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## TRADE, WOLVES, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF NORMAL MANHOOD

THE MOST STRIKING DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE DOMINANT SEXUAL CULTURE of the early twentieth century and that of our own era is the degree to which the earlier culture permitted men to engage in sexual relations with other men, often on a regular basis, without requiring them to regard themselves—or to be regarded by others—as gay. If sexual abnormality was defined in different terms in prewar culture, then so, too, necessarily, was sexual normality. The centrality of the fairy to the popular representation of sexual abnormality allowed other men to engage in casual sexual relations with other men, with boys, and, above all, with the fairies themselves without imagining that they themselves were abnormal. Many men alternated between male and female sexual partners without believing that interest in one precluded interest in the other, or that their occasional recourse to male sexual partners, in particular, indicated an abnormal, “homosexual,” or even “bisexual” disposition, for they neither understood nor organized their sexual practices along a hetero-homosexual axis.

This sexual ideology, far more than the other erotic systems with which it coexisted, predominated in working-class culture. It had particular efficacy in organizing the sexual practices of men in the social milieu in which it might be least expected: in the highly aggressive and quintessentially “masculine” subculture of young and usually unmarried sailors, common laborers, hoboes, and other transient workers, who were a ubiquitous presence in early-twentieth-century American cities. After demonstrating how widely it was assumed that “normal” men could engage in sexual relations with other men and the role of this sexual ide-

ology in organizing the sexual world of “rough” working-class men, this chapter explores the basis of that ideology in working-class gender ideology and in the deeper logic of the association of fairies with prostitutes. For the complex conventions governing the social interactions of fairies and normal workingmen established the terms of their sexual relations as well, and reveal much about the organization of gender, sex, and sexuality in working-class culture.

### THE SISTERS AND THEIR MEN: TRADE AND THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MALE SEXUAL RELATIONS IN WORKING-CLASS CULTURE

The strongest evidence that the relationship between “men” and fairies was represented symbolically as a male-female relationship and that gender behavior rather than homosexual behavior per se was the primary determinant of a man’s classification as a fairy was that it enabled other men to engage in sexual activity with the fairies—and even to express publicly a strong interest in such contacts—without risking stigmatization and the undermining of their status as “normal.” So long as they maintained a masculine demeanor and played (or claimed to play) only the “masculine,” or insertive, role in the sexual encounter—so long, that is, as they eschewed the style of the fairy and did not allow their bodies to be sexually penetrated—neither they, the fairies, nor the working-class public considered *them* to be queer. Thus a private investigator reported in 1927 that a Mr. Farley, owner of a newsstand in the basement of the Times Square Building at Forty-second Street and Broadway, complained to him that “whenever the fleet comes into town, every sailor who wants his d—licked comes to the Times Square Building. It seems to be common knowledge among the sailors that the Times Square Building is the place to go if they want to meet any fairies.” He was unhappy about the commotion so many unruly sailors caused around his newsstand and disapproved of their actions. In no way, however, did he indicate that he thought the sailors looking for sex with the fairies were themselves fairies or otherwise different from most sailors. The investigator himself observed “two sailors . . . in the company of three men who were acting in an effeminate manner.” He labeled the effeminate men “fairies” even though it was the sailors who were “making overtures to these men to go to their apartments [and the men] declined to go.”<sup>1</sup>

Even men working for state policing agencies categorized men in these terms. New York State Liquor Authority agents investigating a sailors’ bar in Brooklyn in October 1938 reported that shortly after midnight, “several males who were apparently ‘fags’ enter[ed] the premises in groups of twos and threes.” They later observed “sailors leaving with some girls, and some men in uniform leaving with the fags.” To make it clear that they thought the sailors were leaving with the fags for the same sexual reason

that other sailors left with female prostitutes, they added: "In particular it was observed that two marines left with two of the fags and remained in the dark street under the railroad trestle." The investigators did not regard the marines who left with the "fags" as "fags" themselves, nor did they otherwise question the marines' status as men. Indeed, their final report recommended that the state close the bar precisely because it "permitt[ed] prostitutes to congregate with male customers . . . [and] permitt[ed] 'fags' to congregate on the premises and solicit males for immoral purposes."<sup>2</sup> They gave no indication that they found it shocking or unusual that the "fags" should have as much success picking up sailors as female prostitutes did. On the contrary, they regarded the sailors' response to the solicitations of "fags" as no different in kind from their responses to those of female prostitutes.

The acceptance of men's relations with fairies as proper manifestations of the male quest for pleasure and power was indicated even more strikingly by the structure of male prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1910s and 1920s, it was increasingly common for both gay- and straight-identified men to sell sexual services to gay-identified men. But at the turn of the century the predominant form of male prostitution seems to have involved fairies selling sex to men who, despite the declaration of desire made by their willingness to pay for the encounters, identified themselves as normal. Indeed, while the term *fairy* generally denoted any flamboyantly effeminate homosexual man (whose self-presentation resembled that of a female prostitute), numerous references in the early twentieth century make it clear that the word was sometimes used specifically to denote men who actually worked as prostitutes selling sexual services to "normal" men.<sup>3</sup> Fairies still appeared in this role in several novels published in the 1930s about New York-based homosexual characters. One 1933 novel, for instance, referred to "the street corner 'fairy' of Times Square" as a "street-walker," invariably "rouged, lisping, [and] mincing." And in Kennilworth Bruce's *Goldie*, also published in 1933, a working-class youth from New Jersey explained "the ways and wiles of the twilight world in New York" to the protagonist, whom the youth had identified as a fairy: "He told him about the 'fairies' and the 'wolves' that frequent the streets of New York . . . around the Times Square section. . . . 'The fairies pull down big dough, too. . . . There's the actors and musicians when the shows break; there's the gamblers and guys with small-time rackets; and there's the highbrow sots when they leave the speakeasies in the wee hours. Fairies work up a regular trade.'"<sup>4</sup>

Numerous accounts of turn-of-the-century homosexual prostitution confirm that it commonly involved men paying fairies for sex, while still considering themselves to be the "men" in the encounter. This, after all, was the premise of the Lower East Side resorts, such as Paresis Hall and

the Slide, where female prostitutes also gathered and where many of the fairies were not only called "male prostitutes" but (in the language of the day) "sat for company," having the men who joined their tables buy them drinks, just as female prostitutes did. Significantly, in prostitutes' slang a "slide" denoted an "establishment where male homosexuals dress[ed] as women and solicit[ed] men," a meaning apparently known to the officials involved in a state investigation of police corruption in 1894. A Captain Ryan testified he had "closed up every disorderly-house, every gambling-house and policy office, and every slide and dives [sic] in the precinct [within] three months [of taking command]." When asked if he were sure he knew what a slide was, he reminded his questioner that "we had one of the most notorious slides in the world in Bleecker street when I had command of that precinct." His comment both confirms the fame of the Slide, which he had shut down in 1892, and suggests that the resort's management had deliberately used the slang term in naming the club in order to announce its character (even though, in fact, the fairies there did not dress as women).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the very existence of the slang term suggests that other such resorts existed, as indeed they did.

There were also brothels where men could meet fairies more privately, as the Reverend Charles Parkhurst discovered in 1892 when he took his famous tour of New York's underworld (his own form of slumming) to gather evidence for his assault on Tammany Hall corruption. His guide took him to a brothel on West Third Street, the Golden Rule Pleasure Club, where the basement was divided into cubicles, each occupied by "a youth, whose face was painted, eye-brows blackened, and whose airs were those of a young girl, . . . [who] talked in a high falsetto voice, and called the others by women's names," each youth waiting for a man to hire his services.<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered that neither the fairies at the Slide nor those at the Pleasure Club were dressed as women; no customer seeking their services could have mistaken them for "normal" women.

