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Subverting Masculinity or Suppressing the Unmanly?
Gender Alterity in Palazzeschi and Capuana's Treatment of the Incorporeal Man

MARTINA O'LEARY

Many great strides have been made in recent years to address the gap in gender and sexuality studies in Italian Literature, such as Derek Duncan's *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (2005) and Francesco Gnerre's *L'eroe negato. Omosessualità e letteratura nel Novecento italiano* (*The Denied Hero. Homosexuality and Literature in Nineteenth-century Italy*) (2000), but, as Charlotte Ross states in her 2010 article, 'Critical Approaches to Gender and Sexuality in Italian Culture and Society', "while recent work is beginning to counteract this disequilibrium, many gaps remain in critical explorations of gender and sexuality."[1] She also highlights that attention to masculinities and nonconformist sexual orientation make up a significant part of this deficit:

> Although gender and sexuality studies ostensibly encompass the analysis of all sexual orientations and modalities of gender, the level of attention devoted to particular identities and experiences varies. This is certainly the case in scholarly work on Italian society and culture, in which modalities of femininity have received more attention than masculinities or dissident sexualities, for example.[2]

This article seeks to engage with the treatment of homosexuality and gender alterity in Luigi Capuana's short story 'L'invisibile' (The Invisible) (1901) and Aldo Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* (*Perelà's Code*) (1911), and this engagement presupposes a clear explication of the notion of hegemonic masculinity within the socio-historic framework of these texts. What follows is an exploration and comparison of these two representative texts of early twentieth-century Italian literature in light of important discussions on gender and sexuality, both within and beyond the Italian context, with attention to the body as the site and nexus of gender performance and sexual identity. Furthermore, I have selected texts from the fantasy genre specifically, since, through its strong use of symbolism, this genre allows for

[1] Charlotte Ross, "Critical Approaches to Gender and Sexuality in Italian Culture and Society," *Italian Studies*, *65* (2) (2010), 165.
[2] ibid., 165.

the exploration of many topics that would otherwise be censored. Therefore, a discussion of the fantasy genre, as well as semiotics, will form part of this inquiry. Through analysis aided by the above contributions I will demonstrate how gender is performed within the selected texts, how non-traditional expressions of gender and sexuality are alluded to, but not directly engaged with, and what this says about gender and sexual alterity both in terms of the writers' socio-political environments, and how the works may impact these environments through the responses of their readerships.

While scholars such as Silvia Ross and Francesco Gnerre have looked at works by Palazzeschi in the context of gender and sexuality, none have examined these authors' works through their use of the fantasy genre as an allegorical means by which to articulate issues of gender and sexuality.[3] The bodiless bodies in this investigation are examined semiotically in terms of Butlerian performativity; a queer reading of this nature explores and exposes the poetics involved in communicating such issues.

Luigi Capuana (1839 – 1915) and Aldo Palazzeschi (1885 – 1974), though generations apart, were both writers who were prolific at the turn of the twentieth century, and the works I am examining are both from around this period. These texts express the concept of homosexuality and gender alterity with remarkable similarity, but approach them from opposite stances, and as such the literary features they employ, such as narrative events, character attributes, and symbolism, are in direct opposition to one another.

Written ten years apart, these texts bear some striking resemblances. In 1901, in a collection entitled *Il benefattore* (*The Benefactor*), Capuana published 'L'invisibile', which was inspired by H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897), and is told as a story, by the protagonist, *il dottor Maggioli* (Doctor Maggioli), the narrator of all the stories in second half of the collection, who also appears in other works by Capuana), to his friends, in which he describes the events surrounding his encounters with an invisible man – a patient of his who complained of an extraordinary sense of lightness.[4] In 1911 Palazzeschi published his acclaimed *Codice di Perelà*, whose

[3] See Silvia Ross's *Tuscan Spaces* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 2010), Chapter 2, 'Palazzeschi's Spaces of Difference: The Materassi Sisters at the Window', Francesco Gnerre's *L'eroe negato* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 2000), 'Riso liberatorio e giochi di travestimento.'

[4] *Il dottor Maggioli* also appears in *Un caso di sonnambulismo* (1867), *Il Decameroncino* (1901), and *La voluttà di creare* (1911).

protagonist is a man made of smoke, first exalted and then execrated by his community, who also defines himself by his lightness of being. These works mark the earlier phase of the period referred to by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) as that in which there had come to be a widespread social awareness of homosexuality. The literary analysis of the body as it appears in any given text, since the body is the site of gender and sexual identity, would produce much discussion on these topics, particularly in terms of transgressive gender and sexual expression, and since unreal representations of the body are under examination, which are other than the real, or ordinary human state, these representations may be argued to allude to diversity or alterity within society. Beyond this, a study of this nature has not been conducted on either of these works, much less a comparative one, and since they each represent opposing camps on the question of repression or acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, they present an ideal case study by which to explore the methods writers may use to produce specific messages in their works relative to their own personal circumstances and socio-historical environments, as well as an opportunity to examine the poetics involved in communicating such messages. Before commencing the textual analysis of these works, I would like to outline the theoretical discussions which form the basis of my analytical approach. This introduction frames the concepts of gender performativity, homosexuality, the body, and fantasy that I indicate as central aspects in my exploration of Capuana's and Palazzeschi's works. I will follow with an analysis of the body as it is presented in *Il codice di Perelà* and 'L'invisibile', which will be complemented by a discussion of the notions of queerness and invisibility in these texts.

Critical Theories – Gender and Sexuality

Since its inception in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, the study of gender performativity has impacted many fields and accumulated a vast body of scholarship. In this groundbreaking work she states:

> Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes [...] 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.[5]

Butler's theory of performativity reemerges and is elaborated on in many of her works, such as *Bodies that Matter* (1993) in which she argues that the regulatory powers that instigate this societal control have a specifically heteronormative purpose. She again details the nature of the performativity of the body: how it operates through reiteration, that this reiteration, being constantly performed around us through cultural production, and then by us, has the effect of continual reinforcement that makes it so pervasive and entrenched that it is viewed as nature. Butler suggests that the regulatory principles that govern and call for this performance bring about this "constrained production"[6] and that these regulatory forces oppose the potentiality for sexual and gender identifications transcending the accepted heterosexual norm and becoming normalized.

Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, highlights the importance of omissions in literature, stating that any work of fiction can be read in terms of its homosexual content, as long as attention is given to these omissions.[7] She also states that at the end of the nineteenth century there was widespread awareness of the homosexual individual in Western culture.[8] Beyond discussions of sexuality, the issue of gender performance and traditional depictions of masculinity is also vital to this discussion. In *Masculinities* (1995), Raewyn Connell (known as R.W. Connell at the time of this book's publication) discusses the origins of the classic ideal of masculinity, arguing that hegemonic masculinity and the emergence of patriarchal societies grew from the process of imperial expansion.[9] In this book, Connell also argues that psychological evaluations of men and women in fact place them as so remarkably similar, that it is social constructions of gender, resulting in the 'constrained production' already delineated by Butler, which identify the sexes as being divergent from one another.

Considering the nature of this investigation, the body is a specific topic of interest. Derek Duncan's discussion on bodies in literature perhaps expresses it best:

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[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24, 25.
[6] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 223.
[7] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.
[8] Ibid., 8.
[9] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995)185.

"The body can never be natural in that it is never free of socially constructed meanings. A sexed, raced, aged body is always a meaningful body, and identities and subjectivities are produced through the enmeshment of the body in cultural discourses and practices."[10] He discusses Elizabeth Grosz's conceptualization of bodies in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), quoting the following lines: "The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past: it is itself a cultural, the cultural product".[11] Loredana Polezzi and Charlotte Ross discuss the body in the Italian context in their introduction to the anthology of essays, *In Corpore* (2007), and reflect upon Judith Butler's assertions in *Bodies that Matter* that the body is not a timeless structure, but a conditioned production of norms and regulations. From this starting point they address the body in the Italian literary context:

> The many facets of Italian history and culture covered in this volume exemplify the way in which, as the privileged site of our projected fantasies of self, the body is marked by the intersection of multiple, shifting boundaries – whether they stem from a cultural desire for intelligibility and fixity or are made manifest as a symptom of our fragmented selves. Authoritarian prescriptions may strive for tidy demarcations, clear separation and "purification" of bodily categories, and seek to punish the bodies that transgress their system, but this is countered in our imagination by delight in the polyvalent bodies that elude constricting dictates and traverse the forbidden boundaries.[12]

Common to all of these works is the supposition that the body in literature is richly inscribed with meaning, and that this meaning is dependent on social factors which impose structure and regulations on the body.

Peter Brooks conducts an in-depth exploration of the body in literature in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (1993). He offers insight into the objectives of works which place the body as the primary focus, and what can be understood from these:

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[10] Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference.* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006)13.
[11] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies.* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1994), 23.
[12] Charlotte Ross, Loredana Polezzi, 'Introduction', *In Corpore: Bodies in Post-Unification Italy*. (Madison (NJ): Farleigh Dickinson U.P., 2007), 22.

> Narratives in which a body becomes a central preoccupation can be especially revelatory of the effort to bring the body into the linguistic realm because they repeatedly tell the story of a body's entrance into a meaning. That is, they dramatize ways in which the body becomes a key signifying factor in a text: how, we might say, it embodies meaning.[13]

Brooks here reiterates that bodies in texts carry a multitude of meanings, and highlights texts whose *specific* focus is the body, and the importance that this focus entails. The central issue of *Il codice di Perelà*, for example, is the protagonist's body, and how it differs from that of 'normal' people, and so without an investigation of the features of this body, both descriptive and symbolic, a thorough understanding of the text as a whole may in fact be eluded. He states later in the text: "It is on the body itself that we look for the mark of identity," and "The body can be made to bear messages of all kinds. Even more interesting than reading the messages on the body may be the study of their inscription."[14] Brooks also attests to the necessity of a semiotic exploration to decipher the meaning attached to these bodies: "An aesthetics of narrative embodiment insists that the body is only apparently lacking in meaning, that it can be semiotically retrieved. Along with the semioticization of the body goes what we might call the somatization of story: the implicit claim that the body is a key sign in narrative and a central nexus of narrative meanings."[15]

Speaking of normative ideals of gender and the body in *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts:

> Always already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the "literal" and the "real." The limits to the "real" are produced within the naturalized heterosexualization of bodies in which physical facts serve as causes and desires reflect the inexorable effects of that physicality.[16]

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[13] Peter Brooks, *Body Work.* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard U.P., 1993), 8.
[14] Ibid., 21, 22.
[15] Ibid., 25.
[16] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 71.

While Butler is here emphasizing the unrealistic fantasy of the bodies of idealized gender archetypes, the authors in my discussion produce fantasy depictions of the body that contradict these normative types, to articulate discussions on gender that either persuade the readers of the supposed rectitude of these ideals (which Butler here identifies as potentially achievable only through fantasy), or highlight the problematics attached to traditional gender models.

Semiotics of Fantasy

As Piero Pieri states in his essay entitled 'L'ordine della scrittura fantastica e il disordine della lettura' (The Order of Fantastic Writing and the Disorder of its Reading) in *Il visionario, il fantastico, il meraviglioso tra Otto e Novecento (The Visionary, the Fantastic and the Extraordinary from the Eighteenth to the Nineteenth Century):*

> Se i movimenti sociali di quel periodo storico non entrano mai nel racconto fantastico, tuttavia certe complessità scientifico-culturali alla fine s'impongono come fonte d'ispirazione e griglia ideologica sulle quali sovente poggia lo sviluppo della narrazione. La forma concreto-sensibile della realtà nel fantastico s'impone attraverso una trama sottomessa ad una retorica controllata dai presupposti ideologici che hanno ispirato il racconto.[17]

