

# Uncovering Same-Sex Desire in Fin-de-siècle Advertising

Mitchell, Rebecca N.

DOI:

[10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Mitchell, RN 2024, 'Uncovering Same-Sex Desire in Fin-de-siècle Advertising', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 46, 2299656, pp. 227-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

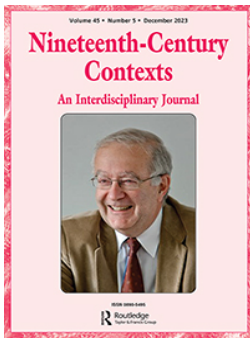
Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



# Nineteenth-Century Contexts

## An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/gncc20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/gncc20)

## Uncovering same-sex desire in fin-de-siècle advertising

Rebecca N. Mitchell

To cite this article: Rebecca N. Mitchell (12 Feb 2024): Uncovering same-sex desire in fin-de-siècle advertising, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, DOI: [10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2024.2299656>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 12 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 29



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Uncovering same-sex desire in fin-de-siècle advertising

Rebecca N. Mitchell

Department of English Literature, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

In a fin-de-siècle trade card ([Figure 1](#)), a blond woman sits in a bathtub, her slippers and clothes tossed at the foot of the tub, her bare knees peeking out of its rim, and her face turned towards the viewer with a sly smile. The card has a flap that folds down from the center, at the line of the bathtub rim, tantalizing viewers with the prospect of the nudity that will be revealed when the card is unfolded. Alas, opening the card shows the woman to be not nude at all: her ostensibly bare knees turn out to be the bald heads of two jolly men, delighted at the sight of her fully clothed self and the tray of drinks that she carries ([Figure 2](#)).

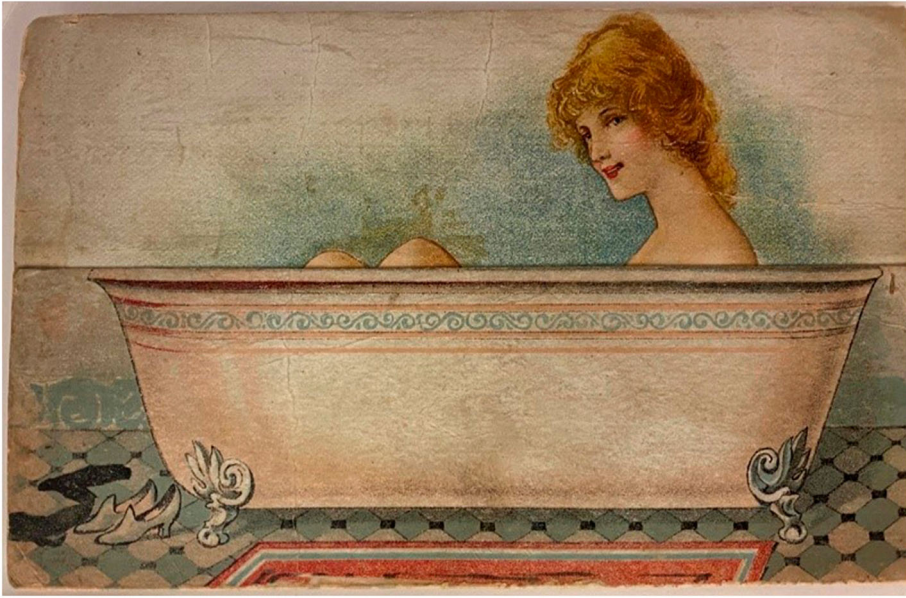
Narratively, the reveal might make little sense, but narrative or contextual discontinuity is one consequence of the development of the trade card form. From the 1860s, as advances of chromolithography increased the quality and decreased the cost of multicolor printing, trade cards quickly became one of the most important, most visible methods of advertising in America. By the 1870s and 1880s, they were, as Margaret Hale writes, “produced by the hundreds of thousands and inserted into packages at the factory, handed out by retailers with every sale, or mailed to prospective customers” (2000, 683) ensuring their ubiquity both in the marketplace and the domestic space. In addition to bespoke cards designed for individual companies or products, printers created generic cards known as “blanks,” which could be customized locally with text on the front or back, allowing for a much broader adoption at a lower price point. Two archival examples of the woman-in-bathtub card illustrate this practice.<sup>1</sup> One copy was imprinted for the Lackawana House of Hoboken, NJ, where, on the back of the card, customers were instructed to “come in quietly, drink moderately, depart soberly, and call again,” and where customers could purchase drinks like those on the tray held by the bather. But another copy of the same card advertises the “tailoring department” of “The Hub” department store in Red Lion, Pennsylvania, a business that seems to have little direct connection with the bathtub lady or her drinking companions. Designed as a pliable form, trade cards could from the start be used for purposes that stretch their most obvious, original applications.

