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Detective fiction's back passages: parody, camp, and carnival in James Lear's fiction

As passagens dos fundos da ficção policial: paródia, camp e carnaval na ficção de James Lear

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ABSTRACT

The Back Passage (2006), by James Lear, has circulated widely as gay erotic fiction yet has received little sustained critical attention. This article reads the novel as a parody of detective fiction, arguing that its parodic operation engages the conventions of the genre at large – from Poe and Doyle to the Golden Age country house mystery – rather than a single subgenre. Drawing on Hutcheon's (1985) theory of parody, Bakhtin's (2025) carnivalisation, and Sontag's (2013) account of camp, the article argues that the novel mobilises the classic conventions of detection, including the rational detective, the loyal sidekick, the closed circle of suspects, and the sealed topography of the country house, only to rewrite them in erotic terms. The three concepts work at different levels: parody as formal operation, carnivalisation as socio-symbolic inversion, and camp as queer register. Lear's novel, the article contends, does not abandon the genre but reoccupies it, bringing to the surface a homoerotic intimacy that criticism has long read as subtext in the tradition.

KEYWORDS: detective fiction; parody; camp; carnivalisation; James Lear.

RESUMO

The Back Passage (2006), de James Lear, circulou como ficção erótica gay, mas ainda não recebeu atenção crítica substancial. Este artigo analisa o romance como uma paródia da ficção policial, argumentando que ele engaja as convenções do gênero – de Poe e Doyle ao mistério de casa de campo da Era de Ouro –, e não um único subgênero. Com base na teoria da paródia de Hutcheon (1985), na carnavalização de Bakhtin (2025) e na noção de camp de Sontag (2013), mostra-se que o romance instala as convenções clássicas da investigação (o detetive racional, o assistente leal, o círculo fechado de suspeitos, a topografia fechada da casa de campo) e as reescreve em termos eróticos. Cada conceito opera em um nível: a paródia como operação formal, a carnavalização como inversão sociossimbólica e o camp como registro queer. O romance, conclui-se, não abandona o gênero, mas o reocupa, trazendo à superfície uma intimidade homoerótica que a crítica há muito lê como subtexto da tradição.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ficção policial; paródia; camp; carnavalização; James Lear.

Introduction

The Back Passage (2006), by James Lear, is the first volume of the Mitch Mitchell Mystery series, which would be followed by *The Secret Tunnel* (2008), *A Sticky End* (2010), and *The Sun Goes Down* (2015). The novel belongs as much to the tradition of gay erotica as to that of detective fiction: graphic homosexual sex permeates the narrative, with at least one encounter, and often several, in each of its eleven chapters. The novel is set in the summer of 1925, at Drekeham Hall, a Norfolk country house owned by Sir James and Lady Caroline Eagle, who have invited a small party of guests for the weekend. Edward “Mitch” Mitchell, an American postgraduate at Cambridge and the novel’s first-person narrator, is among them, accompanied by his friend Harry “Boy” Morgan, recently engaged to the Eagles’ daughter Belinda. The opening chapter places the two men in a cupboard under the stairs during a game of Sardines, where Mitch has long planned to seduce his friend. The scene is interrupted by the discovery of a corpse: the body of Reg Walworth tumbles out of an adjacent cupboard at the precise moment Mitch and Boy reach their first sexual climax together. Over the course of the investigation that follows, Mitch will gather clues and suspects largely through sexual encounters with virtually every male inhabitant of the house and its surroundings, from the hall boy and the chauffeur to the local constabulary. The cupboards, the corridors, the pantries, the servants’ staircases, and the spy holes threaded through the walls of Drekeham Hall, which canonical detective fiction reserves for the circulation of servants and the planting of clues, will function in Lear’s novel as a central setting. Right from its title, the novel announces its central conceit: detective fiction will be entered through its back passages.

James Lear is the pseudonym under which Rupert Smith, a London-based novelist and journalist, has published gay erotic fiction since the early 2000s; under his birth name, Smith has produced a parallel body of literary novels and biographies. *The Back Passage* was issued by Cleis Press, a San Francisco house specialising in LGBTQ+ erotic literature, and quickly became one of the best-selling erotic novels of its decade. On his author website, Smith situates *The Back Passage* explicitly within this lineage, describing

the novel as his “take on the Agatha Christie country house murder mystery”¹. The novel’s parodic relation to detective fiction is, however, more fully marked from within. Mitch traces his own formation as a reader early in the novel, from Conan Doyle to “a new English writer of promise, Agatha Christie” (Lear, 2006, p. 14). Boy Morgan is named explicitly as Mitch’s Watson, introduced through the assertion that every great detective needs a loyal assistant. And when the moment of attempted reconstruction arrives near the end, it opens by invoking the Sherlock Holmes stories in which the detective takes Watson aside and unravels the case before him. The novel knows the tradition it parodies, and tells the reader that it knows.

The Back Passage has so far received little attention from literary criticism. Despite the international success of the Mitch Mitchell series and the novel’s evident engagement with the conventions of detective fiction, scholarly commentary on the book and on James Lear’s work more broadly remains scarce, largely confined to interviews, social media, and reading blogs. The disproportion between the book’s wide circulation and its scholarly invisibility is itself telling: it points to the difficulty academic criticism still has in approaching objects that combine erotica, parody, and popular genre fiction, particularly when those objects are openly queer in their sexual content.

