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## From the Instructor

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Tom Laverriere wrote “Cross-dressing in Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion* and Europe’s Wartime Masculinity” for Studio 112, a WR 150 equivalent offered by the Kilachand Honors College. The assignment asked students to explore a question that in some way touched on the theme of the course, “Modernism and Its Discontents.” Tom conceptualized and researched this paper entirely on his own, beginning with an annotated bibliography and prospectus, then moving through a series of drafts. His intellectual curiosity drove the project from beginning to end.

Tom’s paper takes up a question that many viewers of the film are likely to share: What’s the deal with the cross-dressing number in the middle of this classic war film? He addresses this focused textual question through a broad inquiry into the complex and ambiguous possibilities surrounding masculine expression in wartime Europe. One thing I admire greatly about the paper is the way in which it engages with the work of a variety of other scholars. Tom draws on theoretical concepts alongside historical background to offer a compelling framework for understanding the questions that the film raises about masculinity through its portrayal of cross-dressing. He also builds upon several related arguments, adding to the scholarly conversation in a generous and generative way that will leave readers with renewed interest in what is widely considered one of the greatest films ever made.

— Sarah Madsen Hardy

KHC ST 112: Studio 2

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## From the Writer

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Towards the end of second semester in our Honors College Writing Studio course, KHC ST112, Sarah Madsen Hardy asked us to write research papers on any topic we wanted concerning any of the texts we had worked with. As a Film & TV major, I knew I wanted to write about the film we watched (Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*), but as a writer with the dangerous habit of trying to tackle huge concepts in very limited spaces, the freedom I had was terrifying. We could write about anything. I eventually decided I wanted to better understand the intentions behind and implications of Renoir's presentation of cross-dressing in the film and what that might say about Europe's concept of masculinity during the World War I era. With some coaching from Sarah I found success after paring down my scope and spending a lot of time on a single moment—a moment of silence, at that—that I could use research to interpret and explain.

Thus, what would become my final paper was born, and what I found was incredibly exciting. In reading both scholarship about the film and historical studies of the period, I had my eyes opened to the rich history of Europe's queer subculture of the early twentieth century and the extent to which cross-dressing was a part of it. Nontraditional gender expression, even as we know it today, isn't new; what's new is the vocabulary that's continuing to become socially accepted that allows us to talk about it. Many thanks to Sarah for being there every step of the way and for encouraging me to listen to the silence.

— Thomas Laverriere

THOMAS LAVERRIERE

*Prize Essay Award*

## CROSS-DRESSING IN RENOIR'S *LA GRANDE ILLUSION* AND EUROPE'S WARTIME MASCULINITY

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The military is associated with a masculine ideal, so much so that enlisting may be the ultimate demonstration by a young man of his masculinity. Such was the case in Europe at the outbreak of World War I. In 1914, the conflict was anticipated to be short and sweet, more of an adventure than the total war that ensued. Men volunteered because they feared they might otherwise be missing the opportunity of a lifetime. In the excitement of war fervor, however, and even long after the dust of the Great War has settled, few stop to think about what kind of masculinity the military promoted during this time. The military may be viewed as a standard of masculinity even today, but there are pieces of the military culture of World War I that may not fit with contemporary thought about masculinity in the period. Jean Renoir's 1937 film *La Grande Illusion* offers a more complete picture of this masculinity. This includes a depiction of cross-dressing, a facet of masculinity seldom explored by historians. But where does this fit into the picture of wartime masculinity, and what did it do for men? Using theories presented by Nicholas Edsall and Alon Rachamimov, Renoir's representation of cross-dressing in a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp may be analyzed and explained in terms of masculine expression and used to comment on Europe's changing definition of masculinity during wartime.

### Setting the Scene

Renoir shows cross-dressing as a commonplace behavior for men at war, which already challenges common perceptions of masculinity. In

the film's first act, Renoir presents two of the film's leads, Rosenthal and Maréchal, along with Maisonneuve, an actor, a teacher, and an engineer, all Allied officers preparing to stage a theatrical production to entertain their fellow prisoners of war at a German camp. The scene opens with the six men looking through crates of supplies for the show. They are all excited to find "real dresses," and begin talking about women back home—how they've started wearing their dresses and hair short—before Maréchal suggests that the actor try on one of the dresses so they can see how it looks. At this point, Rosenthal intervenes; he insists that the cross-dressing be done in the best way possible (that is, only a man who has "shaved properly" may dress up) (Renoir 38). That man is Maisonneuve. Maisonneuve agrees, saying, "If you think that's funny," and disappears to make his transformation (Renoir 38).

Maisonneuve returns fully dressed as a woman, wig and all, and is met with silence from his comrades. Renoir describes the scene in the screenplay: "All the men turn to look at him and fall silent, curiously disturbed. How many memories and hopes are there. . . . Maisonneuve feels uneasy to see their intense looks on him" (Renoir 39). The scene continues,

MARÉCHAL, *with forced laughter*: Don't you think it's funny?

MAISONNEUVE: Funny?

ROSENTHAL: Yes, it's funny . . .

MARÉCHAL, *very sane and a little sad*: It's really funny . . . you look like a real girl.

