

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## **Reading a History of Trans\* Literature: Narratives of Transing in Sarah Grand's "The Tenor and the Boy"**

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<1>What would a history of trans\* literature look like? Nineteenth-century fiction often depicts gender variance—characters that cross-dress, reverse their gender, belong to multiple (or no) sexes at once, etcetera. Can we understand such gender variances from the perspective of a trans-historical canon? What would such readings look like?

<2>This article will demonstrate a method of reading a history of trans\* literature, while also outlining some common narratives within this tradition. Using terminology from transgender studies,<sup>1</sup> I present a possible method for reading trans\* in fiction written before the advent of this term. This method is based on a wide array of transing phenomena, using the term “trans\*” to indicate that a character moves away from assigned sex or between different positions of male and female—no matter how or why. This is not equivalent to a modern transgender identity but rather the encompassing of several very different phenomena, and the asterisk is here used to imply a wide variation of gender variance (Tompkins). Picking up *narratives of transing* from my doctoral dissertation (Holmqvist, *Transformationer*), I argue for readings that take departure in doing trans, *transing*, in order to identify a number of transing narratives in nineteenth-century fiction—ways in which trans\* motifs are used in order to produce different narratological effects.

<3>In order to demonstrate the applicability of this method, I will use as an example book IV, “The Tenor and the Boy—An Interlude” from Sarah Grand’s novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893).<sup>2</sup> I am not aiming to achieve an exhaustive analysis of this text (a task which has already been performed by others: e.g. Taylor; Heilmann; Fessler; Vicinus). Previous research, however, has never looked at the story as part of a trans\* literary tradition. By placing “The Tenor and the Boy” within this particular canon, I will shed further light on the story as well as demonstrate how narratives of transing can be used to understand a history of trans\* literature.

### ***Towards a Method of Trans\* Reading***

<4>The first problem with using any derivation of the term trans\* in a historical study is, of course, the fact that this term was not invented until the twentieth century. German doctor and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld famously put forth the term “transvestite” in his book *Die Transvestiten* in 1910, thereby laying the foundation for all trans\* terms to come. Nevertheless, people have transgressed sex and gender categories long before this (e.g. Dreger; Sears; Mak; Skidmore). I am not the first person to advocate the use of trans\* terminology in historical material. Cromwell convincingly opposed the cisnormativity of previous historical research and argued for the identification of transsexual men in history through a set of standard questions.<sup>3</sup> Cromwell’s criteria have subsequently been

supplemented by Beemyn, who has set much of the tone for later contributions. Beemyn claims that it would be problematic to exclude all individuals who have not called themselves transgender from transgender history, but that it would also be equally problematic to assume that they “were” transgender in the same way that we use the word today. Lately, scholars have adapted various trans\* terminologies for different purposes (see e.g. Heaney on ‘trans femininity’; Chess on ‘trans men’; Skidmore on ‘MTF crossdressers’). All terms may be accurate or misleading depending on their respective material and viewpoints. As I have argued elsewhere (Holmqvist, ‘Trans Readings’), anachronistic as such terms may be, the purpose of terminology must be to find ways of describing historical material in a manner that is both faithful to its context and understandable to our own time.

<5>A second problem, and what is perhaps more difficult here, is the question of what we choose to include in our definitions of trans\*. How broad can we make trans\* terms before they lose their meaning? Beemyn argues that the best that *historians* can do is to acknowledge experiences and behaviors that indicate what we would today refer to as trans\* (possibly without labelling them so) and at the same time discern them from individuals who have transgressed gender for other pragmatic reasons. This is a relevant and possibly vital point for historical research. Notwithstanding, it needs to be elaborated within the field of comparative literature. Beemyn’s criteria would leave us with a rather small canon of trans\* literature. This, I believe, would be unfortunate. My stake here is not that all fictional cross-dressing should be understood in terms of what we would today call a transgender identity. Rather, I share Chess’ (177) apprehension that what is interesting here is not if the objects of a study meet the criteria of being understood “as” trans\* but rather “whether asking the questions changes how we think of them.” This brings with it a blurring of the much critiqued cis/trans binary (Enke) and instead seeks a nuanced understanding that neither excludes nor limits itself to what could be recognizable within twenty-first century transgender identity. There is no doubt that there are transing characters in fiction. I am interested in what happens if we look at such narratives *as traditions*, and how this changes our readings.