Fantasy, like many other genres, takes as its subject matter issues pertaining to contemporary life, but fantasy often shifts these real subjects into surreal analogies which stand in their place. The fantasy genre is particularly significant to a study of the poetics used to articulates issues of gender and sexuality, since, beyond simply being the genre in which an unreal body can be present within the text, as a genre it is typically afforded a higher level of freedom of expression than others. Fantasy literature often alludes to relevant contemporary issues through its use of symbolism, and in this regard can address any topic while eluding the scrutiny of censoring bodies since no direct statements are made regarding that which would be censored. This

[17] Angelo Mangini, *Il visionario, il fantastico, il meraviglioso tra Otto e Novecento,* (Ravenna: Allori Edizioni, 2006), 7.
"While social movements of the time never enter into the fantastic tale, nevertheless certain cultural and scientific complexities impose themselves as a source of inspiration and an ideological framework onto which the development of the narrative is often placed. The perceivable-tangible form of reality in the fantastic is established through a plot dominated by a rhetoric controlled by prerequisite ideologies that inspired the story."

genre is gaining recognition as a platform from which to discuss controversial subject matter such as homosexuality, sexual deviance and nonconformist gender expression, however, as yet, the Italian contribution in this regard has been largely neglected.[18]

In *Mythologies* Barthes states: "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance."[19] Here Barthes acknowledges the semiotic potential of subject matter that holds a long line of previous associations, such as the myth, and also, unreal elements in fantasy literature. The past use in cultural production of the signifiers makes it easy for the readers to ascribe meaning to the narrative, while maintaining the possibility of other signification, ensuring immunity from censoring bodies.[20]

Aldo Palazzeschi is widely recognized to be one of Italy's greatest modern fantasy writers.[21] Palazzeschi's literary career can be divided into three main phases: his earlier avant-garde phase in which, possibly influenced by the radical perspectives of the Futurist movement and their refiguration of literary models, but also predating this movement, he wrote novels and short stories that had a heavily experimental style that typically relied on fantasy; his middle 'realist' phase, at which time he produced the novel he is perhaps best known for, *Sorelle Materassi* (*Materassi Sisters*); and his later fantasy phase.[22] Palazzeschi is known for his engagement with, and love for the fantasy genre, declaring in one interview that it was his earlier and later works that dealt with the surreal that he more fully aligns himself with: "la parte a cui io tengo di

[18] For an example of works that recognize the potentiality of the fantasy genre for expression of stigmatized topics such as homosexuality, see James Miracky, *Regenerating the Novel: Gender and Genre in Woolf, Forster, Sinclair, and Lawrence* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[19] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Trans. Lavers, A. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 110 [emphasis in the text].
[20] Juri Lotman argues that language, or rather text, creates reality: that it is cultural production that draws up the parameters for what is acceptable 'reality'; a regulatory force which ultimately shapes the society it is produced in and from. Like Barthes, Lotman also alludes to the vast intertextuality of text, or cultural production: "When an artistic text simultaneously enters into many intersecting extra-textual structures and each element of the text enters into many segments of the intra-textual structure, the artistic work becomes the carrier of meanings whose correlations are extraordinarily complex." Juri Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text.* Trans. G. Lenhoff & R. Vroon. (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1971), 300.
[21] Palazzeschi is one of only eight Italian writers whose works are included in the collection *Italia magica*, as a representative selection of the Italian twentieth-century fantasy genre for an international readership, first published in France as *Italie Magique* in 1946. Gianfranco Contini, *Italia magica.* (Torino: Einaudi, 1988).
[22] Silvia Ross, "Aldo Palazzeschi" In: Rocco Capozzi and Luca Somigli (eds). *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 264: Italian Prose Writers, 1900-1945. (Detroit: Gale Research, 2002).

più […] è la parte surrealistica della mia opera."[23] He also famously declared fantasy to be his sex: "Ho sentito degli amici che si lamentavano perché in tarda età non gli si spegneva il sesso. A me non mi si spegne la fantasia. La fantasia è il mio sesso."[24]

Capuana, though known by many for his contributions to *verismo* (realism), having spearheaded the movement alongside his friend and literary rival, Giovanni Verga, is also widely acknowledged as a prolific fantasy writer, and according to a letter he wrote to Corrado Guzzanti, himself believed his fairy tales would be the texts by which he would be remembered in future years.[25] Capuana had a longstanding fascination with the supernatural and the occult, not only in his writing, but also in his research and recreational pursuits, and even dappled in the paranormal in his *verista* texts, e.g., *Il marchese di Roccaverdina* (*The Marquis of the Verdina Fortress*), with a ghostly visitation during a séance. Capuana accounts for this deviation of genre in his description of the novel: "Un romanzo di punta della narrativa verista, nel quale confluiscono il gusto della ricerca psicologica, l'amore per una realtà fisiologica e terrestre, la curiosità per il soprannaturale."[26] Through the fantasy genre Capuana could evolve a richly experimental style, one in which he had the freedom to develop characters, situations, and (as a result) messages, that may be restricted in other mediums. For example, in *Giacinta;* a realist novel which tells the tale of a young girl, the eponymous protagonist of the text, who was raped, and the ensuing consequences; the focus on gender creates a restrictive model by which to articulate specific ideas regarding gender, and in his fairy tales for children the emphasis is on producing didactic models designed for the readers' moral and educational development. However, in works that have their focus in fantasy, fuller expression is possible since the scope for development is infinite and is constricted neither by the rules of nature, nor the expectations or limitations of more specific literary intentions such as those just mentioned.

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[23] Simone Magherini, Gloria Manghetti, *Scherzi di gioventù e d'altra età: Album Palazzeschi (1885-1974).* (Firenze: Polistampa, 2001), 256. "The part which I value the most is the surreal part of my work."

[24] ibid., 202 "I heard some friends who were complaining because late in life they did not go off sex. For me, I don't go off fantasy. Fantasy is my sex."

[25] Enzo Petrini, *Luigi Capuana.* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1966), 36.