*They fall into a heavy silence again. . . . They cannot find anything to say as they look at this soldier in a woman's dress. Very slow pan across the soldiers' faces staring at MAISONNEUVE in absolute silence . . .*

VOICES *off*: Yes . . . it's funny! (Renoir 39)

Renoir writes tension into the screenplay, and this translates on screen. This tension is ambiguous, however; it's clear from the soldiers' dialogue before Maisonneuve appears dressed as a woman that they are becoming frustrated with being isolated from "real" women. The soldiers appear awestruck because Maisonneuve looks so convincing, but they are all fully cognizant that he is still a man. Yet they allow themselves to be taken

aback and admire him. Given the film's theme of male camaraderie, too, this scene may be read in a homoerotic light. This opens the question of whether Renoir presents cross-dressing as a normative behavior for the soldiers, something to help them reaffirm their own masculinities by enjoying the company of a "woman," or a disruptive behavior that allowed queer expression.

## Contextualizing Cross-dressing in Modern European History

Before we can make sense of what standard of masculinity Renoir applies to cross-dressing, we need to first understand the role of cross-dressing in European culture in the early twentieth century and its place in shaping concepts of masculinity. In his book *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World*, historian Nicholas C. Edsall introduces a cultural struggle in Europe between classical (Greek and Roman) and Western (Christian) theories of masculinity (189). Westernization and the spread of Christianity brought with them a new vision of masculinity that forbade anything bordering on homoerotic; this was a part of the ascetic ideal that Friedrich Nietzsche condemned. Strong male friendships became dangerous to one's reputation. The outbreak of World War I, though, produced extremely strong male bonds that often included homoerotic undertones and sometimes resulted in homosexual encounters. These bonds between men were accepted and encouraged according to the classical model of masculinity. Though homosexual love wasn't necessarily socially acceptable, strong friendships between powerful men were supported under classical ideology because people believed these relationships helped improve society.

In order to answer the question of where Renoir's portrayal of cross-dressing fits into this dichotomy of masculinities, it is important to note the history of the practice of cross-dressing and how that may have fit (or not) into men's identities during this period. Cross-dressing had been a part of a growing queer subculture in Europe for years prior to the outbreak of the War (Edsall 147). An example of cross-dressing and suspicions of homosexuality entering a public forum that illustrates the complexity the issue of masculinity involves would be Kaiser Wilhelm II and his friend Phillip, Fürst zu Eulenburg. The two were part of the same social circle, comprised of many men who were suspected to be homosex-

ual, and sometimes their meetings would include cross-dressing as a social activity (Edsall 147). Later, after both had achieved political power, Phillip was accused of having passed secret information on to the French after the French penetration of Morocco. His suspected homosexuality was used against him in trial (Edsall 148–49).

So, like the military of the early twentieth century, German culture during that time encouraged the strong male bonds between Wilhelm and his friends (classical ideology) until behaviors that suggested homosexuality became public—at which point they were condemned (Christian ideology). This example from pre-War Germany highlights the conflicting ideas facing men of the period that only became more defined as the War set men up to face the issue head-on within the institution of the military, which has always been held up as an inherently masculine system.

This would have to be done privately, however; as Sarah Cole puts it in her book *Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War*, the common intense male friendships, sometimes bordering on the homoerotic, were a “crushing problem” because of the soldiers’ inability to speak of them. Soldiers couldn’t talk about their relationships due to both (Christian/Western) cultural pressures and a lack of the right words; this restrictive feeling for men necessitated the creation of a “hidden language” with which to talk about them (Cole 470, 473). To do this, soldiers turned to classical Greek texts or the Bible for help in creating their own vocabulary. Despite how common these relationships were during World War I, the new space the military provided for these men “could not ultimately resolve the contradictions inherent in the different visions of male unity that the war generated” (470).

Though Cole further illuminates the contradictory nature of soldiers’ freedom and restriction of expression during World War I, we’re still faced with a conflicted view of masculinity. How might we understand cross-dressing in this murky context? As a behavior endorsed by the military, one could consider cross-dressing a manifestation of a “hidden language” for homoerotic expression within the military’s restrictive framework. “This was the golden age of the female impersonator,” said POW memoirist Hermann Pörzgen, “when unfulfilled eroticism . . . reoriented the fantasies of the mass [of soldiers] toward a new object and channeled love, sorrow, adulation, and critique” (Rachamimov 363). Officers of POW camps fully

supported and encouraged performances by men in drag, even encouraged some men to keep up their female personas when they weren't performing (Rachamimov 377). Such men would receive love letters from other soldiers; sometimes soldiers would do their laundry for them and pamper them as they would a female lover—whether they were romantically or sexually involved or not.

The military officials' reasoning appeared to be that if the prisoners got their fix of femininity, they would be less likely to have sexual encounters with the other men. They used cross-dressing, which had roots in queer expression, as a normalizing behavior to promote a more Christian masculinity. They may not have realized that by accepting cross-dressing, they accepted the primarily queer history that came with it. Though the prisoners wanted to see the most feminine-looking performers possible—more evidence in favor of cross-dressing as a normative behavior—they still, like the soldiers in *La Grande Illusion*, became transfixed. These men knew they were watching and interacting with other men. The maintenance of female personas offstage by some men, though, blurred the line between the sexes and even called pronouns into question. What the military believed to be a way of upholding Westernized notions of masculinity may have had the inverse effect on some of the men by giving them an outlet for homoerotic desires and a place to explore them in a classical style.