<6>A first step towards a broad understanding of what trans\* readings could be is to utilize an understanding of trans\* as something that a person *does* rather than a fixed identity. Sears has described a *trans-ing* analysis that she uses in order to study an array of practices and representations of cross-dressing, including both what would and what would not be described as trans\* in modern nomenclature. By so doing, Sears is able to paint a nuanced picture of a wide variety of actions. In a similar vein, and drawing on the work of Stryker (*Transgender History*), a fruitful way of reading trans\* in older fiction is to use it as a verb, understanding trans\* as a movement away from assigned sex and/or crossing the boundaries of normative gender. My use of the term *transing* originates from the film scholar Straube (41), who has used it for readings of modern film. Understanding trans\* as a verb renders discussions on the gender identity of different characters redundant and avoids the essentialism that is the inevitable result of trying to pinpoint gender. Departing from this idea makes it possible to highlight a few recurring narratives of how trans\* is done in fiction. Studying narratives of transing enables great flexibility in describing how traditions within a trans\* history of literature are formed—through characters, motifs, and genres that are sometimes similar and sometimes different. Previous research has generally focused on one particular genre, time period or type of character at a time (see e.g. Lehnert, Chess, Heaney). Although often providing interesting readings, those approaches preclude far-reaching overviews. By analyzing transing narratives instead, more extensive investigations of trans\* literary traditions become possible.

<7>Lately, perspectives from transgender studies have been utilized in analyses of various cultural phenomena. Scholars have argued for the relevance and possibilities of such perspectives for understanding not only gender transgressive motifs, but representations of sex and gender in general (e.g. Zigarovich). Although this is no doubt productive, I think it would be a mistake to let such investigations be the only ones to make from trans\* perspectives.

<8>On the whole, there have been few attempts thus far to discuss a history of trans\* literature. Consequently, many readings of transing characters are based on an understanding of such phenomena as singular. Thus, even though Taylor (43) compares *The Heavenly Twins* with several other transing narratives, she concludes that the novel “enjoys a peculiar and almost singular position” due to the “sporadic and impoverished history of female cross-gendering in British and American literature.” Other critics (Mouton 187; Kucich 197) have even called the plot “bizarre”—as if it were something new to the history of literature. Such statements are representative of a widespread notion that trans\* motifs are uncommon.

<9>Following a similar misconception, scholars of trans\* literature have articulated their frustration at the limited number of texts within a trans\* literary canon. Eastwood argues, out of such frustration, that we do not need to look for actual descriptions of characters we may identify as trans\* in order to write a history of trans\* literature. Instead, Eastwood proposes that we look for resonances; themes that resonate with the modern-day transgender experience. Although Eastwood’s readings prove fruitful, the basis of his argument may be contested. That he has trouble finding a history of trans\* literature is not because there are no texts that would be relevant in such a canon. As Chess (177—178; also Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 32—33) has argued, the resonant readings that Eastwood proposes do not have to exclude texts that describe trans\* motifs. There appears to be a general conception today that there have been few representations of gender variance in fiction until the late twentieth century. This is not true.

<10>Gender variance is an inevitable consequence of gender categories, and fiction from all ages and genres contains descriptions of such variances. More importantly, such motifs travel from text to text, forming a canon of trans\* literature. Take, for example, Shakespeare’s classic *As You Like It* (1623). The cross-dressing in early modern English fiction and drama is a well-known phenomenon (Traub; Chess) and perhaps most particularly Rosalind/Ganymede—the girl who dresses as a boy, performed by a boy actor. Many years later, *As You Like It* has been used in other works of fiction to indicate transing (Garber 71—77; Lehnert 73). Such is the case in, for example, the Swedish suspense story *Vålnaden* (1847, *The Ghost*), in which it transpires that the boy Karl Gustaf has the birth name Rosalie (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 162), Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, named after one of the other characters in *As You Like It* (Lehnert 320), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian falls in love with an actress playing Ganymede (Garber 72), and Théophile de Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), where the main character decides that the man he is in love with must be a woman—at precisely the moment when s/he cross-dresses as Rosalind cross-dressing as Ganymede in the play (Garber 73—75; Lehnert 253—261). Such re-use of transing characters, in which one is transformed into the other, are typical of the history of trans\* literature (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 28—29). As I will demonstrate more fully in the conclusions of this essay, it is true also of “The Tenor and the Boy.”

<11>In order to draw lines between characters, stereotypes, and representations, large overviews are necessary. Chess (178), in her study of transfemininity in early modern English

literature, concludes that there has never been a time when “queer genders didn’t impact cisgenders in relational ways that informed masculinity, femininity, and sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> Based on the common assumption that fiction can be used to understand ourselves, and that the history of literature can (also) be used to understand history, my article will combine overt anachronisms with a contextual history of literature. Surely the numerous cross-dressings, gender reversals, and characters identifying with none or multiple genders could have something to say about nineteenth-century views on sex and gender? And surely the gender variances of that time could have something to say to gender variant persons today?

### ***Narratives of Transing in “The Tenor and the Boy”***

<12>The story of “The Tenor and the Boy” is simple. A young man (the Tenor) meets a boy (the Boy) and they become friends. The relationship grows stronger through equal proportions of homoerotic camaraderie and the Tenor’s professions of love for what he believes to be the Boy’s sister, Angelica. After a period of growing fondness, the Boy—to the Tenor’s great surprise—is revealed to be Angelica.

