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It is with great excitement that we at Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal investigate and analyze our worlds. Curiosity fuels human interaction, and makes us better thinkers, communicators, teachers, partners, supervisors, and students. Interacting with a community of graduate students who inquire, analyze, and explore has invigorated the editorial board of Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal; we’ve entered a forum wherein we are able to work with our peers to improve and shape both the scholastic environment at Southern Connecticut State University and the greater community of graduate students across the globe.

This issue represents the work of graduate students from Connecticut, California, Georgia, North Carolina, Nebraska, and England whose inquisitive nature has led them to author papers, design artwork, review submissions, communicate extensively with one another, and seek out funding opportunities.

Without our reviewers, their efforts, and their professionalism, this publication would not exist. We would like to specifically thank our submission readers: Leslie Arthur, Kate Bellmore, Elena Byrne, Dana Canastar, Emily Cole, Alexandra DeLuise, Dan Fitzsimmons, Siobhan Jurczyk, Jeff Laude, Darcey Lovell, James Rizzi, Sarah Reeves, and Heather Santiago, some of whom have served as authors and readers for both issues of this journal.

As we finalize publication of Volume 1, Issue 2, Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal must say goodbye to three of our outstanding editors: Chelsea Dodds, Nicole Lowman, and Andrew Phelps. Although the journal will miss the spirit of inquiry and vigor that they’ve added as essential members of the editorial board, the legacy of scholarship, motivation, and know-how that they leave behind has shaped this publication.

This journal best exemplifies the spirit of curiosity, community, and camaraderie that push graduate students to thrive and Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal looks forward to further developing our scholastic community as we explore the Fall 2014/Winter 2015 topic, “Pop Culture in Context.”

All the best,

Chelsea Marie Dodds
Jennifer V. Garcia
Nicole Lowman
Andrew Phelps
Katherine Sutton
CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THE FALL 2014/WINTER 2015 ISSUE
OF
TEXT IN CONTEXT: A GRADUATE STUDENT JOURNAL

Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal is published electronically by graduate students in the English Department at Southern Connecticut State University. We seek submissions exploring the text itself and its function(s) and implications both internally and externally—literary analysis, poetry studies, critical theory, popular reception of a particular work, close readings, historical relevance, etc. Though the journal primarily deals with English studies, we welcome original papers from other disciplines, provided those papers focus on the text and/or its context—pedagogy and instructional design, localization of language in the brain, regional dialects and their origins, etc. We currently seek scholarly papers to include in the publication.

Special Topic: Pop Culture in Context

Volume 2, Issue 1 (Fall 2014/Winter 2015) will feature a section of papers devoted to popular culture and its contexts. Papers submitted to “Pop Culture in Context” should explore the ways in which popular culture circulates within texts, replicates itself through texts, or creates and shapes its own contexts through texts. A “text” may be visual or cultural; it need not be strictly literary. Some potential questions papers may address include, but are not limited to:

- Is popular culture primarily subversive or conservative?
- In what ways do the concerns of popular novels, graphic novels, films, music, and television series intersect with those of more canonical literary works?
- How are issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality explored and represented in popular contexts?
- To what degree is an understanding of how popular culture functions becoming an intrinsic part of our studies of anthropology, economics, history, literature, political science, sociology, art, culture, etc.?

“The Text and Time: Past, Present, Future”: Selected Papers

Once again, our Fall/Winter issue will feature selected papers from Southern Connecticut State University’s Annual Graduate English Conference. Volume 2, Issue 1 (Fall 2014/Winter 2015) will highlight selected papers from the April 26, 2014, conference, “The Text and Time: Past, Present, Future.”

Book Reviews

We are seeking book reviews of scholarly texts that have been published within the past two years (2012 to present). Reviews should be no more than 1,000 words and should conform to the MLA guidelines listed below.

See page 51 for Submission Guidelines.
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CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THE FALL 2014/WINTER 2015 ISSUE

“We Should Look the Part”: PERFORMING MASCULINITY IN DIVERGENT AND THE HUNGER GAMES

Amber Hodge

Gendered readings of The Hunger Games trilogy have proliferated since Susan Collins completed the trilogy with the publication of Mockingjay. Given the reception of Veronica Roth’s dystopian series, the Divergent trilogy seems likely to follow suit. To date most scholarship and popular media on The Hunger Games has concentrated on gender as it relates to the female protagonist. While such analyses are fruitful, they tend to come at the expense of representing the complex nature of masculinity and its role in the repression of the feminine. Strong male figures exist in both novels, but they act as either a complement or foil to the female lead, thus they can only be examined within the context of femininity. A review of ancillary male characters in the Divergent and The Hunger Games trilogies supports gender theories presented by Judith Halberstam and Judith Butler, namely the performative nature of gender and the role women play in constructing masculinity.

HELENA’S DEGRADATION IN SHAKESPEARE’S A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

Jazmin Sharif

A Midsummer Night’s Dream depicts Helena as one who struggles with her sense of identity. Exploring how Helena is treated in relation to how she refers to herself is crucial to uncovering the layers which make up Helena’s character. Demetrius treats her as a thing without value and in turn, Helena reduces herself to possession. Compelled by her desire to be loved by Demetrius, Helena’s humanity is willingly reduced to that of a dog. Scholars argue Helena’s misrepresentation of herself as an animal may be attributed to doting and love’s influence on her imagination. Helena’s desire to transform into another human being before desperately referring to herself as a dog encourages one to explore where and when these feelings take place. Helena’s degradation of identity takes place in her mind, regardless of her presence in the court or in the forest.
Nicole Lowman

As graduate students in the humanities, we are exposed to theoretical modes, cultural perspectives, historical periods, and their representative texts, each of which gives us an insight into how people processed information during a given era, as well as which behaviors were considered acceptable and which were “queer.” By tracing “queer” words in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, one discovers a change in cultural attitudes toward sexual “others.” Even the word “queer” began as an adjective connoting something odd, peculiar or suspicious and is now used as a neutral and encompassing term for folks whose lifestyles fall outside of heterosexuality. Despite the semantic shift of “queer” words in the English language and the recognition of same-sex marriage by an increasing number of states in the U.S., many states maintain essentially homophobic laws. This introduction to the special section provides a cursory overview of linguistic and legal progress for the queer population in the United States, as well as an acknowledgement of the country’s sustained heteronormative ideology.

Katherine Robbins

Just like it is hard to pinpoint twenty-first century perspectives on sexuality, it is equally challenging to isolate early modern England’s viewpoint on sex. Given how the usual words of pleasure are made chaste, I started my quest elsewhere by looking at texts that address male pleasure, female pleasure, and couples’ pleasure in the sixteenth century in a more explicit manner. For instance, “pornographic” texts, like Pietro Aretino’s *I Modi*, speak to sex explicitly and help address what is going on in the rhetoric of sexuality when censorship is taken out of the equation. What is intriguing is there are reoccurring ideas in these explicit erotic texts that are reprised in a more implicit way in early modern texts. For instance, Aretino’s *I Modi* showcases male sexual pleasure as separateness between person and genitals whereas women’s pleasure is a union of genitals, sensation, and person. Yet, despite the differences in how each sex experiences pleasure, the *I Modi* shows that mutuality and unity is the focal point of couples having sex. These same discussions also appear in the works of Nashe, Herrick, Donne, Middleton, and Shakespeare. By looking at the rhetoric of the explicitly erotic text *I Modi*, this paper analyzes the use of synecdoche and personification in discussing male pleasure in Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines,” versus the use of metonym and the language of “mutuality” in describing a woman’s and couples’ pleasure in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. 
Joshua Commander

In *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, Shakespeare weaves a sexually misogynistic subtext throughout the dialogue of the play that effectively serves to metaphorically reduce Desdemona to merely her sexual organs. This figurative dehumanization of Desdemona acts as a thematic touchstone to the play’s character-driven theme of misogyny; moreover, the play’s persistent symbolic emphasis on Desdemona’s genitalia calls into question whether or not she and Othello consummated their marriage. By examining the secondary connotations and associated imagery of the terms used to refer to Desdemona, we will uncover not only additional trespasses upon her innocence, but also indications of her dying a virgin.

Vernon Lee’s “Beauty and Sanity” and 1895: Color and Cultural Response

Liz Renes

Vernon Lee’s 1895 publication in the *Fortnightly Review*, entitled “Beauty and Sanity,” was published during a year that saw two significant occurrences that would have wide reaching effects on British sexual subcultures: Oscar Wilde’s infamous trial for sodomy and the translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* into English. Lee’s essay can be read as both a form of emotional expurgation, one which explores in depth her own anxiety about her suppressed Sapphic tendencies through language that oscillates along lines of “health” and “disease”, but also as a marked understanding and response to the events surrounding her. Lee’s own views can be gleaned from one example in particular—her discussion on the cultural symbolism of whiteness and the color’s implications of health and morality, a symbolism she reacts against. This work attempts to dig beneath the surface to understand and translate what whiteness really represents, in a view that it relates distinctly to Lee’s own notions and inner dialogues about an alternative feminine sexuality.

(Homo)Sexual Conflicts within the Self in Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers*

Erik Cofer

Criticism of Henry James often discusses his status as a closeted homosexual male. Perhaps the seminal analysis of queer Jamesian analysis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “The Beast in the Closet” confronts the issue of homosexual panic in James’s “The Beast in the Jungle.” Written fifteen years earlier, however, was a novel (or novella) similarly indicative of homosexual anxiety. My analysis of *The Aspern Papers* focuses on the narrator’s divided self; his refusal to acknowledge his homoerotic desire fuels the novel’s action. The novel demonstrates the friction caused by the collision of opposing forces—desire and shame.
Alexandra DeLuise

Virginia Woolf’s novel *Jacob’s Room* follows the life of Jacob Flanders, one of many young men to be killed during World War I. Throughout the novel, it is clear that Jacob’s sexuality is a complicated situation. Jacob does not overtly prefer the company of men to women, or vice versa; instead, Jacob is a queer character. His sexual preferences deviate from social conventions as he chooses to have sex with prostitutes and experiences at least one instance of homosexual love. Jacob’s sexuality is even confusing to himself, as he constantly applies the desires felt for his male companions onto the females he is with, leading only to disappointment when those women fail him in their intellectual capacity. In looking through the details, Jacob can be seen as a man preferring intellectual stimuli, who battles with his desires for female flesh against his quest to have an intelligent conversation.
Text in Context
"We Should Look the Part": Performing Masculinity in *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*

Amber Hodge

Gendered readings of *The Hunger Games* have proliferated since Susan Collins completed the trilogy with the publication of *Mockingjay*. Given the reception of Veronica Roth’s dystopian series and its commonalities with Collins’ work, the *Divergent* trilogy seems likely to follow suit. To date most scholarship and popular media on *The Hunger Games* has concentrated on gender as it relates to Katniss, the female protagonist. For instance, in a recent article from the children’s literature journal *The Lion and the Unicorn*, one writer invokes Lacan in her analysis of Katniss as a “sacrificial object,” noting that her identity is based on the role she assumes as provider and protector following the death of her father (Tan 57). This is not the only interpretation that draws attention to Katniss’s tendency to assume a masculine role. In fact, most discussions of gender remark on her ability to traverse gender norms; she is, for example, frequently described as “a heroine who embodies traditionally masculine characteristics” (Lem and Hassel 121). While such analyses prove fruitful, they tend to underestimate the complex nature of masculinity and its role in the repression of the feminine.

Strong male figures exist in both novels, but they serve as either a complement or foil to the female lead, thus one can truly only examine them in the context of the narrator (and, consequently, femininity). While “it is crucial to recognize that masculinity does not belong to men, has not been produced only by men, and does not properly express male heterosexuality,” it is also important to acknowledge that “masculinity is a negative identity predicated fundamentally on what it is not; masculinity is understood as not-femininity” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 241; McCormack 27). Though completely disentangling these concepts is impossible, by reviewing characters who fall outside of the narrative of the heterosexual romance so essential to most young adult (YA) texts, I hope to address some of the more nuanced implications of masculine presentations.

For this purpose, this paper will focus on Al (who appears only in *Divergent*) and Finnick (whose character is introduced in *Catching Fire*; he takes on a more significant role in *Mockingjay*). *Divergent* is set in futuristic Chicago, which is now separated into five factions based on the trait each group most values: Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite. At age sixteen, children raised in this society choose which faction they will join based on the results of an aptitude test (though, ultimately, they can select any group based on preference). Al is raised in Candor but transfers into Dauntless the same year as the narrator, Tris. The America envisioned by *The Hunger Games* is separated into twelve districts, divided by the product they manufacture, and a “Capitol” that leads the districts and consumes the results of their labor. The yearly Hunger Games, in which one boy and girl between ages twelve and eighteen from each district is sent to a fight to the death, serve to remind the districts’ citizens of the power the Capitol (whose citizenry delights in the Games) holds over them. Finnick, a victor of one of these Games, is from District 4, which houses the fishing industry. Both narrators provide specific descriptions of those with whom they interact; their commentaries on Al and Finnick, who occupy nearly opposite ends of the physical spectrum, offer revelations into perceptions of the male body. While Katniss and Tris have little in common, each provides a distinct perception of masculinity. This paper explores the ways in which ancillary male characters in *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* trilogies affirm gender theories presented by prominent feminist and gender performance scholar, Judith Halberstam, and her predecessor (one of the founders of modern Queer Theory), Judith Butler, namely the performative nature of gender and the role women play in constructing masculinity.
Butler’s and, by extension, Halberstam’s theories of gender are predicated on the idea that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” and is “historically and culturally situated” (Butler 901; McCormack 23). This situation of gender identity is based on circumstances that surround the development of socially accepted gender roles. These roles have become the foundation of modern society, which also serves as the basis for these dystopian narratives. As Halberstam observes, “masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 2). The pervasiveness of masculinity cannot be understated, particularly as these gender roles appear to become more malleable. Butler applies Foucault’s work on criminals to gender, noting “the subject that is freed is even more deeply shackled than originally thought” (909). This can be seen in tomboyism, which is tolerated socially, even encouraged, as long as it is “linked to a stable sense of girl identity” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 6). While it is acceptable for women to have masculine characteristics, Judy Simons observes, “there is no direct equivalent of the word ‘tomboy’ for boys who behave like girls, or at least no equivalent that is not much more pejorative” (152). Masculinity is prized in the schema surrounding traditional gender roles, which, according to critical theorist Lois Tyson, set men as “rational, strong, protective, and decisive” and women as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (85). Like gender roles, YA novels are also situated in a specific time and place. Each is equally important to understanding the context in which Divergent and The Hunger Games are written and, consequently, the messages they intend to convey.

