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Twinks, Fairies, and Queens: A Historical Inquiry into Effeminate Gay Bottom Identity

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ABSTRACT

Effeminate gay bottoms, or gender nonconforming men who are anally receptive and/or give oral sex to other men who are also “gender nonconforming,” are persistently marginalized in gay and LGBTQ+ communities in Britain and the US. For some LGBTQ+ commentators, “twink” has become relexified to mean a young-looking, slim, hairless effeminate bottom, whereas originally the term primarily denoted a body type and age bracket among gay men. This article explores how the twink has come to bear connotations of effeminacy and bottom subjectivity, highlighting the steady erosion of other available cultural terms to denote a bottom whose gender expression does not conform to dominant cultural masculine stereotypes. It offers an analysis of two key historical effeminate bottom identities in Britain and the US, the “fairy” and “queen,” and argues that the twink not only now carries connotations originally attached to these historical identities, but that it merges their gendered and sexual connotations with new characteristics concerning age and body type that may cause considerable anxiety among contemporary gay men due to their unsustainable “shelf life.”

KEYWORDS

Homosexuality; gay men; twink; effeminacy; gay bottoms

Introduction

Effeminate gay bottoms, or gender nonconforming men who are anally receptive and/or give oral sex to other men, continue to experience marginalization in gay and LGBTQ+ communities in Britain and the US (Brooks et al., 2017; Riley, 2022; Thoma et al., 2021). But this marginalization has historical roots. With the acceleration of gay liberation in the 1970s, effeminate homosexuals who were assumed to be sexually receptive with more masculine men were side-lined in favor of a new gay man: the masculine, sexually versatile gay man who was only differentiated from heterosexual men because of his sex object choice (Baker & Stanley, 2003; Stines, 2017).

From the late nineteenth century until the 1950s, effeminate homosexuals presumed to be “sexually passive,” variously termed *queens*, *fairies*, *poofs*, *bitches*, *pansies*, or *swishes*, dominated public perceptions of who

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homosexuals were, at the expense of considering a range of homosexual expressions, including those of “masculine” homosexual men (Moore, 1998). After the Second World War, men in Britain and the US (as well as other Anglophone settings such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) were increasingly identified and categorized according to sexual orientation, with issues of gender being deliberately detached from questions of sexual attraction (Chauncey, 1994; Hennen, 2008; Houlbrook, 2005; Smaal, 2015). This transformation was partly a result of a long-standing middle-class campaign to make homosexuality respectable and eschew working-class displays of effeminacy and overt sexual receptivity. Indeed, for some men, the ability to be openly homosexual but otherwise a “normal man” was undoubtedly a welcome release from oppressive conformity to patterns of sexually receptive effeminacy (Loftin, 2007). More recently, the project to detach anal sex role from stereotypical gender expressions associated with effeminacy has manifested in a range of attempts to explore the power, masculinity, and agency of the act of bottoming or “being a bottom” (Brennan, 2016; Florêncio, 2020; Riley, 2022), including the power agency of the anus itself (Allan, 2016).

At the same time as Anglo-American gay politics campaigned for a separation of anal sex role and stereotypical gender expression, the term *twink* came into prominence, partly as an evolution from the earlier term *chicken* (Simes, 2005, p. 42). *Chicken* generally meant a young, attractive male or adolescent, with the emphasis placed on youthfulness and innocence. In recorded use from as early as 1910, *chicken* remained a favored way to describe a young, attractive homosexual man into the 1980s (p. 42). However, by the 1990s, *twink* was beginning to replace *chicken* to describe a young, attractive gay man. This time, however, the emphasis was placed on two characteristics: youthfulness and physicality, specifically an ectomorphic body and lack of body hair (especially on the face and chest) (Maki, 2017). In popular culture, *twink* is said to derive from the confectionary item, a Twinkie, highlighting not only the slender profile of the twink, but also the desire of men to fill these twinks with “cream” (or semen). But since the 1990s, as older terms ebbed in popularity, the term *twink* transformed into a complex label freighted with anxieties concerning gender expression and anal sex role, in addition to retaining earlier connotations of specific body type and youthfulness (Wang, 2021).

This article argues that as earlier terms to denote an effeminate bottom such as *queen* and *fairy* declined in usage, the *twink* became relexified beyond its original connotations of youthfulness and slender body, to negotiate cultural anxieties around gender expression and anal sex role that were attempted to be solved with the earlier repudiation of stereotypical “effeminate passive” connotations. As this article will explore, openly gay celebrities who are often dubbed as twinks now routinely express their discomfort with being associated

with the label of the *twink*, not only because of its uneasy links to effeminacy and being sexually receptive, but also because of its original semantic ring-fencing concerning age and body type. In short, the so-called “complicated politics of the twink” go far beyond body stereotypes, but are also weighed down by unresolved anxieties around sexual receptivity and effeminacy that have historical roots in the *queen* and *fairy* and associated terms, which largely remain unexplored (O’flynn, 2018).

The article suggests that, rather than repudiating gendered and sexual stereotypes associated with the word *twink*, it is more prudent to question why the conflation of effeminacy and being a “bottom” in anal sex is deemed so undesirable in the first place, and to foster alternative ways to accommodate a range of effeminate bottom subjectivities that also no longer have the additional burdens of being connected to restrictive body types and age brackets. In turn, the focus of criticism directed against the term *twink* might usefully return to the very real difficulties surrounding its body and age limitations. The article finishes by suggesting emerging ways that those in online gay sex communities are attempting to create space for effeminate bottom identities that are inclusive of multiple body shapes, ages, and ethnic backgrounds.

