig.<sup>7</sup> She did not carry over into her private life her performance of the 'high life' johnnies she impersonated on stage, as some of her male, precursor 'mashers' did.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, she differs from the American impersonators of the 1870s, most notably Annie Hindle. Laurence Senelick's article on the American tradition<sup>9</sup> gives a clear picture of Hindle's disguise of her 'true sex', not only on stage but in her private life, where she furthered gender ambiguity by 'marrying' one of her dressers. Lacking Tilley's androgynous physique, Hindle, as she matured, was endowed with overtly masculine characteristics, including



a moustache and stubble beard, so that the stage act became a means of 'neutralizing' the threat posed to images of femininity by the 'butchness' of Hindle and her imitators. In this instance, art concealed reality.

As Willson Disher observes, all of Tilley's impersonations were based on imitating 'that side of masculinity which is clothes conscious. All the young men she has pretended to be are proud of what they wear – all of them, from the one in "Etons" to the one in Khaki'.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, Willson Disher's listing of her soldiers, sailors, messenger boy, 'as well as a curate or two', can be subdivided into two types of 'clothes conscious' dressing: the dandy and the uniformed male.

### The Dandy and the Soldier

Annette Kuhn, in her essay 'Sexual Disguise and Cinema', establishes a comparative affinity between cross-dressing and dandyism:

*although the two practices differ in their articulation of sexual difference – both foreground the performance aspect of dress, and in so doing activate a certain irony ... If clothing as performance threatens to undercut the subject fixed in ideology, crossdressing as a particular expression of it goes one step further. It highlights the centrality of gender constructs in processes of subjectivity and comments upon a culturally salient means by which a would-be fixed gender identity is marked and constructed ... Crossdressing, then, may denaturalize that phenomenon held in our culture to be most evidently and pre-eminently natural: sexual difference.<sup>11</sup>*

Tilley's 'masher' impersonations involve both these modes of 'self-referentiality'. As a female she assumes the identity of a male, already encoded in a costume which has established a deliberate distance from the 'gendered body'. The dandy, 'a man who, by virtue of his own sense of superior taste, stands outside and slightly above the rest of his society',<sup>12</sup> comes under the critical and satirical scrutiny of the male impersonator.

The notion of dress-as-performance shared by the dandy and the art of cross-dressing are particularly pertinent to the Victorian and Edwardian music-hall impersonator because of the fashionable dandy cult, popularized by

Oscar Wilde. In 1878, when Tilley was making her London debut, Wilde was also abandoning Oxford to make his debut on London's society stage. Wilde used dress as a form of self-advertisement for his entry into society, and as *fin de siècle* dandyism became fashionable, promoted in the high society circles of the Prince of Wales, it became a satirical target in papers such as *Punch*.

As long as the dandy figure remained in fashion, the success of its satirical double was assured. When the Wilde trials of 1895 began to reverse public attitudes, the demise of the parasitic, idle dandy, rapidly completed by the no-nonsense climate of the First World War, was set in motion. As England went into war, Tilley no longer concentrated on aping London's swells, but was cutting a dashing, patriotic figure in military cloth.

Whereas the dandy is characterized as one who does not work for a living, uniform as a dress code primarily identifies people by what they do. Although some of Tilley's uniformed males were civilians, the majority were military types, signifying male values of heroism, strength, authority, and power. In military uniform she was admitted to the 'master' race and engaged in the power values denied her 'true-slave-sex'.

The reverse is true, for example, of the male actors in Genet's play, *The Maids*, who wear the uniform which, just as the military uniform signifies male power, is a metaphor for female powerlessness and subservience. The sinister and fatal double role playing of master-slave fantasies engages the male performer in the antithetical experience of negativity, or reversal of power.<sup>13</sup>

Uniform may also be used to signify an androgynous, asexual coding, foregrounding codes of 'sameness', the group or collective, and thereby undermine the assumption of sexual difference, by an absence of gender identity. In this way, Tilley's uniformed, androgynous figure was not dominated by an overtly overpowering military or 'macho' image, but combined militarism with the asexual uniform of youth.

