

Queer Poetics in Proust: From Camp Style to Fortuny

Uta Felten, PhD.¹

Recibido: 13 de abril de 2021 / Aceptado: 19 de mayo de 2021

Abstract. Recurring to Susan Sontag's theorems in "Notes on Camp" (1964) the contribution analyzes main protagonists of the Proustian novel *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2002) as examples of queer and camp aesthetics that subvert traditional binary discourses of gender and style. In this context the figure of Odette de Crécy is decoded as a hybrid camp figure *par excellence* and a construction of fluid gender. Recurring on Butler's theorems Odette is analyzed as a construction of nomadic identity which oscillates between hyperfeminine Venus, saintly chaste Zipporah of Botticelli and *garçonne*. Another main example of queer aesthetics constitutes the figure of Albertine, who appears in the pictorial vision of the narrator as a Venetian boy dressed in a Fortuny cloak. Proust's novel is finally decoded as an archeology of multiple forms of queerness in which queer and campy lifestyle predominates, presenting us with a pluralistic and polymorphous culture in the sense conceived by Susan Sontag.

Keywords: camp; queer; Proust; Sontag; Fortuny.

[es] La poética queer en Proust: del estilo Camp a Fortuny

Resumen. Recurriendo a teoremas claves de las "Notas sobre lo camp" de Susan Sontag (1964), este artículo analiza a los protagonistas de la novela proustiana *En búsqueda del tiempo perdido* (Proust, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2002) como ejemplos de una estética queer y camp que subvierte los discursos tradicionales y binarios del género y del gusto. En este contexto, la figura proustiana de Odette de Crécy se decodifica como figura híbrida y camp por excelencia y como construcción de un género voluntariamente fluido. Recurriendo a teoremas de Butler, la figura de Odette se analiza como construcción de una identidad nómada que oscila entre la Venus hiperfemenizada, la casta santa Zipporah de Botticelli y la *garçonne*. Otro ejemplo clave de la estética queer lo constituye la figura proustiana de Albertina, que aparece en la visión pictórica del narrador como chico veneciano que lleva un abrigo de Fortuny. La novela de Proust se decodifica como una arqueología de múltiples formas del «queerness» en la que predomina un estilo de vida queer y camp presentándonos una cultura plural y polimorfa en el sentido de Susan Sontag.

Palabras clave: camp; queer; Proust; Sontag; Fortuny.

Sumario. 1. Queer archeology of the 20th century. 2. Analysis of Odette and Albertine according to Susan Sontag in "Notes on Camp". 3. Conclusion. 4. Reference list.

Cómo citar: Felten, U. PhD. (2021). Queer Poetics in Proust: From Camp Style to Fortuny, en *Estudios LGBTIQ+ Comunicación y Cultura*, 1(1), pp. 37-43.

1. Queer archeology of the 20th century

1.1. Camp aesthetics and queer poetics in Proust

In Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*—*In search of lost time*— a heteronormative *Eros* does not exist. On the contrary: Proust presents to us a queer archeology of the 20th century.

All the main figures of the Proustian novel are queer protagonists: protagonists who are gender-fluid, protagonists with nomadic identities that escape the discursive order of the biopolitics of their time to live in *espaces autres* – "other spaces" – to subvert the order of binary discourses in different dimensions such as taste, style, fashion and eros; some of them cultivate a campy lifestyle.

As Roland Barthes had already pointed out, the Proustian *Eros* is marked by a desire for inversion and subversion of heteronormative models. The categories of inversion and subversion as central figures of thought in Proust's work not only affect *Eros* and gender models, but also the models of taste. For Proust, the traditional differentiation between elitist culture, high culture and pop culture does not exist, on the contrary, he gladly celebrates the taste of camp; therefore, his entire work can thus be read as a mere tribute to camp art.

¹ Professor, University of Leipzig, Germany. E-mail: felten@rz.uni-leipzig.de
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6285-9131>

Famous protagonists of game of the inversion and Camp taste are hence the Baron de Charlus, a prefiguration of the ambiguous and gender-fluid popstar, the ex-prostitute Odette de Crécy, the aristocrat Robert de Saint-Loup, who plays the role of a transgendered Venus, and the *garçonne* Albertine, a fugitive *girl* with gender fluid codes who is transformed into a Fortuny fashion icon by the Proustian narrator.