The article assumes a broadly historical, lexicographical, and textual methodology, analyzing historical definitions of terms in their historical and cultural contexts, as well as exploring contemporary media usage of terms to understand broader gendered and sexual anxieties that circulate and impact communities of gay men and men who have sex with men. One of the key challenges but also opportunities of this approach, however, is that it is difficult and even undesirable to make rigid distinctions between “academic” thought and “non-academic” thought on the topic. It is difficult to do so because firstly, there is a paucity of academic literature on the subject, and secondly, because scholarly contributions arising in cultural studies often explicitly align themselves in an identificatory way with the communities and themes they study (Allan, 2016; Mercer, 2017; Norton, 2016; Underwood, 2003). It is undesirable to make rigid distinctions between academic and non-academic thought on gendered and sexual gay practices and identities because these cannot always be bracketed into academic and non-academic silos. As Susanna Paasonen has noted, gendered and sexual imagery and language can impact academics in embodied and affective ways that invite dialogue between the academic and non-academic (2018).

Moreover, queer thought, and cultural studies more broadly, traditionally celebrates and indeed invites the suspension of binary categories, especially in areas such as sexuality and gender that are frequently experienced in partial, situated, and personal ways that are often also negotiated in affective community with others (Hennen, 2008; Nguyen, 2014). It thus becomes prudent to question whether it is wise to make epistemological demarcations based on

educative backgrounds. For this reason, this article moves sinuously between academic thought and thought created and circulated in the media as well as by gay men in the public eye who are all grappling with similar topics from different vantage points.

The complicated politics of the twink—Revisited

Contemporary gay and LGBTQ+ media tends to define the twink in broadly similar ways, but key commonalities are that the twink has a slim, relatively hairless body, and is young-looking. At its core the twink is characterized by physical appearance, including youthfulness, and can be seen as a descendent of the historical *chicken*, although for a time in the 1970s the two were in circulation together, as Bruce Rodgers's 1979 *Gay Talk* (formerly titled *The Queens' Vernacular*) suggests (Maki, 2017; Needham, 2022). As such, the *twink* forms one of a number of other labels for gay bodies, including *jock* and *bear*, the latter of which is characterized by bigger bodies and more body hair as well as a propensity to take an insertive role in anal intercourse (Lyons & Hosking, 2014).

Increasingly, however, definitions of the twink tend to emphasize some form of effeminacy and taking the bottom role in gay sex, even if this is more “strategic” than a fixed sexual role, dependent on perceptions of masculinity in a potential partner (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017, 2018). For example, the online sex advice website, Kinkly, defines a twink as “typically slender and effeminate with little to no body hair [...] They tend to be bottoms in their sexual relationships” (2019).¹ LGBTQIA+ Wiki defines twinks as “gay men who defy traditional masculine roles, embracing traits that are generally seen as feminine” (n.d.).² Writing for Pink News, Danny Polaris has suggested that the twink is typically recognized as “thin, smaller-built, and pretty smooth with little or no body hair” (2018). He notes that while twinks are stereotyped as bottoms and as effeminate, this stereotype should be resisted. Polaris situates the twink as a gay figure with a specific politics that should be addressed. The fact that the twink is usually young and slim is not seen as problematic as the gendered and sexual connotations attached to the twink. In a sense, then, Polaris is attempting to revert to older definitions and connotations, stripping the twink of its more recent connotations of effeminacy and being a bottom.

In response to the *New York Times's* declaration in 2018 that we have entered “the age of the twink,” Brian O’Flynn elaborated for i-D Magazine on what he termed “the complicated politics of the twink” (2018). Firstly, O’Flynn argues that the twink is quintessentially gay. As other commentators have noted, Flynn also suggested that the twink has a reputation for being effeminate and for being a bottom. This combination is said to result in the twink’s objectification as a sex object on the one hand, but also vilification as

undesirable on the other: “Young effeminate gay men understand that they are to be viewed as sexual objects—that’s if they’re lucky enough to be wanted at all.” O’Flynn argues that the root problem is not simply that fem bottoms are shamed, but that we assume that effeminate gay men are bottoms to begin with: “why is it that, thousands of years on from Ancient Greece, we still bow to a heteronormative ideal of a masculine top and feminine bottom?.” Unlike Polaris, O’Flynn recognizes that the twink has gendered and sex role connotations, but seeks to ask why this is so, and to remove the stigma associated with these.

Other media commentators have argued similarly that gay men need to stop assuming that certain body types, personalities, or particular kinds of gay men have distinctive sex roles in bed. Max Micallef has criticized “the very sexist and misogynistic underlying [logic] to all of this that assumes that all twinks are bottoms because their femininity is somehow synonymous with submissive nature” (2021). James Greig has lamented the fate of twinks once they age out of their youthful, slender bodies: “More feminine or sexually passive gay men aren’t so lucky; to be a 35-year-old faggy bottom is often seen as a more pitiful condition than being a masculine top of the same age” (2022). Alex Green, meanwhile, has argued for the complete abolition of top and bottom as sexual identities, thereby freeing twinks from having to be tied to a bottom identity: “Bottoming or topping is not a subjectivity; it’s a thing you *do*” (2020, original emphasis).