[26] Luigi Capuana, *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*. (Milano: Garzanti, 1976), Back cover. "This is a novel on the peak of realist fiction, which merges a taste for psychological research, a love of physiological and terrestrial reality, and a curiosity for the supernatural."

Il codice di Perelà *and 'L'invisibile'*

Il codice di Perelà is considered by many to be Palazzeschi's masterpiece. It tells the story of a man made of smoke, who lived silently in the chimney of the house of three old women, Pena, Rete and Lama. These women lived in apparent ignorance of his existence, and had long conversations around the fire that educated Perelà, until they finally left thirty-three years after he came to be. Perelà descends to search for them and thus emerges from his hiding place into society. Initially he is well received, and quickly the whole city comes to know of his presence, and the king himself requests that he write up the new code, or system of laws, for the city.

In 1910, one year before publishing *Il codice di Perelà*, Palazzeschi wrote his poem *L'incendiario* (*The Arsonist*), in which the theme of the fire starter and the poet conflate, and a strong message emerges when the poet announces his intention to destabilize traditional 'safe' notions and ideals. The theme of the arsonist is prominent in many of Palazzeschi's works throughout his career, and in *Stampe dell'800* (*Printings of the Eighteen Hundreds*)(1932) he talks about his childhood impulse to play with fire. Here, in a chapter with the same title as the above poem, he reiterates the notion that starting fires and writing were synonymous acts; comparing the act of writing, in "una fila poco più lunga e non meno bizzarra", to an instance years earlier in which he had lit matches on a windowsill, giving emphasis to the effect, rather than the act, of both: "E come allora, per un irresistibile capriccio, mi piacque di vedere anch'essa accesa nell'aria; una luce non più alta, né durevole forse, di quella dei cerini nella sera dell'altra primavera."[27] It is visible through Palazzeschi's writings that much of his work has a subversive intent, and with these allusions to writing as a form of fire starting, it is evident that it was one of his main objectives to rouse his society. Considering the substance of Perelà's form, the novel presents a natural progression from the arsonist image; smoke being that which is left over after the purification of fire has taken place. As Oliva di Bellonda (a character in the novel who fell in love with Perelà) states: "non potete dimenticare che'egli è il figlio della fiamma."[28]

Capuana, whose literary career coincided chronologically with the development of popular engagement with such paranormal fields as spiritualism and

[27] Aldo Palazzeschi, *Stampe dell'800*. (Firenze: Valecchi Editore, 1938), 117. "a line which is barely longer and no less bizarre", "And as then, for an irresistible whim, I liked to see that, too, alight in the air, a light neither higher, nor enduring perhaps, than that of the matches in that evening of the other spring."

[28] Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutti i romanzi* Vol. I. (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), 337. "you cannot forget that he is the son of the flame."

magnetism, had a fascination for matters of the occult, and regularly explored them in his writing. 'L'invisibile' was first published on 24 March 1901 in "Illustrazione Italiana" ("Italian Illustration"), then in *Il benefattore* in the same year, and later in *La voluttà di creare* (*The Pleasure of Creation*), in 1911.[29] The theme of invisibility appears to have been of great interest to Capuana, being present in many of his works, such as his novels *Un vampiro* (*A Vampire*), and *Il marchese di Roccaverdina*, and his short stories 'Forze occulte' ('Occult Forces'), 'L'allucinato' ('The Delirious'), 'I microbi del signor Sferlazzo' ('Mr. Sferlazzo's Microbes') and 'Il ritratto d'ignota' ('Portrait of an Unknown') 'L'invisibile' forms part of the collection of stories in the latter section of *Il benefattore*, entitled 'Raccontava il dottor Maggioli…' ('Doctor Maggioli Recounted…') which discuss matters ranging from science, to pseudo-science, to the occult, including, for example, scientific experiments, diseases and germs, and telepathy. The narrative of 'L'invisibile' is framed as a story told by the doctor, *il dottor Maggioli*, a character who Christina Petraglia states is "often considered the *alter ego* of the author," to his friend, *la baronessa Lanari* (the Baroness Lanari), who like a child, begs him for a fairy tale.[30] The story he tells her and the others present describes the invisible man at first as merely mischievous, but later, as sinister and demonic.

What is significant about the two works under examination here is that they place different emphasis on the very similar reasons their main characters were to be considered an abomination by society. Perelà was initially lauded for his difference, and was held in such high regard that he was asked to write the town's new set of laws, but with the first conflict that presents itself – namely, the death of a character called Alloro who wished to become like Perelà and threw himself into a fire in an attempt to achieve this, Perelà is accused of being responsible for this tragedy and is relegated to the level of a monster. When it comes time to determine his innocence or guilt in court, he is shamed as a homosexual, being labeled a pederast, of the third sex and against nature.[31] While before this point there is no real indication of his sexuality, whether supposed or factual, his wispy insubstantial nature, and repeated declaration throughout the text of being "un uomo molto leggero" presents him as the opposite of

[29] Luigi Capuana, *Novelle del mondo occulto.* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2007), 151.
[30] Christina Petraglia, *Uncanny Resemblances: Doubles and Doubling in Tarchetti, Capuana and De Marchi.* (Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012), 163.
[31] Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutti i romanzi* Vol. I (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), 239-331.

the patriarchal ideal of masculinity from the outset.[32] And while his sexuality is in no way determined through his words or behavior, he is alleged to be gay by the 'rabble', as though labeling him as such somehow makes it more plausible to them that he is responsible for Alloro's death.

Many of the conversations that take place, and characters encountered, highlight issues of sexuality and gender presentation, for instance, Eros Copertino, a cross-dressing lesbian, the Contessa Denza who was raped by her husband, and the frigid Contessa Liccio. Once given the task of writing the new code, Perelà decides to visit two nuns, one suor Marianna Fonte, a reformed sinner in prison, the other, suor Colomba Messerino, a 'pure' virgin, in a convent. It is significant that in order to develop his code Perelà must visit these two women, one the embodiment of what is considered purity and the other its antithesis, as though an exploration of these opposites is necessitated in order to redefine through his *codice* what will in future be considered appropriate by society.

