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## Roderick Random's Closet

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## RODERICK RANDOM'S CLOSET

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STEVEN BRUHM

Université de Montréal

### I

**M**EET Captain Whiffle, newly appointed chief of the man-of-war "Thunder," in chapter 34 of Tobias Smollett's 1748 *Adventures of Roderick Random*. Neither warring nor thunderous, Captain Whiffle appears thus:

a white hat garnished with a red feather, adorned his head, from whence his hair flowed down upon his shoulders, in ringlets tied behind with a ribbon. — His coat, consisting of pink-coloured silk, lined with white, by the elegance of the cut retired backward, as it were, to discover a white sattin waistcoat embroidered with gold, unbuttoned at the upper part, to display a broch set with garnets, that glittered in the breast of his shirt. . . . But the most remarkable parts of his furniture were, a mask on his face, and white gloves on his hands, which did not seem to be put on with an intention to be pulled off occasionally, but were fixed with a ring set with a ruby on the little finger of one hand, and by one set with a topaz on that of the other. (194-95)

For Roderick, this fashion sense bespeaks a "disposition" (195) the implications of which are clear to us in the twentieth century, but in case one should miss them Roderick adds to the Whiffle description the "maintaining a correspondence with his surgeon, not fit to be named" (199). We have in this description, then, the modern gay man. According to G.S. Rousseau, Whiffle is "the first authentic description of the enduring male homosexual stereotype in modern culture" (147). And even though that notorious disposition is not fit to be named, it inspires no end of naming. Says Roderick's friend Morgan, "I will proclaim it before the world, that [Whiffle] is disguised and transfigured, and transmogrified with affectation and whimsies; and that he is more like a [baboon] than one of the human race" (196).

Morgan is somewhat vague here about the exact form of his disdain: he either objects that Whiffle is *too* artificial — "transfigured, and transmogrified with affectation and whimsies" — or that Whiffle is not artificial enough — he is more like a beast than a gentleman. In any event, the Whiffle passage, as one of the inaugurating descriptions of a male homosexual stereotype,

registers a new phenomenon in the taxonomy of sexualities. As Michael Kimmel has documented,

the early 18th century witnessed the transformation of homosexuality from a set of behaviors to a type of individual. Prior to the 18th century, one could engage in homosexual acts, to be sure, but the larger culture did not view those as indicating a different and deviant type of individual. The homosexual, one whose erotic desire was focussed entirely on his or her own sex, was a relatively new phenomenon. The term "homosexual" was not used, of course, but the term "sodomite" seems to have changed its usage from an adjective, describing specific behaviors, to a noun, describing a type of individual. (6)

This change is rendered visible not only by Morgan's rather superfluous proclamation, but by Whiffle's very appearance. When Captain Whiffle first walks onto the ship, Roderick and his shipmates read the tell-tale signs of his desire, a reading that automatically labels and condemns. His dress and behaviour tell all. Whiffle represents homosexual visibility itself, both as it constitutes a social category, and as it takes on the definitional specificity of identity.

The ability to read a surface such as Whiffle's marks an important development of the relations between homosexual behaviour and homosexual identity. Whiffle's purported identity equates the homosexual with the effeminate, an equation that had not previously been made. As Susan Staves has argued, the effeminacy and affectation of the Restoration fop are *not* to be equated with homosexual desire; rather, the fop of the late seventeenth century was, if not altogether asexual, then at least predominantly interested in women (414). Etherege's Sir Fopling Flutter, for example, is detestable to the masculine contingent in the play precisely because he can gain a proximity to women through his disarming effeminate qualities. However, as Randolph Trumbach argues, by the 1720s "the fop's effeminacy, in real life and on the stage, came to be identified with the effeminacy of the then emerging role of the exclusive adult sodomite—known in the ordinary language of his day as a *molly*, and later as a *queen*" ("Birth" 134). Etherege's 1676 construction, with its heterosexual privileges, gives way to an increasingly isolating definition of homosexual identity, so that by 1722 Lady Mary Wortley Montagu could proclaim, "There [are] three sexes: men, women, and Herveys" (speaking, of course, of her friend John, Lord Hervey, a notorious sodomite. See Halsband 118). Effeminacy, which had previously meant "an attraction to women," and which was thought to be caused by excessive sexual relations with women, came to mean an exclusively androcentric, "feminine" desire that occluded male obsession with women. I want to suggest that this equation of effeminate dress and behaviour with homosexual desire resulted from a kind of hermeneutic of the performative: by reading