To reach an understanding of how or to what extent it was possible for Tilley to share, seize, or subvert male power-values requires further

reconstruction of her music-hall act, by examining the song material. Songwriting in music hall had also become big business. Singers copyrighted songs from the composers in order to lay financial claims to their 'smash hits', and identifying songs with singers was a signature tune for stardom.

## The Songs

Some of Tilley's early material was written by her father, some by her husband, in addition to compositions by top professional songwriters of the industry. Her early work, as Willson Disher points out, did not 'bear the imprint of her personality', and could have been sung by 'any red-nosed comic or *serio comic*',<sup>14</sup> though that was to change as her act, material, and star quality became established. The songs, or at least those best remembered, split broadly into three kinds: the 'girl' songs, the 'swell' songs, and the 'military' numbers.

In the songs, Tilley consistently aligns herself with the male voice. She addresses the female spectator in the 'you' form (thereby excluding herself from implication) and aligns herself when using the 'we' form with the male populace. She does not use her male guise to engage in double play on her sexual identity, which would detract from the masculine mask.

In the 'girl' songs, as she addresses the female spectator, comments are made about a woman's love of money, her flirtatious nature, and fickleness in love. 'Angels Without Wings' implies that women hide behind pious façades; 'Like the men, you're angels, when you're not found out', is the punch line of the chorus. As is stated in the accompanying explanation to the song in *Sixty Years of British Music Hall*:

*This song depicts women as angels despite all their blemishes and the chorus floats as angelically as the women in the song would have their admirers believe them to behave. The distinction, between what the women really are and what they would wish to appear, is cleverly counterpoised by the verse being in martial 2/4 time and the chorus in blithe waltz rhythm. The impish irony of the lilting chorus comes with the last line 'Like the men, you're angels, when you're not found out'.<sup>15</sup>*

'Wicked young girls' are chastised for being flirtatious and fickle in the chorus of 'Oh! You Girls', and in 'Sweetheart May' the fickle whims of women are contrasted with the constancy of the male partner. The cost of marriage is the theme of 'For the Sake of the Dear Little Girls' – a sad lament on woman as the ruin (perhaps more specifically the financial ruin) of men.

The addresses to women are aimed at a specific group, namely those in the young, single, and working-class bracket. Marital status and age are indicated in the multiple references to the cost of courting a young girl. Class is indicated by the references to the work sphere: the girl waiting in the cook shop ('By the Sad Sea Waves') and the 'slaveys' ('The Bold Militiaman') or the barmaid ('In the Pale Moonlight'). When proper names are used, we are not in the world of the aristocratic Lady Janets and Graces, but in that of the plain, working-class Mary Anns or Aunt Matildas.

The moral finger is occasionally pointed at young girls, warning that frivolity and fickleness will lead eventually to the punishment of a solitary life as an old maid ('Oh You Girls'). Or a much-worked theme of the social drama of the period is given a brief airing, as, for example, in 'Daughters', which touches upon the difficulties families have in successfully marrying their female issue.

## Mocking 'Vanity Fair'

Colin MacInnes, in his study of music-hall songs, notes the importance of references to money, which are frequently found interspersed in love lyrics,<sup>16</sup> and it is this underlying materialistic greed for money which provides a clue to understanding Tilley's satire. Some critics condemn her attitude towards women in the 'girl' songs as antipathetic to the female sex. Yet this is to misunderstand that the target of Tilley's satire is not women, but the 'Vanity Fair' of both sexes; to mock the world's madness in its greed for wealth.

It is precisely because of her image that she is able to foreground the follies of both sexes. Being an amalgamation of male and female, yet androgynously distanced from both, she is able to comment on human behaviour as an outsider

with an insider's knowledge. If a male performer were to use the same material in an act, then women could very possibly be subject to a sharp tone of censure, because the voice would unite with the gulled and injured sex – whereas Tilley is protected by her neutered, neutral self, and is even in a position to enjoy, along with the female spectator, the notion of women getting the better of male stupidity.

Like many of the popular music-hall songs, Tilley's 'swell' numbers are heavily entrenched in London life. There are many references to the fashionable quarters of London, from the Strand ('Midnight Son'), to the seaside girls who take a reminder of the great city on holiday with them in 'Golden Hair from Regent Street'.<sup>17</sup> The latter may be a tongue-in-cheek inference to prostitution, given that Regent Street, despite mid-century attempts to drive away the 'ladies of the street', remained a major thoroughfare for prostitution.