This lack of critical attention is particularly striking in light of a substantial body of scholarship that has read the male pairings of detective fiction as carrying a homoerotic charge that the texts themselves never name. Sedgwick (1990) supplies the general framework, in her account of the homosocial continuum and of the epistemology that governs what may be known but not said about male desire; Robb (2005) identifies coded markers of homosexuality in the founding figures of the form, from Dupin to Holmes; and Bernthal (2016) shows how readily the Golden Age clue-puzzle accommodated queer codes. The claim is not that the genre as a whole conceals a single uniform subtext, but that particular configurations within it, such as the bachelor detective, the devoted male pair, and the sealed and secretive house, have proved persistently legible in these terms. What Lear’s novel does is take that reading at its word and write the intimacy onto the surface of the page. The present article seeks to contribute to filling this gap.

¹ Lear, James. “The Back Passage”. Available at: jameslearbooks.wordpress.com/the-back-passage/. Accessed 16 May 2026.

This article argues that *The Back Passage* parodies detective fiction by mobilising conventions associated with Poe, Doyle, Chesterton, Wilkie Collins, the Golden Age tradition, and the figure of the rational detective. It further argues that the novel activates these conventions through a carnivalesque matrix of high/low inversion and a queer-specific camp register. Parody, in the sense theorised by Hutcheon (1985) and Korkut (2005), functions here as the formal-rhetorical operation through which the novel rereads and rewrites its tradition. Carnivalisation, in the sense Bakhtin (2025) develops from his readings of Rabelais, constitutes the socio-symbolic framework mobilised by this operation: the inversion of high and low, the primacy of the lower bodily stratum, the festive suspension of hierarchy. Camp, as theorised by Sontag (2013), Cleto (1999), and Babuscio (1977), names the specific aesthetic-cultural register in which this carnivalised parody is performed, a register inherited from Wildean dandyism and developed within twentieth-century queer urban sensibility. The image announced in this article's title, "detective fiction's back passages", designates the conjunction of these three operations: the side passages through which Lear's novel enters, traverses, and reorganises a genre whose respectable front entrance lies elsewhere.

The article unfolds in three further sections. Section 1 establishes the theoretical framework, articulating parody, carnivalisation, and camp into the tripartite analytical apparatus. Section 2 reads the novel under the sign of parody, cataloguing the conventions of detective fiction it mobilises, from the detective as reader of signs to the final reconstruction of the crime. Section 3 then reads these same conventions in the conjunction of camp and carnival, showing how the parodic inversions catalogued in Section 2 are performed in a queer camp register and amount, taken together, to a systemic inversion in the strong Bakhtinian sense.

1 Parody, camp, and carnivalisation: a case in three clues

The most influential contemporary theorisation of parody is that proposed by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody* (1985), and this article begins from her formulation. For Hutcheon, parody is best understood as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 6). This formulation rescues the concept from its frequent reduction to ridicule or mere comic imitation. Parody, in

Hutcheon's sense, may operate as homage, as critique, or as reappropriation, and it often performs all three at once. Its defining feature is not its tone, which may be reverent or irreverent, affectionate or hostile, but its structural double-coding: the parodic text simultaneously inscribes and transforms the conventions of its target. This breadth of operation is grounded, for Hutcheon, in the etymology of the term itself, which she revisits in order to recover a dimension obscured by its commonest usage:

A closer look at that root offers more information, however. The textual or discursive nature of parody (as opposed to satire) is clear from the *odos* part of the word, meaning song. The prefix *para* has two meanings, only one of which is usually mentioned – that of “counter” or against. Thus parody becomes an opposition or contrast between texts. However, *para* in Greek can also mean “beside”, and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast. It is this second, neglected meaning of the prefix that broadens the pragmatic scope of parody in a way most helpful to discussions of modern art forms (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 32).

The two senses of the prefix are precisely the two that *The Back Passage* requires. Lear's novel stands against detective fiction insofar as it inverts and exceeds the genre's conventions, but it also stands beside the genre, in intimate proximity to it, repeating and rewriting it with the manifest affection of a reader long formed by the tradition it targets.

A complementary perspective on the same expansive understanding comes from Simon Dentith's *Parody* (2000), which defines the operation as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (Dentith, 2000, p. 9). The formulation has two consequences worth retaining. It locates parody within the broader field of intertextual relations, treating it as one among many practices through which texts position themselves in relation to prior texts. And it recognises that the polemical charge of the parodic gesture may be directed against the precursor text or, just as often, against contemporary realities to which the precursor is made to allude. This second observation will prove especially useful in the analysis to follow: Lear's novel mobilises the conventions of the Golden Age country house mystery not only to engage with the detective genre, but also to expose, by inversion, the homophobic order that the British state of 1925 enforced upon the bodies the genre kept tactfully off the page.

A further refinement comes from Nil Korkut (2005), who classifies parodic practice according to the object at which the parodic gesture is directed. Korkut distinguishes three

major kinds: parody of texts and personal styles, parody of genres, and parody of discourse. The first category covers both parodies aimed at a specific work, such as Fielding's *Shamela* parodying Richardson's *Pamela*, and parodies aimed at the style of a particular author, where the imitation extends to the recurrent stylistic marks of an entire authorial corpus. The second category targets the formal and thematic conventions of a literary genre, of which Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, parodying the chivalric romance, is the canonical example. The third category targets the language of a philosophical, social, professional, religious, or political activity, as in Swift's *A Modest Proposal*.

The Back Passage can be situated within the second category. Lear's novel does not parody a specific work, nor does it parody the style of a specific author, however frequently it summons Doyle, Chesterton, Collins, and Christie by name. What it parodies is the genre itself, with its long-standing repertoire of formal and thematic conventions. Lear's target is the genre as a whole. What the novel offers is less a satirical reply to one author than a sustained rewriting of the tradition.

