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'Just a couple of fags': Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and celebrity feud

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This article argues that the long-running feud between the two celebrity authors Truman Capote and Gore Vidal indicates a crucial shift in the nature of literary celebrity from the 1940s to the 1970s. At its commencement, the feud was about competition for literary fame and the respective literary talent of the two authors. It thus indicated the seriousness and the prestige that American culture accorded literature and how American literary celebrity differed from other forms of celebrity in its emphasis on what Loren Glass calls 'individual authorial consciousness'. But as the decades passed, literary achievement was increasingly sidelined by entertaining one-liners issued by one writer against the other on TV talk shows and in the press, indicating the diminution of literary seriousness that is concomitant with the absorption of literary celebrity into postmodern media culture. I contend that Capote and Vidal's divergent embodiments of homosexual identity were inextricably related to this shift. The two writers embodied contrasting versions of celebrity homosexuality in a period before it was common for public figures to acknowledge queer identification, with Capote's defiant effeminacy offsetting Vidal's patrician masculinity. Vidal's attacks on Capote are not only about literary talent but also about the way Capote's effeminate homosexuality affronted the normatively masculine homosexuality that Vidal strove to promote. Yet the two writers adopted similar camp performative strategies to prosecute the feud - above all, the arch putdown. The campness of the feud, I argue, fed into the decreased authority of literary celebrity in postmodern culture.

Keywords

gore, vidal, celebrity, feud, fags, capote, just, truman, couple

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'Just a couple of fags': Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and celebrity feud

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This essay argues that the long-running feud between the two celebrity authors Truman Capote and Gore Vidal indicates a crucial shift in the nature of literary celebrity from the 1940s to the 1970s. At its commencement, the feud was about competition for literary fame and the respective literary talent of the two authors. It thus indicated the seriousness and the prestige that American culture accorded literature and how American literary celebrity differed from other forms of celebrity in its emphasis on what Loren Glass calls 'individual authorial consciousness'. But as the decades passed, literary achievement was increasingly sidelined by entertaining one-liners issued by one writer against the other on TV talk shows and in the press, indicating the diminution of literary seriousness that is concomitant with the absorption of literary celebrity into postmodern media culture. I contend that Capote and Vidal's divergent embodiments of homosexual identity were inextricably related to this shift. The two writers embodied contrasting versions of celebrity homosexuality in a period before it was common for public figures to acknowledge queer identification, with Capote's defiant effeminacy offsetting Vidal's patrician masculinity. Vidal's attacks on Capote are not only about literary talent but also about the way Capote's effeminate homosexuality affronted the normatively masculine homosexuality that Vidal strove to promote. Yet the two writers adopted similar camp performative strategies to prosecute the feud – above all, the arch putdown. The campness of the feud, I argue, fed into the decreased authority of literary celebrity in postmodern culture.

Keywords: Gore Vidal; Truman Capote; literary celebrity; homosexuality

Introduction

The long-running feud between the American literary celebrities Truman Capote (1924-1984) and Gore Vidal (1925-2012), which began soon after World War II and ended only with Capote's death, was one of the most famous literary quarrels in an era when such conflicts tended to grab headlines. In this essay I suggest that Capote and Vidal's divergent embodiments of homosexual identity were crucially at stake in their decades-long feud. The two writers embodied contrasting versions of celebrity homosexuality in a period before it was common for public figures to acknowledge queer identification, with Capote's defiant effeminacy offsetting Vidal's patrician masculinity. Neither writer could be said to have 'outed' himself in the way that has become a familiar feature of the celebritiescape of the last twenty years or so, which has seen increasing numbers of film, TV, sports and music stars publicly identifying as gay or lesbian in (usually carefully managed) media appearances. Capote's effeminacy may have left little doubt about his sexual orientation in the minds of many, but in the era of the open secret – the period preceding the 1970s during which homosexual identification was rarely *explicitly* attached to the proper name of a public figure – he did not feel obliged to speak the truth of his sexuality in the way that many contemporary celebrities do. Vidal's relation to contemporary gay identity was even more fraught, as he rejected the very notion, insisting on the adjectival rather than the nominal status of 'homosexual'. Nevertheless, I will argue, homosexuality

inflected the public representations of both writers and their antagonistic relations to one another.

At least at its beginning, the feud between Vidal and Capote was about competition for literary fame, and in this respect it was an effect of the intensely competitive environment of the postwar American literary scene. The interest of the media in this issue indicates the extent to which the fame of avowedly 'literary' (rather than 'popular' or 'middlebrow') writers was caught up in the production of celebrity by the postwar period. The idea of 'immortal' literary (or artistic) fame had been distinguished from the other more worldly forms of fame achieved by monarchs and military leaders from the early modern period (Braudy 1986, Glass 2014). As recognizably modern forms of celebrity began to take hold from the eighteenth century, literary fame continued to be positioned as an alternative and privileged form of renown, even though writers furnished many of the most notable examples of early celebrity – the heavily commodified and mediated image of Byron is perhaps the most well-known example (Mole 2007, Tuite 2014). By the mid-twentieth century, when Capote and Vidal made their debuts, the idea of transcendent literary renown continued to exert considerable cultural force, but it was inextricably entangled with the operations of celebrity culture. Mark Greif notes the 'hysterical' tone of literary critical discourse in the immediate postwar period, as academics and literary essayists breathlessly sought successors to the previous generation of modernist luminaries (Greif 2014, pp. 114). The critical hysteria was reinforced by and indeed to some

extent indistinguishable from the media hype that surrounded the new generation of literary novelists, whereby writers were implicitly or explicitly placed in competitive relation to one another.

