

Policing “Men in Petticoats” in the Victorian Press: Fanny and Stella in the *Illustrated Police News*

Robert Steele

In April of 1870, Ernest Boulton (Stella) and Frederick Park (Fanny) were arrested for cross dressing while leaving the Strand Theatre in London, transgressing Victorian gender norms and scandalized the contemporary press. The *Illustrated Police News* (IPN), a late-nineteenth-century periodical known for its explicit (and often exaggerated) coverage of crime, leapt on Boulton and Park’s case but struggled with how to report their non-normative identities. Using the IPN as a case study for the press coverage of the Boulton and Park case and combining a close reading of the language in the periodical with the social context of the trials, I argue that the IPN’s press coverage of the Boulton and Park case shows how class boundaries and, increasingly, gender boundaries were more important to the late-Victorian middle-class identity than sexuality.

On 28 May 1870, the *Illustrated Police News* (IPN) published a three-panel illustration depicting Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park in three states of gendered attire. In the left panel the two don women’s clothes, in the right panel the two don men’s clothes, while the central panel depicts Boulton in a transitional state of dress, with “a city gentleman” removing Boulton’s dress to reveal a men’s suit underneath (fig. 1).¹ The three side-by-side depictions of Boulton and Park in varying states of gendered attire and sexually charged positions indicate the complex contemporary press coverage of their criminal case. Boulton and Park, otherwise known as “Stella” and “Fanny” respectively, had been followed for a year by investigators and arrested alongside Hugh Alexander Mundell the previous month while leaving the Strand Theatre. While Mundell was released, Boulton and Park were both charged with “offense against public decency” for their cross-dressing and for “conspiracy to commit the felony”

¹ “Men in Women’s Clothes,” *Illustrated Police News*, May 28, 1870, 1; While I refer to Boulton and Park by their birth names throughout to reflect how the periodical press named them, I recognize that they may have wished to be referred to by their assumed names.

of sodomy.”² Contemporary press leapt on the case, with newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Illustrated Police News* printing sensational headlines, such as “The Men in Petticoats.”³



Figure 1. “Men in Women’s Clothes,” *Illustrated Police News*, May 28, 1870, 1.

With Boulton and Park at the intersection of so many identities (middle-class, gay, trans, non-binary, sex workers, actors), scholarly interpretations of their identities remain varied. Historians Sean Brady and Morris B. Kaplan interpret Boulton and Park as gay men who cross-dressed and likely engaged in anal sex; Charles Upchurch emphasizes Boulton and Park’s social identities as part of the middle-class; and Simon Joyce has recently attempted to reclaim Boulton and Park’s identities as transgender women.⁴ Just as modern scholars do not agree on how to Boulton and Park identified, contemporary press coverage of the case was equally confused about how to articulate and describe Boulton and Park’s non-normative identities. The three-panel front-page illustration of the IPN shows how the Victorian press could not confidently categorize Boulton’s and Park’s gender identities - depicting them as men, as women, and as somewhere in-between. Scholars have analyzed

² Morris B. Kaplan, “Men in Petticoats”: Border Crossing in the Queer Case of Mr. Boulton and Mr. Park,” in *Imagined Londons*, edited by Pamela K. Gilbert (State University of New York Press, 2002), 46.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Sean Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861–1913* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 75; Kaplan, “Men in Petticoats,” 45; Charles Upchurch, “Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others,” *Gender & History* 12, no. 1 (April 2000), 150; Simon Joyce, “Two Women Walk into a Theatre Bathroom: The Fanny and Stella Trials as Trans Narrative,” *Victorian Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 83–98.

representations of Boulton and Park in *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Reynolds'*, the *Weekly Dispatch*, and the *Morning Post*, yet the *IPN* has not received comparable scholarly attention, despite its extensive coverage of the case.⁵ Using the *IPN* as a case study for press coverage of the Boulton and Park case by combining a close reading of the periodical's language with the social context of the trials, this study argues that the *IPN*'s press coverage of the Boulton and Park case exemplifies how class boundaries and, increasingly, gender boundaries were more important than sexuality to the late-Victorian middle-class identity.