In The High School Journal, Melissa Ames claims that young adult dystopian narratives are an aspect of a larger, post-9/11 phenomenon. She believes the proliferation of dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives in the YA genre are a form of coping mechanisms for adolescents growing up in a “climate of fear” (7-8). While the current circumstances are distinct, they do echo as a variation on a similar theme. For the past five decades, YA dystopian novels have responded to the political atmosphere of their times with the imagination of new societies resulting from technological collapse, human-made environmental disasters, and the pursuit of human perfection (8). Regardless of the circumstances, most popular teen-oriented dystopian books since 2001 have involved “a government that seeks to quell rebellious impulses” and allude to the current cultural climate, typically as it involves surveillance, the media, or religion (9). Divergent and The Hunger Games epitomize these characteristics and, as such, are ideal representatives of modern perceptions of masculinity. Such acuities are particularly evident in their narrative descriptions of the male body, which include corporeal manifestations ranging from the grotesque to the ideal.

The “big body as the grotesque body” traces its roots to Rabelais; in children’s literature, it “may be funny or fearsome, but it is always readily available for observation” (McGillis 261). Divergent’s Al is the personification of the “big body,” particularly as spectacle. Tris introduces him when recounting her first night in her new faction. She is trying to fall asleep in the room for faction transfers when “[a] strangled sound interrupts the breathing, followed by a heavy sob. Bed springs squeal as a large body turns and a pillow muffles the sobs, but not enough. They come from the bunk next to mine—they belong to a Candor boy, Al, the largest and broadest of all the initiates. He is the last person I expected to break down” (Roth 74).

This introduction contrasts Al against his physical presence. His crying immediately categorizes him as weak, not as a result of his tears (Tris acknowledges she also cries the first night), but because he expresses his emotions. Despite his distinctly masculine, physical presence, Al is emotionally available and supportive, which leads the narrator to believe that “Maybe he is too kind for Dauntless” (107). Tris consistently refers to his size, describing his ability to “[lift] me easily into the [train] car,” calling him a “rolling boulder,” and referring to her leg as “barely half the width of his” (121, 249, 189). Despite Al’s imposing physicality, Tris notices “there is something heavy about even his smiles” (247). Although he is physically dominant, he
is not as emotionally sound as the other initiates, reinforcing the idea that masculinity (taking the form of bravery here) “has little if anything to do with biological maleness” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 3). The Dauntless initiates are ranked based on skill, regardless of gender, further emphasizing the concept that in this society gender is based on ability, not genitalia.

Al’s physicality ultimately represents a struggle at the heart of the novel, the “two different kinds of Dauntless—the honorable kind, and the ruthless kind” (Roth 95). Mentally, Al is honorable (for example, he intentionally loses fights that are part of the initiation process because his size gives him an advantage), but his body generates an expectation of ruthlessness. He is unable to reconcile this incongruity. Eventually, Al commits suicide, and his bulk is emphasized even in death. Tris sees “Someone has brought a large black bag to put the body in. I can tell that it will be too small” (303). Roth’s emphasis on Al’s size provides a direct contrast to what Roderick McGillis calls a common trope in children’s literature: “the body’s fragility, and the power of bigness” (263). *Divergent* presents a version of masculinity that is all mental; Al’s size could not have prevented his death, but perhaps mental fortitude could have.

*The Hunger Games*’ Finnick, meanwhile, tackles another form of masculinity, the ideal body. Like Al, Finnick is described in great physical detail, but with an emphasis on sexuality. When Katniss first meets Finnick his “famous sea green eyes are only inches from mine . . . [and] he’s got so much bare skin exposed . . . no trainer could claim to have given him . . . his extraordinary beauty. [He is] tall, athletic, with golden skin and bronze-colored hair and those incredible eyes” (Collins, *Catching Fire* 208). Katniss goes on to imply that his attractiveness is one of the main reasons he won the Games the year he participated; he constantly received gifts from viewers in the Capitol, including the most expensive she had ever seen (a weapon that was instrumental to his victory).

As indicated by descriptions of Finnick, defined male bodies have become “spectacular objects, seemingly defining for our culture the ideal male body and, by implication, masculinity itself” (Buchbinder 221). If we are to understand maleness by gender stereotypes, however, Finnick somewhat complicates the definition of masculinity. Over the course of the novel, Katniss reveals “The citizens of the Capitol have been drooling over him ever since [his Games] . . . Old or young, lovely or plain, rich or very rich, he’ll keep them company and take their extravagant gifts, but he never stays, and once he’s gone he never comes back” (Collins, *Catching Fire* 209). This playboy image is undercut when Katniss discovers she and Finnick “were never real lovers. Just people like our old Head Peacekeeper, Cray, who bought desperate girls to devour and discard because he could” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 170). Finnick, like other victors, was forced into prostitution under threat of death to his loved ones. By equating him to girls who would exchange sex for food, Katniss is emphasizing the commodification of Finnick’s body and his lack of agency in the process. Despite his strength, bravery, and physical perfection, Finnick is no more able to defend himself from the Capitol than anyone else. If Jennifer Mitchell is correct in her belief that “*The Hunger Games* centers on questions of power: how one accesses, uses, and abuses it,” then power is not in masculinity, at least not its physical manifestation (129).

Although the focus here is masculinity as it relates to men, it is important to pause and recognize a significant component of these narratives that cannot be ignored: the female gaze. As women tell both stories, the reader’s view of these men is provided from a female perspective. In her explanation of female reaction shots in film, Halberstam notes the female actor “provides a powerful image of female voyeurism” (“Oh Behave!” 445). While actual visual perceptions are not possible in literature, female narrators act as the sole source of information, ensuring readers interpret ancillary characters through the gaze of a woman (which, can be as much as threefold, in that the authors, and the majority of readers, are also women). Some critics have referred to recent portrayals of the female gaze as “a further opportunity for commodification, in this particular instance, of the male body, produced by the media as ‘desire-worthy’ by
women” (Buchbinder 222). While commodification likely plays a role, another trend may also be present here, the idea that “[m]asculinity . . . has finally been recognized as, at least in part, a construction by female- as well as male-born people” (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 13). Even if what is seen is not a useful measure of gender, the viewer is still identifying the subject as male based on physicality alone, thus perpetuating Halberstam’s notion that “naming confers, rather than reflects, meaning” (Female Masculinity 25). While gender cannot be determined from what is seen, each narrator’s continued conveyance of meaning onto the physical keeps the gender binary alive.

Emphasis on Finnick’s sexuality points to the role gender paradigms play in the construction of power. Mitchell employs Butler’s theories to demonstrate how gender roles entrap society. She insists that in The Hunger Games, “the Capitol itself has seemed to move beyond . . . archaic [gender] markers, those elements are meant for the sake of the districts” (Mitchell 136). Those in power “embrace a culture that celebrates the malleability of body and self” by encouraging men and women to “play by exactly the same rules and use the same gendered markers” while imposing rigid gender standards on those in the districts, particularly those selected as tributes in the Hunger Games (135). By separating the body from gender, citizens of the Capitol are not only exerting a certain level of personal independence, they are also more successfully able to oppress victors, like Finnick, who become sexualized and, thus, commodified.

As Butler states, “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is only real to the extent that it is performed” (907). The Hunger Games and Divergent series help expose the fabrication of gender performance. Each narrative demonstrates, to some extent, that concepts of masculinity are far more mental than physical. The most successful people in these dystopian versions of America are those who are able to identify the false constructions of gender and, instead, adopt characteristics that are presently understood as either masculine or feminine. These novels send a similar message to young adult readers. Divergent emphasizes that no one should choose between Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite; rather, society most benefits from individuals who embody all of those characteristics. Likewise, The Hunger Games demonstrates that to survive and flourish, it is not enough to be strong; one must also be compassionate. In each case, even ancillary characters exemplify the artificial structures that support the current understanding of masculinity. As Halberstam notes regarding the current state of society “It is the equation of maleness plus masculinity that adds up to social legitimacy” (Female Masculinity 16). Although these dark visions of the future may be flawed, it is possible that they may have some advantage over the present: self-actualization is a mental, not physical construct.

Works Cited


When referring to objects, the line between possession and property blurs slightly: the difference lies in value. Critic Erica Sheen relates a 1520 legal case which required a distinction to determine whether a dog was possession or property. During the argument regarding Sir William Filow’s case, Filow’s bloodhound was allegedly stolen by a servant. Sheen references Justice Anthony Fitzherbert who invoked the common law, “a dog was ‘a thing of pleasure’ and therefore had no value and could not be stolen” (89). A dog was declared to be a thing, lacking significant value, reduced to nothing more than a possession. Justice Richard Broke countered Fitzherbert: “the principle of occupation, the process by which things held in common, like animals, wood, and water, become property when someone enters the territory they inhabit and reduces them into possession” (89). Broke’s comment implies that a thing becomes property when it is reduced to possession by someone else through tame obedience, separated from the liberty of the wilderness. What about when a possession is not an object, but a human being instead? William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream introduces a character who willingly degrades herself to be the object of desire to a man who desires someone else. As a whole, the play offers escape into the forest where lovers are hoodwinked into changing love interests before the ending unites respective Jacks with their Jills. Lysander and Hermia flee into the woods to possess one another in marriage, pursued by Demetrius who is followed by Helena. Helena spends much of the play struggling with her identity in hopes that Demetrius might find her attractive again, as he indeed “made love” to Helena before (I.i.107). While a person’s identity naturally changes over time, Helena’s identity shifts rapidly throughout the play. Helena’s identity refers to her sense of self, a sense of humanity dismissed in Act II and rejuvenated in Act V.

While Sheen’s concern engages other Shakespeare plays, King Lear and Hamlet, her discussion on possession and property are appropriate to Helena’s struggle over identity. Initially, Helena wishes to be like a woman other than herself so Demetrius might look at her the same way he gazes upon Hermia. Later, Helena reduces her identity to that of a dog in the hopes that he simply acknowledges her. Helena thrusts herself into the wild forest to chase Demetrius and convince him she is worthy of being his property. Demetrius insults Helena but does not treat her as property; he treats her like an insignificant being. Helena would be grateful to be a thing of pleasure for Demetrius, but instead she remains a nuisance to him for quite some time. Nothing deters her from this quest for his love, including his direct displays of disinterest and vulgar insults. Helena has lost sight of her sense of self and spends duration of the play struggling to stabilize her identity long enough to be content in her own skin. To highlight Helena’s transformation, it proves essential to visit moments in the play-text in which Helena reduces her humanity to property and possession through doting on Demetrius like a dog to its owner.

The first instance where Helena reveals dissatisfaction with her identity is in comparison to Hermia. Hermia’s compliment to Helena’s appearance as “fair” sparks a self-deprecating speech (I.i.180). Helena responds with Hermia’s fair qualities, wishing such qualities were as contagious as sickness, expressing, “Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated, / The rest I’d give to be to you translated” (I.i.190-191). She wants to look, speak and act like Hermia. Helena and Hermia are both women of the Athenian court, but Helena is unable to appreciate her own value as she values Hermia’s beauty above their upper-class status. With reference to this speech, Barry Weller notes, “Here Helena imagines de-facing herself, erasing her own identity to assume that of another; the transfiguration begins with disfiguration,” and Helena
ultimately disfigures herself through her language (72). Helena’s character instantly becomes more complex. Like many women, Helena is complex and not content in her own skin. Helena feels out of place, unworthy, and, in keeping with Weller’s language, Helena disfigures her identity in her first failed attempt to gain Demetrius’s affection.