Sianne Ngai argues that competitiveness '[does] not exist outside a condition of numerosness: a field of many others for the self to interact with the singled-out other in' (2006, p. 111). While competitiveness is often directed at a specific person, Ngai continues, she or he is not technically speaking the feeling's object. Competitiveness's object, Ngai states, is 'position: specifically, the subject's position, relative to and contingent upon the position of many others in a larger hierarchical order' (2006, p. 112). Picking up on Ngai's insights, I suggest in this essay that Capote and Vidal's rivalry can be understood not only in the context of a competition for fame in the field of numerosness that is literary production but also, and relatedly, in the context of a competition for the representation of male homosexuality in the field of numerosness that is gay identity. I don't mean by this that either writer sought to style himself as a spokesperson, let alone a 'role model' for gayness. But Capote and Vidal's celebrity careers were more or less coincident with the consolidation of contemporary gay identity, which most historians of sexuality locate in the thirty or so years following the end of World War II (D'Emilio 1998, Meeker 2006). Their competitiveness was inflected by the ways they were associated in the public mind with homosexuality, as well as by the growing awareness of distinctive gay identities and culture.

This is particularly evident in the campness of the Vidal-Capote feud: that is, the ways in which it was prosecuted via camp performative strategies – above all ‘the game of bitchy putdowns’ that is often a key component of camp (Trask 2013, p. 14). Vidal and Capote’s relationship was antagonistic, but the antagonism was shot through with catty humour. Their enmity was both serious and funny in a textbook illustration of the paradoxical tendency of camp to unite the heartfelt and the frivolous. However, by its conclusion the serious aspects of the feud – in particular, the issue of literary merit – had been sidelined in its media representations in ways that, I argue here, indicate a historical shift in the status of literary celebrity.

Feudal history

Capote and Vidal first met in 1945 in New York, around the time of their respective precocious literary debuts. The twenty-year-old Vidal had already written two novels (*Williwaw*, published 1946, and *In a Yellow Wood*, published 1947), and Capote, a year older, was making a name for himself as a writer of short stories, which were being published in magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*. While at first these two extraordinarily ambitious young writers were friendly, within a couple of years their relations had deteriorated into open hostility. Both Capote and Vidal sought the position of postwar literary *enfant terrible*, a position that was actively constructed by media and publishing industries hungry for new literary celebrities. As Vidal noted retrospectively, ‘After the war everybody was

waiting for the next Hemingway-Fitzgerald generation to appear. That's why so much attention was devoted to novelists and poets, and that's why a new novel by one of us was considered an interesting event' (Clarke 1988, p.130). Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke describes as only slightly exaggerated the English critic Cyril Connolly's report on the postwar American scene for the journal *Horizon*:

The hunt for young authors who, while maintaining a prestige value . . . may yet somehow win the coveted jackpot is feverish and incessant. Last year's authors are pushed aside and this year's - the novelist Jean Stafford, her poet husband Robert Lowell or the dark horse, Truman Capote - are invariably mentioned. . . . [T]heir names like a new issue on the market are constantly on the lips of those in the know. 'Get Capote' - at this minute the words are resounding on many a sixtieth floor. (cited Clarke 1988, pp. 130-31)

The intense interest in potential literary celebrities was evidenced in the magazine *Life's* feature on a group of up-and-coming young writers in June 1947. While Capote was the only one of the group yet to publish a novel, it was his picture that led the article and that was blown up to nearly half a page. The reason for Capote's prominence, as Clarke notes, was that 'he looked unusual, which is to say, newsworthy,' while the other writers 'could just as easily have illustrated a story about young advertising executives' (1988, p. 131). After Capote's large picture, there were two progressively smaller sizes allocated to the remaining writers. Although the premise of the article was that all the featured writers were just starting out on their careers and that the level of their fame was yet to be determined, the graded sizes of

the pictures suggested that a ranking of the writers had already taken place. Despite his movie-star good looks and his own talent for self-promotion, Vidal was given one of the two smallest-sized pictures (along with the forgotten Peggy Bennett) (*Life* 1947). Interestingly, although Vidal was photographed against the eminently masculine backdrop of a naval vessel (a reference to his first novel *Williwaw*, set on an army freight ship during the war), the photo that actually appeared was so truncated that the ship was reduced to an indefinite dark background. Capote, on the other hand, was pictured in a room fussily stuffed with bric-a-brac, a style of interior décor that, as Jeff Solomon argues, would have obliquely signalled homosexuality for an audience acquainted with gay subcultural significations (Solomon 2008). This photograph was a key moment in Capote's performance of a public persona that, as Jeff Solomon puts it, was 'young, effeminate, and strange', and that culminated in the famous jacket photo for his first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), in which Capote reclines on a sofa in a pose that invokes a tradition of painterly renditions of feminine seductiveness (Solomon 2008, pp. 317-20). From the beginning of their careers, then, Capote's flamboyance contrasted with and often trounced Vidal's relatively unmarked masculine style.