the performance, the theatrical aspects of Whiffle's effeminacy, Roderick and his eighteenth-century compatriots thought they could conclude that such signs transparently signified a certain kind of identity or subject position.<sup>1</sup> And it is that hermeneutic that structures the development of eighteenth-century — and contemporary — homophobia.

The equation of performance with a certain kind of desire in the first half of the eighteenth century is not isolated in *Roderick Random*. It is a hermeneutic we see in Peregrine Pickle's condemnation of the Italian Count's behaviour, and "the indecency of his deportment" (242). In Smollett's 1751 novel, the transgressive behaviour is reported thus:

[The count] ravished a kiss, and began to tickle him [the baron] under the ribs, with such expressions of tenderness, as scandalized the virtuous painter [Pallet], who, conscious of his own attractions, was alarmed for his person, and staggered in great hurry and discomposure into the next room.

And the result is this:

Peregrine, who entertained a just detestation for all such abominable practices, was incensed at this information; and stepping to the door of the dining-room where the two strangers were left together, saw with his own eyes enough to convince him, that Pallet's complaint was not without foundation, and that the baron was not averse to the addresses of the count. (242)

Similarly, in another part of town, Mrs. Cole is teaching Fanny Hill that all sodomites automatically betray degenerate morals, and that

in fine, they were scarce less execrable than ridiculous in their monstrous inconsistency, of loathing and contemning women, and all at the same time, apeing their manners, airs, lisp, skuttle, and, in general, all their little modes of affectation, which become them at least better, than they do these unsex'd male-misses. (160)<sup>2</sup>

The aping, the affecting, the theatrics — directed against a pair of men who, we must note, perform in the privacy of a bedroom while Fanny watches on, horrified yet titillated, from a closet — these are what determine the "vice" of the sodomite. Like Foucault's Victorian public, Fanny watches from afar and submits herself to a horrifying scene *in order* that she may condemn that scene and the participants in it.

Performance also clearly indicts the sodomitical eighteenth-century Lord Hervey in Pope's "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot." An avid user of cosmetics, this *Sporus* is a "painted Child of Dirt that stinks and stings" (line 310), and "Eternal smiles his emptiness betray" (315). As political lackey to Robert Walpole, Hervey is a "Puppet" (318), an



Amphibious Thing! that acting either Part,  
The trifling Head, or the corrupted Heart!  
Fop at the Toilet, Flatt'rer at the Board,  
Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord. (326-29)

This political, theatrical, and sexual degradation come together even more strikingly in Henry Fielding's representations of Hervey, in which, as Didapper in *Joseph Andrews*, he is the soft and beautiful Hylas rather than the masculine Hercules (288) in his pursuit of Fanny, and in *Shamela* he actually becomes Fanny. Fielding simultaneously represents him as a mince—"you was observed in dancing to balance your body exactly, and to weigh every motion with the exact and equal measure of time and tune"—and as a klutz—"you sometimes made a false step, by leaning too much to one side" (302). Like Morgan's Whiffle, Fielding's Hervey is condemned for being both too artificial and not artificial enough. And, like other homosexuals in the early eighteenth century, Hervey is defined by his theatricality, and condemned for it at the same time. Little wonder, then, that Jonas Barish should find such consistent evidence of homophobia in the antitheatrical prejudice. Homophobia, as it is written into the Whiffle passage and into a number of other early descriptions, is *itself* a prejudice against the performative. It is a prejudice we still hear in that panicked attempt at tolerance: "I don't care what you do in bed, just don't shove it in my face."

