

# ‘THE MAN WITH THE POWDER PUFF’ IN INTERWAR LONDON\*

MATT HOULBROOK

*University of Liverpool*

**ABSTRACT.** *This article explores the historically specific use of cosmetic commodities as evidence in prosecutions for importuning in interwar London. Taking as its point of departure the story of ‘the man with the powder puff’ told in the journal *John Bull* in 1925, it moves to consider the discrete but intersecting histories within which cosmetics came to function as a material sign of deviant masculinity, illicit sexuality, and de facto criminality. The process through which a powder puff could be deployed as evidence in court depended upon a particular understanding of sexual difference. It was embedded in the emergence of a vibrant consumer beauty culture in the 1920s. It took shape within the operational practices of the Metropolitan Police, particularly the explosive politics of law enforcement after the First World War. It emerged, finally, in response to profound anxieties about the war’s disruptive impact on British culture. In understanding the story of ‘the man with the powder puff’, I argue, we might more fully understand the cultural landscape of post-First World War Britain.*

---

## I

This article is my attempt to make sense of the story of ‘the man with the powder puff’, told in the weekly journal *John Bull* in January 1925. *John Bull* called the attention of William Joynson-Hicks, the home secretary, to what they saw as a ‘tragic and appalling miscarriage of justice’ – ‘a young man languishing today in jail who ... ought not to be there’. There was nothing intrinsically unusual in this. Since its launch two decades earlier, *John Bull* had mirrored the colourful persona of its first editor, Horatio Bottomley. Throughout his various incarnations as financial speculator, Liberal MP, patriotic demagogue, man-about-town, bankrupt, and fraudster, Bottomley remained always the self-styled champion of the ‘man in the street’. *John Bull*, too, was outspoken in defending the British everyman. Noisily populist in tone, muckraking and sensationalist in style, the journal acted ‘without fear or favour’ in seeking to expose and counter the dangers posed by over-bearing political and financial elites, a rising tide of immorality, and the

*School of History, University of Liverpool, 9 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7WZ. M.Houlbrook@liverpool.ac.uk*

\* Thanks to Katie Ankers, Peter Bailey, Lucy Bland, Sam Caslin, Andy Davies, Laura Doan, Peter Mandler, Selina Todd, and Chris Waters and the two anonymous referees for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

insidious deprivations of various ‘foreigners’. Its readers would have been familiar with such a crusade.<sup>1</sup>

This story, however, was strangely unfamiliar. After a trial before the Bow Street magistrate, Thomas B., a twenty-three-year-old railway porter from Rhondda, had been imprisoned for three months for ‘importuning male persons for an immoral purpose’. Having observed Thomas ‘accosting’ several men as he walked between the Tivoli Theatre, Lyons’s Corner House, and a urinal in York Place, plainclothes officers arrested him on the Strand. There ‘he was searched and on him was found a few pounds in money and, certainly a remarkable thing, a lady’s powder puff, powder and a small mirror’. He was taken to Bow Street Police Station.

The case against Thomas hinged upon these three small objects – presented as evidence to the magistrate the morning after his arrest. Here the mere possession of a powder puff served to establish the actuality of Thomas’s offence, functioning as sufficient material sign of a deviant character and transgressive male body. The contents of his pockets, the police suggested, indicated that Thomas was just the sort of man who would look for homosex in London’s streets. In ‘proving’ his guilt, they produced a public narrative that interwove the effeminized male body, sexual encounters between men, the fleeting traces of commodity culture, and the operations of the law. According to this logic, the man who owned a powder puff was effeminate; the effeminate man possessed illicit sexual desires; such a man was, in police jargon, of the ‘male importuning type’.<sup>2</sup>

*John Bull*’s own narrative suggested the resonance of these elisions. Thomas, they noted, had been ‘branded with the mark of infamy and ruined for life’. The language oscillated uneasily between the ‘infamy’ and loss of character associated with the conviction for a sexual offence and the bodily colourings that led to that conviction. Though there was no explicit suggestion that he had powdered his face, Thomas’s body had been symbolically, if not physically, marked as transgressive through the contents of his pockets. As they came to Thomas’s defence, *John Bull* never challenged the cultural logic of these associations. Indeed, they acknowledged the presence of ‘hardened and impudent blackguards long inured to their shameless traffic’ in central London – precisely the sort of men who might rouge their cheeks. But Thomas, they suggested, was not part of this world. Having outlined his background and ‘exemplary’ character – attested to in court by his local MP and station master – *John Bull* asked: ‘is this the type of young man who becomes a social pest in the West End of London?’.

<sup>1</sup> S. Theodore Felstead, *Horatio Bottomley: a biography of an outstanding personality* (London, 1936); Julian Symonds, *Horatio Bottomley* (London, 2001). Bottomley was removed in 1921, when public knowledge of his frauds made him a liability; the journal remained unchanged. Typical vice exposés included ‘Who shields the wicked woman?’, *John Bull*, 2 June 1923, p. 8; ‘A black betrayal’, *John Bull*, 25 July 1925, p. 15; ‘Aristocratic drug fiend’, *John Bull*, 13 Mar. 1926, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> For the ‘male importuning type’ see the National Archives (hereafter NA): CRIM 1 387, *Rex vs Robert B. and others*, keeping a disorderly house: 1927.

The answer, apparently, was no. Thomas had visited London only seven times in the previous five years. On this occasion he had been there a day, visiting the British Empire Exhibition with his mother. This was 'no case hardened West End pest but a simple country visitor' – a rural innocent abroad amid a modern urban culture in which glittering consumerist pleasures co-existed uneasily with profound moral perils and vice.<sup>3</sup> Building upon this defence, *John Bull* carefully extricated Thomas from the pejorative constructions placed upon the powder puff:

*It belonged to his mother!* She was carrying it in a lady's vanity bag ... The jet link handle broke ... the mother took out the powder-puff, the mirror, the keys and her money, and asked her son to carry them for her on the journey to Wembley.

Far from being a 'social pest', Thomas had opened his pockets out of filial solicitude. While his 'anguished mother ... confirmed ... that the articles found upon him were hers' in court, her testimony was ignored. *John Bull* implored Joynson-Hicks rectify an instance of unjust imprisonment and so 'remove from this unhappy youth, not only the restraint upon his liberty, but the dreadful brand of shame that is eating into his heart'.

*John Bull's* involvement in Thomas's case was unlikely; the desire to rescue a workingman from injustice clashing with his links to a metropolitan underworld that normally drew their vitriolic condemnation. Eighty years on it is impossible to know why they were so outspoken on his behalf – or what Thomas was doing that night. Given that he had visited Lyons's Strand Corner House and the Coliseum theatre – known queer meeting places – and was arrested in a neighbourhood that *John Bull* recognized was 'at that hour not free from undesirable characters', it seems likely that he *was* looking for homosex.<sup>4</sup> But this is not really the point. What is interesting here are the ways that this narrative is over-determined by the object found in Thomas's pockets and the remarkable intensity of the debate over its significance that ensued. More than simply a trace of interwar commodity culture, the powder puff seems to possess an excess of symbolic meaning, resonating on London's streets, within the courtroom, on the pages of a popular journal and in the minds of the reading public.<sup>5</sup>

'The man with the powder puff' is, in itself, a fantastic and intriguing story. It is also an incredibly suggestive story that, I would argue, can tell us a great deal about both the historically specific nature of understandings of sexual difference and British culture after the Great War. Significantly, Thomas's was not an isolated case: powder puffs and other cosmetic products were used as evidence in

<sup>3</sup> *John Bull* here evoked circulating notions of the countryside's purity and simplicity that acquired resonance after the Great War. The classic statement is Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London, 1927).

<sup>4</sup> Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago and London, 2005), chs. 2 and 3.

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from 'Grave miscarriage of justice: branded with shame by circumstantial evidence: the man with the powder puff', *John Bull*, 24 Jan. 1925, p. 11.

dozens of similar prosecutions for importuning in interwar London. Regularly and repeatedly, an apparently innocuous object served to establish an association between the effeminized male body, sexual transgression, and criminality and, in so doing, secure a man's conviction and imprisonment.

This article explores the historical conditions through which the powder puff acquired such symbolic power. After first surveying the use of cosmetics as evidence in London's courts, I then trace the cultural, commercial, technological, and legal processes that underpinned a distinctive material culture of law enforcement between the wars. Understanding 'the man with the powder puff', I argue, means situating that item within the discrete but intersecting histories through which it acquired meaning. Why and how could the police remove a puff from Thomas's pocket then use it as evidence in a prosecution for importuning? That action depended upon the growing salience of the effeminate 'painted boy' to public understandings of sexual difference in the 1920s. That cosmetics became integral to many queer men's self-presentation reflected, in turn, a pervasive assumption that homosexual desire was contingent upon an essentially woman-like character. More than this, men's use of make-up as an external signifier of their sexual desires was embedded in rapid changes in the production, advertising, and retail of cosmetics. Within the vibrant beauty culture of interwar Britain, cosmetic commodities were cheap, accessible, and an essential attribute of fashionable femininity that working-class men might readily appropriate.

