

CAMPE-TOI! ON THE ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS OF CAMP

Mark Booth

PREVIOUS VIEWS AND DEFINITIONS

The key to defining camp lies in reconciling its essential marginality with its evident ubiquity, in acknowledging its diversity while still making sense of it.

Recent attempts to define it were sparked off by Christopher Isherwood's discussion of the subject in his novel, *The World in the Evening* (1954). The story concerns the soul-searchings and sexual self-discoveries of a young Englishman in various glamorous locales. One of his self-discoveries is his awakening homosexuality; Isherwood obliquely refers us to the image of a butterfly breaking out of a chrysalis. Tied to this awakening is his realisation of the importance of elegance, or rather, not quite elegance, but camp, which is defined as a matter of 'expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance' of 'making fun out of' what you take seriously as opposed to making fun of it. Clearly, this is not a definition in the strict sense of the word, its function being suggestive rather than limiting. We may contrive to make our married lives or our office lives fun and/or elegant, but to do this might well be wholesome and even sensible – qualities that are inimical to camp.

His examples may also make us uneasy. To call Mozart camp smacks of impertinence; the Baroque, another candidate, was the militantly optimistic art of the Counter Reformation, designed to overwhelm the spectator with awe for the Catholic Church; it was a mainstream movement of great seriousness even

Reprinted from *Camp*, London-New York: Quartet, 1983.

though bits of it may look silly to (some) modern eyes. Perhaps we should pay Isherwood the compliment of believing that when he says that Mozart and the Baroque are camp, he does not mean what he says. What he may mean is that they may be enjoyed (by some people) in a camp way.

The World in the Evening never quite puts its finger on camp. Isherwood is pursued over page after page by the ghost of a good idea, but such is his facility that he manages to evade it.

The next significant examination of the topic, an essay called 'Notes on Camp' (1964) by Susan Sontag, suffers from the same kind of confusion. Like Isherwood, Sontag does not hazard a strict definition, but she does go further by positing a series of criteria. Thus camp, according to Sontag, is a way of seeing things as good because they are bad, particularly when: 1) they are marginal; 2) they are artificial or exaggerated; 3) they are *démodé*; 4) they emphasise style at the expense of content; 5) they are objects of the kind prized by daring and witty hedonists, and by 'the Dandies of Mass Culture'.

Sontag is feeling her way around largely unknown territory and, undoubtedly, she bumps up against some interesting points. However, looked at as a whole, the essay presents several difficulties.

It would, perhaps, be churlish to expect anything with a title as modest and downbeat as 'Notes on Camp' to be systematic; clearly the vast amount of research Sontag has done on camp has taught her its characteristic technique of forestalling criticisms (*Qui s'accuse, s'excuse*). Nevertheless, she should at least be consistent. Camp is 'unserious', but the rhetoric of General de Gaulle is camp. Wagner and Gide are not camp because they are 'not marginal enough', yet Pope, Congreve, poor old Mozart, Ruskin, Tennyson, Wilde, Burne-Jones and Sarah Bernhardt are all camp. What is 'extravagant in an inconsistent or unpassionate way' is not camp, yet *les précieux* in France, and Wilde, are mentioned as having been so. 'Who wants to be consistent?' said Wilde 'The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, the *reductio ad absurdum*. Not I. Nor Sontag.

The attempt to make sense of 'Notes on Camp', to find its unifying principle, is hindered by its style, and, more particularly, by Sontag's little epigrams, some of which are of an almost oriental inscrutability: 'To name a sensibility, to draw the contours of it, to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion'.

Her choice of examples needs close attention too. She mentions Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *Là-Bas*. Unfortunately Des Esseintes figures in *À Rebours*, not *Là-Bas*. The dandy-like character in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* is not Marius himself, but Flavius. [These and other inaccuracies occur in the original 1964 publication of Sontag's essay, but were corrected in the 1966 reprint within the *Against Interpretation* collection – *Editor's note*.] 'The ideas about morality and politics in *Major Barbara* are camp' she adds impressively. How extraordinary to find Shaw dubbed camp – Shaw, who was a sort of sanitised Nietzsche, a Nietzsche-for-all-the-family.