Ironically, one of Perelà's accusers of being a homosexual is a known lesbian, though many of the townspeople conform to heteronormative models of gender, and often in exaggerated ways. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler suggests that it is possible to subvert social constructs of gender through a parodic display of these 'performances': "The parodic repetition of gender exposes […] the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance".[33] While Palazzeschi both exonerates and lauds Perelà for his unconventional gender performance, he ridicules those who exaggeratedly conform to gender conventions, further reinforcing the gay-affirmative, and gender non-conformist agenda.

Perelà's performance of gender is inconsistent with models of gender considered acceptable at the time, and the other characters within the text (who themselves are often depicted as idiotic and mindless 'sheep') infer from this that his sexual persuasions are also non-conformist, and attack him with accusations of such. The comment seems to be that diversity is vilified, with homophobic attacks becoming prevalent when anybody steps out of turn as to what is considered 'normal' according to the general consensus. Palazzeschi himself was gay, and commented directly and, more often than not, indirectly on gender and sexual diversity in many of

[32] Ibid., 137. "a very light man".
[33] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146.

his works.[34]

Perelà's *leggerezza* (lightness), perhaps his most frequently discussed physical attribute, given that his body is made of smoke, is deemed by Luciano De Maria to be representative of the force of opposition to capitalism and conservatism, and as such, Palazzeschi's critique of society's lack of zeal in the resistance of these. Anthony Tamburri, on the other hand, relates Perelà's lightness to the kind of light heartedness Palazzeschi calls for in his 1914 manifesto *Il controdolore* (*The Anti-suffering*), where he advocates exposure to the macabre and the ridiculous in order to better engage with life's challenges. Tamburri states that the key to Perelà's *codice* alluded to in the title of the novel is contained within this notion of *leggerezza,* thus placing this corporeal characteristic at the center of the work's message.

In terms of Butlerian performativity, Perelà's *leggerezza* is an important element in the consideration of gender in the novel. Of his first utterances he describes himself as light; "Io sono… io sono… molto leggero, io sono un uomo molto leggero," a phrase which he repeats many times throughout the novel.[35] One would expect a gender conformist protagonist to resemble something akin to the Nietzschian superman, particularly since the text is allegedly a futurist novel; that Perelà is instead defined by his softness, wispiness and lightness makes it clear that the author's aims lie in destabilizing traditional models of masculinity and proffering a new paragon of honor and righteousness. Far from reinforcing patriarchal models of gender as, Butler asserts, many or most literary works do, this novel is exemplary of Sedgwick's call for open discourse surrounding the stigmatized body. In real life terms, a man who would be considered flimsy, fragile and soft, certainly would not conform to heterosexist ideals of masculinity in the early nineteen-hundreds, even in literature, but by introducing such a character under the guise of the fantastic, not only can a superlative example be employed, but such exaggerated forms of these attributes, presented as positives as they are in this novel, can then serve to soften harsh judgments of such characters encountered in one's community.

Walter Pedullà discusses Perelà's lightness and representations of masculinity in the novel in *Il ritorno dell'uomo di fumo: Viaggio in un paese allegro e innocente*

[34] Palazzeschi wrote only two novels with obviously gay protagonists: *:riflessi* (1908) and *I fratelli Cuccoli* (1948) (see Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutti i romanzi* Vol. I & II. Milano: Mondadori, 2004) though most of his works deal with sexuality and the Other, and contain allusions to homosexuality.

[35] Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutti i romanzi,* Vol I, 137. "I am… I am… very light, I am a very light man"

(*The Return of the Man of Smoke: A Voyage in a Cheerful and Innocent Land*):

> «Un uomo di fumo in questi paraggi?». È Perelà, il protagonista di un romanzo futurista di Palazzeschi. È lui l'elemento maschile di questa storia. In questa storia del Novecento ci sono tre elementi maschili: uno è di fumo e non ha carne né ossa; il secondo, il Signor Di Cartella, ha tutti i desideri di questo mondo ma è impotente dinanzi all'immane difficoltà di congiungere le basilari opposizioni del secolo (per non dire del millennio): essere e divenire, soggetto e oggetto, avanguardia e realismo, massa e individuo, autore e lettore ecc.; il terzo invece, Carlomignolo, si accontenta di poco, del poco che ha. È lui l'eroe del nostro tempo? O è la contessa Denza, che in fondo è un uomo? L'uomo d'oggi è molto leggero, non deve, non può, non vuole.[36]

This discussion is interesting since, delicate though the protagonist may be, it declares Perelà to be the primary masculine element within the story. Further, it considers other "masculine" characters, each of whom are in possession of emasculating characteristics. Pedullà's treatment of masculinity in Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* is consistent with that argued here, that of proffering a new masculinity, one of lightness and non-conformity.

Capuana's 'L'invisibile' is in direct contrast to Palazzeschi's approach. Whereas Perelà is presented as gentle and superior, the invisible man in this story comes across as vile and sinister. While we can assume that Palazzeschi was broader of mind in his approach to gender and sexual diversity, Capuana's perspective on such matters may have been the opposite; he was a devoted follower of Cesare Lombroso, criminologist and physicist, famous for his scientific notion of degeneracy, and who categorized homosexuality as a form of degeneracy that should be treated as a pathological condition.[37] While the invisible man does not have a typically

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[36] Walter Pedullà, *Il ritorno dell'uomo di fumo: Viaggio in un paese allegro e innocente* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1992), 15.
"A man of smoke around here?" It's Perelà, the protagonist of a futurist novel by Palazzeschi. He is the masculine element of this story. In this nineteenth-century story there are three masculine elements: one is of smoke and has neither flesh nor bones; the second, *il Signor Di Cartella*, has all the desire in the world but is impotent before the immense difficulty of consolidating the fundamental differences of the century (to say nothing of the millennium): to be and to become, subject and object, avant-garde and realism, mass and individual, author and reader, etc.; the third, rather, Carlomignolo (Carlo 'pinky finger'), contents himself with little, of the little that he has. Is he the hero of our time? Or is it the countess Denza, who deep down is a man? The man of today is very light, he shouldn't, he can't, he doesn't want to."