The expansive understanding of parody developed so far gains historical depth when read alongside John Cawelti's account of generic transformation. In *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976), Cawelti argues that popular genres typically undergo a life cycle that runs from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a moment when the established conventions begin to feel exhausted and call for renewal. At that point, parody, inversion, and hybridisation become the main devices through which the genre transforms itself from within. The history of detective fiction supplies repeated illustrations of the process: the American hardboiled tradition of Hammett and Chandler emerged in part as a parodic reply to the cerebral excesses of the British whodunit; the metaphysical detective fiction of Borges and Eco rewrites the genre's epistemic confidence as enigma; the anti-detective novel of Pynchon, Auster, and Coover transforms the very possibility of solution into an open question. *The Back Passage* belongs in this lineage. Lear's novel is parodic in the burlesque sense Cawelti identifies, but it also performs a critical operation on the cosy social order that the country house mystery has historically idealised, and it does so without abandoning the affectionate engagement with the genre. The political dimension of this combination has been theorised most fully by Linda Hutcheon, for whom "parody is endowed with the power

to renew” (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 115) and “parody works to foreground the politics of representation” (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 90). Lear’s novel belongs to this process, in which parody renews the genre instead of exhausting it.

The matrix that this parodic operation activates is what Bakhtin calls carnivalisation. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (2025) reconstructs the cultural complex of medieval and Renaissance popular laughter and identifies its central aesthetic principle as that of grotesque realism, whose defining feature is the operation he calls lowering. The carnivalesque topography is at once cosmic and bodily, and in both senses it is absolute: the upper pole is heaven and, in the human body, the face and the head, while the lower pole is the earth and, in the human body, the genital organs, the abdomen, and the buttocks. The operation of lowering transfers all that is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract to this material-bodily plane, and Bakhtin describes its mechanism in the following terms:

Lowering here means bringing down to earth, making something partake of the earth as an element that simultaneously both swallows up and gives birth: as something is lowered, it is simultaneously both buried and sown, it is put to death in order to be born anew better and greater. [...] Lowering digs a bodily grave for a *new* birth. This is why it has not only an annihilating, negating sense, but also a positive reviving one: it is *ambivalent*, it both negates and affirms at the same time (Bakhtin, 2025, pos. 1789-1794).

To this principle of ambivalent lowering Bakhtin attaches a repertoire of carnivalistic acts and figures, including parody and travesty, profanation, and the mock crowning and decrowning of the carnival king, all of which stage the provisional character of every rank and every claim to authority (Bakhtin, 2025). Carnivalisation is the entry of this entire system of inversions, lowerings, and crownings and decrownings into the structure of literature itself. The relevance of these concepts to a theory of parody was explicitly acknowledged by Hutcheon, who identifies “the paradox of [parody’s] authorized transgression of norms” (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 74) as the underlying principle that parody shares with carnival: parody, in this sense, is the form that carnivalisation takes when it enters the literary text and turns against an established genre.

The third concept in the analytical apparatus this article assembles is camp, which names the queer aesthetic-cultural register in which the carnivalised parody of *The Back Passage* is performed. The most influential theorisation of camp remains Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’”, first published in 1964, which approaches it as a sensibility rather

than an idea and identifies the essence of the phenomenon as a love of artifice, of exaggeration, and of style at the expense of content. The scholar defines camp as “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling” (Sontag, 2013, p. 327). The two operations Sontag names here, a seriousness that fails and an experience theatricalised, will return as analytical keys in the reading of Lear’s novel. Sontag also locates the modern formulation of the sensibility in the dandyism of Oscar Wilde, identifying him as the figure in whom camp acquires its conscious ideology. The articulation between camp and gay culture, only briefly stated by Sontag herself, is the central concern of the body of criticism that grew around her essay. Babuscio (1977) identifies four constitutive elements of the camp sensibility in its specifically gay inflection, namely irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour, and argues that they should be understood as expressive resources developed within homosexual experience. Ross (1989) reads camp politically, as the cultural strategy by which queer communities have reappropriated the discarded and the marginal, turning the dispossession imposed by dominant culture into the basis of an alternative aesthetic. Cleto (1999), for his part, insists on the centrality of the queer dimension to the phenomenon and reconceives camp less as a fixed sensibility than as a performance through which queer subjectivity continuously enacts and undoes its own categories.

To analyse *The Back Passage*, parody, carnivalisation, and camp must be understood as a textual construction operating across distinct levels. In this framework, parody functions as the formal-rhetorical operation that rewrites the conventions of detective fiction, while carnivalisation provides the socio-symbolic matrix this operation activates, driving the inversion of high and low and the centrality of the body. Camp then supplies the register in which the whole operation is performed, anchoring it in a queer sensibility. It is this combined framework that the following sections will set to work on *The Back Passage*.

2 Tampering with the evidence: parodying the conventions of detective fiction

Reading *The Back Passage* under the sign of parody requires moving systematically through the conventions of detective fiction that the novel mobilises and demonstrating,

in each case, the double movement that Hutcheon identifies as constitutive of the parodic gesture: a convention is installed so as to later be transformed. The two operations are simultaneous in Lear's novel and inseparable from one another. The conventions Lear engages are those that have organised the detective genre across its long history, from Poe and Doyle through the British clue-puzzle tradition, and that major critical accounts of the genre have consistently identified as its structural repertoire: the detective as expert reader of signs, the pair formed by detective and loyal sidekick, the closed topography of the country house, the closed circle of suspects, the ritualised discovery of the body, the cooperative incompetence of the local police, and the final reconstruction of the crime (Knight, 1980, 2010). The instrument through which Lear consistently transforms each of these conventions is the erotic. Mitch interrupts his investigations to have sex with virtually every male inhabitant of Drekeham Hall and its surroundings, and the cerebral detection of signs that defines the detective tradition from Dupin to Poirot is repeatedly displaced by the bodily detection of desire. This is not, however, the dissolution of the conventions but their reinscription in another key.