One of the difficulties of analyzing media discussions of the twink is the slippage of language around what exactly the twink signifies. Is the twink simply a body type ring-fenced by age? Or is the twink also a cipher of a gendered and sexual combination that invokes a synergy that has long been resisted, between effeminacy and sexual receptivity? And if the twink is all these things, which are the most damaging characteristics or stereotypes to be resisted? While many commentators deplore the stereotypical assumptions around twinks—that they are effeminate bottoms—they often fall back precisely into these stereotypes even as they try to resist them. Greig, for instance, in trying to detach the twink from stereotypical gender or sex role, nevertheless re-conflates them by referring to the plight of the “35-year-old faggy bottom,” as if this were the condition of the post-twink. Micallef, meanwhile, wishes to resist the notion that twinks are submissive, effeminate bottoms, yet frankly admits that he himself can be classed as a twink and is also a submissive bottom who does not identify with stereotypes of masculinity.

As these commentators acknowledge, the twink is indeed sexualized as a bottom due to the ubiquity of the twink bottom in US and European gay porn. Gay porn scholars such as Joseph Brennan, John Mercer, and Yidong Wang have noted that twinks have been at the forefront of the gay pornographic imagination since the 1990s, although physical morphologies of the twink have shifted slightly over time, with varying degrees of youthfulness and

muscularity (Brennan, 2016; Mercer, 2017; Wang, 2021). But increasingly, mainstream gay porn producers such as Bel Ami, Cocky Boys, and even archetypal twink studio, Helix Studios, try where possible to limit any kind of effeminate gender presentation from their models, so that the twink is effectively de-gendered and detached from stereotypical anal sex role. The consequence of this is that the twink itself begins to lose any kind of distinctive identity or subjectivity, beyond a specific body type and age bracket. Twinks do exist, it seems, at least until their bodies or the passage of time move them out of this category. This much seems to be admitted by commentators, albeit reluctantly. What seems especially fraught, however, is the way in which the twink attracts additional stereotypes, such as being an effeminate bottom. The combined synthesis thus becomes unbearable: a specific gendered and sexual expression that is tied to a rigidly policed body type and age bracket.

One need not venture far into the world of online gay communities to discover the negative affect directed at twinks. On the gay “gossip” site, Data Lounge, for example, within a single 2021–22 thread on the topic entitled “Anyone else love twinks?,” users feel free to offer comments such as: “Twinks are great for a pump and dump, but I wouldn’t date one” (R6); “Young dumb and full of cum” (R34); “I’m sorry I like my men manly and not borderline anorexics” (R51); and “Hate Twinks, too girlie for my tastes” (R54).³ Admittedly, other users say more positive things about twinks, but these negative comments are typical of the tone that discussions about twinks can elicit. On the one hand, twinks are highly sexualized and seen as objects of sexual desire, but on the other hand, there are strict conditions attached to this desirability, such as showing no signs of effeminacy (Vytنيorgu, 2022). Because the twink now carries connotations of effeminacy and bottom sexual practices and identity in addition to age and body characteristics, this also means that scorn is poured on twinks who age out of this category but still identify as fem bottoms: there is no identity space for such bottoms to inhabit (Rogers, 2013).

But some commentators are protesting. In 2015 *The Modern Gay Guide to Life* lamented the so-called “death of the twink.” And by “twink:”

I’m not referring to the beautiful, jacked-up 20 year-old boys who make their livings dancing half naked on podiums and posing in their underwear. I’m referring to the skinny boys in midriffs, covered in glitter who weren’t afraid to express their femininity. Ever since bigger became better and masculinity in the gay community became the norm for what is considered attractive, the image of the effeminate young gay guy who likes show tunes and tight fitting clothing has disappeared from public view. In his place are perfectly sculptured bodies of bros who dress like dudes who try to pass as jocks.⁴

For this commentator, well-meaning attempts to de-stereotype the twink have inadvertently made it extremely difficult for those gay men who do feel themselves to be effeminate and who have also formed, or wish to form,

some kind of identity around being a bottom in gay sex. Although he does not say so explicitly, the “death of the twink” seems caused by a phenomenon scholars have variously called “femmephobia” (Hoskin, 2019), “sissyphobia” (Bergling, 2001), or “effeminophobia” (N. Richardson, 2009), and which denotes an explicit fear and rejection of so-called feminine traits in males. Body type and age bracket remain unaddressed. In this specific media riposte, the central problem is that while some are resisting definitions of twinks that connote effeminacy and sexual receptivity, there is nowhere else for those who do identify as such to go, even more so for those whose body or age exclude them from the category of *twink*.

Together, these media discussions suggest the complex position of the twink in contemporary gay culture. Nearly all agree that the twink is slender, relatively young and hairless, and primarily gay (Cadogan, 2018). Beyond that, some commentators recognize that twinks tend to be more gender nonconforming or effeminate, but that this does not necessarily imply they are a bottom. Others would even wish to detach the twink from any kind of gender connotations, but might concede that the twink *can* be a bottom. Still others might even argue whether the twink is even characterized by a slender body type. In other words, the concoction of various characteristics and stereotypes under the aegis of the twink has resulted in the term and potential identity category almost collapsing under the weight of itself. Those who may be called twinks on the basis of their youthfulness and body type may well resist expectations that they be effeminate bottoms. On the other hand, for those who identify as fem bottoms, the tendency to conceive of this synergy as the exclusive property of twinks means that very few are satisfied. How might it be possible to open space for effeminate bottoms who do not or do not any longer fulfil the strict physical and age requirements of the twink?