So too was the Burlington Arcade, linking Piccadilly and New Bond Street, and it is no surprise to find two of Tilley's most famous swells, 'Burlington Bertie' and 'Algy or the Piccadilly Johnny with the Little Glass Eye', connoting the *fin de siècle* decadence of fashionable London (both songs were written and composed by Harry B. Norris). The jollity of Algy's type is reflected in the 2/4 time and crescendoed choruses, while Burlington Bertie's gullibility is emphasized by a slowing down of the waltz tune at passages which tell of the girl who 'sees a new bonnet she likes oh! so much,/ Her simple remark is, "Now who can I touch?".'

Again, Tilley makes fun of the male type she impersonates by showing how women will play on the 'high life' principle by taking the 'swell's' money and laughing privately at his stupidity. The presumed lack of money-sense comes partly from the fashionable pose of the empty-headed 'swell', but also from the way in which they have never had to earn their own money.

The father-figure is parodied by Tilley in one of her most popular songs, 'Following in Father's Footsteps', sung to a tune composed in the tempo of a polka (the dance tempo that had been at the height of fashion in the mid-century dance-cum-whoring halls), which Tilley performed as a 'slim little figure in a straw hat with

cane, exuding mischief'.<sup>18</sup> In trying to arrive at a 'reading' of her performance, Peter Davison cannot decide between 'an affectation of innocence' and 'thorough-going roguery', suggesting, somewhat unhelpfully, that it falls unsatisfactorily between the two.<sup>19</sup>

As reviewers have indicated that Tilley had carefully-prepared routines of facial and kinetic gestural innuendo – clearly a comedian who worked out her laughs rather than ad-libbed them – it is highly probable that gestural innuendo accompanied the directive in lines such as

*How many 'lemonades' we had – my word!  
I really couldn't tell  
At two a.m. pa started off for home, like this,  
And so did I!*

Lyric innuendo and mischievous tune tend towards Davison's 'thorough-going roguery': indeed, it is hard to conceive how the song could possibly be played with 'genuine innocence'. But because Davison 'sees' only the woman playing a man, he fails to take account of a third and highly subversive possibility: androgyny used as a satirical weapon. The image of the child-youth, as non-gender defined, is used to mock the patriarch. The child satirically apes the gender-defined father-to-be-like figure, and rejects paternal authority.

As Tilley's technique of 'telling the story against the masher she mimicked', developed, so too, Willson Disher claims, did her critical acumen, which she brought to bear upon the types she studied:

*Henceforth, instead of merging her own personality into that of the character she acted, she brought her wits to bear upon him critically. By pretending to be young men for so long, she had come to understand them as well as they did themselves. Now she went further and understood them better than they did themselves. That is why we saw them, not as we could see them in real life but as they were viewed through a clever woman's eyes.*

'By the Sad Sea Waves' illustrated this process. She picked on the poor little London 'chappie', earning fifteen shillings a week and spending every penny he could spare on haberdashery for a week at Brighton, where he hoped to pass muster on the promenade as a real masher. Again the story goes against the hero of the song. Back at business, he



found that the beauty he met at Brighton was the girl in the cook-shop. No doubt the song-writer had a little mockery in mind. In performance, however, this was magically translated. What we felt when Vesta Tilley showed him to us was not derision but pathos. She felt for him and with him, and her tenderness over that little scrap of humanity was evident in all the portraits she painted from that time onwards.<sup>20</sup>

The progression from 'derision' to 'pathos', demonstrated in her movement away from the impersonation of the swells, is symptomatic both of her increasing skills and a need to find new comic targets, given the declining popularity of the 'toffs'. As England moved towards war, she found a new source for her impersonations, though significantly not a derisively comical one, in soldiers and sailors of the forces.