As a result of the need for broad use, stock card illustrations often tended toward the anodyne, with, as Stephen L. W. Greene notes, no direct connection to the item being sold: “Flower bouquets, hirsute organ grinders, chicks hatching from eggs, kids teasing

---

**CONTACT** Rebecca N. Mitchell  [r.n.mitchell@bham.ac.uk](mailto:r.n.mitchell@bham.ac.uk)

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.



**Figure 1.** Closed American Trade Card, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.* All images from the Last Collection are the author's photographs and are used with permission.



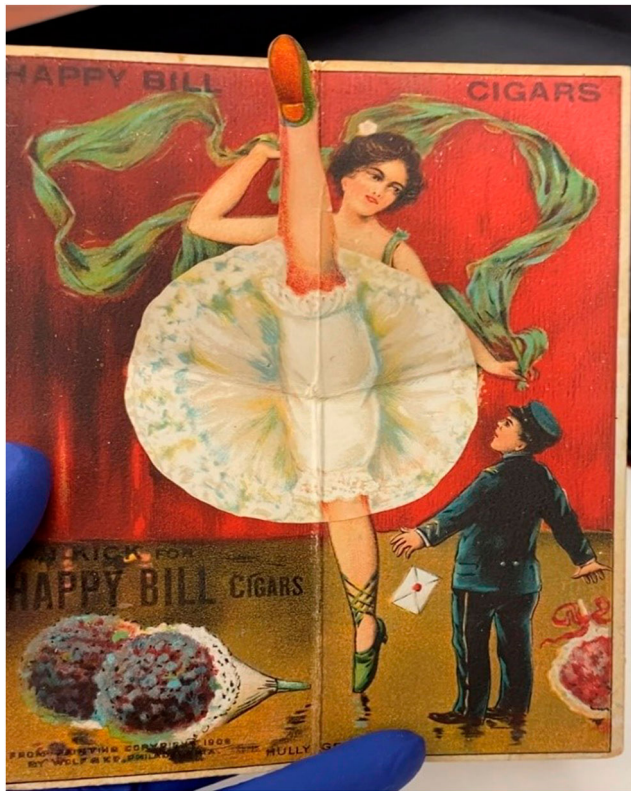
**Figure 2.** Opened American Trade Card, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*



**Figure 3.** “Happy Bill” American Trade Card, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

kittens with a mouse on a string – the subject matter was fertile ground for the artist unrestrained by the need to depict the product itself in a suitable context” (1992, 64). These motifs will be familiar to anyone who has seen popular printed works from the period, be they trade cards, greeting cards, or other ephemera. In a commercial landscape saturated with such banal imagery, there was a premium on novelty, and one route to piquing consumer interest was through shapes outside of the standard three-by-five inch rectangle. Intricate die-cutting allowed for unique designs as well as the addition of folds or flaps that could be manipulated; known as “movable” or “mechanical” cards, those with such innovations allow for surprise reveals easily deployed for humorous ends. Novel though they are, as a subset of trade cards they – and their visual potential – remain understudied.<sup>2</sup>

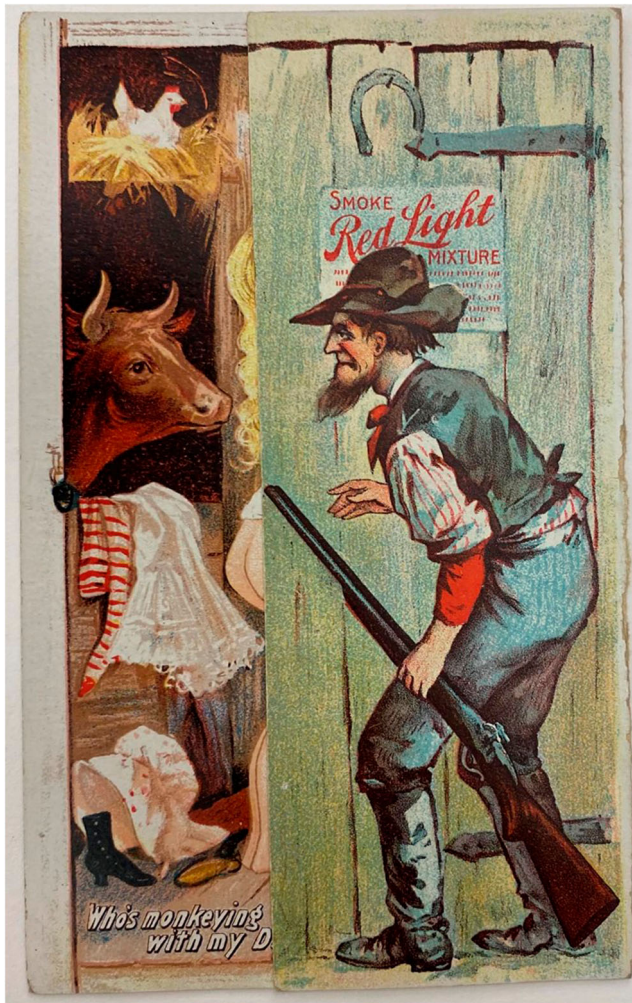
With its suggestion of something hidden to be uncovered, the “movable” form is particularly well suited to erotically charged illustration, enticing a viewer with the suggestion of a sexually explicit revelation, however unjustified by context or by the product being advertised. Many imply sex one way or another, promising that lifting a paper