Helena’s second failed attempt to woo Demetrius proves to be the most important depiction of her debasement when she overtly calls herself a spaniel. Here, she follows Demetrius into the forest, offers herself up as possession in the form of a dog,

'I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me I will fawn on you.  
Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,  
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,  
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.  
What worser place can I beg in your love—  
And yet a place of high respect with me—  
Than to be used as you use your dog? (II.i.203-210)

This self-loathing language does not consist of wishes, like Helena’s speech on being like Hermia. Instead, Helena deliberately calls herself Demetrius’s spaniel, admitting that the more he insults her, the more she will flatter him. She would be used, struck, neglected, and lost just for permission merely to follow Demetrius. The word “me” is repeated eight times within eight lines, giving an echo of Helena’s desperation for this man to have her or allow her to serve under him. What sounds like a moment of redemption undercuts itself, “What worser place can I beg in your love / And yet a place of high respect with me” (II.i.208-209). When she says “worser place,” it seems she is aware of how low she has degraded herself, as she has resorted to begging. The physical “place” to which she refers may be the forest, a wood of respect. Any physical plain with Demetrius would be respected by Helena. A closer reading of these lines suggests, however, that the “place” to which she refers is the status of a dog, a status that Helena views with respect, as any position to serve Demetrius merits respect. She would respect her base position as common possession to be used as property, as long as she belongs to Demetrius somehow.

In review, Helena has transformed from wanting to be another woman to professing herself a spaniel. Helena’s dismissal of her humanity harkens back to Erica Sheen whose article later engages Hamlet’s Hecuba to discuss female characterization as Shakespeare “addresses the animal as a potential within the human…” (97). An animal is not potentially something within Helena’s humanity; she is willing to replace her humanity with that of an animal identity. Helena calls herself a spaniel, but she is not just any spaniel—she is Demetrius’s spaniel. Her speech displays the open, delusional heart of a love-struck woman reducing herself to a dog begging for attention from its master.

Helena is not so delusional that she becomes unaware of conventions of courtship. Shortly after her spaniel speech, she claims “[women] cannot fight for love as men may do; / We should be wooed, and were not made to woo” (II.i.241-242). Yet, Helena spends much of the play pursuing and wooing Demetrius like a chivalric knight doting upon a lovely maiden. Helena’s persistence utterly reverses the roles regarding traditional conventions of courtly love. Possessions essentially hold no monetary value, but being of the court, it is safe to infer Helena is a woman of worth. This worth raises her, for lack of a better word, to property status, only she does not believe she possesses worth unless Demetrius tells her so.

In professing herself as an unworthy possession, Helena comes to believe her own delusion as she has already professed herself as Demetrius’s dog. Helena’s love-influenced imagination misreports her identity and disfigures her humanity in two forms of doting recently described by Robert Dent: the first as unrequited love and the second as having affection for an unworthy object (117). Helena delves into both forms of doting, because her love is unrequited.
and her object of affection, Demetrius, is unworthy in his insults. An insult like, “I’ll run from thee and hide me in the brakes, / And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts” is not only unworthy of love, but unwelcoming to love (II.i.227-228). Robert Dent proclaims love’s effect on imagination has the power to lift an object higher than it is or reduce the object as “base and vile” through rejection (119). Harkening back to the relation between Helena’s behavior and conventions of courtly love, the knight places the maiden on a mental pedestal in heaven. Helena places Demetrius so far above herself that she goes a step further in lowering herself to the species of an animal. She not only feels base and vile; she believes she is base and vile.

Helena’s self-loathing state of mind hinders her ability to trust when characters compliment her as a lady as opposed to an animal or object. In the forest, Puck charms Demetrius and Lysander into loving Helena, who in turn, does not believe their feelings are genuine. Helena’s skeptical attitude does not mean she stops loving Demetrius. Helena rejects herself, feeling mocked and utterly hurt by Lysander and Demetrius’s newfound dotage,

If you were civil and knew courtesy,
You would not do me thus much injury.
Can you not hate me—as I know you do—
But you must join in souls to mock me too?
If you were men, as men you are in show,
You would not use a gentle lady so,
To vow and swear and superpraise my parts
When I am sure you hate me with your hearts. (III.ii.148-155)

The instance Helena appears to own her humanity is also an instance when she feels she is being preyed upon for sport. Helena degraded as animal, finally refers to herself as a “gentle lady” but still feels mocked for entertainment like an animal (III.ii.153). Helena’s dog-like behavior and reduced form of identity disturb readers and viewers without question. By now, Helena’s human identity has merged with her imagined animal identity during her time as Demetrius’s spaniel to where she no longer accepts reason as enough proof of his love.

Catherine Belsey discusses how humans are subject to desire in her article, “Desire in the Golden World: Love’s Labour’s Lost and As You Like It.” To Belsey, desire is expressed through courtship, which leads to marriage and consummation. Without courtship, human desire would be no different from animal desire. Resolution to desire in A Midsummer Night’s Dream is displayed through marriage and blessings. The role reversal between Helena and Demetrius presents itself as a completely different form of desire, combining human with animal desire. If Demetrius made love to Helena in the space of time before the play begins, desire is achieved without marriage, paralleling the behavior of animals. In the same way, Helena hopes to gain Demetrius’s affection through offering herself as his animal and possession. Without marriage, Helena would still fawn one Demetrius; with marriage, Helena’s identity is unknowingly tainted by the end. Helena feels less sorrow and the self-deprecating language stops, to an extent. Even though eventually Demetrius expresses, “And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,/ The object and the pleasure of mine eye / Is only Helena,” she is not fully convinced (IV.i.166-168). Even under a charm, Demetrius plainly refers to Helena as an object. She is the faith and virtue of Demetrius’s heart, but she is still an object, pleasing to the eye. Helena has grown used to being ignored, insulted and mistreated. Just before her final line in the play, Helena’s language reveals a shadow of doubt, “So methinks, / And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own and not mine own” (IV.i.186-188). Demetrius once loved Hermia, but now loves Helena as if through consolasion. Even so, the couples pass time by watching Pyramus and Thisbe, are blessed, and achieve the happy ending. It is almost as if Helena has forgotten or has silently forgiven Demetrius’s curses and vulgarity.

Does Helena remain a dog-like piece of possession or property by the play’s end? As for possession, Helena’s desire is achieved; therefore, the need to act inferior has passed. As for
property, she becomes property in the sense that she becomes Demetrius’s wife. No longer his spaniel, Helena is given equality as she is not left out of the marriages. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, humans envy animals for their honest ability to live “unhistorically” and forget (61). He compares this mode of living to a child who has yet to accumulate a past, “having as yet nothing of the past to shake off, [a child] plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future” (61). Regarded as absurd, Helena’s behavior is influenced by love, as Dent might agree, and even Puck believes “reason and love keep little company / together nowadays” (III.i.127-128). Helena’s happy ending serves as her blissful blindness because all appears forgiven. While impossible to interpret a character’s life outside of the confines of the play-text, Helena’s identity remains like an animal’s in that she appears to forget the heartache she experienced during the majority of the play. A Midsummer Night’s Dream offers an identity-reel for Helena as the audience watches her transform from wanting to be like Hermia, to offering herself as possession in the form of a dog-like companion, to acting as male courtly lover, to asserting herself a lady, and to ultimately achieving long-awaited status as Demetrius’s wife. Helena is not just a self-proclaimed possession to be beaten or neglected; she is a character to experience, relate to, cry with and cry for, dismiss, or enjoy as we see fit.

Works Cited


SEX

Text in Context

EXPLORING SEX AND SEXUALITY IN TEXTS
SEX IN CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

Nicole Lowman

In writing my Master’s thesis at Southern Connecticut State University, I studied psychoanalytic, social, and cultural theory, as well as literary and film criticism. A common thread among the articles, chapters, and books I read was sex and sexuality. To be fair, a main focus of my argument centered on the way in which patriarchal gender ideals cause psychic trauma for the main characters of the texts I explored, so it was only logical that I would seek out rather than simply stumble upon writings that touch at least peripherally on sex and sexuality. What was most interesting to me were the ways in which anatomical sex points to specific cultural expectations of gender and that expectations of gender are often associated with a given sexuality—heteronormativity. It is true, however, that presuming heteronormativity is less common than it was even a decade ago, and that, in the last forty to fifty years, Western society has become increasingly more accepting of multiple sexualities and gender identifications.

By tracing “queer” words in The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), one can follow the cultural shift, or at least determine the beginnings of said shift, in attitude toward sexual “others.” Even the word “queer” began as an adjective connoting something odd, peculiar or suspicious and is now used as a neutral and encompassing term for folks whose lifestyles fall outside of heterosexuality. The first usage of “homosexual” as an adjective is noted in 1892 and as a noun in 1912. “Gay,” as a slang word in the United States for a homosexual person, was officially recognized in 1922. “Lesbian,” meaning “a woman who is sexually attracted to other women” and not someone from the island of Lesbos, entered into the lexicon in 1927. Prior to the introduction of these late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century terms, any sexual behavior outside heterosexuality—“considered to be unnatural”—was termed “sodomy,” a word originating in the book of Genesis, the first usage of which the OED dates to 1297.

Today, “sodomy” is not typically used to mean a sexual abomination and is instead mostly used to connotate anal sex, usually within legal contexts. As unnerving as it may sound to liberal-minded individuals, and despite the legality of gay marriage in nineteen states, sodomy laws still exist in the United States, often coupled with prohibitions against bestiality. In Idaho, “the infamous crime against nature, committed with mankind or with any animal” is punishable by a minimum of five years in prison. That state governments in the U.S. still have laws on record equating bestiality with homosexual sex is appalling and archaic. Despite the 2003 landmark finding of the Massachusetts State Court in Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health that barring an individual from the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage solely because that person would marry a person of the same sex violated the Massachusetts Constitution in that such a marriage ban did not meet the rational basis test for either due process or equal protection, where the Commonwealth failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriage to same-sex couples, Massachusetts still maintains in its constitution a “crime against nature” clause regarding sodomy, similar to that of Idaho. The retention of sodomy laws despite the increasingly more favorable public and legal view of homosexuality seems to indicate a sustained heterosexual ideology that ostracizes the queer population. This statement is not meant as an indictment but rather as an acknowledgement of the work still necessary to guarantee civil and social rights to all in the United States, regardless of sexual identity.
As graduate students in the humanities, we are exposed to theoretical modes, cultural perspectives, historical periods, and their representative texts, each of which gives us an insight into how people processed information during a given era, as well as which behaviors were considered acceptable and which were “queer.” What I often find most interesting is following the chronological path of ideological perspective to determine how norms and ideals have changed and what remains consistent. From the cursory account of linguistic and legal history above, it is clear that heteronormativity remains the dominant ideological force, but a diversity of love, sex, and sexuality is continually gaining political and social ground.

The following five papers illuminate the cultural perception of acceptable sex by examining literary texts, beginning with the sixteenth century and moving through the early twentieth century. The first two papers—Katherine Robbins’ “Explicitly Speaking: Rhetoric of Sexuality in Early Modern Texts” and Joshua Commander’s “’O! To Die for an Eye is to Die for Nothing!’: An Examination of the Sexually Misogynistic Subtext in Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice”—examine early modern perceptions of sex, perceptions that were formed long before the introduction of words like “homosexual” and “lesbian” to the English language and may have been influenced by England’s Buggery Act of 1533, which “declared ‘the detestable and abhomynable vice of buggery committed with mankynde or beaste’” to be a capital offense (Boehrer 49). The final three pieces—Liz Renes’ “Vernon Lee’s ‘Beauty and Sanity’ and 1895: Color and Cultural Response,” Erik Cofer’s “(Homo)Sexual Conflicts with the Self in Henry James’s The Aspern Papers,” and Alexandra DeLuise’s “Physical and Intellectual Sexuality in Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room”—probe texts that more openly examine queer characters and their relationships. Although these papers provide a cursory context of the changing perspectives surrounding sex and sexuality throughout history, each here included provides a thorough inquiry into how sex functions in specific texts. As a chronological overview, these papers shed light on ever-changing perceptions of sex in the English-speaking world, as represented through literature.

References


Suggested Reading


EXPLICITLY SPEAKING: RHETORIC OF SEXUALITY IN EARLY MODERN TEXTS

Katherine Robbins

Just as it is difficult to pinpoint twenty-first-century perspectives on sexuality, it is equally challenging to isolate early modern England’s viewpoints on sex. Searching Shakespeare’s First Folio for words like “desire,” “pleasure,” and “lust,” words that modern audiences associate with sex, yields rather pedestrian results. For instance, the word “pleasure” occurs around 250 times, which could speak to a period that was erotically minded, and yet the majority of those instances use “pleasure” with the OED definition of “that which is agreeable to or in conformity with the wish or will of the person specified” (2). “Desire,” which occurs around 300 times in the First Folio, gets a little closer to suggesting amorous thoughts, but these usages equate desire more with wishes and are only slightly more sexual. Even the word “lust,” which occurs around 50 times as a noun (“lust”) or verb (“lusts”), becomes more of a discussion reminiscent of the Seven Deadly Sins. The three plays where it occurs most are in Titus Andronicus, which equates lust to rape, in Othello, which ties lust to jealousy and corruptibility, and Antony and Cleopatra, which associates lust with downfall and irresponsibility.

Given that modern words of pleasure are a little unexciting in Shakespeare’s plays, I started my quest elsewhere by looking at texts that address male pleasure, female pleasure, and couples’ pleasure in the sixteenth century. For instance, “pornographic” texts, like Pietro Aretino’s sonnets in I Modi, speak to sex explicitly and help address what is going on in the rhetoric of sexuality when censorship is taken out of the equation. The I Modi or the Sonetti, with which Pietro Aretino is most associated, makes for a very natural exploration of positive, playful, and exploratory perspectives on sexuality from the early modern era. The story of the Sonetti is that in 1523, a friend of Aretino’s, Marcantonio Raimond, had made woodcuts of Julio Romano’s sketches of couples in sixteen sexual positions. Aretino, in the “Scourge of Princes,” was able to get his friend released from prison and then wrote a poem to accompany each of the sixteen prints (Moulton 122).