However, the seriously worrying thing about the examples in 'Notes on Camp' is not their intermittent inappropriateness or factual inaccuracy, but their sheer number. A definition of camp that includes Tennyson, the Goon Show, Dali, de Gaulle and children's cartoons is obviously casting the net too wide. In fact, Sontag has difficulty in finding examples of things that, according to her criteria, are not camp; she very properly mentions Jesus, then Napoleon, and Aristophanes's plays (a borderline case perhaps) and Beethoven's quartets (but not apparently the orchestral music?).

The difficulty in this definition is the same as that in Isherwood's; it might be more helpful to say of Tennyson and of children's cartoons not that they are camp, but that they have qualities that invite the patronage of camp people. This would help us to avoid talking as if camp somehow blended into Tennyson or whatever, when camp people began to appreciate them. Camp people and camp objects (that is to say objects made by and for camp people) might then usefully be distinguished from people and objects, which, although not intrinsically camp, appeal to camp people – we might call them camp fads and fancies. This distinction allows a much tighter definition of camp.

Taking examples first from 'Notes on Camp', and then our own, we might illustrate this distinction with two small charts:

A	
<i>Camp</i>	<i>Camp fads and fancies</i>
Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank	Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Jean Genet
Aubrey Beardsley, some pop art, e.g. Andy Warhol	Edward Burne-Jones, Carlo Crivelli
Mae West, Tallulah Bankhead	Victor Mature, Jane Russell
<i>All About Eve</i> , <i>Beat The Devil</i>	<i>King Kong</i> , <i>Casablanca</i> , <i>Tom and Jerry</i>
The Temperance Seven	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, <i>Il Trovatore</i>
B	
<i>Camp</i>	<i>Camp fads and fancies</i>
Dirk Bogarde, Sarah Bernhardt	Judy Garland, Joan Crawford
<i>Interview</i> and <i>Ritz</i> magazines	Fanzines
Lindsay Kemp	Nijinsky
P.J. Proby, Soft Cell	Shirley Bassey, Dollar
Fiorucci clothes and accessories	Granny specs, collarless shirts
Solid gold safety pin, real boa constrictor	Real safety pin, feather boa
<i>Rocky Horror Show</i> , <i>Valmouth</i>	<i>42nd Street</i> , <i>Babes in Arms</i>
Andy Warhol's <i>Marilyn</i>	Kitchener poster: Your Country Needs You
Anglo-Catholicism	Catholicism

Even with so few entries, it should immediately be apparent that there is tremendous variety in the right-hand column. The names have very little in common, except that they display qualities likely to endear them to the sort of people in the left-hand column: artificiality, stylisation, theatricality, naïvety, sexual ambiguity, tackiness, poor taste, stylishness, the portrayal of camp people (which brings in the novels of Genet). The entries in the left-hand column, by contrast, are relatively unified. To put it on a wildly fanciful level, you can imagine Wilde, Warhol and Bette Davis getting on famously, but not Tennyson, Genet and Jane Russell. In trying to make sense of both columns together, Isherwood and Sontag were setting themselves an impossible task.

There is one more distinction to be made before we attempt to define camp. It was F.R. Leavis who said of the poets Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell that they belonged to the history of publicity rather than of poetry – Oscar Wilde, Andy Warhol and the rest in the 'camp' column have all been successful self-publicists.

Camp is primarily a matter of self-presentation rather than of sensibility. If you are alone and bored at home, and in desperation you try to amuse yourself by watching an awful old film, you are not being camp. You only become so if you subsequently proclaim to others that you thought Victor Mature was divine in *Samson and Delilah*. China ducks on the wall are a serious matter to 'straights', but the individual who displays them in a house of otherwise modernist and modish furniture is being camp.

Building on the work of Isherwood and Sontag, and incorporating the above distinctions, we are now in a position to define camp thus: *To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits*. Everything we should wish to discuss with regard to camp unfolds from this definition.

The primary type of the marginal in society is the traditionally feminine, which camp parodies in an exhibition of stylised effeminacy. In the extent of its commitment, such parody informs the camp person's whole personality, throwing an ironical light not only on the abstract concept of the sexual stereotype, but also on the parodist him or herself. For instance, a non-camp cabaret impressionist may impersonate many film stars, but only so fleetingly and superficially that there is no suggestion that he actually sees himself in terms of these stars. A camp female impersonator, on the other hand, may well continue to use the mannerisms of Bette Davis or Joan Crawford off-stage in a way which says as much about himself as it does about the stars.

