THE MORE MISCHIEVOUS THE BETTER:
OCTAVIAN AND QUEER OPERA PERFORMANCE
IN RICHARD STRAUSS AND HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL’S DER ROSENKAVALIER

By

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For my Mother, to whom each of my accomplishments are dedicated, whether or not I remember to say so.
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Despite the thriving gay fanbase opera has developed over the years, this art form continues to cater to conservative ideologies and traditions—especially concerning matters of gender and sexuality. As discussed in studies such as Catherine Clément’s 1979 *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, opera has built its enduring popularity on traditional, heterosexual narratives that conclude with the dramatic demise of their heroines. In this thesis, I argue that composer Richard Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal subvert these established notions of gender and sexuality in the opera *Der Rosenkavalier* through the character of the young Count Octavian Rofrano. Utilizing the operatic practice of casting a female singer as a male character (commonly known as a trouser role), Strauss and Hofmannsthal prevent Octavian from inhabiting a strictly masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual identity. This unique, non-heteronormative characterization endows Octavian with a fluid, non-static gendering that helps to destabilize gender binarity.

After offering an historical analysis of the trouser role, paying especial attention to the figure of the castrato and the pageboy archetype, I contend that Strauss and Hofmannsthal—through cues in the opera’s libretto, musical score, and staging—endeavor to mold a character
that refuses the boundaries of male or female, heterosexual or homosexual labeling. By permitting Octavian to exist within this “queer,” nongendered space, Strauss and Hofmannsthal force viewers of Der Rosenkavalier to reassess traditional gender and sexual roles—both when the opera was premiered in 1911 as well as today. Thus, my thesis offers an analysis that not only situates the opera in the context of the early twentieth century but also outlines the opera’s commentary on gender and sexual roles that are still valuable for contemporary culture, particularly discussions of queer theory.
Nowadays, opera is gay. Twenty-first century audiences tend to associate the exquisite excesses of opera with homosexuality. The phrase “opera queen”—usually used to describe a white, upper middle class, effeminate gay man who frequents the opera—has become a commonly-recognized entry in the ever-growing gay lexicon, and, with the advent of twentieth-century technology, the gay interest has spread to the internet in the form of websites and blogs, such as the self-proclaimed “queer opera zine” Parterre Box (http://www.parterre.com/).

Despite opera’s close association with queerness, many opera houses still play to conservative audiences and ideologies. Even though operatic “divas,” epitomized by Maria Callas, have become synonymous with homosexual sensibilities, the operatic stage still caters to the elaborate fetishization of female demise; as Catherine Clément famously and poetically remarks in her groundbreaking 1979 Opera, or the Undoing of Women, “[O]n the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing” (5).

It is precisely because of this atmosphere of conservative, even patriarchal, interest in opera that its queer transgressions become so powerful. In the mid-1990s critics from academic realms as varied as literature, psychology, and musicology, lead by Wayne Koestenbaum’s seminal text on homosexuality and opera, The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire, began to explore opera’s undeniably queer leanings. Take, for example, the opening scene of Richard Strauss’ popular opera, Der Rosenkavalier. The curtain rises: it is morning. As woodwinds alternate the chirpings of a morningbird song, two women sleepily rouse from their passionate embrace. One of these women is the aging princess known only by her title, the Marschallin; the other woman, however, is the young Count Octavian Rofrano—a male character portrayed by a female actor. Dresden audiences witnessed this very operatic
tableau at the premiere of the opera in 1911, and, as if willfully ignorant of the staging of what appeared to be a blatant sexual transgression, the opera went on to become an instant success with the public. Overlooking or excusing this elephant in the room, the audience at the premiere—as well as audiences since—seemed to dismiss this subverted heterosexuality as a mere operatic sleight of hand. While this practice of women performing the roles that had been left vacant after the demise of the male-bodied, soprano-voiced castrati stretches back through historical operatic performance—from Handel and Rossini to Mozart and Bellini—only very recently has opera and gender scholarship finally begun to unpack the multifarious and often unquestioned gender-bending of these trouser roles.

Not content simply to use the trouser role in their historic purpose as surrogates for the obsolete castrati, Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, composer and librettist of the aforementioned Der Rosenkavalier, utilized this operatic trickery as a means of destabilizing and reassessing the gender roles of the early twentieth century. As Sam Abel asserts in Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Opera Performance, the “female-to-male cross-dresser … always poses a threat. Women dressed as men violate male hegemony by attempting to reject their secondary social role and to assume male power or, more powerfully, to reject the whole concept of binary gender division” (151). In this thesis, I would like to refine Abel’s discussion of the subversive quality of drag. Rather than arguing that Octavian is a priori subversive simply because the character is in actuality a woman in man’s clothing (i.e., a woman who has attained male power), I would like to posit that Octavian’s malleable gender prevents the character from identifying completely as either male or female, placing Octavian at a site of subversive power that fosters a critique of dyadic, heteronormative gender roles. Indeed, the presence of this central trouser role in Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s Der Rosenkavalier does more than provide audiences with lesbian
titillation or reinforce patriarchal constructions by endowing a woman with masculinity; instead, the character of Octavian captures an image of a queered gender fluidity that destabilizes notions of gender binarity, refusing to resolve into either masculinity or femininity, male or female.

Before beginning my close examination of the various texts in Der Rosenkavalier, I must explicate my reading of the word “queer,” which becomes an essential descriptor of Octavian’s manygendered characterization—rather than strictly hetero- or homosexual, lesbian or gay—in this project. My usage of the word “queer” draws from the work of Judith Butler in Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.” In her discussion of this multifaceted and recursive term, Butler states “that ‘queering’ might signal an inquiry into (a) the formation of homosexualities (a historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the deformative and misappropriative power that the term currently enjoys” (229, italics in original). Butler goes on to explain that a possible function of this word is to “resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by ‘lesbian and gay’” (228). Thus, Butler offers a definition of “queer” that, like my argued characterization of Octavian, describes a sexual identification that exists constantly in flux, defying codifiable gender labels. In terms of this paper, I offer it as an alternative to the more limiting and often static identities of “gay” and “lesbian” in hopes that it will signify an even more complex and critical theoretical idea.

So, while Octavian has come to be read as a representative or iconographic lesbian figure in recent gender and opera criticism (see Brett and Wood 359 and Hadlock 265n. 34), I would

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1 While I understand the possible limitations and complications inherent in a term that suggests the existence of “many” genders without defining them, I use the term “manygendered” (as well as “multigendered”) as a linguistic shorthand to symbolize a fluid gender characterization that, rather than representing a character who simply and statically inhabits both masculinity and femininity, maneuvers freely on the continuum between these socially-constructed gender roles.
argue that, through composer Richard Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s use of libretto, musical score, and staging, Octavian functions as a purposefully “queered” character whose successful existence without definable gender reflects the emergence of non-normative sexualities in the social consciousness of the early twentieth century that are still relevant today.
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF OCTAVIAN AND THE TROUSER ROLE

The Rise and Fall of the Castrato

Before embarking on my discussion of the breeches role in *Der Rosenkavalier*, it is necessary to provide a brief background of these roles in opera’s performance history. Before women were universally permitted to grace the stage, whether theatrical or operatic, the castrato sang the high-voiced alto and soprano roles most commonly associated nowadays with women. Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, whose study on diva politics and worship discusses the rise and fall of the castrato at length, trace the practice of castration in *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics*:

Castration was, perhaps, the price patriarchy paid to keep women silent and its authority intact. “As in all congregations of God’s people, women should keep silent at the meeting,” St. Paul advised the Corinthians (I Cor. 14.33-34), and his namesake Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) codified Paul’s advice by officially banning women from singing in St. Peter’s. Church choirs depended on boys and adult male falsettists to sing soprano and alto parts, but as monody gave way to increasingly complicated polyphony, more powerful voices and mature musicians (especially singers who would not be lost once their voices changed) were needed for upper-register parts. (25)

