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# Queer Literary Criticism and the Biographical Fallacy

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QUEER LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL FALLACY

by

Shawna Lipton

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Partial Fulfillment of the

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ABSTRACT

QUEER LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL FALLACY

by

Shawna Lipton

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor Jane Gallop

“Queer Literary Criticism and the Biographical Fallacy” engages with three fields of inquiry within literary studies: queer literary criticism, modernist studies, and author theory. By looking at the critical reception of four iconic queer modernist authors – Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Radclyffe Hall, and Virginia Woolf– this dissertation reinvestigates the relation between criticism and the figure of the author. Queer criticism-- despite its fundamental critique of identity—relies on the identity of the author when it blurs the distinction between the literary text and the author’s biography. Ultimately this work provides a deeper understanding of the queer relation to the modernist author and the critic’s relation to the author’s biography.

The dissertation is divided into two sections and each one pairs two authors who were contemporaries of one another and contrasts their reception in literary criticism. The first section includes Oscar Wilde and Henry James, and the second Radclyffe Hall and Virginia Woolf. The first chapter tracks the critical celebration of Oscar Wilde as he moves from gay hero in the 1980s to queer icon in the 1990s. The chapter argues that despite the queer critique of identity politics, queer critics share a similar personal

investment in Wilde as the earlier gay critics. The second chapter moves to Henry James, whose sexuality (unlike Wilde's) necessitated innovative queer methods of apprehension and interpretation beyond binary categories of homo and heterosexual definition. The subject of the third chapter is Radclyffe Hall, whose legal trial made her a similar public homosexual to Oscar Wilde. Reading through two decades of lesbian and queer criticism of Hall, this chapter demonstrates how often critics discuss the author rather than her novel, and how frequently critics conflate the author with her fictional character. The final chapter on Virginia Woolf demonstrates how contemporary queer criticism rallies against the biographical insistence of an earlier generation of lesbian and feminist critics. In this final case, in contradistinction to the other chapters, queer criticism of Woolf aligns with Woolf's own modernist resistance to the dominance of biography.

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*For My Sister*

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And to Anthony (my partner and inspiration in all things).

Biography lends to death a new terror. -- Oscar Wilde

## INTRODUCTION

### Queer Literary Criticism and the Biographical Fallacy

“To concern oneself with an author’s sexuality is to fall into a prurient and epistemologically naïve form of reading...Or such, at least, is the accepted wisdom.” --  
Vincent Quinn

In what ways do our feelings about the writer interpose themselves between us, as readers, and the texts that authors write? Although the abiding wisdom in contemporary literary scholarship (influenced by the theoretical principles of New Criticism and Deconstruction) is that “it is the work and not the life that counts,” readers maintain an interest in the author as a historical figure (Schenk 88). In “Literary Biographies Today” Leslie Schenk writes:

We all know it is the work and not the life that counts, and yet...we cannot seem to get enough life-stories. Presumably that is because we already know the subject’s works and are so impressed by or even enamored of them we demand to know more about their creators. It really is a little bit like falling in love. (88)

Schenk describes the desire to gain intimate knowledge about the author’s personal life in romantic terms. We are so enamored of the author’s work that we want to know more about his or her life.

This dissertation outlines the theoretical pushback against biographical criticism in literary studies that began with the New Critics in the mid-twentieth century, and goes on to describe how feminist and gay criticism of the 1970s and 1980s became highly

biographical, since these schools of criticism were deeply invested in the identities of female and/or homosexual authors as a political tool. I then suggest how queer literary criticism can point to new ways of theorizing the critical relation to the author. The queer relation to the author that I advocate incorporates a critique of identity politics, and a celebration of style by attending to matters of form in literature, and using art as a method of constructing the self by creating an authorial persona.

There is an unmistakable allure to biographical reading; however, a critical dilemma arises for literary scholars when biographical information about the author is used hermeneutically. Although this project emphasizes critics who focus on formal aspects of texts rather than on extra-textual information as the basis of literary interpretation, I do not wish to cut readers off from author biography as a source of desire and pleasure. I will argue instead that biography, or forms of biographical speculation about the author, are deeply ingrained in literary-critical analysis. This point should not be taken as an argument for easy or reductive biographical readings. Rather, my work contributes to thinking about the role of the author in literary interpretation and encourages us to recognize that the literary-critical disdain for biography is a denial, or repression, of the prurient and socially proscribed curiosities that power the most radical insights of queer thought.

Modernist authors are frequent subjects of queer literary scholarship because queerness can be read in their texts (because of the ambiguous writing style, the portrayal of characters who do not adhere to sexual norms, etc.) but the depictions of sexuality are still hard to define compared to stories that fit within a heterosexual/homosexual binary. The time period covered begins at the turn of the

century with contemporaries Oscar Wilde and Henry James, and ends in 1928 when Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf published *Orlando*, both landmark novels addressing issues of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, this dissertation will intervene in debates about the use of biographical criticism in literary studies, and point to methods of engaging with author biographies informed by queer scholarship: I will show how a queer engagement with the author pushes back against the prescriptive moralism of New Criticism, and also troubles the unequivocal celebration of homosexual identity in gay criticism. At stake are the relations between fact and fiction and between life and art.

## THE BIOGRAPHICAL FALLACY

New Criticism was a formalist school of literary criticism that dominated the American academy in the mid-twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. New Criticism emerged largely as a response to the modernist literature written in England and America in the period between the two great wars.<sup>2</sup> New Criticism emphasizes the explication of the work itself rather than the use of extra-textual material, including biographical information about the author.<sup>3</sup> In an essay published in 1954, New Critics W.K Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley acknowledge the appeal of literary biography as a genre independent of literary criticism: "There is criticism of poetry and there is author psychology... and then we

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent New Critics included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren.

<sup>2</sup> See R.P. Blackmur, *New Criticism in the United States*. The Folcroft Press, 1959. 1. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Abrams, M.H. "New Criticism." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 180-182. Print.

have literary biography, a legitimate and attractive study in itself" (10). What they call "personal studies" tell the narrative of the writer's life and times in a factual and appealing way. They stipulate, "Certainly it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship" (10). But they caution, "there is the danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic" (10). Wimsatt and Beardsley legitimate biography as a literary genre, separate and distinct from literary criticism.

Since the time of the New Critics, research on authors' lives and careers has remained an important specialized aspect of literary research, but most contemporary biographers and critics acknowledge the limits of such information in explaining a text's significance. In New Criticism, reading a literary text synonymously with the author's life is known as the "biographical fallacy." The biographical fallacy occurs when the reader conflates the literary work with the author's biography. The "fallacy" lies in the belief that a work of fiction must directly reflect events in the author's actual experience, and that relating the literary work to that speculative reality is a meaningful form of criticism. For example, in criticism of Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character of Septimus Smith is often read as a representation of Woolf's personal struggle with mental illness. This interpretation is an instance of the biographical fallacy because it relies on extra-textual knowledge of Woolf's biography, and it also reduces Septimus Smith to a reflection of Woolf, rather than a fictional creation with his own psychological makeup and unique personal history (as a male, as a soldier, etc.). This kind of reading searches for biographical truth by stripping away the mask of fiction, rather than

attending to the crafted qualities of the text. This dissertation provides many examples of critical readings that avoid the biographical fallacy by focusing on formal aspects of literary works, and critical interpretations that do not conflate the author as a historical personage with the speaker of their fictional narratives. In my view, reading a novel on its own terms does not mean that the desire to know more about the author needs to be suppressed. It simply means that fictional work should not be read reductively as a form of author biography.

## GAY LITERARY CRITICISM

Since the 1970s, gay and lesbian critics have challenged the exclusion of gay and lesbian authors, literary representations, and themes from the traditional literary canon that was formed based largely on the principles of New Criticism. Since the New Critics emphasized formal aspects of texts, there was no room to discuss the individual identity of the author. By contrast, gay and lesbian criticism makes personal identity a central issue and celebrates the work of homosexual authors.<sup>4</sup> Because homosexual representation is a central concern for gay and lesbian critics a gay/lesbian reading may focus on the author's individual sexuality rather than their literary depictions of sexuality.

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond calling attention to homosexual themes in canonical literary works, gay and lesbian critics have helped popularize works by gay and lesbian authors such as Radclyffe Hall, whose 1928 book *The Well of Loneliness* has more historical and cultural value to lesbian readers than widespread recognition for its literary merit. The reclamation of gay/lesbian authors and texts can lead to the construction of a specific homosexual literary canon, offered as an alternative to the hetero-centric canon commonly taught in university classrooms. The formation of a gay/lesbian canon of authors and texts highlights the similarities between lesbian and gay literary criticism and other politically motivated or identity based movements such as feminist criticism, African American criticism, and postcolonial studies.

The thinking is that not all authors who experienced same-sex desire were able to portray homoerotic characters or scenes in their work because of the threat of censorship and the social and historical context in which they were writing. Oscar Wilde is an example of an author who is frequently studied in a biographical way by gay critics. Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde (published in 1987), for instance, focused on the influence Wilde's sexuality had on his literary works, and paved the way for numerous analyses of Wilde's *oeuvre* through the lens of his same-sex desire. Since Wilde is one of the first publically recognized and "verified" homosexuals, his work lends itself to this kind of biographical gay reading, despite the fact that Wilde's short stories, plays, and novel do not explicitly depict same-sex eroticism.

## QUEER LITERARY CRITICISM

Queer literary criticism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like gay and lesbian criticism, queer literary criticism puts sexuality at the center of textual interpretation: but queer readers reject the assumption that a stable sexual identity exists, either within the text's representation of sexuality, or for the text's author. Queer literary criticism analyzes depictions of sexuality that do not fit within a hetero/homosexual binary, recognizing a plurality of sexual desires and identifications. Queer literary scholarship examines sexual themes in literature but does not seek to define these representations of sexuality as homosexual or heterosexual. Rather, queer literary criticism uses sexuality as one way to confound normative expectations about subjectivity.

My definition of queer draws on literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's assertion that "'queer' can refer to...the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8). This type of ambiguity around sexuality and the resistance to precise definition is central to what distinguishes *queer* from other terms and concepts that refer to sexual acts and identities. This dissertation explores queer literary criticism's treatment of the author in light of the queer critique of identity, and how the queer relation to the author compares to the celebration of gay identity in gay literary criticism.

A queer literary analysis highlights the cultural and historical specificity of the construction of sexual identity and the impact this has on our reading of an author and his/her work. The concept of sexuality as socially constructed and historically contingent, rather than innate or essential, was heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. As Valerie Rohy explains, queer criticism "warns against the hasty assumption of commonalities between present and past same-sex desires and refuses as 'ahistorical' or 'anachronistic' readings that would project modern concepts back in time" (Rohy 65). Queer reading has emphasized historical specificity in order to avoid such anachronistic projection of modern concepts onto texts from the past. For example, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century* (1994) acknowledges the effect that the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde had on shaping ideas about male homosexuality in the twentieth century, but argues that Wilde should not be considered an *a priori* "gay" writer, considering that the historical period in which he was writing was only just

beginning to understand homosexuality as an identity category. This type of queer reading focuses closely on the use of language as a way of reconstructing historically specific meaning. For example, Sinfield explains the changing connotations of the word “effeminacy,” arguing that the twentieth century association of effeminacy with homosexuality emerged only in the wake of Wilde’s scandal.

Both gay and lesbian criticism and queer literary criticism are dedicated to anti-homophobic readings of texts, and are committed to crossing the boundaries between academic understandings of sexuality and the lived experiences of individuals who are socially and politically marginalized. However, one of the imperatives of gay and lesbian criticism is that homosexual identities should be recognized and accepted, whereas queer criticism emphasizes the inscrutability of sexuality and the subversive potential of queer sexuality to disrupt “regimes of the normal” (Warner xxvii).

Reading a text from a queer perspective challenges the presumption that there are stable or inherent “heterosexual” or “homosexual” identities, which undermines the centrality of identity politics in gay and lesbian literary criticism. The queer resistance to definition, stability and normativity, “offers a way to access the potentially of the literary work—not to settle it, once and for all, in a meaning that masters it, but to rewrite it, perpetually” (Ohi 29). Within queer literary criticism, focusing on the text allows for many different meanings to open up, rather than searching for only a homosexual meaning, or trying to limit the interpretation to the one closest to the author’s own sexual desires and experiences. The personal sexuality of the author need not be used to justify a homoerotic or queer interpretation of a text. Instead of locating queerness in the author,

whose sexuality then becomes the key for deciphering the eroticism depicted in the text, the queer reading is based on the text itself.

## QUEER READING AFTER THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

A key concept for resisting the biographical imperative that is so prevalent in traditional literary study is the Post-structural theory of "The Death of the Author," introduced by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay of the same name. Barthes claimed that New Critics had not gone far enough to diminish the interpretive power of the author, since the author is still perceived to be "the past of his own book" (143-145). Barthes argued that the critic is still expected to discover the author behind the work; "when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic" (Barthes 147). This approach is problematic for Barthes because it imposes a limit on the text. The critic is searching for one correct interpretation that closes the writing off from other possible meanings and interpretations. As Cheryl Walker points out, "Death of the Author" critics such as Barthes are rejecting the notion that "behind the text stands a subject called the author to whom all questions about the text should be referred and by whom (literally or figuratively) all confusions will be resolved" (111). The Author seems to provide an answer or ultimate solution to solving the text, which is outside of the text itself. Barthes's target in his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author" was not so much "the Author" as any critical practice that sought "to impose a limit on [the] text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing." Rather than closing the book on the author once and for all, Barthes points to a new way of relating to the author, one that

multiplies meanings in texts rather than shutting them down. Barthes sought to increase and complicate meanings rather than reducing texts to one interpretation.

Barthes was also interested in readers' embodied responses and the socially unsanctioned desires and pleasures associated with aesthetic experiences. In this sense, Barthes provides an enduring model for a *queer* relation to the author because his notion of the author is rooted in readerly pleasure, the commingling of eroticism and aesthetics, and attentiveness to the protean nature of the self. Although Barthes was writing before queer theory developed as an academic discourse, these are all elements at play in current definitions of queerness. We see Barthes's queer relation to the author in his treatment of Marcel Proust. Barthes is interested in Proust as he appears inside his own novel, rather than as a real-life figure. Proust is a fictional construction for Barthes, one that creates interpretive puzzles and challenges, rather than an "Author" who provides answers or solutions. Proust is a particularly tricky subject for theorizing the author because Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* contains many elements of his own biography, which seems to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, art and life. In "The Death of the Author" Barthes theorizes:

Proust himself, despite the apparent psychological character of what is called his analyses, undertook the responsibility of inexorably blurring, by an extreme subtilization, the relation of the writer and his characters: by making the narrator not the person who has seen or felt, nor even the person who writes, but the person who will write (the young man of the novel — but, in fact, how old is he, and who is he? — wants to write but cannot, and the novel ends when at last the writing becomes possible), Proust has given modern writing its epic: by a radical

reversal, instead of putting his life into his novel, as we say so often, he makes his very life into a work for which his own book was in a sense the model.

Proust similarly appears in Barthes's *S/Z* (1970) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) as an example of an author who can become a fiction inside his own fictional work.<sup>5</sup>

Proust himself took a firm stance against biographical criticism in his lifetime. In fact, few writers have insisted more forcefully that we should concentrate on the work, not the life of the author. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust famously took issue with French literary critic Sainte-Beuve's thesis that the private lives of writers should be studied for the light they can shed on their literature. Proust defined Sainte-Beuve's method, to "look to the biography of the man, to the history of his family, to all his peculiarities, for an understanding of his work" (11). Proust argued that what artists reveal of themselves in their personal lives is a superficial social persona, which in no way gives us the key to their literary greatness. It is the books that should be great, not the man himself.