**Figure 4.** “Happy Bill” American Trade Card, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

flap or unfolding the card would reveal a scantily clad woman or a couple in flagrante. In some cases, the cards do cleverly use movement to give viewers exactly what would be the expected resolution. Such is the case of “Happy Bill Cigars,” a “kicker” card that upon unfolding reveals a can-can dancer whose skirts are fully lifted with her kicking leg (Figures 3 and 4). Yet not all cards make good on their promises, and comically thwarting such expectations, as in the case of the bathtub card, is also standard, ensuring that while the boundaries of decorum are toyed with, they are only rarely overtly or explicitly crossed. It is precisely this play of expectation and foiled revelation that gives the trade card its commercial and potential erotic charge, and it is the stability of sexual expectation that allows for these cards to be used as a means of depicting varying modes of desire. “Happy Bill Cigars” and the bathtub card assume a straight viewer, but because those assumptions are so prevalent as to become a reliable standard, the vagaries of the form afford the depiction of same-sex desire, often used to undercut heteronormative expectations.

This article turns to this popular source of fin-de-siècle visual and popular culture, mass-market trade cards, to consider the ways they could play fast and loose with rigid gender expectations and sexual mores, often to humorous ends, while taking seriously the potential of faddish print media to represent same-sex desire in novel ways. In the rest of this article, I will consider a number of trade cards that use their form both to frustrate and reward sexually charged expectations, especially via the



**Figure 5.** Closed “Day & Night” Tobacco advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

depiction of what can be readable as same-sex desire. Safely encoded in the visual vocabulary of advertising, the cards depend on heteronormative expectations only to upend them, offering an iconographic punchline but also a mass-produced depiction of (potentially) queer intimacy.

Recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of the visibility of nineteenth-century queer culture, by, for example, demonstrating that readable signs of sexual alterity existed far earlier than generally agreed. Dominic Janes argues that fin-de-siècle figures including Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater were the “inheritors rather than the initiators” of the iconography of sexual dissidence (2016, 234). As Jane notes, and in accordance with the seminal work of Dennis Denisoff (2006), parody, satire, and other modes of comic production could slyly deploy humor as a means of covering the depiction of all manner of seemingly transgressive behaviors or desires.



**Figure 6.** Opened “Day & Night” Tobacco advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

My concern here is less about the nature of sexual desire or identity than about the possibilities for visual depiction available in this form of mass market advertisement.<sup>3</sup> As histories of advertising note, focusing intentionally on a gay and lesbian audience is seen as a relatively late development in the history of marketing, a focus made possible only once the LGBTQ market share was both identifiable and potentially profitable.<sup>4</sup> Uncovering earlier examples suggests not that companies were necessarily attempting to reach an explicitly queer audience, but rather that the form allowed for such a volume of images that those which could be read as depicting same-sex desire could easily circulate. And the form and circulation of the trade cards made this possible in fin-de-siecle print culture, facilitating a number of ways to same-sex desire evident: some do so by using it as a comic undercutting of heteronormative expectation, some engage with the work of contemporary artists, and others directly depict the desiring and desirable male body. That these suggestions can be rebuffed is precisely the point:





**Figure 7.** Closed American advertising card. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

plausible deniability allows such interest to manifest. These might not have been regarded in their own time as depictions of same-sex desire, but they are nevertheless mainstream instantiations of men gazing desirously at other men, or depictions of the desirable male body on display for the viewer. I will first consider a few additional examples engaging heterosexual desire before turning to those cards that create a space for other modes.