In order to fulfill this need for a voice as light as a child’s, while also as strong as an adult’s, the custom of castrating young boys to preserve their young, high voices, in what is known as an orchiectomy, was born. Although practiced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Church itself publicly shunned the act, and thus, it is uncertain exactly when the practice began; however, documentation exists of castrati performing as early as 1562 (Leonardi and Pope 25). On the other hand, the appearance of women on the stage, even outside the Catholic Church, was often looked upon as an act of gross impropriety. This is not to say that women did not perform publicly; however, because they were often prohibited from appearing and singing onstage, the figure of the castrato began to serve as a proxy for the female performer and the staged female body of the era.
In the 1740s, however, the popularity of castrati began to wane significantly. In *The Diva’s Mouth*, Pope and Leonardi offer a number of suggestions as to why the castrato began to disappear from the public eye: an economic boom in the 1730s which eased dependence upon the cruel and desperate process of castration in order to secure a son’s future, “a decline in the number of religious orders in Italy … and the dissolution of others with the coming of the French,” and attempts by Napoleonic governments to outlaw castration (42). Most importantly for this project, however, is the notion that castrati fell out of favor because of a decline in the florid vocal stylings synonymous with the castrato and a movement towards more realism in opera performance (42). Under the guise of making opera more realistic, the complex, non-heteronormative gender roles embodied in the castrato were shunned by opera composers and librettists. It is only in the early twentieth century, when Strauss and Hofmannsthal introduced their more fantastical Octavian and Composer pants roles (the latter appearing in *Ariadne auf Naxos*) that opera performance truly regained some of the powerful gender complexity present in the era of the castrato.

Contrary to modern listeners’ conceptions of voice and gender, men’s heroic operatic voices before the 1800s were rarely deep and heavy. Instead, the male protagonists in opera could have high, light voices—voices that are now commonly associated with women and femininity; however, with the sparse population of castrati available, opera companies were often forced to seek alternative bodies and voices to reproduce roles that were once the sole domain of the castrato. While some opera composers transposed their music, dropping the vocal lines to lower tessituras in order to accommodate male tenors, baritones, and basses (e.g., Gluck rewrote *Orfeo ed Euridice* so that the once-castrato role of the young poet Orpheus could now be performed by a male tenor), other opera companies began to substitute the similarly-sounding
female mezzo soprano or contralto in lieu of the castrato. Perhaps most famously, George Frideric Handel often employed both male castrato and female mezzo sopranos—vocal ranges that sonically overlap—for the same roles in his operas, simply depending upon the availability of the artists. Margaret Reynolds describes this blurring of the lines between voice and gender in her essay, “Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions”:

In Handel’s day there was sexual anarchy on stage. Men (or ex-men) played the parts of heroes in high voices. Women, dressed up as men, sang heroes in high voices. Men, dressed up as women, played their consorts with high or low voices. And if you couldn’t hire the singer of the sex required, you settled for the voice and didn’t worry. (138)

As apparent in Reynolds’ reading of the opera stage during the eighteenth century, opera served as a site for gender deconstruction where feminine-sounding men stood alongside armor-clad women. Indeed, Handel wrote operas where high, almost feminine, voices could be either male or female and could evoke a number of vocal qualities that ran the gamut from heroism and seduction to virginity and villainy. In his most famous opera, Giulio Cesare, the voice types of the lead roles—Giulio Cesare, Cleopatra, Sesto, Tolomeo, and Cornelia—all fall into similarly high-voiced tessituras that could be sung by both male castrati and women regardless of whether the character was male or female; however, as opera edged further away from the opera seria realm of the castrati to the class struggles and ‘battle of the (heterosexual) sexes’ subject matter of opera buffa, the newly-established trouser role began to signify a new type of sexuality.

The Trouser Role and the Pageboy

After the cessation of the practice of castration, as well as the moral clash of the eerily-juxtaposed masculine body and feminine voice of the castrato with the sexual mores of the late eighteenth century, castrati became virtually obsolete outside of the church. The sidelining of the complicated sexual embodiment of the castrato did not, however, stop composers from writing music for their voice type; now, these composers began to write specifically for the
trouser role—a female singer (usually mezzo soprano) who performs as a man in men’s clothing. The most famous archetype to emerge from this newfound operatic role was the pageboy. The quintessential young man on the verge of sexual awakening, the pageboy is a figure caught between adulthood and childhood, man and not-man, making the androgynous female drag performance functional as well as aesthetic. While the stock character of the pageboy recurs in operas such as Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, the most prominent and popular of these characters is certainly Cherubino from Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*. A secondary character that nevertheless sends Mozart’s *buffa* plot careening into motion, Cherubino is a sexually-volatile page who falls in love with virtually every female character in the opera’s cast. In her discussion of the pageboy figure of Cherubino in “The Career of Cherubino, or the Trouser Role Grows Up,” Heather Hadlock explains that the variety of names for the practice [of female-to-male cross-dressing in opera], variously known as the “trouser role,” “breeches part,” or “pants part,” *Hosenrolle* or *travesti*, testifies both to its international appeal and to the necessity of the singer’s having slim, boyish legs. Equally essential … is a light and clear voice [and the] page’s “talk of love” is typically translated into melancholy or flirtatious staged songs, directly or indirectly addressed to an inaccessible beloved, of which Cherubino’s “Voi che sapete” remains the archetype. (68)

Indeed, the figure of the pageboy is part erotic spectacle (the sight of women’s legs, even clothed in men’s stockings, was a novelty for the stage at that time) and a true example of form fitting function—the singer’s androgynous voice, much like the voice of a boy experiencing the hormonal rushes of puberty, is at times lovely and light while at others plummy and deep.

Yet, the character of the pageboy is a limited one. While beloved, the pageboy is often a minor character in the opera’s drama, rarely eclipsing the traditional heterosexual coupling of the lead soprano and tenor/baritone. Also, despite the pageboy’s zealous sexual appetite, the opera composer and librettist rarely allow this nontraditionally-gendered character to interact sexually
with the objects of his affection other than as comedic (and ultimately ineffectual) playacting. Indeed, in David J. Levin’s discussion of Cherubino in *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, the author notes that, unlike the focal relationships in *Le nozze di Figaro* (e.g., Figaro and Susanna, the Count and Countess, and Bartolo and Marcellina), Cherubino and Barbarina’s relationship remains narratively unresolved because their marriage is still “unscheduled when the opera comes to a close” (78). Levin goes on to claim that this thwarted resolution is a result of Cherubino’s gender confusion: “To the extent that Cherubino embodies something that would resist being tied down, we might describe that ‘something’ as the fact or problem of the figure’s peculiar embodiment itself, a kind of erratic traffic in and between gender” (79). This trope of the fervently sexual, but ultimately sexless, pageboy (what Levin refers to as Cherubino’s “libidinal surplus” [78]) continues throughout the nineteenth century until the emergence of the character of Octavian in Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Der Rosenkavalier* in the early twentieth century who manages to transcend the obstacles of rigid gender and sexual representation that had thwarted the pageboy tradition before him.

**Octavian, the Knight of the Silver Rose**

By the close of the nineteenth century, Victorian notions of sexuality had been brought to the fore of European social consciousness by Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia sexualis* and *fin de siècle* decadence epitomized by writers such as Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde—not to mention the latter’s infamous sodomy trial. Richard Strauss, certainly no stranger to these cultural developments, had recently completed two operas that explored the darker realms of sexuality: 1905’s *Salome*, adapted from Wilde’s play, and 1909’s *Elektra*, Strauss’ first collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal. While Strauss experimented with modernist orchestration in these two pieces, employing chromaticism, dissonance, and atonality to reflect
the tension of this new and troubling sexuality (Plaut 265), the composer returned to more
traditional composition and themes for what would become his most successful and popular
composition, Der Rosenkavalier. Despite what was then viewed as Strauss’ musical and
ideological retreat into safer settings and melodic structures, the composer, as well as his
librettist, Hofmannsthal, endowed the work with an even more complex and avant-garde
treatment of gender and sexuality.