It has been suggested that Proust's resistance to biographical criticism was motivated not by an elevated sense of the literary, but by a desire to keep his own private life a secret. Rumors of Proust's homosexuality circulated in his lifetime, and he chose a heterosexual narrator for his novel, perhaps to distance his prose from his public image. Proust's use of a heterosexual persona led critics to invent an explanatory "transposition theory" of sexuality to apply to his work.<sup>6</sup> The idea is that Albertine is

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<sup>5</sup> For a more complete overview of the role of Proust in Barthes's writing see Malcolm Bowie, "Barthes on Proust," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14: 2001. 513-18. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Justin O'Brien advanced this theory in a 1949 essay and other critics subsequently repeated it. The discussion of Proust in *The Gay 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Gay Men and Lesbians, Past and Present* centers on "what has become famous as 'the Albertine strategy,'

based on Alfred Agnostinelli, a young man who served as Proust's chauffeur. Queer critics push back against the biographical methods of "reading for gayness," and using the author's own sexuality to justify a homosexual reading of the text. As Elisabeth Ladenson argues, the transposition view "may fit in with current trends toward 'regaying' homosexual literature of the past, but it entirely skirts the specificity of Proust's text" (17). In *Proust's Lesbianism* Ladenson convincingly demonstrates how "both homophobic and gay-positive attempts to read Proust's women as men paradoxically have in common the effect of reading out of the *Recherche* what is perhaps its queerest aspect: the narrator's preoccupation with lesbianism" (17). Taking a biographical approach to interpreting Proust's novel using the "Albertine strategy" ignores the central enigma of the text. Albertine is not a woman who is "really a man" but the embodiment of "genderfuck," a character who blends male and female characteristics in a way that subverts normative expectations that a person's gender will be consistent and coherent. Reading the *Recherche* as simply a gay love story in disguise ignores so many nuanced elements that are central to the narrative. In this way, gay criticism with its emphasis on outing authors and "regaying" texts does Proust and his readers a grave disservice. Ladenson sees the narrator's obsession with lesbianism as a key distinguisher of the fictionality of the text (133). Not only is Proust's narrator heterosexual while Proust himself desired men, Proust seems to have had little interest in lesbians and their ways, while for Marcel they are an *idée fixe*. In Ladenson's words, "It is his lesbophilia that

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whereby Proust's real-life lover Alfred becomes, in the novel, the female Albertine in order to disguise the narrator 'Marcel's' sexuality" (Russell 129). The entry under "Censorship" in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage* states, "the most famous sexual transposition in twentieth-century Western literature involves Albertine of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*" (Cady 153).

sets Proust's narrator apart from the author, that marks the novel as a novel rather than a perverse exercise in selective autobiography" (133). Although the novel features a heterosexual narrator, the heterosexual romance plot is queered by Albertine's desire for other women, and the narrator's complete obsession with female-same sex desire. The transgressiveness and elusiveness of sexuality in general is a recurrent theme throughout the book.

In queer criticism of Proust, we see how dual tendencies—feeling an intense connection with the author, and maintaining the integrity of the text as a work of fiction--can coexist despite the theoretical tension between these two impulses. Barthes empathizes with Proust not as a historical figure, but as an author, mediated through fiction. In her 2011 book revisiting Barthes's theories of authorship, *The Deaths of the Author*, Jane Gallop writes:

As Institution, the author is dead, but that hardly means Barthes does not care about, does not feel anything for the author. On the contrary, Barthes desires the author. In the wake of the dead author, Barthes outlines an erotic relation to the author. In our contemporary critical vocabulary we might want to call such a relation to the author queer (38).

Gallop points out that Barthes's theory of the author is queer because it expresses an erotic desire for the author. Although Barthes proclaims that the author is dead, he gives the critical and readerly relation to the author an emotional life. As Gallop writes, "even though the author is dead there are nonetheless authors we 'live with,' authors we welcome into the texture of our life" (19). For Barthes, Proust is one such author.

This dissertation examines the queer relation to four authors, figures who are both cultural icons and personal touchstones for queer readers, and points toward a queer method of biographical criticism. The method of queering biographical criticism that I outline in this dissertation is based on the queer conception of the author theorized by Barthes, where the author lives within his own text. There can be no definitive textual interpretation, so too can there be no final recognition of the author's aims or identity. I argue that rather than longing to connect with the author as a person, we can read the author as a construction of the text. Queer theory celebrates the constructed nature of the self. The author uses writing as a form of self-fashioning, and reading the author as a construction of the text, rather than attempting to recreate the biographical truth of the author using historical facts, is in-keeping with the more subversive possibilities of queer thought (destabilizing subjectivity and thwarting social expectations about how to live a life).

## TOWARD A QUEER THEORY OF THE AUTHOR

The current project sets up a parallel between complex queer readings of sexual identity (rather than reductive homo/hetero definitions) and the construction of an authorial identity (rather than biographical identity). Queer literary interpretation does not need to fix or settle the sexual identity of the author, and neither does it need to seek out the factual and historical biography of the author in their fictional work. Rather, queer literary critics can see the author as a construction of the text, and how our concept of the author is based on the performative effects of his or her writing. In this way I bring

together queer thinking about the performative nature of identity with ideas about authorship from literary criticism.

The concept of the author as a construction of the text is known as the “implied author” in narratological theory.<sup>7</sup> The implied author is a construct formed by the reader on the basis of his or her reading of the literary work. Formalist critics have argued that the reader’s concept of the author must be based on evidence found in the text if the process of authorial construction is not to simply conform to the meanings that readers want to find in the first place. Formalist critics focus on the constraints the formal aspects of the text place on the reader’s freedom of interpretation. The implied author--the authorial presence projected by a specific narrative-- is distinct from the “real” (i.e., the living or historical figure to whom a given work is attributed) author of the text. This concept helps the reader construct his or her notion of the author based on the text itself and not on preconceived notions of the author derived from the facts of their biography, or images of the author circulating in popular culture. This notion of the author is useful in textual interpretation because it helps us describe the layered process by which meaning is generated, and creates a concept for the figure of the author that is not quite the fictional speaker of the text, and not a direct correlate of the author him or herself.<sup>8</sup>

My work addresses the manifestation of the implied author in queer literary criticism, and how queer critics engage with the author in their interpretive process. This relation to the author fuses affect, eroticism, and aesthetics, and a concept of the author

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of the “implied author” was introduced into literary criticism by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).

<sup>8</sup> See Booth, Wayne C. “Resurrection of the Implied Author. Why Bother?” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. J. Phelan & P. Rabinowitz Eds. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. 75–88. Print.

that is not limited to one definition, but is flexible and open to contradiction and reinterpretation. Critics can queer biographical criticism if they take up the construction of the author in the text, rather than trying to reconstruct a “true self” that exists extra-textually.<sup>9</sup> One example of this queer approach to the author in literary criticism would be Kevin Ohi’s reading of Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis* (1905) in his 2015 book *Dead Letters Sent: Queer Literary Transmission*. Although Oscar Wilde composed *De Profundis* as a letter to Alfred Douglas and it is written in a confessional mode, Ohi reads this text as a statement by Wilde as an author, and not direct insight into his thoughts and feelings as a man. In this literary work, Wilde reflects upon his career and artistic choices, bemoaning the fact that he let Bosie destroy his potential as an artist. Despite the recognition he received during his lifetime, Wilde knows that he prioritized pleasure over artistic achievement, since all his greatest successes as a writer occurred before he became involved with Douglas. Wilde recognizes that the loss of the works he might have written had he prioritized his art is a loss to the entire world and to the advancement of culture. In his own words, Wilde became “the spendthrift of [his] own genius.”

*De Profundis* is a piece of writing that adds to Wilde’s mythos as an author, more than it is a personal document. Ohi writes that it is “one of Wilde’s most complex meditations on aestheticism: on the relation between art and ‘life,’ on the eroticism of aesthetic experience” (Ohi 123). It is ultimately, a pedagogical text that helps us consider the consequences of Wilde’s life and works for the question of queer literary criticism (Ohi 123). Like *In Search of Lost Time*’s narrator Marcel, “Oscar Wilde” is a

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<sup>9</sup> This is akin to the poetic “I”, also known as the “speaker” in New Criticism, which is a creation of the text and not the voice of the author.

character that is worked out in the narrative of *De Profundis* and lives within the text.<sup>10</sup>

*De Profundis* is another text that helps to trouble the boundaries between biography and fiction, and that is why a queer reading such as Ohi's is so apt, because a queer reading attends to the constructed nature of identity, the performative effects of language, and the instability and indeterminacy of the self. Queer reading does not seek one fixed meaning (decoding the "truth" about an author's sexuality, or limiting interpretation through the use of biography), and is open to new interpretations that may contradict the accepted wisdom about an author or a text.

Our understanding of Oscar Wilde as an author will inflect our reading of his work, but it does not have to define it. As Barthes theorizes in *From Work to Text* the author is "inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work" (1473-74). The concept of the Author that Barthes attempted to kill was considered the truth behind the text, but the implied author as interpreted by the reader is still generative. In Barthes's theory, the author is no longer an original source but, instead, composed of a "plurality of texts" (S/Z 10). This playful and plural "paper-author" composed of texts is central to my queering of biographical criticism. Instead of seeking biographical truth as a hermeneutic, the author is a source of readerly desire, pleasure, and interpretive play.

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<sup>10</sup> Here we might also compare Wilde to Proust, who retreated from social life in order to write his novel. Proust believed that accessing one's literary genius meant giving up the social self one presents to the world. Proust ultimately valued his creative life over his social life, which aligns with his critical precepts in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

This dissertation does not simply argue that lesbian and gay criticism tends towards the biographical, whereas queer studies do not. I find many examples of queer critics engaging with the author's personal sexuality and appealing to biographical information in their interpretations of the author's work. Therefore, in each chapter of the dissertation I explore different forms of queer biographical criticism: I argue that a queer critique of biographical criticism can unite the modernist call for close reading methods with the queer critique of identity, without sacrificing the affective attachment readers feel towards the authors they love.

## CHAPTER OUTLINES

Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on an author that shows us a unique form of biographical criticism, and each chapter helps clarify the relation to the author in queer literary criticism. The first chapter on Wilde shows us the paradigmatic example of an author who is read biographically by gay critics who use the historical facts of Wilde's life to justify a homosexual reading of his work. Wilde is then taken up by queer critics who are still invested in the fact that Wilde "as a person" is queer. Chapter one demonstrates how Oscar Wilde's biography has often overshadowed the insights of his literary criticism, as well as the queer possibilities of his fiction.

The second chapter on Henry James provides a contrast to Wilde. Criticism of James points the way to a queer form of biographical criticism because it is engaged with the construction of the author through his corpus of writing and how he has constructed his eroticism textually, rather than "going behind" the text to examine the

historical man himself. This version of biographical criticism is still interested in the author, but it is a perverse textual body that is taken up. The chapter examines how Henry James wished to be remembered as an author without readers prying into his personal life. James's attempts to control his literary legacy by thwarting "publishing scoundrels" actually produced a lively afterlife in literary theory. James's queer afterlife can be attributed largely to the pioneering work of Eve Sedgwick who effectively read his textual body, subverting the relation to the author expressed in traditional biographical criticism by using James's to innovate queer methods of close reading.

Radclyffe Hall is significant as the subject of biographical criticism because unlike the other authors I look at, her work does not necessarily stand-alone based on literary merit. Hall's prose does not invite the multifaceted queer reading that Wilde, James, and Woolf's work does, because of her "flat" prose, sentimentality, and obvious political (rather than purely aesthetic) purpose. Hall may actually be more significant as a queer icon and an image circulating in visual culture than as a literary stylist. Hall is also the only author explored in this dissertation who invited biographical readings of her novel, which she marketed as a case study of a sexual invert, whereas Wilde, James, and Woolf all published essays, literary criticism, and other texts that cautioned against searching for biographical truth in fiction.

The final chapter focuses on the literary theory of Virginia Woolf. I outline a subversive model of biographical criticism developed by Virginia Woolf in her essays and novels *Orlando* and *Flush*. By finishing with this reading of Woolf, I show how modernist authors were queering biography long before queer critics were challenging stable notions of gender and sexual identity. This innovative approach to biographical

criticism can be called queer because it combines aesthetic experimentation with an element of unsanctioned eroticism. In both *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf experiments with form when telling the life of an author. By shifting time periods, literary styles, and narrative perspectives, she challenges the readers' notions of how to tell a life, and in this way she does not force the life to fit within the confines of "straight time" (theorized in discourses of queer temporality), or the romance plot.

Although Woolf argues that serious artists deserve to be considered based on their life's work and not their biography, Woolf acknowledges that serious critics will sometimes be tempted "to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page" (*CR2* 205-6). Woolf's description of austere literary critics who long "to touch the flesh" captures the deep connection between engaged reading and the longing for the author. Like Woolf, I do not insist that critics suppress this desire to connect to the author and focus solely on literary works. I simply suggest that Woolf's own writings point to a queer method of literary criticism that does not seek to stabilize the author's personal or sexual identity. In this way Woolf contributes to the formulation of what I am calling a "Queer Theory of the Author."

## CHAPTER ONE

### “Saint Oscar” and the Birth of the Queer Author

“The Wildean gay reader is a fan who longs to sleep with the beloved writer and who reads in order to wear, figuratively, the author’s outfits” –  
Wayne Koestenbaum

This chapter is about reading and what it means to see oneself and recognize one’s desires in literature. I outline how over time gay and queer readers have turned to Oscar Wilde in order to learn about their own sexual identities. Since there are no explicit representations of homosexuality in Wilde’s novel, stories, or plays, this process of identifying with the homosexual Wilde involves a form of biographical reading, where readers overlay the events of Wilde’s personal life onto his texts. Therefore, as Kevin Ohi argues: “The recognition of a gay Wilde—or the recognition of homosexuality through Wilde...occurs...through the negation of his art” (123). The gay Wilde is always a biographical Wilde, tethered to the historical facts of his life; however, the queer Wilde does not have to be. Reading the queerness in Wilde’s texts and writings can open up many more theories and possibilities beyond what Wilde himself experienced.

In this chapter I argue that instead of worshipping at the Wildean altar, building “Saint Oscar” up as the father of modern gay identity, queer literary criticism can learn from Wilde’s writings. In Wilde’s essays and criticism, the author was highly critical about the search for truth in fiction. If we engage with Wilde’s literary theories in this way (instead of with Wilde’s biography): “Oscar Wilde’s critical legacy is...to underline his thwarting of our desire for him to teach the lessons we want to learn—that is to try to

grasp what is most seductive, alluring, risky, and troubling about his *queerness* and ours” (Ohi 139). By projecting a modern gay identity onto Wilde, or looking to Wilde to teach us only the lessons we *want* to learn about same-sex desire or what is “seductive, and alluring” about gay history, and not all there is to read and absorb, we cannot begin a process of queer reading that also allows for what is “risky, and troubling” about Wilde’s queerness and our own.

## A KISS FOR OSCAR WILDE

For years, fans and followers made the pilgrimage to Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris to plant lipstick kisses on Oscar Wilde’s tomb. These readers left their loving imprint and their kisses as a visual symbol of the widespread public affection for Wilde. The flying nude angel designed by sculptor Jacob Epstein was recently restored and cleansed of these markings, giving future visitors no choice but to admire the stone through a seven-foot plate glass protective barrier.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tagliabue, John. “Walling off Oscar Wilde’s Tomb From Admirers.” *The New York Times*. Dec. 15, 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/world/europe/oscar-wildes-tomb-sealed-from-admirers-kisses.html>> Web.



Figure 1: Oscar Wilde's grave, Paris. Personal photograph by author. 2009.

Admittedly, I was one of those who contributed to the layers of cosmetic graffiti that built up on the gravestone. My personal admiration for Wilde is partly what motivates me to take queer literary criticism of his life and work as an object of study. I find that this type of personal affection for Wilde is common amongst academic critics of his work. Gay male critics especially read Wilde with the expectation that they will learn something about the history of homosexuality, or about themselves and their gay identities.

Literary scholars often point to Oscar Wilde as an important historical influence on homosexual identity. His meteoric rise to stardom, criminal prosecution, and two years of imprisonment for committing acts of “gross indecency” have generated enduring interest among contemporary critics (Bristow 2003; Sinfield 1994). As Eve Sedgwick reminds us, “the figure of Wilde may have been the most formative individual influence on turn-of-the-century Anglo-European homosexual definition and identity” (Sedgwick 213). In accounts of gay and queer history Wilde is held up as the first “modern” homosexual.

The trials of Oscar Wilde caused an international sensation and an unprecedented transformation in the general legibility of homosexuality. Wilde’s fall from literary fame into ignominy occurred during three trials in 1895. In the first, he sued Lord Queensberry for libel, when Queensberry left his calling card, inscribing it, “For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite [sic]” (Holland, xi). Defending himself, Queensberry hired detectives and gathered damaging evidence against Wilde, causing him to drop his prosecution. Wilde’s friends urged him to flee to France but he stayed in England, leading to his arrest on charges of sodomy and gross indecency. In the second trial, the state prosecuted Wilde for gross indecency but the evidence against him was inconclusive. In the third, he was found guilty of gross indecency and sentenced to two years hard labor. Despite the devastating consequences for Wilde personally, Wilde’s case created greater public understanding of non-normative sexuality. E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*, for example, describes himself as “an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort” (159). Wilde’s name allows people to name the formerly unnamable and articulate the

unspeakable, which is an essential condition for the establishment of a visible queer modernism (Kahan 352).