The disingenuousness of claiming not to care what one does in bed betrays itself, however, in the early eighteenth-century persecution of homosexuals, and in *Roderick Random*'s continued fascination with homosexual representation. With the change in the definition of sodomy—which Michael Kimmel noted above—came a change in the configuration of the desiring sodomite. Randolph Trumbach argues that the early eighteenth century not only defined the sodomite as a species, but actually recast sodomy from the realm of aristocratic libertinage (bisexual in nature) to a more rigid gender preference ("Birth" 130): the sodomite no longer simply enjoyed what Cleland called "any port in a storm" (141), but rather *preferred* genital contact with members of his own sex. This move made disposition or *desire* the definitive nexus around which persecution could revolve. In 1749, the year both *Random* and *Memoirs* were produced, Richard Spencer was convicted, according to G.S. Rousseau, "for merely *hoping* 'to commit the horrible Crime of Sodomy'" (147, emphasis original). This conviction is significant, in that it marks a change from the persecution of sodomitical behaviour to the persecution of sodomitical desire, a legal move that gay historians and critics usually associate with the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1886. (This late nineteenth-century law convicted Oscar Wilde not for sodomy,

but for "posing" as a sodomite, for behaving as if he were one, and establishes in gay theory the turning point for the reification of homosexual desire as itself a legal fact.) What this legal shift in taxonomy achieved was, first of all, the terroristic fear of persecution, a fear that resulted in the protective molly houses of early eighteenth-century industrial London.<sup>3</sup> But more than that, it registers the presence of an internal desire, already hated *as* desire, and which, as desire, was subject to prosecution. In other words, it registers the presence of a closet. Given this, I want to argue in the remainder of this paper that while Captain Whiffle may be one of the first "authentic" representations of the modern gay man, it is the novel's other homosexual who announces the birth of the closet, and the dynamics of epistemology and regulation that dominate that closet.

## II

Meet the Earl of Strutwell, the second homosexual representation in *Roderick Random*. Strutwell is one of many wealthy characters in the novel who represent to Random the possibility of a station and money: he offers to use his influence at court to help Roderick become secretary to an ambassador abroad. And, like Captain Whiffle's, Strutwell's behaviour manifests a homoerotic desire: the sweetness and candour in the countenance; the squeezing of Roderick's hand; the sighs and whispers; the kissing of Roderick's cheek. But, unlike Whiffle, who visibly demonstrates the passion not fit to be named, Strutwell shrouds his desire in secrecy and *double entendre*: "[h]e caught me in his arms, hugged and kissed me with a seemingly paternal affection," says Random (309) — a "paternal affection" for which the protagonist is constantly seeking in the novel. But Strutwell does not allow the signs of this affection to signify too strongly. In a telling scene, Strutwell gives Roderick a copy of Petronius's *Satyricon* and expounds the virtues of same-sex desire. Yet, when Roderick begins to argue against homosexuality "as an appetite unnatural, absurd, and of pernicious consequence" (310), Strutwell back-pedals significantly:

The Earl smiled at my indignation, told me he was glad to find my opinion of the matter so conformable to his own, and that what he had advanced was only to provoke me to an answer, with which he professed himself perfectly well pleased. (311)

After engaging Roderick in a discursive foreplay intended to arouse him, Strutwell shifts the implications of the entire encounter: the Earl, in short, lies, retreating into the safety of secrecy. Contrary to the unequivocal signs of Whiffle's performance, Strutwell's behaviour toward Roderick moves between open erotic affection and the businessmen's lunch, between avowal of desire and its denial. In this way, Strutwell's behaviour resembles what