[37] Capuana dedicated his book *Un vampiro* to Lombroso, and it is argued in *Bodies that Tell* by Jonathan Robert Hiller to have based characters in various stories on Lombroso, typically doctors or scientists who presented the "voice of reason" within the narratives, see p.188. See *Disease and Crime*,

'villainous' role in the story, and is presented more as a wonder than an antagonist, he is described unfavorably, even before he exhibits objectionable behavior. In fact, Andrea Cedola, in his essay "Capuana e l'altro" ("Capuana and the Other") in *Il visionario, il fantastico, il meraviglioso tra Otto e Novecento,* discusses Capuana's use of fantasy to explore the transgressive in society, typically attributing erotic overtones to his depictions. Such is Capuana's predilection for recounting the exploits of the Other, Cedola's closing statement is: "Respinto o rimosso, l'*altro*, sempre, ritorna."[38]

Dottor Maggioli first says of the power of invisibility and its moral implications: "certi singolari stati fisici, come questo di cui parliamo, richiedono, a quel che pare, singolari e corrispondenti condizioni morali da impedire che se ne abusi, servendosene per soddisfare volgari e delittuosi capricci."[39] Through the course of the story the invisible man is indeed portrayed as lacking the required morals alluded to here, since he engages in criminal behavior and terrorizes the doctor in his home. The doctor also engages in descriptions which resemble homophobic sentiments: saying "stavo incerto se avessi da fare in quel momento con un individuo malato di corpo o di spirito" and stating of his condition: "contraddice a tutte le leggi della natura da noi credute inviolabili". [40]

When the doctor does recount the first instance in which he witnessed the antics of the invisible man, what is described is a cruel practical joke, in which the doctor is reduced to a state of fear in his own home. The character's actions are reprehensible and paint him as menacing in nature. The scene unfolds as follows: the doctor does not believe his patient when he says he can become invisible, so the patient says he will return in a few days to prove it. When the doctor is at home, having put some tea roses in his favorite vase, and settled down to read some letters, he notices that the roses have disappeared. He then realizes that the vase itself has

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edited by Robert Peckham, p.42 for a discussion on Lombroso's theories on homosexuality. Hilda Norman states in her article 'The Scientific and the Pseudo-scientific in the Works of Luigi Capuana': "Lombroso, in describing a séance, alludes to '*L'uomo invisibile* di Welles' [sic]. Capuana may have caught the idea for his story from this title," and mentions Lombroso's influence on Capuana and his work several times throughout.

[38] Mangini, *Il visionario, il fantastico, il meraviglioso tra Otto e Novecento* 161. "Rejected or removed, the Other always returns."

[39] Luigi Capuana, *Il benefattore* (Milano: C. Aliprandi, 1901), 53. "certain characteristic physical states, like those of which we are speaking, require, as it seems, specific and corresponding moral conditions to prevent their abuse, as they can serve to satisfy vulgar and nefarious whims."

[40] Ibid., 53. "I was uncertain if I was dealing in that moment with an individual who was sick in body or in spirit", "contradics all the laws of nature that we hold sacred."

also disappeared, and sees a pen lift into the air and write the words 'Crede ora?' on a pad of paper beside him, at which point he becomes overwhelmed with dizziness, and notices that the flowers and vase have returned, but in another part of the room.[41]

We can break down the actions here as invasion of personal space by entering a person's home uninvited, and the abuse of another's personal possessions by manipulating the space and using items without permission. The doctor is in a state of terror, and these happenings occur around him without his consent: we see him as helpless and violated. He attempts to take control at one point, when he is aware of the invisible man's location due to the movement of the pen, but is unsuccessful as the pen falls as soon as he reaches out. He is completely powerless, and at this moment we see the invisible man as an aggressive, sly character who does not concern himself with the needs of others, but forcefully appropriates what he wants for his own amusement.

The various actions and behaviors described, such as invasion of personal space, violation, abuse, aggressive intent, forceful appropriation, absence of consent, and helplessness, recall rape or another sexual violation. The scene contains many of the same elements – a helpless victim, a sense of powerlessness, one who has the upper hand, happenings that go against the will of the victim, invasion of privacy, manipulation of personal and precious possessions. The vase itself is of particular significance. The doctor says of it: "Allora amavo di avere qualche fiore sul mio tavolino di studio, in un vasetto giapponese regalatomi da un amico, oggettino bello e raro che mi era carissimo".[42] The vase and the roses present a vulnerable, petite, and feminine side to the doctor, they recall female sexuality and presumed frailty. Their removal and subsequent replacement show that he is in fact at the mercy of the invisible man, and to be trifled with and manipulated as he sees fit. The doctor says "chi sa come rideva della mia paura e del mio imbarazzo!" – a comment that would not be out of place spoken by a victim of sexual abuse.[43] The doctor's effort to apprehend the perpetrator by hurling himself at the moving objects in an attempt to stop him are futile, resembling a victim's struggle for self-defense. While Perelà's presence is gentle and passive throughout Palazzeschi's novel, and he finds himself

[41] Ibid., 55. 'Now do you believe?'
[42] Ibid., 54. "At the time I loved to have some flowers on my little study table, in a little Japanese vase which was a gift from a friend – a beautiful rare little object that was so precious to me."
[43] Ibid., 53. "who knows how he laughed at my fear and my humiliation!"

only at the receiving end of persecution and victimization, Capuana's *l'uomo invisibile* (invisible man) is the persecutor and victimizer.