### Military Numbers and War Propaganda

Tilley centred her military impersonations on the militiaman or volunteer though praise for the army was universal – even in the case of the foolish 'Burlington Bertie', who would nevertheless fight and die for his country. For his efforts in the name of King and Country, the soldier earned the devotion of the girls back home, and songs such as 'Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who Loves a Soldier' or 'The Bold Militiaman' implicate the love of a woman as a reward for such duty. Wartime lyrics also introduced the nurse figure, as in the chorus of 'A Bit of a Blighty One', as the wounded soldier sings, 'When a saucy little nursie/Tucks me up and calls me Percy/Then I'm glad I've got this bit of a Blighty One' – a clear indication of what was expected of Britain's wartime women.

It is no accident that Tilley's impersonations were centred on the volunteer, and should have become involved in the propaganda of selling the idea of war. Images of women have often been used in such campaigns. In the First World War, for example, women waved their men goodbye in posters bearing the slogan, 'Women of Britain Say Go'. Within this tradition, the male impersonator also played her propaganda role, often inspiring the women to



inspire the men, as in Tilley's equation of duty rewarded by love.

Peg Woffington, at the time of the Jacobite rising in the 1740s, performed a special epilogue as a 'Female Volunteer' assuming male attire – to fight for King and Country to preserve the joys of sexual intercourse, which the Catholic rebels, if victorious, aimed to curtail. The verses are rife with sexual innuendo, but defending life's carnal pleasures might well have proved an effective propaganda point.

Vesta Tilley's contribution to First World War propaganda was by no means small, and it was one for which she was criticized by those 'disgusted by the futile carnage'.<sup>21</sup> Her song, 'The Army of To-day's Alright' helped to secure recruits before the enforcement of conscription. Furthermore, the War Office took the title for a poster asking for volunteers. She even had a platoon named after her.

Though requested to perform for the troops in the trenches, she never did, pleading the difficulties of transporting her costumes and props.<sup>22</sup> Yet the success of such an enterprise might have been in doubt, given that, in wartime, monastic societies require the maternal signifiers of the homeland or images of passive femininity, offering reassurance of the 'girl back home'.

The military songs clearly delineate the change in gender roles. The volunteer in 'The Army of To-day's Alright' or the 'Military Man' of 'Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who Loves a Soldier' are characterized by a change in attitudes towards women: they are not invited to laugh at men's weaknesses, but to support the ideology of heroism. There is now only one ideal man for women, as suggested in 'The Army of Today's Alright':

*Girls, are the soldiers as attractive as they  
were a while ago?*

*Don't answer no!*

*If there's another kind of fellow you prefer,  
Well, I maintain – You want the cane!*

'Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who Loves a Soldier' introduces the theme of male promiscuity, suggesting that a military uniform is a licence for heroism and promiscuous behaviour – though the threat to women which might be

posed if the song were performed by a man is alleviated by the androgynous image.

In short, it is the military songs which possibly justify reviewers' criticisms of Tilley, because her act has moved away from satirical comment on social behaviour towards prescribing or instructing people on how to behave – a patriotic but retrogressive ideology of the sexes.

### The Feelings of the Fans

Uniting these several aspects of Tilley's performance is their reception by the spectator. The transmission of performance images and their decoding by the audience is a highly complex process which most critics decline to comment on, but it is crucial to understanding Tilley's huge appeal to a vast number of fans.

It is somewhat surprising, at first glance, to learn that the majority of Tilley's fans were female. This phenomenon was not uncommon to women in breeches roles. Popular verses written about Peg Woffington during her first season in London celebrated her in the following way:

*When first in petticoats you trod the stage,  
Our sex with love you fired: your own with*

*rage,*

*In breeches next, so well you played the cheat –*

*The pretty fellow and the rake complete –*

*Each sex was then with different passions  
moved:*

*The men grew envious and the women loved!*<sup>23</sup>

The verse gives a clear indication of the way in which a shapely, attractive woman in male dress may constitute an ideal image of masculinity, to be envied by men and adored by women.