D.A. Miller calls the "open secret," in which the delicious power of a secret depends upon its being kept from the knowledge of others, but those others must first know that there *is* a secret being kept from them. As Miller puts it, "secrecy would seem to be a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject's formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him" (195). Strutwell must negotiate the boundaries of what he shows and what he hides, and the tactical implications of this prevarication are clear: Roderick cannot read homosexual desire in Strutwell's actions. He must have the whole thing explained, that "Strutwell . . . was . . . notorious for a passion for his own sex" (312). Here we see Roderick caught in the hermeneutic problem of the early eighteenth-century straight man: the former contingency between performance and identity has been shattered by a disjuncture. The publicly identifiable sodomite has quietly slipped into the closet, where his desire is no longer clearly performed, no longer supposed to be totally visible.

That Strutwell should exemplify the construction of the closet is not surprising, given historical developments in epistemology during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. I do not have space here to delineate the philosophy of a hundred years, so I will give only a brief sketch to suggest that, while social persecution made the closet necessary, developments in epistemology made the notion of a closet *possible*. To begin, we know that the dualism evoked by René Descartes established a reified division between the mind and the body. The mind, although the privileged site of knowing, was isolated from the world's materiality and from the perceptions of other people. In a way, Descartes built a closet into which he placed each individual subject; and epistemology became like that of a closet — always partial, truncated, individual. When such an epistemology was taken up by John Locke, it not only emphasized the internality of knowing, but it also got expressed in very interesting and telling terms: "methinks," writes Locke, "the *Understanding* is not much unlike a Closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or *Ideas* of things without" (II.xi.17). We exist in a closet, a little room where only faint glimmers of the outside world get in and, by implication, where only faint glimmers of the interior life get out. According to Charles Taylor, this closetedness made the very notion of subjectivity itself something made completely on the inside. This ability of the self to be made, says Taylor, is the very definition of the self, a self that "consists in exploring what we are *in order to establish this identity*" (178; emphasis added). We think about ourselves in order to create ourselves more fully. This reification of the self, begun in Descartes and intensified in Locke, arises at the same time as the appearance and persecution of a gay subculture in London, and is inseparable from it. The private, inviolable space of the self that constitutes an

identity we call modern is also the private space of the gay closet — a space that hides the self from the outside world, a space that that outside world can never really fully know.

Given the individual subjectivity that made possible the development of the gay closet, it is not surprising that Roderick should be unable to read gay desire. When Strutwell praises Petronius, Roderick begins to get worried:

From this discourse, I began to be apprehensive that his lordship finding I had travelled, was afraid I might have been infected with this spurious and sordid desire abroad, and took this method of sounding my sentiments on the subject. — Fired at this supposed suspicion, I argued against it with great warmth. (310)

In one way, Roderick's obtuseness here defines the comedy of Smollett's novel: indeed, Roderick *repeatedly* mistakes people's characters by incorrectly reading their comportment or dress. But, in another way, his mistake registers the uncertainty of reading externals, and the mortification pursuant to this uncertainty. When Strutwell is finally outed by the suave, all-knowing Banter, Roderick is told that "the whole of his [Strutwell's] conduct towards me was so glaring, that no body who knew any thing of mankind could have been imposed upon by his insinuations" (313). Banter's is the voice of the man about town here, but his smugness need not be taken at face value. Unlike the Whiffle-type sodomite, Strutwell has prevaricated and eluded. The frustration Roderick feels is understandable: he has been disempowered by the deployment of the closet.

### III

Roderick's frustration and disempowerment are the inevitable result of the fuzzy distinction between the performance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the homosocial — which defines Roderick's behaviour throughout the novel — and that of the homosexual — which Smollett's *oeuvre* so clearly condemns. The fuzziness pertains not only to the way Roderick can or cannot read Strutwell, but also to a whole lexicon of homoerotic male behaviours, behaviours that Roderick himself performs. He makes "open . . . advances" (306) to Straddle and Swillpot, two (unacknowledged) sodomites with whom he goes walkin' after midnight. Like Strutwell, he passes tokens of affection — watches and diamond rings — to gain favour among the coterie. He insistently pursues Strutwell, bestowing upon him words of praise and affection. In fact, he engages in exactly the same kind of promise-making that Strutwell had used to court him: Roderick promises his best friend Strap a secretaryship when he arrives at the rank of prime minister, a promise that uncannily — and perhaps ironically — echoes Strutwell's offer made to him. These gestures, along with the kissing and hugging of Strap, Thomson, and