Gay critics seem to have no qualms about reading Wilde's literary texts biographically, and also claiming Wilde as their homosexual forebear. In the late 1980s and early 1990s queer critics read the same Wilde archive differently than their contemporaries who identified as "homosexual" in order to claim Oscar Wilde as a queer author. A common thread between the gay and queer readings is that both frequently invoke Wilde's biography. Queer critics attempt to challenge identity politics and use Wilde to trouble cultural definitions of homosexuality in favor of more ambiguous queer readings, but they still betray some fascination with Wilde's larger than life persona and tragic personal history. This chapter focuses largely on the problems of reading texts as author biographies, but also highlights the seeming inevitability of this practice when readers hold a personal stake in the sexual identity of the author.

By revisiting literary criticism of the '80s and '90s I will point out the different reading practices involved in gay and queer criticism of Wilde, and how they reflect assumptions about sexual politics and approaches to literary scholarship. As I provide my commentary I am not wholly critical of these readers because such evocations of the author can lead to complex, personal, and embodied readings. This chapter provides an overview of critical responses to Wilde's biography, sexuality, and literary works, explores his enduring status as the gay author *sui generis*, and traces his emergence as a major figure for queer criticism. But just as the transparent wall that now surrounds the perimeter of Wilde's tomb prevents literary pilgrims from placing kisses, literary critics

writing about Wilde in the present day are expected to maintain more critical distance than they were in the past. In this chapter I point to a less biographical interpretive method based on Wilde's critical writings that could further distinguish queer readings of Wilde from earlier work in gay literary criticism.

## WILDE AND BIOGRAPHY

Interest in Oscar Wilde's biography has been a key factor in Wilde becoming a celebrated writer, a cultural icon, and a gay hero. At one time Wilde was a minor figure, not afforded much critical attention or literary esteem, but publication of Wilde's life history helped bring him into prominence. There was a great surge of scholarship on Oscar Wilde in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely catalyzed by Richard Ellmann's 1988 biography *Oscar Wilde*. Ellmann earned his credibility among literary critics based on his biographies of Yeats and Joyce, who were already established Irish and modernist authors. Ellmann's attention to Wilde gave the writer new legitimacy as a topic of scholarly inquiry, positioning him alongside Ellmann's other canonical literary subjects. Once written off as a quippy dilettante, and left out of the New Critical canon, Richard Ellmann helped recast Oscar Wilde as a major modernist figure.

At the same time Ellmann's serious study of Wilde elevated Wilde's cultural status as a literary figure, Ellmann's biography also authorized scholarly explorations of Wilde's sexuality. The biographer's willingness to reimagine Wilde's romance with Lord Alfred Douglas (or "Bosie" as he was known) as central to the narrative of Wilde's life put an end to an era of evasiveness about Wilde's sexuality in academic writing. For

Ellmann, Wilde's encounter with Bosie, like James Joyce's meeting with his wife Nora in Ellmann's earlier biography, signifies the turning point in Wilde's life. "Homosexuality fired his mind," Ellmann asserts, "it was the major stage in the discovery of himself" (265). This rendering of Wilde's story coheres with the contemporary notion of "coming out." Although Wilde married a woman and fathered children, as soon as he had sexual contact with a man, he became his "true" self and never looked back. Ellmann's interpretation of Wilde's story is in line with gay notions of sexual identity as opposed to queer concepts of sexual ambiguity. This version of the story cleans up any messiness that may result from thinking Wilde may have truly loved his wife Constance and been attracted to her, that he might have been bisexual, or that his previous identity as a family man and father of two sons might complicate the public image of Wilde. Ellmann places homosexuality at the core of Wilde's identity, and same-sex attraction provides a key to Wilde's motivations for the rest of the book. Ellmann takes Wilde's same-sex experiences seriously, but his formulation also suggests that male same-sex desire governed Wilde's each and every action after 1886, the year when Wilde allegedly ceased marital relations with his wife.

## WILDE AND GAY LITERARY CRITICISM

Ellmann's account of Wilde's life narrative particularly impacted scholars within the academic field of gay studies. Suddenly serious scholars were allowed to address sexual issues surrounding Wilde and his work without moral condemnation or omission.

Victorian scholar Christopher Nassar explained the liberating effect of Ellmann's work in gay criticism:

Einstein once said that all scientific breakthroughs begin with a flash of insight which the scientist then proceeds to prove by studying the facts and details of Nature. The same is true of Wilde. The flash of insight, and much of the proof, was provided by Ellmann and paved the way for the rest of us to continue his work. (*oscholars*)

Nassar's observation shows the degree to which Ellmann's biography authorized gay male critics of Wilde to continue studying Wilde's sexuality. Therefore it is not surprising that elements of Ellmann's biography can be seen in later gay readings of Wilde's texts. In particular, Ellmann's assertion that homosexual sex provides the defining moment of Wilde's life, the key to his identity, and the core of his essential self.

Richard Ellmann positioned Wilde to become a homosexual icon, and a subject for academic gay scholarship. When Gore Vidal reviewed Ellmann's biography he described how Ellmann portrayed Wilde as a sexual martyr well suited to the political climate of the 1980s. Vidal wrote, "Ellmann's Wilde may suit altogether too well the AIDSy Eighties" (217). Vidal's statement makes it clear that this biographical incarnation of Wilde, so apropos for the world of the 1980s, might be a little *too* on the nose. Vidal suggests that Ellmann's Wilde has been reconstructed using the discourse of contemporary homosexual identity. Ellmann's Wilde, a gay man mercilessly persecuted by a hostile society, fits with the civil rights movement that was becoming more militant in the midst of the AIDS crisis. Gay scholars, readers, and activists were searching for

their silenced predecessors in history, and Oscar Wilde, publicly outed and shamed, became a perfect tragic hero.

In her survey of Wilde criticism, Melissa Knox highlights how scholarly interest in Wilde dovetailed with the institutionalization of the gay rights movement in the academy after the publication of Ellmann's biography.

The current interest in the homosexual artist, or the artist as homosexual, and the rise within the past ten years of gay and gender studies in academic departments are due in part to the ongoing battle of the gay rights movement. [Wilde's] fate arouses sympathy, admiration, and anger. (Knox xxi)

Oscar Wilde became both a figurehead for gay rights (the first gay pride parade was organized inside the Oscar Wilde Bookshop on Christopher Street in New York) and a focus for gay scholars striving to incorporate homosexual history and culture into their academic work.

The preponderance of readings addressing Wilde's sexuality had a major cultural impact, shaping the public perception of homosexuality. But it is time to reexamine whether these interpretations advance our understanding of Wilde's texts, or primarily reflect the needs and desires of their authors at the advent of the modern gay rights movement. Many gay readings of Wilde are predicated on biographical interpretations (often including biographical and intentional fallacies), or by personal identifications with Wilde tenuously tethered to his actual life history and literary body of work.

## THE GAY READER

Neil Bartlett's *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* exemplifies the literary homosexual relation to the post-Elmann Oscar Wilde in the 1980s. Bartlett looks to Wilde as he is coming to terms with his own identity. He is compelled to tell the story of a "great homosexual," and that is why he takes up the story of Oscar Wilde. Bartlett writes:

His fame rests in part on being hidden (either through his own efforts or through those of others), on being in need of revelation. His life and times are scrutinized, and reveal to the reader the secret of his story; that his homosexuality was in some way basic to his life and work. Layers of clues, suggestions and distortions (letters, works of art, symptoms) are stripped away until we arrive at the truth.

(24)

"Stripping away" the distortions and reading for "symptoms," Bartlett is able to find in Wilde the affirmation he seeks.

I experience the commonest of gay pleasures: recognition. I recognize in this old book my own feelings when I wake and turn and look at the face of the man sleeping next to me. I discover the heart, the meaning locked in a text, which cannot, for historical reasons, declare itself. I sympathize. I understand; I am one of them too. (Bartlett 35)

Bartlett claims "the commonest of gay pleasures" is recognition. He longs to see himself in the literary text. He sees in Wilde's book the same feelings he has when he looking at the face of his lover. For Bartlett, homosexuality is the meaning that is locked in the text, waiting for the modern reader to uncover it. Bartlett suggests that Wilde would have written about same-sex love more explicitly if only his historical circumstances had been

different. Being a gay man himself gives Bartlett a sense of specialized knowledge that helps him relate to and interpret Wilde's writing. When reading in order to see himself, Bartlett sees all of Wilde's life and work as reducible to the "secret" of his homosexuality. Reading for recognition also blinds Bartlett to the extant text; seeking instead a hidden more overtly homosexual text he believes could not have been written because of censorship and the cultural norms at the time it was composed.

Bartlett recounts how his fascination with Wilde is partly based on his limited access to other homosexual narratives. He explains, "Gay history is usually hard to come by, but as he [Wilde] is not only 'a homosexual' but also 'Literature', it is quite easy to obtain *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*" (Bartlett 26). Wilde was accepted as a literary figure at the same time he was accepted as a homosexual and so Oscar Wilde became the "first" and most significant modern gay author. For this reason, he is often the first place gay readers and scholars turn. Many gay scholars share the experience Bartlett describes of being cloistered in the library reading for clues and searching for some representation of their sexual selves. Like Bartlett, Wayne Koestenbaum argues that for the gay reader, "Reading becomes a hunt for histories that deliberately foreknow or unwittingly trace a desire felt not by author but by reader, who is most acute when searching for signs of himself" (Koestenbaum 177). Koestenbaum makes it clear that this type of gay reading is focused on the reader's desires, rather than the author's. The gay reader's acuity is heightened when "searching for signs of himself". In "Wilde's Hard Labor and the Birth of Gay Reading" Koestenbaum argues for a distinctive practice of "homosexual reading". Koestenbaum's theories about Wilde are rooted in an unabashedly essentialist sense of "reading for

gayness.” He begins his reading of Oscar Wilde “without apologizing for its partiality” (Koestenbaum 176). Here we see how gay reading is defined by the search for homosexual identity in a text, and the process of self-definition through identification with a text (as opposed to queer reading's troubling of sexual definition).

Searching for oneself in a text is unproblematic for Koestenbaum. He is at ease with the conflation of self and author, rather than maintaining a critical distance between the two. Koestenbaum uses homosexuality as justification for overriding what the text itself is saying, and authorizing the gay reader to hold the text up as a mirror to himself. Both Bartlett and Koestenbaum read Wilde's life and work together, searching for “Oscar Wilde,” the origin of a gay male identity that contemporary gay readers can recognize as their own. In this sense, Koestenbaum displays a flagrant disregard for the “ethics” of reading rooted in New Critical methodologies such as not reading for authorial intention, “the intentional fallacy,” and judging a work based on its emotional effects on a reader, “the affective fallacy”. The gay reader is searching for both a sense of himself and for the author's intention in the text. Koestenbaum admits that he wants something from Wilde, and if he cannot find it, he is willing to invent it. He contends, “*gay identity as Wilde imagined it--* is something worth reading, interpreting, inventing. If Wilde did not write it, let us write it for him” (Koestenbaum 189). Oscar Wilde may not have imagined the modern gay identity but Koestenbaum gives contemporary readers license to imagine it for him.

It is unlikely that Wilde would have considered sexuality an integral part of identity as Koestenbaum does, and Wilde certainly could not have predicted the kind of identity politics with which Koestenbaum is aligned. But Koestenbaum wants to know

what Wilde would have thought about modern gay identity before it ever existed. Here Koestenbaum becomes more self-reflexive, admitting that he doesn't want to discover Wilde's intent, as much as he wants to use Wilde as a catalyst for defining his own views of contemporary homosexuality. Koestenbaum authorizes an academic searching for gay history to instrumentalize an author or a text in order to invent a theory about homosexual identity. His work clarifies the role of the author in gay literary criticism, which is to mirror the needs and desires of the gay scholar.

Writing the story of gay identity as Wilde may or may not have imagined it is a trend that continues through the 1990s. In 1994, Gary Schmidgall published *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar*. The subtitle indicates a sense of first-person familiarity with Wilde. Schmidgall refers to him only by his given name "Oscar," announcing his intention to interpret "Oscar" himself, rather than Wilde's literary works. Schmidgall predicates his study on the belief that Wilde's homosexuality was his defining characteristic. Although he acknowledges that Ellmann's popular biography was considered definitive at the time of its publication, in his book *The Stranger Wilde* Gary Schmidgall writes, "the ramifications of Oscar's gay identity have still not been fully and satisfyingly explored" (xv).<sup>12</sup> He claims Ellmann's 1987 biography is too "genteel" and "discreet" to pursue all of the "fascinating traces" (Schmidgall xv). Schmidgall is an exemplary "gay reader" by Koestenbaum's definition, content to write the story of Wilde's "gay identity" as he imagines it, and argue for "Oscar's" importance to contemporary gay men.

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<sup>12</sup> Critical issues have been raised regarding the accuracy of the biography. Ellmann was ill while working on the book and he was not able to finish editing it himself. Many errors in the text are now well documented.

## THE LAWYER AS CRITIC

Although Oscar Wilde has now become synonymous with gay aesthetics, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel, does not contain any overt homosexual content. The book was subject to intense scrutiny in the courtroom during his trials as lawyers attempted to translate the oblique references to male homoerotic desire they perceived in the text into incontrovertible facts. Reading in order to expose homosexual themes and define the author's sexuality is a flagrantly homophobic practice in the context of Wilde's trials. In the spring of 1895 Wilde launched an unsuccessful libel suit against the Marquis of Queensberry who had given Wilde a card accusing him of "posing as a Somdomite [sic]." Lawyer Edward Carson defended Queensberry by attacking Wilde and proving that the allegation was true. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 criminalized any sexual relations between men, and Wilde was therefore guilty of a crime. This led to two more trials and ultimately ended with Wilde's conviction for "acts of gross indecency" and his sentencing to two years of imprisonment with hard labor.

Queensberry's defense attorney Edward Carson questioned Wilde on April 3, 1895. The cross-examination included a literary portion, providing a strange instance of a lawyer becoming a literary critic, attempting to interpret some of Wilde's most controversial writings. Carson asked Wilde about the moral and aesthetic philosophy outlined in "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," including the line "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others," and the introduction to *Dorian Gray* which states: "There is no

such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written." Wilde did his best to turn Carson's line of questioning into a joke, responding with flippant remarks. Still, Wilde's responses were indicative of his philosophies of art and life. Carson then used various excerpts to show that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a "sodomitical book." Carson's strategy was to establish a link between literature and lived experience. In Carson's words, the reader of these literary works would "naturally and reasonably infer...that he, Mr. Wilde was either in sympathy with, or addicted to, immoral and sodomitic habits" (qtd. in Wan 716). Carson's interrogation is predicated on his belief that literature is reducible to autobiography. Carson repeatedly attempted to establish a connection between the events and relations in the novel and the writer's personal life. Carson selected several passages as proof of Wilde's sodomitical tendencies. The first concerned Basil Hallward's meeting with Dorian Gray. It seems to suggest same-sex infatuation: Basil claims that the beautiful young man filled him with a "curious terror," that he felt as if he was "on the verge of a terrible crisis," and that he was in danger of becoming absolutely devoted to him. Carson argued that since Wilde was writing about an "improper feeling" between men, it followed that the writer must experience the same kinds of feeling in his own life. Wilde rejected the notion that fiction provides a window into reality. Wilde claimed Basil's feelings toward Dorian were the feelings of an artist toward a beautiful personality and that this type of inspiration was essential to improving his craft.

The second passage offered as evidence in the courtroom concerned Basil's reason for not exhibiting his portrait of Dorian. Basil tells Dorian that he adores him "madly, extravagantly, absurdly," and that every color in the portrait seemed to reveal a

“secret” he was anxious not to disclose. Carson interprets this secret as Basil’s homosexual desire for Dorian, and makes the leap into reality, that Wilde himself also has a shameful sexual secret that he is concealing from legal scrutiny. Carson asked pointedly, “you never had that feeling you depict there?” Wilde responded, “No, it was borrowed from Shakespeare I regret to say.” The courtroom responded with laughter. Carson queried, “From Shakespeare?” To which Wilde affirmed, “Yes from Shakespeare’s sonnets.” The author claims he is inspired by the literary conventions set out in Shakespeare’s sonnets and takes up the same themes transposing queerness from a sexual identity to an aesthetic tradition. He tells the courtroom:

The “Love that dare not speak its name” in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare...It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo... It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. (qtd. in Ellmann 463)

This is Wilde’s primary defense during the “literary” part of the trial, arguing that art refers back to earlier texts and aesthetic conventions and not extra-textual desires and events. Although in the courtroom this line of argument may seem purely self-serving on his part, it is consistent with the anti-mimetic philosophies of art that Wilde had advanced elsewhere. The central tenets of Wilde’s dialogue *The Decay of Lying* published in 1891 include, “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,” and “Art never expresses anything but itself” (982). Despite his protestations that art should not

be conflated with life, the prosecution repeatedly pointed to *Dorian Gray* as evidence of Wilde's guilt. Wilde objected to his work being read so simplistically. This practice also runs counter to the novel's own aesthetic theory articulated by Basil Hallward: "An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography" (Wilde 17-18). Such reductive readings treat Wilde's text as a cipher waiting to be unlocked by the savvy reader who can decode its sexual secrets. The "hidden meaning" of the text is perceived to be homosexual desire, and when the text is read as a series of veiled references to homosexuality, the mystery of the text is solved.