Before fully exploring the complicated gender depictions of Octavian in Der
Rosenkavalier, a brief synopsis of the opera is in order. Der Rosenkavalier narrates the story of
the young Count Octavian and his illicit affair with the Marschallin. As mentioned earlier, when
the opera begins, the lovers are in bed together; however, the Marschallin’s cousin, the boorish
Baron Ochs, calls on the princess to request a young nobleman to perform the ceremonial
Presentation of the Silver Rose for his fiancée, Sophie. Unable to escape before Ochs’ entrance,
Octavian must don the clothes of a chambermaid and soon finds himself dodging the lascivious
advances of the Baron. To appease Ochs, the Marschallin suggests that Octavian bear the silver
rose to Sophie.

In the second act, Octavian arrives at the house of Sophie’s father, the nouveau-riche
Faninal, to present his daughter with the silver rose. During the scene, Octavian and Sophie are
entranced by one another’s beauty, and, after Sophie repulses Ochs’ crass, oversexed
propositions, they pledge their love to one another. Later, while trying to defend Sophie’s honor,
Octavian inadvertently wounds the Baron with his sword; however, Ochs is undeterred and still
plans to marry Sophie. At the end of the act, Ochs receives a letter written by the Marchallin’s
chambermaid (actually Octavian) requesting a clandestine rendezvous.
In the final act, Ochs brings Mariandl (Octavian dressed as a chambermaid) to an inn where he plans to bed her. Unbeknownst to the Baron, Octavian has devised an elaborate plot involving masked men and a woman disguised as the Baron’s supposedly-abandoned widow in order to expose the Baron’s infidelities. As the evening progresses and an outraged Faninal and Sophie eventually arrive at the inn to witness the Baron with the “chambermaid,” Ochs can no longer hold Sophie to her marital obligation. Just as Ochs begins to realize the trick that has been played on him, the Marschallin arrives, sending the Baron away in shame and, despite her own love for Octavian, uniting the young lovers at the opera’s dénouement.

Certainly, whether operagoers chose to ignore or dismiss the non-normative gender depictions in Strauss’ opera, they could no longer passively assume that this operatic genderplay was a simple smoke-and-mirrors illusion meant to stealthily place a women’s voice in the body of a man. From the moment the curtain rises on Der Rosenkavalier, the opera immediately confronts its audience with the image of two female actresses in bed together. The homoerotic sexual tension of this first scene was so dangerous to some that the opera was censored and even banned shortly after its premiere. From the opera’s inception to its more recent productions, the complex tinderbox of sexuality also did not go unnoticed on its performers. As recounted in Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood’s collaborative essay, “Lesbian and Gay Music,” famous opera singer Mary Garden refused to “create the role of Octavian in Der Rosenkavalier because of its lesbian implications” (353-54). Similarly, New Zealand soprano Kiri te Kanawa has stated, on

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2 In “Ruggiero’s Deceptions, Cherubino’s Distractions,” Margaret Reynolds recounts an example of the censorship Der Rosenkavalier faced in England:

The first act bed caused trouble in London where the Lord Chamberlain intervened when Thomas Beecham declared his intention to stage the opera in 1912: either the bed had to go from the scene or there was to be no reference to it in the text sung by the performers. Beecham decided that the former was preferable, so the Marschallin and Octavian conducted themselves with upright propriety. (144)
singing the role of the Marschallin, that the first five minutes of Der Rosenkavalier are “the most awkward to perform in any opera” (Castle 46), and “[o]nce you get past these first few minutes when you are in bed with another woman, you can get on with the role” (Castle 56). As these examples show, the subversiveness of Octavian’s characterization is not simply a theoretical performativity that can only be identified and teased out through academic scholarship; it is an unsettling representation of non-normativity recognizable to both the performers and viewers of the opera as well.

What specifically seems to be so frightening to these performers about the sexuality inherent in the role of Octavian? For one, at the very beginning of the post-coital tableau that opens the opera, the audience is privy to the fact that Octavian, unlike Cherubino, actually experiences the sexual consummation all the other pageboys spend so much time longingly wishing for in song. Or, as succinctly written by Sam Abel in Opera in the Flesh, “Cherubino fantasizes about sex, but Octavian actually has sex” (159). Thus, the playful sexual threat posed by the pageboy and his indiscernible gender finally becomes realized in the character of Octavian.

While Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s characterization of Octavian as sexually active certainly touches upon emerging notions of early-twentieth-century sexual sensibility, I would argue that Octavian offers audiences even more complexity than that. In concluding her examination of the Cherubino figure, Heather Hadlock remarks that twentieth-century composers and librettists no longer treat female travesty as a problem or a challenge, and [Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s] (excessively) frank staging of the relationship between Octavian and the Marschallin puts the female lovers in a spotlight, clearly intended to titillate. Their “Cherubino” no longer undresses behind a screen, and this very shamelessness, this abandonment of over a century of shadows and veils over the page’s body and desire, leaves less to “read.” (92)
While Hadlock’s reading of the pageboy trope via the character of Cherubino is insightful in its investigation of what is often obscured from view, I believe that the author oversimplifies the characterization of Octavian when she claims that his lesbian visibility (the “female lovers”) automatically de-problematizes his gender travesty, as if the characters in Der Rosenkavalier become transparently and unproblematically homosexual. Surely, the more sexually suggestive aspects in the “lesbian” relationship between Octavian and the Marschallin (and later Octavian and Sophie) cannot be completely swept under the rug, but I would argue that Octavian’s characterization is far too mercurial to be labeled as simply homosexual. By blending together the seemingly binary genders embodied in the character of Octavian, merging the feminine and girlish with the masculine and boyish, Strauss and Hofmannsthal not only move Octavian beyond the limited depiction of the operatic pageboy, but reify emergent non-heteronormative sexualities that are still surprisingly relevant in contemporary society.
ACT II
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF OCTAVIAN AND THE TROUSER ROLE

