

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sissy Boy, the Fat Ladies, and the Dykes *Queerness and/as Gender in* *Pee-wee's World*

In all the things I've read or heard about Pee-wee Herman, his shows, and his films, only two commentators even begin to consider the specifically queer gender dynamics centered around Pee-wee/Paul Reubens. Bryan Bruce, in "Pee Wee Herman: The Homosexual Subtext," is right on target when he says, "The most exciting aspect of Pee Wee Herman, so far, remains his role as vindicator of the sissies," adding elsewhere that Pee-wee tends to "undercut masculinity . . . by feminizing it."¹ "The Mail-Lady," the first section of Ian Balfour's "The Playhouse of the Signifier: Reading Pee-wee Herman," toys with, but never directly engages, the idea that Pee-wee's gay sexuality (and the queerness of other characters) might be spoken through gender. Consider this pair of quotations, which follow each other early in the article:

For Pee-wee's mail man is a "mail-lady," a phrase that—given the overdeterminations encoded by the sexual hijinks on the show—takes on an added resonance: the *male-lady*. And, indeed, the phrase the "mail-lady" can be switched into its converse, the *lady-male*, faster than one can change channels by remote.

It doesn't take very long to recognize the gay subtext, intertext, or just plain text of the Pee-wee episodes, most clearly legible in the figure of Jambi, the drag queen genie adorned with a turban, flaming red lipstick, and a single earring.²

Here and elsewhere, Balfour is on the verge of linking the show's gender destabilization with queerness (or is that linking the show's queerness to gender destabilization?), but he can't seem to bring himself to do it explicitly. To be fair, Balfour's reluctance probably arises from an attempt to avoid stereotypically aligning gayness with the feminine/effeminate and lesbianism with the masculine/butch. In any

case, after the first page, the word "gay" is dropped, and the "Mail-Lady" section opts for the suggestive, innuendolike approach to speaking homosexuality through heterocentrist notions of cross-gender identification that Balfour seems to wish to avoid:

He [Pee-wee] then perks up to advise the boys and girls that next time he will tell the story of the "part-time boy." The part-time boy is, of course, Pee-wee; and this phrase too has to be understood in more than one sense. Part-time *boy*, because Pee-wee is part-time boy and part-time *girl*, if only in his most hysterical and histrionic moments. But also *part-time boy* because the other part of the time Pee-wee is something like a man.³

Without a specifically gay cultural-historical context to clarify things here, Balfour's parallel between Pee-wee as a "hysterical and histrionic" girl and Pee-wee as "*something like a man*" can only be read as a reiteration of two heterosexist standards about gay men: (1) they are screaming queens/woman wannabes, and (2) they are less than/something other than "real" (read: heterosexual) men. Given this, it's no surprise that the only appearance of the word "gay" in the article is connected to Jambi ("the drag queen genie") and men wearing lipstick ("Jambi . . . is one of the few male characters on television to wear lipstick, and Pee-wee may be the only other one").⁴

Having said this, I still think Balfour's initially suggestive juxtaposition of gender (mail-lady/lady-male) and (homo)sexuality (implicitly lesbian/more explicitly gay) is an important one to work with in discussing Pee-wee and his texts. I will carry out this discussion within a particular queer context: that of the feminine gay man. Even more specifically, this reading of Pee-wee and his texts will be influenced by the positions of, and discourses surrounding, feminine gay men and boys growing up in white, heterosexual America in the 1950s and 1960s—a cultural and historical heritage Paul Reubens and thousands of gay men share.⁵

In this light, Pee-wee's queerness needs to be analyzed in relation to the then-popular understanding of homosexuality as always a case of gender inversion, where gender is patriarchally heterosexualized and the gay or lesbian is put in the cultural position of a substitute for (and an inferior imitation of) the opposite gender. Connected to this position is the cultural reinforcement of rigid gender roles that subordinated everything considered "womanly" and "feminine." But it is also important to recall that the articulation of Pee-wee's gender position as a sissy gay within 1950s and 1960s discourses is mediated

by, and negotiated within, queer gender discourses of the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ That is, in Pee-wee's world gender is often reconceptualized through queerness as much as queerness is expressed through traditional straight cross-gender positions.

In "The Cabinet of Dr. Pee-wee: Consumerism and Sexual Terror," Constance Penley points out that "the periods, styles and objects [of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*] are, of course, not arbitrarily chosen: they have been selected for parodic recycling because they have their origins in what must have been the childhood and adolescence of the 'real' Pee-wee Herman, the thirty-five-year-old Paul Reubens."⁷ I would add to this that the attitudes to gender and sexuality (and the relationship between the two) that Pee-wee and his texts express also "have their origins in what must have been the childhood and adolescence" of Reubens. The popular press has often called Pee-wee "thirty-five (or so) going on ten," and it is within this complex and often contradictory attempt to work alternately or simultaneously with(in) the past (childhood; the 1950s and 1960s; pre-Stonewall) and the present (adulthood; the 1980s and 1990s; post-Stonewall) that Reubens, through Pee-wee, expresses his "sissy boy" and feminine gay worldview. Given this postmodern time warp, it is often difficult to form clear-cut political readings for Reubens's queer deployment of gender in Pee-wee's universe. Frequently the most conventional codes of queerness as heterosexualized cross-gender identification will be juxtaposed or will coexist with more progressive queer reworkings of the masculine and the feminine.⁸

Of course, the possibility of reading the Pee-wee texts' presentation of queerness and/as gender in a camp register makes coming to an ideological bottom line even trickier. Penley finds that Reubens is relatively evenhanded in his uses of camp in order to have "subversive fun" with gender and sexuality: if Miss Yvonne becomes "the Burlesque Queen of camp theatre, her femininity exaggerated into a parody of itself," then Pee-wee's feminine gay persona is campily coded through his "mincing step, affected gestures, exaggerated speech, obvious makeup and extreme fastidiousness."⁹ If this is the case, then camp's impulse to "satirize and celebrate," which Penley points out, might bring us to wonder just what about gender and sexuality is being satirized or celebrated in Pee-wee's world—and why. If Miss Yvonne's character is a parody of a caricature, is Pee-wee's "mincing" fag the same? Or are they both celebrations of these (stereo)types? Perhaps the answer to these questions depends upon the gender and sexuality agendas of the camp reader, as well as the par-

ticular example of camp she/he is faced with. For example, I find it difficult to read Miss Yvonne's camp parody of conventional 1950s-1960s femininity in exactly the same way I interpret Pee-wee's camp comment on the codes of feminine gayness. While both satirize popular notions of gender and sexuality, Pee-wee's character also seems to function for many queer viewers as an affirmation of the look, behavior, and attitude of the feminine gay.