This pattern was not restricted to such brothels and saloons. Fairy prostitutes, usually dressed as men but using their hair, makeup, and demeanor to signal their character, worked along the Bowery, Riverside Drive, Fourteenth Street, and Forty-second Street, and in Bryant Park and Prospect Park, as well as in the back rooms of saloons on Elizabeth Street and Third Avenue. (These street patterns are discussed at greater length in chapter 7.) One fairy, for instance, a female impersonator from a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn where he was known as Loop-the-loop, a suggestive play on the name of a popular ride at Coney Island, reported to a doctor in 1906 that he regularly plied his trade "chiefly for the money there is in it" (see figure 3.2). Loop-the-loop often worked in his neighborhood as well as in Prospect Park, where, he reported, he and the other prostitutes paid off the patrolmen so that they could wear

dresses. His efforts at female impersonation would not have persuaded any of his clients that they were having sex with a woman, given the inartfulness of his costume and the heavy growth of hair on his legs and arms (he complained of the hair himself, but added that “most of the boys don’t mind it”).<sup>7</sup> But his costume and demeanor, like those of the fairies at Paresis Hall, *did* signify to “the boys” that he was not a normal man, either, but rather a third-sexer, with whom they could have sex without complicating their understanding of their own sexual character.

The relationship between a fairy prostitute and his male customers emblemized the central model governing the interpretation of male–male sexual relationships. The term *trade* originally referred to the customer of a fairy prostitute, a meaning analogous to and derived from its usage in the slang of female prostitutes; by the 1910s, it referred to any “straight” man



Figure 3.2 Loop-the-loop, a fairy prostitute from Brooklyn who was married to another man, as photographed in 1906. (From the American Journal of Urology and Sexology 13 [1917]: 455.)

who responded to a gay man’s advances. As one fairy put it in 1919, a man was trade if he “would stand to have ‘queer’ persons fool around [with] him in any way, shape or manner.”<sup>8</sup> *Trade* was also increasingly used in the middle third of the century to refer to straight-identified men who worked as prostitutes serving gay-identified men, reversing the dynamic of economic exchange and desire implied by the original meaning. Thus the term *trade* sometimes referred specifically to “straight” male prostitutes, but it also continued to be used to refer to “straight” men who had sex with queers or fairies for pleasure rather than money. The sailors eagerly seeking the sexual services of fairies at the Times Square Building, like those who left the Happy Hour Bar & Grill with the “fags,” were considered trade, whether or not money was part of the transaction. So long as the men abided by the conventions of masculinity, they ran little risk of undermining their status as “normal” men.

Although it is impossible to determine just how common such interactions were in the early twentieth century or precisely how many men were prepared to engage in homosexual behavior on these or any other terms, Alfred Kinsey’s research suggests that the number may have been large. Published in 1948, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was based on the sexual life histories Kinsey and his associates gathered from men in the 1930s and 1940s, and thus offers an overview of sexual patterns among men in the half-century preceding World War II. Although most recent commentary on the Kinsey Report has focused on (and criticized) its supposed estimate that 10 percent of the population were homosexuals, Kinsey himself never made such an estimate and argued explicitly that such estimates could not be based on his findings. His research is much more helpful if used, as Kinsey intended, to examine the extent of occasional homosexual behavior among men who may or may not have identified themselves as “homosexual.” Only 4 percent of the men he interviewed reported having been exclusively homosexual in their behavior throughout their lives, but 37 percent acknowledged having engaged in at least one postadolescent homosexual encounter to the point of orgasm, and fully a quarter of them acknowledged having had “more than incidental homosexual experience or reactions” for at least three years between the ages sixteen and fifty-five.\* Clearly some cultural mechanism was at work that allowed men to engage in sexual relations with other men without thinking of themselves as abnormal.

Kinsey’s own remarks about the proper interpretation of his findings

\* Alfred Kinsey, Wardell Pomeroy, and Clyde Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 650–51. Kinsey’s statistical methods were subject to criticism almost from the moment of their publication, and this criticism has mounted in recent years in the wake of several new studies

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

To argue that the fairy and his man emblemized the dominant conceptual schema by which homosexual relations were understood is not to argue, however, that it was the only schema or that all men were equally

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

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

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

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

manager hired rooms to female prostitutes who stood at the windows in “loose dresses and call[ed] the men upstairs.”<sup>15</sup> One investigator noted that the Union Hall saloon was crowded with old Italian men and several young fairies on the night of March 5; a few doors up the street, at 97 Elizabeth, stood a saloon where the fairies, aged fourteen to sixteen, could “do their business right in [the] back room.” A month later the same saloon was said to have “5 boys known as [*finocchio*, or fairies] about 17 to 25 years of age.”<sup>16</sup>

Strikingly, the same investigators found no such open “fairy resorts” in the Lower East Side’s Jewish section, located just a few blocks to the east, even though they discovered numerous tenements and street corners where female prostitutes worked. The police periodically discovered men soliciting other men in a less organized fashion in the Jewish neighborhood’s streets, tenements, and even synagogues, to be sure. Two policemen, for instance, arrested a twenty-two-year-old Jewish immigrant for soliciting men from the window of 186 Suffolk Street, at Houston, in 1900.<sup>17</sup> But they arrested far fewer Jews than Italians on such charges, and the sites of homosexual rendezvous were less stable and commercialized, less well known, and thus, presumably, less tolerated in the Jewish neighborhood than in the Italian.

It is difficult to assess the reasons for the apparent differences in the social organization of and larger community’s tolerance of male homosexual relations in Italian versus Jewish immigrant enclaves, particularly given the absence of more extensive ethnographic studies of the overall sexual culture of either group. But three interrelated factors seem particularly crucial: the sexual cultures the Jews and Italians brought with them to the States from Europe, the different circumstances of their immigration, and the ways gender relations were organized in their communities.

The sexual cultures of immigrants in the United States were clearly shaped in large part by the gender and sexual cultures of their homelands, each of which was, in turn, significantly differentiated internally along regional and class lines. Northern Italians brought to the United States a set of cultural assumptions about sex different from those of Sicilians, for instance; middle-class Italians were likely to organize gender relations differently from peasants or workers.\*

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

\*Unfortunately, no ethnographic studies have been made of the social organization of homosexual relations in southern Italy or the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Russia at the turn of the century, for example, that might shed light on the behavior of

degree that it may implicitly have made sexual contact between men seem relatively harmless. One man who grew up in an Italian neighborhood recalled that “homosexuality just wasn’t regarded as a mortal sin, it wasn’t seen as that bad.” Perhaps more significant is that immigrant Italians were well known for their rejection of church teaching on a wide range of moral matters, and the anti-gay religious injunction was much less effective among them than among Jewish men. Kinsey singled out Orthodox Jewish men for their “phenomenally low” rates of homosexual activity.<sup>18</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, southern Italian men had a reputation in northern Italy and in the northern European gay world for their supposed willingness to engage in homosexual relations. Although this reputation doubtless resulted in part from the propensity of dominant cultural groups to try to differentiate and stigmatize subordinate groups by attributing “immoral” or “bizarre” sexual practices to them, considerable evidence nonetheless suggests that such practices were both more common and more accepted in southern Italy than in the north. Numerous British and German gay men traveled to southern Italy at the turn of the century in search of a more tolerant climate; forty years later, during World War II, many gay American soldiers were startled to discover the frequency and overtness of homosexual solicitation there. On the basis of his own observations during a research trip to Europe in 1955 and the reports he received from several of his most trusted informants, Alfred Kinsey also concluded that southern Italian men were considerably more open to homosexual relations than northern Europeans were. Many Italian youths adopted an instrumental attitude toward their bodies before marriage and did not consider it shameful to use them to secure cash or advancement, observers reported, and even many married men were willing to engage in homosexual relations so long as they took the “manly part.” Only the adult male who took the “woman’s part” was stigmatized.

The patterns of homosexual behavior noted in Sicily appear to have persisted in modified form in the Italian enclaves on the Lower East Side, in Greenwich Village, and in East Harlem. Although more research would need to be done to substantiate the point, it seems likely that an important part of the homosexual culture of fairies and their sex partners visible in turn-of-the-century New York represented

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immigrants from those regions. As a result, my comments here must remain highly tentative and can only suggest directions for future research by historians of Europe as well as of American immigrants. Such research would not only help us understand the social organization and cultural meaning of same-sex relations in those cultures, but would also offer a revealing new vantage point for thinking more generally about gender relations in each group.

the flowering in this country of a transplanted Mediterranean sexual culture.<sup>19</sup>

The relative acceptance of homosexual relations in Italian immigrant communities was related as well to the demographics of Italian immigration to the United States, which were strikingly different from those of eastern European Jews. Given the escalation of anti-Semitic violence and the draconian restrictions placed on Jewish economic and social activities in eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, most Jewish immigrants to New York had decided to leave their villages for good with as many of their family members as possible. But the great majority of the city's Italian immigrants were single men or married men unaccompanied by their families who planned to return to Italy after earning funds to invest there. Eighty percent of the Italians who entered the United States from 1880 to 1910 were males, and the great majority of them were in their prime working years, from fourteen to forty-four years old. So many of them came to work on a seasonal basis or for only a year or two that 43 Italians left the United States for every 100 who arrived in the mid-1890s, and 73 left for every 100 who arrived in the peak immigration years of 1907–11. By contrast, only 21,000 Jews left the United States in 1908–12, while 295,000 arrived; 42 percent of Jewish immigrants were females in the 1890s—twice the proportion of Italian females—and a quarter were children under fourteen, compared to only 11 percent of the Italians.<sup>20</sup> Italian men may have been more responsive to homosexual overtures than Jewish men in part simply because far fewer of them were living with their wives.