In examining the opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, Octavian’s multifarious gender and sexuality can been seen in virtually each facet of operatic performance: from the musical to the visual; however, I would like to begin my examination of the opera with a textual analysis of the libretto, because it is often this literary aspect of opera that is overlooked in current scholarship. Indeed, while opera layperson and fanatic alike may often attribute authorship of *Der Rosenkavalier* to Richard Strauss solely, the work finds a great deal of its shape and narration through the libretto of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Like the famous collaboration between Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte, Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s professional partnership has been, and still is, touted as one of opera’s greatest composer-librettist pairings (an extra-textual homosocial relationship linked to *Der Rosenkavalier* that has not gone unnoticed by opera scholars and queer theorists alike), and their extensive correspondence helped to shape the convoluted birth of the opera. Also, in *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity*, Harry Oosterhuis asserts that for Hugo von Hofmannsthal “sexuality was an intriguing subject that could be deployed to unveil bourgeois society’s sense of security as a façade, full of empty conventions” (260). Thus, I propose that Hofmannsthal, via his textual cues throughout the opera’s libretto, knowingly endows the character of Octavian with a manyheaded and fluid sexuality. This non-static gendering present in *Der Rosenkavalier* not only prevents the lesbian-coded relationships in the opera from being read as merely pornographic, functioning solely to excite sexually and sensationaly, but also presents audiences with an indefinable sexuality that helps to liberate gender and sexual representations from the male/female, hetero-/homosexual dyad, both in our current cultural conceptions as well as the microcosmic realm of the operatic *mise-en-scène*.
As the opera begins, the viewer is automatically provided with visual clues that suggest Octavian’s sexual otherness. Immediately, the audience is confronted with the image of a woman in man’s clothing; however, even the listener (or reader, if the opera house employs surtitles) can recognize the unique space that Octavian inhabits through the words of the opera. This liminal space is often seen when the audience, recognizing the femaleness of the actor portraying the male character of Octavian, is continuously reminded by the libretto, through gendered names or pronouns for example, of Octavian’s maleness. In order to reinforce the theatrical illusion of Octavian’s male gender within the diegesis of the narrative, Hofmannsthal saturates the libretto with various references to Octavian’s maleness and masculinity. For instance, the Marschallin constantly refers to Octavian as “mein Bub’,” a term of affection typically translated as “my boy” (61, 64). Even this simple pet name between lovers signifies with a very specific male gender. Also, on two separate occasions, the Marschallin remarks how the queerly-gendered Octavian behaves much like other men do. When Octavian reacts petulantly and possessively to the Marschallin’s fear of abandonment in the first act, she pleads, “No, please, do not be as all men are” [“Nein bitt’ schön, sei Er nur nicht, wie alle Männer sind!”] (104). Then, near the end of the last act, the Marschallin relinquishes Octavian to his new love, Sophie, both chiding his fickle heart and his sex as a whole when she bittersweetly comments, “You are so like a man—go to her!” [“Er ist ein rechtes Mannsbild, geh’ Er hin”] (196). Not only do these purposeful references to Octavian’s maleness and masculine behavior keep the femaleness of the actor performing the role textually hidden, but the juxtaposition of these remarks with the actor’s true gender also provide for a sly undercurrent of self-referential humor at the genderplay involved in the opera. Although these purposes may strike the reader as both expected and even necessary in reinforcing a more conservative masking of Octavian’s
queerness, when viewed in conjunction with a number of purposefully non-masculine references, Hofmannsthal complicates and problematizes Octavian’s seemingly “straight”-forward role as a man in the context of the opera.

While Octavian physically flirts with a more feminine sexuality (most prominently, when he dresses as the handmaid Mariandl in order to escape Baron Ochs’ notice as he’s leaving the Marschallin’s room after a night of lovemaking), this more feminine characterization of Octavian also translates to Hofmannsthal’s textual treatment of the character. Probably the most consistent example of this is Hofmannsthal’s use of a thematic sexual sameness in the dialogue between Octavian and the other two female leads, the Marschallin and Sophie. Beth Hart explores this mirroring motif between the opera’s all-“female” love triangle in “Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s Accidental Heroine: The Psychohistorical Meaning of the Marschallin.” In her examination of the opening scene between Octavian and the Marschallin, Hart rhetorically asks her reader, “We wonder what need Octavian fulfills in the Marschallin as she mirrors him in voice and gaze, calling him her boy, her darling boy” (421). As Hart suggests, despite the difference in their characters’ genders, the female actors portraying the Marschallin and Octavian reflect one another vocally and visually. Even Octavian’s effusive tendresse manifests itself in poetic waxings that begin to blur the boundaries between the Marschallin and Octavian, the feminine and masculine: “You, you—what does it mean, this ‘you’? This ‘you’ and ‘I’? … but this ‘I’ is lost in this ‘you’” [“Du, du, du—was heißt das »Du«? Was »du und ich«? … aber das Ich vergeht in dem Du”] (61). Octavian’s emphatic lapsing of the two pronouns carries a significant added weight when considering the similar lapse that occurs between the genders of both Octavian and the Marschallin: like the actor portraying the Marschallin, the supposedly male Octavian actually possesses the body of a woman (the actor who plays him). To rearrange
Hart’s rhetorical inquiry, perhaps the more fitting question to ask is “What does the Marschallin fulfill in Octavian,” because it is when Octavian conflates his own self and gender with the Marschallin’s that his role moves beyond the simple woman-as-man transvestite performance to a more complex, ungendered one.

Even Octavian’s interaction with Sophie reveals a similar mirroring trend. After Sophie meets the loutish Baron Ochs, she confides her dissatisfaction to the dashing young Octavian. When Octavian promises to oppose the marriage arrangement on her behalf, he makes her a request: “All alone, you must now stand for us both!” [“Nun muß Sie ganz allein für uns zwei einstehn!”] (132). The provided translation reinforces the doubleness of the Octavian and Sophie figures as Octavian not only asks that Sophie “stand” up for both of their honor but also that she “stand for” (i.e., “represent”) both characters. Again, these textual choices made by librettist Hofmannsthal muddy what initially appears to be a conventionally-masculine characterization of Octavian.

Still more convincingly, only minutes after their pact, the frightened Sophie insists that Octavian stand up for her: “No, no! I can’t open my mouth. You speak for me!” [“Nein! Nein! Ich bring’ den Mund nicht auf. Sprech’ Er für mich!”] (137). At the textual level, Sophie’s request speaks to the similarity between the gender of the two characters insomuch as the one can stand in for the other; however, at this moment, Octavian’s mercurial gender even transcends the confines of the libretto, as the audience will recognize that the female actor playing the male Octavian, when speaking her next lines, actually does speak for Sophie with an almost identical female voice.

This sexual sameness between Octavian and both the Marschallin and Sophie located within the libretto can also be seen in the flesh, so to speak, in the ways in which varying artists
have graduated through or swapped the female roles over the course of their careers. Since Strauss composed all three characters for the soprano voice (although Octavian is most often performed by a mezzo soprano), many singers have found the transition between these differently-gendered characters to be surprisingly smooth and natural. Christa Ludwig and Gwyneth Jones both essayed the role of the Marschallin after successful portrayals of Octavian, and Swiss soprano Lisa della Casa has the distinction of having performed as each of the three lead roles at different stages in her operatic career. This fascinating mobility that performers have found shifting between the roles of the male Octavian and the female Marschallin and Sophie speaks to the same textual/sexual ambiguity that Hofmannsthal gives to the character of Octavian throughout his libretto.

Hofmannsthal likewise imbues Der Rosenkavalier’s operatic mise-en-scène (especially during the love scenes) with a whimsical surrealism that hints at the queerness at work in the character of Octavian. In what is perhaps the opera’s most famous set piece, the second act’s Presentation of the Rose scene, Octavian bears a silver rose to Sophie in recognition of her betrothal to Baron Ochs. When staged, this scene is quite often visually resplendent, with a silver-clad Octavian arriving at his musical cue with a train of similarly clad officers amidst the filigreed architecture of Faninal’s opulent home; however, while the visual markers of the scene’s fantastic qualities are no doubt in plain view, even the opera’s libretto iterates the otherworldliness of this realm where roses smell celestial and a woman playing a man can be both and neither genders. In The Queen’s Throat, Wayne Koestenbaum elaborates upon the ways in which this scene arrests the flow of time and how that chronological topsy-turvydom corresponds to the opera’s queer sexuality:
The silver rose [...] carries the charge of an unspeakable and chronology-stopping love because a connection arose in the late nineteenth century between tampering with time and tampering with gender.