Although it may seem like quite a leap from Pietro Aretino’s mid-sixteenth-century escapades in Italy to late sixteenth century English writers, the jump is not so challenging. Aretino connects to the notable sixteenth-century writers, Thomas Nashe and Ben Jonson. During the famed Harvey-Nashe debate, Gabriel Harvey insults Nashe by comparing him to Aretino. However, Nashe champions the label and calls himself the “English Aretine.” Jonson’s play, Epicoene, is based on Aretino’s Il Marescalco (Moulton 196-97, 211). In Before Pornography, Ian Moulton characterizes Aretino as “the principle iconographic figure of the erotic writer in early modern England” (120). In writings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Aretino is named over 500 times, beating out Machiavelli, who is referenced about 395 times (Meyer qtd. in Hendrix 32).

“Pornographic” texts like Pietro Aretino’s I Modi speak to sex explicitly and help address what is going on in the rhetoric of sexuality when censorship is taken out of the equation. What is intriguing is that there are reoccurring ideas in these explicit erotic texts that are reprimed in a more implicit way in early modern texts. By looking at the rhetoric of the explicitly erotic text I Modi, this paper analyzes the use of synecdoche and personification in discussing male pleasure in Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines,” versus the use of metonym and the language of “mutuality” in describing women’s and couples’ pleasure in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure. This analysis of the rhetoric shows that pleasure for males is described by twoness in which a man’s genitals are a separate entity than his self, whereas for females sexual gratification is described as unity of the body and the self.
In regard to male pleasure, the *I Modi* Sonnets 1 and 10 use synecdoche and personification to separate penises from their owners, thus emphasizing that it is the penis, not the person, that experiences pleasure. In Sonnet 1, the couples are thinking about the joy of sex in contrast to the negative reputation that the fall of Adam and Eve gave the act. The poem starts with the male speaker boldly saying, “let’s fottere / since all of us were born only to fottere / You adore the cazzo and I the potta” (trans. by Lawner 1-3). The quote, instead of saying “I love you” or “I love sex,” becomes about loving the penis and vagina. The male speaker also ends the poem on a note of personification when he asks his partner not to ignore his testicles, which are “those witnesses of every extreme pleasure” (14). Although a logical observation of the testicles’ viewpoint, the male speaker is making body parts separate, having them act as “witnesses,” and using personification that implies voyeurism. This dismemberment and personification is even more clearly seen in Sonnet 10. In the poem, the male speaker says, “my cazzo is yours, and if ‘he’ pleases you / All you have to do is give ‘him’ commands” (1.10-11). What is striking about this poem is the complete separation of man and penis, so much so that the “ cazzo” becomes its own being. Both speakers go beyond a mere sense of synecdoche in which the body part embodies the whole and stands in for the person; instead, the poem enters the realm of personification to make the penis a conjoined entity. The penis becomes someone to command and to own, a servant. The woman’s next line tests her ability to command by ordering the penis not to orgasm: “He’s there! Don’t come! / O cazzo, true companion, sacred cazzo!” (l.13-14). In reward for her ecstasy, she furthers the male’s separation by calling his penis, not himself, her companion.

Male sexuality in English poems and plays also speaks to a sense of disconnection. Often, synecdoche and personification separate men from the pleasure they are experiencing. Either pleasure is a commodity or, as with Arentino’s poems, it is something experienced by the penis but not by the man himself. Herrick’s “The Vine” tells the story of a man who dreams that his penis is transformed into a vine: “her long small legs & thighs / I with my Tendrils did surprize; / Her Belly, Buttocks, and her Waste / By my soft Nerv’lits were embrac’d” (l.5-8). In Middleton’s *The Changeling*, DeFlores uses the line “The wealth of all Valentia shall not buy my pleasure from me” (III.iv.159-160), which turns his pleasure into a commodity, although an unsellable one. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia sings, “Yong men wil doo’t if they come too’t / By Cocke, they are too blame” (IV .v). Although a pun on the rooster who heralds the morning, the less than coded suggestion is blaming “cock,” not person, for sexual dealings.

In looking at Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines,” Bruce Boehrer identifies separation of man and penis in the work of Ovid, whose *Amores* was a source of influence to Nashe. In the source poem, the speaker becomes impotent in a crucial moment of sexual conquest. In frustration, the speaker yells at his penis: “Lie down with shame, and see thou stirre no more / Seeing thou wouldst deceiue me as before” (trans. Boehrer 176). By going so far as to target his own penis as an enemy, Ovid makes his source of pleasure antithetical to his own wishes and desires. Boehrer then later takes a passage from Nashe’s poem in which the love interest, Francis, gives up men and their penises in praise of her dildo: “Adiuew faint-hearted instrument of lust, / That falselie hast betrayed our equal trust . . . My little dilido shall suplye their kinde: A knaue, that . . . stands as stiff, as were made of steele” (Nashe qtd. by 178). In praising this inanimate object, she first says good-bye to the narrator’s penis, personifying it by making it “faint-hearted” and something capable of betrayal. She then personifies the dildo, making it a “knaue” that does not bend or fold under pressure. Francis almost completes the male disjoint between self and source of pleasure by dismembering penis from male person.

Unlike male speakers who use synecdoche to dissect their pleasure, in the *I Modi* women use metonymy to advocate for unity of sex and body and thus experience a more integrated sexuality. In Sonnet 1, the female speaker responds to her partner’s reference to himself as all penis and her as all vagina. She unites genitals and person when she says, “Stick
your cazzo in / So that it reaches my heart, and crushes the soul” (12-13). Whereas the male speaker uses synecdoche, the female speaker uses metonymy so that the penis connects to the heart and soul, and sex links to passion and emotions. The female speaker in Sonnet 6 also uses metonymy to unite body and pleasure. The scenario begins with a note of synecdoche when the woman wishes she could become entirely a potta and her partner become all cazzo. Though an apt synecdoche, the statement works better as metonymy by reflecting a wish to be entirely the pleasure of their genital organs. The male speaker moves the situation from hypothetical to possible by saying, “as you descend upon my cazzo, / Let yourself go completely in your potta; / Thus I’ll be cazzo, finally, and you potta” (15-17). The argument and quest is to become one with each other’s pleasure and their own pleasure and to unite genitalia and body.

Uniting in pleasure and experiencing sex reciprocally also appears in the forefront of Sonnets 15 and 13. Sonnet 15 is the only poem told by a third-party observer, who says, “It doesn’t bother them that they’re exhausted. / Indeed, it seems they like the game so much / They long to swoon in the very act” (trans. Lawner 12-14). The stressing of “them” and “they” is a noteworthy choice that links the couple together in the act and moves for a moment away from the one issuing pleasure and the one receiving, or the one doing and the one being done. Aretino more specifically showcases a shared experience in Sonnet 13, which, in a translation referenced below, shows a couple experiencing a mutual orgasm:

She: I’m going to come. When will you come?
He: Now! Give me your whole tongue.
I’m dying. She: And I . . . He: You’re the reason it happens.
Well are you coming?
She: Now, now I’m coming, Sir.

The discussion of orgasm is a unique one in the use of cutting between the two speakers to track their mutual climax. If we put aside the male partner’s slight impatience, the reciprocity between the two is fascinating. He credits her by saying, “You’re the reason it happens” (14). This interchange is reminiscent of Sonnet 10 in which the male speaker also gives the power of desire and arousal to his female companion. Following her words, “Now I’ve come” (17) with his repetition of his own climax, the male partner emphasizes the satisfaction of both partners. The shared lines, the intercutting of commentary, and the emphasis on both parties achieving satisfaction speaks to mutual pleasure.

Donne, Shakespeare, and Middleton demonstrate versions of mutual and shared sexual pleasure comparable to those displayed by Aretino’s couples. John Donne uses the idea of two made one in both his 1633 poems: “The Flea,” mixing the blood of both in one body, and in “Canonization,” where the speaker asks that the lovers be canonized and writes “we two, being one, are it.” In Shakespeare’s Macbeth, first performed around 1611, the title character writes a letter to Lady Macbeth, telling her, “This haue I thought good to deliuer thee (my dearest Partner of Greatnesse)” (I.v). In Measure for Measure, written between 1603 and 1604, Shakespeare’s emphasis on sex as a “mutual” pleasure is fairly blunt. Surprisingly, in this play where sex is equated with power, money, rape, and disease, the word “mutual” is used three times in reference to sex. The word “mutual” only occurs eighteen times, and three of those occur in Measure with the same meaning and implication each time. The first mention happens when Claudio is questioned about his and Juliet’s sexual affair, an act that has put Juliet in prison and condemned Claudio to death. In explaining their physical marriage and the absence of their legal one, Claudio describes how they intended to keep all secret except that, “it chances / The stealth of our most mutuall entertainment / With Character too grosse, is writ on Iuliet” (I.ii.127). The word, “mutual,” comes up again when Isabella is confessing to the Duke. In a speech in which the Duke pushes Isabella to admit to wrongdoing, she engages in a type of double-talk. When the Duke asks, “love you the woman that wronged you,” she tactfully replies, “Yes, as I love the woman that wronged him” (II.iii.25-6). This takes the Duke
aback and he then asks her more specifically: “So then it seems your most offenceful act / Was mutually committed?” (II.iii.27-8). Juliet responds “Mutually,” creating a line that scans as a shared line with “Was mutually committed.” The shared line implies how little she has to think about her response, and how she views their sex act, in its pleasure and its offense, as one equally experienced. This “mutually” is reminiscent of Aretino’s couple who orgasm mutually, who are united by sex, and who experience a shared happiness when physically together.

As this paper suggests, early modern perspectives on sexuality have a degree of modernism to them, and conversations about gender and pleasure in both early modern and modern eras are equally perplexing and contradictory. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir writes that “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (xxii). Although de Beauvoir approaches man as thinking of himself above all else, it intrigues me that all the early modern examples from this paper are males writing about male sexuality as being fractured, whereas sexual self-awareness is assigned to females who, instead of disconnecting from pleasure, embrace it. Take a pop culture example like the song “I Touch Myself” written in 1991 by the Divinyls. The lyric, “when I think about you I touch myself,” sounds fairly reminiscent of Nashe’s “Choise of Valentines,” in which Francis wants to make her partner part of her moment of self-pleasure. The chorus of “Sex,” a pop song written by the group Berlin in 1983 thinks about men's and women's differences in labels: “I’m a man—I’m a bitch / I’m a man—I’m a geisha / I’m a man—I’m a little girl,” and then comes to the repeated line, “And we make love together”. Not only are there traces of the idea of “mutual,” that Claudio and Juliet want so much to be connected to their own sexual experience, there are hints of Helena from All’s Well that Ends Well, saying “There shall your master have a thousand loves, / A mother and a mistress and a friend, / A phoenix, captain and an enemy, / A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign, / A counsellor, a traitress, and a dear” (I.i.161-165). Given the similar discussions about sexuality that exist in both the modern and early modern eras, it may be time to start exploring our similarities instead of focusing on our differences.

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O! to Die for an Eye Is to Die for Nothing: The Sexually Misogynistic Subtext in Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice

Joshua Commander

While much ingenious scholarship of William Shakespeare’s Othello has been devoted to tracing the play’s pervasive misogyny to specific male characterizations, little has been done to explicate the effects of Shakespeare’s misogynistic subtext and how its marked presence informs not only our general reading of the text, but the specific—and ever-contested—question of Desdemona’s virginity. “Iago’s machinations are effective because Othello is predisposed to believing in his pronouncements about the inherent duplicity of women... Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones,” claims Ania Loomba, in “Othello and the Racial Question” (91). Walter Cohen also suggests that Othello “accepts narratives about himself and Desdemona composed from the repugnant sexual—and especially misogynist—stereotypes of European society” because these stereotypes not only “torment Iago” and Othello, but also every man with an appreciable role in the play—perhaps even early modern men in general (2112). Certainly, Shakespeare’s play makes misogyny—as a thematic element—explicitly transparent via Othello and Iago’s characterizations, but a complex theme cannot rely on characterization alone: it requires near constant reaffirmation through thematic patterning. In The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice, Shakespeare weaves a sexually misogynistic subtext throughout the dialogue of the play that effectively serves to metaphorically reduce Desdemona to merely her sexual organs. This figurative dehumanization of Desdemona acts as a thematic touchstone to the play’s character-driven theme of misogyny; moreover, the play’s persistent symbolic emphasis on Desdemona’s genitalia calls into question whether or not she and Othello consummated their marriage. By examining the secondary senses and associated imagery of the terms used to refer to Desdemona, we will uncover not only additional trespasses upon her innocence, but also indications of her dying a virgin.