Italian men also tended to have less contact with women than Jewish men did because of the greater gender segregation of Italian neighborhoods, a cultural difference only accentuated by the demographics of southern Italian immigration. Not only did more Jewish men live with their families, they centered their social lives in their apartments as well as in their synagogues, union halls, and other communal meeting places. Young Jewish men and women had their own gender-segregated groups and young women bore heavy responsibilities at home, but they were also likely to socialize in mixed-gender groups and at the dance halls, movie theaters, and other commercial amusements that abounded in their neighborhoods. Although they expected to be asked for permission, Jewish parents tended to allow their daughters to go to dances or take walks with young men. The high degree of interaction between young Jewish men and women stood in sharp contrast to the gender segregation of Italian neighborhoods, as many contemporary observers noted. The social investigator Sophonisba Breckinridge commented in 1921, "Most immigrant parents, except those from southern Italy, recognize the impossibility of maintaining the old rules of chaperonage and

guardianship of the girls . . . [but] Italian parents . . . try to guard their girls almost as closely as they did in Italy."<sup>21</sup>

Although many Italian men in New York also lived with their families and many others boarded with families, a large number of them lived in rooming houses, where they organized surrogate, all-male families with other Italian men. Even those men who boarded with families spent much of their time outside their cramped accommodations, in the neighborhood's streets, poolrooms, and saloons; young men living with their parents spent most of their time in similar locales. As the historian Robert Orsi notes, "Men significantly outnumbered women in the first decades of Italian Harlem . . . [and] they lived in a largely male world."<sup>22</sup>

In this all-male social world, clubs or "gangs" of various sorts formed, usually with loosely defined memberships that fluctuated as people moved in and out of the neighborhood. Walking down four short blocks of Mulberry Street, the chief thoroughfare of the Italian Lower East Side, around 1920, John Mariano counted signs announcing the existence of at least thirty such clubs, each of them drawing young men from the immediate neighborhood, often a single block. He described the members of one of them as American-born truckers, dockworkers, and the like, who ranged in age from twenty to thirty. Employed irregularly in seasonal labor markets that made it impossible for most of them to establish even a modicum of economic security, they prided themselves on their rejection of the unrealizable "American" work ethic. "When they desire to be facetious," he noted disapprovingly, "they call themselves 'the Sons of Rest.'" Not only were two-thirds of these men in their twenties unmarried, but the third who were married nonetheless spent a great deal of their leisure time in the all-male group.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE BACHELOR SUBCULTURE

As men who (whether married or not) spent most of their time in a largely male social world, these first- and second-generation Italian immigrants were prototypical members of what several historians and sociologists have rather ambiguously termed a "bachelor subculture." This subculture was the primary locus of the sexual dyad of fairies and trade, and its dynamics help explain the sexual culture not only of Italian immigrants but also of many Irish, African-American, and Anglo-American working-class men. The bachelor subculture played a significant (though relatively little studied) role in American cities from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, when about 40 percent of the men over fifteen years old were unmarried at any given time. It was really a series of distinct but overlapping subcultures centered in the poolrooms and saloons where many workingmen spent their time, in the cellar clubrooms and streets where gangs of boys and young men were a ubiquitous presence,

and in the lodging houses that crowded the Bowery and the waterfront.\* It was a highly gender-segregated social world of young, unmarried, and often transient laborers, seamen, and the like, the “rough” working-class men, that is, whom we have already seen at the Times Square newsstand and the Brooklyn sailors’ bar and whom Ralph Werther, for one, identified as particularly receptive to his advances.

Many of the young men of the bachelor subculture would later go on to marry. Many were immigrants (such as the Italians) planning to work in the States only a short while before returning to their families in Europe. The Irish contributed disproportionate numbers of men to this subculture as well. Irish-American men, like their compatriots in Ireland itself, tended to marry only in their early thirties, if at all, and much of their social life was consequentially organized around all-male groups. Indeed, the high rates of lifelong bachelorhood among the Irish provoked periodic discussions in the Irish and Catholic press of the danger of Irish “race suicide.”<sup>24</sup> The bachelor subculture also included native-born Anglo-Americans who either had not yet married or planned never to do so, as well as immigrants who had left home precisely in order to escape the pressure to marry. It also included married men from many backgrounds who chose to spend most of their time in the company of other men and moved regularly between the bachelor world of “rough” workingmen and the more family-oriented world of “respectable” workingmen.

The working-class bachelor subculture drew heavily from three sometimes overlapping occupational cultures: sailors, merchant marines, and other seamen; transient workers who spent time in the city between stints in the countryside as agricultural laborers, lumberjacks, construction workers, and ice cutters; and common laborers based in New York, who

\*These men have received remarkably little attention in recent studies of immigration and working-class culture. In response to an older historiographical and sociological tradition that viewed social “disorganization” and instability as the inevitable consequences of immigration, a generation of historians has sought to document the social cohesiveness of the extended kinship systems of immigrants and their central role in organizing migratory networks and settlement patterns. In response to older studies that made universal claims about the process of immigration on the basis of men’s experience alone, a generation of historians has offered a finely nuanced analysis of the role of women and families in immigration. These studies have corrected and deepened our understanding of immigration in significant ways, but an inadvertent consequence of their focus has been to ignore the ubiquitous presence of unattached men in immigrant neighborhoods and to limit inquiry into the social worlds they created. Although such men often migrated to the United States to serve the interests of a larger family-oriented and family-determined economic strategy (to raise capital for investment in land in southern Italy, for instance), once in this country many of them moved in an all-male world.

worked on the waterfront, in construction, and in other heavy manual-labor jobs. The highly irregular and unpredictable work of many of them on shipboard, in agriculture, or in construction often took them out of the city on a seasonal basis and made it difficult for them to support or maintain regular ties with a family. The native-born among them, especially, were part of the immense army of migrant laborers, usually known as hoboes or tramps, who constituted a significant part of the American workforce in the decades before the 1920s.

The sailor, seen as young and manly, unattached, and unconstrained by conventional morality, epitomized the bachelor subculture in the gay cultural imagination. He served for generations as the central masculine icon in gay figure pornography, as the paintings of Charles Demuth and Paul Cadmus (see figure 3.1) from the early decades of the century and the photographs produced by gay pornographers in its middle decades attest.<sup>25</sup> But as the records of anti-vice investigators show, his role in the gay subculture was not simply an object of fantasy. He was a central figure in the subculture, and his haunts became the haunts of gay men as well. He was, however, usually not “of” that culture, since he typically declined to identify himself as other than normal and in sexual encounters almost always took the role of the “man.”

The members of the bachelor subculture were a ubiquitous presence in New York in 1900, when two of every five men in Manhattan aged fifteen years or older were unmarried. They were especially evident in parts of Harlem, in the Italian and Irish districts, along the bustling waterfront, and along the Bowery, long known as the “main stem,” or center, of the city’s “Hobohemia.” Their world began to disappear in the 1920s, when the sex ratios of immigrant communities started to stabilize after the strict new federal immigration laws passed in that decade made it difficult for immigrant workers to enter the United States for brief periods of work. The number of seamen in the city began to decline as New York’s port declined, and the number of transient workers (or hoboes) dropped throughout the country in the 1920s, as economic and technological developments, such as refrigeration, the mechanization of agricultural production, and the expansion of auto transport, reduced the need for them.<sup>26</sup> The men of the working-class bachelor subculture continued to play a significant role in the city’s life throughout the half-century before World War II, however, and it was in their social world that the interaction of fairies and trade took its most visible and highly developed form.