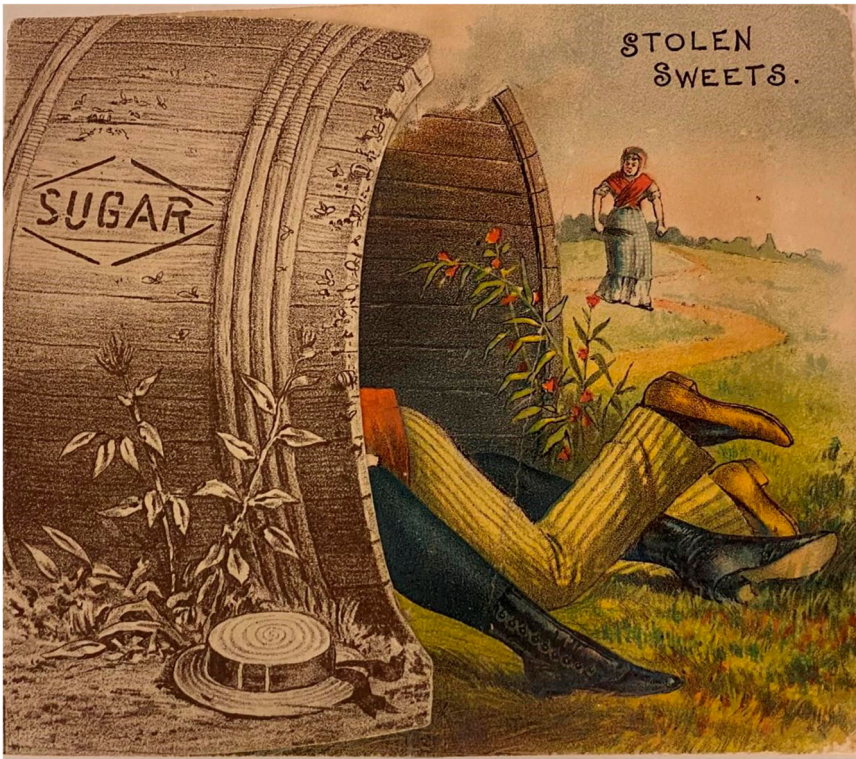
Moveable cards often reveal the male body as the punchline of a sight gag: in one sense, this is what happens in the bathtub card, where men's bald heads are revealed instead of a woman's bare legs. This kind of visual misdirection is the source of countless jokes. A strangely similar visual strategy is at work in a "Day and Night" tobacco card (Figure 5). Here, a farmer with ready gun seems about to pounce on whomever is "Mon-ekying with my D[...]", with the remainder of the final word covered by the closed flap. Perhaps viewers are meant to think the "D" begins "daughter," since a pile of discarded women's clothing is visible inside the barn: striped stockings, petticoat or bloomers, bonnet, boots, and what appears to be the flowing blond ponytail, and bare backside and calves of a young woman. Upon opening the flap, though, viewers are greeted instead with the body of a fully clothed, pipe-smoking boy, whose back-turned elbows



**Figure 8.** Opened American advertising card. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

were readable previously as a young woman's buttocks (Figure 6). "D[...]" is revealed to be "Day to Night Tobacco," being enjoyed, one supposes, by the boy. To offer another example, in a closed trade card (Figure 7), a young woman seems to be scandalously showing her stocking-covered leg to an elderly farmer. Yet when opened, boy in knee breeches (Figure 8).

This subset of sexually provocative advertising trade card, as demonstrated in these examples, earns its comic punchline through the thwarting of heteronormative expectation and substitution of an ostensibly sexually undesirable body (old bald men, young farmer's son) for the anticipated sexually desirable one (nude or sexually provocative woman). The form allows for other possibilities, and the relative security of plausible deniability is afforded precisely because of the ubiquity of the joke in this form: a nude woman turns out not to be a nude woman at all, but rather her opposite (in so far as normative heterosexual desirability goes) – the clothed boy or man. Yet even



**Figure 9.** Closed "Stolen Sweets" advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*



**Figure 10.** Opened "Stolen Sweets" advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*



**Figure 11.** Closed “Egyptian King Cigarettes” advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

here, there is the possibility for alternative readings, with both “Day to Night” and the former card feature an adolescent boy smoking, suggesting the homoerotic subtext of that act.

That potentially homoerotic subtext is foregrounded in “Stolen Sweets” (Figure 9). One of several cards that suggest from the outset the coupling of a man and woman. It frames the intertwined legs of two figures, apparently a man (clad in striped trousers and brown leather shoes) and a woman (wearing black stockings and form-fitting leather boots) who seem to be canoodling in a large sugar barrel, a woman in the distance looking on in consternation. Opening the card, though, it becomes clear that inside the barrel are not a man and woman but rather two adolescent boys joined by a third boy looking on (Figure 10). In one sense, the expected reveal is innocent, certainly not the sexually entangled couple implied by the legs alone. But in another sense, unlike



**Figure 12.** Opened “Egyptian King Cigarettes” advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers*, etc.

the previous cards discussed, “Stolen Sweets” does depict two persons entangled, doing something that would likely also draw their mothers’ disapproval: sharing a cigarette. That encounter – faces inches apart, connected by the lit ends of the cigarettes in each of their mouths – is a trope repeated in a number of other cards that raise the visual stakes of this kind of joke.