In itself, the interplay between understandings of sexual difference and a burgeoning consumer culture cannot fully explain the use of cosmetics as evidence. I move to consider why policemen, legal officials, journalists, and the watching public became so apparently obsessed with make-up and its meanings. For the Metropolitan Police, the growing importance of material evidence in importuning prosecutions was a response to a deep public distrust in their integrity amid the explosive politics of law enforcement after the Great War. For other observers, cosmetics were a fascinating yet dangerous sign of men's ability to cross the boundaries between masculine and feminine by simply transforming their appearance. In this sense, the use of cosmetics in court was both braced by and contributed to broader anxieties about the war's disruptive impact on British culture and the integrity of the social boundaries on which Britain's stability depended. I thus conclude by situating 'the *man* with the powder puff' within the concurrent interwar debates over the cultural significance of *women's* use of cosmetics. Paradoxically, just when men's use of make-up was cohering into an acknowledged sign of sexual transgression, changing modes of fashionable femininity made the meanings of women's rouge or lipstick evermore unclear. Thomas's defence was only one particularly striking manifestation of a more expansive public debate over the use of cosmetics in this period. Only by tracing these diverse histories can we fully understand *John Bull's* story of 'the man with the powder puff'. In so doing, I argue, the powder puff might become a prism through which to understand the cultural landscape of post-war Britain.

## II

Thomas's case was remarkable, but by no means unique. In the lists of exhibits presented to London's courts during prosecutions for importuning or keeping a disorderly house the powder puff – along with other cosmetic products – was a familiar presence, as the Met turned a magpie-like gaze on the contents of arrested men's pockets. Here are three examples:

William K., a hotel porter, sentenced to nine months' hard labour and a whipping after being arrested on Piccadilly in 1924. 'When searched', the Old Bailey heard, 'face powder, scented handkerchiefs, and two photographs of himself in woman's costume were found.'<sup>6</sup>

Harold C. – arrested on Hampstead Heath in 1935: 'face powdered and a puff in his pocket', testified a policeman.<sup>7</sup>

After a 1937 raid on Billie's Club (Little Denmark Street) the prosecution produced powder puffs, compacts, rouge, eye shadows, combs, and a silk handkerchief.<sup>8</sup>

In cases like this, the judicial system often seemed captivated by the ephemeral traces of queer material culture.<sup>9</sup>

In one sense, cosmetics were equivalent to the material evidence that characterized prosecutions for other offences – the jemmy, for breaking and entering, or cocaine, for drugs offences. As evidence, each item consolidated and substantiated a prosecution. Yet while the jemmy or cocaine were directly implicated in the commission of an offence – opening a door or being sold illicitly – the powder puff was neither clearly nor necessarily linked to an offence. Rather than signify a criminal *act*, it operated as proxy for a criminal *type* – evoking a hegemonic public image of the kind of man who might importune on London's streets. In 1936, one solicitor thus described 'a type of moral pervert who seemed to delight in imitating persons of the opposite sex, not only in dress and speech but in regard to the use of powder *and the carrying of such things as powder puffs and rouge*'.<sup>10</sup>

The most striking thing about the initial presentation of 'such things' in court, however, was the lack of any explanation of what they actually meant. Indeed, police were rarely explicit in defining the significance of cosmetics before the magistrate. In 1922 DS Pearce testified in two cases before the London Sessions. Alfred T. – a twenty-year-old printer – and Jack M. – a twenty-three-year-old painter – had been arrested for importuning in the West End. Pearce spoke at

<sup>6</sup> NA: CRIM 1 1041, *Rex vs William K.*: importuning, 1938; 'One of a gang', *News of the World*, 3 Oct. 1926, p. 3; 'Nine months "hard" and the "cat" for a West End pest', *Illustrated Police News*, 18 Dec. 1924, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA): PS HAM 37, Harold C., importuning: 8 May 1935. <sup>8</sup> NA: CRIM 1 903, *Rex vs Billie Joice and others*, list of exhibits: 1937.

<sup>9</sup> See also 'Charge against army captain', *Times*, 24 Apr. 1918, p. 2; 'Male dancer's "make-up"', *Times*, 9 Oct. 1919, p. 7; 'Convict's cocaine', *Empire News*, 9 Feb. 1919, p. 5; 'Clerk's four days', *Empire News*, 14 Nov. 1920, p. 3; 'Powder, rouge and revolver', *People*, 5 Apr. 1931, p. 9; LMA: A PMC 41, Public Morality Council, patrolling officer's report: Dec. 1941.

<sup>10</sup> 'Raid on club', *Times*, 27 Nov. 1936, p. 4.

length about the men's 'bad character' – he had known them for some time – the behaviour that prompted their arrest, and their previous convictions. In identifying the contents of their pockets, by contrast, Pearce was surprisingly curt: 'when [Alfred] was arrested he had upon him some rouge and a powder puff' and 'rouge and powder were also found in [Jack's] possession'.<sup>11</sup> Pearce's silence left the objects to stand on their own, almost as if they possessed an intrinsic verbosity that needed no further elaboration. Arrested men themselves recognized the dangerous significance attributed to their possessions – the axiomatic association between object, appearance, and offence – rapidly discarding lipsticks and powder compacts when facing arrest. The most compelling evidence of queer material culture was left lying on the floor, from where it was eagerly collected by the police.<sup>12</sup>

That make-up's meaning was often considered self-evident did not, however, mean it remained uncontested. Indeed, as Thomas's case suggests, the explanatory power invested in simple commodities like the powder puff meant they regularly became the focus of bitter courtroom clashes, as legal officials and defendants struggled to define their significance. Facing the ingrained suspicion of the court and the watching press and public, men desperately tried to establish a legitimate reason for possessing such objects. In challenging its associations with sexual transgression, they repositioned the use of cosmetics within alternative interpretative frameworks.

In part, this meant invoking the recognized therapeutic, medicinal, or hygienic qualities of beauty products. In 1922 Lewis H. was tried for importuning before the Tower Bridge magistrate. Police testified to the tin of cold cream, leaves, and face powder in his possession, implicitly suggesting that these items embodied his deviant character. Lewis – supported by his mother and brother-in-law – identified a very different use: to relieve pain after shaving, 'as [his] skin is so tender'. Lewis's apparent discomfort was, indeed, a source of profit deliberately targeted by companies specializing in medicinal products. In 1923 *John Bull* itself carried a front page advert for Clement and Johnson's Yadil Antiseptic Powder – 'prepared upon an entirely new principle in toilet and dusting powders'. As well as being 'invaluable for the toilet and nursery', the advert pointedly observed how 'men find it soothing after shaving'.<sup>13</sup>

Powder, Lewis suggested, was a physical necessity. For other men, the cosmetics in their pockets were necessary to meet the standards of appearance their occupation demanded. Such arguments delineated a space in which men might legitimately manipulate their bodies for public consumption, exemplified

<sup>11</sup> 'Smart sentences for disgusting practices', *Illustrated Police News*, 18 May 1922, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> NA: CRIM 1 639, *Rex vs Austin S. and others*: keeping a disorderly house, 1933: copy depositions, CI Smith.

<sup>13</sup> LMA: PS TOW B01 049, Lewis H. and William S., importuning: 24 Dec. 1922. 'Yadil Antiseptic Powder', *John Bull*, 30 June 1923, p. 1. See also 'Numbered prisoners on their defence', *News of the World*, 24 Jan. 1937, p. 19; NA: MEPO 3 405, *Francis Champaign, importuning*: attachment 35a, Street Offences Committee, report of the sub-committee, 28 Jan. 1928.

by the theatre or music hall. Cosmetics had an established theatrical function, both in the process of characterization and in addressing the optical effects of modern stage lighting.<sup>14</sup> In 1924 DS Harris arrested the actor Frank N. in the Canterbury PH (Brixton) for indecent assault: 'on him he found two powder puffs and some grease paint'. In cross-examination, Frank's solicitor emphasized the importance of cosmetics in his client's profession. Harris was forced to admit that 'he knew that actors used grease paint, but he did not know that they powdered their face after making up'. If Frank had erred, his solicitor suggested, it was only in removing those objects from a milieu where they had a recognized occupational purpose, into a public space in which their meanings could be subject to violently contradictory interpretations.<sup>15</sup>

Frank's defence had a wider resonance. In 1930 'the question as to whether it is the custom amongst waiters in the West End to powder their faces ... was discussed' at Marlborough Street magistrate's court. Responding to importuning charges, an Italian waiter at *Ciro's Club* 'stated that the management ordered him to put white powder on his face to hide his dark complexion'. The head-waiter endorsed this: waiters were encouraged to powder their faces since 'it improve[d] their appearance', helped them 'look clean', and 'members expect[ed] it'. Along with dinner, *Ciro's* sold a carefully packaged sanitized version of cosmopolitan sociability – a visual spectacle that required the micro-management of waiters' bodies. The restaurant became a performative space in which it was legitimate for men to make-up, so presenting customers with a normalized whiteness that contained the threat of racial difference within acceptable visual parameters. Yet as the case suggests, such practices held other dangers. Tacitly recognizing the associations between make-up, effeminacy, and sexual transgression, the magistrate was somewhat uneasy: 'it would be better for [waiters] to look dark than to have a lot of powder on their faces. However ... it is a matter of taste.'<sup>16</sup>

Cases like these are not quite *unique* to the interwar period, but they are *characteristic* of it. Although newspapers regularly commented on the presence of 'painted boys' in central London and policemen drew attention to arrested men's appearance in court in the late nineteenth century, neither Matt Cook nor Harry Cocks have found any record of the actual presentation of cosmetics as evidence in sexual offences cases.<sup>17</sup> By the 1912 case of *Horton vs Mead*, however, Met officers had apparently begun to present cosmetics in court. Arrested in Dansey Place, Alan Horton's 'face and lips ... appeared to be artificially reddened and in [his] pocket ... was found a powder puff with pink powder on it'. This object,

<sup>14</sup> See Helena Chalmers, *The art of make-up: for the stage, the screen and social use* (London and New York, 1925); Eric Ward, *A book of make-up* (London and New York, 1930).