As noted above, the Vidal-Capote feud was, initially at least, over the degree of their literary talent. In 1948 at the apartment of Tennessee Williams, Vidal told Capote that he got all his plots out of his fellow Southern writers Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Truman retaliated by saying, 'Well,

maybe you got all yours out of the *Daily News*'. Another writer, Glenway Wescott, reports that Vidal 's reaction to mention of Capote's talent around this time was to explode: 'How can you call anybody talented who's written only one book at twenty-three? I've written three books, and I'm only twenty-two!' For his part, Capote became furious when Vidal's name was mentioned, stamping his feet and crying, 'He has no talent! None, none, none!' According to Clarke, however, the feud was taken less seriously by Capote than it was by Vidal, for a reason that 'was obvious to everyone but Gore: Truman had won; the title of the reigning literary prodigy was his'. In the late 1940s, despite his youth, Truman was, as Clarke writes, 'a mature writer with a distinct and confident voice'. Vidal, on the other hand, though prolific, 'was still floundering for both a style and a subject, and few took his work very seriously' (Clarke 1988, p. 141).

In subsequent decades, though fundamentally different in many ways, both Vidal and Capote consolidated their celebrity through a combination of TV-friendly verbal wit, bestselling books, and associations with the rich and famous. But Vidal, as he never stopped reminding people, was born into the Washington ruling class, the grandson of a senator and the son of a famous aviator. Vidal moved easily from his politically connected background into friendships and acquaintances with the likes of Paul Newman and Princess Margaret, as the domains of political power and celebrity increasingly merged in the postwar period (Mills 1956). Capote, on the other hand, who came from a comparatively humble background, parlayed his talents for

friendship and amusement into a position as a kind of court jester to the jet set. Though he moved in circles that overlapped with those of Vidal's, he remained for the snobbish Vidal something of an arriviste. These differences of class and acculturation fed into their mutual hostility.

As the postwar decades passed, the writers frequently sniped at one another in print interviews or on talk shows. Vidal, for instance, declared that Capote had 'raised lying into an art - a minor art'. Capote gave back as good as he got, saying for instance on a talk show, 'Of course, I'm always sad about Gore. Very sad that he has to breathe every day' (Kaplan 1999, p. 700). In 1975 Capote, a lifelong embellisher of stories - or in Vidal's less charitable assessment a liar - and by this stage a long-time alcoholic and drug addict, gave an interview 'under the influence' to *Playgirl* in which he claimed that Vidal had been drunk and obnoxious at a White House party during the Kennedy administration and had insulted John F. Kennedy's mother, after which he was thrown out onto Pennsylvania Avenue by Bobby Kennedy and a couple of other attendees. After the interview appeared, Vidal filed a libel suit against Capote, alleging that Capote had caused him 'great mental anxiety and suffering', and demanding an apology and a million dollars in damages (Clarke 1988, p. 480). A number of mutual friends of the two writers urged Vidal not to pursue the suit, some on the grounds of Capote's psychic and physical instability, most on the grounds of the collegial principle that one writer should not sue another (Kaplan 1999, p. 704). But Vidal remained determined, motivated by a confluence of powerful impulses arising out of

his *amour-propre* as well as his relations with Capote. Vidal was concerned about inaccurate accounts of his relations with the Kennedys, of which Capote's was the most recent and the most spectacular. Vidal had been friendly with Jack and Jackie Kennedy, though after Jack's assassination he declared in an essay, 'The Holy Family' (1967), that his presidency had been disastrous (Vidal 1993, pp. 809-826). If Vidal's attitudes towards Jackie and Jack were ambivalent, however, there was nothing uncertain about his detestation of Bobby, and he had in fact had a heated exchange with Bobby Kennedy at the party in question. But he was not bodily ejected from the event, and other publicly circulated accounts of the night did not support Capote's assertion to this effect (Clarke 1988, pp. 479-80, Kaplan 1999, pp. 700-5).

Capote, however, seems to have convinced himself that the story was true and that Vidal would humiliatingly lose the suit. His certainty that he would win rested on the presumed support of his bosom friend and muse, Lee Radziwill (Jackie Kennedy's sister), who had been at the White House the night of the party. Whether or not Radziwill ever actually told him the story of Gore's ejection, Truman had convinced himself that she had (Kaplan 1999, p. 703). However, after the libel suit had dragged on for three years through a succession of lawyers' letters, depositions, and countersuits, Capote learnt to his shock that Radziwill had told Vidal's lawyer that she did not remember ever having discussed the night in question with Capote. Baffled and hurt, Capote convinced the gossip columnist Liz Smith to call Radziwill after his

own attempt to contact her went unanswered. Smith reported back to Capote Radziwill's account of why she had turned against him: 'I'm tired of Truman riding on my coattails to fame. And Liz, what difference does it make? They're just a couple of fags' (Clarke 1988, p. 518).

After Radziwill's statement to Vidal's lawyers, *Playgirl* published a retraction. Capote still refused to back down, though, and in 1979 he facilitated the publication in *New York* magazine of a front-page article, 'The Vidal-Capote Papers,' about the feud, an article that included extensive quotations from his own deposition, and that Capote hoped would be strongly anti-Vidal in tone (Kaplan 1999, p. 705). The cover featured a cartoon of a dinner-suited Vidal sailing through the air above the heads of Bobby, John, and Jackie Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and other guests, the White House in the background. A quote from Capote, 'And then Bobby and Arthur Schlesinger and one of the guards just picked Gore up and threw him out into Pennsylvania Avenue,' accompanied the image (Haden-Guest 1979). While the cover seemed to support Capote's version of events, the story was even-handed and did not do Vidal's reputation the damage that Capote had hoped for. The suit continued for another four years, but eventually in October 1983, faced with the possibility of court and a tremendous financial loss, Capote admitted defeat and apologized in writing to Vidal.

