

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Introduction: Writing Aslant: Voicing across Genders in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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I. Critical Meandering, or Trans Victorians Over Time

<1>In the half decade since Lisa Hager’s 2018 call for a transgender turn in Victorian studies, the field has not so much turned as followed a meandering course in its response. While there is hardly a dearth of scholarship heeding Hager’s provocation to “reconceptualize our understanding of gender,” one still has to go out of one’s way to find work in Victorian studies that engages “the possibility of movement between, across, and among genders” (37). Moreover, scholars working on Victorian Britain have tended to take a minoritizing approach when it comes to gender variance in the nineteenth century, sorting out only certain cultural objects as “trans” while passing over the rest. Given that ideas of a gender binary were still developing during the nineteenth century, this tendency perhaps reflects a limitation of our field itself. It is nevertheless our hope that this special issue, with its own form of slanting meandering, will both renew Hager’s call and revise it with one of our own. We mean to encourage not only more Victorian scholarship that incorporates trans theory approaches but also a proliferation of different trans-theoretical approaches to gender variance in British nineteenth-century culture.

<2>The cultural objects that make up this special issue’s focus are literary texts. Literature poses a set of challenges for scholars concerned with the precarious material conditions of trans people today: as much as literary texts have the capacity to offer textual evidence of gender variance—lived realities and imaged fictional or lyric alternatives to historical realities alike—they also have the potential to turn trans existence into an aesthetic feature, plot device, or allegory.⁽¹⁾ As Reina

Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton have pointed out, the increased visibility of trans lives in the field of cultural production has not resulted in safer living conditions for trans people; rather, it has coincided with a time of increased anti-trans violence. Although Gossett, Stanley, and Burton focus on contemporary artistic production, their concerns are relevant to contemporary scholarship as well, very much including scholarship that deals with the past.⁽²⁾ Certainly, it is an act of care to search “the historical record for proof of life, for evidence that trans lives are livable because they’ve been lived,” to use Hil Malatino’s words (7). Yet it is not enough to excavate literary representations of gender variance across history—rather, scholars working on Victorian literature have an opportunity to situate textual histories within the cultural discourses that have led to modern understandings of gender.

<3>With *Writing Aslant: Voicing across Genders in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, we place ourselves in dialogue with concerns such as these—but from an indirect angle. If the term *aslant* indexes our relation as literary scholars to trans studies, it also puts us in step with the winding development of research that draws together the fields of literary studies, trans studies, and nineteenth-century British history. This is not to say that the nineteenth century has been ignored by scholars interested in trans history. Indeed, it was a nineteenth-century British novel that gave Susan Stryker the originary metaphor of “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” the 1993 performance that would become a formative work of contemporary transgender studies. In recent years, the nineteenth century has offered a proving ground for investigations that have led scholars to consider the literary allegory of trans femininity (Heaney), the interleaved histories of Blackness and transness (Snorton), and “minor perverts” (Kahan), to name just a few. But Victorian cultural production remains just beyond the event horizon of this scholarly work.

<4>When it comes to studies of gender in Victorian Britain, we might say that 2018 marked a watershed moment. Even as that year’s special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* on *Keywords* did not include an entry for “trans,” the year also saw Ardel Haefele-Thomas’s special issue of *Victorian Review* on *Trans Victorians*, the essays of which include Hager’s piece. Jolene Zigarovich’s 2018 collected volume, *Transgothic in Victorian Literature and Culture*, was focalized on the gothic genre, whose “atypical forms of embodiment, gender expression, identity, and desire” are particularly receptive to the tools of transgender studies, as Stryker suggests in her introduction to the volume (xi).. In a similar vein, Thomas M. Stuart’s reading of the “boundary-crossing” eponymous characters in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* also appeared that winter

in *Victorian Studies*. In the intervening years between 2018 and our special issue, this concentration of scholarship on transness in Victorian studies has waned.