In "The Incredible Shrinking He[r]man: Male Regression, the Male Body, and Film," Tania Modleski places Pee-wee's camp within the context of postmodernism—and then condemns both camp and postmodernism for their attempts "to escape accountability by relying on the alibi of the figurative—indeed on the alibi of the alibi: nothing is what it seems or where it seems; nothing is taken seriously."¹⁰ Relating all this to our culture's tradition of regressive male "escapist fantasy—even if its function is to serve as a cover story for a hidden gay text," Modleski finds that "insofar as Pee-wee can 'become woman' and at the same time revile through comic exaggeration the very traits that constitute 'womanliness,' he reveals how the desire to appropriate and the need to denigrate can easily coexist in male attitudes towards femininity."¹¹ In first separating, then conflating, straight men and gay men in this section of her essay, Modleski does her otherwise provocative argument (as well as gay men) a disservice. Men may have misogyny in common, but gay men's misogyny, particularly that of feminine gay men, needs to be discussed with more attention to its specific psychological and cultural foundations and patterns.

Besides, as a gay character, Pee-wee less "becomes woman" than represents an expression of gay femininity, less "reviles . . . womanliness" as some sort of essential category than reviles traditional attitudes toward its cultural constructions and surfaces. In saying this, I don't want to suggest that all instances of gender representation and gender play in Pee-wee's world are free of misogyny. Nor do I want to suggest that because certain forms of gay misogyny might have different social and psychological roots than the misogyny of straight men, it is any more excusable.¹² What I do want to call for here in relation to the issue of misogyny in Pee-wee texts, and in other forms of gay camp (including drag/female impersonation), is a more careful consideration of the particular gay contexts in which this camp (postmodern or not) is produced, as well as the possibility of variant audience readings of these particular texts' uses of camp in relation to gender and sexuality.¹³

But aside from Bryan Bruce's article, most academic and popular writing about Pee-wee Herman has foregrounded gender concerns in a heterocentrist manner. That is, these articles implicitly set up straight men and straight women as the ultimate reference points for their analysis of gender because their authors don't seriously consider the possibility that the gayness, lesbianism, and bisexuality in Pee-wee's image and texts might be crucial to that destabilization of gender roles they're all so excited about. If anything, it is the queer tone and context of Pee-wee and his world that allow for, and encourage, most of the gender confusion and reconceptualization. When homosexuality does enter the discussion in these articles, it is usually in the form of questioning, or being suggestively vague about, Pee-wee's *exact* sexual orientation (anything to keep from acknowledging he is fundamentally a gay boy-man), or of acknowledging the character's and a text's gayness at one point only to render explicit gayness invisible again at another (the Balfour article), or to downplay its importance (the Penley article: "Perhaps too much has been made of the homosexual subtext in *Pee-wee's Playhouse*").¹⁴ Investigating how differences in sexualities are culturally gendered from childhood, and how, therefore, the gender play in Pee-wee's world is inextricably bound up in the play of queerness across its characters and texts seems not to be on most commentators' critical agendas.¹⁵

To return to an earlier point for the moment, while the Playhouse, its inhabitants, and its visitors attempt to recreate a 1950s-1960s sissy boy's perceptions and fantasies, we can't forget that Pee-wee is the 1980s creation of an adult gay man, Paul Reubens. This being the case, Pee-wee and other Reubens creations might also be considered against the backdrop of queer attitudes, politics, and styles that developed between the 1950s and the 1980s. As a feminine gay, Reubens might decide to have lots of athletic, traditionally masculine-looking men as Pee-wee's "friends": Tito, the lifeguard; Cowboy Curtis; Ricardo, the soccer player; Mickey, the weightlifting escaped convict; Captain Carl, the ship's skipper; a Marine Corps chorus.¹⁶ But if these men are coded as (stereo)typically butch in an "old-fashioned" gay way, they are simultaneously presented as soft and pretty (as gay "boy toys" or boyfriends).¹⁷ And while many of these men are erotically displayed as ethnic exotics, and therefore as regressively racist examples of "forbidden" sexual desires, when they speak and interact with Pee-wee they seem as friendly and familiar as the multiracial cast of men on *Sesame Street*.

Pee-wee's 1950s sissy boy can't, however, take direct erotic notice of these butch-looking men; so, as many feminine gay viewers have done (or have felt culturally compelled to do), he usually expresses his desire for them by using women as his erotic representatives. To this end, Reubens creates women characters—Miss Yvonne, especially, but also Mrs. Rene, Mrs. Steve, and Winnie the schoolteacher in *Big Top Pee-wee*—who can verbalize and act out Pee-wee's desires.¹⁸ Yet these women are (stereo)typed by certain excesses, which might be explained as part of an overdetermined coding of Pee-wee's/Reubens's hidden and projected gay desires. These marks of excess could also be the result of a sissy boy's/feminine gay man's love-hate relationship with the gender he recognizes his affinities with even while he feels restricted by conventional straight definitions of that gender. Reubens/Pee-wee is the sissy boy/feminine gay man who both enjoys and resents his connection with women. This position is even more intensely held for having been developed in a period such as the 1950s and the 1960s in the United States, when gender was rigidly heterosexualized and publicly defined in a manner that attempted to keep women second-class citizens.