Effeminophobia and nature: Homosexuality according to Vidal

But if Vidal had won this particular battle, according to Vidal himself, Capote had won the war. As Vidal's biographer Fred Kaplan writes, one of Vidal's motivations in pursuing the suit was to 'terminate conclusively the tendency of the public to associate him with Capote, as if they were birds of a feather' (Kaplan 1999, p. 703). Even before the suit was settled, Vidal had conceded failure in this regard. He wrote in a letter that 'No matter what the judge determines, Mr. C has now so muddled things as to make me seem to be his equal: a pair of publicity-mad social climbers who make it a habit to libel and slander one another and everyone else' (Kaplan 1999, p. 706). Vidal's fear that he and Capote had been identified once and for all as equals by the affair parallels Radziwill's identification of both writers as 'just a couple of fags'. In Vidal's and Radziwill's statements, homosexual identity and social climbing are implicitly brought into association, as indicated by the contiguity in Radziwill's statement of her characterization of Capote as 'riding on my coattails to fame' and her homophobic dismissal of both writers. Vidal also saw Capote as a social climber, an identity that was, for Vidal, firmly aligned with Capote's effeminate homosexuality. Vidal saw *himself*, on the other hand, as already at the top of the social heap due to the circumstances of his birth. In Vidal's self-image, this social status was aligned with a pronouncedly masculine intellectual seriousness and with engagement with the weighty rather than the frivolous aspects of the public sphere. In a letter from 1976, responding to a rumour that he was 'about to write a gossip novel', Vidal wrote: 'That is Capote's field. Most of what is written about me in the press is

untrue. . . . I find on TV that I am often supposed to talk about fashions and famous society ladies. I then remind the host that I am the one who talks about politics and Capote is the one who tells naughty stories about the rich' (Kaplan 1999, p. 700). Seeking to distinguish himself from Capote's gossipy arrivisme, Vidal disavows his own immersion in celebrity culture, an immersion that is in fact signalled in his references to his frequent appearances in the press and on TV. He styles himself as a serious public intellectual with political interests – in 1976 Vidal had already run for political office once (for a New York House of Representatives seat in 1960), and he would do so again in 1982 (in a bid for the California Democrat senatorial nomination). He ignores the imbrication of both public intellectuals and politicians in the celebritiescape of TV, a phenomenon that he elsewhere acutely analysed (Altman 2005, Frank 2005).

For Vidal, Capote's effeminate embodiment of homosexuality affronted the alternative version of masculine homosexuality that he sought to promote – and perhaps, though inexplicitly, to represent. Vidal had at the age of twenty-three published *The City and the Pillar* (1948), one of the first sympathetic treatments of homosexuality in the American novel, and he continued to write and speak out sympathetically on the topic, arguing for the 'naturalness' of homosexuality. It seems likely that many interested observers would have assumed that Vidal was homosexual. Responding to the masculine ease of Vidal's persona in TV appearance in the early 1960s, for instance, the closeted gay writer John Cheever wrote in his journal, 'I think

that he is either not a fairy or that perhaps we have reached a point where men of this persuasion are not forced into attitudes of bitterness, rancor, and despair' (cited in Tóibín 2009, p. 21). However (as Cheever's statement indicates), Vidal made his statements in support of homosexuality from behind the protective scrim of the open secret. It was not until the 1960s morphed into the 1970s and the cultural impact of gay liberation was felt that Vidal began to talk publicly about his own erotic liaisons with men, explicitly indicating that his impulse to defend sexual non-normativity may have involved something other than disinterested liberalism.

Vidal's new openness about his own sexuality in the post-liberation era was matched by more open attacks on Capote's effeminacy. In a 1981 essay 1981, he wrote 'if [Capote] had not existed . . . another would have been run up on the old sewing machine because that sort of *persona* must be, for a whole nation, the stereotype of what a fag is' (Vidal 1993, p. 610). In distancing himself from Capote's effeminate embodiment of homosexual identity, Vidal also sought to cordon himself off from Capote's lack of 'class' and his putative frivolity. The interrelation of these traits for Vidal is conveyed in the insulting characterizations of Capote that he made through the years, such as his claim in 1974 that Capote 'thinks he's a very rich Society Lady' (Vidal 1999, p. 215). Capote didn't just write excitedly about society ladies; he thought he was one. Conveying his dislike of Capote, Vidal drew on well-established associations of (effeminate) homosexuality with superficiality and imposture (Sherry 2007); the imposture (or delusion) of

class status was added into the mix. As early as 1949, Vidal drew in a letter on the repertoire of homophobic, or effeminophobic, tropes to dismiss Capote's literary ability, writing that instead of a prose style, Capote has 'a peculiar interior decorator's way . . . of constructing a Saks Fifth Avenue window and calling it a novel' (Kaplan 1999, p. 292).

If Vidal's association of Capote's style with decorativeness works simultaneously to slur Capote as an effeminate homosexual and to mark his work as meretricious, he nevertheless got at something accurate about Capote's prose, which in its early manifestations at least, was bejewelled and distinctive. By contrast, Vidal's prose, at least up until the publication of his 1950 novel *The Judgement of Paris*, was flat and journalistic – hence Capote's association of Vidal with the *Daily News*, or the novelist Christopher Isherwood's comment in a letter that *The City and the Pillar* was done in the style of the *Saturday Evening Post* (Harker 2013, p. 23). As a novelist, Vidal only occasionally indulged his talent for epigrammatic wit in comic works such as *The Judgement of Paris* (1950) and *Myra Breckenridge* (1968), continuing to adopt his undistinctive style for his many historical novels. Capote remarked of Vidal that, except for *Myra Breckenridge*, Vidal never found his voice as a novelist: 'Anybody could have written *Julian* or *Burr*' (Clarke 1988, p. 141). The flatness of most of Vidal's novels contrasts with the coruscation and clarity of his essays – to his displeasure, he was often regarded as a more accomplished essayist than a novelist.