Two turn-of-the-century cards advertising cigarettes extend this pose to adult men, employing beach umbrellas instead of a barrel as the means of cover. A 1901 Kings Egyptian cigarette card features two pairs of legs, like “Stolen Sweets” suggesting a man and woman together, one clothed, the other in bare legs (Figure 11). Yet opening the card reveals instead two men, each gazing intently at the other’s face, their lighted cigarettes the single point of physical contact between them (Figure 12). It is, on the one hand, playing with the same upended expectation that many of the other cards engage. On the other hand, the tone of the card is quite different, lacking the jocular punch of the farmer’s card or even of the adolescents rollicking in “Stolen Sweets.” Here the point seems to be less about humor and more about the erotic charge that does remain intact even after the reveal.



**Figure 13.** Closed “Venus vs King Pin” advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

Another, similar example, makes patently clear that the viewer’s confusion in gendering the obscured figures is precisely the point. “Venus vs. King Pin,” another cigarette ad, plays with the names of the brands of cigarettes to suggest explicitly that the left pair of legs are those of “Venus” and the right are those of “King Pin” (Figures 13 and 14). As with the Egyptian cigarette ad, lifting the umbrella reveals not a man and a woman but two men, again face to face, lighted cigarettes passed between them. Perhaps the reveal offers a comic subterfuge of anticipation, but as was also the case of the Egyptian cigarettes, the card plays its reveal relatively straight. These cards lack the comic cast of the other cards addressed above; the degree of bawdy humor is lower here, and the depiction is of two men, sharing an intimate if even a non-overtly sensual encounter. These cards depict, in other words, a viable scene of same-sex desire and desirability, even if under the guise of the visual discourse of conventional advertisements, recalling



**Figure 14.** Opened “Venus vs King Pin” advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

Janes’s point with regard to earlier comic depictions of queer desire that “it was precisely in the nuanced play between sign and strategic absence of sign [ . . . ] that sexually subversive messages could be smuggled through” (2016, 86).

Fewer moveable cards deploy the scopophilic interest of women (as opposed to for women) in the same manner, but there are examples. A corset ad (Figures 15 and 16), for example, shows its hand with the initial caption, “The secret out at last why Mrs. Brown has such a perfect figure,” ensuring that the two women peeping through a keyhole are understood to be looking at a woman as opposed to spying on a man. Unfolding the card reveals a vignette of two women spying on a third, who is in the process of getting dressed (and who is looking at herself in the mirror).

The movable trade card, with its form that implies the value of what is hidden, is by no means the only venue for offering readable depictions of same-sex desire. Conventional flat cards vastly outnumbered folded or mechanical ones. Humorous movable cards depended on the stability of heterosexual desire for their punchlines and depended on the nature of the joke to facilitate the mainstream depiction of same-sex intimacy. Conventional unfolded cards likely depended on their omnipresence, and the fact that many



**Figure 15.** Closed Corset advertising card, American, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

companies produced several cards – often in collectible series – depicting people and scenes firmly within the bounds of convention, allowing the occasional outlier to be hidden in plain sight.

Some such cards draw on associations with iconography outside of the sphere of advertising. Again, the volume of production and disconnection from context allows for plausible deniability. A bowdlerization of French painter James Tissot’s canvas *The Confidence* (c. 1867) serves as the primary image for an advertising blank, in this instance (Figure 17) imprinted for Silver Star Baking Powder. As is standard, the source imagery is not identified, yet regardless of whether an American consumer in the late 1870s would recognize the original source material, what is recognizable is the image of two young, well-dressed women sharing a moment of intimacy.





**Figure 16.** Opened Corset advertising card, American, Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

A bespoke Ivory Soap advertisement (Figure 18) invokes the Ivory-affiliated idea of purity, with a white-clad cleric holding the bar of soap in place of something more explicitly holy. As with the Tissot-inspired card, the Ivory ad requires no outside knowledge for a viewer to recognize inherent beauty of the illustration or the male body at its center. But had a contemporary viewer recognized the visual milieu into which it enters, namely that of the religious imagery produced by mid-century queer painter Simeon Solomon, the homoeroticism of the image takes on a sharper focus. Perhaps the most likely visual parallel is Solomon's *Mysteries of Faith* (Figure 19), with a close-cropped, dark-haired priest clad all in white, face in semi-profile, holding, in the case of Solomon's painting, the Eucharist, or in the trade card, a bar of ivory soap. Deftly calling up the purity of the priest sanctifying a holy object, the ad equally calls up the homoerotic charge of Solomon's



Clay & Richmond, Buffalo, N.Y.