The bachelor subculture, as several historians have shown, shared many of the characteristics of working-class male culture as a whole, but it also had certain distinctive elements that made it particularly amenable to the presence of fairies.<sup>27</sup> The dominant working-class ideology made the ability and willingness to undertake the responsibility of supporting a

family two of the defining characteristics of both manliness and male “respectability.” But many of the men of the bachelor subculture, either because their irregular and poorly paid work made supporting a family difficult or because they had deliberately chosen to avoid such family encumbrances, forged an alternative definition of manliness that was predicated on a rejection of family obligations. Although many of the men would eventually marry, they tended to remain isolated from women and hostile to the constraints of marriage during the many years they were involved in the bachelor subculture. (They were also considerably more open to advances of fairies before their marriages; Ralph Werther, for instance, noted that most of his young Italian and Irish sex partners went on to marry women.)<sup>28</sup> Indeed, not only their disengagement from the conventions of family life and domesticity but their decided rejection of them were central elements of their culture; they were considered “rough” not simply because many of them rejected family life per se, but more precisely because they scorned the manners associated with the domesticating and moralizing influence of women.

Some of the descriptions of “rough” working-class life provided by hostile middle-class observers in the 1900s and 1910s suggest the extent to which the observers considered the rejection of the feminine domestication of male behavior, the casual mingling of men and fairies, and open displays of homosexuality to be characteristic of such life. An agent investigating the Subway Cabaret on East Fourteenth Street for a moral-reform society in 1917 cited such mingling, along with men refusing to doff their hats (a sign of their lack of domestication), in order to illustrate the “lowergrade” character of the place to his supervisor:

For instance, at one table one sees three or four tough looking fellows . . . who have to be requested to keep their hats off. At another table one sees a sailor, sitting drinking with two other fellows in civilian clothes, the sailor with his arm around the other fellows neck. The proprietor had to make the sailor behave himself. The sailor was constantly going out with one of the other fellows to the lavatory. I went out also a couple of times but they would just stand there and talk while I was there, and thus I was cheated out of witnessing a little homosexuality.<sup>29</sup>

Embodying a rejection of domesticity and of bourgeois acquisitivism alike, the bachelor subculture was based on a shared code of manliness and an ethic of male solidarity. The solidarity it celebrated was expressed in the everyday ties built at work on the waterfront or in construction; it was symbolized by the rituals of saloon conviviality that expressed mutual regard and reciprocity, perhaps most commonly through the cus-

tom of treating one’s fellows to rounds of drinks. A man’s “manliness” was signaled in part by his participation in such rituals and by his behavior on the job, but it was demonstrated as well by his besting of other men in contests of strength and skill in all-male arenas such as the boxing ring, poolroom, and gambling den. Sexual prowess with women was another important sign of manliness, but such prowess was significant not only as an indication of a man’s ability to dominate women but also as evidence of his *relative* virility compared to other men’s; manliness in this world was confirmed by other men and in relation to other men, not by women.<sup>30</sup>

The way the men in this social milieu constructed their manliness allowed other men to construct themselves as something other than men. The men in this culture regarded manhood as a hard-won accomplishment, not a given, and as a continuum, not an absolute value or characteristic. Even as they celebrated their masculine camaraderie and commitment to fraternity, they constantly had to prove their manhood and often sought to demonstrate that they were more manly than their rivals. To be called a “man” or a “regular guy” was both the highest compliment in this world and the most common. But the very repetitiveness of such praise implied that men were in danger of being called something else: unmanly, a mollycoddle, a sissy, even a pansy. Whereas manhood could be achieved, it could also be lost; it was not simply a quality that resulted naturally and inevitably from one’s sex. The calculated character of the everyday rituals of male sociability, solidarity, and competition by which men enacted their manliness and demonstrated their relative virility suggests the remarkable degree to which they regarded their manliness as a kind of ongoing performance, to use Erving Goffman and Judith Butler’s term. It also reveals the degree to which relations in this all-male environment were gendered.<sup>31</sup> It was both this self-consciousness about the performativity of gender and the gendering of relations among men that allowed some males to turn themselves into “she-men,” so long as they did not question other men’s status as men, and allowed other males to confirm their own “he-manliness” by subordinating them. The very theatricality of the fairies’ style not only emphasized the performative character of gender but evoked an aura of liminality reminiscent of carnivals at which the normal constraints on men’s behavior were suspended, making it easier for men to interact with them without considering it consequential.<sup>32</sup>

One of the reasons fairies were tolerated by tough working-class men and often had remarkably easygoing relations with them was the care they took to confirm rather than question the latter’s manliness. Fairies related to men as if they themselves were women—though often the “tough” women who dared venture into the social spaces dominated by

tough men—and they did so in a manner that confirmed the complex social conventions of gender deference, inequality, and power characteristic of gender relations in that culture. But some gangs of men regarded fairies, like women, as fair game for sexual exploitation. Sexually using a fairy not only could be construed and legitimized as a “normal” sexual act but could actually provide some of the same enhancement of social status that mastering a woman did.

That this dynamic sometimes influenced the meaning ascribed to homosexual encounters is suggested by the experience of one Italian youth around 1920. He was sexually active with other men (almost always, he said, “act[ing] as a woman”), but he tried to protect his reputation by developing a conventionally masculine style in the other spheres of his life. He did not carry himself as a fairy and sought to establish his masculinity with the other youths he met at a neighborhood gymnasium by deliberately “talk[ing] about women” with them. Participating in the collective sexualization and objectification of women was one of the rituals by which he established himself as a man. At the gym he met a twenty-five-year-old boxer to whom he was attracted, and he eventually agreed to let the boxer, who had sensed his interest, anally penetrate him. To the boy’s horror, the boxer promptly went to the gym and told everyone what he had done; the boy, humiliated, concluded he could never go there again.<sup>33</sup> A man who allowed himself to be used sexually as a woman, then, risked forfeiting his masculine status, even if he were otherwise conventionally masculine; in this case, the boy’s shame clearly derived from his perception that he had been made a fairy in the eyes of his comrades. The story also illustrates the belief among men in this world that so long as they played the “man’s” role, they remained men. The most striking aspect of the story is the confidence the boxer felt that reporting the encounter would not endanger his status among his friends, that, indeed, having sexually subordinated the boy would enhance it. If a man risked forfeiting his masculine status by being sexually passive, he could also establish it by playing the dominant role in an encounter with another man. Sexual penetration symbolized one man’s power over another.

Men’s sexual relations with fairies were also fundamentally influenced by the character of their sexual relations with women, particularly the prostitutes and other “tough girls” who were the only women with whom many men in the bachelor subculture interacted. The very social organization and meaning of their sexual relations with women made it relatively unobjectionable for them to substitute fairies when such women could not be found. Numerous reports by undercover agents investigating female prostitution in the early decades of the century make it clear that in those social milieus dominated by young, single laborers and seamen, it was understood that men in search of women sexual partners might be

willing to make just that substitution. It was not thought that all men *would*, but it was not considered remarkable when any man *did*.

One evening in the fall of 1927 two agents in search of female prostitutes were taken by a sailor to an Italian restaurant on West Seventeenth Street, where sailors and “hardened neighborhood girls” congregated. After failing to lure any of the women away from the sailors (but, presumably, having succeeded in demonstrating their sexual interest in women), they asked their waitress if she knew where they could find a “sporting girl.” The woman said she did not, but immediately added that “there is a fairy [who] comes in here,” and called him over. One might expect that the fairy was pimping for female prostitutes, but the agents’ response indicates they believed they were being offered the fairy in place of a prostitute. Quickly taking advantage of the unexpected opportunity, they “tried to make an appointment with [him] . . . and [made] an effort . . . to learn where he resided or took his trade.” The fairy begged off, citing a previous appointment.<sup>34</sup> The fairy’s disinclination to cooperate meant that the agents—and we—learned nothing more of his life, but the fact that the waitress referred the agents to him in the first place tells us much about the understanding of male sexuality she had developed while working in a milieu dominated by sailors and Italian laborers. It evidently seemed plausible—even likely—to her that a man anxious for sexual satisfaction would accept it from a fairy if a woman were unavailable.