Queer literary criticism helps problematize the aspect of gay reading that involves exposing or revealing homosexuality in a text. In his 1994 book *Homographesis* Lee Edelman discusses the concept of "reading" homosexuality and uses *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to problematize issues of sexual legibility. Edelman argues that there is social discomfort when homosexuality is not visible and coherent. Wilde's novel provides a central model for Edelman's theory because Dorian Gray's participation in so-called "unnatural vice" fails to produce the "appropriate inscription of difference upon his body" (Edelman 18). Dorian remains ageless and beautiful despite his depraved lifestyle; he is able to live without any consequences from his actions because people believe that "sin ...writes itself across a man's face." During Wilde's trial this anxiety about indistinguishable depravity becomes explicitly aligned with the question of sexual difference. Edelman describes how lawyers tried to read against the ambiguity of the novel, defining its references to "secret vices" as homosexual subtext, and exhibiting a homophobic fear of sexual ambiguity both in the text and in Wilde's personal life.

Cross-examining Wilde, Edward Carson read into the record a passage from *Dorian Gray* in which Basil warns Dorian of the “dreadful things” that are being said about him in London:

You don't want people to talk of you as something vile and degraded...Mind you, I don't believe these rumors at all. At least I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk of secret vices. There are no such things as secret vices. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even. (Wilde 126)

Cutting through what he assumed to be figural evasions, Carson followed the citation of this passage by bluntly and literal-mindedly inquiring: “Does not this passage suggest a charge of unnatural vice?” Wilde avoided a direct answer to the question. Edelman points to the extreme discomfort evoked by Dorian's sexual illegibility. He writes

the passage cited by Carson calls attention to a feature of his novel that may well have contributed to the disturbing effect it had on its contemporary readers: Dorian's clear implication in a world of “unnatural vice” fails to produce the “appropriate” inscription of difference on his body. (Edelman 18)

Edelman concludes, “Dorian himself--like the novel in which he figures-- threatens as an embodiment of undifferentiated sexual difference, to confound the security with which the sameness of (heterosexual) identity can be known”(Edelman 18). Edelman claims that the tropes of sexuality being written on the body and becoming readable to others that circulate at the time of Wilde's trial persist in contemporary culture. Once society perceives sexual preferences as an essential aspect of personal identity, Edelman

claims, the homosexual subject is represented as having, “a body that always demands to be read, a body on which his ‘sexuality’ is...inscribed” (Edelman 10). The insistence that homosexual difference be visible on the gay body is a manifestation of homophobic anxiety.

Although the reading practice Edelman terms *homographesis* relates specifically to widespread cultural homophobia, it is not only homophobic readers who want to interpret the sexual subtext of the novel and label Oscar Wilde a homosexual. Generations of gay readers have done exactly the same thing. Gay readers and critics seeking to relate to and identify with gay authors and texts also practice this kind of “reading for gayness”. When gay critics make Wilde their champion by labeling him a homosexual and assuming his writing is a direct expression of his sexuality, they participate in a reading practice that has been put to deeply homophobic use. The critics who are searching for a sense of modern homosexual identity in the text, and identification with a homosexual predecessor in Oscar Wilde, in many instances, are “reading for gayness,” reading in order to identify gay content, and reading to see themselves in the text. This kind of reading for a sense of personal identification, often leads readers away from Wilde’s writing, and toward the study of Wilde’s life. Even if the book is not explicitly homosexual, the details of Wilde’s life make him easy to claim as a gay author.

One might think that in light of a trial where individuals attempted to prosecute Wilde by connecting his writing to biographical events, even while Wilde himself refuted their claims, contemporary literary critics would summarily reject this approach, protecting Wilde’s creative license as an artist. However, as I have demonstrated, gay

critics often invoke a biographical reading of Wilde to authorize homosexual interpretations of his work. Gay critics want to claim Wilde as one of their own, and use evidence from his life and work to support their sense of affinity with him. Reading for homosexual identification has been used both by homophobic antagonists seeking to persecute homosexuals, and by homosexuals themselves who seek the pleasures of self-recognition.

## QUEER WILDE

Wilde's trial provides an example of a reading methodology that conflicts with Wilde's artistic philosophy, oversimplifying the text of the novel and the sexuality of the characters and their author. As critic Roger Luckhurst contends, "to read 'between the lines' or to find a 'hidden narrative of homosexuality' in Wilde's writing is both disallowed by his own aesthetic (against 'depth' and 'truth of being'), but also because this reading protocol was exactly the one enacted by his prosecutors at the trials" (Luckhurst 339). An alternative to such gay reading practices in Wilde scholarship emerged in 1987 when Ed Cohen published "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation." In this piece Cohen argues that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* displaces the erotic onto the aesthetic making homosexuality confounding and unrepresentable. Cohen means that homosexuality cannot be directly interpreted, as Wilde's prosecutors once attempted, and as many gay critics also hoped to do. Cohen affirms that only through an oblique reading of the painting can a homosexual "moral" of Dorian's life be comprehended. The painting abstracts Dorian's identity into the aesthetic realm,

complicating the notion that there is a neat homosexual interpretation of Wilde's text. Cohen's piece was one of the first sustained queer readings of the novel, embracing ambiguity and eschewing earlier gay reading practices, which focused on sexual identity, sexual definition, and self-recognition.

Ed Cohen's 1992 book on Wilde moves away from literary analysis and examines press accounts of the trials in order to show how they determined the modern conceptualization of the homosexual. In striking contrast to his earlier article, Cohen does not reference Wilde's literary works at any time in the entirety of his book-length study. In his book *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities*, Cohen is influenced by Foucauldian discourse analysis, and explores how Wilde influences modern conceptions of sexual deviance and homoerotic desire. It is notable that despite the queer theoretical stances he evinces, Cohen turned to Wilde for many of the same reasons as other gay scholars before him. *Talk on the Wilde Side* began as Cohen's dissertation. At the time Cohen was recovering from an illness and an advisor told him to write about something that "touched" him. He remarks that it was then that he "realized that what I had most viscerally excluded from my academic life until then...what I most needed to find a way to engage within it, was my identity as a gay man" (ix). Like other gay scholars before him, Cohen set out to imbue his scholarly project with his identity as a gay man.

Ultimately, studying Wilde's life and trial ended up destabilizing Cohen's definition of identity categories and replacing his notion of what it means to be gay with a complex theoretical formulation of the term queer. Cohen realized, "not only did I not know what it meant to experience 'my identity as a gay man' either inside or outside

academia, but I was becoming increasingly less sure about what it meant to 'have' such an 'identity' at all. Thus, I decided to devote myself to examining these personal/intellectual issues, embarking on a journey of exploration which has led me both into the archive and into my 'self' in order to give these realizations meaning" (ix). Working with the Wilde archive allowed Cohen to explore issues of identity and sexuality, but not in exactly the same way earlier gay critics had. He may have started out looking to Wilde to situate himself as a gay man within a literary tradition and establish himself as a critic, but he ended up contributing more to the burgeoning field of queer studies, and complicating notions of selfhood.

Given Cohen's queer notions of sexuality and identity he also takes a more complex stance toward reading Wilde's biography than the gay critics I have referenced. Cohen offers an extended critique of Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde in *The Nation*. One point of contention is that Ellmann claims Wilde was aware of the dangers of "being homosexual" and that this defined his mental state and determined his actions. Cohen counters: "Not only is Ellmann's anachronistic use of 'homosexual'... factually incorrect (i.e. the term would not even enter English usage for another six years) but the 'dangers' associated with 'being' it cannot possibly account for Wilde's 'state of mind' (206). Cohen's critique draws on the Foucauldian distinction from *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, the paradigm shift between when people began to be categorized as homosexuals rather than just participating in homosexual acts. By defining Wilde's sexuality and presenting it as the motivation for his actions, Cohen feels Ellmann's biography of Wilde "excludes the painful indeterminacy that Wilde both lived and evoked" (Cohen 206). Cohen concludes that if we are ever to appreciate Wilde's

courage and creativity, “we must move beyond this individualizing perspective and begin to consider Wilde, as he considered himself, in the context of his historical importance” (206). This approach informs all of Cohen’s work on Wilde, which provides a broad historical context for Wilde’s cultural legacy.

Alan Sinfield takes a similar Foucauldian approach in his 1994 study of Wilde’s impact on modern notions of gender and sexual identity. *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* is one of the most substantial self-proclaimed queer readings of Wilde. Like Cohen, Sinfield uses historical facts to shatter the contemporary notion that Oscar Wilde is always *a priori* a gay man. Sinfield argues that in Wilde’s time homosexuality was not automatically presumed based on Wilde’s style of self-presentation. Dandyism, aestheticism, and effeminacy did not signify homosexuality until after Wilde’s trial. Sinfield calls attention to the influential role Wilde played in binding a non-normative gender performance with an aberrant sexual identity: “For us, it is hard to regard Wilde as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression, because that is the position we have accorded him in our cultures. For us, he is always-already queer-- as that stereotype has prevailed in the twentieth century” (Sinfield 2-3). The sense that Wilde is the apogee of gay style is an aftereffect of the three legal trials in which he appeared in 1895. For the first time in England, homosexual self-presentation (and its homophobic response) had a household name-- “Oscar Wilde.”

What distinguishes Sinfield from the gay male scholars reading for homosexual identification, is his interest in how Wilde contributes to the contemporary definition of queerness that is outside of binary sexual categories, and bound up with a more

general sense of non-normative subjectivity. For Sinfield, Wilde helps deconstruct the notion of sexual identity as such, rather than prefiguring the modern homosexual. With Wilde, Sinfield argues, “the principal twentieth-century stereotype entered our cultures: not just the homosexual, as the lawyers and medics would have it, but the queer” (Sinfield 3). In Sinfield’s claim that Wilde signals the birth of the queer in modern culture we see how Oscar Wilde shifts seamlessly from gay to queer author and icon in literary criticism of the 1990s.

Melissa Knox implicitly critiques the queer theoretical readings of Wilde by Sinfield and Cohen that are supported by historical research in her book, *Oscar Wilde in the 1990s*. She advocates a return to the biographical interpretation of Wilde and contests the generally abstruse theoretical nature of queer scholarship:

[T]he last decade includes what ought to be one of the most fascinating areas in Wilde research, namely gay and gender studies, which should attempt to explore Wilde’s ideas about his sexuality, and the intellectual and emotional constructs through which he and his age understood sexuality. But these books often fail to realize the potential of biography in illuminating Wilde, sometimes because they reject the importance of the concept of personality, preferring to understand Wilde as a product of his culture or an index of it. (Knox xxi)

Knox objects to critics who read Wilde in order to parse out how his life and times impacted cultural constructions of sexuality in general, rather than focusing on Wilde’s singularity, his individuality and personality. Knox bemoans the state of literary criticism in the wake of “The Death of the Author” and feels that queer critics have rejected Wilde’s biography *tout court* in favor of more post-modern and cultural studies-based

inquiries. Knox seems to want a more straightforward biographical interpretation of Wilde. She contends that queer critics sidestep “Wilde’s clear understanding of himself as a homosexual person, not as a man who occasionally committed homosexual acts. Examples from his letters and his famous courtroom speech on the *Love that Dare not Speak Its Name* are too numerous to quote” (Knox 132). Knox sides with Ellmann’s stance in the biography, that Wilde understood himself to be a homosexual.

For Cohen and other queer theorists, Wilde becomes a model for living indeterminately. Queer theorists attempt to deconstruct the dominant perception that Wilde was a gay man, in order to complicate societal notions of sexuality. However, this does not mean that they eschew biographical criticism altogether. Despite Melissa Knox’s protestations that queer critics do not incorporate readings of Wilde’s personality, I have found that most queer critics still rely heavily on knowledge of Wilde’s biography and persona. Although queer theorists operate using less simplistic notions of sexual identity, they still give Wilde pride of place in their studies of sexuality. For example, in *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Sedgwick performs a reading of Wilde’s personal sexuality (not just the sexuality represented in his work). In her reading Sedgwick claims “Wilde’s own eros was most closely tuned to the note of the pederastic love” (Sedgwick 57). For Sedgwick the pederastic model accounts for the fact that Wilde, “did not desire only boys, but his desires seem to have been structured intensely by the crossing of definitional lines-- of age, milieu, initiatedness, and physique most notably” (Sedgwick 58). Here, Sedgwick draws attention to Wilde’s own sexual preferences, rather than the queerness of his writing.

Sedgwick refers to “Wilde’s desiring self” to further her argument about same-sex desire that acknowledges dynamics of power and difference, rather than a homogenous longing for the same. Like Cohen and Sinfield, Sedgwick seeks to complicate the contemporary understanding of Wilde’s same-sex desire. Introducing difference and transgression into the model of homosexuality that is based on sameness queers our understanding of Wilde. In order to make her argument, Sedgwick invokes Wilde’s personal preferences and desires, rather than using textual analysis. She writes: “Wilde ‘as a person’ does not make it particularly easy to assimilate his own sexuality” (Sedgwick 56). Her use of scare quotes around “as a person” displays a self-conscious awareness that her move to discuss the “actual” Wilde is a tenuous one. Wilde “as a person” is a construction based upon his extant biography, literary records, personal letters, and the transcriptions of his trial.

Sedgwick’s writings on Wilde display a queer theoretical relation to the author similar to those of Cohen and Sinfield. She focuses primarily on Wilde’s impact on cultural perceptions of homosexuality and same-sex desire, and attempts to contextualize her arguments historically. She focuses on Wilde because he is a major figure in the history of homosexuality, but she uses him to challenge traditional conceptions of same-sex desire that she finds too limiting. Although Sedgwick provides close readings of Wilde’s literary work she also invokes him “as a person” who engages in same-sex eroticism. Her sense of “Wilde’s desiring self” and Wilde “as a person” clearly inform her concept of Wilde as an author. Sedgwick attempts to complicate our understanding of Wilde’s sexuality, forcing us to see him not as a contemporary homosexual man, but as a throwback to the pederastic model established by the

Greeks. Still, Sedgwick seeks to define and explicate Wilde's sexual predilections, and uses Wilde to stand in for a paradigm shift in the history of homosexual definition.

## IF WILDE DID NOT EXIST WE WOULD HAVE TO INVENT HIM

As we have seen, "Saint Oscar" seems to be a persistent specter that haunts gay and queer criticism throughout the '80s and '90s. In "Queer Theory (and Oscar Wilde)"

Roger Luckhurst claims:

The difficulty with narratives that place 'Saint Oscar' as the culmination of the delineation of the homosexual type is that they may yet erase the evident incoherencies within Wilde's own texts, and give too neat a specific historical moment in order to argue an epochal shift in conceptions of same-sex desire from one monolith to another. (Luckhurst 337)

Luckhurst feels that scholars of sexuality venerate Wilde, and over-determine his personal sexual identity. Luckhurst's claim about honoring the incoherencies of Wilde's texts returns me to my initial discussion of biographical reading methodologies in relation to Wilde and his aesthetic philosophy. If life imitates art more than art imitates life, Wilde's literary works can be seen as far more imaginative and engrossing than his actual lived experiences. Wilde's writings are not a direct translation of his autobiographical experiences and desires; they are complex and contradictory, the product of Wilde's style, imagination, and artistry, rather than the expression of his personal identity. Reading biographically contradicts the aesthetic principles outlined in Wilde's writings. For example, Wilde's novella "The Portrait of Mr. W.H. " (1889)

illustrates that the author himself was skeptical of the critical desire to find specific biographical evidence to interpret same sex love in literary texts. The story revolves around the search for a real-life correlate for the figure of “W.H.”, to whom Shakespeare dedicated his sonnet cycle. This futile search for “Willie Hughes” as a historical person proves more about the interpreters’ own affective investments, and their personal need for recognition, than about Shakespeare or his poetry. “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” thus raises a challenge to modern critics attempting to out Wilde as a homosexual using appeals to his biography and the historical archive.