Disturb gender, and you disturb temporality; accept the androgyne, and you accept the abyss. (218)

Here Koestenbaum asserts that the artificiality and unreality of the ceremony—as well as the silver rose around which it revolves—opens a site for reassessing concepts of time and gender which appear equally fantastic. Indeed, Hofmannsthal’s libretto reflects this notion that the Presentation of the Rose ceremony represents something queer and other that has ripped the fabric of conventional understandings of time, beauty, and gender. When Sophie first smells the silver rose, she notes that it smells not only like an actual rose but also like “roses of heaven, not of earth – like roses of holy paradise” [“Wie himmelische, nicht irdische, wie Rosen vom hochheiligen Paradies”] (115). Sophie’s recognition (or failed recognition) of what is the fantasy and what is the reality of the rose parallels the audience’s own recognition of the meshing of fantasy and reality in the performed gender of the character of Octavian. Hofmannsthal’s clever use of the metaphorical silver rose in the libretto (as a symbol of the unreal) thus comments upon his and Strauss’ purposeful decision to cast the character of Octavian as similarly illusory, by using a female soprano or mezzo soprano to portray the male knight of the rose.

Even the simultaneously spoken words of Octavian and Sophie’s duet during this scene further the idea that the opera has suspended reality, allowing the queer and the other to emerge in this fantastical staged world disconnected from the more realistic and typical ideas and traditions of the early twentieth century. Calling to mind Koestenbaum’s aforementioned discussion of temporality and sexuality, Sophie exclaims, “There’s Time and Eternity in this moment of bliss” [“Ist Zeit und Ewigkeit in einem sel’gen Augenblick”] (116), while Octavian speaks of the tenuousness of his own gender: “I was a boy and did not know her yet. Who am I
then? … Were I not a man, I should lose my senses” [“Ich war ein Bub’ da hab’ ich die noch nicht gekannt. Wer bin denn ich? … Wär’ ich kein Mann, die Sinne möchten mir vergehn”] (116). Indeed, even Octavian himself draws attention to his complex gender characterization by voicing his own confusion about his identity in this surreal and chimerical scene; however, Hofmannsthal does not intend for this glimpse of an indefinable, non-normative sexuality to remain encapsulated inside the hermetically-sealed world of the opera. As mentioned earlier, the sodomy trial of Oscar Wilde (on whose play Strauss had based his 1905 opera Salome) had occurred less than twenty years before the premiere of Der Rosenkavalier, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing wrote his psychiatric study of sexual deviance, Psychopathia sexualis, which catalogued and medicalized homosexuality in the nineteenth century, 3 only ten years prior to that. Wendy Bashant provides a link between Hofmannsthal’s world of opera and the then-emerging understandings of sexuality in her essay, “Singing in Greek Drag: Gluck, Berlioz, George Eliot.” Bashant explains that the “[u]nbridled, gender-bending women like Salome were created by men after Krafft-Ebing’s theories linking athletes, feminists, and ‘opera singers and actresses who appear in male attire on the stage by preference’ were published in 1889. They were meant to be viewed as monstrous women” (222-23). Certainly Octavian can be included in this discussion of “gender-bending women”; however, even with his knowledge of these cultural happenings, Hofmannsthal uses the character of Octavian not as a symbol of fear, mutation, or disease, but, moving beyond the moral decay of nineteenth century decadence, creates a character who is complexly-gendered and yet still endowed with a sympathetic humanity.

3 For more on Krafft-Ebing’s influence on homosexuality in the nineteenth century, see Oosterhuis, who makes the claim that sexual perversion was “recognized, confirmed, and legitimized” through the dialogue between patient and psychiatric community present in Krafft-Ebing’s numerous case studies (212).
In the concluding act, readers can finally begin to envision Octavian’s full character arc as well as the non-normative sexuality with which Hofmannsthal has provided him. When the Marschallin finally arrives at the inn, subsequently ending the convoluted plot Octavian had devised to thwart Baron Ochs’ plans of marrying Sophie, she informs the police commissioner that “the whole thing was a charade and nothing more” [“das Ganze war halt eine Farce und weiter nichts’”] (189) and “‘Tis a Viennese masquerade – nothing more” [“Is eine wienerische Maskerad’ und weiter nichts’”] (190). Ostensibly, the Marschallin is referring to the ploy concocted by Octavian involving numberless characters now dressed as widows, children, and ghosts, but the pointed use of the words “charade” and “masquerade” echo the notion of fantasy and alternative sexualities exemplified in the Presentation of the Rose scene. But this leaves the audience wondering, “Was all of this, then, a hoax? An operatic sleight of hand?”

If so, the return to the triangle of lovers at the opera’s dénouement and the deservedly famous final trio seem to silence any suspicion of the opera’s continuing insincerity. The moving, even if melodramatic, display of emotions in the Marschallin’s relinquishment of Octavian and the charming, even if ephemeral, pairing of the young lovers in the final duet contradict any arguments that may claim that the manygendered Octavian is merely a charade or inassimilable other. At the end of the opera, whether or not Sophie and Octavian remain together long after the curtain’s close, Hofmannsthal allows this symbol of non-heteronormative sexuality to exist and to merit affording a happy ending.
ACT III
MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF OCTAVIAN AND THE TROUSER ROLE

While the more literary aspects of Der Rosenkavalier’s libretto point to a multigendered characterization of Octavian, the most recognized feature of opera tends not to be the text but the music. German composer Richard Strauss gained fame (and notoriety) by writing operas that explored complex and oftentimes disturbing portrayals of gender and sexuality. As I mentioned before, Strauss’ first triumph as an opera composer came after the premiere of Salome in 1905. Adapted from Oscar Wilde’s dramatic treatment of the biblical story, the opera recounts the young Salome’s obsession and lust after Jokanaan (John the Baptist) and closes with an extended scene where she sings a fascinating and horrific song of desire to his severed head. Even Strauss’ follow-up opera, 1909’s Elektra, focuses on the Greek tragedy where the eponymous heroine plots the death of her mother, Klytemnästra, who has murdered Elektra’s father. Aside from their psychosexual subject matter, both of these operas were also marked by Strauss’ use of harsh and unnerving dissonance in order to convey the equally unsettling narratives of sexual deviance (Plaut 268). While the later Der Rosenkavalier has been criticized as a retreat from the more adventurous compositions in the darker Salome and Elektra, the composer by no means balks from musically molding yet another character who explores non-normative gender and sexuality. Indeed, Strauss not only endows Octavian with both masculine and feminine motifs in his musical signatures but also orchestrally shapes Octavian’s scenes in order to draw the audience’s attention to the character’s queered presence.

In her landmark text on feminism and opera, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, Catherine Clément devotes a section to the discussion of Der Rosenkavalier, describing Octavian, in particular, as “the young count Octavian, [who] is distinctly unruly, scatterbrained enough and with a good enough start under ladies’ skirts to be known tenderly as Quinquin. And Richard
Strauss gives him a disturbing woman’s voice” (108). I find that Clément’s choice of words in referring to Octavian as having a “disturbing … voice” robs the character of its powerful position of gender reevaluation as a figure which overlaps genders. Clément’s comment also seems to dismiss that this very particular voice allows Octavian to maneuver more fluidly between the genders represented by the other characters in the opera. For example, in the first act, Strauss often features horn fanfares to represent Octavian’s arrogant and specifically-masculine behavior when he attempts to overpower the Marschallin’s doubts of his fidelity. Indeed, in his article, “Kitsch, Camp, and Opera: Der Rosenkavalier,” Gary Le Tourneau describes the use of brass as “‘ejaculatory’ horn calls” (93). While, in this quotation, Le Tourneau assigns a masculine vocality to the character of Octavian, he continues on to argue that “Octavian is made a member of both genders by the music” (93, emphasis mine). Certainly, despite Octavian’s musical and verbal ejaculations, he can often revert to a more lyrical and feminine line that mirrors the musical characterization of his female lover, the Marschallin. In the selection provided in figure 1, as Octavian and the Marschallin intimately coo over one another, their alternating pet names become repeated musical phrases that produce the effect that the two female voices echo or answer one another:
This androgynous vocalizing in the first act also resembles the vocal and gender leaps of Octavian’s pageboy predecessor, Cherubino. Naomi André explores this notion of Cherubino’s two voices in *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera*:

As for Cherubino, the aria [“Non so più”] illustrates the tug and pull he experiences between his “two voices.”... [I]t is as though he is trying to tame his voice and push it down to a lower tessitura, yet it keeps popping up to a higher range, almost beyond his control.... Split between his higher and lower voices, his “I am” encompasses the two simultaneous aspects of the childlike boy and the budding adult male personalities he embodies. (109)

Much like this doubled voice that exists inside the character of Cherubino, Octavian experiences a similar multivocality. With a vocal line that alternates between violent and bombastic as he
imagines challenging the Marschallin’s husband to a duel and light and lyrical when he comforts
and woos his older lover, Octavian and his vocal characterization, even in the span of the first
scene, swing wildly from the masculine to the feminine. This multigendered vocal line that
Strauss attributes to Octavian (Strauss himself was no stranger to Mozart, and it is believed that
Octavian’s character and name are drawn from the character of Don Ottavio from Don Giovanni
[Abel 159]) reinforces the complex gender construction of the character, allowing Octavian to
transcend the limiting label of a lesbian “sameness” and represent an even more universal,
ungendered figure.

The female ensembles also especially emphasize this tricky destabilizing of gender in
Octavian’s character. Like the previous examination of Hofmannsthal’s libretto during the
Presentation of the Rose scene and duet, Strauss’ orchestration highlights the mystical,
otherworldly quality of this scene which undermines traditional concepts of time and sexuality.
Strauss’ prominent usage of celesta, harp, and flute in the descending theme of the duet creates a
shimmering, glossy effect which enhances the un-/surreality of the moment.

To the fore of Strauss’ orchestration during this scene, however, are the twin female
voices of Octavian and Sophie. As the duet begins, Octavian sings in a low, almost monotone
voice, even dipping down to a C sharp below the staff to sing the word “Jungfer.” While Sophie
begins in a similar monotone, she soon soars up to a B above the staff when extolling the beauty
of the silver rose (“Wie himmelische…”). This marked contrast between the lower-lying
passages of Octavian’s more masculine voice and Sophie’s high, feminine tones present the
listener with very separately-gendered voices—aural signifiers of Octavian’s masculinity versus
Sophie’s femininity; however, when Octavian and Sophie begin singing together, the yearning
triplet pattern of their shared musical line becomes almost identical, and the audience finds it
difficult to separate which voice belongs to Octavian and which voice belongs to Sophie. In the climatic measure especially (beginning at the section labeled 36 in figure 2), the two singers’ melodies synch up perfectly, remaining only a third apart from one another on the musical scale, emphasizing the transvocality of Octavian who, through the course of the duet, sings as both male and female:

Figure III-2. *Der Rosenkavalier*, Act II (Source: Strauss 175-76)

Thus, through his composition and orchestration in the Presentation of the Rose duet, Strauss adds an additional dimension to Hofmannsthal’s textual description of the scene,
underpinning the break from gender tradition and convention captured in the duet’s otherworldly atmosphere and Octavian’s fluctuating musical line that at times embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Strauss’ attention to the gendered vocality of Octavian becomes even more focused in the final trio and duet. In the celebrated trio (“Hab’ mir’s gelobt”), the composer layers the voices of his female performers to create an almost impenetrable mesh of feminine sound. In *Opera and the Culture of Fascism*, Jeremy Tambling describes this ensemble, explaining that “the voices soar, and it is not clear which voice is being heard, whether that of the stage women or the putative male—that is, Octavian” (190). Surely, in composing this piece, Strauss was aware of this inevitable aural confusion—a confusion that, in obscuring the gender of the male Octavian among the female voices of Sophie and the Marschallin, undermines gender binaries, giving form to a character without tangible or definite male- or femaleness. Even more so than its role in the Presentation of the Rose scene, Octavian’s voice alternates between its masculine and feminine colorations, at times providing the supportive moving line while the voices of Sophie and the Marschallin draw out their high notes and then suddenly soaring higher than both the other voices (as seen when Octavian sings “Ist den nein großes Unrecht…” in figure 3):
This inseparable web of female voices dissipates soon after when the Marschallin exits to attend to the neurotic Faninal, leaving Sophie and Octavian alone to perform the opera’s final piece, the duet “Ist ein Traum”—“Spür’ nur dich.” What strikes the listener about this duet is how relatively conventional the piece sounds after the complex vocal maneuverings and chordal dissonances of the trio. The duet’s more typical and familiar structure and delivery stem specifically from the tradition of the heterosexual love duet that runs throughout operatic performance history. As Eric A. Plaut recounts in Grand Opera: Mirror of the Western Mind, it was Hofmannsthal himself who suggested to Strauss that he compose a “Mozartian duet” for the opera’s finale (281). Both structurally and tonally, this closing duet in Der Rosenkavalier follows the pattern of the Mozartian heterosexual love duet typified by the famous “Là ci darem la mano” from Don Giovanni. In The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna, Mary Hunter explains the “predictable” duet structure of Mozart’s duet via the scholarship of Ronald Rabin:
“Rabin has described the progression as moving ‘from independent statements for the two participants, through dialogue, to a closing tutti in parallel thirds and sixths.’ The ‘independent statements’ often repeat the same melody” (162). By extension, this same structure applies to Strauss’ Mozartian “Ist ein Traum”—“Spür’ nur dich.” Indeed, even though Sophie and Octavian’s duet begins with the tutti, after the first unison section, Octavian and Sophie trade off the melody as mentioned above. Just like Don Giovanni’s heterosexual seduction of Zerlina in “Là ci darem la mano,” the male and female figures of Octavian and Sophie alternate the melodic line of the duet until closing the opera with their shared reprise of the duet’s main theme. In composing this duet, whose format and content would be familiar to operagoers, Strauss places Octavian and Sophie in the longstanding tradition of heteronormative gender roles in opera; however, at the same time, the conscious choice to use the androgynous voice of Octavian as a participant in the duet works against a strictly “straight” reading of the scene. The similarity of the two female voices when swapping identical melodic lines or even when singing in harmony enhances the sexual sameness of these supposed differently-gendered characters. Also, the recurrence of celesta, harp, and flute echoes their same thematic uses in the queered Presentation of the Rose scene. So, not only does Strauss present his audience with a non-static character that constantly maneuvers between genders, but his is a character more fully-formed than the pageboys of operatic past, for while Cherubino sings love songs to the world’s women in “Non so più” and “Voi che sapete,” these arias are sung alone; Octavian, on the other hand, is permitted to function in a romantic relationship—to sing a love song to another character and have that character reciprocate his desire.
audiences and scholars alike must pay especial attention to the staging and production of the opera. Although the visual aspect of opera is often its most vivid and striking quality, audiences are deprived of this crucial tool to understanding opera performance when it is heard as a recording. Because this visual component is often ignored by scholars in opera analysis, Linda and Michael Hutcheon argue for the necessity of examining this physical space of opera in their 2000 essay, “Staging the Female Body: Richard Strauss’s Salome”:

While it may seem obvious that the staged body is central to any form of theatrical representation, it is the voice—almost a disembodied voice—that has come to dominate discussions of opera, especially since the technological advances in audio recording and radio transmissions. In a related move, opera criticism has been dominated by considerations of the music that voice sings—usually separated from the libretto’s verbal text and the dramatic staged narrative. Musicologists confidently assert: “It is after all the music that an opera-lover goes to hear.” But, speaking for these opera-lovers, at least, we go to see as well as hear a performance, and that performance includes a verbal text and a staged dramatic narrative—for which that (admittedly important) music was especially written. Opera is an embodied art form; it is the performers who give it its “phenomenal reality.” Indeed, opera owes its undeniable affective power to the overdetermination of the verbal, the visual and the aural—not to the aural alone. And it is specifically the body—the gendered, sexualized body—that will not be denied in staged opera. (206)

Indeed, the gendered bodies of the characters in Der Rosenkavalier are extraordinarily vital means through which audiences may apprehend the complexities of the work, not to mention the ways in which various aspects of the opera as seemingly inconsequential as props and costumes further the queer representations of Octavian.