One of the key problems with current discussions of the twink is that by focusing on two of the twink’s least permanent characteristics—his youthfulness and physicality—at the same time as denigrating his propensity to be an effeminate bottom—the twink becomes fundamentally unsustainable and disposable. While much media attention is paid to the gendered and sexual connotations of the twink, little is said about the age bracket and expectations concerning body type attached to the twink. Two openly gay celebrities—Olly Alexander and Troye Sivan—who have frequently been called twinks by the media—have reported similar frustrations with the term. This frustration is caused by broader cultural resistance to any kind of synergy between effeminate gender, being gay, and preferring to be a bottom. It is also caused by well-meaning attempts to de-stereotype the twink, which inadvertently emphasize the twink’s disposable and unsustainable nature by concentrating on his body and youthfulness as opposed to his gender and sexual preferences. It is useful to think through these concerns with Alexander and Sivan, who speak from their lived experience as those who have negotiated affiliation with the label of

twink. As artists, they also offer a different epistemological route to thinking about the twink and its place among effeminate bottom identities, employing language, music, and visual imagery as well as documentary narrative to story experiences of the twink.

After the *New York Times*'s declaration that we are living in the "age of the twink," British singer and actor Olly Alexander (born 1990) came out publicly expressing his dislike of being referred to as a twink. In an interview for *NME*, Alexander explained that there had been "skinny white boys forever," but that the connotations of the twink were particularly problematic: "'Twink' feels like an easy way to put someone down and say: 'You're dumb, you're just a bottom that wants to be fucked.' There's a lot of bottom-shaming that goes on in the [LGBTQ+] community" (Levine, 2018). Elsewhere, Alexander has been candid about the fact that he is seen, and sees himself, as an effeminate gay man who plays with the idea he might be a bottom. In his 2017 BBC documentary, *Olly Alexander: Growing Up Gay*, Alexander reflected on the homophobic abuse he received when he was at school because he was effeminate, something which he expanded on in an interview for *The Sun*, explaining "I was very effeminate as a kid" (Swift, 2018). At the same time, in the documentary viewers witness Alexander on all fours in a typical gay bottom "doggy" position, revealing a jockstrap framing his "twink ass." The implication is that Alexander is toying with the idea that he might like to bottom. But equally, the golden color of the paint gestures at the way in which twink bottoms can be idolized as sex objects. He is simultaneously acknowledging his own possible identification with this sexual positioning while also drawing attention to the way in which it is culturally positioned as that which is both prized and belittled (see Figure 1).

Typecast as a twink because of his slender body, boyish features, and effeminate gender presentation, Alexander admits that he has been trying to steer clear of referring to himself as a twink, "because I know it has a shelf life!" (Levine, 2018). For Alexander, the twink is partially problematic because of its stereotypical gender and sexual connotations, but importantly it is also



Figure 1. Olly Alexander on all fours in *Olly Alexander: Growing Up Gay*, revealing a jockstrap under his shorts. Author screenshot.

difficult for him because the twink is age-bound. As writer Thomas Rogers wrote for *The Awl*, “what comes after the twink?” (2013). Perhaps it is better not to put oneself in that predicament in the first place, by eschewing identification with the *twink* label. The question then becomes: what happens to an effeminate bottom who can no longer be perceived as a twink? The crucial comment about the twink having a “shelf life” is not simply about body transformation, but about the way in which this body transformation may also signal the destruction of one’s gender expression and sexual position identity in a culture that has no space for innovative synergies of these two qualities. If the effeminate bottom can no longer be a twink (and some may say he can barely be that in the first place), where can he go, who can he be, and who will find him attractive?

Australian/South African singer Troye Sivan (born 1995) has been similarly vocal in public about his fraught relationship with the word *twink*, perhaps more so than Alexander because Sivan is also thought to have sung about bottoming through his 2018 single, “Bloom,” using the Twitter hashtag #BopsBoutBottoming, which has led some to refer to Sivan as a “bottom icon” (Geraths, 2022). In 2021, Sivan released a music video entitled “Angel Baby,” which features Sivan on a motorbike, topless, and with the top of his black thong showing (see Figure 2).

Not only does Sivan position himself in this video as to some degree feminized or effeminate, he also pairs himself, at least in this scene, with a more obviously masculine and muscular, bearded man, who drives the motorbike confidently into the distance, with Sivan clinging to him, his thin arms in clear contrast to his partner’s muscular ones. This combination seems deliberately provocative. Sivan seems to be toying with a gay cultural legacy that is especially contested, between an effeminate male and a masculine male—a combination that can be easily dismissed as heteronormative and imitative of “straight” sexuality (Green, 2020). If Sivan is visualizing himself as a twink



Figure 2. Troye Sivan in his music video “Angel Baby,” revealing his thong. Author screenshot.

here, he is also drawing to the foreground aspects of the twink that are routinely denigrated, such as a tendency to be effeminate and likely to be a bottom in gay relationships.