<5>Even so, a number of key essays have suggested new ways that Victorian studies might benefit from thinking about gender variance, possibilities of gender transition, the sexing and gendering of the body, and the emergence of discourses around gender. Among these is Natalie Prizel's 2019 essay on Algernon Charles Swinburne's intersex aesthetics, which relates Swinburne's interest in the visibility of gender on the body to androgynous figures in his ekphrastic poems. The following year, Sam Holmqvist proposed "a possible method for reading trans* in fiction written before the advent of this term" (2) in the pages of this very journal, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. Holmqvist's reading of Sarah Grand's "The Tenor and the Boy—An Interlude" situates that text within a literary tradition of trans narratives, reversing a critical impulse to treat transness as uncommon or disconnected.⁽³⁾ Also in 2020, Grace Lavery, in an account of transsexuality as the base of George Eliot's literary realism, elucidated the "trans realism" of *Adam Bede* and other novels in relation to that author's self-determination as the insistently masculine figure "George Eliot." Last summer, in 2022, M. A. Miller problematized the reliance of proto-trans representation in Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* on the logic of white settler colonialism, showing how white trans subjects' passing across "borders" of gender reveals and complicates the politics of emerging trans discourses leading up to the twentieth century. These four pieces do not work in isolation (from one another, or from other scholarly works), but rather speak to a collective shift in discourse around the history of gender in Victorian Britain.

<6>As much as the essays in *Writing Aslant* participate in this shift, their concentration in a special issue also offers an opportunity to reflect on the changes since 2018—and on oversights in current dialogues that future scholarship might redress. There is by now an indisputable overlap between trans studies and Victorian studies, as the inclusion of Alexis A. Ferguson's entry on "trans" in *Victorian Literature and Culture's* forthcoming *Keywords Redux* special issue evidences.⁽⁴⁾ If in the original *Keywords* special issue, "trans" could be overlooked, at this point it is necessary to address not only the (often-ambiguous) gender norms in Victorian cultural production but also the variance attendant to emerging discourses of binary sex and gender. Yet within the existing critical discourse, including this issue's, explicit engagement with the imbrication of gender and race is all too frequently passed over (although Miller's essay offers one form of this needed engagement). As Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong noted in their clarion call to "Undisciplin[e] Victorian Studies," "ours remains a field that is more at ease speaking about gender (construed as race-neutral)

than about race” (374). We might add, first, that Victorian studies is a field in which gender is not only construed as race-neutral but also is presumed (however anachronistically and however essentially) to be binary and cis. If, as Dustin Friedman has recently argued, we must “account for the entanglements between the late Victorian epistemological transformation [around homo/heterosexual definition] and the colonial matrix of power” (145), we must also account for epistemological transformations around gender as part of these entanglements. In taking up the tools of trans studies to examine the Victorian period, then, we must also not lose sight of the interrelated discursive histories of the gendered *and* racialized body.⁽⁵⁾ In our original call for papers, we sought out interlocutors researching the place of trans narratives in the construction of racial categories as well as gender variance across the British empire. With this introduction and special issue, we reiterate that call as an ongoing necessity.

<7>It is impossible to discount the current political stakes of research that deals with gender variance and transness, especially in the United States, where all five contributors to this issue work. On 6 June 2023, as this introduction was being finalized, the Human Rights Campaign declared a state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people in the United States: 525 bills targeting LGBTQ+ rights have been introduced in this calendar year alone, with “220 of these bills explicitly target[ing] transgender people,” and over 75 bills already signed into law (HRC Staff). As trans people are all too acutely aware, this declaration merely names a longstanding state of affairs, but it also intensifies and alarmingly codifies a mainstream status quo. In other words, when we conceived of *Writing Aslant*, we already expected to be working against the grain of transphobic cultural sentiments; the HRC’s state of emergency, however, deepens the gravity of our expectations. We understand research on trans pasts to be necessarily in conversation with the contemporary context in which it appears in print; such research is not unrelated to activist labor.

<8>The conception and development of this special issue speaks to the reach of intellectual dialogues around Victorian gender variance beyond the citational threads of published scholarship. *Writing Aslant* marks the culmination of several years of dialogue, synchronous events, asynchronous writing and editing sessions, and continuing efforts to maintain forums of discussion around gender variance and literary writing in nineteenth-century Britain. This publication does not, then, foreclose the continuing potential for critical dialogues around what trans-theoretical tools can do within studies of Victorian literature; rather, it instantiates how Victorian cultural production might furnish trans studies with still more critical affordances. The essays in this special issue each take slantwise approaches to these

dialogues, but before we discuss their individual interventions, it is perhaps only fitting to digress, to meander, and to move aslant by way of introduction.