According to Patricia Parker, in her essay “Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the ‘Secret Place’ of Woman,” the term “dilate” “in [early modern] usage came with a sense of widening, stretching, or enlarging something ‘closed’” and, therefore, “meant both to ‘make large’ and to speak ‘at large’”; and it is this “dimension of dilation that enabled the easy movement between rhetorical and sexual openings” in the early modern usage of the term (63-64). More importantly, “[t]o open or dilate a virgin, the term used routinely in the [early modern] period for such sexual opening, involved the threat of ‘enlargement’ in every sense” (Parker, “Othello” 64)—including the stretching of the vaginal opening during intercourse and the potential enlarging of a virgin’s sexual appetite beyond the confines of the marriage bed. This term, dilate, is first introduced in the play when Othello relates, during his account to the Duke and senatorial assembly of his and Desdemona’s courtship, how a sample narrative of his exploits drew from Desdemona the entreaty “[t]hat [he] would all [of his] pilgrimage dilate” (I.iii.152); it is this dilation of his exotic pilgrimage that served to sexually attract Desdemona to him in the first place—and it is this first dilation that evocatively links its rhetorical and sexual nuances together in the play. Two acts later, when Othello—endeavoring to extract Iago’s seemingly guarded thoughts from him—tells Iago that a person’s reluctance to speak his mind is, “in a false disloyal knave,” mere “tricks of custom, but in a man that’s just, / They’re close dilations, working from the heart / That passion cannot rule” (III.iii.126-29).

1 In fact, in a related article (“All’s Well That Ends Well: Increase and Multiply”), Patricia Parker states that “the use of the term ‘dilation’ for the sexual opening of a woman” dates back to ancient Greece (357).
we can descry a double meaning (and Othello’s surmise of precisely what Iago is supposedly keeping from him) in the phrase “close dilations.” In addition to “close dilations” referring to Othello’s suspicion of Iago’s allegedly closely kept secrets about Desdemona and Cassio, the sexual connotations of the term “dilation” reveals exactly what Othello fears: a sexual liaison between Cassio and Desdemona; in other words, Cassio dilating her.²

In addition to the obvious associations between the words dilate and eye (particularly in reference to the eye’s pupil), Patricia Parker explains that “dilation as [a] rhetorical opening had to do with uncovering and bringing before the eye” and that, “[a]s with rhetorical dilation as an unwrapping or unfolding to the eye, the female ‘lap’ or privity was thus something folded or closed as well as something secret or ‘close’” (“Othello” 61, 65). Shakespeare, ever cognizant of the etymological relationship between words, exploits this link between the terms dilate and eye by using eye to figuratively refer to Desdemona’s vagina.³ Shortly after arriving in Cyprus, when just Iago and Roderigo are in the scene, Iago attempts to convince Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio by telling him, among other things, that “[Desdemona’s] eye must be fed” (II.i.220). Of course, the surface-level rendering of Iago’s claim is merely that Desdemona is no longer attracted to Othello and would rather alight her eyes upon Cassio, who is more conventionally attractive according to Venetian society’s standards. Considering Iago’s propensity for ribald double-entendres, however, we should not discard the less apparent, but more pertinent and vulgar meaning: Desdemona must fulfill her sexual appetites (with the obvious visual of Cassio “feeding” Desdemona’s “eye”)—and it is this latter meaning that so incenses Roderigo and incites him to follow Iago’s plan to discredit Cassio. Iago places additional emphasis upon Desdemona’s “eye” two scenes later, when he bawdily remarks to Cassio, “What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation,” to which Cassio remarks “[a]n inviting eye” (II.iii.20-22)—and we get the unmistakable impression that Iago, at least, is not referring to Desdemona’s organ of vision.

Perhaps the most apparent instance of Shakespeare figuratively alluding to Desdemona’s sexual organ as an eye is when Othello tells Desdemona how to care for the handkerchief—a symbolic representation of the would-be bloodied sheets of their (un)consummated marriage bed—he has given her: “Make it a darling, like your precious eye. / To lose’t or give’t away were such perdition⁴ / As nothing⁵ else could match” (III.iv.64-66). In this instance, interpreting the meaning of “eye” via its secondary sexual sense actually makes more apparent sense than a literal interpretation of it would; Othello is telling her to guard her handkerchief like she would her chastity (her genitalia)—because to lose it or give it away to just anyone would be the height of depravity. More than any other usage in the play of eye as an analogous representation of the vagina, this instance is particularly apt because eyes are even more analogous to virginal vaginas as they both have membraneous barriers that line their respective organs (i.e., the eyeball and the hymen). Moreover, we can see the figurative usage of eyes performing again

² Of the few Shakespearean works where the term dilate is present, Othello is his only work that uses the term or its variants more than once (“Concordance”).
³ In his book, Shakespeare’s Sexual Language: A Glossary, Gordon Williams demonstrates how Shakespeare uses the term “eye” to refer to a woman’s vagina in such works as Antony and Cleopatra, Troilus and Cressida, Henry V, and several others (118).
⁴ Gordon Williams, in A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, cites numerous instances in Stuart literature where the word “hell” is used to refer to a woman’s vagina and “damnation” as another way of calling a woman a whore (both being synonyms of “perdition”) (660, 363). For examples of how Shakespeare also uses these terms in a similar fashion in Othello, see I.iii.102, 348, 385; III.iii.401, 451; IV.i.68; IV.ii.41, 66, 96. Indeed, this analogy is particularly apt when we consider the demon in Desdemona’s name.
⁵ For an exposition on the sexual connotations of the word “nothing,” see page 28.
as a stand-in for Desdemona’s sexual organ when Othello begins to (indirectly) confront her about her ostensible infidelity and demands, “Let me see your eyes” (IV.ii.26). He is not merely endeavoring to locate dishonesty in her gaze; rather, he is performing a metaphoric examination of her genitalia—in other words, descrying honesty in her eyes equates the detection of an intact hymen. With this understanding, Othello’s command to Iago (after seizing him by the throat) to “[g]ive [Othello] ocular proof” of Desdemona’s adultery and to “make [Othello] see ’t” takes on a whole new meaning.

In her aforementioned article, Patricia Parker cites early modern physician Helkiah Crooke’s description of the vaginal orifice from his medical text “Of the Lap or Privities”: “like the letter, o, small and wondrous narrow” (“Othello” 65)—and it is this “familiar Shakespearean euphemism for the female sexual orifice, the ‘O’ or ‘nothing’” or even just “thing,” that Shakespeare uses more than any other to figuratively allude to a female’s genitalia (Williams, Shakespeare’s 219, 221, 306). In one of his several soliloquies, Iago simultaneously reveals his lust for Desdemona and justifies his plan to ruin Othello (on the pretense that Othello has slept with Emilia) when he says “nothing can or shall content [his] soul / Till [he is] evened with [Othello], wife for wife” (II.i.285-86). Indeed, if Iago were to get sexually even with Othello—“wife for wife”—it is Desdemona’s so-called “nothing” that would “content [his] soul.” In a later exchange between Iago and Emilia, we can observe an instance where all three variants—“nothing,” “thing,” and “O”—play off of each other to obliquely refer to Emilia’s vagina:

EMILIA I nothing, but to please his fantasy.

........................................................

EMILIA ...................... I have a thing for you.
IAGO You have a thing for me? It is a common thing—
EMILIA Ha?
IAGO To have a foolish wife.
EMILIA O, is that all?     (III.i.ii.303, 305-09; my emphasis)

More importantly, in two related exchanges between Othello and Iago, there are indications that all three terms allude to Desdemona’s sexual organs. In the first, Othello tells Iago that he would rather be a “toad” subsisting on a dungeon’s foul air than “keep a corner in the thing [he] love[s] / For others’ uses” (III.iii.276-77; my emphasis). In the second and later exchange, Othello contradicts himself by saying he “would have been happy if the general camp, / . . . had tasted her sweet body, So [he] had nothing known. O, now for ever / Farewell” and repeats variants of that “O, farewell” twice in the same speech (III.iii.350-53). Equipped with Shakespeare’s secondary meaning of “nothing,” what becomes especially interesting about this passage is the double-sense of the phrase, “So I had nothing known.” Its primary sense is obvious, of course, intimating that Othello would have been happy so long as he was not aware of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity; the secondary sense, however, relates something entirely different. Othello “would have been happy” if he had “known” Desdemona’s “nothing” before learning of her infidelity—if he had at least “tasted her sweet body” once himself before learning

6 However, he has no idea what he is really looking for, so he simply proceeds with his accusations.

7 Shakespeare takes this analogy even a step further by cleverly using the word “Ay”—a homophone of “eye”—in the same figurative sense (to slantingly refer to Desdemona’s vagina). For examples of such usage, see III.iii.233; IV.i.174; IV.ii.66; V.ii.24.

8 Which is ironic, because Shakespeare has explicitly described the sexual habits of toads to inspire revulsion in previous plays (Williams, Shakespeare’s 309).
that it was contaminated. Now, misguidedly believing that Desdemona has lost her virginity to Cassio, he feels compelled to bid “farewell” to any prospects of knowing her “O”9 at all.10

Rhetorically, Shakespeare often uses the opening lines of a scene as the occasion to emphasize a play’s thematic elements, and in Othello he utilizes this tactic twice to underscore his use of “nothing” as a referent for Desdemona’s vagina and alleged infidelity. Still within the play’s exposition stage, Act II, Scene i commences with Montano asking his First Gentleman, “What from the cape can you discern at sea?” The latter replies, “Nothing at all” (II.i.1-2). While this scene begins with someone looking out to sea and seeing “nothing,” shortly thereafter a ship is spotted holding Desdemona, as well as Iago and Emilia; in other words, if Desdemona signifies “nothing,” she was metaphorically spotted before her ship was. More importantly though, this scene’s opening interchange between Montano and the Gentleman introduces the mingling of three thematic nuances of the figurative reduction of Desdemona to her vagina: the opening of the scene (recall the etymological underpinnings of the term “dilate”) and a focus on eyesight (looking out to sea, in addition to the homophonic wordplay with “sea” and “see”), but seeing only “nothing.” Perhaps even more compelling is when we reach the opening of the second scene of Act IV, when the play’s pace is swiftly moving through the rising action of the plot and approaching the climax, and Othello asks Emilia, “You have seen nothing then?” (IV.ii.1). Othello is not merely asking if Emilia has witnessed nothing untoward between Desdemona and Cassio, he is also asking if she has seen “nothing” between them (sexual intercourse). Not satisfied with Emilia’s answer, he asks whether or not Desdemona had ever, while alone with Cassio, sent Amelia away “[t]o fetch her fan, her gloves, her mask, nor nothing?” (IV.ii.10). While this latter question seems an odd one to interpret in a secondary sexual sense, when coupled with Othello’s later designation of Emilia as the “lock and key of [Desdemona’s] villainous secrets” and the person who “keeps the gate of hell” (IV.ii.22, IV.ii.92)—knowing that Shakespeare also uses “hell” to refer to Desdemona’s vagina11—we can understand Othello’s secondary reference since, according to Othello, it is Emilia’s office to oversee Desdemona’s “nothing.”

The death scene—Act V, Scene ii—wherein Othello kills Desdemona and himself in their bedchamber, has received more critical attention than any other scene in The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice largely due to the secondary sexual connotations of the words “die” and “death” (to experience orgasm) and how this interpretation of their deaths seems to figuratively echo the consummation of their marriage (Williams, Shakespeare’s 93, 98; Parker, “Othello” 71). What critics have largely failed to observe, however, is that this climactic scene does precisely the opposite: it echoes their failed attempts to consummate their marriage as

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9 The ejaculatory interjection—“O”—appears more in Othello (no less than 131 times) than in any other work by Shakespeare (“Concordance”).

10 Moreover, if Othello and Desdemona had consummated their marriage Othello would have most likely been able to determine whether she was a virgin or not and, therefore, would have immediately known if Iago was lying about Cassio sleeping with Desdemona during her and Othello’s courtship. During the European Renaissance, there was a strong incentive for noble parents to preserve the hymens of their daughters as proof of virginity in order to retain their negotiating power in procuring them a good marriage (making allowances for the misconception that a broken hymen unequivocally equated to the loss of virginity, of course). If Othello and Desdemona had consummated their marriage, he would have either witnessed virginal blood on the sheets or, as a seasoned man in his forties, would have known by the relative tension of her vaginal cavity that she was still a virgin. The fact that he does not refer to their consummation to deduce whether or not she has been unfaithful during their courtship implies that there was no consummation.

11 See note 4.
well as the recurrent interruptions that have plagued them ever since their wedding day. Desdemona, in a last ditch attempt to reconcile with Othello, asks Emilia to “[l]ay on [her] bed [her] wedding sheets” (IV.i.108). We know, however, that the wedding sheets were not witness to a consummation the previous night in Venice; if they were, they would be stained with Desdemona’s virginal blood. It is, therefore, unlikely that Desdemona would request Emilia to use them again so soon after the event (IV.i.108). Thus, when Desdemona beckons Othello at the beginning of the final scene—“Will you come to bed, my lord?” (V.i.25)—she is inviting him to finally consummate their marriage.