others, reflect the taxonomy of behaviours he comes to despise in Strutwell, as he had in Whiffle. But for Roderick they proceed from no internal, homoerotic desire. Roderick Random is not a gay man; nor would one want him to be. His are simply the gestures performed to solidify the homosocial bond between men. Moreover, Roderick's anger at deception is not a Sedgwickian "homosexual panic," since such panic depends upon the fear of psychic invasion by another man. Roderick has no such fear, not even when he thinks that Strutwell thinks he might have been "infected by this spurious and sordid desire abroad." Rather, Roderick is caught in a bind that requires him to perform in certain ways with other men, and to have other men perform for him, when he cannot know for sure what disposition or identity motivates those behaviours. This, for Roderick Random, is quintessential performance anxiety. And it is this epistemological breakdown that ultimately structures his relations both to gay men, and to men in general.

If the novel indulges in an ironic—yet malicious and homophobic—obfuscation of gay and straight performance, it does so only to the point when Roderick learns that Strutwell is "notorious for a passion with his own sex," a knowledge that thereby reconstitutes the equal or contingent relation between performance and disposition. Roderick says,

upon recollection, I found every circumstance of Strutwell's behaviour, exactly tallying with the character he [Banter] had described: His hugs, embraces, squeezes and eager looks, were now no longer a mystery; no more than his defence of Petronius, and the jealous frown of his *valet de chambre*, who, it seems, was at present the favorite pathic of his lord.  
(313)

The mortifying disjuncture that had structured Roderick's relations with Strutwell is here moved back into an earlier register, one in which the performance or "behaviour" is found to be "exactly tallying with . . . character," and in which loathsome desires are written and read on the external. With the knowledge that Strutwell is a sodomite, Roderick can not only condemn him, and not only wreak his vengeance; he can also redress that mortifying schism that separated outside from inside, and that rendered the straight man vulnerable to the homosexual closet. The knowledge that there *is* a closet bursts open its doors, and returns Roderick to a sureness that he had earlier enjoyed while reading Whiffle.

However, for all his condemnation of Strutwell's duplicity, for a performance masquerading as affection, Roderick has learned from the Earl a very important lesson: performance both *empowers* one's own closet (the site of knowledge) and *disempowers* another's. Hence, Roderick uses his new knowledge to construct and deploy his own closet. At this point in the novel, Smollett asks us to consider what a straight closet looks like vis-à-vis its homosexual counterpart. By what principles does such a closet operate?

Roderick immediately shows us. Under the auspices of getting back the gifts he had used to ingratiate himself with Strutwell's men, he says,

I . . . began to deliberate with myself, in what manner I should attempt to retrieve the moveables I had so foolishly lost. — I would have thought it no robbery to take them again by force, could I have done it without any danger of being detected; but as I could have no such opportunity, I resolved to work by finesse. (314)

The guiding principle of Roderick Random's closet here is that he must move among other men in secrecy, establish a trust, and thereby get what he desires; in this sense, his closet, like his earlier performances of ingratiating himself with the Strutwell coterie, differs very little from the homosexual closet, which must operate on the same principle of negotiating secrecy and disclosure. But there are two important differences in the deployment of the straight closet through its performance: first, despite his reservations, Roderick knows that he can use force whenever he wants, that he need only invoke the law and public opinion to expose and disempower another man's closet. (Indeed, one of the most efficient ways to get "justice" in *Roderick Random* is to submit your enemy to an ad hoc public hearing.) Second, and more important, the behaviours produced by the straight closet are intended to construct bonds with other men only in order to sever them. Roderick wants to get his watch and ring back so that he can have done with this vile coterie once and for all. Whereas Strutwell and his retinue had employed what Sedgwick calls the homosocial bond as a way of precipitating homosexual relations with other men, Roderick employs the homosocial in order to isolate himself from the homosexual. The gay closet in this novel functions as a self-protecting yet self-disclosing means of letting men in; the straight closet functions as a self-enclosing means of keeping men out.