We will analyze some of these Proustian protagonists as examples of Camp aesthetics and queer poetics by recurring to Susan Sontag's well-known theorems.

2. Analysis of Odette and Albertine according to Susan Sontag in “Notes on Camp”

2.1. Odette

As the “queen of camp”, the figure Odette de Crécy — also called *Dame en rose*, “Lady in pink”, *Dame en blanc*, “Lady in white” or “Miss Sacripant” — is an outstanding example of camp queer and aesthetics (Figs. 1-2-3).



Fig. 1. Laure Hayman, a supposed model for the figure of Odette de Crécy, here in a pastel portrait painted by Julius Leblanc Stewart, 1882.



Fig. 2. Madame Laure Hayman, famous demi-mondaine of the Belle Epoque, photograph by Benque et Cie, circa 1880s.



Fig. 3. Ornella Muti as Odette de Crécy in Volker Schlöndorff's film *Un amour de Swann*, 1984.

As Anne Marie Lachmund's (2020) excellent dissertation on popular strategies, gender configurations and media practices of pop culture has shown in the work of Marcel Proust (2021), the character of Odette certainly invites us to a reading of the camp with the Susan Sontag's essay “Notes on Camp” (1967 [1964]) in mind.

Odette is presented as a cheesy character, what could be named a contemporary camp canon. Susan Sontag emphasizes the dynamic dimension of this canon, noting that it can never be considered as a fixed canon, but as a canon that varies according to the tastes and perceptions of each era: “Of course the canon of camp can change. Time has a great deal to do with it. (...) That is why many objects prized by camp are old fashioned” (Sontag, 1967, p. 285).

For a reader with a “Camp sensibility”, a protagonist of Proust's work such as Odette de Crécy is then decoded as a Camp figure *par excellence*. In her studies on the subversion of binary taste in Marcel Proust, Anne Marie Lachmund (2021) reads Odette as a hyper-feminine figure who prefigures the “drag style” of old fashioned Hollywood diva Mae West and enters the scene as a “Spider Woman” who infects her lover Charles Swann, an art intellectual of elitist culture, with her Camp taste. She captivates him in her spider web and turns him into an object of desire within her campy collection as we will see below.

[...] the Proustian text evokes the inclusion of another dimension that Odette provokes as a representative of bad taste, a supporter of kitsch, apt to non-critique and adherent of mainstream: her power as a female representative of a popular culture that eats and absorbs the male rationality, criticism and any form of activity or resistance through her passivity, apolitics and mass character in the metaphorical sense of a black widow or a black hole. (Lachmund, 2021, p. 323)

A paradigmatic example of the Camp taste of Odette's figure is the staging of her salon, a hybrid place dominated by Campy objects from all periods: Turkish beads, Japanese lanterns, orchids, artificial toads carved in jade, and her portrait, which rested upon a sloping easel draped with plush.

We will visit Odette's famous salon, where she, as the queen of the camp, welcomes her lover Charles Swann for tea:

From the ground floor, somewhat raised above street level, leaving on the left Odette's bedroom, which looked out to the back over another little street running parallel with her own, he had climbed a staircase that went straight up between dark painted walls hung with Oriental draperies, strings of Turkish beads, and a huge Japanese lantern suspended by a silken cord (which last, however, so that her visitors should not be deprived of the latest comforts of Western civilization, was lighted by a gas-jet inside), to the two drawing-rooms, large and small. These were entered through a narrow vestibule, the wall of which, chequered with the lozenges of a wooden trellis such as you see on garden walls, only gilded, was lined from end to end by a long rectangular box in which bloomed, as in a hothouse, a row of large chrysanthemums, at that time still uncommon though by no means so large as the mammoth specimens which horticulturists have since succeeded in producing. [...] Odette had received him in a pink silk dressing-gown, which left her neck and arms bare. She had made him sit down beside her in one of the many mysterious little alcoves which had been contrived in the various recesses of the room, sheltered by enormous palms growing out of pots of Chinese porcelain, or by screens upon which were fastened photographs and fans and bows of ribbon. (Proust, 1992, pp. 307-308)

The atmosphere of Odette's salon in which she enters the scene as a "spider woman", a "hyper-feminine Venus", dressed in pink silk, evokes reminiscences of a brothel, a chapel, a queen's salon and a hot greenhouse.