The sissy boy/feminine gay man knows he's not like men, not "masculine," in the way it is defined by straight patriarchal culture. But to be told by that same culture that he is, therefore, like a woman, is heterosexually "feminine" and that he functions as a woman substitute or as an imitation woman isn't usually a welcomed or enviable alternative—although it often seems the only one, given the absence of homosexuality as a male/masculine choice. The resentment and dislike of women by which gay men—particularly feminine gay men—are (stereo)typically characterized by straight culture and even by much of queer culture, stem less from gay men's problems with actual women than from their problems with the heterocentrist and patriarchal cultural definitions and depictions of women forced upon them. For this reason alone, the "one-size-fits-all" approach to male misogyny that Modleski and others employ when critiquing Paul Reubens's work with women characters is not very sensitive to how the particular position of gay men within patriarchy has been constructed in relation to concepts of "woman" and the "feminine." Certain things Reubens does with women characters might be misogynistic, but, as mentioned earlier, we need to consider more carefully how these instances may express misogyny of a distinctly gay variety, with complicated psychological and cultural foundations of its own, per-

haps more comparable to straight women's misogyny than to that of straight men.

So, in Pee-wee's world, Miss Yvonne has the "biggest [bouffant] hair" and is a vain hyper-1950s feminine type. Mrs. Steve and Mrs. Rene are food-obsessed and fat. The schoolteacher progresses from being an extra-nice and prim 1960s blonde girl-next-door to becoming the lover of an entire troupe of Italian acrobats who are brothers. But while these excessive women may express Pee-wee's/Reubens's gay desires (Miss Yvonne, Winnie, sometimes Mrs. Rene as man-eaters) or his sexual frustrations (Mrs. Rene, Mrs. Steve as overeaters), these women are not passive tokens of homosocial or erotic exchange between men. Their energy and aggressiveness parallel Pee-wee's hyperactivity, and they all stand in contrast to the rather bland pleasantness of the male sex objects on the show. These women are as much counterparts to, and examples for, the closeted Pee-wee as they are unwitting shills for him. For every moment when Pee-wee does something like cutting in on Miss Yvonne in order to dance with Tito, there is another like the one in which he watches Miss Yvonne intently as she seduces the Conky repairman (or some other hunk) with lines such as "Is that a wrench in your pocket?" and then provides the camera/audience with a sly, knowing, and approving look after Miss Yvonne has made a successful pickup.

At least some of these excessive women can also be read in specifically adult gay culture terms as one half of a classic team: feminine gay man and "fag hag," or, to use a more recent term, "fag moll" (although I prefer "women friends of gay men"). In its stereotypical form this pair consists of a thin, witty-bitchy, stylish man and a fat and/or flashily dressed and made-up woman, who often appears to be emulating the look of drag queens rather than that of conventional straight feminine glamour. Indeed, fag moll Mrs. Steve can be read as a drag queen—at least one commentator dubbed her "the Divine stand-in."¹⁹ As fag molls, Mrs. Steve, Mrs. Rene, Miss Yvonne, and even the Cowntess often receive the cruel and bitchy end of Pee-wee's schtick, with fat jokes, vanity jokes, and sexual double entendres aplenty at their expense.²⁰ Even seeing Pee-wee as "one of the girls" doesn't help matters in these cases—it only makes certain moments on the television shows and specials seem like queer remakes of *The Women*, with a different feminine gay man (Paul Reubens rather than George Cukor or R. W. Fassbinder) directing as well as participating in the action.²¹

For balance and counterpoint, however, there are many examples of Pee-wee's camaraderie with women characters, including suggestions that Mrs. Rene and Miss Yvonne on the television series and Simone the waitress in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* serve as Pee-wee's female doubles, representing parallels to his gay femininity—as when Pee-wee gives his wish to Miss Yvonne (on *The Pee-wee Herman Show*) by asking Jambi to make Captain Carl “really like her,” or when Pee-wee leaves Mrs. Rene in charge of the Playhouse when he goes “camping” with Cowboy Curtis, or when Pee-wee and Simone sit in the head of a large model dinosaur, share their dreams, and realize they are soulmates.²² These and other examples of Pee-wee and women characters bonding and doubling are generally worked out as moments of gay femininity connecting with straight femininity rather than as moments in which heterocentrist notions of gayness as an imitation of straight femaleness are being evoked. The much-cited episode in which Pee-wee plays Miss Yvonne on a practice date with Cowboy Curtis stands as an excellent illustration of the type of straight cross-gender positioning Pee-wee usually refuses to accept. Initially reluctant to substitute for Miss Yvonne in a date rehearsal staged by the Cowntess, Pee-wee reluctantly gives in, but remains uncomfortable until he begins a camp parody of the traditional straight female position. When the Cowntess urges Curtis to kiss Pee-wee for the grand finale, Pee-wee stops the proceedings. While it is possible to read this scene as an (unsuccessful) attempt to establish Pee-wee's heterosexual credentials, seen queerly this moment reveals that gay Pee-wee doesn't want to be seen or used as a substitute for a straight woman: he may be *like* Miss Yvonne in many ways (being attracted to Cowboy Curtis is only one of them), but he isn't Miss Yvonne.

While Modleski is concerned about how other articles on Pee-wee implicitly treat his lack of interest in girls as examples of the old idea that “homosexuality is a result of arrested development and involv[es] man's turning away from the ‘mature’ object choice, woman,” she proceeds to argue her points in a heterocentrist manner.²³ Modleski's ultimate criticism seems not to be that the statements about Pee-wee's being uninterested in or “grossed out” by girls-women might be homophobic, but that Pee-wee's rejection of girls-women is let off the hook with only “lighthearted” commentary. Finally, Modleski condemns Pee-wee along with all other little boy-men: “this dismissive attitude . . . is congruent with the misogyny of patriarchal ideology and reveals a contempt for females Freud saw as characteristic of ‘normal’ masculinity.”²⁴ From this position, it might not occur to

Modleski to question and more carefully examine the heterocentrist assumptions behind assertions in the articles she critiques that Pee-wee "is . . . another sort of boy, one who simply isn't interested in girls."²⁵ It is one thing to say Pee-wee isn't romantically or sexually interested in girls-women (or that he rejects them on these counts); it is quite another to have this represent a general rejection and dismissal of women.