The contrasting prose styles of Vidal and Capote dovetailed with the two writers' differing celebrity embodiments of homosexuality. In a 1993 interview with Andrew Kopkind, responding to a question about how his 'sexual identity' has 'informed what he writes', Vidal stated:

It certainly gave direction to my fury. And out of that I took quite a strong, plain style that was absolutely – if not on target, it was unmistakable in its energy and anger. I had been very much in danger, as my whole generation was, of being School of Henry James, and the beauty of higher sensibility. And suddenly something like James M. Cain took over the controls.

(Kopkind 1993, p. 19)

Vidal here identifies his 'strong, plain style' as an appropriate vehicle for the 'energy and anger' produced by homophobia, aligning himself with the supposedly hard-hitting, masculine prose of the hardboiled crime writer James M. Cain rather than the (implicitly effeminate) ultra-refinement of Henry James. The comparison of prose styles that Vidal sets up here is an interestingly strategic departure from his usual position, for Vidal frequently recorded his appreciation of James, and generally showed little appreciation for the plain style of writers like Cain, whom he elsewhere once referred to as 'corny' (1993, p. 457).

The antihomophobic stance that Vidal emphasizes in his response to Kopkind was, however, limited by his effeminophobia; his promotion of homosexuality generally took the form of an emphasis on homosexuality's compatibility with normative masculinity. In a recent revisionist history of mid-twentieth-century male homosexuality in America, Barry Reay places

Vidal's antipathy towards Capote in the context of a pervasive postwar effeminophobia that was prosecuted as enthusiastically by 'manly' homosexual men as it was by the wider culture. Homosexuality and effeminacy were widely equated with one another so that, as Reay amply records, masculine men who had sex with men often did not think of themselves as 'queer' at all (Reay 2010). Reay notes of the original version of *The City and the Pillar* (Vidal extensively revised the novel in 1965) that the masculine hero Jim Willard 'continually pits his same-sex desires against those of the effeminate fairies' he encounters in New York's gay subculture (2010, p. 174). The masculine homosexuality that the novel promotes is premised on an opposition to effeminacy and to camp; for somewhat in tension with Reay's claims about the relatively weak attachment of masculine same-sex-attracted men to homosexual identity in this period, *City* can be read as a prototypical coming-out novel in which, after much emotional turmoil, the protagonist accepts his identity as a gay man (Summers 1992). The 1948 version of the novel is in some ways *more* essentialist than its 1965 update, which reflected Vidal's conviction, evident in his writings from the early 1950s on, that humans are inherently bisexual and potentially capable of any sexual act (Altman 2005, p. 139). Throughout his post-*City and the Pillar* career, Vidal continually returned to the idea that 'there is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo- or heterosexual acts' (1999, p. 138).

For Vidal, effeminate homosexuals like Capote were cultural distortions that arise out of the ghettoization of authentic human (bi)sexuality. Also in his 1993 interview with Kopkind, Vidal stated that 'Fag New York back in the forties and fifties was very chi-chi, and Truman Capote was the sort of icon of that world - with which I had absolutely no connection at all and rather disliked' (Kopkind 1993, p. 17). Vidal stresses his alienation from New York's homosexual subculture via yet another insult of Capote; but the passion and frequency with which Vidal voiced such repudiations of Capote, and of effeminacy, indicates how much his alienation from the collective category of gay identity was shadowed by a sense of association. Also in the Kopkind interview, Vidal states, 'All my life there was a category to which I was assigned. Well, I don't feel like I belong in any category' (Kopkind 1993, p. 19). In the very act of defiantly asserting his sense of his singularity, Vidal testifies to the way in which that felt singularity was constantly compromised by the 'assignments' of the twentieth-century system of sexual identity. Vidal, then, was caught up in a system of sexual categorization that he attempted to resist.

Camp competitiveness

On one level, the open rivalry of Vidal and Capote can in part be understood as exemplifying the masculinist approach to American literary fame embodied by Ernest Hemingway and continued by male writers of the immediate postwar generation - most hyperbolically by Norman Mailer,

whose collection of essays and stories *Advertisements for Myself* (1958) contained a section titled 'Evaluations - Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room', an often brutal series of critiques of his (exclusively male) literary rivals (Vidal and Capote were both critiqued, though in relatively anodyne terms) (Mailer 1992, pp. 463-473). While Mailer's macho bluster, modelled on the style of his father figure Hemingway, is extreme, it indicates the general anxiety that mid-twentieth-century American male writers felt about the masculinity of their enterprise in a culture that 'feminiz[ed] the literary' (Lentricchia 1988, p. 168).

But if Capote and Vidal's pugnacity marked them as in some ways typical of self-styled serious male writers of the postwar period, their performance of that pugnacity differed signally from the macho style of others. While Hemingway and Mailer (again to take the most extreme examples of this style) staked their claims to literary fame through both literal and metaphorical pugilism, the main weapon used by both Capote and Vidal in their feud, at least up to the time of Vidal's suit, was the camp putdown, something hardly, of course, confined to gay men, but something that came in the twentieth century to be understood as a defining characteristic of metropolitan homosexual culture. We can compare here the pugilistic Mailer's recourse to physical violence in 1977 in *his* dispute with Vidal and Vidal's response to being punched by him: while still flat on the floor, Vidal is supposed to have said, 'Once again, words fail Norman' (Thomas 2012). Vidal remarked in a letter of 1948, 'Someone might one day remark in print that

American writers are the most highly competitive and mutually antagonistic in the world' (Kaplan 1999, p. 276). But for Vidal and Capote that competitiveness was witty and camp. Not for them the lugubrious tone of Mailer's accounts of his conflicted relations with his dead father figure Hemingway and other heterosexual male writers, which are devoid of levity and only unintentionally funny.