Camp self-parody presents the self as being wilfully irresponsible and immature, the artificial nature of the self-presentation making it a sort of off-stage theatricality, the shameless insincerity of which may be provocative, but also forestalls criticism by its ambivalence. Non-camp people are occasionally frivolous as a holiday from moral seriousness; camp people are only occasionally not frivolous.

Other types of the marginal are the trivial, the trashy, the kitsch and the not-terribly-good. Thus, in the cultural sphere, to be camp is to be perversely committed to the trash aesthetic or to a sort of 'cultural slumming' (a phrase of Richard Hoggart's in *The Uses of Literacy*), which, being in theory incomprehensible to non-camp people, becomes fashionably exclusive.

Camp art is art that sympathetically, stylishly and attractively represents camp behaviour, or represents a non-camp subject in a camp way. In the case of decorative art, camp objects are those made by camp people to decorate the camp life-style. A work of art may be verified as camp if we catch in it a reflection of a camp ambiguity in the mind of its creator.

This neater, tidier definition maintains the distinction between camp and camp's fads and fancies, and it also helps to distinguish camp from various related phenomena with which it is often confused. It is worth taking a look at some of these confusions.

CONFUSIONS

Troglodytes sometimes confuse camp with homosexual. The unhelpful idea that camp originated in homosexual cliques in the 1930s was aired by Isherwood, popularised by Sontag, and has remained unquestioned in subsequent discussion. However, as we shall see, camp's origins are far from being so humble. Undoubtedly, the effeminate strain in leading camp personalities such as Beau Brummell and Andy Warhol has caused many to think of them as homosexuals, but, although some may have been squeamish about women, this hardly constitutes homosexual behaviour. Camp people tend to be asexual rather than homosexual. Brummell *et al.* were perhaps honorary homosexuals, or homosexuals in spirit rather than in practice. In camp culture, the popular image of the homosexual, like the popular image of the feminine woman, is mimicked as a type of the marginal. So, while it may be true that many homosexuals are camp, only a small proportion of people who exhibit symptoms of camp behaviour are homosexual.

Another common confusion is between camp and kitsch, which, as Roland Barthes has written, 'implies a recognition of high aesthetic values': it represents an unwitting failure on a massive scale. French Symbolist paintings are kitsch, and so are the apocalyptic fantasies of John Martin; the marble stadium that Mussolini built outside Rome is kitsch, as is his railway station in Milan, where even the concrete cherubs have the bald head and bull-neck of *il Duce*; the American Declaration of Independence is kitsch, as is most Sword-and-Sorcery science fiction and most Heavy Rock music; many people find Wagner's operas kitsch. 'The worst art is always done with the best intentions', said Oscar Wilde, perhaps providing the key to the distinction between kitsch and camp. Unlike kitsch, camp does not even have honourable intentions. Yet, although kitsch is never intrinsically camp, it has a certain toe-curling quality that appeals to the camp sense of humour. Kitsch is one of camp's favourite fads and fancies.

Off-stage theatricality, though not synonymous with camp, is certainly a common manifestation of it: camp people use the exaggerated gestures of the theatre to draw attention to themselves, a technique epitomised by Sarah Bernhardt. In her day, she was seen as taking off-stage theatricality as far as it would go. Nicknamed Sarah Barnum because of her tireless publicity-seeking, she drew attention to herself by wearing drag, sleeping in a quilted coffin and surrounding herself with exotic pets – a cheetah, six chameleons, a parrot called Bizibouzon and a monkey called Darwin. Her public persona was so outlandish that it seemed to vindicate even the most bizarre rumour. At one time, she was said to play croquet with skulls that she had dressed up in Louis XIV wigs. On stage, theatricality can be camp when the play itself is camp (e.g. *The Importance of Being Earnest*), when a camp person is being portrayed (e.g. *The Staircase*) or when actors send a play up by deliberately over-acting.