As a literary critic and aesthetic theorist, Wilde was highly skeptical of literary biography. In “The Critic As Artist” Wilde disparages the work of literary biographers, who are referred to as “the mere body-snatchers of literature” (1010). The character Gilbert asserts, “Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography” (1010). Like the characters in “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” seeking to find the real-life muse of Shakespeare’s sonnets to further their own literary careers, biographers are disparaged as traitors, selling out the great artists they admire to improve their own reputation. Gilbert accuses biographers of being nothing more than “second-rate *littérateurs*,” and asserts that, “Cheap editions of great books may be delightful, but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable” (1010). Given Wilde’s own aesthetic privileging of art over biography, it is remarkable how much of Wildean criticism is biographical in nature, and how tied to biography Wilde’s literary reputation has become.

I contend that using Wilde’s biography to justify homosexual interpretations of his literary works is problematic due to the homophobic underpinnings of this practice

evidenced by his trials. “Reading for gayness” is fraught with the homophobic imperative to identify and classify sexuality theorized in Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis*. Wilde could function as a queer figure even without the knowledge that he engaged in homosexual sex acts and relationships “in real life.” Wilde’s writings themselves are queerer than most critical readings have given them credit for. Although queer readings of Wilde in the 1990s took a largely historical and biographical approach, the “incoherences” presented in Wilde’s literary texts align with contemporary queer critiques of identity and normativity. For example, it is clear from his writings that Wilde was suspicious of any sense of a stable and consistent self. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the narrator states that Dorian “used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceived the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex, multiform creature” (Wilde 159-159). The lack of an essential self here prefigures the post-modern anti-essentialist stance that is a major cultural contribution of queer criticism. Instead of using *Dorian Gray* to define the contemporary gay identity, a close reading of the text could trouble the notion of stable sexual identifications.

It seems like readers do not want criticism of Oscar Wilde to exclude Wilde “as a person.” Wilde’s writings, public trials, and his performance of the self are key sites upon which a contemporary queer identity has been constituted. Despite their skepticism about identity politics, I have demonstrated that queer literary critics still show an investment in Oscar Wilde “as a person”. Queer theorists do not eschew the identity politics of early gay readers outright, as they are still drawn to Wilde for being an iconic figure, and a symbol of sexual transgression and anti-normativity. Rather than

reading for gay content and exposing homosexual subtext, the queer readers attempt to redefine Oscar Wilde as a queer author. Wilde functions in literary criticism as both the first gay author and the first queer author, and that is why I have focused on him throughout this first chapter. The reverence for Wilde and personal identification with him as a persecuted sexual deviant, the debates he opens up about how to do the history of homosexuality, as well as the theoretical formulations using his texts to critique sexual identity categories and selfhood laid the foundation for my further thinking about queer criticism in the 1990s and its relation to the modernist author. Future queer literary criticism could take up Oscar Wilde as a literary theorist and critic, looking to his essays, dialogues, and other writings to explore his theories about the hypocrisy of modern culture, his critique of oppressive social norms and cultural mores, the subjective nature of truth, and queer aesthetics, queer kinship, and identity formation.

Although we may be skeptical about venerating “Saint Oscar” and giving him too much pride of place in queer history or the queer canon, his spectral presence cannot be denied. Personal identifications that clash with critiques of subjectivity and sexuality, alongside an embodied desire for the author as a queer sexual being, epitomize the queer relation to the author that I will be examining throughout my dissertation. In the following chapters I will explore how other queer authors that have been significant within queer literary criticism compare to the model set up by Wilde. How do critics read queer author’s lives in relation to their texts? No other author seems as universally loved as Oscar Wilde based on his persona and style. Gay and queer readers share a true affection for Wilde that overshadows the need to “kill” the author. The gay and

queer criticism that I have surveyed remains significant because it cannot fully separate art from life, author from man, gay from queer, self from object of study. I am drawn to this scholarship for these messy reasons, just as in my memory Oscar Wilde's grave will always be covered in contraband kisses. Still I contend that future queer literary criticism could be queerer if based on Wilde's texts rather than his personal history, since biographical reading practices have historically focused on defining sexuality, rather than surpassing expectations and multiplying meanings.

In this chapter I have argued that in matters of interpretation (though not in matters of morals) many Wilde scholars tend to agree with the modes of reading advocated by early critics and by Edward Carson rather than those advocated by Wilde. I have demonstrated how Wilde was not only a persecuted homosexual writer trying to conceal the "truth" of his writings against a press that had "found him out": he was also a literary critic in his own right, and one who was articulating a position which was alternative to the critical orthodoxy of the time. In short, Wilde was an author who argued against authorialism. I also suggest that queer readers can focus on the textual features of Wilde's works, those that involve ambiguity, contradictoriness, and more generally a refusal on the part of the "implied author" to yield a coherent "statement". Focusing on these textual features will lead to a reading process that is not so traditionally biographical and informed by identity politics, which can help readers and critics engage with the difficult and troubling aspects of queerness in Wilde's texts, and in turn to have a queerer relation to the author.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Queer Afterlife of Henry James

"I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility" –

The Deathbed Notes of Henry James

#### HENRY JAMES AND OSCAR WILDE

In *A Small Boy and Others* (1998), Michael Moon posed a provocative question: what if scholars of sexuality took as a provisional starting point for our analysis (rather than Wilde) a figure such as Henry James, “who had in many ways a much less readily legible relation to the emergence of homosexual identity in his lifetime?” (2). During his trials Oscar Wilde crystallized a public image of male same sex desire, resulting in the consolidation of effeminacy, aestheticism, and dandyism into a recognizable and deployable stereotype. Although James does not fit the mold of a Wildean dandy, he was a perennial bachelor and an artist whose primary orientation was toward aesthetics. At the turn of the century in Britain, being a self-professed bachelor was a sexually ambiguous and culturally marginalized social position.

At first glance Oscar Wilde and Henry James seem to have nothing in common in terms of their personal style and aesthetic philosophies. After meeting Oscar Wilde on January 12, 1882, in Washington, D.C when Wilde was on his lecture tour of America, James wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner that Wilde was “repulsive and fatuous” and, to another correspondent, an “unclean beast” (*newrepublic.com*). It is

clear from these letters that James disapproved of Wilde's ostentatious self-presentation; where Wilde was insouciant and performative, James was staid and proprietary. In effect, the two writers took entirely different approaches to life. Wilde practiced the art of living, fashioning himself into a character more enduring than any he created for the stage. James valued self-control, and an ascetic lifestyle, dedicating himself to mastery of his craft.

James and Wilde had two totally different temperaments and held diametrically opposed attitudes toward artistic creation. Whereas Wilde insisted he put his talent into his art and his genius into his life, Henry James did the exact opposite<sup>13</sup>. Despite their differences, Wilde's legacy has undoubtedly had an impact on cultural perceptions of James. All of the works in James's so-called "major phase" were written in the cultural aftermath of Wilde's trials.<sup>14</sup> As a result, James's ambiguous and ambivalent attitude toward sexuality has always been a source of suspicion. Although James's expressions of gender and sexuality were nothing like those associated with Wilde, the conceptions of sexuality that were formed in the wake of Wilde's trials continue to inform perceptions of Henry James.<sup>15</sup>

If Wilde truly believed that he reserved his true genius for his personal life, perhaps he would not mind that generations of people have been fascinated with his life

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<sup>13</sup> Wilde famously claimed, "I've put my genius into life; I've put only my talent into my works" qtd. in Hyde, H. Montgomery. *The Annotated Oscar Wilde*. London: Orbs. 1982. xiv. Print.

<sup>14</sup> James's literary career is commonly divided into the early period including *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), *Daisy Miller* (1879), *The Europeans* (1878), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881); the middle years of *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), *The Bostonians* (1886), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1889); and the major phase encompassing *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the impact of Wilde's trials on modern homosexual definition see Cohen (1992), Sinfield (1994), and Bristow (2009). For more on the relationship between James and Wilde see Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (2007).

story. The same cannot be said of Henry James. James actively attempted to ensure that his biographers would be faced with an inscrutable mystery. In 1910 James destroyed his archive of forty years of letters, manuscripts and notebooks. He continued regularly with such bonfires until his death, and told his executor, "My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter . . . [and] to declare my utter and absolute abhorrence of any attempted biography or the giving to the world . . . of any part or parts of my private correspondence" (896). But of course he could destroy only the letters he received, and many people kept the letters he sent to them.

Thanks to his efforts, there is no concrete evidence to suggest Henry James ever had a physical affair, but we do know that he wrote erotically charged letters to other men.

James's letters to Hugh Walpole typically began "dearest, dearest, darlingest Hugh," and in September of 1900 he wrote to the bisexual William Morton Fullerton, "You are dazzling, my dear Fullerton; you are beautiful; you are more than tactful, you are tenderly, magically *tactile*" (qtd. in Norton). But these expressions of desire are always mediated by writing, and so not wholly divorced from his authorial self.

James's identity was bound up in being an author. Even by his closest friends he wanted to be addressed as "My dear Master." Having mastery over his personal comportment and his literary style was a point of pride. Unlike in the case of Oscar Wilde, readers have had a hard time saying with certainty that Henry James was gay "in real life" and that his writing is therefore evidence for and an expression of his homoerotic preference.

As I outlined in the previous chapter, critics consistently engage with Oscar Wilde as a legendary figure when reading his work. This is in part because Wilde's image and

persona are now almost universally beloved. I have suggested that appealing to the personal identity and sexuality of the author is problematic when critics use details from Wilde's life to authorize gay readings of his texts. As I have demonstrated, "reading for gayness" is not only a reductive interpretive practice, but, in the case of Wilde, one that has been used to homophobic ends. In my first chapter I defined gay reading as reading for identification. This identification occurs when a gay reader identifies with the author, and/or when the reader attempts to identify the material as gay. Despite their efforts, queer critics were never fully able to read Wilde queerly. Queer literary critics attempted to complicate gay readings of Wilde, but Wilde could never fully be extradited from the conception of the homosexual that he was instrumental in creating.

In contrast, the work of Henry James is one of the places where contemporary queer criticism has elaborated a distinctive way of reading. This is a reading that is attentive to the historical formation of modern sexual norms and identities as well as to the unorthodox play of identifications and desires that transgress or elude those norms. In this chapter, I argue that James helped queer critics distinguish queer reading from gay reading, and to create a queer form of biographical criticism that invokes the author in more complex ways than had previously been employed in gay criticism.

Critical work on Henry James has been central to defining queer literary criticism as a discrete field of study, with different aims and approaches than gay criticism, which had found its hero and martyr in Oscar Wilde. For Michael Moon, James provides the opportunity to construct alternative historical, sexual, and aesthetic frameworks and counter the dominant gay literary historical narrative that begins with Wilde. Moon suggests, "Using James's...model of a major queer culture-making career might yield

us considerably different set of expectations for queer art" (2). Henry James's "less readily legible relation to the emergence of homosexuality" has posed a challenge to his biographers and made him an uneasy subject for gay critics. Whereas gay criticism concerned itself with the explicit representation of homosexual desire, queer criticism, influenced by deconstruction and by Foucault's theories of the social regulation of sexuality, took up the aesthetic traces of sexual deviance embedded in complex narratives.

This chapter examines the centrality of Henry James in the development of queer literary studies and uses examples drawn primarily from Eve Sedgwick's critical readings of James to demonstrate a queer interpretive methodology that invokes the identity of the author while at the same time troubling stable notions of sexual identity. I argue that this queer approach to reading James resists the impulse to reduce all art to autobiography, what Eric Savoy calls the "biographical imperative" in gay criticism. Never fully formalist, the queer method employed effectively by Sedgwick, and carried on in later queer readings of James, is a hybrid of close reading and biographical critique. Because the critic engages with the author's *corpus*, reading the eroticism within his textual body of work, these writings on James express a queer relation to the author.

## THE AFTERLIFE OF THE AUTHOR

Henry James wrote critically about the craft of writing, outlining his own theory of the relationship between the artist's experience and their work in "The Art of Fiction." James

concedes that the novelist must write from his experience in order to make fiction come to life, but he complicates the reader's definition of "experience" in this context. He writes:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations (James 52).

For James, the artistic sensibility is able to transform sense impressions, moments of inspiration, and insights about the observable world into realistic experiences in fiction. Thus, the author is not limited to writing about what he has experienced firsthand, because his scope and perceptions are so broad that they extend beyond him like a "huge spider-web." Because of this literary sensibility and ability to transform experience into fiction, the author's life is actually less rich and engrossing than the reality he is able to create in his writing.

Henry James's preoccupation with author figures and the changing conditions under which literature is produced, disseminated and received is apparent in his critical essays "The Art of the Fiction", 1884, and "The Future of the Novel", 1900, and in his many tales of literary life from the mid-1880s and the 1890s, in which living or dead authors are subjected to biographic, material and erotic desires ("The Author of Beltraffio", 1884; "The Aspern Papers", 1888; "The Lesson of the Master", 1892; "The Middle Years", 1893; "The Death of the Lion", 1894; and "The Figure in the Carpet",

1896). Many of James's tales of literary life center on the conceit of the author having two incarnations, one physical and one textual (his *corpus*). In "The Private Life," the author's two bodies are represented as identical figures. The clever one sits alone at his desk writing all day and the dull one socializes and provides material for the other to aesthetically transfigure. As Michael Cooper argues, "James most deplores the prevailing tendency to prefer the physical body to the textual one, to engage the person rather than the work, even though the fact of the work, not anything about the physical person, is the source of the author's attraction" (69). Just like the character he portrays in "The Private Life," Henry James is always most interesting when engaged as an author and not as a man. The search for biographical truth in James's life does not lead us to the truth of James's identity. James's life was mediated through fiction; we do not get closer to the true James's by stripping away the authorial persona he created. As James asserted in an interview: "One's craft, one's art, is his expression...not one's person, as that of some great actress or singer is hers. After you have heard a Patti sing why should you care to hear the small private voice of the woman?" (qtd. in Walker 37). James did not understand why the public would want him to splash himself across the page, or reveal his private self on paper.

James was highly critical of the world's fascination with the author as an individual, instead of focusing on the author's work alone. For this reason, he had great animosity towards those in the publishing world who sought to expose details of the author's private life after their death. In 1888, Henry James published the novella *The Aspern Papers*, his sharpest satire of the biographer as post-mortem exploiter. The plot was inspired by the letters that Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote to Mary Shelley's stepsister

Claire Clairmont, who saved them until her death.<sup>16</sup> In James's tale, an unnamed narrator travels to Venice to find Juliana Bordereau, the former lover of an acclaimed poet named Jeffrey Aspern. The narrator has previously edited volumes of Aspern's work and is seeking access to the trove of biographical information he believes that Juliana keeps hidden away. Since the narrator's letters to Juliana entreating her to share the wealth of documents were rebuffed, he travels to her home in Venice under an assumed name and attempts to ingratiate himself to the elderly woman and her niece.

The narrator's desire for biographical information about the poet is described hyperbolically throughout the text: "One would think you expected from it the answer to the riddle of the universe, " she said; and I denied the impeachment only by replying that if I had to choose between that precious solution and a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern's letters I knew indeed which would appear to me the greater boon" (22). The narrator believes that Aspern's status as a genius entitles the world to access his "literary remains" (27). We are never told what the narrator intends to do with the letters once he procures them, but he is assured of their "importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (73). Ultimately, the narrator's efforts are in vain, and he cannot prevent the women from destroying the personal documents. The family would rather burn the letters than let them fall into the hands of a "publishing scoundrel" such as himself (95).

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<sup>16</sup> The theme of an editor or literary biographer's search for hitherto secret information about an author was used later by, amongst others, Somerset Maugham in "Cakes and Ale" (loosely based on the life of British novelist Hugh Walpole), Penelope Lively in "According to Mark", A.S. Byatt in *Possession* and Alan Hollinghurst in *The Stranger's Child*. Most significantly, James' close friend, Edith Wharton, used this theme as the subject of her first novel, *The Touchstone*.

The story satirizes the narrator's hero worship of Jeffrey Aspern, and his obsession with his private life. In the end, the search for insight into Aspern's personal life is fruitless, and contributes nothing to his literary legacy. *The Aspern Papers* is a clear condemnation of the "publishing scoundrel" seeking to expose information about an author after his death. From this story, we would assume that James did not concern himself with learning personal information about the writers that he loved. However, this was certainly not the case when it came to George Sand. James's critical writings on George Sand expose a longstanding fascination with the author's private life, and he read many volumes of her personal writings, letters, and biographies. He wrote extensively on Sand in his 1914 *Notes on Novelists* (his last published volume of critical work).