The Italian waitress was not the only one who believed this. The general secretary of the city’s major anti-prostitution society warned in 1918 that opponents of his anti-prostitution campaign might use the “apparent increase of male perversion” during World War I as “evidence to sustain their argument that vice driven out of one form will appear in another.”<sup>35</sup> (The campaign is discussed in chapter 5.) His fear that such reasoning would seem plausible was well founded. One of his own investigators had used it to explain the homosexual liaisons he had observed on the streets surrounding the Brooklyn Navy Yard late one summer night in 1917, when no women were to be found:

The streets and corners were crowded with the sailors all of whom were on a sharp lookout for girls. . . . It seemed to me that the sailors were sex mad. A number of these sailors were with other men walking arm in arm and on one dark street I saw a sailor and a man kissing each other. . . . It looked like an exhibition of mail [sic] perversion showing itself in the absence of girls or the difficulty of finding them. Some of the sailors told me that they might be able to get a girl if they went ‘up-town’ but it was too far up and they were too drunk to go way up there.<sup>36</sup>

The belief that fairies could be substituted for female prostitutes—and were virtually interchangeable with them—was particularly prevalent among men in the bachelor subculture whose opportunities for meeting “respectable” women were limited by the moral codes, gender segregation, or unbalanced sex ratios of their ethnic cultures. Indeed, many of these men found the sexual services of fairies to be both easier and cheaper to secure than those of women. They could be found around the Navy Yard and along the waterfront, on well-known streets and in many saloons frequented by sailors and workingmen, and even in many subway washrooms, where a man could find quick release on the way home from work merely by presenting himself. A finely calibrated map of the sexual geography of the neighborhood was usually part of men’s gender-specific “local knowledge.” Many workingmen knew precisely where to go to find fairies with whom, if they chose, they need not exchange a word to make their wishes clear.<sup>37</sup>

Still, the relative accessibility of fairies to men isolated from women hardly explains the latter’s willingness to turn to them. After all, thousands of women were working as prostitutes in the city, and workingmen often *did* have recourse to them; the immense number of single men in the city with few other means of meeting women supported the business of prostitution on a scale that would never be repeated after the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> If men had risked being stigmatized as queer on the basis of a single homosexual encounter, most of them would have sought sex exclusively with such women.

But the very character of their sexual relations with prostitutes and other “tough” women made it possible for them to turn to fairies as well. The moral codes governing the sexual practices of many men in the bachelor subculture (as in the larger culture of men) divided the world into “pure women,” with whom men did not expect sexual contact until after marriage, and “impure women” or “whores,” whom men felt free to pursue aggressively for sexual purposes.<sup>39</sup> In the eyes of such men, the simple willingness of a woman to enter the saloons, poolrooms, and other social spaces they dominated was a sign that she was a prostitute. In a culture in which men regarded themselves as highly lustful creatures whose health would be impaired if their explosive sexual needs did not find release (or, as they usually termed it, “relief” or “satisfaction”)<sup>40</sup>, a phallic economy of sexual pleasure governed relations with such women. Sex was something a man did *to* them, not *with* them: a man’s phallic dominance and “satisfaction” were his paramount concern. A man might have a close romantic relationship with one woman, whom he hoped to marry and treated with affection and respect, but still feel free to use a prostitute to satisfy his immediate sexual needs. Few men would ever even imagine substituting a fairy for their beloved (although they might develop feelings

of affection for some fairies, just as they did for some prostitutes, and might even find it easier to relate to fairies than to prostitutes because they found it easier to relate to men than to women).<sup>41</sup> But many men did find it relatively easy to substitute a fairy for a prostitute, since both offered immediate sexual satisfaction, as well as the pleasures and amusements of bawdy “female” companionship. In a world in which “every woman is just another place to enter,” as one Italian teenager described the attitude of men at his neighborhood pool hall in 1930, the body to enter did not necessarily have to be a woman’s.<sup>42</sup>

Gang rapes and other phallic sexual practices highlighted the cultural logic that allowed men to substitute fairies for women as objects of sexual penetration. Loop-the-loop, the fairy prostitute mentioned previously, reported to a doctor in 1906 that on a single day he had had sex with “no fewer than twenty-three men . . . one immediately after the other . . . in a room in Brooklyn.”<sup>43</sup> His boast is more plausible than it may at first seem, for he would have engaged in a well-established practice when he had sex with a line of men, even if he exaggerated the number. “Line-ups,” in which men (“anywhere from three to seventeen,” by one account from an Italian neighborhood in the late 1920s) formed a queue to have intercourse, one after another, with a single woman, were not uncommon. Some line-ups constituted nothing less than gang rapes (in which the women “were the victims of a planned scheme on the part of the men,” according to the same account). In a smaller number of cases, the women had enough control of the situation to stop it when they chose and to charge the men for the encounter. Every line-up allowed men to find sexual satisfaction and to enact their solidarity with other men by establishing their collective difference from and dominance of the woman they used. In a similar manner, groups of young men and boys sometimes forced younger boys to provide them with sexual “relief,” either by submitting to anal penetration, or, when the number of boys was too large, by masturbating the older boys, one after another.<sup>44</sup> The very structure of such encounters and the interchangeability of fairies, women, and boys in them highlights the degree to which

<sup>41</sup>Will Finch, a middle-class gay man who had pursued and constantly associated with straight working-class men since the 1930s, believed that the homosocial character of “rough” working-class culture gave gay men an advantage over women in one respect: “We can be *buddies* of men, whereas a woman never can.” For most of the unmarried working-class men he knew, women were for sex, men for “companionship,” a situation, Finch thought, comparable to that in classical Greece. One of his sex partners, whom Finch wryly christened “the voice of the urban proletariat,” had commented, typically enough, “that he is not at ease with a girl socially and intellectually and emotionally, but only with other males. But girls are lots of fun to fuck.”<sup>41</sup>

men were simply using the body of the fairy and sometimes the body of a boy, just as they might use the body of a woman, as a vehicle for phallic satisfaction and manly solidarity.

The phallogocentric presumption that a man's sexual satisfaction was more significant than the gender or character of the person who provided that satisfaction allowed gay men to make certain arguments in their approach to "normal" men that would seem utterly incredible in the absence of that presumption. Most commonly, gay men simply offered to perform certain sexual acts, especially fellation, which many straight men enjoyed but many women (even many prostitutes) were loath to perform. In such cases it was the particular phallogocentric pleasure, rather than the gender of the person providing the pleasure, that men found appealing, although fairies, who were commonly called "cocksuckers," were especially known for this service, in part because so many women refused to provide it. As one gay man observed of the Irish and Italian young men from South Brooklyn with whom he associated in the 1940s and 1950s, they "do not (necessarily) despise fellators—including these 'nice' Brooklyn boys. Or especially they. They find the fellator desirable. . . . The same with sailors."<sup>45</sup> But even though men found the queer man's services desirable, they also believed that a man lost status if he fellated another man. This was not simply a matter of his losing gender status, however, for women also lost status by performing fellation, which is one reason so many women refused to do it. The act itself—a nonreproductive sexual act whether performed by man or woman and thus "unnatural" by the tenets of a reproductively oriented sexual ideology—was considered perverted for men and women alike to do. Its transgressive character was, indeed, part of its appeal, whether performed by men or women.

Some gay men interested in sex with "straight" men also portrayed themselves as less dangerous than women by arguing that there was no chance they would infect the men with the venereal diseases women were thought to carry. Their success with this remarkable line becomes more understandable when one considers the focus of the highly publicized education campaigns launched to curb venereal disease during World War I. The campaigns, controlled by officials concerned with preserving the sexual morality of young men from rural homes as much as with protecting their health, had tried both to heighten men's fear of venereal disease and to use that fear to persuade them to shun contact with prostitutes or the other "loose" women they might encounter in the nation's port cities and training camps. Some educational materials explained that condoms could protect men from venereal disease (and a measure of their success was that condoms came to be called "protectors" in the slang of the 1920s). But most leaflets and posters identified sex with a woman, rather than sex without a condom, as the source of venereal dis-

ease.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, one quite unintentional effect of such moralistic campaigns was to reinforce the traditional belief among men that they could catch syphilis or gonorrhea *only* from female prostitutes or other women, whereas sexual contacts with another man were safe—a misconception men interested in seducing other men were quick to seize upon. An investigator posing as a seaman recounted the following conversation with a thirty-year-old Swede employed by the United Fruit Line, in a waterfront cafeteria's washroom in 1931:

I was about to leave and he said "It smells like a c . . . house. Did you have a woman lately?" I said "No, I am looking for one. Do you know a place?" He said "Wouldn't it be much safer to have it blown?" I said "Do you know a woman who would do that?" He said "Why do you want a woman, they are not safe." I said, "I want only a woman." He then took hold of my arm and said, "Let's get inside. I'll do it for you."<sup>47</sup>

This view was shared by the police as well. A crackdown on homosexual activity after World War I came to an end, in part, because the chief of the vice squad grew concerned that the campaign had diverted too much attention from the squad's efforts against prostitutes, who, he apparently feared, posed a medical, as well as moral, danger to their customers, and through them to their families. Telling his men that "one prostitute was more dangerous than five degenerates," he ordered them to give more attention to the former, a shift in priorities soon reflected in the squad's arrest statistics.<sup>48</sup> Concern about the relative health risk posed by sexual relations with fairies and prostitutes was possible only because it was presupposed that men could substitute fairies for women without undermining their masculine status. Indeed, men's ability to calculate the relative rewards and risks involved in each kind of encounter provides the most powerful evidence possible that the hetero-homosexual axis did not govern their thinking about sexual practices. In the right circumstances, almost any man might choose to experiment with the queer pleasures of sex with a fairy.