The phenomenon that best accommodates itself to comparison with camp is dandyism. At this point, the Victorian moralist, Thomas Carlyle should make his entrance, with his portly little figures of speech trotting after him, for he it was, in *Sartor Resartus* (1834), who set about defining dandyism. 'A Dandy is a Clothes-wearing Man' he wrote, 'a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of clothes wisely and well: so that as others dress to live, he lives to dress'.

Carlyle then goes on to highlight the hollowness of dandyism (as he understands it) by suggesting in a *recherche* simile that it bears 'a not inconsiderable resemblance to that superstition of the Athos Monks who, by fasting from all nourishment and looking intensely for a length of time into their own navels, came to discern therein the true Apocalypse of Nature and Heaven Unveiled'.

Carlyle's jokes will always be greeted with the reverence they deserve. Fervidly anti-dandy, he was concerned to discredit them, and duly did. But a closer examination reveals various aspects of the dandy that refuse to submit to Carlyle's authority. For instance, to see the original dandy, Beau Brummell, as simply a 'Clothes-wearing Man' is to diminish him to such an extent that he ceases to be recognisable. When Brummell's friend Byron said that there were three great men in the nineteenth century, Brummell, Napoleon and himself, he was evidently not anticipating Carlyle's view of Brummell merely as the man who invented trousers.

In his own lifetime, Brummell's reputation was principally as a wit. He is supposed to have said of the Prince Regent (later George IV), 'I made him what he is, and I can unmake him'. He also uttered the maxim: 'A well-tied tie is a men's first serious step in life', and 'I like to have the morning well-aired before I get up'. In fact, Brummell was the originator of that exclusive wit and provocative frivolity which we tend to think of today as inimitably Wildean, but which was really (all too imitably) Brummellian. He was also a collector of snuff-boxes, china plate and bibelots, and he wrote society verses including the famous *Butterfly Funeral*.

Brummell's spirit (and, after Brummell's, the dandy's) was consecrated not, as Carlyle supposed, simply to clothes, but to trivia, of which clothing was one example, along with pretty witticisms, snuff-boxes, verse and all the rest. Carlyle mistook an instance for the principle.

Nowhere does dandyism's campness come across better than in the Silver Fork novels; it was these novels of dialogue and decor that Oscar Wilde was avowedly trying to revive with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Written by followers of the Beau, and usually containing fictionalised portraits of him, they purported to depict the beau monde accurately. The first Silver Fork novel, written in 1825, was Plumer Ward's *Tremaine*, and Benjamin Disraeli wrote *Vivian Grey* in 1826. The two outstanding examples, however, were Thomas Lister's *Granby* (1826) and George Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham: the Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828).

Granby contains an extended portrait of Brummell in the guise of Trebeck, 'the most powerful poseur of his year'. We follow him in his intrigues through the world of Dandy clubs, balls, the ballet and the opera. The tone is best conveyed by snatches of dialogue:

'I solemnly assure you', said Trebeck, 'that nothing was further from my intention than a compliment. Compliments are *mauvais ton* – are they not Lady Elizabeth? They are quite obsolete – went out with hoops and hair powder. Pray do not accuse me of wishing to revive them'.

... Lord Chesterton – a man deeply impressed with his own consequence, but not at all skilled in the art of impressing others with it.

The eponymous dandy hero of *Pelham* moves in similarly flippant circles. The book begins:

The end of the season was unusually dull, and my mother, having looked over her list of engagements, and ascertained that she had none worth staying for, agreed to elope with her new lover.

Confusion between camp and aestheticism perhaps arose out of Oscar Wilde's early aesthetic pose. In fact, Wilde was never a true aesthete. Aesthetes want to see; camp people such as Wilde prefer to be seen. Where the aesthete makes his life a work of art, the camp person tries to do the same with his personality. The sociable sometimes socialite literature of camp should not be confused with the sad, solitary pleasures of the aesthete and his grubby cultivation of his mental garden. Camp literature is easily accessible and light-hearted; aesthetic literature is troubled by a Poe-faced symbolism. Serious aesthetes tend to be priggish, whilst camp people gaily publicise themselves as immoral.