This isolation goes further than merely protecting the self from being duped by a court full of queens. Roderick also deploys his closet to keep out his straight friends: when Banter, having enlightened Roderick about Strutwell, demands an explanation for how Random could be so easily deceived, Roderick says, "I could easily divine the source of his concern, but sneaked away in a solitary manner, without yielding the least answer to his expostulations" (314). For some time, this closet becomes all-exclusive: "neither had I resolution enough, to undeceive Strap, whose looks in a little time, were so whetted with impatience, that whenever I came home, his eyes devoured me, as it were, with eagerness of attention" (315). By letting his friends in on the process, Roderick would draw further attention to his own hard luck and imbecility for allowing himself to be "so egregiously duped" by Strutwell (314). In fact, he only disabuses Strap out of necessity — "finding myself reduced to my last guinea" (315) — that is, when he can no longer hide the fact that they are out of money. And, even then, "I



endeavoured to sweeten the discovery by rehearsing to him the daily assurances I received from my patron" (315). Roderick may be demonstrating sensitivity to Strap's fragile character, but such sensitive generosity also exonerates him from blame for imprudence, for allowing himself to be seduced (metaphorically speaking). By maintaining secrets, or by being selective in their telling, Roderick continually avoids honest and vulnerable admission to Strap. Whereas Strutwell had used the performative gestures of the closet to gain proximity to other men, Random uses them to gain distance from other men, even those he claims to be his closest friends. In contradistinction to the gay closet, the performances of the straight one are used to protect the sacred space of subjectivity from the presence of another, *any* other, regardless of the trustworthiness of their character.

To the degree that straight male performances are invoked to protect the self from other men, they also seem to protect the self from the self. There is yet another ostentatious dandiacal performance in *Roderick Random*, one performed by Roderick himself. When he reunites with Strap, who has been *valet de chambre* to a wealthy master for some time and has been left a small inheritance, the two decide to set themselves up in fine style. Roderick catalogues his new ensemble in a passage reminiscent of the Whiffle description:

My wardrobe consisted of five fashionable coats full-mounted, two of which were plain, one of cut velvet, one trimmed with gold, and another with silver-lace; . . . one waistcoat of gold brocard; one of blue sattin, embroidered with silver; one of green silk, trimmed with broad figured gold lace; one of black silk, with figures . . . (256),

and on for most of the rest of the page. With this Parisian dress, of course, come the same connotations surrounding all things French, the connotations that circled around Captain Whiffle and his *valet de chambre*: when Roderick returns to England with his new look, "I was observed with an uncommon degree of attention and [he thinks] applause," to which he responds with "a thousand ridiculous coquetries." But this favourable opinion soon becomes "pity or contempt" (257) as Roderick's behaviour becomes more affected, stylized, and artificial. "How often did I redder at the frequent whispers and loud laughter of my fellow beaux, which I imagined were excited by me!" (258). Like all dandies since the Restoration, Roderick fancies himself a popular and "pretty fellow" (257), but is actually detested by the company.