II. Cross-Gender Voicing, or Speaking Aslant

<9>Metaphors of kinship are rampant in academia: *Doktormutter*, sibling rivalry, and even incest or inbreeding. The collaboration that produced this special issue is, perhaps, an affordance of an academic equivalent to “chosen family.” Three years ago, at a symposium on “Decadence,” put together by the University of California, Irvine (UCI), “Queer Theory Reading Group,” one of the editors of this special issue, Margaret Speer, gave a work-in-progress talk about Alfred Tennyson’s slanting literary identification with female homosexuality. (This was a fluke: a last-minute replacement for a panelist who, understandably, had to drop out—it was 2020). Grace Lavery gave the symposium’s keynote, on work now in print in *Pleasure and Efficacy: of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques*. Thinking we would surely have common interests, Lavery—who works with Mary Mussman at the University of California, Berkeley—introduced the two of us. In the time since then, we have worked closely to create this special issue, and an MLA panel on the same theme. Though not “really” Speer’s advisor, Lavery has come to be all that an advisor is, in the same way that non-biological queer family (family, aslant) often comes together: out of both necessity and joy. Indeed, her most recent title’s combination of “pleasure” with “efficacy” frames much of the thinking of our shared field(s).

<10>One of the very first speakers the Queer Theory Reading Group hosted was Emma Heaney, just after the publication of her field-changing book on the topic of transgender literary voice—and its strategic cooptation: *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*. Heaney’s presence was as transformational as her monograph for both Speer and for Scotty Streitfeld, UCI Queer Theory Reading Group co-coordinator alongside Speer and author of “‘A World of Abnormal Women’: The Queer Demography of Henry James’s *The Bostonians*” in this issue. In 2017, Heaney argued that trans femininity became a useful (and problematically utilized) figure through which Modernist authors asserted the newness of their style, by way of perennially transphobic and historically inaccurate assertions that trans women are “new.” Both Streitfeld’s writing on the gender-avoiding impersonality of Henry James’s narratorial style and Speer’s research on literary uses of female homosexuality strongly resonate with Heaney’s influence. This special issue continues a genealogy of collaborative organizational service, the labor of which has been inextricable from the scholarly conversations about trans identities in literature it has afforded: Streitfeld was, of

course, also at the symposium where the conversations with Lavery took place. These connections—social as much as intellectual—form the web of relations at the heart of this special issue.

<11>Over the course of these multiple collaborations, Speer’s originary questions about why Tennyson sometimes wrote in not just a feminine but also a distinctly lesbian voice evolved into Speer’s article “Queer for Art: Tennyson’s Poetic Autonomy as Female Same-Sex Desire,” which appeared in 2022 in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. This piece suggests that Tennyson strategically revived a Renaissance tradition of representing lesbian love (and poetry) as a dead end, so that male homoeroticism (and thus masculine poetry) might live. Tennyson’s adoption of a lesbian voice as motivated by the poet’s ambivalently misogynist politics of aestheticism complicates any easy or sanguine reading of a trans Tennyson.

<12>We are living in a historical moment when an unprecedented proliferation of gender and sexual identities are available in ways, as Kadji Amin has pointed out, that partially resemble the taxonomizing impulse of nineteenth-century sexology. For Amin, the crucial difference of today is that the “new queer classification system recontextualizes and repurposes the taxonomical method for queer ends. Strikingly, these new taxonomies emerge from below—they are vernacular in origin and . . . are distinguished by the ethos of self-identification” (96). Nevertheless, even now, the elaboration and even the livability of a multiplicity of genders and sexualities is not equally accessible to all. Legibility, even to oneself, is contingent: materially circumscribed, and dependent on historical availability.(6)