Wilde's aestheticism was primarily a means of shocking others. He was relatively uninterested in nurturing inner-directed experiences, but espoused a sort of comic aestheticism. In his essay *Pen, Pencil and Poison*, he relates with

obvious approval the story of the flamboyant dandy Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, who murdered a girl called Helen Abercrombie, and, when reproached by a friend, shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Yes, it was a dreadful thing to do, but she had very thick ankles'. Wainwright's quip was evidently a springboard for much of Wilde's humour.

Another confusing term is preciosity, or indeed, *préciosité*. Our understanding of the *précieux* has been much coloured by Molière's comedy *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, which guys the pretensions to *préciosité* of two young country girls:

'Come and hold for us the counsellor of the graces', says one of the girls to a servant.

'Gracious me!' replies the servant, 'I don't know what creature that is: you must talk like a Christian if you want me to understand you'.

'Bring us the looking-glass, you ignoramus, and take care not to contaminate its surface with the reflection of your image'.

Understanding *préciosité* in terms of a comedy, we are perhaps apt to forget that it was partly a serious-minded movement concerned to refine and to clarify the French language. Some of its more extreme refinements and 'clarifications' may now seem silly and affected, but we should be wary of calling them camp on that account.

French critics make a useful distinction between mainstream *préciosité* and *coquetterie*, the latter being the fun-loving and irreverent aspect of *préciosité* that required poets to exercise their ingenuity in writing elegant banter to amuse salon guests – for example, verses to accompany the gift of a bouquet of flowers or to commemorate the death of a parrot. This sort of good-humoured commitment to the marginal might justifiably be called camp.

To be precious, then, is not the same as to be camp – humourless preciousness is not camp – but there is a vein of camp behaviour that is precious and is characterised by a humorous fastidiousness and mock-feminine hypochondria. A camp character in Ronald Firbank's *The Flower beneath the Foot*, complains that he has 'a hundred headaches'.

In *Revolt into Style* (1970), George Melly pointed out that in the 1960s, pop was more or less synonymous with camp. And if we look at Richard Hamilton's famous list of the attributes of pop, we can draw up a very similar list of attributes of camp, at least the camp of television entertainment and media advertising.

Pop	Camp
Popular (designed for mass audiences)	Easily accessible
Transient (short-term solutions)	Determinedly facile
Expendable	Trashy
Low cost	Mock luxurious

Mass produced	Mass-produced
Young	Youth worshipping
Witty	Witty
Sexy	Mock sexy
Gimmicky	Wilfully hackneyed
Glamorous	Mock glamorous
Big business	BIG BUSINESS

Some twenty years later, it is much easier to avoid confusing pop with camp. Although camp has been an important factor in determining the style of pop, it has become mixed with other styles – negro, folk, country, music hall and Hollywood razzmatazz. And although pop has served to jazz up and help popularise camp, it did no more than that, for camp is a much older (by some 300 years) and bigger phenomenon, taking in aspects of High Culture as well as popular performance.

Nowadays, if camp is liable to be confused with any one word, it is not with pop but with chic. Lucinda and Piers may seem very camp as they trip lightly from the social columns of *Vogue* to *The Tatler* and back again, but one need only remind oneself of the 1950s when doughty debs, charms all too palpable, were herded up from the country to be decked out in ropes of pearls and chiffons, to realise that this connection between camp and chic is, like the one between camp and pop, a matter of historical accident rather than conceptual necessity. Chic is, of course, the quality which the French regard themselves as having to a superlative degree, but it carries with it no implication that they regard themselves as being in any way marginal; on the contrary, they take it more as a mark of their racial superiority. Similarly, Shirley Temple may be very chic as an American ambassador, but she does not intend thereby to be camp. True chic is an expression through extreme elegance of superior power, as opposed to camp which is a self-mocking abdication of any pretensions to power.

ORIGINS AND ETYMOLOGY

An examination of the origins and etymology of camp provides historical support for my definition.

The far-fetched, the bogus and the patently ludicrous will always cluster round camp. There have been many extraordinary explanations of its origin. As Philip Howard (1997) recorded in *New Words for Old*, it has been located in the police files of New York City as KAMP (Known As Male Prostitute), as the name of homosexual brothels in the Australian outback of the nineteenth century, and as a slang word used by dandies to describe their assignations with soldiers spending the summer under canvas in London's Hyde Park. Colourful as these etymologies are, they must regrettably be discarded as retrojections of today's Isherwoodian and Sontagesque misconceptions.