<13>Characters like the Boy/Angelica have been immensely popular. Horak has noted it in around 400 silent films from the early twentieth century, and it was common in fiction long before that. Lehnert calls it the Girls as Boys character (“Mädchen als Knaben”). In “The Tenor and the Boy,” there are three apparent narratives of transing: as pragmatism, as eroticism, and as a secret. Although these narratives are certainly not the only narratives within the history of trans\* literature, previous research points to them as common ones (Holmqvist, *Transformationer*). In order to show how “The Tenor and the Boy” is situated within a history of trans\* literature, I will continually compare “The Tenor and the Boy” with other works of fiction that use the same narratives. I will describe transing as pragmatism, eroticism, and secret narratives through “The Tenor and the Boy,” while also positioning the story within trans\* literary traditions. As I will demonstrate, “The Tenor and the Boy” is part of a rich tradition, of which Grand (and her expected readers) were well aware.

### **The Boy’s Freedom—Transing as Pragmatism**

<14>After realizing that the Boy is Angelica, the Tenor immediately starts looking for an explanation. “Why have you done this thing,” he asks, “What was your object?” (Grand 449) Angelica, who was the Boy just a few moments ago, initially answers that she had none. Nevertheless, after this she declares over several pages the pragmatic reasons for transing. As an upper-class woman, she has been forced into idleness and boredom instead of being allowed to have a career as an artist, “—or something; made to feel responsible, you know” (Grand 453). She gives several reasons for her male identity, wanting to “be free to go and come as I would” and “see the world as men see it” (Grand 451). She also underscores that she has “hated to deceive” the Tenor, something which explains not only to him but—more importantly—to the reader that Angelica did not want to be dishonest. Her motives are pure. She is, in other words, a good woman after all.

<15>The numerous possible explanations of transmasculinity (work, travel, freedom, etc. e.g. Dekker and Pol; Easton; Wheelwright) have made them easy to describe through transing as pragmatism-narratives. A particular character within such narratives can be called *the cisgender woman in male clothing* (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 167): a woman who dons male clothing while also explicitly and undoubtedly expressing her female identity. Using male clothing to achieve some specific aim—like Angelica—is part of the tradition Lehnert

calls “the honorable disguise” (*der ehrenwerte Verkleidung*; 56—100). Such characters are in nineteenth century literature usually not portrayed as transgressing gender or sexuality, and they are often loving daughters or wives. This is demonstrated for example in the several American slave narratives that depict such transings, such as Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862) or the Crafts’ *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), or Beecher Stowe’s fictional account of the same kind of transing in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; on transings in slave narratives and Victorian fiction, see Lee 75–89).

<16>Explicit feminist explanations of transmasculinity often fit—perhaps surprisingly—well into these narratives. Descriptions of how society forces cisgender women into masculinity is a convention of its own within feminist tradition, already since early women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century. Heilmann (83) has noted the effect of this in *The Heavenly Twins*, pointing out that not only Grand but many nineteenth-century feminists “were keen to celebrate activist forbears and military heroines whose cross-dressing exploits showed that it was costume, not the body, which inscribed gender and assigned social power to the wearer.” Angelica mentions “women in the ranks [...] and at sea,” (Grand 456) together with predecessors such as author George Sand (known for dressing in male clothing) and Doctor James Barry (who became famous after his death when it was revealed that he had been assigned female sex at birth). By so doing, Angelica positions herself within a narrative of masculine transing as pragmatism that was familiar to Grand’s contemporaries. Transing soldiers have been particularly popular as a fictional motif, representing ideal womanhood by combining femininity and patriotism (Dugaw). The 1865 foreword of soldier Sarah Edmond’s (6) autobiography explains this logic in full, arguing that if any reader should “object to some of her disguises” one need only remind them that “it was from the purest motives and most praiseworthy patriotism, that she laid aside, for a time, her own costume, and assumed that of the opposite sex.” As long as the goals are in line with a majoritarian view of correct behavior, transing may very well be in line with cisnormativity.

<17>However, such explanations are always subject to scrutiny and discussion—women taking male liberties is undoubtedly a controversial issue. Angelica and the Tenor certainly do not agree regarding the justness of her actions. The Tenor, representing a patriarchal majoritarian society, is shocked—which is, of course, the reason why Angelica emphasizes that her agreement with her husband entails “nothing morally wrong” (Grand 459), comparing the situation to what would arguably be less moral, but more accepted: “You cannot bear to see me decently dressed as a boy, but you would think nothing of it if you saw me half undressed for a ball” (Grand 454). Heilmann rightly notes that this type of narrative is generally surrounded by attempts to make the characters appear chaste. Transing as eroticism (which I will return to in the next section) has imbued transing masculinities with sexual undertones and, in some periods and contexts, transmasculinity has been synonymous with sex work (Lehnert 242—3; Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 51; Sears 42—3). But Heilmann’s (92) claim that New Woman writers “knew only too well that with their choice of cross-dressing plots they were opening themselves up to further attack” is not entirely true. Narratives of transing *could* be controversial—but most often were not. As Vicinus (203) notes, contemporary critics were particularly fond of the “The Tenor and the Boy” part of *The Heavenly Twins*, and did not appear to find the section provocative. On the contrary, one critic specifically regarded this as the “single artistic episode”—unlike the rest of the novel (Vicinus 212 footnote 49).