It is scenes like these, combined with Sivan's coy evasions about his status as a bottom, that provoke viewer responses like those found in a Data Lounge thread from 2018 after "Bloom" was released, entitled "Troye Sivan: 'labeling me as a bottom is reductive.'" Here, Data Lounge users respond with comments such as "Does she really think we're going to buy her as anything but a bottom? Gurl, please" (R1); "Self-hating bottom" (R14); and "This gurl ain't never topped anyone in her LIFE!" (R21, original emphasis).⁵ While these somewhat acerbic comments, which also tastelessly play with Sivan's gender identity through mixing pronouns, seem designed to highlight a paradox facing gay or LGBTQ+ viewers who follow Sivan's music and try and read his self-presentation in light of his own comments about himself, they also resonate with Sivan's own challenges regarding his gender nonconformity. Indeed, the use of she/her pronouns for non-masculine presenting twinks, however subjective this perception may be, seems indicative at least of a broader openness to considering gender variation among gay men in an era when masculine-presenting gay men are preferred (Glick et al., 2007; Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Moreover, such usage also continues historical practices of mixing male and female pronouns, depending on context, when referring to the *fairy* or *queen* (see below).

Sivan is candid in interviews about the way in which his effeminacy has impacted his sense of self in non-straightforward ways. In a 2018 interview for the *Guardian*, for example, he notes: "I have to get comfortable with the fact that I am kind of effeminate sometimes—or really effeminate sometimes [. . .] That I want to paint my nails. Overcoming all those stupid rules that society embeds in you as a kid about gender and sexuality is a conscious task" (Snapes, 2018). Singing about bottoming, and using key signifiers such as a thong, in addition to the more subtle flower imagery that queer rhetoric scholar Corey Geraths has interpreted as "Bloom's" queer rhetoric—his *anthos* – means that Sivan is, at least on some level, trying to negotiate what it means to have a bottom identity, to be effeminate, and to be openly gay, belonging with all three facets of himself (2022). In other words, Sivan is publicly staking a possible position for himself as a fem gay bottom, even though this is heavily qualified by statements implying that he has no such fixed identity, let alone an identity as a twink.

While Alexander and Sivan are both reluctant to publicly identify themselves as twinks, they both nevertheless recognize that their identities as gay men are intimately connected to effeminacy and bottom subjectivity in ways that are fraught with anxiety. It is understandable that Alexander does not wish to identify as a twink because "it has a shelf life." The challenge is to find ways to celebrate, articulate, and develop some collective self-awareness of

a mode of being gay that has been persistently criticized and marginalized for decades. Whether, as Brian O’Flynn has argued, Alexander and Sivan are indeed “twinky role models,” is debatable (2018). What seems clear from their LGBTQ+ status is that they are role models of a kind—one that uneasily synergizes gender, sexual orientation, and sex role in ways others would rather they did not. One response would be to suggest that, as possible twinks who also have to negotiate cultural associations of effeminacy and sexual receptivity, Alexander and Sivan are descendants of historical identities that synergize effeminacy and bottom subjectivity. For Silva (2022), this identity is that of George Chauncey’s (1994) pre-1940 New York *fairy*, but it could just as easily be the London *quean* of Matt Houlbrook (2005), the British *queen* of Baker and Stanley (2003), the New Zealand *queen* of Chris Brickell (2012), or the Australian *queen* of Yorick Smaal (2015). Alternative, Anglo-American twentieth-century labels that could also be invoked include *bitch*, *swish*, and *pansy* – all of which have connotations of effeminacy and “sexual passivity.” However, due to the cultural prominence of *queen* and *fairy*, I will focus on these.

Fairies and queens as effeminate bottoms

While the concept of “a bottom” in the sense used to describe contemporary twinks did not exist before the late twentieth century, concepts of effeminacy and sexual receptivity among men did exist, and the two were often synergized in ways that have since been largely rejected, for example, through the cultural figure of the *fairy* or *queen*. And while it is true that the *queen* or *quean* has an older lineage associated with effeminacy and male homosexuality in addition to earlier prejudicial meanings associated with female prostitutes, this discussion focuses specifically on the historical moment in which *twink* gained ascendancy in gay argot and the way in which it negotiated themes of effeminacy and sexual receptivity in ways that in the early-mid twentieth century the *queen* and *fairy* (among other terms) did (Norton, 2016).

The New York *fairy*, as delineated by George Chauncey’s (1994), is frequently invoked by historians and cultural analysts as a symbol of a pre-Stonewall era in which the predominant image of the (working-class) homosexual was a sexually “passive,” effeminate one (Cleminson, 2004; Hennen, 2001; Silva, 2022). Other scholars offer alternative identities to describe the same historical phenomenon, including *pansy* (Stines, 2017), *swish* (Loftin, 2007), and *queen*, or *quean* (Baker & Stanley, 2003; Houlbrook, 2005; Smaal, 2015). Each of these have their own intricate linguistic and cultural histories. Lexicographer Gary Simes, who has synthesized the work of other glossaries, has traced the *fairy* back to 1892, to denote “an effeminate male homosexual; *orig., spec.* one who performs fellation” (2005, p. 105).