Sontag asserts that before her essay, camp had only broken into print in Isherwood's *The World in the Evening* (published in 1954, not as she claims in

1948). But the word appears in at least one essay by the popular American journalist, Tom Wolfe, *The Girl of the Year* (published 1963 [1964, in fact. *Editor's note*]); and in the same year, the English literary mandarin Cyril Connolly wrote a spoof on spy fiction called *Bond Strikes Camp* (in which the beautiful Russian spy turns out to be 'M' in drag). Sontag could also have mentioned Angus Wilson's 1952 novel, *Hemlock and After* which refers, among other usages, to 'the blond malice of Sherman's camp chatter'. Even earlier Constant Lambert wrote in *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (1934): 'The change in style observable between the pre-war and post-war Diaghilev ballets reflects the purely fashionable change in the tastes of the concentration camp of intellectuals to whom Diaghilev played up'. And, 'With the minor Parisian figures, the camp followers of Diaghilev, it is fairly safe to assume that lack of individuality and desire for chic were at the back of their changes of style'. That the word 'camp' is used twice in the context of the camp people who gathered around Diaghilev is surely not a coincidence.

Ware's dictionary of *Passing English of the Victorian Era*, published in 1909, says this of camp: 'actions and gestures of an exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly of persons of exceptional want of character, e.g. "How very camp he is"'.

Following Ware, we find *se camper* in Théophile Gautier's *Capitaine Fracasse* (1863) – an elaborate and witty spoof on the Romantic novel, written in a lush, decadent style that he created as a pastiche of *préciosité*. It concerns an impoverished young baron who sets out to make his fortune, joining up with a wandering troupe of actors on their way to Paris. Matamore, a stock character among the comedians of the troupe, makes a fool of himself by falling in love with a lady, Isabelle, whose affections lie elsewhere. This vainglorious poseur defiantly presents the gift of his body to Isabelle: '*Mata-more se campait dans une pose extravagamment anguleuse dont sa maigreur excessive faisait encore ressortir le ridicule*'. (Matamore camped it up in an extravagantly angular pose which his great thinness served to make even more ridiculous.)

Gautier is apparently using *se camper* here with the associations of an army camp. *Se camper* is to present oneself in an expansive but flimsy manner (like a tent), with overtones here of theatricality, vanity, dressiness, and provocation.

Tracing the origin of this sense of *se camper* provides a valuable signpost to the origin of the whole phenomenon. It is interesting that *Capitaine Fracasse* is set in the seventeenth century, of which it presents a nostalgic portrait, for camp people have always idealised seventeenth-century France, above all because of Louis XIV and Versailles.

Prinnie, the Prince Regent, and 'mad' Ludwig II of Bavaria justified their camp architectural follies by reference to Louis XIV: Versailles was the place where Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac (who was the model for Marcel Proust's Baron de Charlus) held some of his legendary parties. In the novel *Venus and Tannhäuser*, Venusberg is Aubrey Beardsley's pornographic vision

of Versailles, while the fearsome eyes of Vathek in William Beckford's Gothick novel, capable of knocking people backwards with just a glance, are the fabled eyes of Louis XIV.

Camp people look back on Louis XIV's Versailles as a sort of camp Eden, a self-enclosed world devoted to divertissements, to dressing-up, showing off, and scandal – in fact the world captured in Madame de la Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). 'There is only one thing worse than going to a party with one's beloved', she wrote, 'and that is not going with her'. How evocative that proto-Wildean sentiment is of a camp ambiance! The world Madame de la Fayette describes is one of an indefinitely prolonged adolescence, an interplay of appearance, pretence and deceit in the midst of which the greatest joy was 'to note the effect of one's beauty on others', where the greatest worry was keeping up with the latest fashion, and where love was always mixed with cynicism, and cynicism with love, auspicious circumstances for the ascendancy of camp.