James shared his love for all things George Sand with his friend Edith Wharton, and the two communed over their mutual interest<sup>17</sup>:

There was an avid exchange of news and views on the racier current French fiction. Both knew the literary and intellectual world of Paris and followed the 'lurid' extensions of George Sand's afterlife in the hands of the press. 'Dear old George' acquired legendary status. (Gooder 134)

In this instance, James did not recoil from the post-mortem exploitation of the author, but instead followed fervently the details about Sand's life and legacy. James's writings on George Sand complicate his philosophy on the relation between art and life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wharton travelled to Sand's home Nohant, wondering if being in the writer's place of residence would give greater insight into her creative mind, writing in 1904, "Does a sight of Nohant deepen the mystery, or elucidate it?" (qtd. In Gooder 134).

<sup>18</sup> *Henry James: Literary Criticism; French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition*. Eds. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson. New York: 1984. Print

The “after-life” of the author is partially created by the author, and a product of their work securing their own legacy. As Jean Gooder explains, an “after-life”, “may be staged en vivant by the author, projected by memoirs and selective republication, or edited through suppression, the destruction of papers, denial of access” (136). During her lifetime, Sand constructed an identity for herself, through the use of her pseudonym, and through her autobiographical writings. However, a different “after-life” takes shape after the author’s death, and this one is “less susceptible to safeguard”; it is “accorded by literary conventions, public interest, or (as the author of *The Aspern Papers* well knew) the retrospective pursuit of private papers and revelations. Other hands with other interests may rearrange or uncover the past” (Gooder 137). George Sand died in 1876, and in 1880 her children sold their mother’s literary property to a publishing house that published six volumes of her letters. In 1896 James came across letters written between Musset and George Sand during their eighteen-month affair. Henry James reflected on this correspondence in “She and He: Recent Documents”: “The lovers are naked in the market-place and perform for the benefit of society” (744). Reading these documents blurred distinctions between truth and fact, or any lines separating private from public. Reading the whole dossier brought James to a candid admission: “When we wish to know at all we wish to know ‘everything’” (740).

James’s desire to “know everything” about Sand conflicted with his own intense desire to control his own literary afterlife. James wanted to know everything but wanted to remain unknowable himself. He wrote:

The cunning of the inquirer, envenomed with resistance, will exceed in subtlety and ferocity anything we today conceive, and the pale forewarned victim, with

every track covered, every paper burnt and every letter unanswered, will, in the tower of art, the invulnerable granite, stand, without a sally, the siege of all the years. (743)

In this quote James imagines the artist immortalized “in the tower of art,” inaccessible to anyone who wishes to unearth facts about his personal life. By burning every paper and letter, James imagines that the artist becomes “invulnerable” to the siege of prying readers who wish to tear down the edifice of privacy he has built up around his authorial persona. Given these sentiments, it is no surprise that in the winter of 1909 James made a “gigantic bonfire” of his personal letters.<sup>19</sup> James’s nephew, Henry James III, raised the question of James’s own literary remains, of his liability to the invading chronicler. This prompted an explosion. James had long thought of “launching by a provision in my will, a curse not less explicitly than Shakespeare’s own on any such as try to move my bones.” James abhorred the prospect of posthumous scrutiny, of being “blazed upon to the last intensity.”<sup>20</sup> James emphasizes the ghoulish and predatory aspects of posthumous scrutiny by likening the biographer to a grave robber (Lee 2).

Despite James’s own interest in the “literary remains” of other writers, the relation between his private life and a public after-life remained non-negotiable. James wanted to allow the reading public access to himself only as an author, and not as a man. James attempted to destroy his own personal letters, and yet in writing the prefaces to the New York Edition, which gave insight into his writing process and authorial mind, he

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<sup>19</sup> See letter of 2 Jan 1910 to Mrs. J. T. Fields, in *Henry James: Letters*. Ed. Edel, iv. 541. Print.

<sup>20</sup> *Henry James: Letters*. Ed. Edel, iv. 806. Print.

added to his own extra-textual persona. As Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen insightfully observes:

In James's authorial acts of burning letters and constructing the New York Edition, we find a tension between the desire to allow readers access to the author's private self, for the rewards of the marketplace and canonization, and the efforts to limit access by destroying the documents that most forcefully signified the desired intimate relation with the author, for aesthetic and ethical reasons. (*Authorship*)

James thwarts the idea that "the desired intimate relation with the author" is accessible only through the author's personal life and letters. Instead, James invites the reader into an intimate relation with his work.

## FINDING PLEASURE IN HENRY JAMES

It is arguable that James's sexual orientation was toward writing, his sexual identity was bound up in being an author, and that his primary sexual gratification came from creating a narrative. Cooper writes, "James, unsurprisingly, left behind few written reports of being sexually aroused. That so many of these appear in the context of discussing the process of creation justifies speculation that (save when corresponding with his young favorites) it was perhaps only when writing, when losing himself in the complex emotions and situations of his created characters, that he allowed guiltless ardor to wash freely over his psyche" (Cooper 75). For Cooper, James's primary passion was the writing process itself; therefore James's writing should not be

instrumentalized as something to strip away in order to reveal a true sexual identity hidden behind the mask of fiction. As Cooper reminds us, “One comes to know authors properly only in their absence through the mediation of their texts” (78). Ultimately, establishing James’s own gender and sexual identity is less important than attending to his interrogation of gender and sexuality in his work. For queer critics, such as Cooper, James’s identity as an author is far more intriguing than the particularities of his biography.

Queer literary criticism concerns itself with complicating notions of James’s gender and sexual identity, drawing distinctions between James “as a person” and as an authorial presence in the text. In her influential 1988 essay “Too Early Too Late: Subjectivity and the Primal Scene in Henry James,” Kaja Silverman makes a distinction between the biographical James and his textual persona. Despite the, “ostensible gender of the biographical James, the author ‘inside’ his texts is never unequivocally male” (Silverman 180). As Leland S. Person argues in *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (2003), “Silverman helps to open up the question of gender identification in James’s writing, while separating that question from James’s biographical selfhood” (Person 6). Building on Silverman’s foundational work in “Queer Henry *In the Cage*,” Hugh Stevens argues that sexual identity should be seen as something “worked out” or explored within James’s texts rather than as a secret to be traced back to the biographical author (123). This approach we see in criticism of Henry James focuses on the queer effects at play within the text itself rather than within the experience or psyche of the biographical writer. In this queer approach to textual interpretation,

meaning, being, and identity might be constituted in a particular way in a given text, but no one text expresses the writer's "essential being."

Reading sexuality as something "worked out" in various forms in James's writing represents a queer method of textual interpretation, as opposed to a biographical method that attempts to justify a gay reading using biographical facts. Scholars have been unable to prove that James ever acted upon his homoerotic desire, even if they see such desire manifested in his writing.<sup>21</sup> This is one aspect of "gay reading" that doesn't seem to work for Henry James. The other aspect of gay reading that falls flat when applied to James is reading in order to identify with the author.

There isn't much about James as a character for contemporary gays to celebrate or aspire to. In fact, gay male critics have regularly used James as a cautionary tale; an example of a sad life lived in the closet. Changing cultural perceptions of sexuality over the course of the twentieth century have contributed to the different afterlives that have played out for Henry James and Oscar Wilde in literary criticism. Although James was respected as a serious literary talent long before Wilde, Wilde gained popular appeal at the advent of the gay rights movement and is now lauded for being an "out" gay author. In turn, James has become one of the most notoriously closeted ones. In contemporary culture, "being in the closet" has negative connotations, considered cowardly, pitiful, and repressed.

## THE BIOGRAPHICAL IMPERATIVE IN GAY CRITICISM

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<sup>21</sup> This raises a question of identity and reification: in order to "be" homosexual, does one need to act upon one's desires (and what, if anything, besides physical same-sex relations would constitute such action)?

Henry James's sexuality has fascinated scholars because sexuality manifests in many forms in his fiction but is ambiguous in his personal life. It seems unthinkable that James could show such insight into a variety of human desires in his writing, and yet have had limited sexual experiences.<sup>22</sup> The seeming absence of sexuality in James's personal life creates an acute desire to delve deeper into his personal affairs. As Eric Savoy writes, "James prompts a high degree of speculation about the impulses and desires that are not so much concealed by celibacy as rendered precisely as something to be looked into" (Savoy 109). James's celibacy spurs on his critics and biographers who repeatedly attempt to reconstruct and retell James's life fixating on his unfulfilled or blighted sexual desire. James's hidden or repressed sexuality becomes the "pot of gold at the end of the biographical rainbow" (Savoy 109). Readers and critics seem to want to solve the mystery of James's sexuality with as much specificity as possible.

Although James was private and not forthcoming about personal details of his intimate life, people have attempted to strip away his mask of propriety. According to James, he was a proud bachelor, devoted to his literary career above all else. Some critics and reviewers seem to find something amiss in his version of events, seeking a darker more perverse explanation for James's lack of a love life. In his lifetime, rumors circulated that James's bachelorhood might be a product of his impotence, or even castration. The rumor that James suffered from sexual dysfunction originated from a passage in a memoir. James spoke of once having incurred a "horrid" but "obscure

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<sup>22</sup> These assumptions run counter to the aesthetic theory outlined in James's "The Art of Fiction" which argues precisely that experience is not required, and that the imagination, along with a keen sensitivity to impressions is more than enough, indeed creating experiences even richer than "actual" ones.

hurt." In actuality he had strained his back during a stable fire while serving as a volunteer fireman, but his "obscure" description of the incident led to speculation about a potentially more debilitating injury. Biographer Leon Edel describes this passage in James's memoir:

Henry tells us of the "obscure hurt" and it is a queer tale--queer since he has mingled so many elements in it and at the same time thoroughly confused us about the time sequence... The details, as given by Henry, are meager; and they bristle with strange ambiguities. (175)

Edel draws attention to the queerness of this story, how strange it seems that James refuses to provide readers with a literal picture of what happened, leaving them to speculate about the event and its consequences. Edel describes how the "strange ambiguities" in James's writing are what allow readers to form their own opinions. In the case of James's fiction, these ambiguities are open to various interpretations, making his work challenging and complex. In the case of James's memoir, James leaves out vital information, making it unclear what he is leaving out of the story and why. Relying solely on James's description of the event, James's contemporaries questioned what injury could be so unspeakable that it must be couched in mystery. They assumed that James had been rendered impotent, or even castrated. Ernest Hemingway incorporated an allusion to James's alleged castration into his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. In Chapter 12, Jake Barnes refers to his World War I accident, and Gorton says, "That's the sort of thing that can't be spoken of. That's what you ought to work up into a mystery. Like Henry's bicycle." Barnes replies it wasn't a bicycle; "he was riding horseback." (Hemingway had originally included James's full name in the novel, but compromised on

"Henry" alone for publication.) Hemingway was not the only one who accepted this rumor as fact. The story of James's accident was so provocative to F. Scott Fitzgerald that he wrote to Van Wyck Brooks, author of *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*, "Why didn't you touch more on James' impotence (physical) and its influence?" (qtd. in Wood). This quotation indicates how quickly readers make the leap from speculating about James's sexuality, to speculating about the impact of his sexuality on his writing.

As more biographical material became available to scholars, including the diaries of James's contemporaries and the hundreds of affectionate and often erotic letters written by James to younger men, the previous theories of emasculation and neurotic celibacy gave way to the interpretation of James as a closeted homosexual.

Contemporary critic Michael Wood considered the rumors about James's impotence in conjunction with the rumors of his homosexuality. In "The Mystery of Henry's Bicycle" Wood writes: "I'd like to offer what I think is a comprehensive list of the possibilities which exist with regard to the outcome of the accident and James' sexuality. I'm not going to comment on how each scenario might be seen to change how we 'approach James' work': if James was a gay man who died an impotent virgin, you can read into that whatever you think is appropriate"(lit.konundrum.com). Wood sidesteps the issue of how each possibility surrounding James's embodiment and sexual orientation might impact interpretations of his writing. This is a rare instance of a scholar engaged in a study of James's sexuality who self-consciously eschews biographical criticism of James's literary works.

Once the homosexual interpretation of James's sexuality was in circulation, gay scholars wanted to claim James as a gay author, but they had a hard time classifying

him as such. According to Eric Savoy, Henry James officially became a gay writer in 1991 when Edmund White included James in *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*. At the time there was a growing group of self-identified gay readers and a developing field of academic gay criticism seeking to develop a definitive gay canon (Savoy 100). But there are no homosexuals or overt gay themes in *The Pupil*, the James story anthologized in the Faber collection. This omission led to some debate as to whether or not it should be included amongst other works of gay fiction. The controversy centered around a fundamental problem of identity politics and the canon: are “gay” texts those written by identified gay authors or are they texts that give representation to gay identity no matter the identity of the author?<sup>23</sup>

Critic Wendy Graham is strongly in favor of identifying James as a gay man whether or not he ever acted upon his desires physically. Graham provides a gay-affirmative historical reconstruction of James’s homosexual identity. In *Henry James’s Thwarted Love* (1999) Graham writes, “James’s abstention from full genital contact did not deprive him of a homosexual identity” (28). Graham’s claim brings up interesting questions about why critics want to identify James as a homosexual so strongly despite the absence of most accepted markers of homosexuality from his life (such as self-identification and sexual contact with other men) and more generally, how much sexuality is defined by physical sex acts. The “did he or didn’t he?” debates about James’s homosexuality amongst literary critics stem from the disagreement on this issue amongst James’s most prominent biographers. In Leon Edel’s five-volume biography published between 1953 and 1972, Edel portrayed James as a man with low

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<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of James as a gay author see Eric Haralson. *Henry James and Queer Modernity*. Cambridge UP. 2003. 27-53.

amatory interest. He describes James's passionate affection for various men throughout his lifetime, but affirms there is no evidence to support that these relationships were ever acted upon physically. "We may speculate endlessly on this theme, without discovering the answers," Edel writes. "From all appearances, James...never made love either to a woman or to a man" and "ended up with a personal aloofness which probably shut him into auto-eroticism" (qtd. In Cooper 67). Edel's comprehensive biography of Henry James was considered definitive for years, as was his interpretation of James as a potentially gay virgin.

In 1979 Richard Hall published an article in the *New Republic* critiquing Edel's treatment of James's sexuality, identifying "a peculiar timidity" at the center of his biography (180). Hall points to Edel's tendency to "wash out the sexual content" of his analysis, and even suggests Henry James's attachment to his brother William bordered on the erotic and incestuous (180). Edel further acknowledged James's potential homosexuality in his revised and abridged biography published in the 1980s, but a frank discussion of James's potential homosexuality did not emerge until Fred Kaplan published *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius: A Biography* in 1992. Kaplan attempted to account for new developments since the final installment of Edel's five-volume biography twenty years earlier. Kaplan's concise one volume biography focused more intensely on James's development into a suppressed homosexual. The back cover proclaims that "Kaplan . . . gives us the plainest, clearest picture yet of James's sexuality." Although Kaplan asserts that James began falling in love with men in the mid-1890s, and more frequently in the next decade, he suggests that James felt pressure to suppress his desires.

He...had no doubt about what men did in bed together...James had had, at least since his Paris days, a dim sense of his own homoeroticism, which his position, his personality, his background, and his culture all gave him every incentive to repress. He knew that aspect of his sexuality indirectly, in his idealizations of the beauty of the male body and of male friendship. He had good reason for doing so, including the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which made even private, consensual homosexual acts punishable by two years' imprisonment and hard labor. (300)

In the post-Wilde world James inhabited, there was intense pressure to suppress homosexual urges. Henry James was acutely aware that the same law Kaplan references in this passage had destroyed Wilde's life and career. Although Kaplan asserts that James had a "sense of his own homoeroticism," he believes the cultural pressure to suppress his desires was too great and that he never physically acted upon them. Despite the effusive letters James wrote to young men, Kaplan claims, "verbal passion did not imply for him physical action. He had no desire to challenge his inhibitions, let alone society's" (300).