Arguing for the *undistinctiveness* of homosexuality – its compatibility with normal masculinity – Vidal was alarmed and angered by the effeminate Capote's prominence as a representative of same-sex desire. But his expression of that alarm and anger (mostly) took the form of camp witticisms. In the very act of attacking Capote's effeminate homosexuality, Vidal drew on camp rhetorical and performative strategies that were effeminately coded. Not only could Vidal not escape the assignation of homosexual identity, then; his own favoured argumentative strategies caught him up in the effeminacy that American culture generally associated with homosexuality.

Sianne Ngai describes how competition between individuals of non-privileged identities, such as women and African Americans, may become an object of 'profit and amusement' for privileged audiences, as in the trivializing reduction of public conflict between women to the 'catfight' (Ngai 2006, pp. 113-114). As David Halperin has similarly argued, while conflict between straight men is accorded the utmost seriousness in our culture and is the material of such sanctioned art forms as tragedy, conflict between women is the stuff of low forms such as melodrama. By extension, because they

occupy a feminized position within the social order, conflict between gay men also lacks the dignity and pathos of conflict between straight men. Indeed, gay men in general have not historically been accorded seriousness (Halperin 2012). This cultural assumption is acerbically summed up by Vidal in a comment he made in a preface to a 1994 reissue of *The City and the Pillar*:

There were those who found the original ending [in which the gay protagonist murdered his ex-lover] “melodramatic”. When I reminded one critic that it is the nature of a romantic tragedy to end in death, I was told that so sordid a story about fags could never be considered tragic, unlike, let us say, a poignant tale of doomed love between a pair of mentally challenged teenage “heteros” in old Verona. (Vidal 1994, pp. 5-6)

For many commentators on gay culture, it is the exclusion of gay men from seriousness that entails the recourse to camp. Halperin, for instance, argues that gay male camp is ‘an instinctive response’ to the patriarchal ‘system of gender, power and genre’ and ‘a strategy for resisting the values enshrined in it’ (2012, p. 283). And in a much earlier discussion of camp, from 1978, Jack Babuscio makes much the same point, arguing that camp is a primary expression of a ‘gay sensibility’ that arises ‘from the fact of social oppression’ (1999, p. 118). Camp humour for Babuscio is ‘a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity’ (1999, p. 126). For both these commentators camp is primarily positioned as a mode of perception that finds not simply enjoyment, but also the possibility of a gay-affirmative politics, in the apprehension in cultural products of

'failed seriousness', to use Susan Sontag's phrase from her classic 1964 essay 'Notes on Camp' (Sontag 1966, p. 287).

Both Halperin and Babuscio privilege camp as a mode of perception rather than a mode of effeminate social performance – the other usual understanding of what camp is. Michael Trask argues that this privileging of camp perception rather than performance is typical of post-gay liberation commentary that wants to position camp as 'progressive'. On the other hand, gay commentators who see camp as form of self-oppression rather than liberatory tend to de-emphasize camp as perception and to stress camp as performance – precisely because camp as performance, in Babuscio's words, 'runs the risk of being considered not serious at all' (Trask 2013, pp. 11-12, Babuscio 1999, p. 128). For commentators such as Halperin and Babuscio, camp needs to maintain a strong connection to the serious for it to have a political effect. Babuscio argues that:

camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, allows us to witness "serious" issues with temporary detachment, so that only later . . . are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The "serious" is in fact crucial to camp. (1999, p. 128)

And Halperin contends that the 'anti-social politics' of camp consists in 'an undoing of the serious – or whatever qualifies as such' (2012, p. 194). Camp's enfolding of the serious within the humorous is brought out in Halperin's eloquent discussion of camp representations of suffering, which work '*to drain suffering of the pain that it also does not deny*' (2012, p. 188; emphasis Halperin's).

Camp representations, Halperin observes, may be 'at once parodic and real' (2012, p. 179); similarly, Babsucio notes, they combine 'fun and earnestness' (1999, p. 128).

The Vidal/Capote feud, I suggest, combined the serious and the humorous in a way that was typical of camp. The feud was founded on or at least fed by the two writers' difference over approaches to literature and their respective literary achievement, matters treated by American culture with great seriousness in the 1940s and 1950s. However, we should not miss the way in which the feud was simultaneously a mode of self-conscious performance and source of amusement for both men. Clarke writes that when Vidal sued Capote, the feud was transformed from an amusing stoush into something 'extremely nasty' (1988, p. 480). But the feud actually *combined* the amusing and the nasty, even once the participants got lawyered up. Picking up on the affective complexity of the libel suit, Anthony Haden-Guest wrote in the *New York* cover story that it was 'at once extremely funny and rather sad' (1979, p. 55). Catty humour rippled through the two writers' depositions. Capote deliberately mangled the title of Vidal's first novel *Williwaw*, calling it *Willie Wonka*. And asked what happened on the occasion of his last meeting with Capote, which took place at a cocktail party, Vidal said 'I sat on him . . . I didn't have my glasses on and I sat down on what I thought was a stool and it was Capote'. In reply to the lawyer's question 'Where was Capote sitting at the time you sat on him?', Vidal replied, 'On a smaller stool' (Clarke, p. 480).

