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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/14d9756g>

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Publication Date

2013-02-01

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'Ambisextrous:' The Universal Appeal of Julian Eltinge

According to a newspaper of the time, there 'has probably never been an impersonator of feminine characters in this country who has created such a sensation' as Julian Eltinge.¹ This is a consensus borne out by the modern scholarship, as is the assertion that he was not 'like the ordinary female impersonator.'² He was critically and financially unparalleled. Whilst Eltinge enjoyed undeniable success with his female audience, largely due to the rise of the emancipated, sexualized 'New Woman,' this paper will focus on some of the reasons for Eltinge's considerable success with a male audience.

Born in 1883 in Montana, Eltinge was the son of a poor mining family. At some point before Eltinge's 10th birthday, the family moved to Boston; both this origin and this move became significant in Eltinge's later career. In Boston, he became involved in amateur theatricals and eventually entered the world of vaudeville. After a period of touring with the Cohan and Harris minstrels, Eltinge made his Broadway debut in 1904 in *Mr. Wix of Wickham*. Whilst the play was a commercial and critical flop, Eltinge gained attention for his impressive impersonation of a woman. Soon, he had embarked on a career that would reach its zenith between 1911 and 1915. He progressed from one-man vaudeville shows to full-length musical comedies created around his act, a number of which were made into films. My research for this paper focused particularly on two of these comedies, *The Fascinating Widow* (1911) and *The Crinoline Girl* (1914).

1 Untitled, undated newspaper clipping. Collection *ZC-170 (Julian Eltinge Clippings), New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

2 'An Odd Picture of a Star,' *Stage Pictorial*, undated, p. 20, *ZC-170, NYPL

Eltinge's lack of campness and his unparalleled ability to convincingly assert a masculine persona off-stage set him apart from his contemporaries on the vaudeville and Broadway stages, to the extent that the critic Perry Hammond coined the term "ambisextrous" to describe Eltinge. I argue that it was precisely this masculinity that caused Eltinge's remarkable success at a time when traditional notions of gender and sexuality were being challenged by the rise of the 'New Woman' and the development of gay identity. Through careful construction of his act and hyper-masculinity off-stage, he actually reinforced traditional gender roles.

The first way in which Eltinge reinforced ideas about the traditional male role was through the construction of his act itself. The women whom Eltinge portrayed were ultimately closer to embodiments of the 'Ideal Woman' than the 'New Woman.'³ They displayed a demure and restrained sense of feminine decorum and, crucially, they lacked the vulgarity of other female impersonators.⁴ He avoided sinewy and exotic dance routines and publicized the fact that he only wore lingerie in scenes where the plot would necessitate an uplifted skirt.⁵

The plots themselves were also tightly constructed to legitimize Eltinge's cross-dressing and promote a masculinity-enhancing story. All of Eltinge's acts involved identical elements: (1) the solid establishment early on in the play of the heterosexual

3 Casey, Kathleen Bridget. *Cross-dressers an race-crossers: intersections of gender and race in American vaudeville, 1900-1930* (University of Rochester, Ph. D. thesis, 2010)

4 Hauerbach, O. 'Julian Eltinge in "The Fascinating Widow,"' *New York Tribune*, 12 September 1911

5 Wolf, Rennold. 'The Sort of Fellow Julian Eltinge Really Is,' *The Green Book Magazine*, p. 796

masculinity of Eltinge's character, (2) a predicament requiring a female "disguise" (usually an effort to right a wrong), (3) a heterosexual romantic interest for his character (Eltinge would usually be forced to don female garb as a convoluted way of winning the approval of a parent or guardian), and (4) a happy and coupled conclusion, with Eltinge returning to maleness and claiming his paramour as his 'reward' so that his audience could go home satisfied that order had been restored.⁶ Furthermore, much of the humor of the act was derived from lapses into masculine behavior; illusion was not the aim of the plot.⁷ The most important part of this plot construction was that Eltinge always began and ended the performance in masculine attire, a continuation of the "de-wigging" trope that had marked his vaudeville career.

Eltinge also publicized his private life in such a way as to create a hyper-masculinity identity for himself. This protected both his act and himself from accusations of degeneracy and vulgarity. It should be remembered that the journalists who interviewed Eltinge and reviewed *The Fascinating Widow* and *The Crinoline Girl* were men themselves. Their conversations with Eltinge would have taken the form of manly chats over cigars backstage or at Eltinge's house. Of all the female impersonators of the time, Eltinge is the only one who is known to have cultivated relationships with reporters in all of the places that he visited with his act.