<sup>15</sup> 'Serious charge against an actor', *Illustrated Police News*, 10 Apr. 1924, p. 7. See also 'Alleged scandalous scenes in a dance hall', *Illustrated Police News*, 16 Dec. 1926, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> 'West End waiters and powder', *Illustrated Police News*, 8 May 1930, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Cocks, *Nameless offences: homosexual desire in nineteenth century England* (London, 2003); Matt Cook, *London and the culture of homosexuality, 1885–1914* (Cambridge, 2003).

commented Lord Chief Justice Alverstone, was ‘not unimportant in connection with an offence of this kind’. While the importance of cosmetics in importuning trials was thus clearly acknowledged *before* the First World War, there are comparatively few recorded cases. It was in the 1920s and 1930s, by contrast, that such practices became most common, generating an unprecedented number of examples in legal files and newspaper reports. After the Second World War, the powder puff again vanished from the courtroom. How, then, can we explain the peculiar courtroom history of cosmetics?<sup>18</sup>

### III

The power of cosmetics as evidence between the wars depended upon an increasingly pervasive assumption that male ‘effeminacy’ was a sign of transgressive sexual desires in this period – it was underpinned by a map of male sexual practices in which difference and ‘normality’ were embodied in the distinction between flamboyantly camp ‘queans’ and ‘men’, rather than in our modern categories of homo- and heterosexual. The distinction between ‘queans’ and ‘men’ had a deep resonance within working-class culture in particular, both as a mode of self-understanding and a way of interpreting other men’s behaviour and character. In the 1920s, Quentin Crisp recalled, ‘the same exaggerated and over-simplified distinction that separated men from women ... ran like a wall straight and impassable between ... roughs and ... bitches’. The language of ‘queans’ and ‘bitches’ evoked a commonplace equivalence between sexual difference and effeminacy; Crisp ‘was over thirty before I heard someone say ... that he did not think of himself as masculine or feminine but simply as a person attracted to other people with male sexual organs’.<sup>19</sup>

Crisp’s memories suggest an interpretive framework predicated upon the idea of what Susanne Davis calls ‘dichotomously sexed bodies’.<sup>20</sup> Sexual desires and practices were here understood as an inherent attribute of gender, embedded in an innate physiology or psychology. Set against an ‘exaggerated’ and rigid distinction between men and women, male and female bodies were assumed to be ‘sexed’ in particular ways. The desire for a woman was considered inherently masculine. The desire for a man was a priori womanlike. It was within this context that sexual difference and ‘normality’ were mapped onto the gendered opposition between quean and man. Men neither understood themselves, nor were labelled by others, through their choice of sexual partner.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie Moran, *The homosexual(ity) of law* (London and New York, 1996), p. 137. The earliest case seems to be ‘Impersonating a woman’, *Times*, 24 Apr. 1906, p. 4. See also ‘West End pest’, *People*, 11 Jan. 1914. The only post-war case I know is NA: CRIM 1 2424, *Regina vs Cecil W.*, importuning: 1954.

<sup>19</sup> Quentin Crisp, *The naked civil servant* (London, 1968), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Susanne Davis, ‘Sexuality, performance and spectatorship in law: the case of Gordon Lawrence, Melbourne 1888’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7 (1997), p. 405.



This gendering of desire underpinned the ways that all contemporaries interpreted same-sex practices. It was, for example, codified through sexological case histories and theories. Anomaly's *The invert and his social adjustment* (1927) located men's 'homosexual' desires in their essentially feminine physiological constitution – a constitution which contradicted the external signs of biological sex. In the 'invert', he argued, 'the balance of male and female elements is such that the element which determines sex impulse is at variance with the sex structure'.<sup>21</sup> Yet such ideas were most important in structuring the self-understanding of working-class men. 'We were queer', John Alcock recalled, 'so we were much more like women than we were like men.'<sup>22</sup> For Alcock, and many others, the idea that his desires reflected his womanlike nature gave those desires meaning. In constituting a particular understanding of selfhood, such mentalities shaped *both* the ways that Alcock talked about himself, *and* his erotic, affective, and social life. That homosexual desire was thus conceptualized as contingent upon a broader deviation from normative masculinities meant that the basis for labelling someone a 'quean' – or identifying as such – was thus not who a man had sex with but his gendered character. As Sam remembered, people 'might call you queer, but ... only ... because they thought you was a bit girlish ... not because of the sexual act'.<sup>23</sup> These assumptions were reproduced through the language within which sexual difference was mapped. Rather than sexual practice, terms like pansy, Nancy-boy, and pouf denoted particular gendered patterns of behaviour. They were, in the first instance, used to describe those who failed to do what was expected of a man at work, on the streets, or at play. Self-presentation was one part of this array of expectations.<sup>24</sup>

While men were labelled as different because their behaviour approximated to practices culturally ascribed to women, the effeminized male body was automatically thought to be sexed in specific ways. In 1922 the metal worker William S. was arrested for importuning on Waterloo Road. Seeking information about his background, police visited William's workplace in Hoxton. As workmates tried to understand why William had gone looking for homosex, his apparent failure to meet the prescriptive demands of working-class masculinity acquired a deeper significance. He was, they noted, 'rather womanish in habits'. Set against hegemonic masculinities, it seemed, the man whose 'habits' were 'womanish' could not but desire men.<sup>25</sup>

These assumptions exercised a profound influence over both popular and official responses to men like William. In 1933 the *Morning Advertiser* reported the trial of sixty men arrested at a Holland Park Avenue drag ball under the headline

<sup>21</sup> Anomaly, *The invert and his social adjustment* (London, 1927), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> National Sound Archive (hereafter NSA): C456 03 02, John Alcock.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Weeks and Kevin Porter, eds., *Between the acts: lives of homosexual men, 1885–1967* (London, 1999), p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Partridge, *The Wordsworth dictionary of the underworld* (Ware, 1995), pp. 462, 496, 524–5, 527.

<sup>25</sup> LMA: PS TOW Bo1 049, Lewis H. and William S., importuning: 24 Dec. 1922.

'MEN DRESSED AS WOMEN'.<sup>26</sup> Yet reports of the case, particularly the comments of the recorder, Ernest Wild, evinced a widespread assumption that the men's transgression went far beyond cross-dressing. Wild's summation established an easy link between appearance and sexual character, praising the police for exposing this 'nest of sodomitical haunts'. A category defined by its disruption of gender norms – the quean – was inscribed on to a category defined by the behaviour of the sexualized male body – the sodomite. In conceptualizing male gender inversion as a sign of sodomy, contemporaries clearly assumed that transgressive sexual desires could be read off the male body or, to put it another way, that a man's gendered character constituted those desires.<sup>27</sup>

These assumptions represented a distinct shift in public understandings of sexual difference – one that goes some way to explaining the comparative absence of cosmetics from the courtroom before the First World War. Alan Sinfield, Joseph Bristow, and Charles Upchurch have all highlighted the 'indeterminacy' of the associations between gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century. Male 'effeminacy' was not *automatically* read as a signifier of sexual practice or as an essential character trait of the 'homosexual'.<sup>28</sup> In this context the powder puff's ability to 'prove' a defendant's 'guilt' was negligible. In the early twentieth century, however, the elaboration of police operational practices, the regular prosecutions reported in the press, and a series of spectacular 'pansy cases' gradually eroded this 'indeterminacy'. Certainly, by the 1920s, the effeminate quean was the dominant image of queer urban culture and, for many, the embodiment of sexual difference – exactly the sort of man who would look for homosex in London's public spaces.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

The opposition between quean and man invested workingmen's desires with a particular cultural meaning – as symptomatic of their womanlike physiology or psychology. It was this interpretive framework that underpinned the second trajectory through which cosmetics entered the courtroom after the Great War – the development of a new mass market in cosmetics. The 1920s was a key decade in the emergence of what Kathy Peiss has called the 'beauty industry'. Young women's increasing spending power – together with cinema's influence on iconic forms of femininity – provided the context within which 'selling beauty as a product became much more systematic, self-conscious and

<sup>26</sup> 'Numbered prisoners at Old Bailey', *Morning Advertiser*, 21 Feb. 1933, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> 'West End nest of vice smoked out', *News of the World*, 5 Mar. 1933, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde century: effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the queer moment* (New York, 1994); Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: homoerotic writing after 1885* (New York, 1995); Charles Upchurch, 'Forgetting the unthinkable: cross-dressers and British society in the case of the Queen vs. Boulton and others', *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), pp. 128–9.

<sup>29</sup> Matt Houltbrook, 'Lady Austin's camp boys: constituting the queer subject in 1930s London', *Gender and History*, 14 (2002), pp. 31–61.

widespread'.<sup>30</sup> From being an expensive and somewhat dissolute preserve of theatrical performers and fallen women in the mid-nineteenth century, modern forms of industrial production, marketing, and retail transformed cosmetics into an integral component of a demotic consumer culture through which young women were encouraged to buy into rapidly changing norms of self-presentation.