To understand how the *IPN* represented Boulton and Park, we must first understand the context in which the *IPN* emerged as a sensational periodical. First published on 20 February 1864, the *IPN* was founded alongside a proliferation of periodical publishing in Britain during the 1860s. By the mid-Victorian era, technological and social developments radically changed British print culture. The early nineteenth-century surge of adult literacy; the abolishment of certain duties (the advertisement duty in 1853, stamp duty on newspapers in 1855, and excise duty in 1861), and innovations in wood- and steel-engraving techniques all contributed to a robust Victorian print culture. By the 1860s, British print culture was typified by a literate public eager to read illustrated periodicals and a publishing industry that was able to meet those demands.⁶ Responding to a popular demand for crime reporting, the 1860s publishing industry popularized the genres of penny newspapers (cheap newsprints) and penny bloods (crime periodicals), with the *IPN* being the only illustrated periodical at the intersection of both genres.⁷ While the *IPN*'s mandate to educate gave it a greater air of respectability than other crime periodicals, it nevertheless operated in the same register as "New Journalism," a popular late-nineteenth-century genre of reporting that focused on sensational storytelling for broad public appeal.⁸

Despite the *IPN*'s sensational genre, its publisher, George Purkess, defended the periodical's accurate depiction of events: "I know there exists a popular impression that our illustrations are largely imaginative, but as a matter of fact we are continually striving after accuracy of delineation."⁹ However, as Linda Stratmann explains, accuracy

was not necessarily the standard for the *IPN* which, attempting to titillate its readers, often depicted cross-dressing women, eroticizing the female body concealed under men's clothes.¹⁰ When the *IPN* portrayed men dressed as women, Stratmann argues, "it suggested a perversion which the reader was not expected to understand or feel any sympathy with, and could only observe with some dismay."¹¹

While Stratmann's claim may be true for other depictions of male cross-dressing, the *IPN* initially treated the Boulton and Park case with surprising delicacy, although subtly critiquing their gender identities. Notably, in its initial coverage of the case on 7 May 1870, the *IPN* established the practice of referring to Boulton and Park by feminine pronouns: "Adopting the pronoun used regarding the prisoner during the hearing of the case, 'she' had a small signet ring on the little finger of the left hand."¹² Using scare quotes around 'she,' the *IPN* conceded to the court's use of feminine pronouns to refer to Boulton and Park while also undermining the validity of those assigned pronouns. Though the *IPN* was clear that Boulton and Park were biologically male, it refrained from using masculine pronouns to refer to either of them, referring to them as "the prisoners," as "the defendants," or simply by their surnames throughout its initial coverage of their case.¹³ The simultaneity of the *IPN*'s gendering of Boulton and Park as men while referring to them by feminine pronouns (if only for accuracy to the courtroom) shows how the Victorian press strove to understand Boulton and Park more complexly than as merely cross-dressers while also refusing the potential for Boulton and Park identification as women.

The *IPN* was delicate to the point of being vague in its gendering of Boulton and Park, yet it was exhaustively detailed in describing their appearance. Indeed, much of the coverage in this article focuses on their attire, as exemplified by the initial description of their appearance upon being arrested: "Boulton wore a cerise satin dress with an 'open square' body.... 'Park wore a beautiful green satin dress, which was made with an 'open square body' and short sleeves, like that of

5 See Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861–1913*; Kaplan, "Men in Petticoats"; and Charles Upchurch, *Before Wilde: Sex Between Men in Britain's Age of Reform*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

6 Linda Stratmann, *Cruel Deeds and Dreadful Calamities: The Illustrated Police News 1864–1938* (London: British Library, 2011), 7–8.

7 *Ibid.*, 8.

8 *Ibid.*, 7–8.

9 "'The Worst Newspaper in England': An Interview with the Proprietor of the 'Police News,'" *Pall Mall Gazette*, Nov. 23, 1886, 2.

10 Stratmann, *Cruel Deeds and Dreadful Calamities*, 86.

11 *Ibid.*

12 "Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women," *Illustrated Police News*, May 7, 1870, 2.

13 "Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women," 2.; "Charge against Gentlemen Personating Women," *Illustrated Police News*, May 14, 1870, 2.; "Men in Female Attire," *Illustrated Police News*, May 28, 1870, 2.; "The Men in Petticoats," *Illustrated Police News*, June 11, 1870, 2.; "Men in Women's Clothes," *Illustrated Police News*, June 16, 1870, 2.; "The Personation of Women," *Illustrated Police News*, July 2, 1870, 2.; "The Men in Female Attire," *Illustrated Police News*, July 16, 1870, 2.