**Silver Roses, Swords, and the Gendered Props of Der Rosenkavalier**

Aside from the titular silver rose, perhaps the most famous prop that cleverly comments upon Octavian’s sexuality is his sword. Serving as a surrogate phallus for the female actor’s literal lack, Octavian’s sword doesn’t simply sit at his side for the entirety of the opera but
almost performs a role of its own in propelling the narrative to its finale. In *Opera in the Flesh*, Sam Abel explains the use of Octavian’s sword in *Der Rosenkavalier* against the more blatant psychosexual dramas of *Salome* and *Elektra*, claiming that “Strauss carries over the fetish-laden atmosphere of his first two successes and transforms it into a much more subtle use of the sexually obsessive symbol” (124). This “visual objectification of Octavian’s elusive masculinity” (124), as Abel calls it, often comes into play in the opera’s plot in order to clarify Octavian’s maleness. In the first act, for example, Octavian accidentally leaves his sword in the Marschallin’s room as he runs to hide from Baron Ochs. Not only does the phallic sword, in this instance, allude to the post-coital scene that opens the opera, but the Marschallin also chides Octavian’s masculinity for his misplacement of the weapon, stating, “You scatterbrain, how careless of you! Is it the thing to leave one’s sword lying around in a lady’s bedroom? Have you no manners?” [“Er Katzenkopf, Er Unvorsichtiger! Läßt man in einer Dame Schlafzimmer seinen Degen herumliegen? Hat Er keine besseren Gepflogenheiten?”] (63) This utilization of the sword as a prop in this scene and the Marschallin’s subsequent chastisement of Octavian’s maleness reinforce once again that Octavian is a character who has been gendered in multiple ways by the staging of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Not only does the sword metaphorically signify Octavian’s masculinity, but his improper placement of it (i.e., his misuse of the phallus) labels him as unmasculine and distinctly non-heteronormative.

In the second act, the sword takes on an even more significant role as the scuffle that ensues between Baron Ochs and Octavian climatically sets into motion the conflict that will bring about the opera’s *deus ex machina* resolution. When Octavian initially confronts Ochs on behalf of Sophie, Ochs is dismissive and condescending toward the young boy. Octavian rashly challenges Ochs to a duel, brandishing his sword, which results in Ochs accidentally wounding
himself on the weapon. As Ochs blusters over the slight injury he receives, he remarks, “One is what one is and has no need to prove it” [“Man ist halt, was man ist, und braucht’s nicht zu beweisen”] (140). Again, Octavian’s sword and Ochs’ response draw attention to the limitations of Octavian’s maleness. Even the ineffectual wounding of Ochs (other than the tantrum it elicits from the Baron) reemphasizes Octavian’s inability to wield his substitute phallus and to successfully perform expected male roles. Thus, Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s effective use of the sword as prop and symbol throughout the narrative and staging of Der Rosenkavalier work to further Octavian’s complex characterization as a fluidly-gendered figure that destabilizes conventional binary gender constructions.

Alfred Roller, Erté, and the Costuming of Octavian

More so than most operas (the spartan production values and costuming of Wagner and verismo operas immediately come to mind), Der Rosenkavalier gains a majority of its appeal from its distinctive, elaborate visual style. This confectioner’s sugar coating has garnered the opera many critiques for being too superficial, but I would argue that this surface sheen serves as yet another important facet in fleshing out a queered sensitivity of this work. The costuming in particular functions to both masculinize and feminize the character of Octavian. In his discussion of Victorian representations of trouser roles in Opera in the Flesh, Sam Abel notes that artists often made no attempt to hide the femaleness of the travesti performers:

There is no attempt at realistic illusion; the contours of the ideal feminine body are often more highlighted in drag than in “proper” women’s clothes. The male clothes emphasize the female parts. Images of hourglass figures, wasp waists, and large bosoms recur in these engravings, clearly evoking the ideal of feminine sexual allure. (211)

In the sketches available from the original 1911 Der Rosenkavalier premiere, however, the costume designs literally obscure the gender of the actor playing Octavian under men’s military
or ceremonial outfits while also introducing “feminine” and ornate touches to complicate the character’s masculinity:

![Figure IV-1. Octavian Rofrano: Drittes Kostüm, Erster Aufzug (Source: Roller 17)](image1)

![Figure IV-2. Octavian Rofrano: Viertes Kostüm, Zweiter Aufzug (Source: Roller 25)](image2)

In these original 1910 costume sketches for the opera’s premiere in Dresden, Alfred Roller portrays Octavian with a lithe, boyish figure stripped of any marker of the femaleness underneath (except, perhaps, for the more pronounced hips of the figure in the second image). The faces, however, are certainly more androgynous. In figure 1, Octavian’s colored cheeks and feline eyes make him more pretty and feminine, while the cherubic face in figure 2 seems to defy
gender categorization completely. Even the costumes themselves, especially the silver outfit in figure 2, are almost feminine in their sartorial opulence and finery.

The Octavian in figure 3, also by Alfred Roller, brings the actor’s femaleness even more to the fore as the jacketless figure’s feminine hips and backside are now visible (even though, surprisingly, the face appears more masculine than the previous two images). Thus, in each of these sketches, Roller emphasizes both the masculine and feminine qualities of the Octavian character, creating a figure that balances between, rather than resolving into, a strict male or female gender identity.
Erté’s costume designs for the 1980 Glyndebourne Festival similarly straddle depictions of masculinity and femininity:

Unlike the more ambiguous genders of the figures in Roller’s sketches, the image of Octavian in figure 4 at first may appear to be an unquestionable female in men’s clothing, as if designer Erté makes no attempt to hide the gender of the actor playing Octavian; however, when compared to the accompanying paintings of Octavian’s retinue (figure 5)—male characters, especially those associated with the fantastical Presentation of the Rose scene, who would actually be performed onstage by male actors—they appear similarly effeminate. Thus, the fashion-oriented Erté displays Octavian’s fluid gender not through the same androgyny of
Roller’s images, but through an almost effeminized masculinity, which endows the male characters in the opera, whether being performed by male or female actors, with a beauty typically associated with females. So, both Roller and Erté maintain a multigendered portrayal of Octavian through their respective costume sketches by recognizing both the masculine and feminine qualities of the character.

Even more so than two-dimensional images and sketches, though, the three-dimensional costuming of Octavian plays an integral role in the comprehension of Der Rosenkavalier’s queer performativity. Over the course of Der Rosenkavalier, Octavian dons women’s clothes and disguises himself as Mariandl—first to escape notice when leaving the Marschallin’s boudoir and secondly to entrap Baron Ochs in order to thwart his marriage arrangement to Sophie. This double cross-dressing by the actor playing Octavian draws even more attention to the genderplay at work in the opera. For example, when the Marschallin kisses Octavian dressed as a woman (“You darling! And I can give you no more than a kiss” [“Du Schatz! Und nicht einmal mehr als ein Busserl kann ich dir geben.”] [69]) and calls after him, “And come back, darling, but in man’s clothing – and by the front door, if you please” [“Und komm’ Er wieder, Schatz, aber in Mannskleidern und durch die vordre Tür, wenn’s Ihm beliebt”] (69), she makes known her preference that Octavian return to her in the drag costuming of his male clothes. Thus, the Marschallin doesn’t desire Octavian as a lesbian (as many modern scholars have interpreted the Marschallin-Octavian affair) or as a heterosexual woman, but instead desires the other-gendered Octavian who inhabits both realms of sexuality.