In 1936 *The Times* thus reported the commemoration of the birth of Johann Leichner, founder of the 'House of Leichner' and 'father of the modern cosmetic'. From their origins producing theatrical make-up, by the 1930s Leichner were offering a massive range of products for what was called 'social use'. The head of the company's British operation noted how 'the use of cosmetics ... had grown to enormous dimensions': in 1935 their London factory 'supplied ... over 3,000,000 lipsticks and almost the same number of boxes of powder'.<sup>31</sup> Together with the newspaper's interest in Leichner's history, such figures, in Stanley Redgrove's words, 'give a good idea of the extremely important position now occupied by the cosmetic industry in the civilised world'.<sup>32</sup>

Leichner's success – like the international empires built by Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, and Max Factor between the wars – was founded partly on their commitment to 'scientific' and 'experimental research'.<sup>33</sup> The cosmetic industry', argued Theodor Köller in 1920, 'is mainly indebted to the researches of chemists, who have first pointed out the right paths to follow, then introduced new and valuable substances'. As Köller suggests, this dialogue with the physical sciences led to the discovery of new colouring and therapeutic agents and precise chemical formulae for the composition of cosmetic products.<sup>34</sup> New industrial processes – exemplified by the 'Modern Face Powder Machine' depicted in Redgrove and Foan's *Paint, powder and patches* (1930) – allowed cosmetics to be produced cheaply and on an unprecedented scale.<sup>35</sup> This commitment to innovation and advances in available technologies and materials meant new products appeared on the market at a remarkable rate in the early twentieth century – mascara, pressed powder and compacts, vanity cases, nail varnish, and twist-up lipstick. When interwar commentators talked about the 'cosmetics industry' they explicitly acknowledged the sector's scale and sophistication. By the 1930s, this was an international concern, with giant factories like those of Cheesbrough-Ponds on the Great West Road or Boots in Nottingham utilizing the latest industrial

<sup>30</sup> Kathy Peiss, 'On beauty ... and the history of business', in Philip Scranton, ed., *Beauty and business: commerce, gender and culture in modern America* (London and New York, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> 'A grease paint centenary', *Times*, 31 Mar. 1936, p. 14. Surveys indicate increasing cosmetic use: in 1930 30 per cent of women wore lipstick; by the 1940s 90 per cent of women under thirty were making-up. Sally Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and '30s', in Alexander, ed., *Becoming a woman and other essays in 19th and 20th century feminist history* (New York, 1995), p. 311; Adrian Bingham, *Gender, modernity and the popular press in interwar Britain* (Oxford, 2004), p. 174.

<sup>32</sup> H. Stanley Redgrove and Gilbert Foan, *Paint, powder and patches: a handbook of make-up for stage and carnival* (London, 1930), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> 'Grease paint centenary', p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor Köller, *Cosmetics: a handbook of the manufacture, employment and testing of all cosmetic materials and cosmetic specialities* (London, 1920), p. v.

<sup>35</sup> Redgrove and Foan, *Paint, powder and patches*, p. 31.

techniques, scientific research and development, a trade press and agreed standards of health and safety.<sup>36</sup>

The cosmetics industry's growing power made lipstick or powder compacts an increasingly familiar presence in advertising and retail sites between the wars, as companies sought to encourage women to wear make-up and buy their products. Leichner's boss 'described the columns of newspapers as the greatest shop-windows of the world'.<sup>37</sup> Magazines and newspapers were all singled out as 'shop windows' in sophisticated advertising campaigns. As Penny Tinkler and Adrian Bingham suggest, young women were confronted with images of 'desirable' forms of femininity daily. Desperate to maintain their female readership and attract the lucrative advertising revenue provided by cosmetics and fashion companies, columnists gave advice on 'becoming visibly feminine' – on clothing and adorning the female body according to dominant ideals of womanhood. 'Experts' offered step-by-step guidance on applying cosmetics.<sup>38</sup> More than legitimate and respectable, cosmetics became almost a social imperative for fashionable women. As actress Clare Hardwicke commented in the *Daily Express* in 1929: 'makeup is a modern necessity. No woman can do without it.'<sup>39</sup>

In interwar Britain industrial processes made make-up cheap; advertising and fashion made it a 'modern necessity'. Simultaneously, changes in retail made cosmetics instantly accessible. Although salons had sold beauty products since the late nineteenth century, they had been neither publicly displayed nor widely available. The 'American' retail practices associated with the expanding chain and department store sector changed this. In 1909, Selfridges in Oxford Street became the first store to display powder and rouge openly. By the 1930s, their customers could sample products and 'learn secrets of the skilful and artistic treatment of the complexion' from trained experts.<sup>40</sup> The growth of the cosmetics industry was thus intertwined with the reinvigorated consumerism of the 1920s – exemplified by the success of companies like Woolworths, selling affordable mass-produced commodities. First established in Britain in Liverpool in 1909, Woolworths opened 92 new stores in the 1910s and 336 in the 1920s. The 'for your toilet table' section of their 1929 *Home shopping guide* offered the very

<sup>36</sup> For standards of safety and chemical composition see Redgrove and Foan, *Paint, powder and patches*, ch. 3. For the commitment to scientific research and the trade press see W. A. Poucher, *Perfumes, cosmetics and soaps* (2 vols., London, 1925–26); *Soap, perfumery and cosmetics trade review* (London, 1934–5). This discussion of the cosmetic industry draws upon Kate Mulvey, *Decades of beauty: the changing image of women* (London, 1998), pp. 20, 56–7, 67, 74–5, 93; Nancy Shuker, *Elizabeth Arden: beauty empire builder* (New York, 2001); Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a jar: the making of American beauty culture* (New York, 1999); Madelaine Layeau-Fernandez, *Helena Rubinstein* (Paris, 2003). <sup>37</sup> 'Grease paint centenary', p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> See Chalmers, *Art of make-up*, pp. 143–8. Penny Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood: popular magazines for girls growing up in England, 1920–1950* (London, 1995), pp. 152–60.

<sup>39</sup> Bingham, *Gender, modernity*, p. 174.

<sup>40</sup> 'Beauty adorned', *Times*, 12 Mar. 1932, p. 10; Lindy Woodhead, *War paint: Miss Elizabeth Arden and Madame Helena Rubinstein: their lives, their times, their rivalry* (London, 2003), pp. 71–3, 124–5.

latest 'lipsticks; rouges; face powders – nationally advertised brands; ... Velour powder puffs ... Compacts with puff; vanity cases'.<sup>41</sup>

These changes in production, advertising, and retail meant that in the 1920s, for the first time, items like the powder puff were cheap, readily available, and vigorously promoted as an essential attribute of modern womanhood. It was in this context that, Taylor Croft observed in 1932, 'the use of cosmetics has become general' among queer men.<sup>42</sup> As Croft recognized, in constructing a public persona many men bought into the consumer cultures of femininity they witnessed around them, appropriating commodities available in the local department store. Those cultural practices coded as 'effeminacy' represented the process through which working-class men drew upon the gender culture in which they were socialized to make their bodies publicly intelligible within it. Drawn into an ongoing engagement with consumer goods and styles, men manipulated their very physicality. Powder puffs, lipstick, eye shadow – these were literally the embodiments of what men understood as their essential nature: their femininity.

As a young man in the East End, Terry Gardener 'went to Woolworths for a stick of make-up ... If you were posh you bought Leichner powder ... A three-penny stick of make-up ... a sixpenny box of powder and I was equipped for anything.'<sup>43</sup> Alex Purdie

was a swine for make-up ... my perfume was called Soir de Paris ... if I could scrounge together half a crown to have a bottle of this ... my day was made. We used to have a velouti on the ecaf ... one of those pancake things ... we used to put powder on ... thought we looked absolutely marvellous.<sup>44</sup>

The shops and products are recognizable, everyday, and affordable. Men like Purdie and Gardener plucked and pencilled their eyebrows; they wore lipstick, eye shadow, rouge, and powder; they painted their fingernails; they wore scent.<sup>45</sup> Drawing upon the material culture of fashionable femininity, they manipulated their bodies' physicality to create an arrestingly colourful persona that made them a striking urban presence. In a deeply gendered consumer market, the use of cosmetics was unambiguously coded as womanlike. It was his use of make-up that most visibly distinguished the quean from 'normal' men. Common phrases like 'men of the powder and paint calibre' suggest the importance invested in the condition of men's face in defining their transgression.<sup>46</sup> Being 'done up',

<sup>41</sup> The guide was produced in America, but distributed in Britain: 'The Woolworths virtual museum', <<http://museum.woolworths.co.uk>> (2004).

<sup>42</sup> Taylor Croft, *The cloven hoof: a study of contemporary London vices* (London, 1932), p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Alkarim Jivani, *It's not unusual: a history of lesbian and gay life in the twentieth century* (London, 1997), p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> NSA: C444 03 30a–32a, Alex Purdie. 'Ecaf' is backslang for face.

<sup>45</sup> See NA: CRIM 1 633, *Rex vs Lawrence B.*, gross indecency: 1933; NA: MEPO 3 758: DS Mogford: 25 Aug. 1934; NA: MEPO 2 4485, *Running Horse public house: permitting drunkenness/disorderly conduct of undesirables*: minute 63a: PS Gowen, 6 Mar. 1937.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Burke, *The London spy: a book of town travels* (London, 1922), p. 303; 'Rouged rogues', *John Bull*, 3 Jan. 1925, p. 10.

observed H. P. Macmillan in 1928, 'is a very unusual thing in the case of a man, something that would naturally attract your attention'.<sup>47</sup>

In reconfiguring the landscape of fashionable femininity, the beauty industry thus simultaneously reconfigured the visual and material signs in which observers – including the police – located queer *men's* deviance. By the 1920s, officers clearly assumed that transgressive sexual desires – and, by extension, criminal behaviour – could be read off the effeminized male body. In 1927 representatives of the Street Offences Committee asked PC Handford 'have these male importuners ... anything distinctive about them?' Handford acknowledged 'different forms of sodomites' but, nonetheless, clearly visualized the transgressive male body in a particular way.<sup>48</sup> He replied immediately: 'yes. Painted lips, powder'. It was, the committee concluded, likely that a man would have some 'outward indication of his nefarious habits'.<sup>49</sup> 'Nefarious' sexual desires, it seems, could not but colour the skin of those who held them. The 'painted boy' became a working definition both of the queer himself and the perpetrator of a sexual offence, his body a demonstrable sign of deviant intent and his pockets subject to rigorous scrutiny.