Boulton.”¹⁴ Pairing the letterpress’s description of Boulton’s and Park’s “feminine” features and “beautiful” attire with an accompanying illustration that emphasizes their elaborate dress (fig. 2), the *IPN* emphasizes Boulton’s and Park’s abilities to pass as women. If we read generously, this emphasis on Boulton and Park’s abilities to pass as women reads as a potential attempt on the part of the *IPN*’s to affirm their feminine identities. More likely, the *IPN*’s emphasis on their ability to pass as women betrays the newspaper’s attempt to pique readers’ interests through Boulton and Park’s fashion, reproduce the illustrations’ level of visual detail in the letterpress, and encourage readers to empathize with Mundell, who claimed he was deceived by Boulton’s and Park’s dress, believing them to be “natural” women.¹⁵ Historian Judith Rowbotham has argued that “male cross-dressing had become threatening by the mid-Victorian era,” informing court suspicions toward cross-dressers, Boulton and Park foremost among them.¹⁶ However,

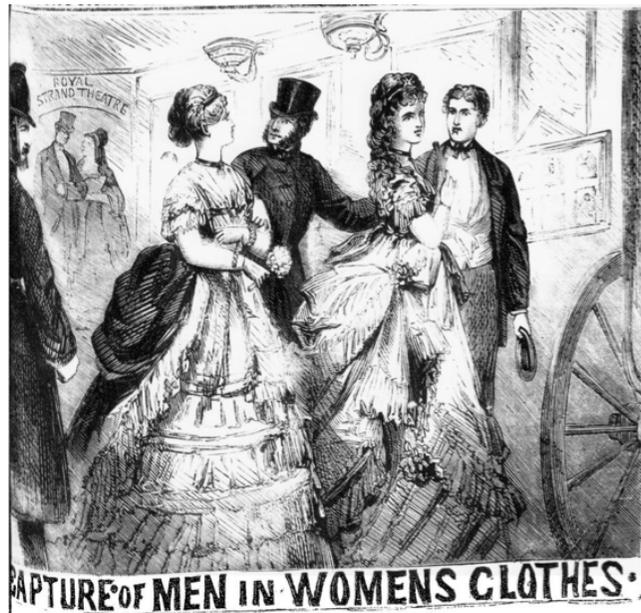


Figure 2. “Capture of Men in Womens Clothes,” *Illustrated Police News*, May 7, 1870, 1.

¹⁴ “Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women,” 2.

¹⁵ “Charge against Gentlemen Personating Women,” 2.

¹⁶ Judith Rowbotham, “A Deception on the Public: The Real Scandal of Boulton and Park,” *Liverpool Law Review* 36 (2015), 126.

the *IPN*’s relatively positive portrayal of Boulton and Park’s femininity in its detailed coverage of their feminine attire reflects the fact that neither the Victorian periodical press nor the Victorian public necessarily understood the act of cross-dressing itself as a criminal offence.

Though the *IPN* was relatively positive in its portrayal of Boulton and Park’s women’s costume, it implied that frequent cross-dressing might indicate the wearer’s criminal nature. The solicitor representing Boulton and Park, a Mr. Abrams, claimed that their cross-dressing was not itself illegal and that Boulton and Park were guilty merely of a “lark.”¹⁷ By contrast, the *IPN* reasoned that the degree and extent of their cross-dressing may indicate more sinister crimes. “An examination of the articles discovered in the house No. 13, Wakefield-street, ... and in the lodgings of two of the prisoners, rather increases than removes the doubts belonging to the case.”¹⁸ Here again, the *IPN* was extremely detailed in its description of articles found at the apartment:

When brought together there were found to be between thirty or forty silk and other dresses, all of fashionable patterns, and some elaborately trimmed with lace, furs, &c.; a large ermine cloak, well stocked female glove boxes, more than a score of different wig- and head dresses, chiefly of the prevailing golden hue, and some of them having plaited hair rolls from twenty to thirty inches in length attached, a great number of girls’ hats variously trimmed, ladies’ white kid boots, Balmoral walking boots richly embroidered, a large quantity of bizarre jewellery [sic], with some bracelets and necklaces of a better class, caps, feathers, garters, &c.¹⁹

The copious description of their clothing and accessories reasserts the visual appeal of the periodical, on the one hand, and belabours the extensiveness of Boulton’s and Park’s cross-dressing on the other. The vivid image of their “bizarre” wardrobe therefore positions Boulton and Park’s extensive history of cross-dressing as evidence of their guilt: “if, as the magnitude of their feminine wardrobe ... indicate[s] ... that they have made the acquaintance of strangers, and ... have inveigled them to keep appointments, the charge may certainly assume a totally different character.”²⁰ Thus, while cross-dressing itself did not immediately indicate Boulton and Park’s criminality, the *IPN* nevertheless viewed their history of frequent cross-dressing as suspicious, perhaps even incriminating.

