


Interestingly enough, two of the collection's editors, Oram and Cook, co-authored a wonderful book precisely about this question. In *Queer Beyond London* (2022), the two scholars recover the histories of Brighton, Leeds, Manchester, and Plymouth as sites of LGBTQ struggle, culture, and leisure. Much like *Locating Queer Histories*, Oram and Cook's study owes much to the sharp increase in LGBTQ public history initiatives, and uses the growing availability of source material to unsettle London-centric accounts. In this edited collection, however, the editors point in their introduction to the fact that the articles presented "only tangentially fit a conventional trajectory of queer history". While this is also a reflection of the varied disciplinary backgrounds of the collection's authors, ultimately, one is left desiring more sustained engagement with the conventional narrative.

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## Jacob Bloomfield. *Drag: A British History*

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Thanks to the global success of the reality television franchise *RuPaul's Drag Race*, more people than ever associate drag performance with a specific, commercialized form of gay or queer culture. But in *Drag: A British History*, Jacob Bloomfield takes us back to a time when "female impersonation" drag performance had a similarly wide reach—albeit as a form of mainstream popular entertainment largely unassociated with queerness or sexual deviance. During the century from 1870 to 1970, Bloomfield argues, female impersonation was a staple of music hall, pantomime, revues, and stand-up comedy, and of these theatrical genres' descendants in film and television. Mainstream drag performances generally took one of two forms: either the pantomime dame, a stock comedic character who satirized older, typically working-class, women; or "glamor drag," a style whose aesthetic ideal was the alluring actress or film star. Several drag artists were celebrities who achieved considerable commercial success, in part through successfully neutering the possibility that their acts might be seen as deviant or obscene by allying themselves with conservative cultural politics and with normative masculinities in their offstage personas. Although the specter of queerness haunted drag throughout its heyday, Bloomfield suggests that drag only became firmly associated with gay culture after the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s provided a platform for more radical and subversive forms of drag.

Bloomfield traces this argument through four case-study chapters that offer snapshots of renowned drag performers and their relationship to the normative gender and sexual order of twentieth-century Britain. Chapter 1 focuses on the figure of the dame, through the lens of Arthur Lucan, a celebrity performer who, as his character Old Mother Riley, starred in plays, films, radio programs, and comics. Chapter 2 is about *Les Rouges et Noirs*, a popular theater troupe of World War I ex-servicemen whose association with wartime masculinities helped to underscore the respectability and entertainment potential of their glamor drag. Chapter 3 discusses the ubiquitous midcentury drag artist Danny LaRue, who asserted the

respectability of his glamor-drag nightclub act, West End performances, and television programs by emphasizing his Catholicism, criticizing 1960s “permissiveness,” and expressing homophobia and transphobia onstage. Chapter 4 turns to consider the perspective of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office that, between 1843 and 1968, censored British theater. Bloomfield shows that, despite the Lord Chamberlain’s Office’s increasing concern about drag’s association with “sexual immorality” amid growing public awareness of the category of homosexuality in the postwar period, the censors approached drag with a light touch, and most audiences in the period continued to view it as a form of wholesome, family light entertainment.

Throughout the book, Bloomfield shows that drag always carried with it the risk of a threat to the gender and sexual order. Although it is not the focus of his study, he mentions in passing female impersonation performers throughout the period who were embedded in queer and trans cultures and communities. Yet he also shows that performers, producers, audiences, and censors alike pursued deliberate strategies to avoid associating drag with immorality. These strategies changed over time, as historically specific models for normative masculinity—the ex-soldier, the family man—allowed drag performers to assert their respectability in different ways, and as the coalescence of the category of homosexuality changed how British people thought about gender and sexual nonconformity. The result was that, for much of modern British history, female impersonation performance was central to popular culture, with performances judged on their ability to provide convincing, realistic portrayals of femininity. Not only is this in itself a striking finding about the history of British popular culture, but it is also in dialogue with recent work about gender and sexuality that has sought to take a more nuanced approach to questions of normativity and deviance, showing that gender and sexual nonconformity was not always proscribed and persecuted. Bloomfield’s study offers us some indication as to why and how this might have been the case.

Yet in some ways, the book’s analysis stops just short of its most ambitious and provocative conclusions. Bloomfield mentions that drag artists who convincingly embodied glamorous femininity sometimes lived more feminine lives offstage than their claims to respectable masculinity implied, and that the fan cultures that developed around them emphasized their sexual desirability. And he points out moments that the Lord Chamberlain’s Office expressed concern about drag acts that were obscene precisely because they were *too* convincing: a 1939 revue that the Office judged obscene because a drag striptease performance fell afoul of prohibitions on female (not male) nudity, and a moment in 1958 when the Office worried that glamorous, sexually alluring drag performers would seduce male audience members into homosexuality. Yet—the views of the censors aside—is male homosexuality really, or only, what is at stake in these stories that emphasize performers’ ability not to parody but rather to embody femininity? The story of British drag might fruitfully be enhanced by a trans analysis, attentive not only to the fraught relationship of drag to gay culture, but also to moments when drag can reveal the long history of cultural anxiety around trans femininity and can help us to understand how the modern British gender order more widely has been constituted and upheld.

Indeed, throughout its long history, mainstream British drag might be more entangled with queer and trans cultures than Bloomfield always explicitly lets on. Perhaps what the book’s vivid snapshots from drag history suggest is that it is not always possible clearly to disentangle the normative and the subversive, and that it is when historical actors most aggressively assert the stability of the binary gender order that it is in fact at its most unstable.