Such practices highlight the cosmetics industry's spectacular success in creating a public realm in which its products were indelibly linked with femininity, beauty, and appearance in the 1920s. Modern forms of consumerism thus problematized older forms of body management, particularly men's use of products like Yadil Antiseptic Powder for medicinal or hygienic purposes. Increasingly, any face powder was considered incompatible with normative masculinities – risking considerable suspicion and attention. So strong were the associations between cosmetics and femininity that even 'Make-up Artists' deliberately instructed male actors in the acceptable limits of theatrical self-presentation. 'In the case of the lips', N. E. B. Wolters advised, 'one must be careful in the choice of colour, as a bright shade will immediately add an appearance of effeminacy'.<sup>50</sup>

Produced as evidence in the prosecutions of 'painted boys', the powder puff thus both represented and constituted a wider shift in the public meanings of sexual difference. In itself, however, the centrality of make-up to hegemonic notions of the 'West End pouf' cannot quite explain cases like Thomas's – we need again to emphasize changes within the cosmetics industry. Consider the restaurant scene witnessed by A. B. Walkley in 1922 – a young woman 'plying her lipstick as frequently as her knife and fork'. More than 'a mere beautifier', the item had 'been promoted; it had become didactic, expository, something between a lecturer's wand and a chairman's mallet'. Walkley was struck by

the unabashed publicity of the whole affair. Women used to 'make-up' in private ... Now they powder their noses and redden their lips with a flaunting publicity in the street, on the

<sup>47</sup> NA: MEPO 3 405; transcript of proceedings, 5 Jan. 1928: Q460, Q461.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: Q233, Q462.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: Q459–67.

<sup>50</sup> N. E. B. Wolters, *Modern make-up for stage and screen* (London, 1935), pp. 44–5.

top of the bus, at the restaurant ... everywhere. No sensible man objects to what ... is a real mark of confidence.<sup>51</sup>

For Walkley, young women's willingness to 'make-up' publicly depended on their individual 'confidence' and society's acceptance. More than this, applying powder on a bus required *both* a pervasive assumption that the fashionable modern woman had to take constant care in maintaining the public illusion of beauty *and* the development of those new technologies that allowed her to do so. This cultural practice had a historically specific material co-requisite – portable cosmetic commodities that women could carry around the city. The operational practices that characterized importuning prosecutions took shape within a similar interplay between culture and technology. In 1922, police displayed the 'face powder in a machine' found on Lewis H. To succeed, this use of evidence depended upon the associations between effeminacy and criminality. Crucially, it could only be adopted because companies like Stratton had begun to manufacture mechanical powder compacts that men like Lewis could buy and carry in their pockets after the First World War.<sup>52</sup>

## V

If the cultural logic that underpinned the introduction of cosmetics into the courtroom depended upon the interrelationship between hegemonic notions of sexual difference and a burgeoning 'cosmetics industry', it also reflected wider anxieties surrounding the readability of the body and the erosion of social boundaries after the Great War. What do I mean by this? In June 1925, five months after taking up Thomas's case, *John Bull* turned its attention to a new metropolitan phenomenon. Writing under his penname 'A man with a duster', the social critic Harold Begbie published a lengthy article in which he called London 'A modern Gomorrah'. Begbie drew his readers' attention to 'a well-known teashop and public house in Coventry Street ... where painted and scented boys congregate every day without molestation of any kind ... sit[ting] with their vanity bags and their high-heeled shoes, calling themselves by endearing names and looking out for patrons'. This was a disturbing sight: 'we ... conquered the Germans and now in London there is an outbreak of this deadly perversion ... which will surely rot us into ruin unless we recover our sanity and fight it to the death'. He demanded Joynson-Hicks order the Met to

make a clean sweep of so monstrous an iniquity ... encourage the public to go on charging these boys day after day in the police courts, forcing them to prove how they get their living until the streets are swept clean of them ... make Coventry Street exceedingly unpleasant to creatures who shame the name of England and degrade the face of man.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> 'Lipsticks: their use and abuse', *Times*, 11 Oct. 1922, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> LMA: PS TOW B01 049, Lewis H. and William S., importuning: 12 Dec. 1922; Juliette Edwards, *Powder compacts: a collector's guide* (London, 2000), pp. 6–33.

<sup>53</sup> 'A modern Gomorrah', *John Bull*, 13 June 1925, p. 18.

Drawing upon circulating associations between national identity and sexual morality established in the 1918 'Black Book' libel trial, Begbie defined sexual difference as gender transgression, and essentially un-British.<sup>54</sup> This 'German' 'perversion' threatened to destroy the nation from within, where the Kaiser's armies had failed from without. The 'painted and scented boys' enjoying themselves in the teashop were an alien presence, not only 'sham[ing] the name of England', but jeopardizing its very existence.

Begbie's article – elaborated in subsequent weeks – was the centrepiece of a concerted attack on what *John Bull* labelled the 'painted boy menace'. These 'rouged rogues' were, they suggested, 'one of the worst menaces of modern times'.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneously, the journal posed as a privileged urban observer, and the 'outraged' voice of 'respectable citizens'.<sup>56</sup> It described queer London explicitly, presenting that process as a purifying step, necessary to mobilize public opinion and force the authorities into action. In May they offered Begbie's 'dossier of information' – 'an amazing document bristling with true but almost incredible stories of sordid filth and sickening shame' – to the Met, 'so anxious are we to remove this blot upon the reputation of this country'.<sup>57</sup> This was a crusade, defending the 'social life of the country' against a 'dangerous' and 'sickening' threat.<sup>58</sup>

The 'painted boy menace' exposé drew upon established images of sexual difference. Echoing the anxieties of the Victorian fin de siècle, it interwove traditional languages of racial degeneration, moral decline, and urban civilization – evident in the repeated allusions to Rome, Greece, and the Cities of the Plain, and the fears that the British empire would suffer a similar fate if this vice went unchecked.<sup>59</sup> The 'painted boy' was, however, the 'worst menace of modern times', becoming a figure of profound cultural disturbance because he embodied particular historical fears and anxieties, contingent on the experience of the First World War. While the war's precise impact has been subject to ongoing debate, it is clear that many Britons experienced this as a moment of profound dislocation that threatened to destabilize the boundaries between classes, sexes, and races on which the nation's stability depended. Post-war Britain, as Samuel Hynes and Paul Fussell have suggested, was a 'damaged' nation.<sup>60</sup> In particular, the war was thought to have disrupted established gender roles. As women gained opportunities in the workplace, political power, and a degree of personal freedom,

<sup>54</sup> For the 'Black Book' trial see Philip Hoare, *Wilde's last stand: decadence, conspiracy and the First World War* (London, 1997); Lucy Bland, 'Trial by sexology? Maud Allan, Salome and the "cult of the clitoris" case', in Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds., *Sexology in culture: labelling bodies and desires* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 183–98.

<sup>55</sup> 'Wickedest gang in London', *John Bull*, 25 July 1925, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> 'Rouged rogues', p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> 'Brazen blackmail gang', *John Bull*, 30 May 1925, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> The language echoes James Douglas's attack on Radclyffe Hall's *The well of loneliness* in the *Sunday Express*. See Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: the origins of a modern English lesbian culture* (New York, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> See Roger Luckhurst and Sally Ledger, eds., *The fin de siècle: a reader in cultural history, c. 1880–1900* (London, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A war imagined: English culture and the First World War* (London, 1992); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and modern memory* (Oxford, 2000).



men were – supposedly – emasculated and feminized. Set against this upheaval, as Susan Kingsley Kent suggests, postwar reconstruction consciously attempted to recreate a more ordered world, a desire ‘nowhere more evident than in the realm of gender identity and relations between men and women’.<sup>61</sup> In reconstructed Britain social stability and racial survival was predicated upon re-asserting traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, particularly a domestic ideal embedded in the rigid division between gender roles and public and private life. This made the ‘painted boy’ a disturbing threat – a highly visible defile for wider anxieties about the erosion of the boundaries between men and women. In 1920, touring London’s night haunts, Sydney Moseley was thus unnerved by the sight of ‘a crowd of young men so made-up that it is not easy to guess their sex’.<sup>62</sup>

As Moseley suggests, in enabling men to become almost indistinguishable from women, make-up was a particularly resonant embodiment of these anxieties. Like *John Bull*, his exposé moved neatly between the individual corporeal body and the gendered body of the British nation. In symbolizing the body’s physical permeability, the powder puff became a proxy for the instability of the social body at large. In the late nineteenth century, Mike Roper suggests, ‘manliness was judged largely in terms of external qualities: it was from a man’s comportment, his physical appearance and performance, that inner qualities were judged’.<sup>63</sup> These assumptions received impetus through the cultural experience of ‘modernity’. Within the perpetual transience and motion of modern urban life it was impossible to know fully an individual’s place in society; the gaze turned inexorably to the body’s surface as the key marker of identity.<sup>64</sup> In this sense, the Great War itself provided the immediate context in which pervasive and recurring historical anxieties around the instability of categories of gender or class acquired greater resonance in the 1920s. After the war, such assumptions figured the queer’s make-up – like the hysterical victim of shell shock or the shattered body of the disabled – as a challenge to traditional notions of masculinity, character, and selfhood. Each figure embodied a dangerous feminization of the

<sup>61</sup> Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making peace: the reconstruction of gender in interwar Britain* (Princeton, 1993), p. 2. See also Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the male: men’s bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1999); Susan Grayzel, *Women’s identities at war: gender, motherhood and politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Nicoletta Gullace, ‘The blood of our sons’: men, women and the renegotiation of British citizenship during the Great War (Basingstoke, 2002); Marek Kohn, *Dope girls: the birth of the British drug underground* (London, 1992).