Louis XIV's well-known policy of diverting the nobility from politics by means of fêtes and other such Versailles entertainments (Walpole called Versailles 'a toy' and 'a garden for a great child') – in effect, the policy of manoeuvring the nobles into the margins of French life made Versailles a paradigm of high camp society.

All camp people are to be found in the margins of society, and the richest vein of camp is generally to be found in the margins of the margins. Marginal to the king's own set at Versailles was that of his brother, 'the king of mischief makers', known simply as 'Monsieur'. Modelling his personal style on that of the effeminate Henri III, Monsieur surrounded himself with exquisites. He had been educated to be totally ignorant of all political and practical matters (so as not to be a threat to the king), possibly spending part of his childhood in girls' clothes: he grew up to wear rings, bracelets, ribbons, women's jewellery, perfume and sometimes even rouge. He was notorious for his underworld connections, for his irreverence (it was believed he used to take a large missal every day to mass, until someone found he was reading Rabelais), for his sodomy and for many things much too disgusting to include here. Monsieur's fêtes, without the ballast of power-affirming symbolism that the king's presence imposed, floated off into camp fantasy. He liked to throw parties to which everyone went as shepherds and shepherdesses – a pastime which, because of her peasant village at the Petit Trianon, we tend to associate more with Marie-Antoinette. Anne Marie d'Orléans describes how she and Monsieur (who had by now totally abandoned himself to absurdity with his minute cherry mouth and the record of his gluttony stretching out in front of him) dressed in silver fabric bordered with red piping and wore aprons of black velvet covered with red, white and black plumes, with their hair dressed in the style of the peasants of Bresse; they also carried shepherds' crooks of red lacquer decorated with silver. 'Bodily toil frees us from mental trouble', said the *précieux* philosopher, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, 'and that is what makes the poor so happy'.

There is another first-hand account of Monsieur's set in a passage in the bizarre *Transvestite Memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy*, who was a well-known chronicler of court and church affairs. These memoirs provide a fascinating record of his and Monsieur's secret eccentricities.

I opened five or six buttonholes at the bottom of my gown, in order to reveal a robe of speckled black satin, the train of which was not as long as the gown. I also wore a white damask underskirt, which could be seen only when the train was carried. I ceased to wear trunk hose; to me it was hardly becoming to a woman, and I had no fear of being cold because it was full summer. I had a muslin cravat, whose tassels dropped on a huge knot of black ribbon which was attached to the top of my *robe de chambre*. The gown revealed my shoulders which always remained quite white through the great care I had taken of them all my life; every morning, I lathered my neck with veal water and sheep's foot grease, which made the skin soft and white.

He tries to come to terms with his tastes:

The attribute of God is to be loved, adored. Man, as far as the weakness of his nature allows, wishes for the same, but, as it is beauty that kindles love and since that is usually the lot of women, when it happens that men have, or believe themselves to have, certain traits of beauty, they try to enhance them by the same methods that women use, which are most becoming. They feel the inexpressible pleasure of being loved. I have felt this more than once during a delightful affair. When I was at a ball or the theatre, wearing my beautiful *robe de chambre*, diamonds and patches, and heard people murmur near me, 'There is a lovely woman', I experienced an inward glow of pleasure which is incomparable, it is so strong. Ambition, riches, even love do not equal it, because we always love ourselves more deeply than we do others.

But his happiest hours were spent in the company of Monsieur – 'I went to the Palais-Royal whenever Monsieur was in Paris. He was almost effusively friendly to me, because we had the same inclinations. He longed to dress as a woman himself, but did not dare, because of his position (princes are prisoners of their rank). In the evenings he would put on cornets, ear pendants and patches, and gaze at his reflection in a mirror'.

Fulsomely flattered by his admirers, he gave a great ball every year on Shrove Monday. He ordered me to attend in a loose robe, my face unmasked and instructed the Chevalier de Fradine to lead me in the *courante*.

It was a splendid assembly; there were at least thirty-four women decked with pearls and diamonds. I was admired, I danced to perfection, and it seemed the ball was made for me.