Odette, queen of camp who reigns in her erotic chapel, has an affectionate relationship with all the objects placed in her salon; she loves to kiss the artificial toads, calling them *mes chéries*, "my darlings", thus turning Swann into a *chéri* object desire in her campy collection of kitsch Nippon draperies, rosaries and orchids.

She found something "quaint" in the shape of each of her Chinese ornaments, and also in her orchids, the cattleyas especially – these being, with chrysanthemums, her favourite flowers, because they had the supreme merit of not looking like flowers, but of being made, apparently, of silk or satin. [...] As she drew his attention, now to the fiery-tongued dragons painted on a bowl or stitched on a screen, now to a fleshy cluster of orchids, now to a dromedary of inlaid silverwork with ruby eyes which kept company, upon her mantelpiece, with a toad carved in jade, she would pretend now to be shrinking from the ferocity of the monsters or laughing at their absurdity, now blushing at the indecency of the flowers, now carried away by an irresistible desire to run across and kiss the toad and dromedary, calling them "darlings". (Proust, 1992, pp. 309-310)

Much later, in the volume *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*Within a Budding Grove*), the reader learns that this hyper-feminine Odette was once a queer character, called "Miss Sacripant," a *garçonne* of fluid gender who cannot be captivated.

It was – this water-colour – the portrait of a young woman, by no means beautiful but of a curious type, in a close-fitting hat not unlike a bowler, trimmed with a ribbon of cerise silk; in one of her mittened hands was a lighted cigarette, while the other held at knee-level a sort of broadbrimmed garden hat, no more than a screen of plaited straw to keep off the sun. On a table by her side, a tall vase filled with pink carnations. [...] The ambiguous character of the person whose portrait now confronted me arose, without my understanding it, from the fact that it was a young actress of an earlier generation half dressed up as a man. But the bowler beneath which the hair was fluffy but short, the velvet jacket, without lapels, opening over a white shirt-front, made me hesitate as to the period of the clothes and the sex of the model, so that I did not know exactly what I had before my eyes, except that it was a most luminous piece of painting. [...] Along the lines of the face, the latent sex seemed on the point of confessing itself to be that of a somewhat boyish girl, then vanished, and reappeared further on with a suggestion rather of an effeminate, vicious and pensive youth, then fled once more and remained elusive. (Proust, 1996, pp. 494-495)

The fictitious painting of Miss Sacripant refers to a campy portrait by the painter Maxence, which is part of the Parisian Musée d'Orsay's campy collection, entitled *La dame aux orchidées* (Fig. 4).

2.2. Albertine

"Captiver cet être de fuite" — "to capture this fugitive being" — is a goal that can never be achieved, because Proustian characters constantly flee from the binary order of a biopolitics system that constantly tries to fix identities.

Another character who constantly flees from the binary order is the character of Albertine, an object of desire and constant jealousy of the Proustian narrator. She has a fluid and ambiguous identity, which can already be seen in her first appearance on Balbec beach with her "bande à part", her band of girls: the "riot girls" of the Belle Époque.



Fig. 4. *Femme à l'orchidée*, Edgard Maxence, 1900



Fig. 5. A detail of Zipporah, Jethro's daughter, in the *Trials of Moses*, Sandro Botticelli (fresco, Sistine Chapel), circa 1481-1482.



Fig. 6. *History Portrait*, Cindy Sherman, 1990.



Fig. 7. *Ritratto allegorico di una donna (Simonetta Vespucci)*, Sandro Botticelli, 1457.

Albertine presents herself as a *garçonne* with an androgynous look: she wears sweatpants, a cap, speaks slang, rides a bicycle. She radically breaks with the official Belle Epoque dress code on Balbec beach. Taking a look at the official Cabourg beach dress code (which serves as the model for the fictional Balbec beach in Proust's novel), Albertine's look is revealed as a radical subversion of the traditional style of the ladies in Cabourg at that time (fig. 8).