But this is just what is done in Modleski's critical discussion of Pee-wee, as much as in the work of others she cites (Balfour, Penley). As a sissy boy/feminine gay man, Pee-wee might not be sexually interested in girls-women, but he is certainly very interested in them in many other ways that cannot be called "dismissive" or "misogynistic"—he's interested in them as friends. To briefly bring in the example of a similar heterocentrist take on another Playhouse character, Balfour argues that there is one "exceptional moment" on the series in which Jambi seems to become "the stereotypical masculinist male." This is when "against all expectations, Jambi chooses to have a female genie head as his companion."²⁶ Given Jambi's character as feminine gay, this moment is hardly atypical: Jambi wishes to have a girl friend, not a girlfriend. With their fixation on sex as the primary bond between men and women, heterocentrist positions and readings constantly attempt to recast the relationships (real and representational) between women and gay men in terms of sexual antagonism. By these terms, gay men hate and dismiss women because they don't want to have sex with them, or jealously want to be women, or covet their men.

Besides his straight women friends, another group of women important to defining Pee-wee's sissy boy/feminine gay position, as well as central to establishing the general queerness of Pee-wee's world, are the tomboys/dykes. Not surprisingly, this group has been almost totally unacknowledged in discussions of Pee-wee Herman texts. Aside from John Goss's short film "*Out*"takes (1990, which "outs" Dixie as a dyke), and the occasional informal conversation, lesbians seem to be invisible to most people looking at Pee-wee's television shows and the films. Taken together, these dykes represent further illustration of the mediation between 1950s-1960s and 1980s-1990s styles and attitudes typical of Reubens's work: the codes of butch-as-heterosexualized male and femme-as-heterosexualized female meet, and often mingle with, more queerly gendered looks, attitudes, and behaviors, including lesbian-butch and lesbian-femme. Often, dyke characters coded as butch are used as counterparts to Pee-wee's/

Reubens's feminine gay personality: Reba the mail-male lady, Dixie the cabdriver, Herman Hattie (*The Pee-wee Herman Show*), Large Marge (*Pee-wee's Big Adventure*), and k. d. lang (*Pee-wee's Playhouse Christmas Special*).²⁷ Whether you read these butches as heterosexually masculinized or queerly masculine often depends upon the episode, the scene, the moment, and the spectator.

Most often, however, the straight masculine codes of dress and behavior connected with these butch dykes are combined with enough androgynous or feminine coding to suggest that they operate in the space of some lesbian reconceptualizing of masculinity rather than as imitations of straight men. That is, they seem to be butches who are both woman-identified and masculine. In any case, it makes queer sense that Reba is in the Playhouse with Pee-wee when it becomes lost in space and enters an alternative universe in which Miss Yvonne's double appears as a bald alien. Or that when Reba and Dixie appear in dresses at one Playhouse party they elicit the same type of surprised comment as when Pee-wee gets out of his prissy plaid suit and red bow tie and into more butch attire (a baseball uniform, a cowboy outfit). Or that Herman Hattie (note the first name), hoping to get a kiss, echoes Pee-wee's dialogue to Miss Yvonne, and will trust only Pee-wee to guard her jeep's tools and paraphernalia ("with your life"). Or that k. d. lang is the only guest star on the Christmas special who interacts with the entire Playhouse crew during a spirited rendition of "Jingle Bell Rock."

But there is another side to these suggestions of complementarity between sissy Pee-wee and the butch dykes. For if these dykes are depicted as Pee-wee's "opposite" queer gender comrades, they are also often presented as uncomprehending of the world of the feminine gay man, as well as incomprehensible within this world. Reba is constantly befuddled by what happens in the Playhouse (one time calling the Playhouse and its inhabitants "twisted"), Dixie is abrupt and uncommunicative, k. d. lang tries too hard to fit in and appears awkwardly hyperkinetic, Herman Hattie is a laughable hillbilly hick with a skunk stuck to her "butt," and Large Marge metamorphoses into a monster. But this ambivalent presentation of butches in Pee-wee's world accurately reflects queer cultural history, past and present, as it suggests the longstanding suspicion and distrust between lesbians and gays (particularly between butches and sissies), which has only recently begun to change in any significant way with the revival of queer coalition politics, particularly around AIDS and women's health issues.

If the femmes in Pee-wee's world are treated more benignly, it is perhaps because they seem less like "others" to the sissy boy—he has the expression of queerly reconfigured femininity in common with them. The only femme Pee-wee seems uncomfortable with is Sandra Bernhard, appearing in one episode as an operator who aggressively vamps Pee-wee over the picture phone. Bernhard's charade of straight femininity here (which parallels her off-screen "I'm not a lesbian" pronouncements at the time) causes Pee-wee great irritation, and he quickly cuts off her parodic seduction scene.²⁸ But Pee-wee can enthusiastically greet each cartoon featuring Penny, a femme tomboy who has interesting relationships with a mermaid, an imaginary twin sister, a real sister, and Dorothy Lamour, among other females; and he can have fun singing "Hey Good-Lookin'" with Dolly Parton during her visit to Pee-wee's Playhouse on an episode of her own variety series (that is, until he suspects her of getting romantic with him).

And then there is Miss Yvonne, the character who has been with Pee-wee since his nightclub beginnings—at once the hyperfeminine straight woman who expresses Pee-wee's gay desires, the fag moll, and the femme dyke. Miss Yvonne's position as (unwitting) femme lesbian is most clearly articulated in *The Pee-wee Herman Show* when Herman Hattie, the hillbilly butch in coonskin cap and buckskin, romances "Miss Y" by presenting her with a bottle of "Rocky Mountain Valley Violet Perfume." Later, in the beauty makeover episode of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, Dixie asks Miss Yvonne if she could "do her" after she finishes with Mrs. Steve. But Miss Yvonne's queer textual status as femme isn't consistent, and seems a case of Reubens partially working out his feminine gayness through Miss Yvonne by connecting his cross-gender identification with her to queerness: so Miss Yvonne is the ultra-femme(inine) figure who lusts after the Playhouse hunks while occasionally being sexually paired through double entendres with butch dyke figures such as Dixie, Herman Hattie, and Reba.