The (un)serious business of literary celebrity

In its early references to artistic differences, the feud demonstrated the divergence of twentieth-century writer-celebrities from other kinds of mass culture celebrity. As Loren Glass writes in his book on American literary celebrity, theories of celebrity usually focus on 'corporate culture industries', such as film, TV, and popular music, 'in which the individual agency behind the celebrity persona is clearly vitiated, if not irrelevant' (2004, p. 3). Such theories cannot account for the status of literary celebrities, who sustain 'an ethos of individual creative production over and against the rise of [the] culture industries in which they nevertheless have to participate' (Glass 2004, p. 4). As with the modernist literary celebrities Glass examines, 'individual authorial consciousness' was, to begin with, an important element of the celebrity careers of both Vidal and Capote. The media interest in their feud, and in other literary feuds of the postwar period, such as that between Vidal and Mailer, or Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman, attested to the potency of a distinctively *literary* celebrity up to the 1970s. While it's true that media attention to the *writing* rather than the *personalities* of these celebrities was seldom prominent in coverage of their feuds, that coverage nevertheless depended on the prestige of literature and on a sense, however vague, of differences in literary approach between the various combatants.¹

Glass makes a case that Mailer is 'the last celebrity author', arguing that Mailer 'ballasted his mass cultural fame in a model of masculine modernist genius that was, by the post-World War II era, clearly residual'

(2004, p. 17). The 'cultural authority' of masculinist literary celebrity, which arose with mass culture and modernism, Glass argues, is 'greatly diminished in scale and scope' in the era after second-wave feminism and postmodernism (2004, p. 197). As evidence, Glass points to the 'relative modesty' of the celebrity of Don DeLillo (2004, p. 197), nominated by Joe Moran as one of the contemporary 'star authors' in his book-length study of that name (Moran 2000). While conceding that today celebrity 'remains a crucial ingredient in the marketing of books' (Glass 2004 p. 199), Glass contends that literary celebrity, along with publishing itself, has been absorbed into the generality of postmodern cultural production, characterized by the interpenetration of the economic and artistic forces. The authority once wielded by individual authorial consciousness and by the idea of 'the literary' no longer obtains.

Although the outline of Glass's argument is compelling, one might want to nuance it somewhat at the level of historical detail. Indeed in a recent essay on the present-day celebrity of Philip Roth, Glass himself has recently noted that his earlier position was 'premature' (Glass 2014, p. 224). With regard to the Vidal/Capote feud in particular, I would argue that their exchanges demonstrated the continuing, but decreasing, importance of individual authorial consciousness from the 1940s to the 1970s, as matters of literary style and merit were displaced as objects of public attention by their entertaining media personalities.

In a close analysis of the hostile exchanges between Vidal and Mailer on an episode of *The Dick Cavett Show* from 1971, Marcie Frank observes that

'if it is difficult to imagine a literary battle supplying such a vibrant piece of theater today, this is less because TV has changed than because literary rivalry has barely any cultural consequences' (2005, p. 41). The episode began with a tongue-in-cheek monologue from Cavett that challenged the critical commonplace that TV 'lacks culture' by adducing several fictional examples that 'TV has figured in the thoughts and writings among literary professionals', including insulting references to Cavett himself by William F. Buckley, Jr. and Kate Millett (Frank 2005, p. 47). In a point that dovetails with Glass's argument, Frank states, 'Vidal and Mailer's display of literary rivalry on TV and Cavett's representation of literary rivalry *with* TV both suggest that what was at stake in this episode's almost zoological display of types of machismo was the diminishing literary, cultural, and political authority of the male novelist' (2005, p. 48). Vidal and Capote's feud similarly indicated this diminution of authority, as matters of literary achievement were increasingly sidelined by media-friendly *ad hominem* one-liners. But while the verbal combat of Mailer and Vidal on *The Dick Cavett Show* could perhaps convincingly come off as a display of different types of machismo, when Vidal was ranged against Capote the contest took on a camp flavour which stressed the deflation of serious, masculinist literary celebrity.

If Vidal and Capote's feud was founded on serious differences, it also exemplified the tendency of camp to 'dethrone the serious' at the expense of an obvious reference to it (Sontag 1966, p. 289). This tendency is perhaps, as Babuscio argues, more likely in camp performance, which 'runs the risk of

being considered not serious at all'. But the depletion of seriousness evident in Capote and Vidal's interchanges was also, I would suggest, an effect of a more general convergence between camp strategies and postmodern media culture. As Angela McRobbie argues, 'since the mid-1960s camp has . . . provided a momentum for the creation of postmodern culture, where the boundaries of high and low art are irrevocably blurred' (1994, p. 84).

Following on from camp, postmodern media culture tends towards a kind of ironic and unserious flattening, effecting what Sontag in her essay on camp called the 'equivalence of all objects' (1966, p. 289). If the Vidal/Capote feud remained in key ways serious for its participants, its prosecution through the media de-emphasized seriousness, presenting it as a camp spectacle. The quarrel between these two homosexually oriented celebrity writers became for a general audience an object of 'profit and amusement', to return to Ngai's phrase, that indicated both the unseriousness generally accorded to gay men and the growing trivialization of literary celebrity. Any gay-affirmative political effect that might have been conveyed in the appearance of these two openly homosexual writers on TV and in the press was compromised by the imperative of the sound bite.