What ensues is Othello’s metaphoric attempt to do so, but he fails dismally. Tellingly, rather than attempting to kill Desdemona via penetration—such as with a knife or sword, which would more figuratively allude to sexual intercourse—Othello smothers her, but fails to kill her before being interrupted by Emilia. Emilia’s entrance reflects the numerous interruptions that foil Desdemona and Othello’s continual attempt to consummate their marriage, but Desdemona’s false death, which symbolically represents a false orgasm, implies Othello’s inability to sexually perform his nuptial duty—the excess of orgasmic-like “O”s that accompany this scene only serves to reinforce its overt sexual forgery. Moreover, we have a corresponding death between a couple that has consummated its marriage and that does successfully represent the metaphoric embodiment of sexual intercourse: when Iago draws his sword and stabs his wife. Emilia makes no mistake about her death (and orgasm): her last words are “I die” (V.i.58). On the other hand, when Desdemona finally is on the precipice of death, she proclaims, “A guiltless death I die,” thereby intimating that she suffers the unjust effect of murder (dying; i.e., experiencing an orgasm) without committing a crime (a reason why she should die; i.e., sex) (Vii.132). What is more, Desdemona’s last words also deprive Othello of his sexual agency; when Emilia inquires, “O! who hath done this deed?,” Desdemona responds, “Nobody, I myself,” therefore rendering her death a matter of choice and self-infliction—and perhaps a death occasioned by a broken heart, since she is not likely to die after recovering from asphyxiation to such a degree that enables her to breathe and speak at length only to unaccountably die from a smothing that ceased minutes ago. Thus, Death—and not Othello—actually did take Desdemona’s maidenhead, and it is this revelation that she is not only innocent of infidelity, but actually died a virgin that makes her tragic end all the more poignant: she died for nothing.

Othello is remarkable for, among other things, being one of only a select few of Shakespeare’s plays that somewhat adheres to the Aristotelian concept called “unity of time”; once Act II opens in Cyprus, the rest of the play is concluded with only one intervening night and within (roughly) twenty-four hours. We know that Othello and Desdemona did not have time to consummate their marriage in Venice (II.iii.8-10); we know that, during their only night in Cyprus, they were recalled almost immediately after they departed to bed because of the row between Cassio and Montano (II.iii.146); we know that Othello spent the rest of the night with Montano to minister to his wounds (II.iii.237-38); and we know that when Othello returned to Desdemona in the morning, they were discussing Cassio, not consummating their marriage (III.iii.146). Moreover, later that day Desdemona suggestively swears by the Virgin Mary (“By'r Lady”) that she “could do much” (postpone their consummation?) if Othello does not do as she wishes (III.iii.75). The only night remaining is the night of their deaths.

The ejaculatory “O” appears more in this one scene (45 times) than in any of the other acts in the play (“Concordance”). Another instance where Desdemona is likened to the Virgin Mary; according to Biblical mythology, Mary experienced the effect of sex (impregnation) without the cause (having sex); Desdemona, too, experienced the figurative effect of sex (an orgasm, or “dying”) without the cause (being neither penetrated by Othello nor Cassio—in death or in sex).
Works Cited


Appendix I

Other Terms Used in *Othello* with Secondary Sexual Meanings

**acquaintance.** Used to pun off the medieval and early modern term “quaint” (“cunt”), such as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20 (“A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted”; line 3). See III.iii.101 and IV.ii.193. Also see a similar pun in “cunning hell”: I.iii.102.

**appetite; feeds well.** Sexually punning off the earlier statement “Her eye must be fed” (II.i.220). See III.iii.188 (“feeds well”); II.iii.321 and III.iii.274 (“appetite”).

**fig.** An early modern obscene gesture that, when voiced, Shakespeare also figuratively uses to refer to a vagina. See 1.3.316 and 2.1.243. Terms such as “fruit” and “fruitful are also thematically linked; for example, see II.iii.315, 350; III.iv.36; V.i.118.

**parts.** Desdemona’s genitalia. See II.iii.295.

**subdue.** Sexually suggestive; used as a subtextual double-entendre. See I.iii.112; II.iii.314; III.iv.57; V.ii.357.
Appendix II
Instances in *Othello* where Desdemona is Associated with Virginity

**By’r Lady.** Desdemona swearing (ironically—and suggestively) by the Virgin Mary that she could withhold sexual favors from Othello if he did not comply to her request (of re-instating Cassio to lieutenant). See III.iii.75.

**maid.** Desdemona being referred to as a “maid.” See I.ii.67; I.iii.94, 112; II.i.62.

**maiden’s hearts.** According to Othello, what was used to preserve the “dye of mummy” in the handerchief/napkin he gave to Desdemona. See III.iv.73.

**rose.** A metaphoric symbol of Desdemona’s maidenhead. Othello, when he is preparing to kill her, says “When I have plucked thy rose / I cannot give it vital growth again.” See V.ii.13-14. This is yet another instance where death and sex are metaphorically analogous; once Othello has killed her (had sex with her), he cannot reverse her death (reverse the loss of her virginity); tellingly, the rose is associated with the color red, the color of blood. And just as tellingly, Othello fails to draw blood in the figurative representation of their (un)consummated marriage (since he attempted to *smother* and not *stab* her) just as he never drew from Desdemona the virginal blood of her maidenhead.
Vernon Lee’s “Beauty and Sanity” and 1895: Color and Cultural Response

Liz Renes

In 1895, the lesbian Aesthetic writer Violet Paget, penning publically since 1875 under the pseudonym “Vernon Lee,” published her most recent musings on the mind/body response to art in her essay “Beauty and Sanity” in the *Fortnightly Review*. Lee’s explorations into what she termed “Psychological Aesthetics” had been an obsession since the early 1880s, one which her close childhood friend, the portraitist John Singer Sargent, admonished to her as being “preposterous and . . . vaguely sacrilegious” (“In Memoriam” 250). Not one to listen to the status quo, Lee pressed on in her studies until her death in 1935. The 1895 essay looked to explore, as Bernard Berenson would later state in his *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* of the following year, the “life enhancing qualities of objects” and the direct relationship between the study of art and its physical benefits (39). However, as a sexual outsider filled with anxiety about her own repressed lesbianism, Lee’s essay can be more accurately read as a response that wrestles fervently but beneath the surface with her attempts at finding sanity within the beauty of the female form. Most pertinent to this understanding is her discussion in the essay on the symbolic aspects of “whiteness,” a color she criticizes for its social symbolism of purity, virginity, and decidedly heterosexual love.

Lee’s anxiety about her own sexuality has often been remarked upon as the cause of her “aloofness and lack of feeling” to the point where, as Leonée Ormond states, she “was personally repelled and [simultaneously] obsessed by the whole idea of the love relationship, and particularly its physical side . . . this distaste coloured (sic) her whole attitude to life and art” (151). That she was unable to communicate her desires or feelings outwardly necessitated an inward, veiled expression which appears like a thread through her work, mimicking in many respects the practice as used by her mentor Walter Pater, who frequently praised Johann Winckelmann’s love for ancient male nude sculpture as a longing which “burns like lava” within him (197). Many scholars have read Pater’s Platonism and use of such “like” subjects within his works as his own way of speaking and exploring a sexuality that openly equated to imprisonment and social exile. Vernon Lee’s similar type of literary expurgation can then be seen to follow in line with Pater and Aestheticism’s wider practice of exploring subversive desires through veiled metaphor. However, such a method was not confined solely to male-male relationships, and Lee’s reticence was not representative of its approaches to Sapphic desire, as epitomized by the feminine duo behind Michael Field, who claimed more openly in their poetry that “If thou art beloved, well then, fear no grief from mortal men” (116).

Lee’s understated implications on the matter in the text, however, do not seem to express the confidence of desire found in the works of Field. The text frequently engages with a back-and-forth oscillation between the duality of “wholesomeness” and “disease,” of which the discussion of whiteness appears as a representative example. In 1895, this type of social concern experienced a marked resurgence in public thought due to both Oscar Wilde’s sodomy trial and the translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* into English, which brought the perceived threat of sexual and countercultural minorities to a fever pitch. Reading Lee’s

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1 For additional reading on the relationship between homosexuality and the study of ancient sculpture in both a masculine and feminine context (the latter specifically in relation to Vernon Lee), see Evangelista, “Platonic Dons and Adolescent Bodies,” 206-36 and “A White and Ice Cold World,” in Patricia Pulham’s *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (31-70).
text in light of these social dialogues occurring in London in 1895—she states unequivocally in the first sentence of the essay that she is “out of London at last”—can produce not only a wider understanding of how a perceived Other responded to such events, but also attests to the continued thriving of Aesthetic vanguard culture, even when under attack (Lee, “Beauty and Sanity” 117).

That Lee initially views herself not as one on the side of health, but rather as a “poor, sick, hustled human being” constantly exposed to germs and disease, seems to initially set up a contradictory metaphor of intent (“Beauty and Sanity” 124). Is she herself “diseased” because of her attraction to women, or is it society that acts as the “germ” seeking to infest her with its culturally produced notions of morality? Her later use in the essay of whiteness as a metaphor seems to suggest that her intention was the latter. Lee continues here to protest against how modern civilized society has moulded the “love of white” into an obsession with the virginity of its women. Culture infects and corrupts what she perceives to be the essential principle that “beauty in itself is neither morally good nor morally bad . . . it has no value other than its being beautiful” (“Ruskinism” 210). Sexuality is similarly untainted when viewed in light of Aestheticism’s drive towards a tabula rasa, or seeing human complexity and beauty as pure instinct and of its own merits as opposed to one tainted and “deadened by culture” (“The Child in the Vatican” 19). In this view, one’s physical attractions and desires are seen as a form of admiration for the untainted beauty in others, and such subjective “aesthetics” and personal preferences can be viewed to be discrete from social or moral influences.

Walter Pater, on some level, also attempts this kind of purification of desire in his own discussions in The Renaissance. When speaking of Johann Winckelmann’s (and ultimately his own) admiration of male sculpture as a “white light, purged from the angry, blood like stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the god in him . . . ” (224), Pater is twinning whiteness with a specific male-male crystalline desire. Lee hints at the continuance of such connections in her own text, initially calling white “the queen, as Leonardo put it, of all colours” (133) echoing Pater’s eponymous 1873 essay on Da Vinci. The question is not whether Lee was inspired by Pater—as indeed much research has shown that she was—but rather, how Lee transcribes this idea of “whiteness” into one of subverted female sexuality.

Lee’s rejection of cultural standards and color attributions are the first distinctions she makes in her initial discussion on the color white, listing in the first two pages of section eight the various implications it has for sanity, health, “excellence of climate” and “cleanness of air” (“Beauty and Sanity” 134). But in an about-face, and in what is most likely a stirring inspired by Nordau, she begins her interrogation as follows: “But what if we do not care for white? What if we are so constituted that its insipidity sickens us as much as the most poisonous and putrescent colours which Blake ever mixed to paint hell and sin? [sic] You say we are abnormal, unwholesome, decaying; very good, then why should we not get pleasure in decaying, unwholesome and abnormal things?” (135). She laments that society will reject such concerns as a “pose” and that her distastes for purity will rather be viewed as a type of “constitutional morbidness [or] nervous exhaustion…” (136) to which attraction to the

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2 Nordau’s text lists a multitude of examples of “degeneracy,” which include, amongst others, the Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetes, Decadents and Wagnerites. Lee, in some form or another, references all of these examples in ‘Beauty and Sanity,’ discussing initially the preference for black over white by “Poe and various other French writers,” linking discussions against white as “common since the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite movement,” while later discussing her listening to “German music” and its stirring of emotion and a “remembrance…of the violation of the privacy of the human soul.” She unequivocally seems to be listing herself as one of the ‘degenerates’ mentioned in Nordau’s text, while using a dislike of whiteness as her main point of rhetoric.
opposite sex will be considered biological as opposed to socially formed. She again appears to
draw the line between aesthetics and lust, agápe and éros, which battle perpetually within the
ground of the body. In order to open oneself to the transcendental purity of aesthetic practice,
one also risks a vulnerability to unnatural obsession, which Baudelaire links in The Painter of
Modern Life to the artist’s curiosité, as something that is both inspirational but also a potentially
“fatal, irresistible passion!” (7). To contend against the Sapphic lust that she, herself, found so
horrific, Lee contains such passions within a purely intellectual plane. Though she frequently
connects herself to such degenerates in the text by using “we” as an identifier, she finds a way
to transcend the erotic, thus enabling her to maintain the possibility that one can house within
oneself a love for the unwholesome without becoming consumed by it. Lee believed that this
end could be achieved through repeated interaction with objects of creative production, such
as art, music, poetry, as a way to healthily ‘exercise’ and keep the demons of lust at bay.

Lee makes a distinct example of healthy ‘wholesomeness’ in her discussions on music,
which when examined more closely put forth her own insight that it is internal, as opposed to
external cultural forces (like in the example of whiteness), which provide the most potential
for moral and spiritual growth. However, a type of extraction is necessary for this process to
begin; aesthetic elements—color, line, light and so forth—must first be removed from moral
means and taken as pure elements, of their own accord, hence such “for its own sake” maxims.
Music is able to do this more readily than say poetry because it does not require words or
language, the latter of which is in itself something also culturally predetermined. Like music,
Lee’s most crucial assertion is that the color white in itself is not offensive, or even beneficial—it
is what it is. Rather, there are social associations and understandings, a type of agreed language
of propriety, which give whiteness its nature of wholesomeness and health. This system to
Lee, and invariably to Aestheticism at large, is inherently flawed. What is not to say that we
can’t redefine whiteness to work the other way? Why is it that black can’t be associated with
health? Black as a color is similarly unblemished. But again, cultural implications of black with
mourning, and thus death and disease, make this impossible. The same is true with white, as
the only reason it began to be associated with brides, virginity, and cleanliness in the first place
was that Queen Victoria chose to use the color for her wedding gown in 1840, presumably for
the economical purposes of advertising British lace. Fashion dictated symbolic renegotiation,
which in turn meant that those who went against the fashion, people like Vernon Lee, were
ultimately judged and categorized as unwholesome. Whiteness, in a wider berth, can be read
as a symbol for sexuality; as something naturally “of itself” that is appropriated by culture
and changed, misshapen and deformed, with some parts being deemed unfit, while others are
accepted. So when Lee cries, “but what if we do not care for white?” she is crying out against
communal manipulation and not necessarily the color itself.