Given that this scene occurs only sixty pages after the Whiffle scene, it is impossible to read it without referring to the blatant homophobia that underwrote the earlier scene. But Roderick is unable to make the connection; the scene is marked more by the kind of ignorance that structures the later Strutwell episode than it does the epistemological clarity that condemned Whiffle. In this scene Roderick is performing a certain role—that of the

beau, whose behaviour was meant to enfranchise the cultured gentleman as arbiter of taste and fashion (Trumbach, "Birth" 135), yet whose behaviour was often indistinguishable from that which he was trying to reform. But that performance demands that he forget the prior reading of Whiffle, which for him had signified so clearly, and which had allowed him to condemn the sodomite. What allows Roderick to enact this scene is a closet that is marked by ignorance, not the ignorance of a public who assumes it can clearly read him — indeed, when he picks up a prostitute, "She seemed to be in some confusion" (258), for she assumes that his clothes tell all; rather, Roderick's closet here is marked by a self-ignorance, an ignorance that cannot imagine how others are reading him. As theorists from Descartes to Sedgwick have argued, the closet is foremost a site of ignorance, a site that not only truncates our knowledge of others (as in the Strutwell scene), but also our knowledge of ourselves (see Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 68–78). Roderick *assumes* that his performance in no way compromises his masculinity or signifies a certain type of identity. (Nor does he figure it out later, when he indulges in all the homoerotic gestures with Strutwell's boys that I discussed earlier.) Despite the early eighteenth-century equation of foppiness with sodomy, of performance with identity, Roderick tacitly maintains the distinction. He has adopted a closet of unreadability in regard to his own self-definition.

In the mapping of the closet through representations of homosexual desire, *Roderick Random* also maps the development of a disjuncture that troubles the burgeoning heterosexual male at the beginning of the eighteenth century. That disjuncture, effected by the closet, is the recognition that performance is necessary to the solidifying of identity, but that performance also displaces identity, that it renders the self something other than the self. This puts in a very precarious position the genesis of straight male identity, an identity that, as we have seen, was beginning to be defined in contradistinction to women and Herveys (and Whiffles and, more problematically, Strutwells). The efficacies of the performative are similar to what Judith Butler describes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. For Butler, there is no pre-existing sex upon which the inscriptions of gender get written; rather,

the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (24–25)

Thus, she concludes, "the 'unity' of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (31). Butler's comments in this regard are helpful for understanding the overt masculine performances emanating from Roderick Random's closet. Written in the early dawn of masculinity as one point in a binary—or tertiary—opposition to women and homosexuals, the novel exorcises the epistemological uncertainties engendered by the closet, and returns our hero to an empowering prescriptive acuity. It hypostatizes straight male performance and allows it to "constitute the identity it is purported to be."<sup>4</sup> Like the eighteenth-century self that Taylor described, the straight male self is in no way "natural," but rather is created, made and remade.

However, the construction of gender here is more complicated than Butler's theory allows. In arguing that all gender is parodic performance, Butler maintains that there is no "origin" or essential gender underlying that performance; there is no "self," strictly speaking, to perform. Conversely, *Roderick Random* suggests that the "origin" of straight male identity is the closet itself. Roderick's dandy scene indicates that gender is not only constructed, but that that construction is built upon a forgetting, a constantly shifting foundation of what one understands as normal and allowable. Straight masculinity proceeds from a historically defined separating of its performances from those it would deem not only parodic, but perverted, the performance of the homosexual and/or the fop. In this sense, Roderick's straight male identity gestures toward the performative homosexual "other" both in order to define itself against that other, and to forget that other as a definitive aspect of the self. Roderick constructs identity from the blinding assurance that he knows who he is, and that he is not subject to the same hermeneutic breakdown that he so painfully experienced with Strutwell. But that breakdown is precisely the generating principle of his sense of self. His mistaken hermeneutic assumption becomes Smollett's homophobic "joke" on Roderick: as our hero forgets the performance he defines himself against, he adopts those performances to construct who he is. The "origin" of identity here is that which precedes performance, and remains outside it, at a kind of non-performative site.