While the *IPN* viewed Boulton and Park’s frequent cross-dressing as suspicious, it portrayed their status as middle-class cross-dressers

¹⁷ “Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women,” 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

as particularly scandalous. The initial report of their arrest notes that Boulton was “the son of a stockbroker” and that Park was a “law student,” establishing their middle-class backgrounds.²¹ That same article implies with incredulity that, based on “an elegantly fitted photographic album,” found in the Wakefield Street apartment, Boulton’s and Park’s sexual partners were all of middle- or upper-class standing. The album, according to the *IPN*, was “filled with portraits of young men apparently of good birth, and bearing the appearance in many cases of university men and other personal property denoting a fair amount of good breeding.”²² Unlike the relatively sympathetic portrayal of their cross-dressing, the *IPN*’s emphasis on Boulton and Park’s middle-class status shows how their class, more than their cross-dressing itself, shocked the Victorian public. Indeed, as Charles Upchurch explains, while the British middle-class enjoyed performances of lower-class cross-dressers on stage, the same toleration was not given to middle-class cross-dressing.²³

The Times was even more explicit in its critique of Boulton and Park for transgressing normative middle-class gender presentation, attempting to distance white middle-class British civility from their gender bending and class transgressions: “we have been accustomed to associate such offences with the sensuous civilization of antiquity, and with the barbarism or demoralization of certain races in our own day. But we are not prepared to find even the suspicion of them attaching to the youths of respectable family and position.”²⁴ Boulton and Park themselves seem to have played with class-boundaries, as female servants’ clothing was found in among their wardrobe at Wakefield street, which the *IPN* detailed in its report: “Amongst all this property there are not more than one, or at most two, costumes bearing any affinity to a masquerade or fancy dress. All the remainder are articles of female attire, and with the head gear have been found an assortment of white net caps, neatly trimmed with fancy ribbons, as worn by household servants.”²⁵ Therefore, protecting class boundaries was more important to the Victorian periodical press than the strict distinction between gender boundaries, and Boulton and Park’s betrayal of their class by cross-dressing in public, when it was only fit for lower-class actors on the stage, was more shocking than their feminine attire.

The *IPN* appears to have been more concerned with class boundaries than gender presentation. The periodical nevertheless remained preoccupied by Boulton and Park’s gender transgressions, and complicated

its portrayal of their femininity by tying it to same-sex desire. Charles Upchurch has argued that the “New Journalism” of the late-nineteenth century, of which the *IPN* forms a prime example, “changed the rules for reporting sex between men” through its implications of sodomy.²⁶ In its coverage of the trial, the *IPN* speculated on the reasons why Boulton and Park would don women’s clothing, subtly implying that they were practicing sodomy: “It was unnecessary at the present to suggest what exact shape the case might assume; whether of the very worst possible character or of a less unfavourable aspect; viz., that they did this for the purpose of extorting money.”²⁷ Here, a crime of the “worst possible character” likely does imply sodomy. Later, medicolegal testimonies were given by Dr. Richard Barwell, a Charing Cross Hospital surgeon treating Park, and Dr. Paul, an E Division Police surgeon who performed a magistrate-ordered invasive examination of Boulton and Park to determine if they had engaged in anal sex. Reporting on the doctors’ testimony, the *IPN* redacted mentions of sodomy: “The witness [Paul] here described the result of his examination, which, like the evidence of Dr. Barwell, is totally unfit for publication, all of which, however, went to substantiate a most serious charge against both prisoners.”²⁸ Despite the omission of any direct reference to anal sex, the redactions of Barwell’s and Paul’s testimonies sensationalized the case by implying rather than explicitly stating the potential of Bolton’s and Park’s sodomy.

The *IPN*’s implications of sodomy indicate a burgeoning awareness of the link between male cross-dressing and sodomy. Indeed, as Angus McLaren explains, in late-nineteenth century Britain, “homosexuality and transvestism were inseparable” in the popular imagination.²⁹ However, Morris B. Kaplan complicates McLaren’s claim, arguing that before Boulton and Park’s case, “cross-dressing was not established in the public mind as an indication of same-sex sexual desire,” but that the prosecutors of their case “undertook to establish that link” by charging them with two crimes: “conspiracy to commit the felony” (of sodomy) and “offense against public decency.”³⁰ George Chauncey similarly argues that, by the 1890s, gender presentation “governed the interpretation of sexual practices,” at least across the Atlantic in New

21 “Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women,” 2.