Among the conventions that the detective genre has bequeathed to its readers, none is more fundamental than the figure of the detective himself, and nothing in that figure is more inseparable from him than reason. From Dupin's overheated chains of inference in the Rue Morgue to Holmes's methodical observation of cigar ash and the cut of a sleeve, the genre has built itself around the spectacle of a mind that can read what others overlook. Stephen Knight has argued that this spectacle is far more than a literary device. Writing of Conan Doyle's Holmes, he observes that

the captivated readers had faith in modern systems of scientific and rational enquiry to order an uncertain and troubling world, but feeling they lacked these powers themselves they, like many audiences before them, needed a suitably equipped hero to mediate psychic protection (Knight, 1980, p. 67).

The detective's reason, in this account, is an ideological resource. It assuages anxiety by holding out the promise that the world remains decipherable, that disorder is local and provisional, and that a properly equipped mind can always restore the intelligibility of things. The detective is, in this sense, the cognitive guarantor of an order the genre disrupts only in order to restore.

This guarantor has never been quite as sexually neutral as the convention implies. The bachelor detective of the nineteenth century, indifferent to women, fastidious in his tastes, at home in the male spaces of his culture, carried a homoerotic charge that criticism has since brought into focus. Robb (2005) reads the founding figures of the genre, from Poe's Dupin to Conan Doyle's Holmes, as built on coded markers of homosexuality: the aversion to marriage, the aesthetic refinement, the shared domestic and homosocial life, including the Turkish baths that Holmes and Watson frequent and that the period associated with queer sociability. Holmes, Robb writes, is a figure "everyone already knows, instinctively" to be homosexual (Robb, 2005, p. 260).

It is this encoded tradition that *The Back Passage* brings to the surface, and it does so first of all in the figure of its detective. The credentials assembled for Mitch, introduced early in the novel not through a crime but through his formation as a reader of detective fiction, place him directly within the genre. Mitch describes his childhood in Boston, his early addiction to the form at the age of seven, the long apprenticeship he served under Conan Doyle, Chesterton, Wilkie Collins, and the new English writer of promise named Agatha Christie, and the adult ambition to which this reading led: "little Teddy Mitchell grew up with a burning desire to be a private detective" (Lear, 2006, p. 14). The credentials are then itemised with care. Mitch is a student of medicine, like Doyle himself, and flatters himself for possessing "an eye for the telling forensic detail" (Lear, 2006, p. 14). He claims, too, "a nose for hypocrisy, and an instinct for divining the truths of human motivation" (Lear, 2006, p. 14). The Cambridge setting completes the picture: an American postgraduate at the heart of British academic life, surrounded by aristocrats at a country house party, occupies precisely the position from which the classical detective has always operated. The cerebral apparatus is in place. The reader of detective fiction is given every signal to expect that what is about to unfold will offer the form of cognitive mediation Knight describes.

The investigation, once underway, systematically undoes the apparatus the opening had so carefully constructed. The reader who expects Mitch to begin gathering evidence and reading signs finds him, instead, weighing his investigative duties against an erotic urgency of greater force. The novel formulates the tension with disarming directness in a sentence Mitch addresses to the reader: "as a twenty-two-year-old postgraduate medical student, I was ruled by two passions: cock and crime. And here, at Drekeham Hall, both

were being offered to me. Which would I choose?” (Lear, 2006, p. 14-15). The dilemma is announced as constitutive. Crime and desire are placed on the same plane, both classed as passions rather than as activities of distinct orders, and the rationalist apparatus of detection is reframed from the outset as one appetite among others. The frame established by Knight (1980), in which the detective mediates the reader’s faith in scientific enquiry, no longer holds. The hero is no longer a guarantor of cognitive order; he is a subject divided between two pulls of the body.

The alliteration is, of course, intentional. “Cock and crime” miniaturises in three words the operation the whole novel performs on the genre. The high concept of crime, with its tradition of ratiocination and forensic detail, is paired with the low term that disrupts it, the two yoked together by a sonority that refuses to take the high seriously. The detective’s task is no longer a matter of choosing between true and false readings of the world, but between the trail and the body.

The scene that follows confirms the pattern. Mitch returns the next morning to the cupboard from which Reg Walworth’s corpse had fallen the previous night, hoping to examine the evidence while it remains fresh, only to find that the cupboard has been cleaned. The opportunity has been lost, and Mitch knows why: “If only I had been able to examine the evidence while it was fresh!” (Lear, 2006, p. 29), he laments. “But no: I had followed my prick instead. What would Sherlock Holmes have said?” (Lear, 2006, p. 29). The confession is precise. The classical hermeneutics of the crime, founded on the patient reading of material traces, has been displaced by another hermeneutics, founded on the urgencies of the body. The detective’s eye for the telling forensic detail survives, but it is repeatedly diverted towards telling anatomical details: an attractive footman, a willing chauffeur, the youngest son of the house. Mitch acknowledges the loss with the rueful invocation of Holmes, the implicit standard against which his own failure is measured. A few pages later, frustrated by his inability to interpret a witness’s testimony, he reflects that “Sherlock Holmes would, by now, have picked out the vital clue from Belinda’s disjointed narrative” (Lear, 2006, p. 41). The implicit comparison is self-deprecating, but the gesture is fundamentally affectionate. Mitch summons Holmes not to ridicule him but to measure himself against him and to acknowledge, with rueful humility, the distance between the cerebral detective of the tradition and the erotic detective the novel has produced.