**SILVER STAR BAKING POWDER**

Pleases all housewives that take pride in producing nice pastry.

**Figure 17.** Baking powder advertising card, American. T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *FOOD Ingredients, Baking powder O-Z, by company; priJLC\_FOOD\_bin3.*



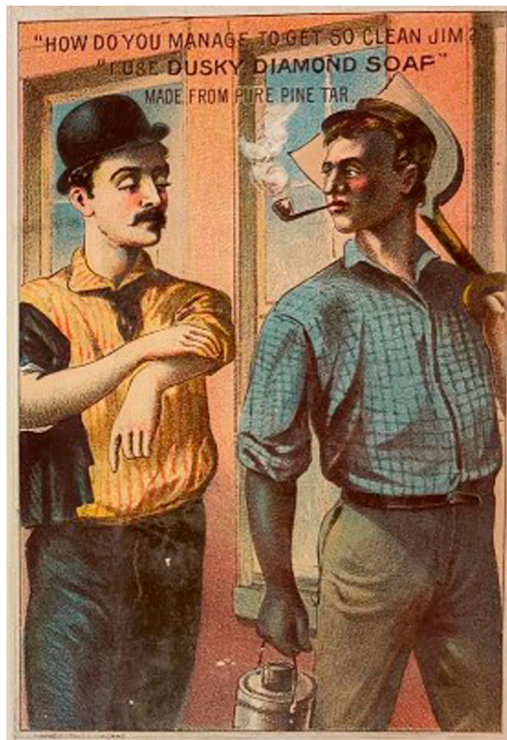
**Figure 18.** Ivory Soap advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *HOUSEHOLD GOODS, Cleaning Products Soap, P-R by Company, priJLC\_HHD\_bin12*.

painting: the beautiful male body, in an act of worship, itself available for worship to the viewer..<sup>5</sup>

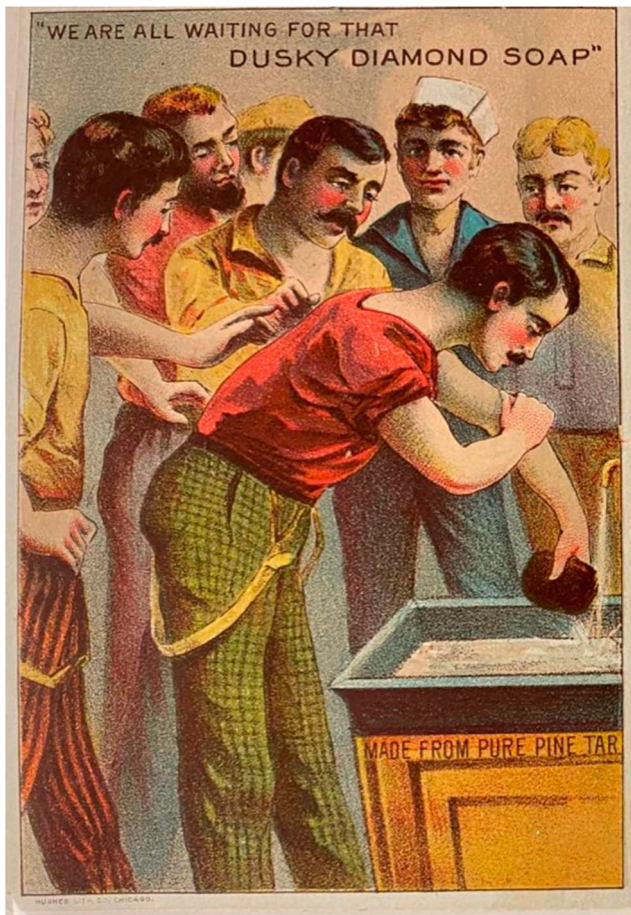
More overt than the Tissot and Ivory cards are two examples from Dusky Diamond soap that feature scenes of homosocial encounters freighted with the potential of erotic desire. In one, captioned “How do you manage to get so clean, Jim”, a still work-soiled man with a noticeably bulging crotch exchanges a knowing look with the freshly washed Jim, who is rolling up of his sleeves (Figure 20). Another card from apparently the same series, clearly drawn by the same hand, features a scene of group intimacy: a group of men encircle another who is washing himself, some touching his back, suspenders fallen down in an act of apparent disrobing, under a caption of anticipation: “We’re all waiting for that dusky diamond soap” (Figure 21). These depend not on confusion or upended gender expectations and there is no punchline. Closer in tone (and in style of



**Figure 19.** Simeon Solomon, *Mysteries of Faith* (c. 1870), oil on canvas, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, public domain image.