**Fassbaender, Kirchschlager, and the Filmed Performances of Der Rosenkavalier**

Lastly, I would like to examine briefly two performances of Der Rosenkavalier available on DVD and how their respective actors’ portrayals of Octavian enhance (or fail to enhance) the notion of gender mutability I have espoused throughout this project. The first filmization is a
1979 performance of the Bayerisches Staatsorchester, conducted by Carlos Kleiber; Brigitte Fassbaender performs the role of Octavian. The second is a 2004 Salzburg Festival performance by the Wiener Philharmoniker conducted by Semyon Bychkov; the Octavian is Angelika Kirchschlager. Although the 1979 performance is more traditional and typical in its production and staging choices, I feel that this filmic representation conveys more successfully than the avant-garde and controversial Salzburg Festival entry the plastic and fluid gender of Octavian’s character.

In her justly-famous assumption of the role of Octavian, Brigitte Fassbaender creates a character whose complicated web of genders and cross-dressings are always utterly believable. Never betraying discomfort in her intimate interactions with Gwyneth Jones or Lucia Popp (the actors who portray the Marschallin and Sophie, respectively), Fassbaender and her ease of performance naturalizes the non-heteronormativity of her drag character; however, despite her studied mimicry of masculinity, Fassbaender is never satisfied to simply perform as a man. In her essay, “In Praise of Brigitte Fassbaender: Reflections on Diva Worship,” Terry Castle explains just how Fassbaender’s complex performance as Octavian avoids a seamless illusion of maleness:

Precisely to the degree that Fassbaender seems to enter “into” her male roles, precisely as I watch her approach (though without ever reaching) a kind of “zero degree masculinity,” I find myself becoming more and more acutely aware of, and aroused by, her femininity. The very butchness with which she tackles, say, a role like Octavian—the sheer, absolutist bravado of the impersonation—infuses it with a dizzying homosexual charge. (43)

Indeed, while Fassbaender certainly makes her masculinity believable (seen particularly convincingly when an uncomfortable, almost homophobic, tension builds at the prospect of Octavian, in the double-drag as Mariandl, kissing Baron Ochs—though, in reality, a heterosexual kiss between a male and female actor), as Castle notes, the singer never achieves a perfect
semblance of masculinity. Fassbaender, I believe, is even aware of this disjunction, and often, in her characterization of the multigendered Octavian, fondles his sword, sheathing and unsheathing it, in symbolic recognition of her own—and, by extension, the character’s—ultimate phallic lack. Thus, I feel that Fassbaender succeeds in providing an interpretation of Octavian that truly explores the character’s ungendered qualities, rather than simply assigning Octavian either a masculine or even subversively lesbian identity.

Angelika Kirchschlager, on the other hand, for all her many musical talents, fails to succeed in providing the wholly complex characterization so evident in Fassbaender’s interpretation. The problems with Kirchschlager’s performance surface most prominently when her Octavian is dressed as Mariandl. In the first act, when she’s attempting to escape Baron Ochs, no amount of playacting can disguise the fact that Kirchschlager has now reverted back to being a woman. Wearing red lipstick and her breasts unbound, it becomes obvious to the audience that the actor playing Octavian is, in reality, female. It is almost as if director Robert Carsen had wanted to divulge the theatrical secret of Octavian’s character by having the actress dress in female clothing in order to reveal her “true” identity. Unlike the aforementioned 1979 performance, which never tips its hand either way about Fassbaender’s true gender (even during the curtain calls, Fassbaender chivalrously leads Jones and Popp out in front of her), this more recent performance breaks the operatic conceit and, even more detrimentally, explains the previously unexplainable gender of the Octavian character.

In the final scene of the Salzburg performance, when Octavian dresses as Mariandl in order to seduce Baron Ochs, Kirchschlager is costumed in layered lingerie and comes sashaying campily through a circle of women in her new disguise. Almost completely antithetical to her previous double cross-dressing, Kirchschlager now treats femininity not as Octavian’s true
identity, but as full-blown parody. Instead of fleshing out the varying genders and sexualities that comprise Octavian’s identity, this parodic portrayal of Octavian’s double drag performance turns the character’s sexual slippage into a humorous—but meaningless—joke, rather than a source of gender exploration and examination.

Then again, some viewers and scholars may argue that the subversive sexuality absent in Kirchschlager’s performance can be seen more openly in the vivid and unabashed sexual displays throughout the 2004 production. Certainly, the opera’s bookending scenes feature Octavian and the Marschallin (Adrianne Pieczonka)—and Sophie (Miah Persson) in the finale—in various stages of undress, passionately kissing, embracing, and rolling around on beds. Unfortunately, I see this seeming celebration of Der Rosenkavalier’s queer sensibilities as ultimately limited. Rather than truly exploring the sexual complexities of Octavian’s character, these scenes simply exploit the more prurient and sensationalist homosexual aspects of the opera’s casting, as evidenced by the remainder of the pre-World War II Regietheater production, which sets the final scene in a brothel where numerous couples simulate intercourse in the background. In contrast to the Presentation of the Rose scene, where the otherworldly atmosphere queers gender and sexuality, the scenes of sexuality in Carsen’s production of Der Rosenkavalier simply serve to shock and titillate.
POSTLUDE

So, in examining the extraordinarily vital textual, musical, and visual features of *Der Rosenkavalier*, modern operagoers and scholars can begin to see how Strauss and Hofmannsthal as well as subsequent opera directors, producers, costume designers, and performers have each attempted to preserve the fascinating sexual and gender mores of the opera and its eponymous hero(ine). As I bring this project to a close, I would like to draw your attention to a correspondence written by composer Richard Strauss to librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal on the ninth of July, 1909. Replying to a draft of the second act that Hofmannsthal had recently sent, Strauss discusses the character of Octavian and his elaborate plot to foil Baron Ochs’ plans of marrying Sophie: “The more mischievous Octavian is the better” (267). Whether or not Strauss intended this comment to refer specifically to Octavian’s complicated cross-dressing as Mariandl or simply the convoluted scheme in general, I feel that this quotation helps us to grasp the very purposeful intent behind the character of Octavian: to function as a contrary to heteronormativity. Not simply a lesbian or homosexual figure, Octavian is a powerfully-ungendered other that opens a site for questioning accepted genders and sexualities and challenging the status quo. As we look over the long lineage of the trouser role and its multifaceted methods of commenting on gender and sexuality, from the onstage gender anarchy of Handel to Mozart’s lusty pageboy, arriving at Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Der Rosenkavalier* brings us to a point in operatic history where the queer sensibilities currently so synonymous with opera truly began to emerge and, even to this day, flourish.

So, as opera continues to build an even larger gay and lesbian following, queer scholars and fans alike can continue to expand and refine the discourse of gender rebellion that occurs on the operatic stage. By viewing opera through the lens of queer and gender studies, we can unlock perceptions and interpretations long obscured by the more conservative ideologies that
have dominated this multimedia art form. Thus, if we truly recognize and embrace the queerness of opera—from its *travesti* to its divadom to its still untapped realms of non-heteronormativity—lovers of opera can begin to mine the rich depths of subversion inherent in these extravagant, melodramatic, campy—and fabulously gay—works of art.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Peter D’Ettore is a native of Florida, born and raised in Pembroke Pines. He earned his bachelor’s degree in English literature with a minor in women’s studies from Florida State University in December 2004. Over the course of his graduate study, he has developed interests in 20th century women’s poetry, gender and queer studies, and opera studies. After receiving his master’s degree from the University of Florida in December 2007, he plans to pursue a career as a junior college literature and writing instructor.