The pattern repeats throughout *The Back Passage*. Investigative opportunities are missed, witnesses are seduced rather than interrogated, and clues yield ground to encounters. The convention of the detective as warrantor of cognitive order is not completely abolished, since Mitch continues, throughout the novel, to call himself a detective, to invoke Holmes as his measure, and to claim the credentials the opening had so meticulously installed. What is rewritten is the regime of attention that the convention had always presupposed. The detective remains; reason no longer rules him.

In the genre, the detective rarely operates alone. From Poe's anonymous narrator at Dupin's side, through Holmes's Watson, Poirot's Hastings, and Nero Wolfe's Archie Goodwin, the genre has built itself around the figure of the pair, a transhistorical convention rather than the property of any single subgenre. Within the structure of detective fiction, the sidekick performs a function more substantial than companionship. He occupies the position from which the reader receives the detective's reasoning, since it is to the sidekick that the detective explains and through the sidekick that the reader follows the case, and his cognitive ordinariness throws the hero's exceptional intelligence into relief (Rzepka, 2005). The pair is also, structurally, a homosocial bond, and it is here that the coded homoeroticism discussed above settles most visibly: the Holmes-Watson relation has become the privileged site for the critical readings discussed above (Sedgwick, 1990; Bernthal, 2016). What those readings had to infer, *The Back Passage* states outright.

The novel installs the convention with a directness that leaves no room for evasion. The pair is introduced through what is at once a foundational statement and a parodic gloss on it: "Every great detective needs a loyal assistant, and after I'd spent the night 'training' Boy Morgan he was every bit as loyal as I could wish" (Lear, 2006, p. 99). The opening clause names the convention in its most canonical form, the second discloses the means by which the convention has been fulfilled. Loyalty is acquired through sex, and the verb "training" is held in suspense between its investigative sense, the detective forming his assistant, and its bodily sense, the lover initiating his partner. The transformation is then made explicit in the comparison that follows: Boy Morgan, Mitch concedes, "wasn't the brightest", but "Morgan had a great advantage over Watson: he was rapidly learning to take cock up his ass and down his throat" (Lear, 2006, p. 99). The cognitive deficit of the sidekick is acknowledged in keeping with the convention, but the

deficit is now compensated by an erotic competence the genre had never recognised as a possibility for the pair.

The genre's pair has never simply been a literary convenience; it has been the engine of its narrative. The detective explains and the sidekick listens; when danger comes, it is the sidekick who acts. *The Back Passage* preserves this functional architecture intact and, indeed, depends on it more visibly than its classical models. Across the novel, Boy Morgan accompanies Mitch through nearly every stage of the investigation. He shares Mitch's room, his bed, and his deductions; he gathers information that Mitch alone could not access, particularly from Belinda Eagle, his fiancée, who would have closed any door to a stranger; he keeps watch while Mitch eavesdrops on conversations; and at the moments of greatest danger he intervenes decisively. Late in the novel, when Mitch finds himself cornered in a hidden tunnel behind the panelling of Drekeham Hall while Sergeant Kennington threatens him with a revolver, it is Boy who saves him: "He had crawled noiselessly along the passage – obviously, he was shaping up to be a very useful detective's sidekick indeed" (Lear, 2006, p. 223). The sidekick rescues the detective and earns the affectionate epithet by which the tradition has always honoured him.

What the novel adds to the classical function, without ever supplanting it, is the erotic continuum within which it now occurs. Boy crawls towards Mitch in the tunnel; he hands him the gun; and he immediately climbs on top of him and starts kissing him, because the cramped space allows for nothing else and because the narrative Lear has built tolerates no separation between rescue and arousal. The investigative pair and the erotic pair are the same, and the novel's narrative force derives from this fusion. To remove the sex would not be to recover a chastely classical detective tale, but to break the engine of the book entirely, since the access Boy provides to suspects, the trust the household extends to a guest engaged to its daughter, the cover their public friendship gives to private investigations, and the bond that enables the two men to act in coordination through danger, are all functions of the erotic relationship between them. The convention of the pair is, in *The Back Passage*, intensified rather than undermined.

The country house weekend, the closed circle of suspects, and the cooperative incompetence of the local police compose a single arrangement: a sealed topography, a finite set of suspects, and an authority that defers to the amateur investigator (Cawelti, 1976; Knight, 1980). This domestic geography of suspicion, characteristic of Golden Age

crime writing, has an affinity with the spatial logic of the closet that relates closely to queer theory. The sealed house, where so much is kept behind respectable surfaces, gave the genre a setting in which the unspeakable could be present without being named, and criminal suspicion could share its atmosphere with a desire the period would not let into the open. Bernthal (2016), writing on Agatha Christie, has shown how readily the conventions of the classic mystery accommodated queer codes, from ambiguous bachelors to disguise and the instability of social identity. When Lear reoccupies Drekeham Hall and turns the country house weekend into a theatre of explicit desire, he draws out a structural closet the genre had contained all along rather than inventing a new use for the setting.

The novel keeps the genre's spaces and repurposes them: each is preserved, but made a stage for the desire the detective tale had kept out. The country house, in the classical convention, is a site of decorum: its corridors organise the formal life of the household, and its back passages, used by servants, are where the surface narrative is not. Lear literalises the title and reverses the priority. The cupboards under the stairs, the spy holes in the walls, the tunnels behind the panelling, the disused passageways become the principal stage of the novel. The aristocratic geography is preserved in every detail, but the back of the house, in both senses of the title's pun, displaces the front as the place where the story happens.