#### HUSBANDS, WOLVES, AND PUNKS

If every workingman was thought to have the capacity to respond to the advances of a fairy, it was nonetheless the case, as gay men themselves realized, that some men were more interested in sexual contacts with fairies and boys than others were. And although some men treated fairies in the same way they treated prostitutes, not every relationship between a man and a fairy was brief, coercive, or loveless, nor did all men orchestrate the relationships in a way that established their distance from the

fairies. Some men sought love and even marriage with fairies, and others at least made no bones about their sexual preference for them. Parker Tyler found many of the Italian men who lived in the Village to be responsive to his charms, for instance, but in his 1929 account of his interaction with the cameramen in a Village speakeasy (see chapter 2), he regarded the one who seemed the most anxious about the meeting and who made the most earnest entreaties to *him* as a more distinctive character: a “wolf.”

Such men, known as “husbands,” “wolves,” and “jockers” (terms sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes for different groups of men in different social milieus), occupied an ambiguous position in the sexual culture of the early twentieth century. They abided by the conventions of masculinity and yet exhibited a decided preference for male sexual partners. From a late-twentieth-century perspective they might be regarded as homosexuals more easily than the men just described, since they engaged in homosexual activity on a more exclusive basis than most men who were trade. But the fact that neither they nor their peers regarded them as queer, even if they sometimes regarded them as *different* from other “normal” men, highlights the degree to which gender status superseded homosexual interest as the basis of sexual classification in working-class culture.

Some men involved in marriages with fairies were so confident of their status as “normal” men that they readily acknowledged their relationships to others. One such man, a band musician, told a doctor in 1906 that he did not limit himself to brief, anonymous, and infrequent sexual encounters with other men, but considered himself the “husband” of a fairy (the prostitute Loop-the-loop), with whom he was involved in an ongoing relationship. He “apparently [did] not care an iota,” Dr. Shufeldt reported, “whether I was aware of his sex relations with [the fairy] or not,” an impression strengthened by the man’s willingness to confide to the doctor, man to man as it were, that Loop-the-loop was “the most passionate mortal he had ever heard of, and one of the most difficult to satisfy.” Given the doctor’s middle-class and professional background, his response to the man was ambivalent. By remarking on the man’s nonchalance, the doctor implied that he, in contrast to his subject, considered the arrangement noteworthy and somewhat objectionable. He also expressed his “surprise [that] he was an intelligent young man,” although his surprise was probably due at least in part to the fact that he would have predicted a less respectable husband for the fairy, whom he considered “very uncouth.” But he did not feel compelled to comment directly on the man’s sexual character, and clearly did not regard him in the same terms as he regarded the fairy. The relationship reproduced the conventions of a highly role-differentiated marriage between a man and a woman, and the “husband,” since he played the

conventional masculine role, even though with a wife who was anatomically male, did not seem so “abnormal.”<sup>49</sup>

The male partners of men such as the musician were not always fairies, nor were the relationships always so close. Indeed, some sexual relationships were organized on the basis of a power and status hierarchy dictated by age rather than by gender (although that age hierarchy was sometimes thematized as one of gender) and sometimes took on a more coercive edge. Known as “active pederasts” or, most commonly, “wolves,” the term Tyler used, such men acknowledged having a particular predilection for playing the “man’s role” in sex with fairies and, more typically, youths, the latter usually referred to as “punks.” *Punk* generally denoted a physically slighter youth who let himself be used sexually by an older and more powerful man, the wolf, in exchange for money, protection, or other forms of support.

The punk’s sexual character was ambiguous: he was often neither homosexually interested nor effeminate himself, but was sometimes equated with women because of his youth and his subordination to the older man. He was regarded by some men as simply a young homosexual, by others as the victim of an aggressive older man, and by still others as someone whose sexual subordination was merely an aspect of his general subordination to a dominant older man.<sup>50</sup> In a west Pennsylvania prison in 1892, for instance, an older prisoner explained the meaning of *punk* to the anarchist Alexander Berkman in the following manner: “Ever read Billy Shakespeare? Know the place, ‘He’s neither man nor woman; he’s punk.’ Well, Billy knew. A punk’s a boy that’ll . . . give himself to a man. . . . It’s done in every prison, an’ on th’ road [by which he meant among hoboes], everywhere.” This may have been the original derogatory meaning of *punk*, which only later passed into underworld and then more general slang as an epithetic diminutive without specifically sexual connotations.<sup>51</sup>

The erotic system of wolves and punks was particularly widespread (and tended to take somewhat different form) among three groups of men who were exceptionally disengaged from the family and neighborhood systems that regulated normative sexuality: seamen, prisoners, and the immense number of transient workers (or hoboes) who passed through American cities before the 1920s. That the wolves regarded themselves as something other than queer attests both to the absence of a sharp hetero-homosexual binarism in their culture, which would inevitably have classified them as homosexual, and to the centrality instead of effeminacy to the definition of sexual abnormality among workingmen. Their behavior in prison or on shipboard could be dismissed as a product of the situation (the absence of women) rather than of predisposition (a preference for boys or fairies), but such explanations became implausible when the

behavior persisted in settings where women were available. Wolves combined homosexual interest with a marked masculinity. None of them behaved effeminately or took feminine nicknames, and few played the “woman’s part” in sexual relations—and then only secretly. On the contrary, their very appellation, *wolf*, evoked the image of the predatory man-about-town intent on seducing young women, and their masculine dominance over punks was further emphasized by the fact that the latter were also referred to as *lambs* and *kids*. Wolves generally did not seek sexual encounters with other “men,” in which they might have been forced into sexual roles that would have compromised their own masculine identification, but only with punks or fairies, males ascribed lower status because of their youth or effeminacy.<sup>52</sup>

Thus a seaman blithely explained to an undercover agent whom he met on the lower Manhattan waterfront in 1931 that he liked sex with “fairies or c . . . s . . . . .,” particularly fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys he called “punks.” “I had one of those punks living with me at the [Seamen’s Church] Institute for quite some time,” the man bragged. “He was a young kid about 15 years old, [and] pretty.” The fact that he found a boy attractive, regularly had sex with him, and supported him financially did not make the older man, in his own mind or in the opinion of the investigator, a fairy or queer. Critical to both was the fact that, in the seaman’s version of the relationship, the boy “satisfied me the same as a woman.” At the same time, the seaman appears to have believed that some men—possibly including the investigator—were more likely than others to take an interest in punks; he mentioned his relations with the punks only after learning that the investigator had not visited the “sporting houses” (tenement brothels) that he had previously shown him.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, their interaction suggests that having recourse to a punk or fairy did not have the same reputability in this milieu that going to a prostitute did. When the seaman introduced the agent to a punk prostitute, the agent was able to put off meeting with him by indicating he did not want to make an appointment in front of his friend. This concern evidently seemed plausible to the boy, who accepted the excuse but assured the agent that he could find him anytime around the Seamen’s Church Institute.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the seaman’s willingness to boast about his relationship with a punk to a man he barely knew suggests that he did not expect to lose much, if any, status because of it. If one man might be reticent about admitting such interests (as he might be about any sexual matter), they were acceptable enough that another man could take pride in commenting on them.