The narrator of the *Recherche* is fascinated from the very first moment on. This "Punk-Albertine" breaks with the conventions of his time and so he is calling her the "black goddess" of modernity that will be the center of his novel: "[...] je me disais que c'était avec elle que j'aurais mon roman" (Proust, 1988, p. 268). To captivate this fluid being called Albertine, the jealous Proustian narrator, called "Marcel", builds her a golden prison in which he makes her his prisoner. But the prisoner constantly tries to flee, despite the expensive gifts the narrator presents to her: a Fortuny coat, a Rolls-Royce, a Fortuny gown, slippers with furs and pearls. Albertine is seduced by these fantastic haute couture objects of the time, but nevertheless she is always trying to run away from him, looking for fun in her own way with the girls of her band.

It is thanks to Mariano Fortuny's fashion that Albertine allows herself to be dominated by the narrator for a certain period of time. In Proust's time the couturier / dressmaker Mariano Fortuny is the most popular, truly hipster designer in Paris: the Comtesse de Greffuhle (fig. 9), it-girl of the Belle Epoque and relative of the dandy Robert de Montesquiou (fig. 10), who serves as a model for Proust to build the figures of Oriane de Guermantes and the Baron de Charlus, has a whole collection of dresses and coats by Fortuny (which were part of an exhibition a few years ago at the Palais de Galliera). In figure 11 we can see one of Fortuny's famous coats which, like Proust's novel, are conceived as a search of lost time, especially of the colors of Carpaccio's Quattrocento paintings.



Fig. 8. Postcard from Cabourg, *La Promenade de la Mer*, LL. Archivo personal.



Fig. 9. *La Comtesse de Greffuhle*, Paul Nadar, 1896.



Fig. 10. Robert de Montesquiou, Giovanni Boldini, 1897.



Fig. 11. Mariano Fortuny, 1912.

Captivating Albertine as Marcel’s prisoner only works for a certain amount of time. From one day to the next, Albertine flees for good, taking with her the best piece of her fashion collection: her Fortuny coat. As the reader finds out later, Albertine died in a horse accident very close to the Vivonne river, near Montjouvain, a place full of Sapphic desire and pleasure where her lesbian friends celebrated sado-erotic games.

After Albertine’s death, the narrator seems to be cured of his obsessive jealousy, of his permanent need to know what Albertine was doing with her friends. He then takes a trip with his mother to Venice. As we are in the volume *La Fugitive* (*The Sweet Cheat Gone - The Fugitive*), the sixth volume of the Proustian work, the narrator visits the Galleria dell’Academia in Venice, where he stands in front of a famous painting by Vittore de Carpaccio from 1494 entitled *Il Patriarca di Grado che esorcizza un indemoniato* —*The Patriarch of Grado heals a possessed man*— (fig. 12).

Ironically, the narrator himself is revealed as a possessed man who can never be cured of his maddening love for Albertine. Looking intently at the painting, Albertine suddenly jumps out at him in her Fortuny coat:

Carpaccio, as it happens, who was the painter we visited most readily when I was not working in St Mark’s, almost succeeded one day in reviving my love of Albertine. I was seeing for the first time “The Patriarch of Grado exorcising a demoniac”. I looked at the marvellous rose-pink and violet sky and the tall encrusted chimneys silhouetted against it, their flared stacks, blossoming like red tulips, reminiscent of so many Whistlers of Venice. Then my eyes traveled from the old wooden Rialto to that fifteenth-century Ponte Vecchio with its



Fig. 12. *Il Patriarca di Grado che esorcizza un indemoniato*, Vittore de Carpaccio, 1494.

marble palaces decorated with gilded capitals and returned to the canal on which the boats are maneuvered by adolescents in pink jackets and plumed torques. [...] Finally, before leaving the picture, my eyes came back to the shore, swarming with the everyday Venetian life of the period. I looked at the barber wiping his razor, at the negro humping his barrel, at the Muslims conversing, at the noblemen in wide-sleeved brocade and damask robes and hats of cerise velvet, and suddenly I felt a slight gnawing at my heart. On the back of one of the *Compagni della Calza* identifiable from the emblem, embroidered in gold and pearls on their sleeves or their collars, of the merry confraternity to which they were affiliate, I had just recognised the cloak which Albertine had put on to come with me to Versailles in an open carriage on the evening when I so little suspected that scarcely fifteen hours separated me from the moment of her departure from my house. Always ready for anything, when I had asked her to come out with me on that melancholy evening which she was to describe in her last letter as “doubly crepuscular in that dusk was falling and we were about to part,” she had flung over her shoulders a Fortuny cloak which she had taken away with her next day and which I had never thought of since. It was from this Carpaccio picture that that inspired son Venice had taken it, it was from the shoulders of this *Compagno della Calza* that he had removed it in order to drape it over the shoulder of so many Parisian women who were certainly unaware, as I had been until then, that the model for it existed in a group of noblemen in the foreground of the *Patriarch of Grado* in a room in the Academia in Venice. I had recognised it down to the last detail, and, that cloak having restored to me as I looked at it the eyes and the heart of him who had set out that evening with Albertine for Versailles, I was overcome for a few moments by a vague feeling of desire and melancholy. (Proust, 2002, pp. 876-877)