The fundamental difference between the gay and straight performance in *Roderick Random*, then, proceeds from a fundamental difference in the nature of the closet. That difference appears to be one of transparency, of visibility. Strutwell performs in order to service a certain transgressive desire; and he must calibrate that performance to reveal only just enough, and never too much. Roderick performs in order to keep the male gaze—even Strap's devouring eyes and "eagerness of attention" (315)—outside the vulnerable closet of the self. Moreover, this transparency, this seeing or not seeing into the closet, determines what one may find there. As a persecuted

gay man, Strutwell is conscious of what his closet might reveal; subjectivity is, for him, very much present, open to persecution. *Pace* Judith Butler, for whom *non*-performative aspects of identity seem not to exist, Strutwell knows that identity is something for which he can be hanged. For Roderick, on the other hand, internal identity is something to be forgotten. Inside, there is a self conscious of secrets, of homosocial gestures that often ape those of homosexual desire. Roderick is aware of a whole matrix of what he calls "troublesome reflection[s]," but he admits that "I was so well skilled in procrastinating" this matrix that it is easy to forget (315). Roderick uses performance to forget the possibility of those secrets, and to shore up a sense of self. His swagger does not construct his masculinity so much as it helps him to forget aspects of it. Performance divests the self of that which would affect it, and of those very tensions that constitute it. Roderick Random's closet, by being perhaps too full, is rendered empty.

#### NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> What underlies this hermeneutic, of course, is the epistemology of empiricism. Empirical observation was not confined in the eighteenth century to external dress and comportment. It extended to the body, where homosexual desire could also be read. In fact, so legible was this body thought to be that "Surgeon's apprentices," like Roderick or Smollett himself, "were taught before sailing how to search for 'obliteration of the radical folds around the anus' as evidence of [sodomitical] penetration. Such instruction was deemed necessary because it produced the most convincing evidence in court" (Rousseau 146).
- <sup>2</sup> The editor of the Signet edition, J.H. Plumb, points out a fascinating—although contentious—hypothesis in the book's reception history: "The publication of *Fanny Hill*," he says, "did not unduly disturb the tough-minded public of eighteenth-century London and it was not until a disreputable publisher called Drybutter wrote into it a long, explicitly homosexual scene in 1757 that the authorities took any notice of the book" (viii). According to Peter Sabor, no such person existed; the scene is Cleland's own. In any event, if Mrs. Cole is the spokesperson for this tough-minded London public, then her outrage is just enough to satisfy a prurient audience (represented by Fanny) while toeing the correct moral line. And that male homosexuality should be the only condemnable vice in this book is ironic to say the least.
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the molly house as safe haven, see the last chapter of Alan Bray's *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. Bray emphasizes the "pogrom like" quality of eighteenth-century persecution, a quality that Eve Sedgwick picks up for her discussion of terrorism and homosexual panic in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*. In his discussion of the proliferating violence directed against homosexuals in the eighteenth century, G.S. Rousseau suggests that the subculture successfully "haunted the bagnios and brothels around Covent Garden," as did "its Dutch counterpart in the narrow lanes behind the tree-studded Voorhooft in The Hague." Rousseau continues his optimistic vision of gay life in the eighteenth century by noting that "In



Holland, it was the sudden detection of this network in 1730 that prompted the Dutch massacres, which now have been called the first mass genocides of homosexuals in Western Civilization — exaggeratedly, in my view, as only two hundred men were executed" (154).

- <sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the efficaciousness of this "purporting," of this straight performance, is not confined to straight men in the eighteenth century. Trumbach relates the following anecdote:

John Potter was a perukemaker and worked as the foreman in another man's shop. Two soldiers invited him into a room in an inn. He said he wanted to go home, but instead one of them unbuttoned his breeches and "used me very unhandsomely". When they let him go, Potter went to get the constable. The constable was reluctant to make the arrest and tried to talk Potter out of his complaint. The two soldiers tried to see what swagger would do for them and remarked that they did "not know whether John Potter was a man or a woman." Potter would not be intimidated and refused to withdraw his charge. But when the case came to trial, it was swagger that won the day. The soldiers' sergeants came into court, swore their good character, and they were acquitted. ("Sodomites" 22)

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