<18>Transing femininities complicate the picture of transing as pragmatism-narratives (Chess 4) as there are evidently fewer pragmatic reasons to become a woman. According to

historian McLaren (216), by the second half of the nineteenth century, transing femininities were generally regarded as suspicious, precisely because they could not be rationalized as practical. Notwithstanding, Boag (29—30), for example, has described the ease with which transfemininity appears to have been accepted when explained as a means of securing female dance partners in the U.S. gold rush. Within fiction, feminine transing as pragmatism-narratives may have been less common, but they certainly exist. As there are no extensive overviews of trans\* literature, the statistical occurrences of particular narratives, themes or characters are still unknown. Nevertheless, occasional feminine transings as pragmatism-narratives—Sténio visiting a lecture for women in the second version of Sand's *Lélia* (1839), the disguises in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884; see e.g. Morris), Gregory becoming a nurse to care for his love in Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1883) or how Count de Hamal in Brontë's *Villette* (1853) conceals a love affair by acting as a dead nun—are fairly common and do not appear to have been particularly controversial.

<19>Garber (69) has called the pragmatic explanations of transing *the progress narrative*—the fitting in of trans\* within a normalizing structure in which it is “explained, and explained away.” Halberstam (*In a Queer Time and Place* 55) has labelled it *the project of rationalization*, something which “placates mainstream viewers by returning the temporarily transgender subject to the comforting and seemingly inevitable matrix of hetero-domesticity.” As long as gender transgressions can be interpreted in a positive way by majoritarian society, they can also be accepted, even liked. Transing as pragmatism-narratives demonstrates this logic and is often illuminating with regards to how a reasonable pragmatic explanation appears in a particular context. By explaining and motivating transings in a manner that is understandable and relatable to a majoritarian audience, transing as pragmatism-narratives fit in with cisnormativity.

### **The Boy's Beauty—Transing as Eroticism**

<20>Male friendship that turns into heterosexual desire as a boy becomes a woman is a classic transing as eroticism-narrative. Although the Tenor's explicit love object in “The Tenor and the Boy” is the woman he believes to be the Boy's sister, he appears to be just as (or more) interested in the Boy. As Taylor (31) points out, the Tenor is attracted to both the female Angelica and her transing male persona. The Tenor thinks about the Boy with “curiosity and interest” after their first meeting and the homoerotic undertones become increasingly clear as the Tenor's “heart warmed more and more” (Grand 381). Soon, the Tenor spends all his money on the Boy's favorite foods, becoming pale and skinny just to “indulge the fancies of that rapacious Boy” (Grand 412). The Tenor's feelings are not unrequited. The couple indulge themselves in the beauty of the other and the Boy amuses himself by describing the Tenor as “the sort of fellow that women would like to kiss” (Grand 412).

<21>Transing as eroticism is perhaps the most common narrative of transing—from Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–1824; Wolfson; Garber 218—9, 319—20) to Balzac's transfeminine opera singer in *Sarrasine* (1830) via Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835; Lehnert 252—261). Such narratives have sometimes been controversial, and other times not. As Vicinus (187) notes, the erotically charged stage performances of the Principal Boy (one of the traditions that Grand's story originates from) have the potential for lesbian and gay as well as heterosexual desire, thus providing both “eloquent and luxurious sexual undecidability *and* a threatening homosexual potential.” One example of a well-respected tradition of transing as eroticism are the sensual androgynes of Romanticism (in which, by the way, “The Tenor and

the Boy” could also be read—Lloyd’s point about the religious and spiritual foundations of Grand’s androgynous ideals would make an interesting read together with Hoever’s and MacLeod’s readings of Romanticism and androgyny). Less well respected, the transing as an eroticism-narrative is also found in genres of pornography. The BDSM classic *Frank and I* (1901; Lehnert 244) is a heterosexual example and, by the end of the nineteenth century, homosexual examples form an entire gay male pornographic tradition, sometimes as examples of mere cross-dressing, as in *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881) and, in others, complete transfeminine fantasies, as in the sequel *Letters from Laura and Eveline* (1883).<sup>5</sup>

<22>The foundation of transing as eroticism-narratives—regardless of genre or direction of desire—is the combination of characteristics that are traditionally associated with certain genders. A gender transgressive body may incorporate what is traditionally regarded as both male and female traits. The transfeminine Abbé de Choisy’s (26) memoirs from the late seventeenth century describes how a mistress expresses her erotic fascination as the combination of the “heart of a man” and “the charms of femininity.” In other words, she has been seduced by the Abbé’s combination of male and female traits (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 128). In the Boy’s case, the same effect is achieved by noting “what a graceful creature” he is and how his “slender figure” is seen to advantage in clothing that makes him “look broader and more manly while leaving room for the free play of limb and muscle” (Grand 436).