The circle of suspects shifts in the same way. The convention requires that everyone present remain a possible criminal until the final reconstruction, and the novel honours the requirement. What it adds is that nearly every man in the circle is also Mitch's actual or potential lover: Boy Morgan, Simon the hall boy, Hibbert the chauffeur, Leonard Eagle, Burroughs the butler, and the stableman. The same men who make up the field of suspicion make up the field of sexual circulation, with the significant exception of the police, whose place in that field is examined below.

The police complete the figure. Classical convention casts the local constabulary as a benign authority whose role is to legitimate the amateur's enquiry. In *The Back Passage* the constabulary is anything but benign. Sergeant Kennington and Constable Piggott are torturers who beat and sexually abuse a young suspect, joking about the size of his genitals while supervising the brutality. The civility of the cosy mystery is replaced by the obscene reality of state homophobia in the Britain of 1925, decades before the Sexual

Offences Act of 1967 (Cocks, 2003). This scene is not one erotic encounter among the others, and the novel does not offer it as one: the young man does not consent, and what the constabulary inflicts upon him is force rather than desire.

The classical detective tale closes with the reconstruction. The detective gathers the surviving suspects, narrates the chain of inferences that has produced his solution, identifies the criminal, and delivers the case to the legitimate authorities. The reconstruction is the formal seal of the genre's epistemic confidence: the world has been disordered by crime, and the detective has restored the order by reading it correctly. *The Back Passage* announces the convention with metafictional precision and then refuses to honour it. The penultimate chapter opens with Mitch's own acknowledgement of the form:

There comes a point in most Sherlock Holmes stories when the great detective takes Watson to one side and tells him that he has divined the truth behind the mystery, then demonstrates his superior powers of deduction by unraveling the entire story to the astonished sidekick (Lear, 2006, p. 158).

The acknowledgement is followed at once by an admission of failure. The solution arrives nonetheless, but it is not Mitch who delivers it. Rex Eagle, the elder son of the house, narrates the full chain of events in the closing pages, and Mitch is left to listen as the case closes around explanations supplied by another. The convention is preserved in form and emptied in function. The detective has lost his constitutive privilege over the truth.

Read in sequence, the conventions surveyed across this section produce a coherent picture. The detective as reader of signs is installed and then diverted by the body. The detective and his sidekick are constituted as a pair and then revealed as lovers. The country house, the circle of suspects, and the local police are preserved as structural features and converted into stages for the circulation of desire. The reconstruction is announced and then surrendered to a character who is not the detective. Each convention is, in Hutcheon's terms, installed and transformed at once. None is abandoned: what changes, across all of them, is the regime that organises the genre's universe. The cerebral hermeneutics of the classical detective tale is replaced, scene by scene, convention by convention, by the bodily hermeneutics of *The Back Passage*.

3 Below stairs: camp and carnival in *The Back Passage*

The parodic operation set out in the preceding section can be read at a second level, in which the same gestures appear as the realisation of an aesthetic-cultural register and the activation of a symbolic-social matrix. The register is *camp*, the modulation of irony, theatricality, and excess developed within twentieth-century queer urban culture as the inheritance and continuation of Wildean dandyism. Susan Sontag, in the essay that founded the critical study of the phenomenon, locates the core of camp in a theatricalised relation to experience and in a seriousness that knowingly fails to sustain itself (Sontag, 2013). As further developed by Babuscio (1977) and Cleto (1999), camp articulates irony with aestheticism, theatricality with humour, and binds them to a specifically queer sensibility that finds, in the failed seriousness of straight cultural forms, the material of its own pleasure.

The framework is carnivalisation, the literary entry of the symbolic economy of high/low inversion that Bakhtin reconstructs in his study of Rabelais. Its defining operation is lowering, a movement that brings what is high, abstract, and ideal down to the material-bodily plane, and the movement is fundamentally ambivalent, since the lower stratum is the place of birth and renewal as much as of death and decay: “Lowering digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (Bakhtin, 2025, pos. 1793). What follows reads *The Back Passage* in the conjunction of the two. The parodic rewriting of detective fiction analysed in the preceding section is performed in a camp register and activates, through that performance, a carnivalesque matrix in which the conventions of the genre are turned upside down rather than undone for the duration of the festival the novel stages.

The title of the novel is very revealing: *The back passage* names, in the geography of the country house, the corridor used by servants, the secondary passage that connects rooms without disturbing the formal life of the household. It also names, in the colloquial English of the period and of the present, the anus. The two senses do not alternate; they coexist, and the reader is required to hold them together. The pun is, in this sense, the inaugural gesture of the book, and it organises the entire narrative. The series that grew from it extends the procedure: *The Secret Tunnel* (2008), *A Sticky End* (2010), *The Sun Goes Down* (2015). Each title operates by the same double coding, and each invites the

reader to find, in the most innocent of architectural or temporal expressions, the sexual sense the convention had kept out of mention.

The double entendre is the gesture camp has historically claimed as its own. Irony has been identified as the first of the constitutive elements of the camp sensibility (Babuscio, 1977), and the irony in question is precisely this: the suspended duplicity by which an utterance offers itself to two audiences at once, one that hears only the innocent meaning, another that also catches what the innocent ear misses. The pleasure is, in part, the pleasure of recognition shared among those who hear both. The same logic of recognition organises the experience of parody. Hutcheon (1985) emphasises that the parodic gesture cannot perform its work without a competent reader, since the parodied conventions must be recognised as conventions before they can be perceived as transformed. Part of the pleasure of reading parodic texts is the pleasure of this complicity: the reader is invited to share with the author the knowledge of the tradition that the text is rewriting.