Monsieur opened it with Mademoiselle de Brancas, who was very pretty (she later became the Princesse d'Harcourt) and a moment later he went to dress up as a woman and returned to the ball masked. Everyone recognised him, just as he intended, and the Chevalier de Lorraine tendered him his hand. He danced the minuet and then went to sit amongst all the ladies. He had to be persuaded a little before he would remove his mask, although secretly this was all he wished to do, as he longed to be seen by everyone. It is impossible to describe the extent of his coquetry in admiring himself, putting on patches and then changing their positions. But perhaps I would have been worse. Men, once they think they are beautiful, are far more besotted with their appearance than women are.

In view of all this camping at Versailles, it is appropriate that what may have been the earliest mention of *se camper* in our sense is to be found in *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, a play by Louis XIV's beneficiary, Molière, first performed in 1671. It appears in a passage that Gautier may, consciously or unconsciously, have been echoing – a suggestion reinforced by the fact that Matamore's valet in *Capitaine Fracasse* is called Scapin.

In *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, the rascally valet Scapin persuades Octavio to bluff his way out of trouble with his father by dressing up as a stage villain and prancing around in front of him in a provocative manner:

'Wait, stop a minute', says Scapin to Octavio, as the idea dawns on him, and he begins to see the possibilities, 'Stick your hat on at an angle and look disreputable. Camp about on one leg (*'campe-toi sur un pied'*). Put your hand on your hip. Strut like a comedy-king!'

To understand the peculiar connotations of *se camper*, it is helpful to know a bit about army camps in France at this time. The idea of tents did not then call to mind the small khaki, utilitarian apologies of today, but great billowy creations of shining fabrics – satins and silks studded with jewels, tapestries and gold banners.

When Louis XIV went on manoeuvres, the courtiers who had been camping out in the apartments, rooms and corridors of Versailles, de-camped to follow the king. If they did not fight, they at least moved to a respectful distance from the fighting, to watch. In fact, as Saint Simon recorded, the spectacle and the display of court life was transferred to camp, which differed only in its lightness and its impermanence. The camp was an insubstantial pageant, a byword for transient magnificence where men were encouraged to wear their finest costumes, to preen themselves – indeed, to advertise themselves.

Camp behaviour was not thought incompatible with good soldiering – if anything, the reverse. Monsieur himself loved battles, not only for the exercise (part of the ever-futile fight to keep himself trim) but also because of the opportunity for swanking. The De Villiers Journal recounts a young French officer's

complaints about camp life's drain on his purse: the expensive items were not, it seems, irrelevancies like weapons, but clothes, carriages and silver plate.

Again, the element of off-stage theatricality in Molière's use of *se camper* is significant. Puritans, both religious and secular, have always worried about the effect of theatre on moral seriousness; theatre falsifies the self, encourages insincerity and promotes frivolity. Versailles in its more camp aspects might have embodied their worst fears. Anthony Blunt (an account of whose own very camp schooldays is to be found in Louis MacNeice's autobiography) has noted that in the courts of this time the borderlines between stage and off-stage, between fête and daily life, were very vague. Often a masque or a play such as *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* would culminate in a ball, an invitation to which was extended to the whole audience.

In 1661, Mademoiselle de Sévigné recorded in her letters how the king would sometimes appear in costume on stage – sometimes even in ballets – and how, at other times, when carnivals spread through the streets surrounding the palace, he would mask himself and slip off into the crowd incognito, to who knows what assignations. Some people detected an air of pasteboard about the whole institution of the monarchy; the Prince de Conti referred to Louis XIV in a letter as '*le Roi de théâtre*' and was banished – the barb seems to have hit home. Amorality succeeded morality, and stylishness replaced graciousness: the courtiers in the pictures of contemporary artists such as Callot are consummate stylists, behaving almost as if they are on-stage, walking with a swaggering, dance-like action which in their day (if Molière's usage was not unique) would have been called *se campant*, and which we should call 'camping it up'. If we translate their hyperbolic gestures into twentieth-century terms, we see queens lolloping about underneath the streetlights of Berlin or Mae West shakin' the shimmy.

Of course, Louis XIV did not build Versailles with the intention of making it camp, but, like peasants after a revolution, camp people have camped out in the palace. They have overrun the legend of Versailles and converted it to camp. Versailles stands in camp memory, not, as it was intended, as a symbol of Decorative Absolutism, but as a symbol of Absolute Decorativism.