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*Gender, Urban Culture,
and the Making of the
Gay Male World,
1890—1940*

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the prevalence at the time of the interpretation of homosexual activity outlined here. They indicate that many of the men he interviewed believed their sexual activity with other men did not mean they were homosexual so long as they restricted that behavior to the "masculine" (Indeed, his commentary is probably more useful to historians than his statistical claims.) He presumably singled out for comment those notions that his interviews had revealed to be particularly widespread in the culture. His comments are not now generally noted, but hetero-homosexual binarism has become hegemonic and the concepts against which he argued no longer have credibility. But it is significant that in the 1940s he still believed he needed to take special care to distinguish interpretations of homosexual relations that regarded only one of the individuals involved in them as "genuinely homosexual" (and possibly not even a man) and the other as not homosexual at all. It was absurd to argue, as he argued, that "individuals engaging in homosexual activity are neither male nor female, but persons of mixed sex," or that "inversion" meant a man playing the roles culturally ascribed to both sexes as an invariable accompaniment of homosexuality."¹⁰ Equally significant (and, apparently, common), he thought, were the claims of men who allowed themselves to be fellated but never performed fellation on other men that they were really "heterosexual," and the popular belief that an active male in an anal relation is essentially heterosexual in his orientation and [only] the passive male . . . homosexual."¹¹ The schema that the fairy and his man emblemized the dominant conceptions of homosexuality by which homosexual relations were understood is not to be dismissed, however, that it was the only schema or that all men were equally

produced lower estimates of the incidence of homosexual behavior.⁹ It is not necessary to defend Kinsey's sampling methodology or to assert the infallibility of his estimates, however, to object on historical grounds to the effort by recent historians to prove Kinsey was "wrong" by contrasting his figures with the lower figures recorded in recent studies. The fact that a certain percentage of the population engaged in homosexual practices in the 1990s does not mean that the same percentage did so fifty years earlier, when Kinsey conducted his study. It is preposterous to argue that such practices are culturally organized and that the prewar sexual regime would have made it easier for men to engage in casual homosexual behavior in the 1930s than in the 1980s, and that such behavior would ineluctably mark them as homosexual. Kinsey's methodology makes his precise statistical claims unreliable, but the fact that they are higher than those produced by recent studies does not by itself demonstrate that he was wrong. Moreover, Kinsey's study had the merit of trying to measure the incidence of homosexual activity rather than presuming that there was a clearly defined population of "homosexuals" whose size he could measure. Even if his study overestimated the incidence of homosexual activity twofold or threefold, his numbers are still astonishingly high.

prepared to engage in sexual relations with other men on those terms. The image of the fairy was so powerful culturally that it influenced the self-understanding of all sexually active men, but men socialized into different class and ethnic systems of gender, family life, and sexual mores nonetheless tended to understand and organize their sexual practices in significantly different ways. Several sexual cultures coexisted in New York's divergent neighborhoods, and the social locus of the sexual culture just described needs to be specified more precisely. As the next chapter will show, middle-class Anglo-American men were less likely to accept the fairy-trade interpretive schema Kinsey reported, and even their limited acceptance of it declined during the first half of the century. It was, above all, a working-class way of making sense of sexual relations.

Among working-class men there were also ethnic differences in the social organization and tolerance of homosexual relations. Unfortunately, the evidence is too fragmentary to support a carefully delineated or "definitive" characterization of the predominant sexual culture of any of the city's immigrant or ethnic groups, and, in any case, no single sexual culture existed in any such group since each of them was divided internally along lines of gender, class, and regional origin. Nonetheless, the limited evidence available suggests that African-Americans and Irish and Italian immigrants interacted with "fairies" more extensively than Jewish immigrants did, and that they were more likely to engage in homosexual activity organized in different terms as well. Certainly, many Anglo-American, Jewish, and African-American gay men thought that "straight" Italian and Irish men were more likely to respond to their sexual advances than straight Jewish men were, and police records tend to support the conclusions of gay folklore.¹²

The contrast between Italians and Jews, the two newest and largest groups of immigrants in New York at the turn of the century, is particularly striking. A 1921 study of men arrested for homosexual "disorderly conduct," for instance, reported that "the Italians lead" in the number of arrests; at a time when the numbers of Italians and Jews in New York were roughly equal, almost twice as many Italians were arrested on homosexual charges.¹³ More significant is that turn-of-the-century investigators found a more institutionalized fairy subculture in Italian neighborhoods than in Jewish ones. The Italian neighborhood of the Lower East Side had numerous saloons where fairies gathered interspersed among the saloons where female prostitutes worked. In 1908, Vito Lorenzo's saloon, located at 207 Canal Street (near Baxter), was charged by the police with being a "fairy place."¹⁴ In 1901, agents conducting a systematic survey of "vice conditions" on the Lower East Side found male prostitutes working in two Italian saloons on the block of Elizabeth Street between Hester and Grand, the same block where the Hotel Zaza's