In the late stages of his feud with Capote, Vidal, for all his attempts to evade association with the effeminacy, and indeed with gayness altogether, was caught up in public perceptions about the specificities of gay identity. Vidal found himself named by Radziwill as a 'fag', the damning epithet he was happy to liberally bestow on others during the postwar pre-liberation

decades. This moment of nomination echoed an earlier incident, from 1968, in which the right-wing pundit William Buckley intemperately named Vidal a 'queer' during a heated television debate. While this earlier incident may have ended 'the public invisibility of Vidal's sexual orientation' (Frank, p. 99), Vidal continued to resist public perceptions of his sexual identity. But with the Capote lawsuit, as we've seen, Vidal to an important extent admitted defeat, resigning himself to the public perception that both Capote and he were gossip queens. This is not to say that Vidal did not continue to proclaim his own seriousness or to assert his distance from homosexual identity – far from it. But, as the letter quoted earlier demonstrates, he seems to have accepted that such proclamations and assertions were largely futile in a media environment in which celebrity image could not, with any degree of certainty, be manipulated by the person behind the image.

By contrast with Vidal's resistances to sexual categorization, Capote embraced the persona of the fag in the aftermath of Radziwill's betrayal, going on Stanley Siegel's nationally broadcast TV show to dish the dirt on his former friend in an exaggerated camp southern drawl (Clarke 1988, p. 519). If Capote's celebrity image had been established as 'young, effeminate and strange' in the mid-1940s – an image that 'both broadcast [his] gay identity and disguised its particulars with a general outrageousness that played to a broad audience' (Solomon 2008, p. 296) – now, in the post-liberation era, Capote exploited the performative possibilities of open gayness (more accurately, perhaps, open fagginess) in order to take his revenge against

Radziwill. What Capote called his 'crazy queen' act was carefully rehearsed, though its execution did not fulfil his ambition that the Siegel broadcast would be 'one of the great comic classics of all time' (Clarke 1988, p. 519). 'I'll tell you something about fags, especially Southern fags', Capote announced to Siegel and the audience. 'We is mean. A Southern fag is meaner than the meanest Southern rattler you ever met . . . I know that Lee wouldn't want me to be tellin' none of this. But you know us Southern fags - we just can't keep our mouths shut'. Capote then began revealing secrets that he claimed Radziwill had confided to him about her love life and her jealousy of her sister Jackie Kennedy. Siegel, however, 'becoming increasingly nervous at the direction [Capote's] monologue was taking, interrupted, destroying the mood he had so carefully created and causing his speech to sputter to a depressing conclusion' (Clarke 1988, p. 520). In contrast to Vidal, who vacillated between protest at and resignation to the public perceptions of his homosexually coded lack of seriousness, Capote here attempted to deploy his unserious fag image in order to revenge himself against Radziwill. But when his camp performance became *too* nasty for national TV, it was terminated. Like Vidal, Capote could not fully manage his own celebrity persona.

Conclusion

The Vidal/Capote feud can be understood as indicating a turning point in the history of literary celebrity. The fact that it could furnish the cover of a mass-marketed magazine like *New York* testifies to the still-current power of literary

celebrity at the end of the 1970s. Yet the presentation of the feud as a humorous spectacle – epitomized by its literal transformation on the *New York* cover into a cartoon – also testifies to the way literary celebrity was rapidly losing cultural authority and being absorbed into the postmodern culture business. Noting a reference to Vidal as a guest on a TV talk-show that is hijacked by the crazed fan of the talk-show host in Martin Scorsese’s film *The King of Comedy* (1982), Frank argues that Vidal ‘comes to be a figure not only on, but also for TV’. By 1982, so thoroughly has Vidal been absorbed into the televisual apparatus, he can represent in Scorsese’s film ‘“normal” TV on the verge of interruption’ (Frank 2005, p. 48). A similar process of absorption is observable in Capote’s career. If Capote’s exaggerated performance as a ‘Southern fag’ on the Sam Siegel show in 1979 indicated the assimilation of his personality to the electronic media, the apotheosis of this process had perhaps been reached three years earlier, when Capote played (badly) a fictionalized version of himself in the comedy film *Murder by Death* (1976) (Clarke 1988, pp. 474-476).

The Vidal/Capote feud was founded in a heartfelt competition over literary achievement and it continued to involve serious issues to do with difference of literary approach. This difference was inflected by difference over homosexual identity – over the manifestation of homosexuality as masculine or effeminate. From the 1940s up to the 1960s, the two writer’s contrary embodiments of homosexuality informed the feud inexplicitly but powerfully. After the advent of gay liberation in the early 1970s, the

difference over homosexuality became more or less explicit, particularly in Vidal's relentless attacks on Capote's effeminacy. Less interested in sexual politics than Vidal, and therefore less inclined to engage in debates over sexual identity, Capote nonetheless through his celebrity effeminacy continued to act as a foil to the image of same-sex orientation as 'natural', normative, and serious that Vidal strove to promote. Despite this effort, Vidal, through his own camp approach to the feud, was ultimately connected to the stereotype of effeminate gay identity and its collateral lack of seriousness. If Capote for his part embraced the unserious and effeminate associations of gayness, both writers saw the matter of their own literary craft, which both had begun at least by regarding very seriously, eclipsed by their own postmodern celebrity status - a status facilitated by the camp performativity that both writers adopted.

¹ The Hellmann/McCarthy feud is perhaps an exception to the inattention to the writing of the participants in the famous postwar literary feuds, as it pivoted on McCarthy's extravagant claim that '[e]very word [Hellmann] writes is a lie, including "and" and "the"' (cited in [Kahan 2013](#), p. 190).

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