22 Ibid.

23 Upchurch, “Forgetting the Unthinkable,” 141.

24 “The Men in Women’s Clothes,” *Times*, May 31, 1870, 11.

25 “Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women,” 2.

26 Charles Upchurch, *Before Wilde*, 130.

27 “Charge against Gentlemen Personating Women,” *Illustrated Police News*, May 14, 1870, 2.

28 “Men in Female Attire,” 2.

29 Angus McLaren, *Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries 1870–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 217.

30 Morris B. Kaplan, “‘Men in Petticoats’: Border Crossings in the Queer Case of Mr. Boulton and Mr. Park,” *Imagined Londons*, edited by Pamela K. Gilbert, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 48–49.

York City.³¹ Indeed, the link between Boulton and Park's cross-dressing and homosexuality was firmly in place by the publication of *Sins of the Cities of the Plain, or Confessions of a Mary-Ann* (1881), an early work of homosexual pornographic literature in English that adapted Boulton and Park's cross-dressing case as erotica.³² Therefore, because the *IPN* implies but does not definitively link cross-dressing to sex between men, its coverage of the Boulton and Park marks a transition period between an earlier nineteenth-century abstraction between gender and sexual practice and the late-nineteenth century conflation of the two.

The *IPN*'s coverage of the Boulton and Park case therefore reveals how, while Victorians became increasingly concerned with sexuality and sexual practices, Boulton's and Park's class and gender coding were more immediately legible to its readership. The *IPN*'s emphasis of Boulton's and Park's feminine attire reveals how cross-dressing as a practice was not itself threatening to Victorian middle-class ideals, except for in cases of excess. However, Boulton and Park's identities as part of the middle-class made that cross-dressing shocking and intolerable. Moreover, the ambiguous allusions to anal sex in the *IPN*'s coverage shows how gender presentation developed as a signifier of sexuality in the late-nineteenth century. The *IPN*'s sensational coverage of Boulton and Park therefore shows how their case challenged Victorians' understandings of identity, paving the way for a greater late-nineteenth-century interest in the intersections between class, gender, and sexuality.



Bibliography

- Brady, Sean. *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861–1913*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- “Capture of Men Dressed Up as Women.” *Illustrated Police News*, May 7, 1870, 2.
- “Charge against Gentlemen Personating Women.” *Illustrated Police News*, May 14, 1870, 2.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Perseus, 1994.
- Joyce, Simon. “Two Women Walk into a Theatre Bathroom: The Fanny and Stella Trials as Trans Narrative.” *Victorian Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2018): pp. 83–98.
- Kaplan, Morris B. “‘Men in Petticoats’: Border Crossings in the Queer Case of Mr. Boulton and Mr. Park.” In *Imagined Londons*, edited by Pamela K. Gilbert, 45–68. State University of New York Press, 2002.
- McLaren, Angus. *Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries 1870–1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- “Men in Female Attire.” *Illustrated Police News*, May 28, 1870, 2.
- “The Men in Female Attire.” *Illustrated Police News*, July 16, 1870, 2.
- “The Men in Petticoats.” *Illustrated Police News*, June 11, 1870, 2.
- “Men in Women’s Clothes.” *Illustrated Police News*, May 28, 1870, 1.
- “Men in Women’s Clothes.” *Illustrated Police News*, June 16, 1870, 2.
- “The Personation of Women.” *Illustrated Police News*, July 2, 1870, 2.
- Rowbotham, Judith. “A Deception on the Public: The Real Scandal of Boulton and Park,” *Liverpool Law Review* 36, no. 1 (2015): pp. 123–145.
- Stratmann, Linda. *Cruel Deeds and Dreadful Calamities: The Illustrated Police News 1864–1938*. London: British Library, 2011.
- Upchurch, Charles. *Before Wilde: Sex Between Men in Britain’s Age of Reform*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Upchurch, Charles. “Forgetting the Unthinkable: Cross-Dressers and British Society in the Case of the Queen vs. Boulton and Others.” *Gender & History* 12, no. 1 (April 2000): 127–157.
- “‘The Worst Newspaper in England’: An Interview with the Proprietor of the ‘Police News,’” *Pall Mall Gazette*, Nov. 23, 1886, 2.

³¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Perseus, 1994), 127.

³² Kaplan, “Men in Petticoats,” 98.