Unlike these earlier biographies, Sheldon M. Novick's *Henry James: The Young Master* (1996) contradicts James's self-professed celibacy. Novick strips away the sexual ambiguity surrounding Henry James. At the time of its publication, *The Young Master* caused uproar amongst James scholars. Edel virulently objected to Novick's claim that James had active sexual relationships with men, writing that Novick "attempts to turn certain of his fancies into fact — but his data is simply too vague for him to get away with it" (slate.com). Novick, who previously authored a biography of Oliver

Wendell Holmes, writes in a footnote that Holmes was someone with whom James "might have been intimate." Edel retorts, "'Might have been'? There's incertitude for you. My surmise is that Novick is trying to support his hypothesis of James' initial sexual experience, and that he picks the name handiest to him...He simply wants us to know that James was a sexual man and a loving person. Biographers often develop strange attachments to their subjects" (slate.com). Novick responded in a pointed letter addressed to Edel himself: "Your remarks focus obsessively on Henry James' sexuality. This is your obsession, not mine. You dwell on a single sexual encounter that takes no more than a page in my book and is not referred to again" (slate.com). Novick defends his work, denouncing Edel's — "For a modern reader," Novick wrote, Edel's biography "badly distorts the record of the novelist's life" — and chides the 89-year-old author for refusing to accept "that James, although his principal affections were for men, ever had sexual contact with a man."<sup>24</sup> Novick's letter — which concludes "Lighten up, professor" — initiated an eight-part online debate with fellow James biographer Fred Kaplan entering the fray. Joining forces with Leon Edel, Kaplan pointed to the weaknesses in Novick's book, claiming he based his argument that James was actively gay on "bits and pieces of fragmentary, indirect, or negative evidence" (slate.com).

The controversy amongst his biographers threw the spotlight on James's sexuality, specifically his homosexuality. Gay literary critics adopted James as part of a

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<sup>24</sup> Novick's main evidence is a passage from James's notebooks recalling his experiences in the spring and summer of 1865 in Cambridge, Mass.: 'I knew there, *had* there, in the ghostly old C. that I sit and write of here by the strange Pacific on the other side of the continent, *l'initiation premiere* (the divine, the unique), there and in Ashburton Place...Ah, the "epoch-making" weeks of the spring of 1865!' [Novick's ellipses]. James's description of being initiated into a new way of life might refer to a sexual experience, but in context James's heightened language likely refers to his discovery of his literary vocation.

historical tradition of homosexual writing based on these biographical accounts. Gay critics insisted that James's writing belonged in the gay canon because James himself was a homosexual (regardless of whether or not he physically acted upon his homosexual desires, or if his work represented homosexual relationships, or if he provided any specific insights about homosexuality). Allan Hollinghurst observes, "as gay studies started to take on the heft of a discipline, there were ever bolder attempts to catch bigger writers (Henry James being an eminently recalcitrant example)" (theguardian.com). Hollinghurst's remark captures both the desire to claim major authors as homosexual forebears, and the fact that James does not easily fit into this classification.

It seems that gay critics wanted to claim Henry James as one of their own, only to denounce him at the same time. For example, in A.L. Rowse's (notably bibliography-free) study *Homosexuals in History*, Rowse writes, "It is very odd that Henry James...the most intellectual of novelists, so intellectually aware, should not have woken up to the fact about himself until he was a middle aged man...Not until James was fifty-six did truth erupt into his own so carefully guarded life" (300). Rowse attributes James's best work such as *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, to the "opening out of heart and mind" that flowered from his sexual awakening. By constructing such a clear coming out narrative for James, Rowse is able to add another "man of genius" to his collection, even as he pines for the lost years James supposedly spent in self-delusion (Rowse 302). Rowse describes a progress narrative for James as the author moves from sexual ignorance into self-knowledge. This individual story of gay liberation

is a microcosm of the larger narrative of gay progress that dominates discussions of gay history and gay rights.

Colm Tóibín's non-fiction history book, *Love in a Dark Time*, typifies this progress narrative of gay history. Beginning with Oscar Wilde, Tóibín seeks to document the lives of homosexual men in increasingly livable conditions, a "history of progress" culminating in the present moment, which he calls a "less dark time" (Tóibín 4). Tóibín's ideas about James are derived primarily from Leon Edel's biography. For Tóibín, James is the epitome of a closet case, and James's stunted sexuality also negatively impacts his work. Tóibín writes: "It is astonishing how James managed to withhold his homosexuality from his work. It is also astonishing how bad some of the stories are, how fey and allusive and oddly incomplete" (Tóibín 29). Tóibín suggests that a writer must incorporate his personal sexuality into his stories, or else those stories will be "incomplete." Tóibín chastises gay critics for grasping at straws and attempting to claim James's writing for the gay canon despite James's recalcitrance. Tóibín writes, "Critics will not give up on James. He was gay; therefore he must have written stories which, if we read them carefully and deeply, will yield evidence of this" (Tóibín 31). Tóibín suggests gay reading tactics such as those employed with Oscar Wilde do not work on Henry James. However, Tóibín still employs a form of gay reading that imposes contemporary notions of homosexuality onto James and forms the basis for his biographical critique of James's writing.

Tóibín directly links the events of the author's life with the events that take place in his work, particularly in his interpretation of James's novella "The Beast in the Jungle." The novella tells the story of John Marcher, a man who lives his life in fear that

a terrible destiny is in store for him, only to realize in the end that he has manifested that destiny by never fully living. The widely accepted interpretation of this story based on Edel's biography is that the tale has a biographical basis in James's indifference to the writer Constance Fenimore Woolson. According to Edel, James had "taken her friendship, and never allowed himself to know her feelings" ("Introduction" 10). This dynamic corresponds to the fictional relationship between John Marcher and May Bartram in the story. In Tóibín's biographical reading, heterosexuality is not the solution to the absence of love in Marcher's life. Instead, "The Beast in the Jungle" is the ultimate parable of a life lived in the closet. He writes, "The story becomes much darker when you know about James's life- something that almost never happens with novels. You realize that the catastrophe the story led you to expect was in fact the very life that James chose to live, or was forced to live" (Tóibín 33). Tóibín alludes to the many biographies of James and suggests that they provide the interpretive key to James's work. He says "The Beast in the Jungle" is "for readers familiar with Edel's or Kaplan's biographies of James, and readers willing to find clues in the text itself, about a gay man whose sexuality has left him frozen in the world" (Tóibín 34).

Tóibín opines James lived "a life of pure coldness," and thus he can never be a hero to contemporary gay men. This interpretation is reflected in Tóibín's 2004 historical fiction novel about James titled *The Master*, which dramatizes many of the events from Edel and Kaplan's biographies, and depicts James as a gay virgin. Despite the protagonist's perceptiveness and skill for narrative, he is stifled in his personal life, unable to express his desires. Time and again Tóibín depicts James's repressed silence, "He moved his lips, about to say something, and then stopped"; "He stared at

her grimly and, he hoped, blankly and said nothing”; “He still did not speak”; “He said nothing” (qtd. in Updike). In his critical writings Tóibín takes issue with James’s evasiveness. In Tóibín’s reading, Marcher doubles for the author:

Clearly, he has been unable to love May Bartram, as James was unable to love Constance Fenimore Woolson; and it is open to readers whether or not they believe that May has understood all along something Marcher cannot entertain. He may have failed to love her because he was gay. And because he could not deal with his own sexuality, he failed to love anybody. (34-35)

As John Updike observes in his review of *The Master*, “Marcher and James had the misfortune of living before the cheerful, liberating word “gay” was appropriated” (*newyorker.com*). Tóibín’s James is the James of gay criticism; he is a cautionary tale, or a measure of how far gay rights have advanced since his time.

## QUEER CRITICISM AND THE JAMESIAN TURN

The recalcitrance that made James an uneasy subject for gay critics (including the lack of sexual content in his published works and the potential lack of sexual contact in his personal life) made him the ideal author for queer literary criticism. Queer work on James by writers such as Joseph Litvak, Michael Moon, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick made James an extremely important figure for thinking about early twentieth-century constructions of sexuality. These scholars suggested “one might find in James’s reserve and obliquity not just a pale, repressed version of Wilde’s extravagant performance but an alternative mode of erotic expression calling for further investigation” (Matheson

713). Whereas critics attempted to re-work gay readings of Oscar Wilde queerly, Henry James's work necessitated the creation of new queer methods of reading, and more complex theoretical frameworks for sexuality that moved away from classification and identification.

Joseph Litvak broke down an easy juxtaposition between Wilde and James by calling attention to the "inappropriate" theatricality of James's style. For Litvak, James's very vagueness seems to call attention to itself. Litvak writes

"vagueness," far from representing a mere failure of meaning, already viewed as suspect in its own right, not despite but because of the fact that it is also seen as an alibi: by seeming not to mean anything much, it is taken to mean something in particular, and that something, however obliquely named- whether as "queerness"...or as "perversity" or "effeminacy," to cite other readers of James- is homosexuality, well established by James's time, as the proverbial name of the unnamable. (215)

Although Litvak identifies Jamesian vagueness as queerness, which suggests homosexuality, he does not attempt to define what James intentionally left vague, as gay scholars have often tried to do. Litvak provides one example of how queer scholars employ an innovative form of biographical criticism in their work on James. Litvak notably read James's autobiography *A Small Boy and Others* like a fictional text, rather than reading James's fictional texts as veiled autobiography, in order to examine how James "makes a scene," a matter of craftsmanship that also applies to James's fiction. Litvak's work is an example of how queer criticism shifts attention from the biographical author onto the performative effects of his writing.

Michael Moon also incorporates readings of James's published works with biographical materials such as his letters in order to examine James's authorial performances and the evolution of his style. Moon does not use biographical materials to elucidate James's fictional texts, or to reduce his published material to autobiography. Both Moon and Litvak focus on James's style, which allows them to deal with his complexity, rather than shifting their attention to the author himself. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick employs many of the same queer interpretive strategies and principles used by Litvak and Moon.<sup>25</sup> The impact of Sedgwick's essay "The Beast in the Closet" on the development of queer criticism can hardly be overstated. Sedgwick's reading of James's "The Beast in the Jungle" began to distinguish queer criticism from gay criticism ideologically and methodologically. Sedgwick's essay seems to have arrived at just the right moment, when deconstructive and psychoanalytic readings of James were *de rigueur*, and gay and lesbian criticism had provoked interest in homosexual aspects of James's life and work.<sup>26</sup> But Sedgwick is much more interested in what is not said in "The Beast in the Jungle" than she is in dragging John Marcher, James, the beast, and all his skeletons out of the closet.

In her interpretation Sedgwick insists upon Marcher's sexual indeterminacy, even as she invites us to read that indeterminacy suggestively. Marcher lives not as one who is *in* the closet but the secret of having a secret functions in Marcher's life *as* the closet.

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<sup>25</sup> Sedgwick credits Moon with helping her formulate her reading of James in *Tendencies* (Sedgwick 103).

<sup>26</sup> "The Beast in the Closet" was first published in Ruth Barnard Yeazell ed. *Sex Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, Selected Papers from the English Institute*. 1982-84. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore/London, 1986, 148-86. The essay appears as the fourth chapter in her landmark 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, but it was in fact the "inaugurating investigation" of Sedgwick's study of male homo/heterosexual definition (Sedgwick 183).

Sedgwick argues, "It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man, for Marcher is not a homosexual man. Instead it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret- the closet of imagining a homosexual secret" (Sedgwick 205). In the context of the emerging sexual specificity that was occurring in medical and penal public discourse around the years of the Wilde trials, Marcher's sense that he has a secret that must be suppressed susurrates with unspoken meaning suggestive of "the love that dare not speak its name." The unspoken meanings in "The Beast in the Jungle" include homosexual meaning, and emerge through what Sedgwick calls a "thematics of absence." This is one example of how Sedgwick embraced a paradox, arguing that sexual meanings in texts are unstable while simultaneously insisting that the instability of meaning in texts is an index of sexuality gone queer. Natasha Hurley asserts, "what is at stake in James is not just whether John Marcher was a gay man who couldn't see the fact for himself...What is at stake...is the very reading practices we bring to bear on sexuality in literature and the way literature itself comes to bear on sexuality" (Hurley 310). James's writing--and the writing about his writing-- continues to inspire and revise our thinking about the epistemologies of sexuality.

Sedgwick's readings of James display a complex relation to the text and the author. She proclaims her wish to "do some justice to the specificity, the richness, above all the explicitness of James's particular erotics" (61). She asserts that unlike gay scholars, her project is not focused on making him "an exemplar of 'homosexuality' or even of one 'kind' of homosexuality," though she specifies, "I certainly don't want, either, to make him sound as if he isn't gay" (61). Sedgwick asserts that she is not invested in typical forms of gay reading for identification and classification. She still feels it is

worthwhile to assert that Henry James is gay (or at least that he wasn't not gay...).

Unlike scholars working in gay criticism, Sedgwick is committed to explicating James's eroticism, but she does not need to assert definitively that James was a gay man, or turn him into an exemplar for modern gay people. Despite her critique of liberatory identity politics, Sedgwick does not eschew biographical modes of literary criticism. In fact, Sedgwick comes out strongly in favor of biographical criticism of Henry James because it helps to combat the heteronormativity that pervades literary criticism. She writes, "for James, in whose life the pattern of homosexual desire was brave enough and resilient enough to be at last biographically inobliterable, one might have hoped that in criticism of his work the possible differences of different erotic paths would not be so ravenously subsumed under a compulsorily...heterosexual model" (Sedgwick 197). Sedgwick praises critics such as Georges-Michel Sarotte (1978), Richard Hall (1983), Robert K. Martin (1978), and Michael Moon (1986) who account for James's personal sexuality in their assessments of his writing, moving between readings of life and art (Sedgwick 204).

The most fascinating example of Eve Sedgwick's use of biographical criticism occurs in a footnote to "The Beast in the Closet." Sedgwick refers to an excerpt from James's notebooks written in 1905, that she feels points with greater specificity to James's homosexual desire than the story itself. She calls this passage a "pregnant address to James's male muse" because he uses male pronouns to describe the inspiration that will enable him to access his hidden thoughts. She also memorably describes this passage as "an innovation of fisting-as-écriture" (Sedgwick 208).

Sedgwick calls our attention to the anal eroticism in the lines:

I shall be able to [plunge] my hand, my arm, *in*, deep and far, and up to the shoulder- into the heavy bag of remembrance- of suggestion- of imagination- of art- and fish out every little figure and felicity, every little fact and fancy that can be to my purpose. These things are all packed away, now, thicker than I can penetrate, deeper than I can fathom. (qtd. in Sedgwick 208)

Sedgwick suggests that plunging the hand and arm deep into the bag of remembrance is evocative of fisting. David Halperin speaks of anal fisting as a sexual act that “decentralizes” and de-phallicizes male bodily pleasure (90-91). Sedgwick associates the staunch and reserved James with this shockingly anti-normative and perverse sex act. But Henry James is hardly the nineteenth century’s answer to Robert Mapplethorpe (who exhibited graphic images of men being fisted). Even Sedgwick’s bold and confrontational reading concedes that James’s imagery is subtle and oblique. Rather than reading a one to one relationship between the author’s sexual activities and the sexual imagery in his writing, Sedgwick encouraged readers to consider the “potential queer erotic resonances” in the writing of Henry James. Drawing on a “thematics of anal fingering and ‘fisting-as-écriture’” in James’s work, Sedgwick bases her claims on certain grammatical features of the text, rather than saying these acts were explicitly performed either in the text or the author’s life. In “The Beast in the Closet” the long passage Sedgwick quotes from James’s personal notebook appears in a footnote. How that biographical writing helps elucidate the fictional text of “The Beast in the Jungle” is not clearly explained. The passage from James’s diary is offered as evidence of his anal eroticism and his personal homoerotic tendencies.

Remarkably, Sedgwick returns again and again to this one passage in each of her major critical statements on James, bringing it more to the forefront in each successive examination of his life and work. In her 1993 book *Tendencies* Sedgwick writes:

In a footnote to a previous essay on James, "The Beast in the Closet," I quoted a passage from James's notebooks written during a 1905 visit to California, which still seems to me the best condensation of what *The Wings of the Dove* presses us to recognize as his most characteristic and fecund relation to his own anal eroticism. (99)

She asserts that she still feels this quote is an example of "fisting-as-écriture" but she also uses it to elucidate aspects of the novel. For example, Eugenio is forever "carrying one well-kept Italian hand to his heart and plunging the other straight into [Milly's] pocket, which...fitted it like a glove" (101). In this passage we hear an echo of how James describes his untapped remembrances: "I shall be able to plunge my hand, my arm, in, deep and far, up to the shoulder, into the heavy bag of remembrance." In the novel Milly is described as "a mine of something precious" that "needed working and would certainly yield a treasure" (101). In the notebook James described his memories in a similar fashion: "These things are all packed away, now, thicker than I can penetrate, deeper than I can fathom, and there let them rest for the present...till I shall let in upon them the mild still light...in which they will begin to gleam and glitter and take form like the gold and jewels of a mine" (99). When Sedgwick reads the notebook and the novel together, she suggests that these repeated images and echoed phrases are

suggestive of James's particular erotics, and the theme emerges that things that are hidden or buried are more precious.