### *Analysis of La Grande Illusion*

What, then, does this mean for *La Grande Illusion*? Some scholars who have written on this scene have analyzed it as evidence of Renoir's fascination with the theatre arts; additionally, scenes depicting plays weren't uncommon in 1930s cinema. Keith Reader provides a more insightful reading of the film in his article "If I Were a Girl—And I Am Not" that ranks questions surrounding cross-dressing in league with nationalism and social class, hugely important themes in the film. Reader makes this comparison by noting another instance of cross-dressing as a strategy Maréchal uses in one of his escape plans (56). He tries to escape three times: once as a chimney sweep, once as a German soldier, and once as a woman. Relatedly, Reader cites Celia Britton who says, "The drag show is the most obvious visual correlate to the theme of illusion" (56).

Thus, despite its short screen time, cross-dressing may be an integral part of Renoir's vision. Reader's interpretation assesses the "illusion" of cross-dressing as neither a reaffirmation of heterosexual norms nor an outright refutation of them, but rather a form in which both may coexist.

Edsall's notion of competing masculine ideologies (the classical and the Christian) and Rachamimov's exploration of cross-dressing as a normative or disruptive behavior may shed more light on Reader's interpretation and better explain Renoir's portrayal of cross-dressing in the film in context. Since the film shows the theatrical performance that included cross-dressing as endorsed by the camp, it seems to promote cross-dressing as a normative behavior, yet the tension between the soldiers when *Maisonneuve* emerges as a woman suggests that dressing up could have been an expression of a more disruptive classical masculinity. To be sure, Renoir's vision of cross-dressing isn't necessarily normative and Christian *or* disruptive and classical, but the notion that the military could use drag as a normative behavior (for Christian values) that results in the expression of classical masculinity seems paradoxical. Can one really classify the military's endorsement of cross-dressing as normative if its support creates a space for socially disruptive homoerotic expression?

Instead, one may say that Renoir captures the subjectivity of the experience of cross-dressing. It was normative/Christian for the military officials that endorsed it in the POW camps and on the front lines, but disruptive/classical for many of the soldiers that participated. Looking more critically at the reactions of the soldiers to *Maisonneuve*, one can see the disruptive nature of his cross-dressing. The soldiers insist that it's funny, but the silence before the laughter shows the soldiers' uncertainty of their feelings and how to express them. They have to insist that it's just for fun to either confirm their longing for a biological woman or repress their longing for a man. What Renoir doesn't show us is that some of the characters at this performance would have likely had some sort of homosexual encounter(s) at the camp or on the fronts, and cross-dressing may confuse soldiers' feelings, romantic or sexual or not. Viewing the film through a homoerotic lens is validated by the relationship of Maréchal and Rosenthal; at the end of the film Maréchal chooses to continue traveling with Rosenthal instead of settling down with his female love interest. This friendship between the men is never sexual, but it illustrates the kinds of



bonds men formed with homoerotic undertones. The representation of cross-dressing is highly ambiguous, but so were the soldiers' feelings about themselves and each other—and this is the point.

Given the strong male relationships showcased throughout the film and that events are portrayed almost exclusively from the prisoners' perspective, one may be inclined to accept their perception of cross-dressing: a disruptive behavior that embraces classical masculinity. The homoerotic tension in the film aligns with classical masculinity, but whether Renoir presents cross-dressing as normative or disruptive is less clear. Since the military culture is such a large part of the film, it makes sense to say that its depiction of cross-dressing is normative even though the soldiers use the behavior to adhere more closely to classical masculinity. The ambiguity, however, shows that Renoir didn't ignore the homoerotic and homosexual implications of cross-dressing, and as such, its disruptive potential. We see cross-dressing through the soldiers' eyes, but in the context of the military. Therefore, Renoir shows his audience more of the normative than the disruptive side of cross-dressing.

The secondary, disruptive potential of cross-dressing, however, could be yet another of Renoir's illusions. Setting the film in its historical context with a focus on the various and changing functions of cross-dressing, largely from the homosexual community, opens doors to new interpretations of Renoir's depiction of cross-dressing in *La Grande Illusion* that at the very least establish the scene's authenticity as a part of the larger experience of war. It wasn't simply a throwaway scene showing Renoir's personal interest in theater, but another moment of character study and world building. Perhaps the film itself acted as part of a "hidden language" like the one Cole describes to explore homoeroticism in a non-explicit way. There is something to be said of the film's ambiguity, but its portrayal of a classical ideal of masculinity is clear. If cross-dressing fit into the final cut of Renoir's film and has (albeit slowly) begun attracting the attention of historians and gender scholars, how this behavior fits into a picture of masculinity is a conversation worth having. When the illusions are stripped away, the findings may be surprising.

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