**Figure 20.** Dusky Diamond Soap advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *HOUSEHOLD GOODS, Cleaning Products, Soap K-L by Company, priJLC\_HHD\_bin10*.



**Figure 21.** Dusky Diamond Soap advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *HOUSEHOLD GOODS, Cleaning Products, Soap K-L by Company, priJLC\_HHD\_bin10.*

illustration) to the beach umbrella ads, these simply depict the bodies of healthy, working men, whose cleanliness – or future cleanliness – is to be awaited and admired.

If such ads smuggle the potential for same-sex desire through positive depictions of men sharing intimate encounters, other cards use the medium to subvert gender norms overtly, showing the tenuousness of readable masculinity and femininity. A Cohen & Golden clothing advertisement serves as a final example. It uses a die-cut card with two folded panels to offer a range of gendered riffs on clothing, attesting to the likelihood that ad readers could or would be willing to recognize – even to enjoy playfully – gender flexibility in advertisement. The first image viewers encounter via the card in its original state, features the top half of a man and the bottom half of a woman (Figure 22). The accompanying verse attempts to reassure viewers against any fears of sexual panic: “This man is much too vigorous, to be to-day’s new man, / The queerest thing in manhood, since existence first began, / That weak, insipid fellow, of whom there’s many rumors; / This merely shows how men would look, if dressed in ladies’ bloomers.”



**Figure 22.** Cohen Goldman & Co. advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

Stating that the “New Man” is queer, weak, insipid, and the subject of rumors, the ad notes that the man in the ad, despite his bloomed bottom half, is none of those things.

Opening and closing the flaps reveal three other combinations: a woman in bloomers (Figure 23), which draws faint praise, at least in comparison to the man in bloomers (“The gracefulness of contour, makes the picture much more true”) and an acknowledgment of the popularity of the style (“Her like upon the avenues, most every day we see”). The woman in men’s trousers – or more accurately, the top half of a woman and the

The Cheapest Pants House  
wishes to announce  
that

FIG. 3. In the present illustration, in men's pants the girl's arrayed,  
The change is really pleasing, and puts bloomers in the shade;  
All agree that she looks better: mother, brother, cousins, aunts,  
As a swell, dressed like her brother, in his Cohen, Goldman  
pants.



NO 2

NO 3

FIG. 2. Observe the suit of bloomers, as they're shown in number two;  
The gracefulness of contour, makes the picture much more true,  
Her like upon the avenues, most every day we see,  
But for further deviation, just turn to number three.

**Figure 23.** Cohen Goldman & Co. advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

lower half of a man (Figure 24), draws high praise, perhaps unsurprising given the fact that the ad is for a trouser company: “In the present illustration, in men’s pants the girl’s arrayed, / The change is really pleasing, and puts bloomers in the shade; / All agree that she looks better: mother, brother, cousins aunts, / As a swell, dressed like her brother, in his Cohen, Goldman pants.” Whatever transgressive qualities are evidenced in the image, the accompanying copy mitigates them by emphasizing the positive endorsement of the woman’s family, and the fact that the male body hers is interchanged with is in fact that of her brother. The final variation (Figure 25) restores the male top half to the trouser-wearing bottom half, and again the verse underscores the relief and delight of this restoration: “But, ‘The Thing,’ ‘The Proper Caper,’ ‘The Exact,’ ‘The Up to Date,’ / Is depicted here in number four.”

The Cheapest Pants House

wishes to announce

that

Their Fall productions

**Excel**

Anything they have ever offered to the trade.

**COHEN GOLDMAN & CO**

684 BROADWAY,

NEW YORK.

FIG. 3. In the present illustration, in men's pants the girl's arrayed,  
The change is really pleasing, and puts bloomers in the shade;  
All agree that she looks better; mother, brother, cousins, aunts,  
As a swell, dressed like her brother, in his Cohen, Goldman  
pants.



NO 3

NO 3

FIG. 4. But, "The Thing," "The Proper Caper," "The Exact," "The  
Up to Date,"  
Is depicted here in number four, and judges all must rate,  
That for fit, style and quality, that "a swell dresser" enchants,  
There's not on earth an equal to the Cohen, Goldman pants.

**Figure 24.** Cohen Goldman & Co. advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

If the Cohen & Goldman ad plays with gender dynamics only to end with a return to normative expectations around masculinity, it is worth recalling the King's Egyptian Cigarette card to dwell for a moment on its relative lack of any kind of invocation or assurance of normativity, or veneer of humor to allow for an acceptable "smuggling," to use Janes's term, of readable desire. Even lacking the cover of the "Venus versus King Pin" caption, that ad, and others like it, simply allows viewers to uncover a scene of same-sex presence, engagement, and desire by drawing on, and subtly subverting, a commonplace form.