If the queer readings offered thus far seem either tentative or tenuous, it is probably because the queerness of Pee-wee's world is understood by most viewers through connotation, as is the queerness in most mainstream cultural texts. D. A. Miller elucidates this in a discussion of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*:

Now, defined in contrast to the immediate self-evidence (however on reflection deconstructible) of denotation, connotation will always manifest a certain semiotic insufficiency. . . . Connotation enjoys, or

suffers from, an abiding deniability. . . . *Rope* exploits the particular aptitude of connotation for allowing homosexual meaning to be elided even as it is also being elaborated. . . . In this sense, the cultural work performed by *Rope*, toiling alongside other films . . . and other cultural productions . . . consists in helping construct a homosexuality held definitionally in suspense on no less than a question of its own existence—and in helping to produce in the process homosexual subjects doubtful of the validity and even the reality of their desire, which may only be, does not necessarily mean, and all the rest.²⁹

Substitute *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, *Big Top Pee-wee*, and the other Pee-wee texts for *Rope* in the quotation above, and Miller's observations about homosexuality as connotation will indicate both the pleasures and the painful limitations of Pee-wee's world for queerly-positioned audiences. The air of insider, "wink-wink," double-entendre queer cultural referentiality, linked to instances of more obvious queer cross-gender codes (but are they "obvious" only to certain queer readers?), has opened the space for my analysis above. But the queer-deniability factor Miller refers to is powerfully at work in Pee-wee's world, allowing for readings that downplay queerness, separate it from other topics (most notably from gender concerns), or render it invisible. Not surprisingly, this last category of reading Pee-wee is the one favored in articles written for mass-market newspapers and journals, which typically cast Pee-wee as a wacky and disconcerting asexual or presexual man-boy who encourages outrageous and "naughty" behavior in similarly asexual or presexual child viewers. It is a reading of his character and his work that the closeted Reubens has encouraged in interviews conducted as Pee-wee, while also coyly hinting at "offscreen" women admirers of his character.³⁰ But one child viewer cited in Henry Jenkins, III's article "Going Bonkers!: Children, Play, and Pee-wee" unwittingly provided the best metaphor for the Pee-wee universe, as embodied in his (in)famous Playhouse, when he called it a "crazy closet."³¹ The television Playhouse as "crazy" queer closet has its parallels in Pee-wee's film house and farm, which offer similar self-contained, queer-connotative environments set apart from the "normal" world (it makes sense that in *Big Top Pee-wee* a stranded circus is quickly and easily integrated into Pee-wee's farm).

Perhaps it is to be expected that Pee-wee and his friends are stuck in a closet of queer representation-as-connotation, as most of Pee-wee's world is constructed to fit into the conventions of children's television and mainstream filmmaking, while it is also placed within

that time warp between the 1950s-1960s and the 1980s-1990s.³² To make it even more difficult for Reubens to directly express queerness in his work, the 1980s-1990s seem to be shaping up as a period in which America is reworking the conservative ideologies of the 1950s-1960s. So Pee-wee's world is one in which safe sex is referred to, but only by way of the sight of Miss Yvonne quickly changing into a plastic raincoat and "a transparent plastic cap to protect her large, dome-shaped bouffant hairdo."³³ It is also a world where muscular men can be erotically displayed, but where Pee-wee can't even touch them—and where Dixie's demand that Miss Yvonne "do" her after doing Mrs. Steve can only result in a femme-inizing beauty makeover.

But there are closets within the closet of the Playhouse. In *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* there is the hidden and excessively guarded garage that houses Pee-wee's prized bicycle; *Pee-wee's Playhouse* contains a secret room that stores this same bike (and a bizarre monster helmet); the series and *The Pee-wee Herman Show* both feature the box containing Jambi, the queeny genie, a.k.a. "The Wish Man." Even *Big Top Pee-wee*, with its (albeit often parodic) heterosexual romance narrative has a closet-within-the-closet. Hidden behind a curtain in Pee-wee's top security experimental greenhouse is his most important project. Leading rugged circus manager Mace Montana (Kris Kristofferson) past oversized tomatoes and cantaloupes (on which Mace comments in deadpan double entendres), Pee-wee swears Mace to secrecy as he unveils his "hot dog tree." "You've got big ideas," Mace tells Pee-wee. Then, looking at the tree again, he comments, "I need one of those." "Help yourself, Mace!" exclaims Pee-wee. But if Pee-wee's (Play)house becomes, in many ways, a closet of and for queer connotation (with "secret words," double-entendre dialogue, campy bric-a-brac, and everything) and, as such, is the prison house of open queer expression, the closets-within-closets represent Pee-wee's desire to "come out" or "come forward." It is the desire of a closeted sissy boy to directly express himself in/to the outside world.

At the end of each episode of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, Pee-wee pulls down the arm of a reproduction of the famous Greek discus-thrower statue, releasing his bike and "one-eyed monster" (slang for "penis") helmet. Once helmeted and on the bike, he bids his Playhouse pals and the audience good-bye before magically zooming out of a previously unseen boarded-up and padlocked door; he takes this route rather than going out by the front door, which is presided over by a reproduction of the Venus de Milo. So Pee-wee's "outing" of himself is provocatively presented here as a move from the "Venus de Milo" (the

incomplete figure of desire) Playhouse door to the hidden "Greek discuss thrower" door/space. That is, it is a move from a door that leads into and out of a place that indirectly expresses queerness (or expresses it strictly in cross-gender terms), to a place that indicates the potential for open, and even culturally sanctioned, gay identities and desires.