Writing in 1918 as Earl Lind and frequently using she/her pronouns to describe herself, Ralph Werther penned the first sustained autobiography of an

American fairy, entitled *Autobiography of an Androgyne*. Although written for medical experts, the text was allowed to be published uncensored, and is remarkably frank about the author's desires and sense of self as a fairy. Lind speculates that the term originated when seafaring took extended periods of time and men were deprived of "the female of the species," so they would find a suitable male to "supply her place. Looked upon as a fairy gift or godsend, such individual would be referred to as 'the fairy'" (1918, p. 7). For Lind, *fairy* is the colloquial term for the medical term *invert*, which elsewhere she insists denotes a sexually "passive" male who has the mind of a female (p. 8). For Lind, this takes the form of an "androgyne" that is not automatically equivalent to other, contemporary versions of *fairy* identity that may represent a different balance of male and female characteristics and modes of performativity. For Lind, her sense of her gender and sexuality are thoroughly "inverted" from that of "normal" males (Chauncey, 1994). As a fairy, for Lind this "passivity" seems restricted to fellating other men; she expresses disgust for "passive anal sex," although admits that from time to time she has had to do this, though with no pleasure at all. Lind also goes to great length to describe her body, and at times discusses the prominence of her "breasts," the muscular tone of her body, or the general "voluptuous" profile of herself as a fairy. In short, unlike the *twink*, the *fairy* seems more inclusive of a range of body shapes and ages and it may even be accurate to talk of different kinds of *fairy*: not all were as publicly gender nonconforming, but they nevertheless still synergized gender nonconformity and sexually receptive gestures and practices.

By contrast, the late-nineteenth-century or twentieth-century *queen* or *quean* seems to have denoted a less specific form of sexual receptivity: the queen was simply an "effeminate passive homosexual," whether this meant being anally penetrated or fellating men. As Stephen Murray has said in relation to what he terms "gender-stratified homosexuality," where one male is effeminate and "passive" and the other masculine and "active," such males are simply "male receptacles for phallic discharges," wherever this discharge happens to be deposited (2000, p. 255). In his history of early twentieth-century queer London, Matt Houlbrook positions the *quean* as the British counterpart to Chauncey's American *fairy*, and makes it clear that the quean was associated with being anally penetrated in ways that were more emphatic than the American fairy (2005). As such, it is possible that, whether spelt *queen* or *quean* (the two terms have different etymologies), the term also gained currency in the US at the same time as the fairy, to denote those "passive inverts" who also enjoyed anal penetration. For example, Chapter 13 of *Sex and Personality* by Catherine Cox Miles and Terman (1936) narrates the personalities of several self-identified *queens*, some of whom apparently disliked fellating other men and seemed to prefer receptive anal sex as their primary form of sexual activity. By 1972 the definition of a queen seemed to

remain largely unchanged from forty years earlier: “male homosexual; usually refers to effeminate male homosexuals who prefer more masculine men” (Farrell, 1972, p. 106). In Britain, Paul Baker and Jo Stanley have shown that, at least among service staff in the Merchant Navy and on passenger ships such as P&O cruises, *queens* survived as a coherent, self-conscious group of effeminate sexually receptive homosexuals well into the 1980s (2003). And, on gay internet forums such as Data Lounge, *queen* remains a commonly used term to describe effeminate gay men assumed to be bottoms, as well as a term that more broadly denotes a gay man, often used with a preceding noun (such as *drag queen* or *size queen*). But such users often reveal themselves to be “elder gays,” drawing on historical usages of *queen* to comment on contemporary phenomena.

While the queens’ purported preferences for receptive anal sex as opposed to active fellatio differs from Lind’s account of fairies’ enjoyment of fellatio, together the narrative accounts nevertheless emphasize a strong collective self-consciousness of having several characteristics in common that mark them out as different, not only from other men in general, but from other homosexuals. These include recollections of childhood gender nonconformity (being called a *sissy* by other boys), attraction to men unlike themselves: masculine, athletic, and “normal,” and expressed dislike for forming unions with other effeminate, sexually receptive homosexuals. I will focus on the first two aspects, as they have particular relevance when analyzing relationships between the fairy, queen, and twink.

Of the 77 “passive male homosexuals” interviewed by E. Lowell Kelly for *Sex and Personality* (Miles & Terman, 1936), the majority recalled some form of childhood gender nonconformity, particularly concerning play activities, with the most popular form “playing house” (1936, p. 249). As adults, nearly all these males adopted what Kelly refers to as “queen names,” by which they are known among “their associates” (p. 248): “It appears,” noted Kelly,

that the large majority of passive male homosexuals are characterized from fairly early childhood by an inversion of interests, attitudes, and activities. The ‘pansy’ type of behavior of adult inverts is not primarily an affectation or the result of ‘abnormal’ or ‘perverted’ sexual practices (1936, p. 250).

In recent years any kind of statement about gender and sexuality emanating from historical sexology has been robustly subjected to scrutiny through Foucauldian lenses of biopower, including this study overseen by Miles and Terman (Honkasalo, 2016). And it seems clear that there are aspects of this study that can indeed be subjected to satisfactory critique along Foucauldian lines. But this statement concerning the childhood gender nonconformity of “passive male homosexuals” in fact anticipates the findings of multiple studies since, including most recently by Ashlyn Swift-Gallant and colleagues, among others (Li et al., 2017; Swift-Gallant et al., 2017, 2021; Tasos, 2022). Swift-Gallant in particular