Just as the cards' context was often distinct from the advertised product, store, or service being advertised, the card itself also soon became disconnected from its intended use as an advertisement, instead coming to be used in gift exchange, scrapbooking, and other interpersonal significance. Black argues, based on the proliferation of examples of





**Figure 25.** Cohen Goldman & Co. advertising card, American. Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Binder: *UNCATALOGUED Mechanical Kickers, etc.*

trade cards in late-nineteenth-century scrapbooks, that they were understood as “divorced from their commercial origins and instead inherently connected to personal expression and gift giving,” simultaneously co-opting some of the formal qualities of existing “sentimental” print objects, including greeting cards<sup>6</sup> and becoming an important part of “sentimental culture” in their own right (2017, 2). Given this common usage, one can imagine the way that the cards discussed here could function as affiliative markers: safely viewable by all eyes, these cards serve as examples of readable evidence of that queer desire, or of potential queer desire, that was present in fin-de-siècle advertising culture.

## Notes

1. Holding multiple copies of movable cards is common practice in collections, to limit the need for users to manipulate the delicate folds; this practice is particularly helpful in demonstrating the range of application of stock cards. All of the trade cards in this article are from the Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History at the Huntington Library in San Marino. I am grateful to the Huntington for a short-term fellowship that supported the research for this article, and especially to David Mihaly, Jay T. Last Curator of Graphic Arts and Social History, and Krystle Satrum, Assistant Curator, Jay T. Last Collection, Prints, Posters, and Ephemera, for their help. I am also indebted to the Leverhulme Trust for a Fellowship in support of this project.
2. Mechanical or movable cards are receiving little attention even in otherwise comprehensive accounts of the form. John Broom's *A History of Cigarette and Trade Cards: The Magic inside the Packet* (2018), for example, does not mention them.
3. Exploring such depictions in trade cards raises the issue of anachronism in labelling that has been so fruitfully explored by Simon Joyce in his recent *LGBT Victorians* (2022). He describes the difficult choice that "historical recovery work inevitably faces": "either proceed anachronistically, trying to find the best equivalence for historical actors among a broad range of modern identity concepts and labels, or respect the past's difference from the present [...] at the risk that what emerges is incoherent to modern readers even after its decoding" (4–5).
4. See, for example, Juliana Sivulka's *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, which argues that it was not until television series began featuring queer characters (e.g. NBC's *Will and Grace*, 1998–2006) that market outside of niche print opened up (2012, 388–390).
5. Thanks to Victoria Osbourne, Fine Arts Curator at the Birmingham Museums Trust, for suggesting this work of Solmon's.
6. "Advertisers," Black argues, "appropriated the visual and rhetorical cues from sentimental culture when they copied the physical qualities of antebellum greeting cards and calling cards for their trade-card designs" (2009, 298).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Rebecca N. Mitchell* is Professor of Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham (UK). She has published widely on Oscar Wilde, Victorian fashion, print culture, realism, and George Meredith. Her books include *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (Ohio State, 2011); the anniversary edition of George Meredith's *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside*, co-edited with Criscillia Benford (Yale, 2012); *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery*, co-authored with Joseph Bristow (Yale, 2015); and *Fashioning the Victorians: A Critical Sourcebook* (Bloomsbury 2018).

## References

- Black, Jennifer M. 2009. "Corporate Calling Cards: Advertising Trade Cards and Logos in the United States, 1876–1890." *The Journal of American Culture* 32 (4): 291–306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2009.00718.x>.
- Black, Jennifer M. 2017. "Exchange Cards: Advertising, Album Making, and the Commodification of Sentiment in the Gilded Age." *Winterthur Portfolio* 51 (1): 1–53. <https://doi.org/10.1086/693448>.

- Broom, John. 2018. *A History of Cigarette and Trade Cards: The Magic Inside the Packet*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword.
- Denisoff, Dennis. 2006. *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greene, Stephen L. W. 1992. "Advertising Trade Cards: Nineteenth-Century Showcases." In *Advertising and Popular Culture: Studies in Variety and Versatility*, edited by Richard Danna Sammy, 64–72. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press.
- Hale, Margaret. 2000. "The Nineteenth-Century American Trade Card." *Business History Review* 74 (winter): 683–688. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3116471>.
- Janes, Dominic. 2016. *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Joyce, Simon. 2022. *LGBT Victorians: Sexuality and Gender in the Nineteenth-Century Archives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sivulka, Juliana. 2012. 1998. *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*. London: Wandsworth Cengage.