But the desire to be "out" (or to "come forward") and therefore to be is still expressed symbolically through the play of connotation, and even within these terms, coming out is cast as a dream, a fantasy, a wish. In *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, Pee-wee wins the Tour de France and public acclaim with his unconventional (read: unathletic, unmasculine) biking style, but wakes up to find it was only a dream. Later in the film, his forays into the outside world on his bike end in humiliation (he falls off his bike in front of a group of boys) or disaster (his bike is stolen by another sissy boy who must sense its sexually symbolic importance).³⁴ Pee-wee's public reunion with his (homo)sexualized bike in this film is initially set to take place in the *basement* of the Alamo, which proves to be nonexistent in any case, as Pee-wee discovers to his mortification while his tour group laughs derisively. When he finally locates the bike, it is on a movie set, where he must cross-dress as a nun to get it back. And while Pee-wee may blast out of his fantastic Playhouse on his bike at the end of each episode, he always lands in an equally fantastic "outside" environment in the form of obvious back projections of the open road. The episode of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* where the secret word is "out" metaphorically translates the process of coming out into Pee-wee's developing an illness that makes his "emotions lie very close to the surface," as he tells Ricardo. But having come "very close" to blurting out these "emotions" to one of his love objects, Pee-wee retreats to his bed and soon feels "better." His bout of coming-out jitters passed, he is once again ready to take charge of his *implicitly* queer Playhouse-as-closet.

More and more it seems to me that Jambi, the queeny genie, might be the key to the closeted yet richly queer-connotative time-warp Zeitgeist of Pee-wee's world. As the deep-voiced drag diva hidden in a bejeweled box and the model for the coyly winking sphinx high atop the Playhouse, Jambi flamboyantly expresses a queer femininity that is both the "embarrassing" secret and the cause for celebration—in Pee-wee's world, and often in the straight and queer worlds outside. He is the fairy godmother who grants Pee-wee wishes (such as making him visible again after he has made himself vanish during a magic show), as well as being the (older gay generation?) voice of Pee-wee's

conscience, often encouraging him to examine his motives and emotions before making a wish.

Connected as he is with effeminacy, queer femininity, drag culture, and magic and witchcraft, Jambi is a compelling and disturbing figure whose power and threat are contained because usually he can appear only at Pee-wee's behest (and only in the form of a head with no body, at that). As the most overtly queer character, Jambi and his magic powers must be carefully guarded, monitored by the regime of the closet of connotation that is Pee-wee's world. But, to quote D. A. Miller again, "if connotation . . . has the advantage of constructing an essentially insubstantial homosexuality, it has the corresponding inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place."³⁵ Locked away in his box most of the time, Jambi's queenly spirit still presides on the Playhouse roof as a campy sphinx—at once guarding the secret of Mondo Pee-wee's queerness while announcing it to the world at the beginning of each episode.³⁶

Development, Rochester looks somewhat perturbed and forces out an embarrassed "uh huh." Finally, however, the mail carrier finds a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* for Rochester, who explains that he subscribes to the newspaper because he owns two shares of Jack: "I bought it at thirty-nine. It's been there for ten years!"

47. *Ibid.*, 191.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Benny and Benny, *Sunday Nights*, 103-4.

50. Gilbert Seldes, *The Public Arts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 156-

57.

51. Benny and Benny, *Sunday Nights*, 111.

52. *Ibid.*, 113.

5. *The Sissy Boy, the Fat Ladies, and the Dykes*

1. Bryan Bruce, "Pee Wee Herman: The Homosexual Subtext," *CineAction!* 9 (Summer 1987): 6.

2. Ian Balfour, "The Playhouse of the Signifier: Reading Pee-wee Herman," *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988): 155-56.

3. *Ibid.*, 156.

4. *Ibid.*

5. I am assuming Paul Reubens is queer, as I do later for Dolly Parton. While having my assumptions validated by public statements might be important to some of my points in this section, such a public disclosure would not significantly alter most of my discussion about Pee-wee and gayness/queerness. In any case, Reubens (like a number of celebrities) is *considered to be gay*, or otherwise queer, by some portion of the queer and straight publics because this is how they read his Pee-wee Herman persona. By rarely appearing out of character, Reubens encouraged the near-erasure of his private life, and the substitution of the public figure of Pee-wee in its place. Therefore, gayness (or a less specific queerness) is part of the range of readings audiences have given Reubens and/as Pee-wee. For an interesting examination of Dolly Parton's place in lesbian culture, see Jean Carlomusto's video *L Is for the Way You Look* (1991). As for Sandra Bernhard and k. d. lang, whom I also mention later in this section, both have more or less come out and come forward about their queer sexuality: Bernhard through remarks about a lover she refers to as "she" in *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991, Miramax, Alex Keshishian), and lang in an interview with Brendan Lemon for *The Advocate*, issue 605 (June 16, 1992): 34-46.

6. My use of "sissy" and "sissy boy" to describe preadult feminine queer men is an attempt to capture the position of many homosexual men, like Reubens, who as children were defined and labeled as "sissies" (or "girly") by the straight world. The challenge for these queer men (among whom I count myself) in later years is to work with, through, or around the pejorative straight gender politics that are deployed when a person is labeled "sissy" or "effeminate."

7. Constance Penley, "The Cabinet of Dr. Pee-wee: Consumerism and Sexual Terror," *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988): 147. Program cited: *Pee-wee's Playhouse* (1986-91, CBS).

8. The following sources provide invaluable queer cultural and historical background for working through visual and aural codings of queerness and gender—in life and in representation: Derek Cohen and Richard Dyer, "The Politics of Gay Culture," in *Homosexualities Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective (London and