has emphasized that childhood and adult gender nonconformity are especially prevalent among gay bottoms as opposed to tops, lending support to a “kernel of truth” among stereotypes that suggest that, at least some bottoms are more effeminate than tops (Swift-Gallant et al., 2021; Taywaditep, 2002, p. 4). Earlier, in 1992, James Weinrich and colleagues argued that there is a cross-culturally validated type “in which childhood gender role was relatively feminine and in which receptive anal intercourse has become a highly preferred adult genitoerotic role” (Weinrich et al., 1992, p. 583). Or, as Simon LeVay wrote in *The Sexual Brain* (1994), effeminate bottoms form a particular subgroup of gay men, “for whom their preferred erotic role is in a sense a continuation of a life-long sex atypical form of self-expression” (p. 115). The important point here, which Kelley also recognized, is that effeminate males who strongly prefer receptive anal intercourse are only a small proportion of a heterogenous body of gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men (D. Moskowitz, 2022). And, indeed, it seems that even among this group of gay men, there continue to be variations in degree of gender nonconformity, context in which this emerges, and considerable variation of personal style in “performing” this identity, as there was historically. Moreover, these correlations are by no means intended to characterize all men who bottom, and it is also true that there is evidence to suggest that as men age they may also incline more to versatile and insertive anal sex practices (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011).

I would suggest, though, that the queen and fairy both fit into this ideal type, in which, unlike the twink, gender nonconformity and sexual role are highlighted as a matter of course, as opposed to body type and age (Murray, 2000). Joseph Harry’s famous “defeminization” thesis, which argued that during adolescence gay males defeminized due to peer pressure, therefore makes sense when set in its historical context, during the 1970s and 1980s in which the rise of the masculine-identified “clone” firmly displaced the effeminate fairy and queen in the US and in Britain (1983). Defeminisation may have been experienced individually in response to peer pressure, but it was also a politically instigated social phenomenon undertaken on a collective level.

The kind of anxiety expressed by Olly Alexander and Troye Sivan also seems plausible in a contemporary climate that still relates uneasily to any perceived synergies between being gay, being effeminate, and being a bottom. And yet the absence of any well-known and easily understood terms to describe fem bottoms has meant that terms which originally did not necessarily imply bottoming and effeminacy, such as the *twink*, have become relexified in an attempt to try and negotiate lingering anxieties around effeminate gay men who bottom (Fernández-Aleman & Murray, 2002).

In “Angel Baby,” Sivan’s pairing with a more masculine and muscular man also poses difficult questions about what are often dismissed as “heteronormative” pairings, between masculine top and effeminate bottom. And yet historically, the queen and the fairy had little difficulty adopting precisely

such a relational dynamic with other men, and it is for this reason that Stephen Murray was able to enfold the fairy and queen into his typology of gender-stratified homosexuality (2000). In many accounts of the fairy and queen, there is strong evidence that, at least as an ideal type, these effeminate bottom types sought after males unlike them. Lowell notes that “practically all” of the queens he interviewed “have lived with men in the relationship of man and wife” (1936, p. 248). In the 1980 London Network Television series, *Gay Life*, Gifford Skinner related a similar perspective, recalling that in 1930s London he and his fellow effeminates referred to each other as “she” and would only contemplate forming a union with a “real man.”⁶ Sometimes these “men” were called *trade*, but essentially they were men who were not demarcated by any dissident form of gendered or sexual behavior: they were simply *men*, whose gender as masculine and sexual aim as penetrator were congruent (Baker & Stanley, 2003; Chauncey, 1994). A similar visual morphology is found in texts from the time such as Allen Dennis’s *The Gay B. C. Book* (1966), in which *studs* and *swishes* form a recognizable pair, or in *The Gay Coloring Book* (1964), depicting the adventures of Percy and his masculine counterparts.

Chauncey is correct to link this sexual and gendered “complementarity” to Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in which sexual aim is distinguished from sexual object. After the Second World War, men were increasingly divided by their sexual object choice as opposed to their sexual aim, which could be fluid. Thus, concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality were simultaneously co-created and relied upon each other for understanding. When sexuality is not rigidly tied to sexual object choice, men who prefer to penetrate, either males or females, are not singled out as being in any way remarkable, although their tastes may be regarded as idiosyncratic (Norton, 2016). As ideal types, the queen and fairy, by contrast, have an “inverted” sexual aim that is in accord with their inverted gender, and so are marked out by both gendered and sexual deviance.

Concepts of inversion, or of gay men in some way being women trapped in male bodies, have for decades been subjected to fierce criticism, and were one of the chief battles waged by the Mattachine Society and other American homophile movements at the forefront of gay liberation (Stines, 2017). But one of the difficulties facing contemporary effeminate gay bottoms is that in discarding any possibility that effeminacy and bottoming might in some way be complementary, they are encouraged to be suspicious of any connection these might have in their lives, including suspicion directed at terms such as *twink* that have been relexified to accommodate lingering anxieties originally directed at the fairy, queen, and other effeminate bottom types. Both Alexander and Sivan, for example, are consistently reticent about there being any meaningful connection between their effeminacy and their flirtation with bottoming and bottom identities. There simply is not the cultural airtime for such speculations.