The same pun may also be read, in another light, as a particular enactment of the carnivalesque procedure Bakhtin describes. The corridor of the country house, an architectural feature of the upper world of aristocratic domesticity, is brought down to the body, and to the lowest part of the body. Lowering, in the technical Bakhtinian sense, is at work here – Bakhtin describes the topography of the grotesque body in unambiguous terms: “the top is the face (the head) and the bottom is the genital organs, the abdomen, and the buttocks. These absolute topographical senses of top and bottom are indeed what grotesque realism, including medieval parody, is working with” (Bakhtin, 2025, pos. 1788-1789). The architecture of the noble house and the anatomy of the lower stratum are placed, in *Lear’s* title, in the same word, and the word is then carried as the organising figure of the novel. The pun is camp because it is double, knowing, and shared with a reader the dominant culture had not anticipated; it is carnival because the doubling moves consistently in one direction, from the elevated to the bodily, from the salon to the back of the body, from the front entrance to the back passage.

The discovery of the body in the opening chapter is the founding scene of the novel, and read in the conjunction of camp and carnival it discloses their functioning. The reader will recall the setup: Sardines, the parlour game of the country house weekend; Mitch and Boy hidden in a cupboard under the stairs; Mitch performing the first sexual act of their

friendship; Boy approaching climax. At that precise instant, a scream echoes through the house. Belinda Eagle has found the body of Reg Walworth fallen from an adjoining cupboard. What gives the scene its force is not the discovery itself, which the genre had prepared, but the simultaneity – the corpse and the climax inhabit the same narrative instant.

The carnivalesque structure of the scene is striking. Bakhtin's grotesque realism describes an ambivalent topography in which death and birth, the grave and the womb, the lowering and the new beginning, may occupy the same symbolic space. The lower stratum is at once the place where things end and the place where they begin again. The cupboard from which Reg Walworth's corpse tumbles is a few feet from the cupboard in which Boy Morgan's body is having its first sexual experience with another man. The corpse falls, the body climaxes, and the two events are difficult to separate: one can scarcely be related without the other. The dead man and the living one, the grave and the womb of pleasure, are placed in adjacent cupboards under the same staircase. The grave that is also a womb is exactly the ambivalence Bakhtin attributes to grotesque lowering (Bakhtin, 2025), and his account of it reads here almost as stage direction.

The camp register in which this carnivalesque coincidence is performed is, in turn, what makes the scene legible as deliberate. The novel's narrator reports his withdrawal from Boy in a sentence that combines forensic vocabulary with operatic timing: "Reluctantly I relinquished Morgan's cock, stuffed him back into his pants and burst out of the cupboard" (Lear, 2006, p. 9). The reluctance, the inventory of bodies and trousers, the dramatic emergence into the corridor with the taste of precum still on the tongue, all theatricalise the moment beyond what the situation requires. Sontag's formulation returns here with particular force: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (Sontag, 2013, p. 319). The seriousness that fails is the seriousness of the country house murder mystery, which the genre had cultivated for nearly a century as the very emblem of decorum disturbed; what theatricalises that failed seriousness is the scene itself, arranged with full knowledge of the convention and evident pleasure in disarranging it.

The country house, in the configuration of the classical detective tale, is not only a sealed topography but a hierarchical one. Its upper floors house the family, its lower floors and back corridors house the servants, and the spatial arrangement repeats the social arrangement that gave the genre its political comfort. The amateur detective moves freely between the two levels because he is a gentleman, and the genre takes that mobility as an unspoken privilege of the form. *The Back Passage* preserves the architecture and inverts its social use. Mitch moves between the floors not as a gentleman investigator but as a desiring body, and the men he encounters on every floor become participants in the same erotic circulation. Simon the hall boy, Hibbert the chauffeur, Burroughs the butler, the stableman, the kitchen staff, and the policemen of the local town stand at the bottom of the social hierarchy of Drekeham Hall; Sir James Eagle, his sons Rex and Leonard, and his guests stand at the top. The novel arranges consensual encounters across the entire vertical hierarchy, indifferent to the boundaries that the country house mystery had always preserved as the unmarked frame of its decorum. Leonard Eagle himself, the queer son of the house, describes the arrangement to Mitch with precision:

It's like a great big daisy chain. The butler buggers the first footman, the first footman buggers the second footman, who buggers the hall boy, who buggers the boots; the head gardener buggers the under gardener, who buggers the nurseryman, who buggers the stable boy. [...] The whole place is Sodom-by-the-Sea (Lear, 2006, p. 83).

What this configuration enacts, beyond its contribution to the parody of the detective genre analysed in the preceding section, is the carnivalesque principle that Bakhtin reconstructs from the festive culture of late medieval and early modern Europe. The carnival is the temporary moment at which the social order suspends itself, the master meets the servant on the same plane, and the verticality of authority gives way to the horizontality of the festival. Bakhtin (2025) describes carnival as the moment that exposes the relativity of every rank and position, the festive sense that no hierarchy is permanent or absolute. The Drekeham of *The Back Passage* is precisely this kind of festival: the classical country house mystery had taken the vertical arrangement of the household for granted as the silent frame of its decorum; the novel makes it the explicit object of its inversion. The boundaries between Sir James and Hibbert, between Leonard and Simon, between the guest from Cambridge and the stable boy are crossed by bodies in a way that falls outside the conventions of the genre.

The carnival does not abolish the hierarchy of the country house, which is fully reinstated when the weekend ends and Mitch returns to Cambridge. This temporariness has been the basis of a critique of the Bakhtinian model, voiced influentially by Stallybrass and White (1986), for whom carnival is a licensed and ultimately conservative rite that the dominant order tolerates precisely because it changes nothing. The objection holds for the social hierarchy of Drekeham, which the novel does indeed restore. But what the novel does not restore is the silence: once the homoerotic life of the house has been brought to the page, the convention that had kept it off the page cannot be reinstated.