hired rooms to female prostitutes who stood at the windows in
esses and call[ed] the men upstairs.”¹⁵ One investigator noted
Union Hall saloon was crowded with old Italian men and sev-
g fairies on the night of March 5; a few doors up the street, at
eth, stood a saloon where the fairies, aged fourteen to sixteen,
o their business right in [the] back room.” A month later the
on was said to have “5 boys known as [*finocchio*, or fairies]
to 25 years of age.”¹⁶

ly, the same investigators found no such open “fairy resorts”
wer East Side’s Jewish section, located just a few blocks to the
though they discovered numerous tenements and street corners
male prostitutes worked. The police periodically discovered men
other men in a less organized fashion in the Jewish neighbor-
reets, tenements, and even synagogues, to be sure. Two police-
instance, arrested a twenty-two-year-old Jewish immigrant for
men from the window of 186 Suffolk Street, at Houston, in
ut they arrested far fewer Jews than Italians on such charges,
tes of homosexual rendezvous were less stable and commercial-
well known, and thus, presumably, less tolerated in the Jewish
hood than in the Italian.

fficult to assess the reasons for the apparent differences in the
ganization of and larger community’s tolerance of male homo-
mations in Italian versus Jewish immigrant enclaves, particularly
absence of more extensive ethnographic studies of the overall
lture of either group. But three interrelated factors seem partic-
ucial: the sexual cultures the Jews and Italians brought with
the States from Europe, the different circumstances of their
ion , and the ways gender relations were organized in their
ties.

exual cultures of immigrants in the United States were clearly
n large part by the gender and sexual cultures of their home-
ch of which was, in turn, significantly differentiated internally
gional and class lines. Northern Italians brought to the United
set of cultural assumptions about sex different from those of
for instance; middle-class Italians were likely to organize gen-
ons differently from peasants or workers.*

gh both Catholic and Jewish religious authorities condemned
ual relations, Catholic teaching, especially, focused on the moral
posed by sexual contact between men and women to such a

ately, no ethnographic studies have been made of the social organization
exual relations in southern Italy or the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Russia
n of the century, for example, that might shed light on the behavior of

42. "Social Contagion in the Pool-room," 14-15, in Frederic M. Thrasher, "The Use of the Superior Boy in Research," BSH, box 11, folder 229 ("NYU Boys Club Study, 1930"), microfilm reel 6.

43. Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 457.

44. "Sex Practices and Stimuli," 12-13, in Thrasher.

45. Finch diary, Jan. 3, 1951. Committee of Fourteen investigators regularly reported that even prostitutes were unwilling to engage in oral sex; see, for example, the reports on 269 1/2 W. 22nd St., May 26, 1927; tenement, 756 Eighth Ave., Dec. 4, 1928; tenement, 2544 Eighth Ave., June 21, 1928; Navarre Hotel, Seventh Ave. and 38th St., Mar. 16, 1928, box 36, COF. Not all women rejected such requests, however; see the reports on tenement, 954 Eighth Ave., Sept. 20, 1927 ("I don't make a practice of it, but if you want it, I'll accommodate you"); tenement, 42 W. 46th St., July 22, 1927; and B&G Sandwich Shop, 140 Fulton St., Dec. 19, 1927 (the woman there said "the only way I do it is the French way," explaining that she did not want to risk pregnancy), all in the same file.

46. Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 2-3, provides the best account of such campaigns. On men's fear of catching a disease from a prostitute, see, for example, Report on Maxim's, 108 W. 38th St., Sept. 25, 1916, box 31, COF. In significant respects such campaigns prefigured the AIDS education campaigns of the early 1980s, which often identified sex with a gay man or an IV-drug user, rather than sex without a condom, as the source of AIDS. Such campaigns led many people to fear that the most casual contact with certain categories of people was unsafe, while reassuring them, with deadly inaccuracy, of the safety of the most intimate contact with other categories of people.

47. Report on Hanover Lunch, 2 South St., June 12, 1931, box 35, COF. Gene Harwood and Frank Burton, in discussing their memories of the 1920s and 1930s in an interview with the author, also pointed to men's fear of getting venereal diseases from women as a reason for their willingness to have sex with gay men. The sociologist Nels Anderson also reported that hoboes argued they were less likely to catch a venereal disease from homosexual than from heterosexual intercourse (*The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923], 134, 147-48), a view shared by the Chicago Vice Commission in its 1911 report, *The Social Evil in Chicago*, 296-97, cited in Anderson, 148. See also Samuel Kahn, *Mentality and Homosexuality* (Boston: Meador, 1937), 50-51. For indications that this belief was of long standing, see Randolph Trumbach, "The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660-1750," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 129-40.