- New York: Allison and Busby, 1980), 172-86; Christine Riddiough, "Culture and Politics," in *Pink Triangles*, ed. Pam Mitchell (Boston: Alyson, 1980), 14-33; Jackie Goldsby, "What It Means to Be Colored Me," *OUT/LOOK* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 8-17; Marlon Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," *The Independent* 14, no. 3 (April 1991): 32-34; Marlon Riggs, "Ruminations of a Snap Queen: What Time Is It?" *OUT/LOOK* 12 (1991): 12-19; Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 97-164; Amber Hollinbaugh and Cherié Moraga, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 394-405; Joan Nestle, "The Fem Question," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 232-41; Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1987), 100-109; "Sensibility and Survival," *New Gay Arts*, A Special Issue, *Village Voice* (June 28, 1988): 21-39; Esther Newton, "Of Yams, Grinders, & Gays," *OUT/LOOK* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 28-37; Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky, "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Lesbian and Gay Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncy (New York: New American Library, 1989), 426-40; Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-1989): 55-71; Lisa Duggan, "The Anguished Cry of an 80s Fem: I Want To Be a Drag Queen," *OUT/LOOK* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 62-65; Jan Brown, "Sex, Lies, & Penetration: A Butch Finally 'Fesses Up,'" *OUT/LOOK* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 30-34; Arlene Stein, "All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go? Style Wars and the New Lesbianism," *OUT/LOOK* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 34-44; Mark Leger, "The Boy Look," *OUT/LOOK* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 45; Julia Creet, "Lesbian Sex/Gay Sex: What's the Difference?" *OUT/LOOK* 11 (Winter 1991): 29-34; Jan Zita Grover, "The Demise of the Zippered Sweatshirt: Hal Fischer's *Gay Semiotics*," *OUT/LOOK* 11 (Winter 1991): 44-47; Michelangelo Signorile, "Clone Wars," *Outweek* 74 (November 28, 1990): 39-45; Martin Humphries, "Gay Machismo," in *The Sexuality of Men*, ed. Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 70-85; Seymour Kleinberg, "Where Have All the Sissies Gone?" in *Alienated Affections* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 143-56. Besides these specific pieces, many issues of *OUT/LOOK*, *Outweek*, *The Advocate*, *On Our Backs*, and *Bad Attitude* (as well as local and more "underground" lesbian, gay, and bisexual papers and magazines) have articles, columns, photographs, and drawings that touch upon issues of queer style, gender and sexuality attitudes, and media and art representation.
9. Penley, "Dr. Pee-wee," 147.
 10. Tania Modleski, "The Incredible Shrinking He[r]man: Male Regression, the Male Body, and Film," *differences* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 64.
 11. Modleski, "Shrinking He[r]man," 66.
 12. In an editorial comment on this section, Chris Straayer (of the Cinema Studies Department, New York University), wondered if gay misogyny might not be discussed as a form of "gay-straightness"—that is, as instances of gay men expressing attitudes they have taken from the straight male culture around them. This would appear to be

Modleski's point; and perhaps it is the reason she finally conflates straight and gay men in her discussions of misogyny, Pee-wee, camp, and the postmodern. Certainly all—gays, lesbians, straight women, queers—take their original cues from the patriarchy for misogynistic attitudes and expressions. And whether their source is straight or queer, male or female, all expressions of misogyny are reprehensible. But culturally and psychologically, women's, gays', lesbians', and other queer-identified people's misogyny could only be exactly like that of straight men if these former groups' relations to power were the same as that of straight men.

While gay men are "men," I doubt that many can fully ignore or forget that their position in the scheme of straight patriarchal cultures is still a feminized one in the sense that conflates "the feminine" with "woman" and trivializes or reviles the qualities ascribed to the "feminine-woman." Gay men might internalize patriarchal notions of the feminine-woman, or they might accept the conventional characteristics of the feminine-woman while rejecting the pejorative attitudes, or they might attempt to reconceptualize "femininity" (and "masculinity") and its alignment with "woman" (and "man"), or they might reject straight patriarchal conceptions of gender and gender characteristics and formulate alternatives. But no matter which position they take, those gays who in some manner function under the signs of gender must have different understandings of their relation to the concepts of "woman" and "the feminine," and therefore must have cultural and psychological foundations for their misogyny different from those of straight men.

13. Of interest to the ongoing discussions of camp in general and in relation to Pee-wee Herman in particular is "Where Have All the Sissies Gone?," a chapter of Seymour Kleinberg's *Alienated Affections: Being Gay in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 143–56. In part a defense of camp by a feminine gay man (a "sissy"), Kleinberg's comments are compelling reminders that camp critiques referring to queer texts such as *Pee-wee's Playhouse* need to be careful and rigorous about considering queer cultures and queer spectators in their working through the ideological meanings of camp's uses: "Camping did express self-denigration, but it was a complex criticism. . . . Camping also released for gay men some of their anger at their closeted lives. . . . Between the values of virility that they did not question and their rage at having no apparent alternatives, gay men would camp out their frustrations" (pp. 149–50). Implicit in Kleinberg's comments here is the idea that becoming a traditionally feminine straight woman is not, and was not, seen by many "sissies" as the alternative to "virility," that is, to taking on the attributes of straight men. Through camping, sissy gays can create alternatives to those conventional notions of masculinity and femininity that are fused with biologically essentialist conceptions of being a "man" or a "woman." Camping often split culturally constructed gender attributes and labels ("masculinity," "femininity") from the biological categories ("male," "female," "man," "woman") to which straight culture links them. In spite of this queer cultural work, however, straight culture continues by and large to see gay men (whether butch, feminine, or androgynous) as fundamentally "like women" or as "feminine" and treats them accordingly. This straight cultural tenet has an interesting history in the West, some of which is suggested by the title of a lecture given by George Chauncey, Jr., at Cornell University (February 24, 1992): "Why Were Female Prostitutes and Male Homosexuals Linked in the Early Twentieth Century?"

Gay artists and performers might often be seen as reversing the terms of straight culture's "gay men-as-straight women" ideas, by presenting representations of

"straight women-as-gay men": think of certain films of R. W. Fassbinder (*Veronika Voss*, 1982; *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1978; *Lola*, 1982; *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1973; *Frauen in New York*, 1977); Pedro Almodóvar (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, 1988; *High Heels*, 1991; *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, 1990), George Cukor (*The Women*, 1939; *Girls About Town*, 1931; *Les Girls*, 1957; and *The Chapman Report*, 1962), Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Robert Harling's play *Steel Magnolias*, most of Tennessee Williams's plays, drag performances, and Paul Reubens's Pee-wee Herman texts. The painter Paul Cadmus, responding to a comparison of his nude figures to those of Michelangelo's, said: "I do love his forms. His male nudes are wonderful. Both he and Caravaggio are great favorites of mine. In fact, Michelangelo's women often look like males with grapefruits attached" ("Under Fire," Steve Weinstein, *Genre* [April-May 1992]: 75). Critiques of these representational "reversals" as progressive, self-oppressive, misogynistic, or whatever, would need to consider individual texts, their production contexts, and the cultural contexts of text, creator, and potential reader-critics in order to avoid the sort of "one-size-fits-all" cultural politics I address elsewhere in this chapter.