<23>There is a Pygmalionesque aspect to the particular tradition of transing boys and their relationships with men, something which is evident in the Tenor’s constant attempts to reform his younger comrade. The pedophile undertones have been pointed out (Bogiatzis; Vicinus 205) although these critics seem to miss the particularities of transing narratives. Relationships between older men and younger *women* are a standard ingredient of nineteenth-century fiction and when ciswomen don male clothing, this takes a particular spin. A man can be approached as an equal by another man, and this is actually one of Angelica’s explanations of her transing as pragmatism. The camaraderie between the Boy and the Tenor is an important part of their relationship. “Treat me like your younger brother,” the Boy says at the beginning of their friendship, urging “confidential relations” (Grand 383). Lehnert (243—4) has demonstrated how such relationships allow for a temporary equality that perfectly fits into patriarchal desire. The friendship between the man and the boy allows a friendship between (more or less) equals, while female submission is ensured by the subsequent reveal of a female identity. Thus, the hierarchy between the sexes is kept in place, while at the same time the (male) protagonist is allowed a more intimate relationship. Lehnert describes it as a sort of have your cake and eat it too function of transing as eroticism-narratives. One of the erotic possibilities in transing narratives is that characters can be both male comrades and female lovers; equals as well as subordinates.

<24>There is an apparent homoerotic opportunity here, and an important aspect of the transing as eroticism-narrative is the breaking of boundaries of heteronormative desire. In contexts in which same-sex desires are impossible to express, transing opens up new possibilities. It is difficult to tell the difference between what is straight and what is gay in many transing narratives. Is the title character of Honoré de Balzac’s *Séraphita* (1834—one of the erotically charged androgynes mentioned above, see also Weil 79—83) to be regarded as locus for homo or heterosexual desires? And does Paquita in his *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1835) dress protagonist Henri as a woman in order to make her heterosexual desire lesbian, or to make her lesbian desire straight? Not to speak of how Jacques in Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénu*s (1884) is made into a woman to fulfil the desires of his masculine female lover.

<25>Several critics (see Taylor 29—36 for an overview) have pointed out the homoerotic undertones between the Boy and the Tenor, but again we can further develop this observation by placing the story within a trans\* literary tradition. Heilmann (98—100), for example, rightly points out that it is at the point when homoeroticism is about to become physical that the Boy falls into the water (after which point he is identified as Angelica). Heilmann, however, argues that when the Tenor realizes that the Boy has been transing, he becomes aware of the homoerotic nature of their relationship and, faced with this “both prohibited and now unrealisable” desire, he “seeks, but patently fails, to annul this desire.” What Heilmann fails to see is the literary *tradition* of transing as eroticism, which gives the Tenor every possible opportunity to transform his homoerotic desire into proper heterosexuality. If the Tenor is even slightly aware of the popular narratives of his time, he should have no problem in encountering a woman underneath the Boy’s clothes.

<26>The possibility of making homoerotic desire heterosexual is one of the reasons that the transing as eroticism-narrative has been so popular. The prevalence of this tradition is also why the Boy is (as Heilmann also notes) constantly eroticized in the text: From being approached by a female prostitute on the very first page in which he appears (also Vicinus 204), to the recurring descriptions of his beauty and the Tenor’s fascination. The reveal of woman-in-boy usually represents a switch from homoerotic undertones to overt heterosexual desire. In most cases, this reveal is the beginning of a happy ending. From a peculiar relationship between a man and a boy, it turns out that the boy is a perfectly acceptable object of erotic desire (Garber; Lehnert). In the aforementioned suspense story *Vålnaden*, for example, it transpires that the youngster, Karl Gustaf, is the girl Rosalie when he is put to bed—a place in which reveals in fiction often take place (Garber 202). It is Karl Gustaf’s tutor who removes his clothing and “with a yell of deepest surprise and amazement, threw himself from the bed and stood rooted to the floor” upon discovering a “lily white bosom with its buds of burning purple” (Blanche 599, transl. by the author). Karl Gustaf then disappears from the story only to resurface in the novel’s finale, now as Rosalie and the bride of her former teacher. Another Swedish short story, Vilhelm von Braun’s “Reskamraten” (1842, *The Fellow Traveler*), contains almost exactly the same plot (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 170–71).