48. Bulletin 1504, Mar. 24, 1922, box 88, COF.

49. Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 459, 456.

50. Will Finch thought the latter, although he sometimes substituted the older Navy word *pogue* for the more generally used *punk*. As he commented of one young Norwegian sailor, an older sailor's "boy" who nonetheless ended up in bed with Finch one summer night in 1946 and made it clear he expected Finch to anally penetrate (or "brown") him: "I decided that he was either queer and *liked* to be browned or the big guy's pogue and *expected* to be browned" (Finch diary, July 14, 1946). On the widespread use of *pogue* by sailors in the World War I era to mean a man who desired to be browned, see Chauncey, "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion?" especially 192, 196. The evidence suggests that the young men to whom the term was applied fell into all three camps.

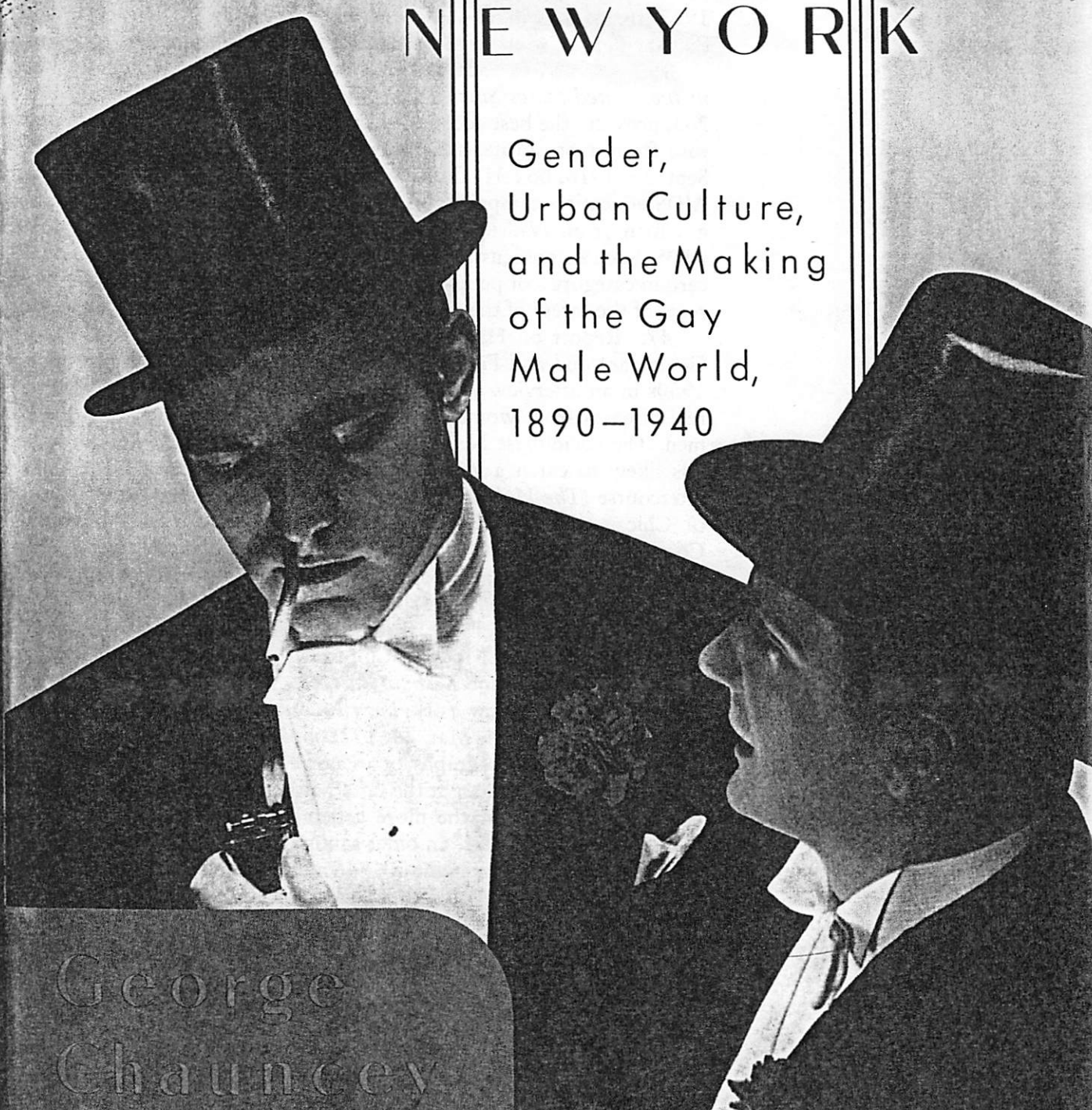
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—FRANK RICH, *New York Times*

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