Similarly, discussing the nineteenth-century tradition of male impersonators, Senelick cites the number of 'mash notes' received by Annie Hindle, referring to the occasion when 'she once compared billets-doux with Henry J. Montague, the matinee idol of Wallack's Theatre, and her admirers, all women, far outnumbered his. She was quite indifferent as to whether her correspondents addressed her as "Sir" or "Madam".'<sup>24</sup>

In instances cited by Vesta Tilley, female adoration could be extreme:



*It may be because I generally appeared on the stage as a young man that the big percentage of my admirers were women. Girls of all ages would wait in crowds to see me enter or leave the theatre, and each post brought piles of letters, varying from an impassioned declaration of undying love to a request for an autograph, or a photograph, or a simple flower, or a piece of ribbon I had worn. To illustrate the impression I made upon at least one of my girl admirers, I have in my possession now a complete diary of a young girl, covering a period of some ten years, in which she records the first time she saw me, her journeys to see me in various towns at which I appeared, her opinions of the many new songs I had introduced during the time, all punctuated with expressions of lasting love and devotion. 'A Diary of my most loved Artiste Miss Vesta Tilley' is the title.<sup>25</sup>*

There have, however, been few attempts to understand Tilley's appeal to women. MacInnes, in his 'reading' of her performance of the song 'Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who Loves a Sailor', suggests (though is too coy openly to state) the presence of lesbian desires:

*'Girls!' she cried, in the final line of the chorus, 'if you'd like to love a soldier, you can all love me!' Since she was appealing to the girls, but was dressed herself as a man, there is something slightly equivocal about this number.<sup>26</sup>*

MacInnes's suggestion, which might be applicable to the overtly masculine appeal of a performer like Annie Hindle, fails here to distinguish that what the *women* saw was not a masculinized woman, but a sexually androgynous image of a beautiful youth. In 1980s western society, women in masculinized dress signify feminist-lesbian subcultures. On stage in the 1890s, Tilley's image was the vision of an Adonis.

The most ardent group of female fans comprised the young, single, factory girls in the gallery – and what she offered them was an ideal 'man'. Whereas images of 'macho', muscular masculinity invite the admiration of males and engage women in the voyeuristic gaze of physical and sexual desire, the Adonis image, for the female spectator, is a spiritual, asexual coupling in which the threat of physical, sexual contact is absent. It is a narrative image

which relates the mythology of romance – the fairy-tale prince who protects, loves, and is the eternalized moment of 'happy ever after'. For the young, female spectators this was what Tilley's image signified: a representation of a collectively recognized, mythical ideal of male beauty.

To take a modern example, Tilley's image might be compared to Julie Andrews in the film *Victor Victoria* (1982). Though this image has a narrative function in the storytelling of the film, its visual signification is that of androgynous, sexual ambiguity. As a woman, impersonating a gay man, impersonating a woman, sexual ambiguity is compounded, and the androgyny of Andrews – surprisingly akin to Tilley in physique, style, and dress – is highlighted by the 'macho' image of her lover, played by Burt Reynolds.

As for male critical response to Tilley's act, it comes as no surprise to find that her 'true sex' is never out of sight, and what is registered is the success of the 'illusion'. If androgyny is discussed, it is with reference to the male ego taming the female, but the androgynous appeal of asexual masculinity for women is never explored, given that it links, threateningly and subversively, to images of homosexuality. Imagine the reaction if the male critic were to concede the illusion, and align the image of a feminized *male* with the military, naval or Eton costumes – signifiers of monastic institutions threatened by homosexuality, abhorred and punished as undermining the 'macho' image.

Perhaps with the bisexual, androgynous cult figures of popular music – David Bowie, Boy George, *et al.* – it has become more acceptable, within the confines of the cult, for a male to foreground his 'femininity'. Yet, what makes it acceptable is the knowledge that it is a performance, and whatever the reports of 'deviant' offstage life-styles, the spectator is protected from them by the distancing established between spectator and 'star'.

So long as the boundaries are clear, aberrations of the 'true sex' are licensed. In Tilley's case, the conventions and framework of the music-hall act permitted collective spectatorship of an image of sexual ambiguity. Essential to the pleasure of the experience was the distance in the proxemic relationship between solo artist

and audience. Not only the factory girls but also the affluent middle classes, who frequented the halls in their heydays of big business and growing respectability, could enjoy the sexual ambiguity, with the assurance of the protection afforded by the conventions and expectations of the spectator's role in theatrical communication.