<27>This particular narrative—a man falling in love upon discovering his younger comrade has female breasts—appears to be what Grand plays with in “The Tenor and the Boy.” Just like Karl Gustaf’s tutor, the Tenor reacts with shock when he discovers Angelica: “No, he had not been mistaken, he was not mad, he was not dreaming. It was the Boy who had plunged into the water headforemost, but this— — / God in heaven!” Immediately thereafter, he reinterprets his former comrade as a sexual object. The Tenor’s instantaneous reflex reveals how well-known and established such narratives were during Grand’s time. From an initial, resigned reaction—“I must marry her now, I suppose”—the Tenor’s feelings swiftly become more tender (Grand 447). While listening to Angelica’s explanation and her depiction of transing as pragmatism, his affections grow stronger by the minute. As the Tenor understands that his close young friend is a cisgender woman who can rationalize her transings and put them in a reasonable, pragmatic light, he expects a traditional blissful ending—assuming that all will end in the same manner as transing as eroticism-narratives usually end. But unfortunately for the Tenor, “The Tenor and the Boy” does not end in his heterosexual bliss. In spite of being a woman, Angelica is not a suitable partner as she is already married. When Angelica mentions her husband, the Tenor’s expectations are shattered. “Your – *what?*” he exclaims, “every vestige of colour gone from his countenance, yet not convinced. ‘What did



you say?’ he repeated, aghast” (Grand 458). It is at this point—when the Tenor learns that Angelica is married—that he is truly shocked. Although he was surprised at the reveal of the Boy and Angelica being the same person, he could thus far understand Angelica’s actions within the limits of convention. When the heterosexual ending is annulled however, those conventions are shattered.

<28>Thus, through Angelica’s marriage and the Tenor’s disappointment, Grand adds a twist to the transing as eroticism-narrative. This twist can take place precisely because of the extensive tradition of this narrative (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 168–69). It is only because there is a convention—sufficiently familiar as to be taken for granted—that the Tenor’s reaction can go so swiftly from shock to marriage proposal to shock again. Mangum’s (80) statement that “this turn of the plot is certainly innovative” is true only because Angelica is married. Were it not for this, “The Tenor and the Boy” would fit perfectly within everything that was expected of a transing as eroticism-narrative during Grand’s time.

### **The Boy Conundrum—Transing as a Secret**

<29>The Boy is described as something of a puzzle, “a conundrum” (Grand 449), constantly avoiding questions and always with an “enigmatical grin” (Grand 418). Such descriptions of transing characters as mysteries or enigmas are representative of transing as a secret-narrative; stories in which transing is used to create a mystery. “There was something unusual in his manner and appearance,” the Tenor notes, while thinking of the Boy with “curiosity and interest” (Grand 380). But what is it that is unusual about the Boy, before it transpires that he is Angelica?

<30>The point of transing as a secret-narratives is that the secret is implied without being revealed, thus building up suspense through the readers’ (and, most of the time, the other characters’) pondering over the mystery that a certain character represents. As a rule, the reader is not assured that the character is transing until the end of the story—but knows from the start that there is *something* strange about them. As Garber (187) puts it, “the habit of looking *through* rather than *at* the cross-dresser” is “an absolutely foundational move.” Although Garber’s argument particularly concerns detective stories, this applies to a much wider array of fiction that uses the transing as a secret-narrative. In “The Tenor and the Boy,” readers are provided with initially discrete, then increasingly telling insinuations of the Boy’s identity. The first indication of a similarity between the Boy and Angelica comes in the first chapter in which the Boy emerges. Corbett (5) has noted the relationship between Angelica/the Boy and Marie Cruchot—the prostitute who approaches the Boy when he first appears—and says that the episode “initiates the reader’s awareness of Angelica’s nightly excursions in the guise of the Boy.” But that statement assumes a very attentive reader. The only visible link between the Boy and Angelica at this point is the Boy’s reference to Mosley Menteith, a character who plays an important part in the rest of *The Heavenly Twins* and whose doings Angelica is also familiar with. This is not much of a hint of the Boy’s true identity, but rather a first clue that the reader is supposed to be pondering at it. After this first scene, other insinuations become frequent. Most telling is the Boy’s hair, which forms another link between the Boy, Angelica, and Angelica’s twin brother, Diavolo. The Boy’s claim that he is Angelica’s brother is substantiated by his blonde hair, since—as the reader of *The Heavenly Twins* is well aware—one of the few differences in appearance between Diavolo and Angelica is that she has dark hair while his hair is blonde. Notwithstanding, the Boy’s hair and the shape of his head are repeatedly pointed out and described as “queer” (Grand 387, 408). While the blondness of the Boy’s hair signals that he is Diavolo, the

strangeness of it also suggests a wig. The hair symbolizes how the Boy's identity would, should, *could have been* possible to see right from the start—if only the Tenor, or the reader, had been sufficiently attentive. “I used to wonder how you could look so intelligently and see so little” (Grand 448–49), Angelica says on the subject of her hair, after the Tenor has discovered her beneath the Boy's clothes. This is the essence of the transing as a secret-narrative: that the answer to the mystery is something “which you would never have guessed for yourself, but you see it at once when you hear it, and then it seems so simple” (Grand 449).