Once these facets have been untangled, it is easier for the student of aesthetics to
internalize and process the world. But for Lee this process is one fraught with conflict.
Appreciating beauty as it is, as in her descriptions of listening to music, lends to the stimulation
of “emotions often undesirable in themselves, and always unable, at the moment, to find their
legitimate channel, which [leads to] enervation and perhaps degradation of the soul” (140). It
is the appreciation of beauty which allows one to access the inner self, what Lee refers to as
the “soul’s vague viscera” (141), thus also allowing one to provide structure and organization
to this melange of confused inner feelings—a type of method of flow, if you will, to push
uncomfortable realizations towards a type of Victorian emotional productivity. That Lee’s
language of structure and control is consistently asserted against ideas of degeneracy and
“confused instincts” (141) shows on many levels an intense desire to control the more primal
aspects of her sexuality. Though the words often appear confident and well-reasoned, beneath

3For additional information, please see Kay Staniland and Santina M. Levey, “Queen Victo-
the surface there brims an anxiety and disavowal of the disorder that arises with the full experience of love and sexuality, an experience she attempts to transcend and regulate.

This idea of structuring the aesthetic experience does serve as a contradiction to the pure process of sensual interaction espoused by many writers in the British Aesthetic circle during this period. That Pater calls it a “stream” and a “swarm” of sensory impressions implies a quick moving looseness and flow to life that resists any type of logical structure. The insistence is rather to release and relinquish control, and give in to the “perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (The Renaissance 247), including the embrace of erotic love and desire. Lee’s lack of such liberation in “Beauty and Sanity” implies a certain apprehension with the concept of “release” in all its symbolic and literal (more orgasmic) forms. However, I do not see this tension as a sign of frigidity. The cultivation and appreciation of the aesthetic is intensely sensual in and of itself, and speaks to the idea that pleasure serves the mind as opposed to the body organ. It is an extraction of sexuality outside of procreative norms; it is experiencing pleasure in the body without enslaving it to the needs of reproductive, and thus marriage confined, sex. In this way it also allows Lee, as an unmarried, lesbian woman, to experience and encourage the act of pleasure without the social limitations of requiring a heterosexual partner. Though it produces anxiety, Lee seems to follow and encourage a nascent form of free pleasure, one refreshingly modern in the face of the constrictive ideas of female sexuality rampant during the end of the nineteenth century and beyond.

In retrospect, Lee’s insistence on the internalization of pleasure and her reaction against external culture seem thoughtful in the wake of Oscar Wilde’s own public humiliation for his homosexuality. That Wilde gave into the body and actualized his responses to beauty (of the male form in this case) seem to be what got him into trouble, so to speak, and Lee’s discussions of the inner private world and control can be read as a way of responding to these issues. However, it was this need for emotional protection from society that socially defined her as being, as Ormond describes, “aloof” and lacking feeling, and was thus an approach to life not without its own heartbreak and isolation (“Vernon Lee” 151). Lee ultimately expresses that the human experience of love and desire is much like the color white—never wholly pure or as uncomplicated as it appears to be on the surface.

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(HOMO)SEXUAL CONFLICTS WITHIN THE SELF
IN HENRY JAMES’S THE ASPERN PAPERS

Erik Cofer

Mentions of sexuality in the fiction of Henry James are so abundant that it would be nearly impossible to avoid the subject altogether. As Kelly Cannon argues in Henry James and Masculinity, James admired writers like Dickens, who “pleased him precisely because [he] avoided describing sexual activity” (4). Nonetheless, James believed that the social environment had evolved, and sexual matters could be broached. James’s conflicted sentiments manifest themselves in the sexual confusion of the male protagonists in his later fiction, resulting in the kernel of queerness in his texts. Jamesian texts greet readers with “utter conventionality, leading them to take comfort in the supreme respectability of his fiction, never exploring the numerous cracks and crevasses below” in which James is constantly “inscribing erotic spaces refuted by decorum” (Cannon 6-7). Particularly in James’s later works, this stylistic and contextual melding of the sexual and queer with the conventional and inconspicuous becomes viscerally evident. Queerness, for this essay, will be defined in contrast to male heterosexuality, to instances within James’s fiction in which homoeroticism threatens masculinity.

As I will argue, queerness permeates James’s The Aspern Papers (1888). While stories such as “The Beast in the Jungle” receive ample criticism analyzing the homosexual undertones, The Aspern Papers has excited scarcely a footnote. The narrator of The Aspern Papers faces emasculation even while partaking in a supposedly masculine adventure. The nameless narrator, as I will henceforth refer to as “NN,” represents the product of androgyny in a binary-rendered sphere of heteronormativity, illustrating the complexities of male desire and the intrinsic mutability of this desire. This essay will demonstrate the ways in which the aspersion of male desire bolsters the narrative of The Aspern Papers. Examining the text through the elements of the divided self, gay shame, and female toxicity will reveal as much about the life and mind of James as what James reveals about his protagonist.

Daniel J. Schneider argues that James’s fiction portrays the “unconsolidated man” or the “divided self” (447), by which Schneider means “a soul so deeply split in its inclinations ... that it finds itself at a profound disadvantage in dealing with the ‘hard, functional people’ of the world who know what they want and set out to achieve their ends without hesitation or compromise” (447). Such a characterization hardly seems befitting of “NN”—a male figure brazen enough to enter the Bordereau palace under an assumed name, with the pretense of innocently seeking lodging. “There’s no baseness I wouldn’t commit for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake,” he declares to Mrs. Prest (James 7). Referring to James, but equally true of Aspern’s admirer, Schneider writes: “He is perfectly safe in this self-created world; nothing will occur in it that he does not wish” (448). For “NN,” the self-created world involves his dogged determination to retrieve the last worldly remnants of Jeffrey Aspern, the great American writer. When his plan begins to fizzle, however, James’s protagonist’s optimism appears starkly lacking. Out of brazenness and desperation, he stealthily enters Miss Juliana Bordereau’s room in an apparent attempt to seize the prized documents. His description of the scene, of having “no definite purpose” (James 77), contradicts his actions as outlined in his own narrative. Reaching the secretary—which he believes contain Aspern’s papers—he attempts to see if the cover of the secretary will move upon his touch, despite expressing the belief that “it almost surely contained nothing in which I was interested” (James 78).

The narrator appears as a figure hopelessly incapable of ever resolving his internal contradictions. His repeated claims of denial with respect to the papers prove quite curious in
light of his procession to the secretary. “Ten to one the papers had been destroyed,” he reasons pessimistically, yet he also confesses to feeling “unmolested, at the hour of freedom and safety, nearer to the source of my hopes than I had ever been” (James 77-78). This scene suggests ambivalence; “NN” experiences self-doubt as to whether or not he truly wishes to retrieve the papers. Of Juliana, he concedes that he “grew used to her” over time (14). If the effect of witnessing the last living person to have known Aspern could wane over time, shrinking to a fleeting novelty, surely the papers would eventually shrink to a similar status, not unlike the other relics from Aspern’s career. While “touching them means touching what Aspern himself touched” (125), as Leland S. Person writes, touching the papers also means confronting the reality that what is being touched will never be more than a substitute for the man himself.

The protagonist’s unwitting revelation of his divided self does not testify to an overwhelming fear of being barred possession of the relics; rather, it suggests the opposite. “NN” suffers from the unconscious terror that he will gain possession of the documents and, apart from the potential for the findings to sully the name of his “god,” his mission will be finished (or his mission will be finished with him) yet he will not be satiated. The “male-male eros” that Michael Moon discusses with respect to James’s writing appears abundantly in The Aspern Papers, with the protagonist unabashedly professing his deeply-rooted connection to the late poet (3). For “NN,” Aspern stands as “one of the most genial men and one of the handsomest,” and “no man could have walked straighter in the given circumstances” (3). The thrill for “NN” in undertaking his task is the sense of adventure entailed, and I submit that this adventure proves decidedly homoerotic. The aforementioned scene detailed—that of the narrator sensing how close to reaching the papers he has come while simultaneously denying this belief—is a scene of homoeroticism, or “a scene of pleasure and terror and a scene of pleasure in which terror is absent” (Moon 52). His homoerotic adventure offers him the closest thing to a sexual relationship possible for him. The illusory nature of the papers serves as foreplay, with its ultimate “guarantee of pleasure” (Cannon 84). As Cannon asserts, “NN” “describes the success or failure of his quest in physical terms, occasionally nearing orgasmic intensity” (84). Of course, his quest never fully reaches orgasmic intensity because he never retrieves the documents from the Bordereau woman.

The protagonist’s status as a “divided self” or an “unconsolidated man” reflects James himself. Daniel K. Hannah suggests that for James, “writing is an act of both exposure and withdrawal, of self-examination and self-denial” (77). The desperate scramble to find some meaningful dialectic recourse in these oppositions manifests itself in James’s fiction, with the implication of queerness. Similarly, Moon argues that James “imagines himself both inside and outside” an “imaginary circuit” of homoerotic desire, and, in such circuits, “the intense pleasures of remaining inside and outside” that result in “the successful artist and author haunted by the figure of the wounded or dead male body” (36). James suffered from being outside the realm of sexual normalcy, leaving him ever-reaching for a locus of stability. Like “NN,” his own imagination “threatens his very sense of identity” (Person 3).

Much of James’s and “NN’s” behaviors in this regard can be interpreted through the context of what Leo Bersani calls “gay shame” (68).¹ In Affect Theory, this is when “the eyes turn away from the object and are, so to speak, directed back to the subject’s own face: full of ambivalence, he looks at himself being looked at” (Bersani 67). The gay shame in The Aspern Papers presents itself with more subtlety than in “The Beast in the Jungle,” another work by James. “NN” fails to empathize with others, regarding them more as objects than subjects: Juliana as a marveling yet hazardous spectacle and Miss Tina as an amoeba-like obstacle that he must skillfully master. The relationship between “NN” and Miss Tina may be characterized as lacking in reciprocity. This imbalance becomes evident when he expresses his incredulity

¹ The term actually derives from “Militant queer groups in San Francisco and New York” that go by the moniker “Gay Shame” and reject the Gay Pride movement (Bersani 68).
at Miss Tina’s suggestion of marriage: “That was the price! And did she think I wanted it, poor deluded infatuated extravagant lady?” (James 91). “NN’s” disgusted shock at her quasi-proposal is mingled yet with a sense of self-righteousness, as he boasts “It was as comfort to me a long time afterwards to consider that she couldn’t have seen in me the smallest symptom of disrespect” (90). Oblivious to his own queerness, he confides in the reader: “I don’t know why it happened that on this occasion I was more than ever struck with that queer air of sociability, of cousinship and family life” (James 93). He cannot relate to the heteronormative concept of marriage.

Person asserts that “the narrator feels intense emotion as he gets nearer to Aspern—that is, to an Aspern embodied in a woman” (126). His account of the scene in Juliana’s room provides ample fodder for an interpretation of gay shame; on the cusp of retrieving the Aspern papers, his progress is stunted when he discovers Juliana “there in her night-dress . . . watching me . . . and for the first, the last, and the only time I beheld her extraordinary eyes” (James 78-79). It is doubtful that Juliana, the feeble old woman, could offer much resistance if he were to proceed, and abstaining out of a sense of virtue seems inconsistent with his stated motives. Though he claims to be “horribly ashamed” by his actions, his shame lies not in being deemed a thief, but in the strength of the homoerotic desire that led him to his actions. Coupled with this shame is the unconscious drive to sabotage his quest.

The narrator’s desire to retrieve Aspern’s documents proves problematic in that to achieve this successfully, the focus of his desire would be eliminated and the desire theoretically fulfilled. The orgasmic quality of his adventure would pass, inevitably ensued by a sense of emptiness. “NN” needs for his desire to connect with Aspern to remain unfulfilled because “no object could ever be an adequate substitute for an objectless being that never was” (Bersani 111). However, the desire merely remaining unfulfilled is not enough. The completion of the desire must always appear within reach. In essence, the protagonist’s anxiety over the void left by the completed discovery of Aspern’s last private relics must be the force that opposes his desire to unite with them.

The strained relationship that the narrator shares with women can be traced back to James’s own life. He shared a strictly platonic relationship with fellow writer Edith Wharton, in which he would “aim for the maximum of eroticism just short of physicality” (Cannon 69). “NN’s” refusal of Miss Tina demonstrates his unwillingness to conform to heteronormative behavior, even for the “god” that he would supposedly commit any act of baseness for. Marrying Miss Tina would align him with the heterosexual and heteronormative, yet would also afford him the union with the Aspern papers. His initial refusal to marry her stems from his desire to connect with Aspern without interference. He seeks a singularly male bond with Aspern, but the “entrance into the bonds of matrimony carries a price too high even for his obsession” (Cannon 83). Says “NN”: “I couldn’t pay the price . . . I couldn’t, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous pathetic provincial old woman” (James 92). The marginalization of the poet’s relics to “a bundle of tattered papers” provides a striking contrast to the reverence with which he previously displayed for the papers. The marriage proposal provides a convenient reason for “NN” to restrict himself, ironically suspending his own homoerotic desire by refusing a heterosexual narrative for himself.

