

## The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine

To the Editor:

In “The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch” (106 [1991]: 1094–105), Rita Felski doesn’t emphasize the writers’ conscious motives for the fin de siècle “cult of art and artifice” (1094) she otherwise treats so well. Of course, her forthcoming book may do just this, but I think her article scants the extent to which the writers involved knew what they were doing.

First—and I don’t think this can be emphasized too much—careers and lives could easily be smashed by any openness at all, and everyone knew it.

Second—and Felski seems to me to de-emphasize this too—there is the formidable difficulty of describing or envisioning oneself at all, given the cultural counters available. How to describe—or even be—this man-who-is-not-a-man? How to do so especially at the particular time Felski notes? As Jonathan Ned Katz demonstrates (*Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary*, New York: Harper, 1983), the crucial business of inventing “heterosexuality”—that new identity the European medical profession was so insistent about—required for real success “homosexuality”: a bad and deviant twin. The cult and the new identity fit precisely, too. Unnatural? Fine; we’ll make a value of artifice. Immoral? We’ll make a virtue of heartlessness. Feminine? We’ll scorn women. Defective? We’ll be aristocrats, either by birth or by taste.

Without more emphasis on the reactive nature of the cult, readers of Felski’s article may misinterpret such phrases as “a subtext of anxiety and repressed violence” (1102) and “deeper anxieties about sexuality and the body” (1101) and conclude that such anxieties result from homosexuality or that they cause it. When oppression is soft-pedaled, the connection between anxiety and oppression gets lost, as does the link between anxiety and outright persecution.

When actual gay politics becomes active rather than reactive, so does cultural politics, of course. Some of this did happen in the period Felski describes. I look forward to her book, but I hope it will embrace more of the historicity of the phenomenon she studies and will face more squarely the problem of how conscious a strategy the decadent sensibility was and what sort of strategies were practical for writers whose earnings and living depended directly or indirectly on their work. Along with Katz, Sheila Jeffreys (*The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930*, London: Routledge, 1985) and Lilian Faderman (*Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and*

*Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York: Morrow, 1981) are important sources for this period; that Felski doesn’t use them here is a mistake, I think.

A note on Huysmans’s character Miss Urania: her name is a joke clearly aimed at those in the know. A German term, originating in the 1860s, *uranism* was used throughout the 1880s and 1890s (especially in the United States, says Katz) to mean homosexuality. Huysmans’s brutal strong man at the fair reappears in Quentin Crisp’s *Naked Civil Servant* as the tall dark man and throughout Jean Genet’s novels as just about everybody.

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### Reply:

My primary concern was to explore the motif of the feminization of writing as exemplified in specific literary texts of the fin de siècle. This topic relates to my broader interest in the gendering of the aesthetic sphere during modernity and in the reasons why, since Romanticism, the artist has often been seen as a feminine man. A historical account of how this motif developed and of its convoluted politics has, in my view, significant implications for some contemporary claims that an experimental writing codified as “feminine” is either necessarily revolutionary or linked to the interests of feminism.

My discussion, in other words, seeks to address the aesthetic and political implications accompanying the literary subversion of gender categories (masculine/feminine) rather than of sexual norms (homosexual/heterosexual). I am thus somewhat surprised by Joanna Russ’s confident assumption that my argument is really “about” homosexual men. Recent gay theory has, after all, expended a great deal of effort on demonstrating that there is no necessary connection between the homosexual and the “feminized” man. Nevertheless, I would agree with Russ that the cultural politics of homosexuality needs to be given greater weight in my argument, given the historically contingent intersections between (rather than identity of) the figures of the artist, the homosexual, and the feminine man that did emerge in the late nineteenth century, as exemplified in the public visibility of a figure such as Wilde. In the extended version of the article that forms part of my current book, I attempt to address some of the connections between a self-conscious aestheticism and the construction and circulation of a homosexual identity.