Capuana's invisible man is described from the outset as being of questionable ethics, being against nature, mischievous, vulgar, and sick. He, like Perelà, is also described as being 'light', saying that he moves as the air moves; a lightness and grace that had Perelà denounced by the crowd as homosexual. Just as Palazzeschi endows Perelà with such attributes, but in a way that proffers an alternative to the archetypes of the time, Capuana does the same, but with a reverse effect – that of shaming such difference. In *Il codice di Perelà* it is the misguided townspeople who shame Perelà for being different, but in 'L'invisibile' it is the main character who engages in this shaming. As we saw, the invisible man is described as "un individuo malato di corpo o di spirito",[44] a choice of words that recalls homosexual shaming, and resembles the accusations against Perelà of being "contro natura" ("against nature"), much like the other description of the invisible man as a violation of nature.[45]

The doctor refers to himself as a victim, and goes on to mention that the invisible man returned to his clinic smiling with satisfaction. In this second visit to the doctor's office, he takes on a dominating presence once again, ordering the doctor where to sit, not to move, and to be quiet. The final description of the invisible man, in which he is for the first time witnessed becoming invisible, is once again quite similar to Perelà: this time he becomes a pillar of smoke, and disappears out of the window, just as Perelà disappears out of the chimney of his jail cell at the end of the story.

This theme of smoke accompanying invisibility is also present in *Un vampiro*: (*A Vampire*) "e nel medesimo istante si vide apparire davanti al lume una mano grigiastra, mezza trasparente, quasi fosse fatta di fumo."[46] The vampire in this novella, like *l'uomo invisibile,* is also depicted as an unwanted sexual presence, being the spirit of the dead former husband of the protagonist's now wife, who torments the living couple with his violent jealousy at her perceived betrayal, and attempts to suck the life out of their baby. While invisibility here is perhaps not given homosexual

[44] Ibid., 53. "an individual sick in body or in spirit"
[45] Aldo Palazzeschi, *Tutti i romanzi* Vol. I (Milano: Mondadori, 2004), 239.
[46] Luigi Capuana, *Il vampiro.* (Firenze: Passigli Editore, 1995), 12. "and in the same instant he saw appear before the light a half-transparent sickly grey hand, almost as though it were made of smoke"

connotations, it is implicit that sexuality is the culprit, as the present husband describes his wife as seeming virginal when he fell in love with her, which appears to serve as a remedy to the declaration elsewhere in the story that one should never marry a widow, a comment which appears to suggest that a widow, as a woman who has formerly been in a sexual relationship with another man, is tarnished. This impression is compounded by the protagonist's description of his own feelings of jealousy towards his wife and her former spouse:

> Luisa aveva distrutto ogni traccia del morto. Non per ingratitudine, giacché quegli, illudendosi di essere amato, aveva fatto ogni sforzo per renderle lieta la vita; ma perché temeva che l'ombra di un ricordo, anche insignificante, potesse dispiacermi. Indovinava giusto. Certe volte, il pensiero che il corpo della mia adorata era stato in pieno possesso, quantunque legittimo, di un altro mi dava tale stretta al cuore, che mi faceva fremere da capo a piedi.[47]

This repeated emergence of the invisible man, again accompanied by the image of smoke, reinforces Capuana's use of these symbols as pertaining to sexuality, the sinister, vile, corrupt and unwanted. While Perelà is described in terms which evoke purity and beauty, Capuana's invisible man in 'L'invisibile' is described as being snake-like, with a writhing, twisting movement, and emitting a repulsive smell. The image of the snake calls to reference the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the symbol of corrupt influence and temptation.[48] Though both Perelà and the invisible man finally disappear, they do this in very different ways: while Perelà ascends and transforms into a white cloud, the invisible man descends to the ground, making it look as though the pavement were itself producing smoke. As symbolic images these are polar

[47] Ibid., 7. "Luisa had destroyed all traces of the dead. Not for ingratitude, since he, under the illusion of being loved, had made every effort to give them a happy life; but because she feared that the shadow of a memory, however faint, could displease me. She guessed right. Sometimes, the thought that the body of my beloved was in full possession, though legitimate, of another, so wrenched my heart that it made me shudder from head to foot."

[48] Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de Siècle Culture* (1986), p216, argues that women were considered around the time these works were written to be responsible for the downfall of the human race because their sexuality deters man from his goal of pursuing spiritual and intellectual excellence. This work discusses shifts in literature at the turn of the twentieth century in its attitude to women and the feminine, and argues that women were viewed at this time to be a force which restricted mankind's evolution, arguing that it was woman's sexuality which presented this threat; Darwin's theory of evolution maintained that sexual proclivity restricted the development of man, and contributed to a decline in activities which contribute to the furtherance of mankind. By the same token it can be argued that the homosexual male falls into the same category of those who would present a sexual threat to mankind.

opposites, the first associated with heaven, purity, and good, the second with the fires of hell, wastelands, destruction, even war.

Invisibility and the Queer Individual

The theme of invisibility itself is one which is very relevant to the concept of homosexuality, especially in the early twentieth century, since homosexuality existed in the margins, and was widely hidden in order to avoid persecution and maintain social acceptance. Invisibility, to the gay individual, is a force that at once both protects and sequesters, thereby perpetuating the cycle of marginalization, and is described here as 'silenzio' ('silence') by Gnerre:

> Questo silenzio, ancora oggi così difficile da scardinare, è stato in Italia la più efficace forma di repressione, un silenzio assoluto che ha gravitato sull'omosessualità anche nelle storie letterarie e nella critica. L'omosessualità semplicemente non esisteva e quando traspariva inequivocabile si negava l'evidenza.[49]

Duncan says of the theme of masking (which is itself referential to the theme of invisibility through its characteristic of concealment):

> The idea of 'masking' brings up issues relating to cultural production and the public visibility, or representation, of marginalized subjects. It implicates both writer and reader in a process of collaboration that aspires to some form of mutual recognition. This mode of (inter)subjective inscription provides one means of imagining an identity grounded in sexual practice.[50]

While Gnerre discusses the imposed invisibility on homosexuality in cultural production as a tool of oppression, Duncan states that masked visibility of homosexuality in literature was in fact a platform for dialogue on the subject. What is at play here is the almost complete (and yet still partial) concealment, as opposed to the total obliteration of, homosexual content – while one allows elements that can be

[49] Gnerre, *L'eroe negato*, 29. "This silence, even today so difficult to dismantle, was in Italy the most effective form of oppression, an absolute silence that gravitated upon homosexuality even in literature and criticism. Homosexuality simply did not exist and when it became apparent its evidence was negated."
[50] Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality*, 7.

recognized, and yet not stated outright, the other oppressively negates homosexuality, further enforcing attitudes that it is 'against nature' and such like.

