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Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair

Erin G. Carlston

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Secret Dossiers:

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The Jew was created by God to serve as a spy wherever treason is in preparation.

—Civiltà Cattolica, qtd in Nicholas Halasz, *Captain Dreyfus*

Homosexuals find nothing in France to their taste, not even the homeland, for they are internationalists.

—Armand Dubarry, *Les Invertis (le vice allemande)*

I do believe I was the first Dreyfusard.

—Marcel Proust, attributed

This essay investigates the representations of and relationships among male homosexuality, Jewish identity, and nationalism in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*,¹ focusing on Proust's treatment of the Dreyfus Affair, a turn-of-the-century espionage scandal involving a Jewish officer in the French Army. Writing his *magnum opus* in the years just before and during World War I, when nationalism and France's national aspirations were again crucially at stake, Proust found in the Dreyfus Affair a rich, politically current discursive paradigm for analyzing both Jewishness and homosexuality in relation to national identity. While **[End Page 937]** many critics have discussed the novelist's lifelong interest in the Affair,² none that I am aware of have noted that it was the centrality, not only of Jewishness, but also of sexuality, to the Affair that made it such a useful paradigm for Proust, allowing him to use "espionage" as an analog for Jewish and homosexual experience and thus to offer a reading of subaltern cultural and sexual identities and practices as treason.

Let us take a moment here to clarify the relationship between espionage and treason. Spies dissimulate their identities in order to convey information about one person or group to another person or group. Not all spies are traitors to their own nation, of course, but all are treacherous; they lie and deceive, performing loyalties that they do not actually feel. A spy's ability to pass as someone or something else is what makes such an agent both useful and irremediably dangerous. A spy's employer—a country, for instance—can never be sure that even the most apparently patriotic and dependable spy is not really a double agent. Thus, in the cultural imagination of nineteenth-century Europe, the ability of Jews and homosexuals to pass across normative, visible boundaries of racial and sexual classification left perpetually open the possibility that supposed members of the national community were only feigning allegiances they really owed to another racial or sexual tribe.³

Proust's reading of the relations between Jewishness, deviant sexuality, and treason was particularly responsive to predominant *fin-de-siècle* European cultural anxieties about the legibility of difference. Sander Gilman and others have demonstrated that there was an entrenched European tradition of concatenating Jewishness with sexual and/or gender deviance, dating back at least to the medieval period, when it was believed that Jewish men menstruated, thus failing to conform to gender norms so thoroughly as to constitute an interruption not only of the social, but of the natural, order. By the nineteenth century, scientific interest in the classification of biological types had modernized Christian religious hostility to both Judaism and sodomy, so that Jewishness and homosexuality were now apt to be viewed as pathic conglomerations of psychological and biological traits proper to all or most of the members of these classifications.

Thus the two categories were analogous in their configuration; most obviously, as one critic notes, "Both Jew and homosexual are other to society's Christian and heterosexual norms" (Diamant 179). But "Jew" [End Page 938] and "homosexual" (or "invert"), were not merely comparable terms for marginality or difference; the two were often mapped onto each other, mutually constructing each other in specific, significant ways as physiologically, socially, and politically alien. One of the most common (and for Proust, most significant) topoi of that mapping, for instance, was the already existing imbrication of Jewishness, the effeminate, and sexual decadence in Orientalist rhetoric, so that one French sexologist could speculate that Jews were, as orientals, particularly...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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