<sup>62</sup> Sydney Moseley, *The night haunts of London* (London, 1920), p. 43. Such comments evoke more familiar anxieties over the ‘boyish’ flapper or ‘masculine’ women’s fashions. See Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, ch. 4; Billie Melman, *Women and the popular imagination in the Twenties: flappers and nymphs* (Basingstoke, 1988).

<sup>63</sup> Mike Roper, ‘Between manliness and masculinity: the “war generation” and the psychology of fear in Britain, 1914–1950’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 347–8.

<sup>64</sup> See Richard Sennett, *The fall of public man* (Cambridge, 1977); Christopher Breward, *The hidden consumer: masculine fashion and city life, 1860–1914* (Manchester, 1999); Martin Daunt and Bernhard Rieger, eds., *Meanings of modernity: Britain from the late-Victorian Era to World War Two* (Oxford, 2001); Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea eds., *Modern times: reflections on a century of English modernity* (London and New York, 1996).

British man; together they generated a pervasive anxiety over the degeneration of the male body amid the traumatic cultural experience of modern industrial warfare. Found in men's pockets or witnessed on the face of the 'West End pouf', cosmetics were a reminder that the corporeal male body – supposedly the repository of masculinity – was never natural or stable but was subject to manipulations that made it inherently problematic.<sup>65</sup>

## VI

Produced in London's courts the powder puff exemplified a dangerous transgression of the 'natural' boundaries between men and women. It suggested that it was impossible truly to know an individual's place. By allowing men to cross social boundaries the powder puff suggested just how fragile they were. In the wider context of the decade this was a disturbing threat to a nominally ordered society. But it also represented far more than this. The police were, quite simply, obsessed with finding material objects to substantiate prosecutions. Searching men's pockets was only the tip of the iceberg. After a club or bar had been raided officers subjected the floor, cloakroom, and furniture to meticulous scrutiny. Men like William K., arrested on Piccadilly in 1938, could undergo the humiliating ritual of having their bodies tested for powder with a piece of cloth – later produced in court.<sup>66</sup> After a 1937 nightclub raid CI Donaldson 'record[ed] ... the condition of each man's face', putting one 'half-caste' 'under the electric light as I wanted to be certain'.<sup>67</sup>

The lengths to which officers went to secure 'evidence' highlight the contradictory – paranoid – character of the material culture of law enforcement. If it was assumed that transgressive sexual desires were indelibly marked upon the male body, the desperate attempts to retrieve powder puffs or lipsticks suggested the very opposite. The queer body, it seemed, was not always publicly legible through the tropes of gender inversion. Officers often tacitly recognized this, as in 1936, when one described youths with 'cosmetics on their faces, which had been skilfully made up and was not easy to detect'.<sup>68</sup> This inscrutability was, in part, a function of the ways that men carefully negotiated the city, remaining alert to the contingencies of the messages inscribed upon the body. Make-up was, after all,

<sup>65</sup> For post-war anxieties over the male body see Ina Zweininger-Bargielowska, 'The culture of the abdomen: obesity and reducing in Britain, c. 1900–1939', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 239–73; Ana Carden-Coyne, 'From pieces to whole: the sexualization of muscles in postwar bodybuilding', in Christopher Forth and Ivan Crozier, eds., *Body parts: critical explorations in corporeality* (Lexington, 2005); Seth Koven, 'Remembering and dismemberment: crippled children, wounded soldiers and the Great War in Great Britain', *American Historical Review*, 99 (1999), pp. 1167–202; Elaine Showalter, *The female malady: women, madness and English culture, 1830–1980* (New York, 1985). Mary Poovey, *Uneven developments: the ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England* (London, 1989), suggests the recurring nature of anxieties around the instability of gender.

<sup>66</sup> NA: CRIM 1 1041, list of exhibits, 11 Oct. 1938.

<sup>67</sup> See NA: CRIM 1 903, CI Donaldson: 12 Jan. 1937.

<sup>68</sup> NA: MEPO 2 4485, Minute 23b, Insp. Gavin: 9 Sept. 1936.

only a transitory bodily manipulation and could be easily removed, allowing men to move invisibly through potentially dangerous public spaces. Many used make-up carefully, producing subtle visual cues. Alex Purdie used Lipsyl – ‘that colourless stuff you put on when you got sore lips’ – rather than lipstick because ‘you couldn’t have it too dark’. Before going out, his friends monitored each other’s appearance: ‘If you had too much slap on ... your mates say too much slap on your ecaf. Yeah. Oh really girl? Yes ... Go in the lavs here and have a look. And they would look in the mirror, take some off. Or put some on sometimes.’<sup>69</sup>

That transgressive sexual practices could be unfixed from their bodily moorings – that the ‘painted boy’ did not always unequivocally appear as such – meant ‘difference’ and ‘normality’ existed in precarious tension, the boundaries between them ambiguous, problematic, and often indiscernible. Throughout the 1920s it was thus often unclear what actually constituted the difference between the transgressive queer body and the normal, healthy male body – or even how different they were. These tensions between queer and normal, difference and sameness, the readable body and the hidden danger, figured the effeminate quean as a potent threat to dominant moral codes.

These anxieties crystallized in the violent debates over police practices in dealing with ‘street offences’ that exploded after the First World War. Like the ‘soliciting’ charges used to regulate female prostitution, the offence of ‘importuning male persons for an immoral purpose’ represented an attempt to suppress the use of public space by individuals seeking illicit sexual encounters.<sup>70</sup> Unlike prosecutions for gross indecency or public indecency, which usually arose after officers witnessed a sexual act, making an arrest for importuning or soliciting meant attributing meaning to gestures or movements that were often ambiguous and minute. As the discussion above suggests, policemen became increasingly sensitized to the visual signifiers that allowed them to differentiate the importuning man or soliciting woman from the crowd. Their gaze was thus oriented by a close scrutiny of the public body: its clothing, location, movement, and comportment – the significance of a backward glance – and the condition of its skin. To succeed in court, they had to convince the magistrate that their reading was accurate.

In the 1920s, however, the Met’s ability to interpret the body’s behaviour and appearance was subject to intense critical scrutiny. As arrests for ‘street offences’ increased after the war in response to unease over London’s moral condition, a number of high-profile cases in which ‘respectable’ men and women had been wrongly arrested – in which officers had *misread* signs – severely undermined the Met’s credibility. In a number of importuning cases – most notably Frank Champain’s 1927 trial – magistrates expressed growing disquiet with police practices, particularly their submission of testimony uncorroborated by the

<sup>69</sup> NSA: C444 03 30a–32a, Alex Purdie.

<sup>70</sup> The offence was established under the Vagrancy Law Amendment Act (1898) and Criminal Law Amendment Act (1912).

public, the apparent fabrication of evidence, and the use of *agents provocateurs* to entrap suspects, discharging defendants or passing sentence reluctantly. The ensuing furore generated a series of inquiries into the gap between working rules and legal conventions, culminating in the Street Offences Committee (1927) and Royal Commission on Police Powers and Procedures (1928).<sup>71</sup>

This volatile climate sustained a generalized critique of law enforcement, within which the law's procedural morality allowed queer men repeatedly to challenge police actions in court and in print. Writing in *The continued extension of the criminal law* (1922), for example, the sexual reformer George Ives noted with bitter irony how

so little ... seems needed to constitute an offence that an alleged smile or wink, or look may cause an arrest ... any young person is at the mercy of any two detectives hunting in couples ... [who have] a degree of unchecked authority which places the liberty of citizens entirely in their hands.<sup>72</sup>

Ironically, when *John Bull* came to Thomas's defence, they deliberately echoed such critiques, exploiting public distrust in London's police. This was, they argued, a case of mistaken identity in which the policemen's testimony remained uncorroborated: 'nor was the man he is alleged to have affronted asked to give evidence. Why not? We confess we do not know.'<sup>73</sup>

Using cosmetics as evidence was a response to these debates. In 1919, the barrister and purity campaigner W. J. H. Brodrick was cross-examined by the Association of Moral and Social Hygiene's committee of enquiry into sexual morality. 'With regard to proof of male prostitution', they asked, 'is the same type of proof demanded as in the case of a woman?' Brodrick replied:

it is much easier ... These people are well-known to the police and much slighter evidence is accepted in their case than in the case of a woman. As a rule the evidence consists of rouge and powder puffs and things of that kind. It is quite easy to get. You never fail in a prosecution for want of evidence.<sup>74</sup>

Brodrick's optimism was misplaced – *John Bull's* involvement in Thomas's case suggests that the significance of cosmetics could always be challenged, and

<sup>71</sup> Champain was initially convicted for importuning in urinals around the Adelphi. Public outcry surrounding his successful appeal forced Joynson-Hicks to refer the case to the SOC. NA: MEPO 3 405: attachment 35a, report of the sub-committee; 'Another case dismissed on appeal', *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 21 Sept. 1927; 'Where justice erred', *News of the World*, 25 Sept. 1927. See also NA: CRIM 1 547, *Rex vs Harold R.*, importuning: 1931; NA: MEPO 3 992, *Hugh C.*, persistent importuner: 1935; NA: MEPO 3 990, *use of plainclothes officers in detecting indecency offences*: 1933. V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Crime, authority and the policeman state', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge social history of Britain: 1750–1950*, III: *Social agencies and institutions* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 271–7. See also Houlbrook, *Queer London*, ch. 1.