No doubt the working-class male, also evident in audience composition, would take particular delight in the ridicule of effeminate, aristocratic swells and would not be averse to the idea of working-class women taking advantage of their 'superior's' gullibility. Spectators, of whatever class or background, would be paying homage to the 'star' image, which for some might have been the only image they 'saw'.

### The Success Story

With the help of the publicity billing machine, which created the glamorous star image and covered up the harsh realities of performing in at least two halls a night, Tilley reached the top of her profession, commanding top fees, at the expense of the male types she satirized. Her success story unfolded at a time when women were campaigning for their rights and challenging Victorian gender-stereotyping. As David Cheshire writes, 'it cannot really be entirely coincidental that her career spanned the years of the Feminist Revolt, when women were trying to play an active part in the political life of the country, and pursue careers in their chosen professions, just as easily as actresses had since 1660'.<sup>27</sup>

Tilley's career drew to a close when her husband entered parliament as a Conservative MP – an ironic taming for a woman whose career had independently secured her wealth and fame, but an inevitable conclusion for one with a self-confessed love of high-society circles.

Summarized by Senelick as the 'most highly-charged and disturbing of theatrical devices',<sup>28</sup> the phenomenon of the late nineteenth-century male impersonator, though short-lived, was one which was endowed with a potential power of satirical subversion. No longer a device for underlining femininity, it aimed at satirically imitating male types, suppressing femininity,

and creating the illusion of 'being a man'. The sexual ambiguity of Tilley's act was such that spectators of both sexes could foreground her male or female 'self', according to gender-based desires and expectations. On occasion, this did cause 'offence', as demonstrated at the Royal Command Performance in 1912, when female royalty looked the other way – though the fact that this was not a customary audience response is perhaps indicative of pre-Freudian 'innocence'.

David Cheshire cites 'increased sophistication, and a wider knowledge of Freudian psychology' as factors that would have ultimately 'led to unsympathetic analysis of her act', and her retirement in 1920.<sup>29</sup> This is a very probable hypothesis, given the furore in 1918 over the supposed 'Black Book' listing 47,000 sexual perverts living in Britain, and the widespread publicity given to the term lesbian due to the connected libel suit of the dancer-actress, Maud Allen – a term which not so many years previously defenders of public morals had been anxious to deny existed.<sup>30</sup>

Ella Shields, singing of another Burlington Bertie, 'who rose at ten thirty', and later Hetty King, who, like Tilley, was both a popular impersonator in the halls and a successful principal boy in pantomime, carried on the impersonations of evening-suited males and military chaps right through the first half of the twentieth century, Hetty King's act being recently captured on film in a television documentary by Channel Four. Neither, however, achieved the fame that Tilley did, partly, of course, because Tilley's success patterned the ascendant fortunes of the music halls.

In terms of the entertainment industry, Vesta Tilley made significant inroads for future 'feminist' comedians, who have since struggled to establish themselves as stand-up comics (traditionally male acts) or in cabaret routines. Though the women's theatre groups of today might investigate the subversive power of the male impersonator by 'historical' reconstruction,<sup>31</sup> working in a theatrical fringe of converted, minority, middle-class audiences, they could not hope to achieve the subversive potential of Tilley's act – which won top billing in a form of mass-popular entertainment, and which, despite the big-business syndrome, had

not altogether lost touch with the culture, class, and social background of its varied and enthusiastic audiences.

But Tilley's legacy is felt and kept alive in current women's groups such as Fascinating Aida and The Millies, or solo performers such as Victoria Wood, who perform acts and sing songs which, like Tilley's material, construct a comic medium in which to complain of gender-stereotyping and in particular ridicule the male sex. Often asexual or masculinized costumes, brightly-coloured dungarees, or loose fitting suits deflecting interest away from the female body are used as updated means of suppressing femininity.<sup>32</sup> Tilley's proto-feminist comedy routine and its satirical base is therefore both a significant contribution to the changing images of women in the 1890s, and an important legacy for the continued challenge in the 1980s.