James’s female characters in this text function as figures of female toxicity for the male protagonists. They are the greatest threats to “NN’s” masculinity. Sexuality is socially defined in binary terms, and the presence of these women compels the narrator to perform socially acceptable male behavior. His anxieties are confronted by truth in the form of the two women. Truth exists not only as a woman or the body of woman, however. Truth is “the female genitalia, an area of the female body . . . particularly repugnant and terrifying” (Schotten 115). Thus, the narrator allows for the papers to be abolished rather than enter into a union that would conventionally obligate him to the presence of female genitals, or “truth.”
For “NN,” of The Aspern Papers, not only does Miss Tina signify the “truth” that threatens his masculinity, but both she and Juliana are obstacles he “must go through” in order to fulfill that desire (Person 125). If his endeavor is a masculine one pertaining to artifacts of masculinity, then the masculine entity that he lacks is in the possession of two women—together comprising the “truth.” He manages only to retrieve a portrait of a young Jeffrey Aspern, which intensifies his loss at the end of the narrative: “it hangs above my writing-table . . . I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers” (James 96). “NN” convinces himself that the loss felt is of the papers, exemplifying the true nature of desire, as he never actually possessed what he “lost.” When the papers have been destroyed, he refers to the deceased Juliana as an “old witch” due to her current uselessness for him (James 94); dead, she cannot help him in his queer adventure.

Henry James’s complex relation to homoerotic desire dictates the course of action in The Aspern Papers. The homoerotic desire of James’s fiction exists in layers of sophistication, and this analysis submits that it is the multiplicity of desire and anxiety in a heteronormative society that is being confronted in this novel.

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Physical and Intellectual Sexuality in Virginia Woolf’s Jacob’s Room

Alexandra DeLuise

Virginia Woolf’s novel Jacob’s Room follows its title character, Jacob Flanders, through his short life. Jacob, one of the many young English men to be killed during World War I, is a complex character. When it comes to sexual partners, Jacob does not overtly prefer the company of men or women; his sexual preferences deviate from social conventions in that he chooses to have sex with female prostitutes and experiences at least one instance of homosexual intercourse. Jacob’s sexuality is confusing, even to himself. As he constantly tries to force his female partners to match the intellectual fulfillment provided him by his male partners, he is left disappointed, his intellectual needs left unmet. Instead of considering Jacob as either hetero- or homosexual, I argue that he should be seen as a man who prefers intellectual stimuli from his sexual partners, his desire for female flesh pitted against his quest for intelligent conversation.

Jacob’s relationships with men are infused with intellectual stimuli, whereas his attempts at relationships with women—more often than not purely sexual in nature—are based upon physicality and necessity, and generally involve women who are not overly intelligent. The intellectual connection Jacob feels to his homosexual lovers is evident in the novel. As Susan Harris notes, “Woolf carefully entwines the narrative strand that follows Jacob’s sexual education with the one following his intellectual education until the two finally become inseparable” (421). By so doing, Woolf links the relationship between intellectual and physical attraction for Jacob making it impossible for him to feel fully satisfied unless his sexual partner can meet both his intellectual and physical needs.

Jacob has a sexual encounter with his friend Simeon while the two are studying at Cambridge. In this scene, the emphasis is on intellectual connection between the men; the physicality behind their acts is loosely coded so that the sexual nature of the scene is not overt. The two men are talking alone, when the scene suddenly shifts its discursive focus to “intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly, . . . intimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool . . . it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the luster of pearl” (45). There are two references to intimacy here: one, the intimacy of two minds imprinting on each other; the other, intimacy like a deep pool. The first intimacy emphasizes the intellectual connection of the two men. Notably, it is not “body upon body” that is the focus of this first intimacy, though this section is certainly not lacking in sexual implications. The second intimacy references a “pearly pool,” and is arguably a reference to ejaculation, with the “wash[ing] over everything” of this semen-colored intimacy rising with the increased mental stimulation between the two characters. In this scene, the two different levels of intimacy fuse and create a moment between the two men where the physical and the intellectual are indivisible.

The narrator states that, for Jacob, “the body is harnessed to a brain” (83), implying that the two must communicate and influence one another. This mind-body relationship implies that it is impossible for Jacob to be completely happy in a relationship unless the needs of both his body and mind are satisfied. He cannot choose to pursue somebody solely based on the desire of his mind, nor can he seek bodily pleasure where there is nothing to appease his brain. This is why his interactions with Simeon, particularly during their sexual encounter, are so focused on their intellectual connection. Simeon is an educated man, appealing to Jacob’s brain as well as his body. In the midst of their intimate encounter, there is evidence of both bodily and spiritual communication. As Jacob stands over Simeon’s chair in their quiet Cambridge room, the narrator states, “[Jacob] appeared extraordinarily happy, as if his pleasure would brim and spill down the sides if Simeon spoke. Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing” (45).
Physically, there is the picture of Jacob happily standing—a reference alluding to his erection. Spiritually, it is clear Simeon’s words have a great pleasure-bringing effect on Jacob. In fact, Jacob’s “pleasure . . . brim[img] and spill[img]” (45) at Simeon’s words alludes to another ejaculation taking place between the two. This ejaculation is brought on by the intellectual intimacy the two share, thus showing that Jacob’s physical pleasure is tightly connected to his intellectual needs being fulfilled.

Throughout Jacob’s Room, Woolf allows the narrator to flow between thoughts seamlessly, allowing the reader to catch on to the implied meaning—or not. This strategy is used to portray the relationship between Jacob and another one of his friends, Richard Bonamy, to make the homosexual love between the two less prominent. For example, in one scene Jacob stands alone, choosing something to read from the bookshelf and sighing. He is “so profoundly gloomy that gloom must have been lodged in him to cloud him at any moment, which was odd in a man who enjoyed things so, was not much given to analysis, but was horribly romantic, of course, Bonamy thought, in his rooms in Lincoln’s Inn” (147). In a single—albeit complex—sentence, we are taken from Jacob’s gloom to Bonamy’s thoughts; Bonamy, however, could not know Jacob was sighing, because the two are geographically miles apart. This narrative strategy places Jacob and Bonamy together, not physically, but mentally, allowing the emotions of one character run into the thoughts of another. This demonstrates the closeness of their friendship, and shows that Bonamy often thinks of Jacob in a romantic light when they are apart.

Also important in this scene is the fact that Jacob and Bonamy are merged together while Jacob is choosing a book. A book is a symbol of knowledge, and a love of books is something that Jacob shares with his more intelligent lovers. The focus on books and reading draws further attention to the mental connection between Jacob and Bonamy in the scene mentioned above, when Jacob is choosing a book: “But the Daily Mail isn’t to be trusted,’ said Jacob to himself, looking about for something else to read . . . It was to Bonamy that Jacob wrote from Patras—to Bonamy who couldn’t love a woman and never read a foolish book” (147). That the two males find reading extremely important is evident; in fact, their relationship seems defined by what they read. This smooth transition between Jacob and Bonamy through a single sentence sweeps readers across time and space, emphasizing the juxtaposition between the males’ intellectual abilities while suggesting that loving women is, essentially, the equivalent of reading a foolish book.

In addition to their love of serious books, Jacob and Bonamy are also connected in a more personal way. The narrator states: “there remains over [Jacob] something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself. Moreover, part of this is not Jacob but Richard Bonamy” (73). The purpose of this section is to show the relationship of the two men: Jacob has a private element of himself only he can decide to share, and one can speak of Bonamy in the same way. If Bonamy “could not love a woman” (147) and is the same as Jacob, then Jacob likewise cannot love a woman. Because Jacob alone can convey this “something” about himself to a second person, and part of this is also part of Bonamy, it is evident that there is a secret connection between them; a connection that includes avoiding both foolish books and the love of women, and that cannot be spoken of by the narrator.

Despite being unable to love a woman, Jacob does engage in intercourse with a few women during his short life. Florinda is Jacob’s most prominent female companion. Florinda constantly has her intellectual abilities belittled throughout the novel; for example, when looking at her, Jacob thinks, “beauty goes hand in hand with stupidity” (83). The idea that beauty is nearly worthless is a constant theme of the novel. At one point, the narrator states: “if

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1 Fanny Elmer, one of Jacob’s lovers, does attempt to win his heart by reading Tom Jones, but fails to keep Jacob as her lover after he leaves for Greece. Her relationship with Jacob will not be discussed, as it falls outside the scope of this paper.
you talk of a beautiful woman you mean only something flying fast which for a second uses
the eyes, lips, or cheeks of Fanny Elmer, for example, to glow through” (122). These fleeting
moments in which beauty shows itself are superficial and have no lasting importance in the
realm of the intelligent. It is through these fleeting moments of beauty that Florinda appeals
to Jacob; her body fulfills his need, but does not leave a lasting impression or appeal to Jacob’s
need for intelligent conversation.

Just as reading is important to Jacob, his “long letters about art, morality and politics”
(97) to his friends at Cambridge are another form of intellectual stimulation and connection to
his male lovers. Florinda’s inability to satisfy Jacob’s intellectual needs is most evident in her
struggle to write cohesive letters. Florinda is, essentially, incompetent; the narrator describes
her as “a butterfly, gnat, or other winged insect, attached to a twig which, clogged with mud, it
rolls across a page” (97), giving the reader the impression that Florinda is a worthless, crushable
creature. Her attribution to nature is not flattering; the mud of her stick pen is dirty, her technique
non-existent, and it appears that her writing is thoughtless. In short, “the impediment between
Florinda and her pen was something impassable” (97). If Florinda cannot successfully handle
her own pen, it is safe to assume that she is not very good with Jacob’s “pen,” either. This
example can be taken to describe Florinda’s inability to satisfy Jacob on a mental level, but can
also be a coded implication that her bedroom skills also leave much to be desired.

Sandra Wentworth-Williams is the first woman in Jacob’s life to pass beyond the borders
of Jacob’s heart. Upon meeting her, Jacob “was surprised by his own knowledge of the rules of
behaviour; how much more can be said than one thought; how open one can be with a woman;
and how little he had known himself before” (154). Sandra shows Jacob a glimpse of what he
would consider masculine traits in her personality: she is unafraid to say what she thinks, is
intelligent, reads books, and even wears breeches under her skirts (154). Sandra also appeals to
him physically, because she is a woman. The union of the body and the brain disrupts Jacob’s
relationship with Bonamy because Sandra fills Bonamy’s role as an intellectual companion, as
well as satisfies Jacob’s physical needs.

Soon after Jacob meets the woman who connects his physical and mental desires, he
dies. Jacob’s confused sexual appetite is the only part of him we are shown throughout his
short life, a narrative strategy which sheds light on a sexuality that does not conform to the
rules of heterosexuality enforced by society. Instead, Woolf is acknowledging Jacob’s sexual
wants and needs, allowing him to fulfill these desires without being exposed to any but the
most careful readers.

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HEATHER SANTIAGO graduated from SCSU’s Master of Arts in English program in 2013. She has since started her Master of Science in Library and Information Science, with a focus in Archives and Records Management. Heather works as an Academic Specialist for the Master of Arts programs at a university in New Hampshire. Her literary passions are firmly rooted in nineteenth-century British and American literature, contemporary American Indian fiction, early-American historical fiction, and narratives from the New England region dating back to the seventeenth century. Outside of the world of occupational demands, and her literary sanctuary, Heather can be found perusing flea markets for small treasures and under-appreciated, unique, antiquarian books. She currently lives outside of Manchester, New Hampshire, with her husband.

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**Submission Guidelines**

The submission deadline for our Fall 2014/Winter 2015 issue will be September 15, 2014. The deadline for our Spring/Summer 2015 issue will be March 15, 2015.

Please send submissions electronically to textincontext.southernct@gmail.com as MS Word email attachments, indicating in the body of the email to which section you are submitting your paper. Our editorial board employs anonymous peer review in its selection process; thus, author name and contact information should appear in a separate file and not in the manuscript itself.

Submissions should be no longer than 2,500 words in length, set in 11pt, Palatino font, double-spaced, with 1” margins, and adhere to 2009 MLA style. When citing play lines, use capital Roman numerals for act numbers, lower case Roman numerals for scene numbers, and Arabic numerals for lines (i.e. I.ii.23-25).

All submissions must be the author’s original thought and therefore must include a complete works cited page also in MLA format. Please also include a short abstract and third-person author bio, no more than 150 words each.

If figures, illustrations, and/or video clips accompany the submission, please present them in separate files. The author has sole responsibility for any copyright permissions and fees.

**Book Reviews**

We are seeking book reviews of scholarly texts that have been published within the past two years (2012 to present). Reviews should be no more than 1,000 words and should conform to the MLA guidelines listed above.

**Requirements**

Authors must be currently enrolled in a program of graduate study at an accredited university. Submissions must be previously unpublished, but the author retains future publishing rights.

**Copyediting**

If your manuscript is accepted for publication, it will be copyedited by members of our editorial board. *Text in Context: A Graduate Student Journal* reserves the right to make minor grammatical edits to all manuscripts accepted for publication. Copyediting regarding language change or sentence structure will be forwarded to you for your review with additional instructions from your editor.
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