<13>In the (sometimes uneasily) related fields of queer and trans theory, arguments about whether literary figures long identified as gay or lesbian might be better understood—or would have understood themselves—as transgender, are familiar.(7) At our 2023 MLA panel on “Writing Aslant,” Ardel Haefele-Thomas framed new arguments about Vernon Lee’s relationship to queerness and trans masculinity through more recent scholarly frameworks, in the wake of a historical moment when Lee was all but subsumed by “lesbian recovery projects.” While they have written extensively on Lee in the past,(8) Haefele-Thomas’s future work changes Lee’s pronouns; the possibilities of such revisions are inherently historical-material, and contingent. The reversal (the inversion, perhaps) of questions about the most authentic genders and sexualities of nineteenth-century novelists or characters—were such an identity viable, or even available in thought, at the time—might be: what are other uses of cross-gender fantasy? Beyond or queerly beside authentic selfhood, how does slanting across gender become useful in literature and

in history? And, can we ever hope to separate identity, or sense of self, from usefulness to life?

<14>The “slanted” piece of *Writing Aslant* might mean “complicated”; “unstraightforward” (like queer families); even “crooked,” in that gloriously “wrong” way of queerness; as much as simply “not straight.” For Rebecca Nesvet, in “Walking Aslant: Irene Adler Visits the Inner Temple,” Irene Adler’s masculine “walking clothes” afford them entry into a male space that contemporary feminists were fighting for, as much as a “comfortabl[e] and habitual[]” transmasculine identity. Henry James’s ungendered narratorial voice, produced to evade partiality between *The Bostonians*’s two rival protagonists, ironically reveals the uneven playing field between men’s and women’s social and political power in the moment of the women’s reform movement. Streitfeld examines this sometimes paradoxical Jamesian project of gender, region, and voice by an American-born author whose literary ambitions slanted (back) across the Atlantic in his attempt to prove that he could write an American novel.

<15>Author Florence Dixie, of Dan Abitz’s piece, “Androgynous Possibilities in Lady Florence Dixie’s *Gloriana*,” reaches backward from the Victorian to the Renaissance period, much as Speer has argued of Tennyson’s writing, which slants across the nineteenth to the sixteenth century. Abitz’s article brings a fascinating and understudied text to our attention and offers an important interlocutor for Speer’s work on the relationship between the Renaissance and Victorian England in Tennyson’s writing (Speer (“Queer for Art”). Conversely, Speer’s transhistorical research brings into view Dixie’s use of a trope of Renaissance literature in which homosexual desire becomes “an impossible possibility,” once the gender of one foiled lover is either magically changed or revealed.⁽⁹⁾ The *deus ex machina* gender change and the unmasking narrative, alike, put heterosexuality aright—correcting or making straight, one might say, something that was askew or aslant. As Abitz argues, however, a trace of queerness is preserved in the passion with which *Gloriana*’s lover regards a portrait of *Gloriana* painted as a man, even after *Gloriana*’s “unmasking” “as” a woman.⁽¹⁰⁾

<16>This special issue also offers an asynchronous complement to an in-person special session at the 2023 MLA convention in San Francisco. Many participants in the conversation we had about “writing aslant” at MLA acknowledged the use of cross-gender ventriloquism as a mode of protection for queer men newly and unevenly vulnerable under the 1885 Labouchere Amendment’s criminalization of “gross indecency.” We are again living in a historical moment when queer and trans bodies are increasingly under surveillance and legislative attack. But reading,

writing, and living aslant—queerly, across genders, and sometimes back again—also perpetually opens up new pleasures and politics, in addition to stronger readings of texts. Our panel contributor Alexis A. Ferguson suggested: “like ‘athwart,’ aslant conveys an ‘intimate and complicit’ critical orientation towards normative structures. An aslant analysis of Victorian sex or gender, then, must simultaneously assume historicized intimacy and discursive complicity with the objects of its study” (Wiegman and Wilson 11). Such a position of historicity as complicity offers an elegant and refreshing reformulation of the ways in which scholars in trans and queer studies are often pressed to justify the queer and trans critical lenses they adopt to examine historical objects, rather than their historicity, itself.

