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van Oers, Raphaela (2024) Gender and Sexuality Reading Group discussion on November 20 2024 - Review of Bloomfield's Introduction and Chapter 4 from "Drag: A British History". Other. Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK. (Unpublished)

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Gender and Sexuality Reading Group – November 20, 2024

The Gender and Sexuality Reading Group (GSRG) met for the second time this term to discuss two chapters, the “**Introduction**” and “**Skirting the Censor: Drag and the Censorship of the British Theater**,” from **Jacob Bloomfield’s** *Drag: A British History*.¹ Our initial thoughts were that it was an enjoyable read, with a lot of surprising information. Based on our experiences and knowledge surrounding drag today, many of us were surprised that drag was so mainstream. As others mentioned, however, drag and cross-dressing on stage has a long history, even longer than Bloomfield suggests in the introduction. Masquerades in Britain in the 18th century, for instance, sometimes involved cross-dressing, and, going back further in history, only men and boys were allowed to perform in Greek tragedies and would also play the parts of women.

We then discussed Bloomfield’s methodology and reliance on case studies as evidence. Although Bloomfield gave us plenty of information through the case studies, it felt overwhelming at times, and the number of case studies and different plays referenced, especially in the introduction, became a bit repetitive and distracting.

Bloomfield’s arguments against a linear, progressive view of history resonated with our group, and our understanding of the histories of gender and sexuality. Bloomfield demonstrates that drag was not always a political act, and the press did not always condemn it. We agreed that it’s important to push against the idea of a linear, progressive history, and to also consider how different groups in the same time period often had very different views. For instance, Bloomfield explains that the censorship office, the police, and members of the public often disagreed on whether a play needed to be censored.

We started our discussion of “Skirting the Censor: Drag and the Censorship of the British Theater” by sharing some of the facts and information that surprised us. These included that the censorship office and the police would often disagree on whether a play needed to be censored; that ex-servicemen moved into theater and drag shows; and that the censorship office and police were (at different times) more progressive and accepting.

Our main critiques of the chapters centered around us wanting more information. We were very curious about the Church’s views on drag during this time; the influence of race, the British colonies and empire; as well as possible transnational links and whether Hollywood influenced drag. We also thought that the chapters were too focused on London to claim to be a British history of drag, and needed a discussion of what was happening in other cities and towns, or an explanation as to why the book doesn’t delve into these. The chapter on censorship, for instance, should have discussed whether the censorship rules extended to Wales and Scotland. Although we enjoyed the text overall, we agreed that the book was not quite a comprehensive history of drag in Britain.

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¹ Bloomfield, Jacob. “Introduction” and “Skirting the Censor: Drag and the Censorship of the British Theater.” In *Drag: A British History*, 1-31 and 106-141. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.