The same configuration, read in the camp register, reveals a further dimension. The pleasure the novel takes in its own indecorum is performed with deliberate excess, and the sexual scenes are arranged with a theatricality that sometimes seems to exceed the requirements of an erotic narrative. Babuscio identifies theatricality as one of the four constitutive elements of the camp sensibility and reads it specifically as an “exaggerated (usually sexual) role playing” (Babuscio, 1977, p. 45). The encounter between Mitch and Leonard Eagle, the young son of Sir James and Lady Caroline, lends itself readily to such a reading. Mitch and Leonard meet in a secluded woodland pool on the grounds of Drekeham, where Leonard appears as a “vampirelike, beautiful, just this side of effeminate” aristocrat (Lear, 2006, p. 16). The sexual encounter that follows is narrated less as physical urgency than as choreographed performance, and it closes with a wordless exit worthy of the silent screen:

Leonard adjusted his position with the precision of a seasoned fuckee, placed my fat bulbous head against his sphincter, and then engulfed me. [...] Leonard’s body hardly moved, but the vacuum inside him was playing merry hell with my cock. [...] Under the surface of his milky white, tight skin I could see the muscles of his abdomen and thighs working in subtle, sinuous rhythms – and all the while that gold fire in the eyes. [...] [He] saw Leonard springing to his feet like a cat stalking a bird. [...] With his shoes and socks in one hand, he padded through the bushes toward the house without a word of farewell, a kiss, even a caress (Lear, 2006, p. 25-27).

The passage speaks the language of stagecraft, not of appetite. Leonard moves “with the precision of a seasoned” performer; his body works in “subtle, sinuous rhythms” while Mitch is held in place as the spectator of a virtuosity directed at him; and his exit, feline and silent, completes the impression of a figure who has been performing throughout. The figure Leonard cuts is that of the silent-cinema seducer, the vamp of the 1920s screen

translated into male form. The reptilian glamour, the heavy-lidded control, and the theatrical departure all belong to the melodramatic repertoire of the era in which the novel is set. The affinity between camp and the iconography of the screen star is well established in the criticism: Dyer (1999) reads the gay attachment to the heightened performances of cinema as one of the constitutive gestures of the camp sensibility, and Sontag (2013) herself lists the flapper styles of the 1920s among her examples of the camp canon. Lear mobilises this repertoire with evident relish, casting Leonard as the languid screen seducer.

The novel performs one final inversion. Mitch is crowned detective from the second chapter onwards, when his credentials are itemised with care: medical training, an eye for forensic detail, a literary apprenticeship under Doyle and his successors, a position of social mobility within the household. The genre prepares the reader for the cognitive triumph this figure is supposed to deliver, and the reader is reminded of it at every stage of the investigation, since Mitch invokes Holmes repeatedly as his own implicit standard. The penultimate chapter announces the moment of triumph and then surrenders it. Mitch confesses his inability to resolve the case, and the solution is delivered, in his place, by Rex Eagle, the son of the house. The detective who had been crowned by the genre is decrowned by the novel.

The carnivalesque sense of the gesture is, again, the operative one. The mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king is, for Bakhtin, the founding rite of carnival, and its meaning is not the destruction of authority but the public demonstration that authority is provisional. The grotesque sense of the world, he writes, treats necessity itself as relative and limited, and the carnival sense of the world “destroy[s] limited seriousness [...] and free[s] human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new possibilities” (Bakhtin, 2025, pos. 2356-2358). Mitch is precisely such a decrowned figure. The cerebral hermeneut of the genre, presented by Knight (1980) as the agent of a mediation that orders the world for an anxious bourgeois reader, is shown to be a young man overwhelmed by desire, distracted from his own investigation, and finally outdone in the matter of reasoning by a character whose function in the genre had been merely to be one suspect among others. The figure of cognitive guarantorship is dethroned for the duration of the novel, and the dethronement does not

celebrate irrationality; it shows, festively, that the genre's claim to rationality had always been a convention, susceptible at any time to being reworked.

Concluding remarks

The Back Passage rewards the attention that criticism has so far withheld from it. Read as parody, it engages the detective genre across its long history, from Poe and Doyle to the country house tradition of the Golden Age, installing the conventions of detection only to rewrite them through the erotic. Read as carnival, it activates the Bakhtinian economy of high and low: the cerebral detective gives way to the desiring body, the noble house to its back passages, the rational hermeneut to a decrowned figure who cannot solve his own case. Read as camp, it performs this double operation in a register inherited from Wildean dandyism and the queer culture that followed, addressing a reader who recognises both the convention being transformed and the pleasure of its transformation.

These three readings converge to one. The parody is carnivalesque in its matrix and camp in its register, and the novel cannot be adequately described by any of the three terms alone. Lear reoccupies the conventions of detective fiction rather than discarding them, and the homoerotic intimacy that criticism has read as subtext in the genre since Holmes and Watson becomes, in his hands, the principle around which everything else is arranged. What this reoccupation recovers is not only a literary form but the economy of silence that the genre helped to sustain in a culture that policed homosexual desire. The cheerful explicitness of the novel, set in a decade when that desire was criminal, is in this sense a political gesture as much as an aesthetic one: it returns to the scene of the genre's discretion and refuses it. This is not a break with the tradition but a passage through it, by a route its standard histories have rarely traced.

That this route remains largely unmapped by criticism says more about the discipline than about the novel. Erotica, parody, and popular genre fiction have each been treated as marginal, and a work that occupies all three at once falls through the gaps between them. The present article has tried to show that the gap is worth entering, and that a novel built on a pun about a back passage has a good deal to say about how a genre is inherited, rewritten, and kept alive.

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