<sup>72</sup> George Ives, *The continued extension of the criminal law* (London, 1922), p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> 'Grave miscarriage of justice', p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Women's Library: Association for Moral and Social Hygiene Box 49, 'Committee of enquiry into sexual morality': testimony of W. J. H. Brodrick, 1 Dec. 1919. Thanks to Lesley Hall for this reference.

certainly by the mid-1920s magistrates regularly refused to convict. Still, his response suggests how the material culture of law enforcement addressed a widespread unease over police procedures. If the queer body was never immediately and self-evidently visible; if the testimony of individual officers was considered an unreliable guide to arrested men's behaviour, then the burden of proof was partially displaced on to items which had a tangible – undeniable – physical existence. The 'rouge and powder puffs and things of that kind' which officers might find in suspects' pockets materialized their testimony for the benefit of the magistrate. As Leslie Moran suggests, 'through [such] a technology of surveillance, examination and practices of documentation [the individual's] desires and his body ... are not only given a visibility but also a particular and permanent meaning'. The powder puff's meaning may have remained contested, but in the right circumstances the cluster of associations surrounding it could be sufficiently compelling as to 'permanently' mark the criminal body, meeting the formal demands of juridical process and making such cases comparatively 'easy'.<sup>75</sup>

## VII

The powder puff's position within London's criminal justice system reflected a key motif in interwar British culture: the profound fascination with individuals who faked it – who masqueraded as something or someone they were not – or who crossed boundaries of class, gender, race, ethnicity, or age in other ways. While this fascination was not necessarily a new cultural phenomenon, it became more pervasive as accounts of such lives were everywhere in the popular press, descriptions of metropolitan 'vice', and the subjects taken up by popular novels and films throughout the 1920s. They were parodied in music hall songs like 'You can't tell a book from its cover'.<sup>76</sup> They were manifested in the concern over relationships between white women and black or Chinese men identified by Lucy Bland and Laura Tabili. Their most characteristic expression is through stories of cross-dressing – the cases explored by Angus McLaren, James Vernon, and Peter Gurney. In these diverse narratives the transgressive individual is variously – and often simultaneously – a source of massive cultural anxiety and a figure of humour and intrigue.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Moran, *Homosexual(ity) of law*, p. 136. Using cosmetics as evidence paralleled other attempts to materialize the queer body, including medical examinations of the anus/penis in buggery cases or photographing men arrested in drag. On photography see Houlbrook, 'Lady Austin's camp boys', p. 49. On forensic medicine, NA: CRIM 1 433, *Rex vs John S. and William H.*, buggery: 1928: statement of Divisional Surgeon Philips.

<sup>76</sup> Thanks to Peter Bailey for this title.

<sup>77</sup> On cross-dressing see James Vernon, "'For some queer reason": the trials and tribulations of Colonel Barker's masquerade in interwar England', *Signs*, 25 (2000), pp. 37–62; Peter Gurney, "'Intersex" and "dirty girls": Mass Observation and working-class sexuality in England in the 1930s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8 (1997), pp. 256–90; Angus McLaren, *The trials of masculinity: policing sexual boundaries, 1870–1930* (London and Chicago, 1997). On miscegenation see Lucy Bland, 'White women and men of colour: miscegenation fears in Britain after the Great War', *Gender and History*, 17 (2005), pp. 29–61; Laura Tabili, 'Women "of a very low type": crossing racial boundaries in late-imperial Britain', in Laura Frader and Sonya Rose, eds., *Gender and class in modern Europe* (Ithaca, 1996).

In this context, anxieties surrounding the use of cosmetics extended far beyond the ‘painted boy menace’. Indeed, we can more fully understand the story of the ‘man with the powder puff’ if we look beyond queer urban culture to the more familiar debates over *women’s* use of make-up that became so common in the 1920s. Along with other ‘cheap trappings of glamour’, cosmetics were, for many young women, an exciting sign of modernity.<sup>78</sup> Paradoxically, as a generation embraced such pleasures, changes in feminine self-presentation generated deep anxieties about make-up’s disruptive impact on categories of class, femininity, morality, and selfhood – its apparent erosion of established social boundaries.

Consider, first, J. B. Priestley’s disdainful comment on the demotic effects of consumer culture – provincial ‘factory girls looking like actresses’. Here make-up was dangerous, because it allowed working-class women to pretend to a glamour and beauty inappropriate to their station. It made it impossible to know an individual’s place since, ‘for the first time in history, Jack and Jill are nearly as good as their master and mistress ... Jill beautifies herself exactly as her mistress does.’<sup>79</sup> As Sally Alexander suggests, this unease made cosmetics central to leftist anxieties over the erosion of traditional working-class values within a burgeoning consumer culture.<sup>80</sup> Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the dole* (1933) explicitly contrasted the Salford mill girls’ ‘clogs and shawls of yesterday’ with their newfound ‘modernity’ of ‘cheap crimped hair, powder and rouge’. John Sommerfield’s *May Day* (1936), similarly dismissed ‘those silly girls, in their synthetic Hollywood dreams, their pathetic silk stockings and their lipsticks’. Subsumed into elaborate critiques of Americanization and consumerism – disparaged as ‘synthetic’ and artificial – make-up seemed to destroy the working-class woman’s integrity and authenticity.<sup>81</sup>

The association between cosmetics and performance – what Eric Ward called ‘modern methods of facial disguise’ – moreover, made many observers wonder just what women’s make-up concealed.<sup>82</sup> Set against the assumption that appearance bore a direct relation to an individual’s character, cosmetics were regularly interpreted as what Kathy Peiss calls a ‘corporeal hypocrisy’ – ‘symbols of artifice, deception and masking’.<sup>83</sup> Mrs Chesterton thus watched a young woman ‘industriously making up her face’ in a London County Council hostel in 1926. The transformation was amazing and immediate: ‘powder, rouge and lipstick repair the ravages of fatigue ... she sets forth again looking like a rose

<sup>78</sup> Alexander, ‘Becoming a woman’, pp. 222–3.

<sup>79</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London, 1934), pp. 376, 401–2.

<sup>80</sup> Alexander, ‘Becoming a woman’, p. 204.

<sup>81</sup> Walter Greenwood, *Love on the dole* (London, 1933), p. 42; Sommerfield is quoted in Alexander, ‘Becoming a woman’, p. 204. Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and its enemies* (London, 1927), pp. 141–9, warns against such aspirations.

<sup>82</sup> Ward, *Book of make-up*, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Kathy Peiss, ‘Making up, making over: cosmetics, consumer culture and women’s identity’, in Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The sex of things: gender and consumption in historical perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), p. 314.

refreshed'.<sup>84</sup> As Chesterton implies, making-up could constitute a form of faking it, through which the user deceived those around her. Particularly in the early 1920s, women's pages regularly warned readers against using 'camouflage' like this. True beauty was a natural beauty, reflecting a woman's inner being rather than the mask she wore. 'When a woman makes up', Mrs Adrian Ross commented in the *Daily Mirror*, 'the face has a smooth waxen look like some hair-dresser's dummy. It is just a painted face, pretty in a way, shallow and soulless.'<sup>85</sup>

By the middle of the decade, however, it was precisely the transformative potential of cosmetics that manufacturers used to sell their products; achieving the illusion of beauty held the tantalizing prospect of access to a hitherto unanticipated realm of social cachet, male adoration, and romantic fulfilment.<sup>86</sup> This signalled a marked shift in the meaning of selfhood. Certainly by the 1920s, Peiss argues, identity was increasingly thought of as a kind of performance, manifested in external signs and styles – dress, posture, and make-up – rather than being fixed in the body itself. 'In promising transformation', Peiss suggests, 'the cosmetics industry blurred the distinction between the made-up face as revealing a woman's inner self and the made-up face constituting that self'. Identity was no longer authentic, stable, and immediately discernible, but – as the 'painted boys' realized – something to be carefully constructed through an engagement with modern consumer culture.<sup>87</sup>

That women might thus use cosmetics to transcend their social position or to exercise power over unsuspecting men unnerved many observers. For the sexologists Fischer and Dubois, cosmetics' popularity originated in wartime 'Khakimania' when, driven by an insatiable and hysterical desire, 'make-up was a weapon in the feminine man hunt', enabling women to lure and entrap their prey.<sup>88</sup> For others, beauty culture provided opportunities for a knowing – albeit defensive – humour. 'There ain't so much mystery about [women] now', observed Charles Pooter in the *Empire News* in 1920, 'we knows all about wot they wears ... and 'ow they makes themselves beautiful':

every woman nearly kids 'erself she's beautiful, but she puts a bit of face cream an' powder, an' rouge an' things on 'er face jest to make 'erself more beautiful, and then tells yer that she don't care wot anybody thinks about 'er, an' don't want ter attract the attention of men.<sup>89</sup>

Pooter, for one, was confident he could separate the fake from the authentic beauty.

This conception of make-up as a 'facial disguise' informed the physician and novelist Arabella Kenealy's eugenicist tract *Feminism and sex extinction* (1920). Kenealy clearly assumed that a woman's essence was manifested outwardly. For

<sup>84</sup> Mrs Cecil Chesterton, *In darkest London* (London, 1926), p. 84.

<sup>85</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 24 May 1921: in Bingham, *Gender, modernity*, p. 173.

<sup>86</sup> Tinkler, *Constructing girlhood*, pp. 158–60.

<sup>87</sup> Peiss, 'Making up', p. 323.

<sup>88</sup> H. C. Fischer and E. X. Dubois, *Sexual life during the world war* (London, 1937), p. 109.