<31>In order for this to work, the secret must be visible without being revealed—something which is often achieved through insinuations of how gender does not quite match sex. The Boy's hands and feet are “too small” and he has “a skin of extreme fairness and delicacy,” so delicate in fact that “it made him look effeminate” (Grand 379). His “slender” (Grand 375, 379, 414, 443) figure is constantly referred to, and “you would have called him ‘a pretty boy’ while thinking it high time he had grown out of his prettiness” (Grand 379). His contralto voice—which in the dark is mistaken for a woman's—is also frequently mentioned, being “hardly rough enough for a boy of his age,” but “in harmony with his fragile form, and delicate, effeminate features” (Grand 391). The same pattern—transing characters being described through gender non-conforming characteristics—applies to most transing as a secret-narratives. Transmasculine characters are described as fair and of small build, while transfeminine characters are large, clumsy, and rough—thus implying something *else* that contradicts gender. Sometimes—as in examples from Charlotte Brontë—it is a matter of a nun (i.e. Count de Hamal) looking “tall of stature, and fierce of gesture” (*Villette* 93), or a female fortune-teller (i.e. Rochester) having a “bold and direct gaze” and “harsh” voice (*Jane Eyre* 91). Other times it is men or boys who, like the Boy, are described as soft and feminine—like the page Kaled in Lord Byron's “Lara,” (1814) with hands “so femininely white it might bespeak Another sex, when matched with that smooth cheek” (canto I, verse 27). Without explicitly pointing out the transing, male characters are portrayed through female characteristics, and vice versa.

<32>The effect of such insinuations is a sort of proof of the naturalness of nature—the transing as a secret-narrative assumes an innate sex. Several critics have discussed the problems of the term “passing” due to its, as Halberstam (*Female Masculinity* 21; also e.g. Stone) puts it, assumption of “a self that masquerades as another kind of self.” This assumption is precisely what the transing as a secret-narrative emanates from (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 197). The narrative takes for granted that sex is solidly anchored in the body, therefore emphasizing the act of passing itself. Within these narratives, passing is hence often difficult and *almost* impossible to achieve, mirrored in what Bettcher has called the representation of transgender people today as “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers.” In “The Tenor and the Boy” this is accentuated in Angelica's detailed description of how she has managed to pass as the Boy—ordering a tailored suit from London “padded to make me look square like a boy,” hiding her small hands and procuring the blonde wig that accounts for “the fairness of my skin, which would have looked suspiciously clear and delicate with darker hair” (Grand 451–52).

<33>Consequently, the transing as a secret-narrative points to an important distinction between trans\* and queer readings. Setting aside the somewhat complicated history of queer versus trans studies (e.g. Stryker, ‘Transgender Studies’), this could simply—but importantly—be described as being a difference in perspective. As I have argued elsewhere, focusing on what is (possibly) the subversive in trans\* runs the risk of missing out on

narratives that do not live up to this standard (Holmqvist, 'Trans Readings'). A trans\* reading need not be interested in potential "queerness" of the text—sometimes, it is enough to just point out the existence of a trans\* motif. Just like any other convention, narratives of transing are sometimes used just because they happen to be in fashion, a possible story among other stories. They are sometimes part of convention, and occasionally stabilize cisnormative views on sex and gender. What might at first appear to be something rather queer in transing as a secret-narratives—a feminine boy, for example—actually affirms normative views of sex and gender. Beneath the clothing there is a body, and the body is presumed to speak the truth. The reveal (Seid) of the character's "true" sex, then, works to stabilize the presumed essence of gender. The features that were once gender incongruent become normative — the feminine boy is *actually* a woman! Through this revelation, femininity is explained away in a cisnormative manner. The normatively gendered body becomes the key; a final answer to any question of "true" identity. Any gender that does not correspond with whatever sex was assigned at birth is, in such fiction, considered false.

<34>Although discussions of queer outcomes are new to the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the narrative of transing as a secret itself is certainly not. Narratives of transing appear practically everywhere we look in nineteenth century literature. It is impossible to say—at least within the limited scope of this essay—when a nineteenth century reader of "The Tenor and the Boy" would have guessed the Boy's secret. Is it already when the Boy mentions Mosley Menteith, as Corbett suggest? At the descriptions of queer hair and delicate features? Or when his voice is mistaken for a woman's? It would be a mistake to assume the clues to be perceptible only to modern readers. Instead, readers of Grand's time were arguably more familiar with this narrative than readers of today. That the clues are there is in itself a signal of Grand's familiarity with the transing as a secret-narrative. And as we could see in the Tenor's surprise when he found out that Angelica was married, Grand elegantly plays with transing narratives in order to simultaneously adhere to and break their conventions.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

<35>By placing the Boy/Angelica within trans\* literary traditions, I have demonstrated how perspectives from transgender studies can inform and develop understandings of nineteenth century literature. What has been regarded as a strange and singular plot is in fact a set of standard narratives within a popular tradition. Research into the history of trans\* literature is still scarce and there is no doubt that further studies will develop the narratives of transing that I have presented here. No doubt, such research will nuance these narratives as well as highlight other ones.