<17>Another of our “Writing Aslant” MLA panelists, Shyam Patel, suggested that a critically trans lens offers a more nuanced understanding of the ekphrastic aesthetics of Michael Field’s poetry in relation to paintings that also inspired cross-gendered homosexual fantasies between two people assigned female at birth. As Martha Vicinus notes of Field, “the fifteen-year difference between [Edith Cooper] and her aunt [Katharine Bradley] . . . cast her in the role of the young initiate. In recording her delirious fantasies when she was sick with scarlet fever, Edith compared herself to Antinous, the beautiful boy beloved by the late Roman emperor Hadrian” (103). One can easily imagine similarly cross-gendered homosexual fantasies occurring among putative lesbians in a new generation’s play with gender and power of the sort that, as Amin suggests, connects our contemporary moment to the nineteenth century.

III. Slanting Through Lines, or the Measure of the Issue

<18>The shape of this special issue is so compact as to warrant notice, as it comprises three scholarly articles and a coda entitled “Quiet Commitment.” With its focus on Victorian literary texts, *Writing Aslant* narrows the purview of an already small field. How did literature, we ask, allow writers in nineteenth-century Britain not only to create and represent alternative experiences of gender but also to expose the instability of normative gender? Taking literary writing as a primary object, the trio of essays in *Writing Aslant* offers a series of indirect approaches responding to this question. Like the labile term *aslant* itself—which as an adverb indicates a direction or orientation, but as a preposition moves across—these pieces turn upon and cross the usual boundaries of what we might include under the rubric of the Victorian, thus making the narrow purview of our special issue more capacious, despite its modest length. How might a fictional dream of a feminist utopia reflect on nineteenth-century English politics? What do contemporary multimedia adaptations reveal about trans masculinity in the Victorian period? Why might

statistical discussions about gendered types in the US interest a British readership? These considerations convey how fiction dispels the issue of historical truth in its capacity to represent otherwise. Sidestepping some regulations of journalistic, legal, and scientific discourses, literature offers a view of the past that is already inherently a slanting one.

<19>The issue opens with Abitz's "Androgynous Possibilities in Lady Florence Dixie's *Gloriana*," a reading of a novel rarely discussed in the field. *Gloriana* (1890) is framed as a dream whose narrative culminates in a feminist utopia, but it is the androgyny of Dixie's protagonist, alternately called Hector and Gloriana, that paves the way for this vision of British political life. Approaching this decidedly non-canonical Victorian work with tools of canonical theoretical texts by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Abitz offers literary evidence for resistance to an emergent ideology of binary gender, including the history of women's suffrage. The dream that gives *Gloriana* its plot, it seems, thus manages to slip past the limitations of Victorian mores.

<20>In "Walking Aslant: Irene Adler Visits the Inner Temple," Nesvet examines the Adler character, who first appears in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's initial Sherlock Holmes short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891). Although Adler is said to be "always *the* woman" for Sherlock Holmes, a seeming assertion of Adler's definitive womanhood, Nesvet's impressive accumulation of textual evidence intimates that the male detective's impression might be mistaken: what Holmes fails to detect is Adler's transmasculinity. Adler's transmasculinity has become an accepted part of the character's depiction in adaptations across the Sherlock Holmes transmedia universe, but Nesvet importantly historicizes this depiction as part of the initial text. For one, a cabinet photograph at the center of the short story's plot recalls the cabinet photographs in the high-profile 1870 trial of Stella Boulton and Fanny Park—a connection indicative of the importance of gender variance and queer sexuality in Doyle's text. This suggestive resonance is reiterated by the story's concluding scene, when Adler walks across London in masculine dress from Holmes's residence on Baker Street to the Inner Temple, one of the Inns of Court, which only admitted cisgender men in the late Victorian period. The walk across London, Nesvet argues, is a queer act of self-liberation, and the pivot point around which Adler's transmasculinity turns.

<21>Focusing on the writing of Henry James, an author with a shifting transatlantic national affiliation, Streitfeld skews the premise of a collection focused on British Victorian culture from the outset. Even as a novel concerned with populations in the US, *The Bostonians* (1886) was immediately published in Britain and available to a

late Victorian readership, thus serving as a cultural foil for thinking about Anglophile average types together with gender variance. In “‘A World of Abnormal Women’: The Queer Demography of Henry James’s *The Bostonians*,” Streitfeld analyzes the tension between demographic and subjective representation. Rather than maintaining distinct types or categories, James’s figure of the average undermines clearcut differences between genders and nationalities. In James’s hands, Streitfeld shows, social data-gathering and demographic discourses become the site of a queer gender nonspecificity.