The seaman’s interest in punks and fairies was not unusual, nor were such interactions kept carefully hidden. The investigator accompanied the man to Battery Park, whose benches were filled with young men

waiting to be picked up by sailors. The punk to whom the seaman introduced him, a sixteen-year-old named Julius, assumed he wanted a rendezvous and immediately offered to find a room in a lodging house in Chatham Square. He also offered a straightforward account of his prices: along with the room, which cost a dollar, he charged 50 cents for oral sex and 75 cents for anal sex. The investigator frequently saw punks and fairies talking with seamen at the Institute, in nearby lunchrooms, and in the park; on one occasion a seaman identified fifteen male prostitutes in the park, sitting “on separate benches, always leaving room for a [man] to sit down.”<sup>55</sup> Although the openness and even the existence of such men was news to the investigator, it must have been common knowledge among workers and residents of the waterfront.

Long-term relationships or “marriages” between wolves and punks seem to have been even more common among hoboes, although precisely how many hoboes participated in such relationships is, of course, impossible to determine. A study of a hundred “vagrants” in New York City in 1916 identified a quarter of them as “perverts”; studies conducted in other cities produced lower figures, although any such estimates need to be regarded with suspicion.<sup>56</sup> The prevalence of homosexual relations was so “generally assumed to be true among hoboes,” wrote the sociologist and former hobo Nels Anderson in a 1931 hobo handbook, “that whenever a man travels around with a lad he is apt to be labeled a ‘jockey’ or a ‘wolf’ and the road kid is called his ‘punk,’ ‘preshun,’ or ‘lamb.’ It has become so that it is very difficult for a good hobo to enjoy the services of an apprentice.”<sup>57</sup>

As Anderson’s comment suggests, partnerships between older and younger men on the road were common, and while they were presumed to have a sexual element, many did not. In both sexual and nonsexual partnerships, the older man usually took responsibility for teaching his apprentice the arts of the road as well as providing for his material needs. The younger man performed a host of services for his mentor, including shaving him, and also contributed to their supply of cash. In many respects their relationship reproduced the sexual roles, division of labor, and conventions of mutual dependence that were characteristic of husbands and wives in the dominant culture. In his classic 1923 sociological study of hoboes, Anderson noted that “it is not uncommon to hear a boy who is seen traveling with an older man spoken of as the ‘wife’ or ‘woman.’”<sup>58</sup> As with heterosexual marriages, the quality of the partnerships varied widely: some were brutal and coercive, others were close and affectionate, and still others simply instrumental.

The character of such relationships needs to be explored more fully by historians, but it seems likely that the widespread existence of hobo partnerships made it easier for men in sexual relationships to fit into the

social world that took shape in rural hobo camps and in urban “hobohemias,” the districts, such as the Bowery, where many transient workers spent the winter. Some men doubtless entered into such relationships only because of the circumstances in which they found themselves, but other men must have sought out such circumstances precisely because they made it possible for them to engage in homosexual intimacies.<sup>58</sup>

Another locus of relations between wolves and punks, the New York City Jail on Welfare Island, deserves scrutiny because the organization of sexual relations in it illuminates the boundaries drawn between different kinds of men who engaged in homosexual practices. Although the homosexual world that took shape among prisoners was a peculiar one, it was not so exceptional as is often thought. Nor does the culturally blind concept of “situational homosexuality” offer an adequate framework for analyzing that world. In a remarkable study of homosexual relations in an American prison in the 1970s, Wayne S. Wooden and Jay Parker showed that the social organization of such relations varied among Chicanos, African-Americans, and Euro-Americans. Men did not react to being deprived of other sexual contacts by engaging in homosexual practices in a spontaneous and unstructured way, but organized those relations in accordance with the sexual norms they brought to the prison from their own cultures.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the homosexual world that evolved in the New York City Jail in the early twentieth century, rather than being a singular world cut off from wider cultural patterns, was profoundly shaped by those patterns. It drew especially on the patterns of the bachelor subculture, whose members, as the men least socialized into the dominant social order, were disproportionately represented in the jail.

The dominant pre-World War II conceptualizations of homosexuality were inscribed in the spatial organization of prisons and in the everyday interactions of prisoners. The central position of the fairy in the dominant cultural conception of homosexuality was signaled by the decision of prison authorities not only to segregate homosexual prisoners from other men but to classify as “homosexuals” only those men who exhibited the typical markers of effeminacy. It is not clear when this policy was initiated, but it had become a well-established practice by the 1910s. All prisoners

<sup>58</sup>Indeed, homosexual relationships appear to have been so widespread among seamen and hoboes that historians need to recognize the desire to live in a social milieu in which such relationships were relatively common and accepted—or to escape the pressure to marry in a more family-oriented milieu—as one of the motives that sent men on the road or to sea. More work needs to be done on the patterns of same-sex relations in all-male work settings where “hoboes” and other transient laborers worked, such as lumber camps, cattle ranges, and many mining camps.<sup>59</sup>

who had been convicted of homosexual solicitation or transvestism were incarcerated in this unit, of course, but the majority of inmates identified as “perverts” had been convicted of drug use or other nonsexual offenses; the authorities segregated any man whose dress or mannerisms suggested he might be homosexual. Segregation from the other prisoners was complete. “Fags” were confined to the prison’s South Annex, the most isolated and secure section of the prison; they ate separately, saw movies separately, and worked in separate work gangs, which were assigned “women’s work” in the prison laundry and in the warden’s home (see figure 3.3). Within the South Annex (which many prisoners called the Fag Annex), men were informally allowed to wear long hair, wigs, makeshift dresses, and homemade rouge and lipstick. Guards and other prisoners alike usually referred to them by their camp names—“Greta Garbo,” “Lillian Russell,” “Broadway Rose”—and at Christmas the South Annex inmates staged a bawdy show called the “Fag Follies” for a select audience of guards and well-connected prisoners. Normally the only contact between the “fags” and other prisoners came when the former were marched past the latter on their way to the mess hall.<sup>61</sup>

If the basis on which the authorities segregated homosexual prisoners confirms how widely the fairy was regarded as a distinct social type, the reasons they gave for segregating them confirm how widely it was believed that any man might be attracted to a fairy. Most authorities did not think that men isolated from women would randomly engage in homosexual behavior, but they did assume that such men would be susceptible to the fairies. When a new administrator took over the jail in 1934 he announced that he would force the fairies with long hair to get “military hair cuts,” in order, he explained to the press in a revealing comment, to “cut down their attractiveness.”<sup>62</sup> Although most prison authorities found inmates’ having sex with fairies to be reprehensible, they hardly considered it unusual. Indeed, their fear was not just that fairies would induce other men to engage in homosexual practices but that rivalries between men for a fairy’s attentions would escalate into violent confrontations. “Perverts, frank and under cover, stimulate tortured men to indulge in perversion, often by direct solicitation,” one prison doctor and reform advocate warned in 1934. “The institutional type, the one the man in the street recognizes under the optimistic title of ‘fairy,’ should be segregated in colonies, such as now utilized for mental defectives; only in this way can their moral leprosy be prevented from spreading.”<sup>63</sup>

Prison officials generally refused to acknowledge the existence of homosexual activity in their prisons, but reformers brought it to the attention of the public in 1934. Shortly after the newly elected mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, appointed his own commissioner of corrections,



Figure 3.3 The original caption for this photo, published in a 1934 prison study, announced: "In the penitentiary at Welfare Island, New York, are confined a daily average of 75 members of the 'third sex.'" Gay prisoners were segregated from other prisoners and assigned "women's work" in the prison laundry. (From Joseph F. Fishman, *Sex in Prison* [New York: National Library Press, 1934].)

Austin H. MacCormick, the commissioner conducted a raid of Welfare Island. His purpose was both to seize control of the prison from the crime-boss inmates who exercised effective suzerainty within it—running numbers rackets, selling liquor, and leading as luxurious a life as prison conditions would allow—and to discredit both the old prison administration that had allowed such conditions to develop and the Tammany Hall mayoral administration preceding La Guardia's.<sup>64</sup> The raid produced sensational newspaper stories that destroyed the credibility of the old administration. Some of the most lurid stories concerned the homosexual segregation unit. The new administrators used the "freedoms" granted homosexuals as well as gang lords to attack the old administration; when they invited the press to tour the prison on the day of the raid, they pointed to the spectacle of homosexual depravity to demonstrate the depths to which the prison had sunk.