⁶ 'Julian Eltinge "Widow is Truly Fascinating," *unnamed newspaper clipping*, 23 November 1910, *ZC-170, NYPL

⁷ *Ibid.*

The most obvious part of his life that Eltinge was keen to publicize was the creation of his act. He frequently invited members of the press backstage to watch or even photograph him get ready or see him out of costume.⁸ As a result, these reporters would then write about the expertise behind Eltinge's act. By advertising the technical expertise and physical effort involved in his female impersonations, Eltinge could ensure that they remained within a theatrical framework. The legitimacy of his career rested on the premise that impersonation was a form of art and he disseminated prodigious amounts of information to ensure that the audience was aware of how much effort he put into his act and to create the idea of himself as a craftsman who approached his task with scientific precision.⁹

As part of this, he was careful to emphasize the 'personal discomfort and sacrifice' that he endured for his act.¹⁰ This demonstrated to the audience that Eltinge emphatically did not impersonate women because he enjoyed dressing up as a woman, but because it was a peculiar talent that he possessed and that had become necessary for his act. It created the idea in the minds of the public, particularly the male public, that the women Eltinge portrayed on the stage could only be achieved through extensive preparation and artificiality. The idea that these beautiful, strong women were an artistic creation comforted men by protecting masculine identity against the challenge of the 'New Woman' and changing ideas of sexuality. Eltinge presented

8 'A Dressing Room Marvel,' *unnamed, undated newspaper*, *ZC-170, NYPL

9 'Julian Eltinge, Best In His Line,' *unnamed, undated newspaper*, *ZC-170, NYPL

10 Wolf, 'The Sort of Fellow Julian Eltinge Really Is,' p. 796

women as a complex cipher to be decoded. One of the ways in which he did this was through his magazine, *The Julian Eltinge Magazine and Beauty Hints*. Many of the articles and endorsements were geared towards promoting the role of paints and powders, as well as items such as the Nemo corset.

Eltinge also used press reports regarding his private life to enhance his masculine image and further sharpen the contrast between his masculine persona and the women he portrayed on stage. Indeed, he created a whole identity for himself that would be in keeping with the image he wanted to promote of himself. For instance, Eltinge was the grandson of Irish immigrants, but by the time he reached fame, he was hiding his Irish roots to avoid any potential stigma. Eltinge also manipulated class perceptions to ensure his access to a certain audience. Whilst there is no record of Eltinge having attended Harvard, or even of having finished high school, he would nevertheless discuss in interviews how he got his start in female impersonation while carrying out college pranks with his fellow undergraduates and worked on his first impersonation job whilst moonlighting from the Harvard baseball team.¹¹ This image preempted a number of questions about Eltinge's background, education and wealth.

Photographs would often be of him at home, either with his mother or his dogs. Sometimes he would be sitting on his veranda, at other times in an ornate drawing room. Notably, in *The Julian Eltinge Magazine*, there were as many photographs of Eltinge in masculine attire as in costume. He was described as having traditional, manly, American pastimes and as living the life of a country gentleman. Mention was

¹¹ Wolf, 'The Sort of Fellow Julian Eltinge Really Is,' p. 802

frequently made of his motorcar and, according to most articles, he enjoyed fishing, boxing, rowing and billiards. This proved to be an effective strategy at a time when such activities were becoming bastions of defense against the perceived feminization of society. It was in this era, for instance, that gyms first became popular, and indeed first came into existence in the way they are today conceptualized. These gyms provided a place for men to meet and "be men together," and activities such boxing and rowing were an important part of male bonding. Eltinge also painted a picture of himself as an astute businessman who was sufficiently successful to financially support his mother.

Finally, the press also made much of Eltinge's (almost certainly fictitious) love life. One journalist recorded Eltinge as having been engaged at least ten times, with none of the women having been sufficiently domestic for the relationship to last.¹² On international tours, he was often photographed with anonymous women, some of whom were captioned as his wife. The majority of modern scholarship argues that this hyperbole was due to Eltinge's probable homosexuality. I would contend that it is actually somewhat irrelevant whether or not Eltinge was homosexual. Whatever his sexual inclination, it was necessary to keep Eltinge's true sexual nature in the shadows in order to achieve both the illusion of femininity and the authority of masculinity. His respectability would not have survived a male lover and his act would not have survived a wife.

Related to this last point, no discussion of Eltinge's press is complete without mention of the extensive coverage accorded to his brawls. Eltinge was notorious for

¹² *Ibid.* p. 803

getting into fights to "defend his honor." He frequently offered 'good, muscular proof' of his masculinity;¹³ there were numerous reports over his career of him getting into fistfights with journalists and stagehands who dared to challenge his masculine authority. This apparent readiness with his fists was an obvious way of displaying his masculine credentials for the world to see and of diverting any possible accusation of effeminacy.

Therefore, as much as Eltinge relied on his popularity with women, his success also depended on his audience believing that, off-stage, he was a 'real,' masculine man, thereby providing men with a way to reassert their masculinity and confidence. The "hybrid sexing" displayed by Eltinge provided a way for confused and anxious audiences to navigate their way through the choppy waters of the social changes in early twentieth century America. It is my contention that it was precisely Eltinge's 'ambisexuality' that made him so much more successful than his peers.

13 Untitled, undated newspaper clipping, *ZC-170, NYPL