<22>*Writing Aslant* closes with a genre-bending swerve in a coda by Speer, one of this issue’s co-editors. In “Quiet Commitment,” Speer reflects on the current material conditions of academic labor in the humanities, conditions that index a transformation of the relationship between identity and work since the Victorian period. Among junior scholars, the precarity of employment often defines the conditions of academic work; for queer and trans academics, this sense of risk has only been amplified by the current political atmosphere. But rather than responding to these conditions with cynicism, Speer outlines an alternative affective relation to intellectual labor, theorized partially as a response to the labor of co-editing *Writing Aslant*, that she calls “quiet commitment”—that is, a commitment to the pleasures and affirmations of queer and trans life offered by collaborative intellectual discourse, exemplified by the work of co-editing this special issue.

<23>Under the oblique auspices of the term *aslant*, this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* pays homage to those whom history has called “bent,” to the works of literature within the transgender past, and to queer perspectives on gender. Its pieces slip between Victorian and trans studies, the literary, and the social scientific, thus illuminating writing that strays beyond or skews constructs of male and female, historical and contemporary. Keeping in sight the disproportionate risks to safety that gender variance still entails, *Writing Aslant* reminds us of Victorian literary criticism’s ongoing value to contemporary discourses about gender.

Notes

(1) Emma Heaney has traced one such consequence of this potential in the allegorization of trans feminine experience, which finds its origins in nineteenth-century sexological discourses, typifies explorations of sexuality among literary modernists, and was renewed in queer theoretical texts at the end of the twentieth century. (^)

(2) This is not a new issue: for the relevance of this concern to queer theoretical writings, see Namaste. (△)

(3) It is striking that the passages central to both Lavery's and Holmqvist's discussions of trans Victorian writing involve a reflective interruption of a main narrative: Lavery points out that such an interruption "is the precondition for the self-theorizing of realism," as in "Chapter XVII: In Which the Story Pauses a Little" of *Adam Bede* (Lavery 730); the title of "The Tenor and the Boy—An Interlude" seems to invite further reflection on this other formal motif of trans literature. (△)

(4) Ferguson also authored "On Knowing Nature's Syntax: Non-Cis Sex in *Adam Bede*," which won NAVSA's 2022 Sally Mitchell Prize. The prize's announcement highlighted this essay's "theoretically rich and ambitious account of how Trans studies might expand our understanding not only of Eliot's ethics of sympathy, but also of the social construction of cis-sexuality during the period," speaking to a well-deserved recognition of both this piece and a broader potential for this line of scholarly work—namely, to engage with transness as a way to examine the construction of gender and sex more generally (Flint). (△)

(5) In addition to Snorton's nineteenth-century study, see Bey and Ellison et al. for work that brings together transness and Blackness; see also Chatterjee. In their introduction Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong also cite hallmark studies from the 1990s by Jennifer DeVere Brody (on Blackness and femininity), Anne McClintock (on sexuality and imperialism), Catherine Hall (on sexuality and colonialism), and Anne Stoler (on middle-class white masculinity), each of which brings together gender and race in the Victorian period. (△)

(6) For more on the material circumstances of identities, see Speer ("Portrait"), 2020. (△)

(7) For example, see Doan and Prosser's revisions of Radclyffe Hall and Stephen Gordon in their work on *The Well of Loneliness*. (△)

(8) See Haefele-Thomas 2012. (△)

(9) See Valerie Traub on how proliferating representations of love between women in England's early modern period stressed the impossibility of sexual consummation between women without divine intervention, as in John Lyly's *Gallathea*, where Venus turns one girl into a "real" boy. (△)

(10)On the visual economy of the cross-dressed heroine, and “the Mulan paradox (that is, whether a straight man’s gay desires are redeemed as hetero by the revelation of his love object as a woman),” see Corfman.(△)

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