<sup>89</sup> 'Marcus on woman', *Empire News*, 28 Mar. 1920, p. 6.

her, the body's surface offered a reliable indicator of the nation's physiological, cultural, and moral well-being: '*Beauty is Normality*' she argued, and 'plainness is a mark of abnormality'.<sup>90</sup> From this foundation Kenealy developed an elaborate critique of a contemporary world in which, she argued, the natural differences between men and women were being eroded. Women's work, education, and 'modern strenuous methods of raising girls' had deleterious physiological consequences, emasculating men, masculinizing women, and risking the potential decline of the race itself. 'Painted boys' represented an imperial nation become dangerously effete. Women's use of make-up, by contrast, was simultaneously *both* sign of a more disquieting degeneration *and* a way of hiding the physical manifestations of that process:

some [women] are ... an interesting and attractive 26, but the fresh warm, vital and beautiful years from 17 to 27, the years of a natural woman's most charming bloom of mind and body, have dropped from their lives, like petals from roses ... our girls in their teens require to hide the ravages of time by every sort of artifice.<sup>91</sup>

Women 'hiding' their faces here symbolized a race on the brink of disaster; the 'artifice' of cosmetics concealed, but did not address, the problems ahead.

The final anxiety surrounding women's use of cosmetics again paralleled concerns surrounding the 'painted boy'. The visual and material signs used to identify men's sexual transgression echoed those in which many contemporaries located *women's* immorality. Like queer men, women carefully managed their bodies to enhance their visibility and desirability to potential suitors. Like queer men, their make-up was thought to symbolize a dangerous excess of independent femininity and unruly sexuality. Such assumptions functioned as a set of shared cultural codes, shaping the organization of official surveillance, the provision of social welfare, sensational exposés of metropolitan vice, and breathless narratives of popular entertainment.<sup>92</sup> In 1919, for example, the association between cosmetics and sexual transgression was dramatized in a remarkable scene in D. W. Griffith's film *Broken blossoms*. Fifteen-year-old Lucy Burrowes escapes the violent attentions of her brutal stepfather on to the streets of Limehouse. First cautioned against the drudgery of married domesticity by a neighbour, Lucy is then 'warned as strongly by the ladies of the street against their profession'. Alongside the correlation between place and transgression evinced in the inter-title, the character of the two young women depicted in this scene is refracted through a set of powerful visual signs. Their clothing exhibits a brittle glamour – fur collars on jackets and feathers in hats. As if to preclude any alternative reading, one woman draws powder and a puff from a small vanity bag, before deliberately and ostentatiously 'making-up'.<sup>93</sup> The meanings of these items and their use appeared

<sup>90</sup> Arabella Kenealy, *Feminism and sex-extinction* (London, 1920), p. 86.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>92</sup> See the identification of 'undoubted prostitutes' through their 'loud attire and powdered faces' in NA: MEPO 2 10108, *Allegations that the Café Royal is frequented by known prostitutes and confidence tricksters*, report of SDI Collins: 13 Apr. 1920; 'Criminal law amendment', *Times*, 23 Feb. 1917, p. 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Broken blossoms*, dir. D. W. Griffith (1919).



self-evident. As *John Bull* claimed, when discussing metropolitan prostitution in 1925, 'the most unfledged yokel may distinguish the tribe at a glance: the rouged lips and painted face ... speak as plainly as the boldest aggression and most shameful of words'.<sup>94</sup>

Yet when young women of all classes were eagerly embracing the exciting modern femininity associated with cosmetics, it was increasingly unclear as to which 'tribe' could be distinguished by the condition of their faces: make-up could no longer be read as an axiomatic sign of prostitution. In 1920s Britain, prostitutes, 'bad girls', flappers, shop girls, and fashionable women *all* became what Sydney Moseley called 'women of the painted class'.<sup>95</sup> As such, the boundaries between respectable and immoral, the 'professional' and the 'amateur' collapsed. In the 1920 prosecution of the unlicensed Dalton's Club (Leicester Square), observers thus struggled to decode the semiotics of female self-presentation. 'Look[ing] around the crowded court', one journalist saw 'women whose faces are thick with rouge and whose eyebrows are thinly pencilled'. He, at least, assumed that such bodily modifications meant these women were 'of the unfortunate class'. Other witnesses, by contrast, struggled to maintain a rigid distinction between immoral and respectable – or, indeed, to ascribe a stable meaning to make-up. SDI Collins was asked 'Do you think you would know a prostitute if you saw one in the street?' He replied, 'I am not sure' – though pointed out that other officers were 'well-acquainted with these women'.<sup>96</sup> Horace Prior – a club committee member – explained to the court that 'it is quite impossible to tell the character of a woman from her appearance alone'. Defence counsel, Mr Carter, agreed: 'of course it is. They don't wear the scarlet brand of shame on their brow' – or, he might have added, on their cheeks.<sup>97</sup>

These overlapping meanings of cosmetics made it increasingly difficult to read women's class, status, or sexual morality from the condition of their face. In 1928 Mrs Chesterton described the confusion this might cause: "'In the old days you knew where you were by a girl's make-up", men have said to me, "but now all of them seem to look the same ... there doesn't seem any clear dividing line."<sup>98</sup> Lipstick or powder did not necessarily indicate prostitution – or even sexual immorality. Simultaneously, a young woman's use of cosmetics might signal a glamorous and fashionable modernity, youthful individuality, erotic daring, or participation in an illicit sexual trade. These meanings co-existed uneasily, giving the female body a disturbing instability of meaning. As with the 'painted boy', make-up became a defile for broader anxieties about the disruption of gender roles and social boundaries after the Great War, a way of talking about the constantly shifting

<sup>94</sup> 'A new peril to women', *John Bull*, 10 Jan. 1925, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Moseley, *Night haunts*, pp. 47, 150.

<sup>96</sup> 'London's underworld', *Empire News*, 11 Jan. 1920, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> 'Visit to a nightclub', *Empire News*, 18 Jan. 1920, p. 5. See also Gladys Mary Hall, *Prostitution: a survey and a challenge* (London, 1933), p. 29; Hubert Stringer, *Moral evil in London* (London, 1925), pp. 175–80.

<sup>98</sup> Mrs Cecil Chesterton, *Women of the underworld* (London, 1928), p. 161.

terrain on which categories of gender, morality, and selfhood were constituted and contested.

### VIII

In March 1925, *John Bull* sadly reported that, despite their vociferous campaign, ‘the authorities do not see their way to interfere with the decision of the court’ in Thomas’s case. Still, they noted, ‘it was a great satisfaction to us to be able to champion his cause’. There was consolation in a letter from Thomas’s mother:

[Your report] satisfied the curious, it satisfied my best friends who were in the dark, as we could not bring ourselves to repeat the whole sordid story. People took my boy by the hand, and he is now on his old work, and has the complete confidence of all his superiors.

Thomas served three months in prison, legal fees cost his family £200, but *John Bull*’s intervention had, at least, restored his reputation and self-esteem.<sup>99</sup>

Thinking about the ‘man with the powder puff’ is, I have argued, a productive starting point from which to explore interwar British culture. This is because of the peculiar chronology of the material culture of law enforcement. On one level, this article has addressed a simple question – why? Why is Thomas’s case characteristic of the 1920s rather than the 1890s or 1950s? What historically specific conditions had to be in place for his story to be told in court or on the pages of *John Bull*? One way to think about this is to construct an imaginary biography of the powder and puff found in Thomas’s pockets – assuming that they were not his mother’s. New scientific and industrial processes made these items cheap and ubiquitous; magazines and cinema made make-up an essential attribute of fashionable femininity. A young man, trying to make sense of desires labelled womanlike and construct a public persona consistent with his inner nature bought a powder puff at his local Woolworths. On the Strand he was arrested, his pockets emptied, and the puff produced in court by police negotiating vociferous criticisms of their conduct by seeking a material justification for their actions. Thinking in these terms highlights the intersection between discrete historical processes – the emergence of the ‘cosmetics industry’, a particular understanding of sexual difference, the contentious politics of policing, and worries over the stability of social identities – which made such cases so common after the First World War.

Through these intersecting trajectories the powder puff became a kind of fetish object, subject to elaborate and obsessive regimes of surveillance and acquisition. Produced before London’s magistrates, it emblemized a culture – and a police force – that was under profound stress. Fetishism, Anne McClintock argues, constitutes ‘the historical enactment of ambiguity itself’, ‘mark[ing] a crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution’. In this reading, the powder puff came to stand for the problematic and disorderly nature of

<sup>99</sup> ‘Grave miscarriage of justice’, *John Bull*, 28 Mar. 1925, p. 12.

modern life, embodying in one object the permeability of social boundaries, the impossibility of maintaining a stable system of sexual difference and normality and the illegibility of the body itself. It was 'an impassioned object', invested with electric symbolic resonance that belied its mundane and everyday status within modern consumer culture.<sup>100</sup>

The powder puff's ambiguity was further enhanced through the ongoing debates over its significance. For if cosmetics *could* function as a compelling material sign of a man's criminality, their meaning was never entirely clear. Arrested men insistently challenged the dangerous inferences invested in their possessions, invoking alternative yet increasingly anachronistic interpretive frameworks in which making-up was understandable, rather than illicit, acceptable, rather than a dangerous sign of moral depravity. Just as the meanings of women's make-up were neither clear nor self-evident, men also might have applied powder to approximate the appearance of femininity, soothe sensitive skin, or tread the boards in London's theatres. In court, this meant the police and watching press had to work hard to suppress alternative understandings of cosmetics' cultural significance – to contain the powder puff's 'disruptive or undecidable power'.<sup>101</sup> If successful, this use of evidence established a rigid and unambiguous distinction between queer and normal bodies. Crucially, however, this could often only be achieved by fixing the judicial gaze on objects like the powder puff; it required a material commodity to establish the actuality of a man's bodily transgression. As officers hunted through men's pockets for evidence, they simultaneously attempted to stabilize the boundary between difference and sameness. Even at the moment of finding, however, this ambiguity persisted. Powder puffs, lipstick, and rouge remained a forceful reminder that no one need ever be who they seemed.

<sup>100</sup> Ann McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (London and New York, 1995), p. 184.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.