## Notes and References

1. Vesta Tilley has recently been rediscovered and re-evaluated in the Virago Pioneer series, in a biography by Sara Maitland (1986). Though an improvement on the 1984 biography, *The Great Little Tilley* by Gwynedd Sudworth, which draws heavily on Tilley's autobiography and has no theoretical or methodological base, Maitland's biography is, however, disappointing and insubstantially researched, drawing erratically and uneasily on Freudian psychology.
2. See Clifford Bax, *Pretty Witty Nell* (London, 1932), Chapter XVI, 'The Triumphant Comedienne, 1667', p. 89.
3. The play was the mid-century *Masks and Faces* by Charles Reade and Tom Taylor, which had several accomplished interpreters of 'Peg' throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, including Mrs. Bancroft, Madge Kendal, Mrs. Bernard-Beere, and Marie Tempest.
4. See his introduction to *Herculine Barbin* (New York, 1980), p. vii.
5. 'La Zambinella' is the subject of Balzac's short story, *Sarrasine*, the macabre tale of the castrato opera singer, loved by a man, which Roland Barthes uses for his study, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970). Herculine Barbin(e) was the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite, raised as a woman in all-female societies, and later reclassified medically and legally as a male. Her/his memoirs are introduced by Foucault, as referenced in note 4.
6. W. R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall*, describing Vesta Tilley as 'Burlington Bertie', quoted by David Cheshire in *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbot, 1974), p. 79–80.
7. Vesta Tilley herself describes, in her autobiography

*Recollections of Vesta Tilley* (London, 1934), p. 147–8, how she cleverly disguised her own 'long wavy hair' under a wig, which, close up, resembled 'a skull cap covered with short hair'.

8. An early example was the *lion comique* George Leybourne, known as 'Champagne Charlie', who was encouraged to extend his image of the *bon viveur* into his own lifestyle, as a form of self-advertisement. This was disapproved of by high-minded reformers who felt that the image of irresponsible, high living was a bad influence on young spectators.

9. 'The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage', *Essays in Theatre*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1982), p. 30–44.

10. *Winkles and Champagne* (London, 1938), p. 76.

11. In *The Power of the Image* (London, 1985), p. 48–73 (p. 54).

12. Sima Godfrey, 'The Dandy as Ironic Figure', *Sub-Stance*, XXXVI (1982), p. 21–33 (p. 24).

13. Interestingly, Louis Jouvett, the director of the original production of *The Maids*, was against the idea of men playing the women's roles and insisted on a female cast. Only recently has it been more widely played by men as Genet originally intended.

14. *Disher* (1938), p. 78.

15. John M. Garrett (London, 1976).

16. *Sweet Saturday Night* (London, 1967), p. 30.

17. In music-hall songs, the seaside is frequently cited as an alternative location to the capital city. It signifies a hard-earned respite from the work-day world and an occasion for 'spooning'. In Tilley's songs, romance at the seaside is used to offset the poignant references to poverty in 'By the Sad Sea Waves' and 'In the Pale Moonlight', painting over the cracks of a tough working-class existence.

18. George Le Roy, *Music Hall Stars of the Nineties* (London, 1952), p. 52.

19. *Songs of the British Music Hall* (New York, 1971), p. 139.

20. *Disher* (1938), p. 78–80.

21. Senelick, p. 40.

22. See Tilley's autobiography, p. 142–3.

23. The verse is quoted in Janet Camden Lucy, *Lovely Peggy* (London, 1952), p. 59.

24. Senelick, p. 36.

25. *Autobiography*, p. 233–4.

26. MacInnes, (1967), p. 79.

27. 'Male Impersonators', *The Saturday Book*, No. 29 (1969), p. 245–52 (p. 250).

28. Senelick, p. 40.

29. *Music Hall in Britain* (1974), p. 79.

30. The existence of this book, allegedly prepared by the German Secret Service, was brought to the public's attention by Noel Pemberton Billing in an article for his newspaper *The Vigilante*, headed 'The Cult of the Clitoris' and implicating Maud Allen, performing in Wilde's *Salomé*, as one of the 47,000. Maud Allen brought a libel suit against Billing, which she ultimately lost.

31. For example, in 1983 Jacky Lansley's revue *The Impersonators* set out to explore the potential of the Victorian and Edwardian male guises.

32. Fascinating Aida, however, wear exceptionally feminized dress costumes in order to push the stereotypical image of women as sex objects to the point of grotesque caricature.