Since homosexuals of Capuana and Palazzeschi's time were pushed into the margins of society, and could only hope to coexist unscathed by prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, and avoid oppression, by rendering their queerness invisible, this idea of the 'hidden' is one which came to be representative of the gay experience, symbolized by the infamous 'closet' in which individuals who fall outside the margins of what is considered normal sexuality exist when they are not forthcoming regarding their sexual identity. The notion of invisibility therefore is one which may possess strong allusions to homosexuality, which can be further explored by examining the invisible characters in greater detail, to see if there exist other factors which may indicate a possible discussion on queerness. Perelà's intangible form borders the bridge between the visible and the invisible (which relates to Duncan's above discussion on masking and visibility of homosexuality), and could represent a tentative 'coming out', which is reflected in many of Palazzeschi's works, which seek to explore gender and sexual diversity with some level of reticence. Though only two of Palazzeschi's novels include obviously homosexual protagonists, most of his works are populated with his famous *buffi* (buffoons, oddballs), who are socially awkward characters who present as nonconformist and often grotesque individuals, but who are also charming and lovable, and their insertion within the texts targets assumptions regarding diverse individuals in society, helping to shift parochial attitudes in this regard, extending also to gender and sexual nonconformists. Capuana's 'L'invisibile', on the other hand, presents the antagonist as flitting at will between states of visibility and invisibility, engaging in the latter with corrupt and deceitful behavior.

Further to the apparent presentation of Perelà as a role model and voice of authority, he is argued by Luciano De Maria to be a Christ figure: "Perelà imita … Cristo, ma in modo involontario e su un registro degradato, consono al carattere fondamentalmente farsesco dell'opera."[51] Certain elements such as his age, that he was followed by the masses and trusted to create a new system of laws, that he was ultimately betrayed by his followers, and 'rises', create this parallel. Visual depictions of Jesus throughout the ages have typically been effeminate – with a slight physique,

[51] Luciano De Maria, *Palazzeschi e l'avanguardia*. (Milano: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1976), 70. "Perela imitates Christ, but in an involuntary way, and in a lower register, appropriate to the fundamentally farcical character of the work."

rounded shoulders, long flowing hair, soft features, and meek bearing. Perhaps Palazzeschi is drawing on these depictions in his portrayal of Perelà – highlighting that even the most revered personage of contemporary society, Jesus Christ, did not conform to heteronormative ideals. Pedullà, who speaks of the singularity of this character, and of the text to which he belongs, also compares Perelà to Christ, and explains how his physical form dictates his philosophy: "Perelà è un "povero Cristo" che non ha altra esperienza del mondo se non quella astratta e assoluta che gli è venuta dai discorsi delle tre vecchie, Pena Rete Lama. Sa di essere leggero per struttura, e quindi è radicalmente negato a ciò che è pesante".[52]

Palazzeschi utilizes characteristics, narrative events, symbolism and other tropes which evoke sympathy for his character, and alludes to homosexuality both directly (through the accusations made against Perelà during his trial) and indirectly (through the description of him as antithetical to the patriarchal paradigm of masculinity). Capuana employs similar tropes that bear contrasting associations and implications, which paint his invisible man, like Perelà, as singular, but unlike Perelà, as conniving and devious. It is curious to see how these writers' individual poetics articulate a topic that was then highly controversial and lacked coherent expression, and also fascinating to recognize the very distinct symbolism used by both, which is identical when referring specifically to gender and sexual alterity, but diametrically opposite when assigning value to this diversity. According to Butler's notion of performativity, Capuana's invisible man, in negatively portraying a character who does not conform to heterosexist ideals, reinforces enacted performances of classic models of gender. Palazzeschi, however, in his presentation of Perelà, goes some way towards invalidating these models, and instead presents an alternative, in possession of laudable yet perhaps "unmanly" characteristics (at least in the traditional sense), and so interrupts the cycle of cultural production presenting the patriarchal models of gender and sexuality that inform societal performances of such, going some way towards reshaping conceptions of what constitutes masculinity.

On the topic of self-recognition and the stigmatized body, Sedgwick states:

[52] Walter Pedullà, *E lasciatemi divertire! Divagazioni su Palazzeschi e altra attualità* (San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2006), 60. "Perelà is a "poor Christ", who has no other experience of the world than the abstract and absolute one that came to him through the discussions of the three old women: Pena, Rete and Lama. He knows he is light of structure, and therefore, radically negates that which is heavy."

> I am sure that not every visibly handicapped person, or transgendered person, or person of color, or fat person, or visibly sick person, or person with gender-"inappropriate" voice or demeanor in fact experiences his or her body as stigmatic most or necessarily even any of the time. But it is a very plain fact that many of us do. And I would like with this proposition to open something like a door into the mix of paralysis or transfixion [...] that many of us experience as we struggle to continue the adventure of recognizing ourselves and being recognized in these problematic femininities and masculinities that constitute us and that we, in turn, constitute.[53]

While Palazzeschi and Capuana themselves address the stigmatized body, the outcome of their discussions produce differing effects on the process of self-recognition in the reader. Fantasy literature, as I have demonstrated, can be used as an outlet for commentary on homosexuality, and as such, homosexuality can be subject to critiques and shaming – further reinforcing this stigma. However, this genre can also provide avenues for gay-affirmative authors to express their perspectives on gender and sexual identity, and as such can celebrate and venerate the differences that constitute this stigma, thus working towards dismantling it, and proffering non-conformist models of gender and sexuality that will result in positive, empowering, and liberating instances of mutual recognition between the reader and the writer.

[53] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!" in *Constructing Masculinity*, Berger, Wallis & Watson (eds.) (Routledge: New York, 1995), 18, 19.

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