<36>It would be regrettable if future research continues—as most previous scholars have—to focus only on one type of motif or character at a time. A wider scope reveals connections between different kinds of motifs, characters, and narratives. As Vicinus so elegantly describes, "The Tenor and the Boy" for example originates from the Principal Boy of pantomime. Attention to a wide array of trans\* motifs can continue that genealogy by pointing to The Principal Boy's supporting character the Dame (played by a cisgender man). These two are a couple that share much history while also being separate traditions. Originating from Commedia dell'arte (Radcliffe), the Dame has travelled onwards to become the high het entertainment that Butler spotted in twentieth-century films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982). While critics like Garber (6–10) have read such films as examples of the subversive potential of trans\*, Butler (126) claims that they provide "a

ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy.” Similar narratives of transing as a joke are found in nineteenth-century literature as well as today, perhaps particularly in films and TV series (Holmqvist, *Transformationer* 181–182). These narratives are decidedly different from the ones presented in “The Tenor and the Boy,” while also—through the Dame—being linked to it.

<37>Understanding trans\* as a verb allows us to discuss a variety of ways in which gender variance has been expressed on various levels. By examining and comparing different transings we can uncover unlikely companions that produce similar narratological effects. For example, during the twentieth century, the transing as a secret-narrative took new meanings in suspense fiction (Holmqvist, ‘Cross-Dressing Mysteries and Monsters’). The revelation of “real” sex beneath an assumed gender expression was then paired with fears of male homosexuality and transfemininities, creating (in)famous classics like *Psycho* (1959) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1988).

<38>Looking at narratives of transing rather than particular motifs, stereotypes or characters enables understandings of what both differs and recurs within different traditions. It is a way of analyzing the fact that cisgender women in male clothing from transing as pragmatism-narratives also appear in narratives of transing as eroticism, in which she can be paired with both etheric androgynes and gay men. Such narratives have some of the same effects, but through very different characters and addressing diverse audiences. The Boy in Grand’s story is heavily charged with eroticism of both a respectable and a controversial nature. On the one hand, the homoeroticism between the Boy and the Tenor represents a deviant desire—the love that dares not speak its name. On the other hand, Angelica is able to present herself as a respectable ciswoman in male clothing, transing as pragmatism. The normalizing structure of the transing as a pragmatism-narrative aims for what in mainstream society (or the expected readers) appears to be rational. In “The Tenor and the Boy,” this means transing for the benefit of freedom: being allowed to do what men do and thus escape a traditional female role. Closer scrutiny of transing as pragmatism-narratives in the history of literature could show us how such rational explanations have changed through different contexts. Today, such rational explanations may very well be things that were decidedly *irrational* when “The Tenor and the Boy” was written. When Angelica explains her transing she does so by voicing a female (albeit unconventional) self. In a story of today, a transgender identity may very well be used in similar explanations.

<39>There is a wide array of transing characters in fiction, and the only thing they all have in common is that they articulate conceptions of gender. Articulations of (cis- and trans) genders have been part of creating current conceptions of (cis- and trans) genders, and they can also help us understand what life could be like for people who transgress the limits of normative gender. The importance of a trans\* history has been well acknowledged (e.g. Stryker, *Transgender History*), and getting rid of history is a privilege for people who have a history to get rid of, as Eastwood (591) reminds us. For transgender people, such a process of elimination is not (yet) possible, and history writing is still an important work of the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, I am changing pronouns based on what gender a transing characters represents rather than what sex they are assigned before or after their transing. As a rule, I do not take

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for granted assigned sex, but rather emphasize representations of gender. Further terminology is explained throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup> I am doing this in the full knowledge that this excludes important aspects of the story as a whole. As Fessler (45–46) notes, when “The Tenor and the Boy” was published separately it included other parts of the novel as well, most importantly book V (see also Taylor 24–29 on the relationship between ‘The Tenor and the Boy’ and *The Heavenly Twins*).

<sup>3</sup> Cisnormativity is used here as a parallel of queer theory’s heteronormativity, however, with a greater emphasis on gender binary rather than heterosexuality (see e.g. Straube 22 on “heterocisnormative”). “Cis” or “cisgender” is used as the opposite of trans\*. Being a cisgender woman, for example, means being assigned female gender at birth, growing up as a girl, identifying as a woman and being perceived as a woman by others.

<sup>4</sup> I use transfemininity/masculinity to describe the direction of transing. For example, “transmasculinity” is used to describe a male or masculine character that has been assigned female gender. My terminology in such instances is therefore comparable to the more traditional “female masculinity” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*) but allows for an understanding of gender that does not take assigned gender for granted.

<sup>5</sup> In accordance with my overall anachronistic terminology, I am using both homo- and heterosexuality as broad terms to describe same- and different-sex activities, respectively. This should not be understood to be identity categories in accordance with modern terminology.

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