Albertine seems to have been transformed into a *garçonne*, a very handsome young man, dressed in a beautiful coat exactly like the ones that served as the model for Fortuny’s coats and gowns (Figs. 13-14). Albertine is reborn as a zombie, a dead walking woman in a Carpaccio painting dressed in the famous Fortuny coat.

3. Conclusion

Following Sontag’s positions, precisely its condition of *démodé* work, of an “old fashioned” work, that paradoxically makes Proust fashionable again, fashionable with regard to its recent estimation as the campiest work of epic literature according to the current positions of a modern critical orientation

Odette is probably the most campy character in the whole *Recherche*, because the reader has to prove a “camp sensibility” to decode the Proustian novel as a camp work *par excellence*. It can therefore be stated that Proust and his protagonists are part of today’s campy canon.



Figs. 13-14. Details of Carpaccio, *The Patriarch of Grado heals a possessed*, 1494. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

The figure of Odette is constituted as an ambiguous figure of fluid gender of “an unrecognizable sex”, of a nomadic identity that oscillates between a hyper-feminine Venus, the queen of camp, the *garçonne* Miss Sacripant, and the saintly chaste Zipporah of Botticelli’s painting which in Proust’s time already had a “camp” status.

In the end, Odette, constantly on the move from binary models, cannot and does not want to be captured. The character engages in a practice of infinite metamorphosis that allows the body to transform one’s own body using pictorial quotations and thus demonstrating the possibility of building ephemeral identities to infinity, in the style of appropriation art artists.

Regarding Albertina, it is as if she has finally achieved what she wanted to be throughout all her life: a garçon, a Venetian boy. Albertine’s nomadic and fluid identities never cease to torture and fascinate the narrator, a true prisoner of his labyrinth of desire.

Proust presents us in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) an archeology of multiple forms in which queer and camp lifestyles predominate and in which the traditional binary models of Eros, sex and taste are subverted.

Susan Sontag (1967) argued: “If I had to choose between the Doors and Dostoevsky, then (...) I’d choose Dostoevsky. But do I have to choose? (...) I was - I am from a pluralistic, polymorphous culture” (p. 310).

Proust’s novel is finally decoded as an archeology of multiple forms of queerness in which queer and campy lifestyle predominates presenting us as pluralistic and polymorphous culture in the sense of Sontag.

4. Reference list

- Butler, J. (2014). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. Routledge.
- Lachmund, A. M. (2020). Ugly Male High Culture and the Absorption into Tumorous Female Popular Culture: Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. In U. Felten, G. Colaizzi, F. Zurian & T. Schwann (Eds.), *Coding Gender in Romance Cultures. Bd. 1* (pp. 311-330). Peter Lang.
- (2021). *Proust, Pop und Gender. Strategien und Praktiken populärer Medienkulturen bei Marcel Proust* (Diss). Peter Lang.
- Proust, M. (1988). *À la recherche du temps perdu – Tome 2 (À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs II)*. Gallimard.
- (1992). *In Search of Lost Time – Volume 1, Swann’s Way*. Fully revised and updated edition of the Scott Moncrieff and Kilmartin translation. Modern Library Edition.
- (1996). *In Search of Lost Time – Volume 2, Within a Budding Grove*. Fully revised and updated edition of the Scott Moncrieff and Kilmartin translation. Vintage.
- (2002). *In Search of Lost Time – Volume 5, The Fugitive*. Translated by Lydia Davis, Mark Treharne, James Grieve, John Sturrock, Carol Clark, Peter Collier, & Ian Paxterson. Allen Lane.
- Sontag, S. (1967). *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*. Eyre & Spottiswoode.