14. Penley, "Dr. Pee-wee," 145.

15. This queer blindness takes its most extreme form in articles such as Rob Winning's "Pee Wee Herman Un-Mascs Our Cultural Myths About Masculinity" (*Journal of American Culture* 11, no. 2 [Summer 1988]: 57-63), which discusses Pee-wee's reconceptualization of masculinity in heterocentrist terms. Aside from noting that Pee-wee's "movements vacillate between those of a frenetic child and an effeminate male" (thus suggesting that homosexuality is an immature form of behavior), Winning's article fully recuperates the character and his texts as examples of a kinder, gentler straight masculinity.

16. Along these lines, one might place various aspects of Pee-wee's world sharply within the range of feminine gay experiences as described by a man quoted in Kleinberg: "We fell for masculinity when we were twelve; there must be something to it because it made us gay. Most of us didn't become gay because we fell in love with sissies; we became sissies because we fell in love with men, usually jocks" (154). With critical irony, Kleinberg follows this quote by saying, "It sounds familiar. And so what if one chooses to make one's life pornographic?" (*Alienated Affections*, 154).

17. Cited in Penley's article ("Dr. Pee-wee"), but worth repeating here, is Bryan Bruce's observation that each "attractive man" on *Pee-wee's Playhouse* "represents a specific gay male icon, prominent fantasy figures in homosexual pornography . . . including the sailor (Captain Carl), the black cowboy (Cowboy Curtis), and the muscular, scantily clad lifeguard (Tito), not to mention the escaped con (Mickey) in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*" (p. 5).

18. Film cited: *Big Top Pee-wee* (1988, Paramount, Randal Kleiser).

19. Penley, "Dr. Pee-wee," 147.

20. Other specific cultural and psychological contexts would complicate straight-(forward) readings of Pee-wee and the fat women characters in his texts in relation to misogyny. Some of these contexts are suggested in Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's dialogue essay "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion," *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1990-91):

"MICHAEL MOON: It was a deep fear of mine as a twelve-year-old boy putting on pubescent weight that after having been a slender child, I was at puberty freakish and unaccountably developing feminine hips and breasts. . . . One happy aspect of the

ember 1986): 79; T. Gertler, "The Pee-wee Perplex," *Rolling Stone* (February 12, 1987): 37-40, 100, 102-3; Margy Rochlin, "Pee-wee Herman," *Interview* 17, no. 7 (July 1987): 45-50.

31. Henry Jenkins III, "'Going Bonkers!': Children, Play and Pee-wee," *Camera Obscura* 17 (1988): 182.

32. The Penley article does an excellent job of critically analyzing the production history of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, making a good case for the conscious risks the network took in "transforming a sexually risqué work of performance art [*The Pee-wee Herman Show*] into a children's television program." Penley goes on to say that "what is surprising is that CBS never questioned or censored the show's presentation of sexuality, including its clear allusions to homosexuality" ("Dr. Pee-wee," 144-45).

33. *Ibid.*, 136.

34. My gay reading of the sexual connotations surrounding Pee-wee's bicycle is in part a response to Winning's interpretation of the bike in conventional pop Freud dream-fantasy terms as "a potent phallic symbol" because it is "something which is fast, red, has a head, and most importantly, fits between his [Pee-wee's] legs" ("Pee Wee Herman Un-Mascs," 58). In the context of Winning's straight reading of Pee-wee's character, this makes sense, as does seeing the loss of the bike as representing castration anxiety. But I'd like to offer a queer—specifically a gay male—reading of this same bicycle and its symbolic sexual functions in Pee-wee's world. As much as something that "fits between his legs," the bike is something Pee-wee sits on. In his Tour de France dream, Pee-wee "is riding erect," as Winning notes, as he excitedly pedals his bike over the finish line. Rather than Pee-wee's own lost penis or phallus, the bike could represent that of another man. So Pee-wee's activities on his bike would not only represent masturbatory autoeroticism and castration, as the sexual pleasure and loss here could be connected to anal sex or dildo play and the loss of a sex partner or a sex toy.

35. Miller, "Anal Rope," 119.

36. At the end of his article, Balfour reminds readers that "the classical sphinx proposed a riddle, a question whose answer, as only Oedipus knew, was 'man'" ("Playhouse of the Signifier," 166). While Balfour suggests that "man" is the question, not the answer, in *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, I would queerly propose that "man" is indeed the answer (as in "I want/need a man"), considering queeny Jambi is the sphinx and gay Pee-wee is our Oedipus. Perhaps a gay version of the Oedipus myth is being suggested here?

Afterword: "You Flush It, I Flaunt It!"

1. Films cited: *Batman Returns* (1992, Warners, Tim Burton), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992, Twentieth Century-Fox, Fran Rubel Kuzui).

2. For examples of supportive critical pieces written in the wake of Reubens's arrest see: Laurie Stone, "Pee-wee Agonistes," *Village Voice* 36, no. 33 (August 13, 1991): 39; Michael Bronski, "Reel Politick," *Z Magazine* 4, no. 9 (September 1991): 64-67; Fuchs, "Fuchs on Film," *Labyrinth* (a Philadelphia women's newspaper) 8, no. 9 (October 1991): 9; Peter Wilkinson, "Who Killed Pee-wee," *Rolling Stone* 614 (October 3, 1991): 36-38, 41-42, 140.

3. Stone, "Pee-wee Agonistes," 39.

4. Reubens himself was the object of media "inning" after his arrest when tabloids spread stories about him being romantically involved with actress Carol Kane.