An alternative response, other than rejecting synergies between gender and sexual role, is to articulate and imagine new identities and subjectivities that proudly synergize effeminacy and being a bottom, without relying on physical types or age brackets that add to the burdens laden in the term *twink*. Elsewhere I have discussed the importance of the *pussyboy* and *boiwife* as contemporary Anglicized identities that refuse to separate gender role presentation and anal sex role (Vytņiorgu, 2022). These identities flourish online in pornographic contexts, where users are able to fantasize about multiple aspects of identity including but not limited to sexual life. Some pussyboys and boiwives also use these pornographic outlets to hypothesize about the origins of their gender and sexuality, leading to some remarkably similar statements to those issued by Lind and the queens interviewed by Lowell in 1936. For example, one user on Tumblr has argued that

bottom is both a 'gender' and a 'sexual orientation.' It's a comprehensive identity and way of life, based on embracing one's natural femininity and receptivity, one's inferiority to and complementarity to Men. A true bottom turns her receptivity according to Nature into freely-chosen and actualised complete acceptivity [*sic*].⁷

For this blogger, being a pussyboy or boiwife entails a quest of acceptance, believing that such are born that way. Lowell also noted that the queens he interviewed by and large said that they felt they were born that way, and Lind similarly argued extensively that fairies were born rather than caused by environmental factors. Of course, the kind of relational dynamic proposed by this Tumblr blogger, with references to “inferiority” and “natural femininity” will concern many who are anxious to steer clear of any hint of essentialism, or that some people are biologically programmed into “inferior” roles. But one need not discard a commitment to overcoming biologisms that lead to essentialist thinking and still welcome imaginative sexual fantasies that enable self-identified fem bottoms to explore their sense of self and desires in ways that help build community with others who also feel and think like them (Richardson, 2022). Indeed, there is a strong element of “communal fantasy” to writing and imagery about boiwives and pussyboys, and much of it is meant to encourage fem gay bottoms to negotiate the effeminophobia they encounter in the wider gay and LGBTQ+ community that repudiates synergies between effeminacy and bottoming (Barker, 2014).

As identities, the pussyboy and boiwife are also meant to be more inclusive than the twink. Although many images of pussyboys and boiwives figure twink bodies, they are not inherently reliant on body types or age brackets, but rather focus on the very elements of the contemporary twink that are routinely denigrated: effeminacy and bottoming. In this way, the pussyboy and boiwife are closer descendants of the historical queen and fairy than the twink, because they are primarily concerned with links between effeminacy and bottoming in ways that historically and even today the twink tries to resist. To put it another

way, where Trevor Hoppe talks about bottoming in terms of “pleasure and power,” or Jonathan Allan in terms of the agency of the anus, pussyboys and boiwives find a form of power and agency in relinquishing the discourses of power and masculinity that have become commonplace in discussions around bottoming (Allan, 2016; Hoppe, 2011). For them, “inferiority,” as part of a careful, self-chosen “game” between submissive and dominant, can feel incredibly releasing and empowering (Phillips, 1998).

Conclusion

Contemporary frustrations with the term *twink* are understandable. If the term is perceived in its original meaning, to mean a young-looking, sexually desirable slender and hairless gay male, then it can be rejected on the basis of its “shelf life.” For young gay men to be pigeon-holed into an identity that is fundamentally unsustainable is indeed a recipe for anxiety and feeling objectified.

However, in recent years *twink* has been made to carry more meaning than this: it has undergone a form of relexification, in which it now carries connotations of effeminacy and being a bottom. I would argue that this has happened in part because of the historical rejection of gay identities and labels that openly synergize gender nonconformity and sexual receptivity. Since the 1970s, *queens* and *fairies* – historical terms and ideal types that have denoted an effeminate bottom—have been marginalized, although as Paul Baker and Jo Stanley note, there have been pockets of resistance, such as in the British Merchant Navy and passenger ships, where effeminacy and bottoming happily went together (2003), and the term still lingers in corners of the internet. The twink, therefore, has been made to carry lingering anxieties around effeminacy and bottoming, but has become especially toxic due to maintaining original meanings attached to the twink, including youthfulness and specific body types that prioritize thinness and smoothness that by their very nature entrap some and exclude others.

By contrast, effeminacy and bottoming are not intrinsically tied to any specific body type or age bracket, and queens and fairies were counted among all kinds of men-loving males. And while the queen and fairy might now largely be consigned to historical gay argot, I have suggested ways in which contemporary effeminate gay bottoms are formulating alternative identities to that of the twink. But one of the key enablers in such identity exploration and formation seems to be accepting that, at least for some gay men, their desire to be a bottom and their gender nonconformity seem mutually reinforcing (Swift-Gallant et al., 2021; Weinrich et al., 1992). While this synergy may continue to challenge hegemonic gay and LGBTQ+ perceptions of masculinity and sexual versatility, it clearly continues to inspire other

gay men, who might wish to create other, more inclusive labels and identities than suffer under the restrictive and objectifying gaze of *twink*.

Notes

1. <https://www.kinkly.com/definition/6210/twink> (accessed 20 September 2022).
2. <https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/Twink> (accessed 20 September 2022).
3. <https://www.dataounge.com/thread/27910049-anyone-else-love-twinks-> (accessed 17 January 2023).
4. <https://themoderngay.com/2015/05/03/the-twink-is-dead/> (accessed 20 September 2022).
5. <https://www.dataounge.com/thread/21948538-troye-sivan-%E2%80%9Clabeling-me-a-bottom-is-reductive-> (accessed 15 September 2022).
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzPzb3exfVc> (accessed 20 September 2022).
7. Since December 2018 Tumblr has cracked down on adult content. It is therefore necessary to register for an account in order to view adult content. In order to protect this blogger's privacy, their identity has been obscured.

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