The *New York Herald Tribune* cooperated fully in the effort. It described the scene witnessed by the crusading commissioner on the day of the raid when the "sex perverts" entered the mess hall: "These men appeared for lunch, some of them heavily rouged, their eye brows painted, their lips red, hair in some instances hanging to the shoulder, and in most cases hips swinging and hands fluttering. . . . Mr. MacCormick

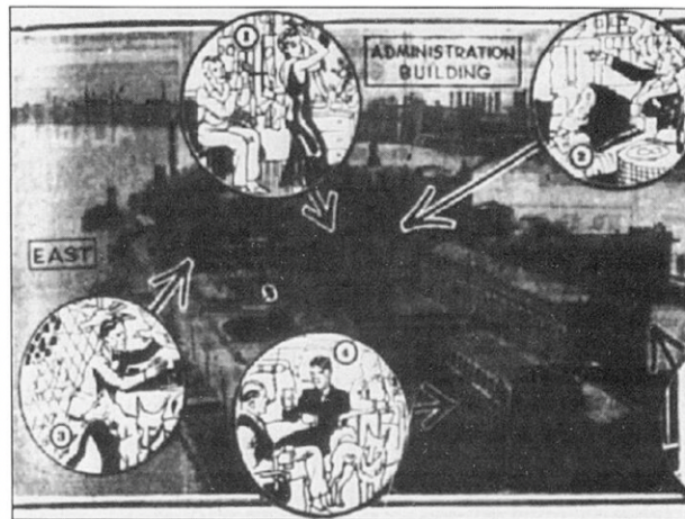


Figure 3.4 The day after authorities raided the New York City penitentiary, a newspaper published this artist's depiction of corrupt jail conditions, which spotlighted the liberties supposedly given homosexual prisoners. A drawing of someone who appeared to be a woman dancing in front of another inmate was captioned: "We have a few of the boys entertaining." (From the *New York Daily Mirror*, January 26, 1934. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Wisconsin.)

[said] he could see no reason 'for permitting them to flaunt themselves in front of the rest of the prisoners in this way,' and he "intimated" that this was "but a slight example of the liberties this group had previously had in the prison." The *Daily Mirror* offered a fuller account of their "liberties" when it noted they "had been permitted by the prison bosses to roam the Island, visiting various buildings and cell-tiers 'in drag'—or female costume," although even it only hinted at the sordid purpose of their visits. When the raiding party entered the South Annex, the *Herald Tribune* continued, it was "greeted by cries and howls in high falsetto voices. . . . Inside the cells were found every conceivable article of women's wearing apparel. Dozens of compacts, powder puffs, and various types of perfume were found, while silk step-ins, nightgowns and other bits of negligee were strewn about the cells." The paper also described the dramatic scene as "one man . . . clung desperately to a set of false eyelashes, which he did not want disturbed," in an apparent effort to turn the confiscation of the false eyelashes into a symbol of the reformers' struggle to restore order to the New York City Jail.<sup>65</sup> The sensational

news articles were soon followed by a flurry of more “authoritative” studies by prison doctors and reformers with titles like *Sex in Prison* and *Revelations of a Prison Doctor*.<sup>66</sup>

The segregation of “fags” hardly put an end to homosexual liaisons in the city jail, though. As numerous reformers and prisoners themselves testified, the jail was the quintessential home of the “wolf” and the “punk,” and the treatment accorded the wolf by inmates and prison authorities alike attests to the degree to which he was regarded as a “normal” man. The wolf’s behavior led him to lose little status among other prisoners; if anything, he gained stature in many men’s eyes because of his ability to coerce or attract a punk. Prison authorities did not try to segregate the highly masculine and aggressive older wolves by confining them in the “degenerate” unit in which they segregated the effeminate fairies, primarily because they did not think it was possible to distinguish wolves from other prisoners.

Whether the wolf could be distinguished from the other inmates was subject to debate. Some prison reformers, such as Thomas Mott Osborne, thought that “‘wolves,’ who by nature or practice prefer unnatural to what we may call natural vice,” should be distinguished from other homosexually active men “who have no liking for unnatural vice [and] outside of prison would never be guilty of it.” Several reformers recommended that wolves be segregated from vulnerable youths.<sup>67</sup> But most prisoners, like the prison authorities, seem to have regarded the wolves as little different from other men; their sexual behavior may have represented a moral failure, but it did not distinguish them from other men as the fairy’s gender status did. As one prisoner wrote in 1933, “The ‘wolf’ (active sodomist), as I have hinted before, is not considered by the average inmate to be ‘queer’ in the sense that the oral copulist, male or female, is so considered. While his conduct is felt to be in some measure depraved, it is conduct which many a prisoner knows that he himself might resort to under certain special circumstances.” The “special circumstances” he envisioned were not so special after all and presumed that any prisoner might be attracted to a youth. “If the prisoner can find a good-looking boy, and the opportunity, and is sufficiently ‘hard up’ for sexual satisfaction,” he explained, “he will not usually disdain to make use of him for purposes of relief.”<sup>68</sup> The line between the wolf and the normal man, like that between the culture of the prison and culture of the streets, was a fine one indeed.

The ability of many workingmen to alternate between male and female sexual partners provides powerful evidence that the hetero-homosexual axis—the dichotomy between the “homosexual” and the “heterosex-

ual”—governed neither their thinking about sexuality nor their sexual practices. While fairies, trade, wolves, and punks all engaged in what we would define as homosexual behavior, they and the people who observed them were careful to draw distinctions between different modes of such behavior: between “feminine” and “masculine” behavior, between “passive” and “active” roles, between desire for sex with a man and desire for sex. The organization of the relationships between fairies or punks and their husbands, trade, wolves, and customers (sometimes overlapping groupings of men) serves to highlight the cultural presumption that the men in such relationships were defined by their *differences*—manifested in their different sexual roles or their differently gendered modes of self-presentation—rather than by their *similarities*—their shared “homosexuality.” Even evidence of persistent and exclusive interest in sexual relations with another man did not necessarily put a man in the same category as his partner. The band musician’s marriage to Loop-the-loop did not turn him into a fairy, after all, but into the husband of a fairy. While today we might regard all of them equally as “homosexuals,” they recognized no “homosexual” category in which they all could be placed. In the very different sexual culture that predominated at the turn of the century, they understood themselves—and were regarded by others—as fundamentally different kinds of people. To classify their behavior and identities using the simple polarities of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” would be to misunderstand the complexity of their sexual system, the realities of their lived experience.

As this chapter’s ethnography of sexual practices and identities demonstrates, men did not just use different categories to think about a sexuality that, despite appearances, was fundamentally the same as that of men today, for those different cultural categories governed and were manifest in men’s everyday social practices. Even in the terms of the late-twentieth-century hetero-homosexual axis, in other words, it would be difficult to argue that the “normal” men who had sex with fairies were *really* homosexuals, for that would leave inexplicable their determined pursuit of women sexual partners. But neither could they plausibly be regarded as heterosexuals, for heterosexuals would have been incapable of responding sexually to another male. Nor were they bisexuals, for that would have required them to be attracted to both women as women and men as *men*. They were, rather, men who were attracted to womanlike men or interested in sexual activity defined not by the gender of their partner but by the kind of bodily pleasures that partner could provide.

Not all men in working-class New York had the same degree of interest in sex with a fairy (and many had none at all), just as not all men had the same degree of interest in sex with a dark-skinned woman or a middle-aged woman or a blue-eyed woman. But almost all workingmen—from

the liquor authority agents who watched “fags” trying to pick up sailors at the Happy Hour Bar to the newsstand owner who watched sailors trying to pick up fairies at the Times Square Building—considered it unremarkable that a man might go with a fairy and as little revelatory about his sexual identity as his preference for one kind of woman over another. A man’s occasional recourse to fairies did not prove he had homosexual desire for another man, as today’s hetero-homosexual binarism would insist, but only that he was interested in the forms of phallic pleasure a fairy could provide as well as a female prostitute could. Men’s identities and reputations simply did not depend on a sexuality defined by the anatomical sex of their sexual partners. Just as the abnormality of the fairy depended on his violation of gender conventions, rather than his homosexual practices alone, the normality of other men depended on their conformity to those conventions rather than on an eschewal of homosexual practices which those conventions did not require. Heterosexuality had not become a precondition of gender normativity in early-twentieth-century working-class culture. Men had to be many things in order to achieve the status of normal men, but being “heterosexual” was not one of them.