Like James, Sedgwick cannot help repeating these phrases and images in her writing. According to Sedgwick fisting imagery throughout James's language functions as "an anatomical double entendre whose interest and desirability James...appears to have experienced as inexhaustible" (103). She adds the cheeky aside, "and I can only join him in this" (103). Sedgwick's motivation to keep returning to James's work is due in part to her personal delight in explicating his anal eroticism. This type of perverse and pleasurable close reading is integral to her methodology. Sedgwick clearly had not exhausted the theme of James's anal eroticism since she returns to it with even greater zeal in her essay on James's prefaces to the New York edition of his collected works, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*."

Henry James's prefaces to the New York Edition represent an exhaustive feat of authorial self-examination. Completed after the flop of James's play *Guy Domville*, the New York Editions of James's works were also a commercial failure themselves. For these reasons, Sedgwick points out that James's prefaces have an intense relation to the affect of shame. One aspect of Sedgwick's readings of James that distinguishes her work from the biographical writings and gay criticism of James that preceded her is her exploration of how shame is a defining and shaping factor in the formation of queer identity. Queer shame was Sedgwick's counter to gay pride, a defining theoretical difference between gay and queer studies. For these reasons James is not a hero for

queer critics, but a figure who forced new ways of reading and conceptualizing sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

The prefaces are intriguing to Sedgwick because of the “playful spectacle” of their “authorial narcissism” (Sedgwick 7). In the prefaces, James provides “behind the scenes” insight into his own writings, calling attention to himself as the author behind the texts by literally inserting himself into them. Some critics have argued that the idea of the presence of the author as the originary source behind the text is essential to James’s theory of fiction. David Carroll writes that for James, “behind...[the fictional universe] stands the ‘true origin’ and subject of the novel: the author and his consciousness” (quoted in Silverman 157). But as Kaja Silverman observes, were we to accept this view of James as the “originating consciousness” then, “he would emerge as the very embodiment of the traditional author” (Silverman 157). The traditional author implies an exemplary male subject, but Silverman argues that James’s authorial subjectivity is definitively located at the margins of traditional masculinity. She writes, “the James who is conjured forth by his authorial fantasmatic defies specification according both to a strictly heterosexual, and to a classically homosexual paradigm” (158). In this reading, “James’s predilection for rear subject-positions” and “going behind” takes on a more sexually suggestive valence (Silverman 158).

Eve Sedgwick seems to have delighted in just this type of innuendo and double entendre. Sedgwick’s readings of James get increasingly more “out there”, from her

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<sup>27</sup> Sedgwick’s work on queer shame has inspired contemporary critics to embrace the darker and less affirming aspects of queer life experiences. For example, Heather Love’s 2009 book *Feeling Backward* attends to outlying figures that do not fit into the standard progress narrative of gay rights, and Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), which is dedicated to “All of History’s Losers.”

measured and historically situated close reading of “The Beast in the Jungle,” to her creative biographical critique of *The Wings of the Dove*, and finally her self-reflexive, often scatological interpretation of Henry James’s prefaces to the New York Edition. In her essay on the prefaces in *Touching Feeling* (2003) Sedgwick returns to the same passage she footnoted in “The Beast in the Closet” for the third time, and repeats an almost identical passage from her essay on *The Wings of The Dove*. She writes, “In a footnote to a previous essay on James, ‘The Beast in the Closet’, I quoted a passage from James’s notebooks, written during a visit to California only a few months before he started on the New York edition, which still seems to me the best condensation of what these prefaces press us to recognize as his most characteristic and fecund relation to his own anal eroticism.” She continues, “At the time, I quoted this as a description of ‘fisting-as-écriture’ (*Epistemology* 208); I am sure it is that, but the context of the prefaces brings out two other saliences of this scene of fisting equally strongly-- saliences related to each other and, of course, also to the writing process” (48). In this passage we see lines repeated from her essay on James in *Tendencies*: “At the time, I quoted this as a description of ‘fisting-as-écriture’; I am sure it is that, but the context of *The Wings of the Dove* brings out two other saliences of this scene of fisting equally strongly” (99). Sedgwick applies the same passage from the notebook to elucidate both his fiction and his non-fictional prefaces. Unlike her earlier essays on James, Sedgwick is now interested in how this scene of fisting relates to James’s creative process and to his authorial voice. Even though she is not directly explicating textual material, Sedgwick still engages with James as an author by referencing process and voice. She does not try to “go behind” the writing in order to access the man, privileging biography

over fiction. Sedgwick is interested in how anal eroticism informs James's aesthetics and thematics, rather than using these writings as evidence of James's personal sexual preferences. Sedgwick is more explicit and irreverent in this piece than in her earlier literary criticism and claims, "The prefaces are way out there...and in more than a couple senses of out" (Sedgwick 39). But Sedgwick's reference to being "out there" does not mean her end goal is to out James by definitively determining that he was a homosexual.

It is well known that later in life Henry James had relationships with young men, some of whom are known to have had sexual relationships with other men (such as William Morton Fullerton and Hendrik Christian Anderson). The nature of James's relationships with these men is revealed only through his letters, and florid declarations of affection were accepted as common totems of friendship in James's lifetime. Reading James's letters to younger men does not expose the truth of his homosexuality: what is most striking about these correspondences is his exquisite use of language. In her essay Sedgwick focuses not on James's letters to young men as evidence of his homosexuality, but on his letters to his brother William as evidence of his queerness. The two brothers' early correspondence includes pages upon pages about Henry's constipation ("what you term so happily my moving intestinal drama"). Sedgwick offers James's constipation as an objective correlative for what had before been an "inferential reading of the centrality of an anal preoccupation in James's sense of his body, his production, and his pleasure" (49). True to her sentiment that fisting is an "anatomical double entendre whose interest and desirability" she finds to be "inexhaustible," Sedgwick traces images of the "obstetric hand" and "the fisted bowel" in both James's

letters and the prefaces. It might seem that Sedgwick uses James's personal letters and notebooks to attempt to shed light on his (literal) inner workings. She does not make clear distinctions between his personal writing, his novel, and his prefaces, but she does focus solely on aspects of his literary style. Although his metaphors and images may originate in his personal bodily obsessions and eccentricities, Sedgwick engages with James as an author by explicating his writing. This is a "queer" analysis largely because the demarcations of inside and outside, the literary and the biographical, the semantic and the somatic have become indeterminable.

#### QUEERING BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

Queer reading, even when employing biographical criticism, does not mean "code cracking," in other words, using biography to decipher "hidden" gay messages in the text. In queer criticism of James, biographical information is invoked but used to support rather than to shut down multiple interpretations of his texts. Writing in the wake of Sedgwick, Eric Savoy critiques the "biographical imperative" in literary studies of James and attempts to define an alternative queer method. Savoy argues:

At stake here is the distinctly different way in which gay studies and queer theory conceptualize the erotic as an object of literary scrutiny. The former understands the homoerotic as essential to the author's self-identification (or...characteristic of the author's observable affiliation and desire), which plays itself out demonstrably in the author's work. Queer theory is suspicious of such coherent

linkages between life and work, and tends to locate the erotic in the discursive field of writing, in its performative effects. (106)

For Savoy, the “biographical imperative” marks a fundamental difference in the approach to interpretation in gay and queer literary criticism. Queer literary criticism troubles a coherent linkage between author’s biography and the literary text. Queer reading focuses on the queerness played out in the writing, rather than the writing as an expression of the queerness of the author.

As Kevin Ohi writes in *Henry James and the Queerness of Style*, “the daunting complexity of James’s writing is its queerness” (2). Taking their cues from Sedgwick, queer critics of James employ a kind of Queer Formalism in order to deal with James’s complexity, rather than trying to “solve” the challenges presented by the texts using biographical criticism. Sedgwick’s method includes what she describes as “the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading” (*Touching Feeling* 145). For Eric Savoy imaginative close reading is an integral part of queer literary methodology. Savoy writes, “Queer Formalism is not only a means of illuminating the complexity of James’s characteristic form, it also provides a concrete way of moving from textual example to an initiation into these contemporary theoretical protocols.” For Savoy, “To track Queer James, then, is to attend closely to the residue of his figurative language, the imagistic suggestiveness of his lexicon” (Savoy 103).

These queer readings refuse “normal and normalizing” criticism, and in the case of Sedgwick, are unselfconsciously perverse and partial. Queer formalism is offered as an antidote to the reductive identitarianism of gay criticism, and the timidity and banality of literary criticism that only allows for heterosexual meanings. Part of the pleasure of

reading (for Sedgwick and readers of Sedgwick) is that James's vagueness allows for virtuosic critical close readings. As Kevin Ohi writes, "in the chapter on James in *Epistemology of the Closet*—she registers the critic's (and in this case, her own) vested interest in the spectacle of the closet as a fund of secrets and as a fuel for interpretive acuity" (7). Criticism of Henry James provides the paradigmatic example of a queer reading practice because in this case, appealing to the sexuality of the author has not been used to shut down interpretations of the text; such appeals have often multiplied interpretive possibilities.

Although my dissertation as a whole is critical of author-centered biographical criticism, this chapter on James offers an example of queer literary critiques that subvert the totalizing imperatives of conventional biographical narratives. Queer criticism of Henry James is one instance where queer criticism actually differs from gay criticism in the way it deploys biographical material, because it applies literary modes of reading to the recurring themes and images in an author's writing, rather than attempting to use biographical facts to pick apart his literary work, stripping away the fiction to expose the man. Queer criticism of James challenges sexual identity categories, even though it still engages with the identity of the author, because it does not try to define James as a homosexual man, it allows for his sexuality to remain ambiguous and ambivalent. These queer critics engage with a perverse textual body based on the literary corpus (which includes fiction, letters, and memoirs), rather than the author's physical body, therefore queer criticism of James is where we see a queer form of biographical criticism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Redressing Radclyffe Hall: The Critical Legacy of *The Well of Loneliness*

Radclyffe Hall published *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 and within six weeks it was prosecuted for obscenity. In the sensational *Sunday Express* article, “A Book That Must Be Suppressed,” journalist James Douglas denounced the novel as “moral poison” because it addressed a subject that had never been portrayed sympathetically in print. The plot focuses on the plight of a masculine woman named Stephen Gordon who desires other women, and seeks social acceptance despite her differences. Douglas’s hyperbolic claim that he “would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel” piqued public interest in what might otherwise have been a marginally successful work of middlebrow fiction (Doan and Prosser 38).

The prosecution of *The Well of Loneliness* for obscene libel in the summer of 1928 had a similar effect on lesbianism as Oscar Wilde’s trial had for male homosexuality. It crystallized an image of the lesbian, and Hall’s name, like Wilde’s became synonymous with same-sex desire. The obscenity trial forged a picture of the lesbian in the image of Radclyffe Hall: “monocle, tuxedoed, hair cropped short, cigarette in hand” (Benstock 173). The high profile trial that thrust Hall into the spotlight is reminiscent of what the quintessential gay man, Oscar Wilde, faced after his own trial in 1895. In *The Wilde Century* Alan Sinfield describes how one archetype came to represent the homosexual in public discourse, arguing that Wilde’s prosecution and surrounding press provided the public with a “brilliantly precise image” (Sinfield 118). In

very much the same way, Radclyffe Hall's masculine manner of dress became fused with the public's perception of lesbianism.

The public nature of the book's obscenity trial raised Hall's profile so high that Radclyffe Hall became perceived as the *quintessential lesbian*. The trial drew attention to Radclyffe Hall, creating the perception that she was "the book's real-life heroine." Hall stood behind the model of female homosexuality she presented in her novel, and through her trial became inseparable from the public image of lesbianism. Laura Doan, an expert on the evolution of masculine style and its relation to lesbian identity in the twentieth century, explains that Hall's hyper-iconicity was an after-effect of the obscenity case. Doan asserts, "Hall's manner of self-presentation became inextricably connected to lesbianism after the trial" (*genders.org*). The massive publicity was highly visual and the newspapers literally gave female sexual inversion a face. Posing for portraits in Spanish hats, bowties, and ornate smoking jackets, Hall presented a powerful image of herself to the world. The image of Hall herself may be more compelling than her novel, which is so full of moralizing and handwringing that it seems tame by comparison.

It is ironic that an author so impeccably stylish and modern in her appearance should produce a book so sentimental and old-fashioned. Though her subject matter was innovative, her prose style was not. Critic Cyril Connolly wrote, "*The Well of Loneliness* may be a brave book to have written, but let us hope it will pave the way for someone to write a better one" (qtd. in Ladenson 109). In an era of modernist experimentation, Hall opted for a traditional narrative structure, a melodramatic style redolent of middlebrow romance novels, and a barrage of biblical references. It may come as a surprise that the content of a book that was banned for obscenity, a book

that became the subject of such persistent critical attention, is actually quite tame. There are no racy scenes of lesbian lovemaking, only long passages about the protagonist's pitiful fate in a society that does not accept her. For literary scholars, the body of criticism about the book makes for livelier reading than the novel itself.

## THE TRIALS OF RADCLYFFE HALL

Heralded as the first English lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness* is now one of the books most widely identified with lesbian literature worldwide. Because of its historical significance it is one of the books most likely to be read by lesbians and those interested in a portrayal of lesbianism. *The Well of Loneliness* has also become a fixture in lesbian and queer literary studies, where it continues to incite controversy. In *Dirt for Art's Sake* Elisabeth Ladenson writes, "[*The Well*] has become a classic in the specific domain of gay literature, and as such it continues to give rise to opprobrium and discord" (Ladenson 107). The "opprobrium" she describes is not the original homophobic opposition to *The Well of Loneliness* by readers who sought to censor and critique it on moral grounds; lesbian, queer readers, and critics themselves generate this "discord".

My title "Redressing Radclyffe Hall" refers to the ongoing contributions of critics seeking to redress, or "set right" earlier interpretations of the book, as well as a metaphorical sense that the contents of the novel are continuously "re-dressed" according to the fashionable discourse of the day. The critical responses reflect shifting

concerns surrounding issues of identity, gender, and sexuality from different eras of feminist, lesbian, and queer thought. Clothing metaphors are particularly apt in reference to Radclyffe Hall, the author of a book with an immaculately well-tailored protagonist and lush with sartorial details, not to mention the critical attention that has been paid to the significance of fashion in relation to gender identity in the text. Judith Halberstam went so far as to call the book an epistemology of “the wardrobe” (Halberstam 98).

Although so much has been said about *The Well* already it is worth revisiting this critical commentary. In answer to Terry Castle’s sardonic question, “**Oh god not again:** *The Well of Fucking Loneliness*. When will the nightmare stop?” I answer, “Not just yet” (Doan and Prosser 394). Castle’s exasperation can be attributed to Hall’s overexposure in literary studies of gender and sexuality. Still, I argue that it is valuable to reexamine not the novel itself, but the differing interpretations of *The Well*, focusing on provocative moments of tension between literary critics.

Since its publication, *The Well of Loneliness* has been plagued by controversy that can be attributed to the slippage between art and life. The book was banned in 1928 based on fears it would influence the British public and promote female homosexuality. In “Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Identity” Sonja Ruehl claims, “The prosecution of the novel promoted it as a major source of how to ‘be’ a lesbian in real life. And focusing attention on its author, the book’s real-life heroine, the trial unwittingly took the question of lesbianism outside the category of ‘fiction’” (Ruehl 166). From the beginning, *The Well* was treated as a sourcebook for information about gender and sexuality rather than a work of fiction. Radclyffe Hall’s inclusion of elements from

medical texts and sexology may have increased this sense of verisimilitude and created the impression that it was intended as an instructional text. Hall's assertion that she was authorized to speak to this topic because of her own experience as a sexual invert contributed to the public's sense that the author was the real-life correlate of her character Stephen Gordon.

Comparisons are often made between *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* because they were published the same year. *Orlando* presents a fictionalized biography of Woolf's lover Vita-Sackville West, and flirts with lesbian subtext using a protagonist who incurs a mystical sex change halfway through the book. Woolf's novel did not face social censure for its subject matter and unlike Hall, Woolf was never a spectacle in court. Woolf is a self-proclaimed "highbrow" literary stylist and her book has been celebrated for its wit and subtlety. In *Orlando*, she uses the novel to deconstruct categories of gender and identity, to play with and fantasize about them, exposing gender as superficial and socially constructed. Orlando lives through many epochs, and his/her story has a similarly timeless quality. Contemporary queer critics praise its fluidity and deconstruction of gender categories.

Compared to the gender-defying and still modern seeming Orlando, Stephen Gordon is neither playful nor fantastic. Woolf's novel resonates with contemporary queer critiques of normative life trajectories, as Orlando carves out an unprecedented life for herself outside of standard time. Unlike Orlando, Stephen subscribes to the pathologizing discourses of gender and sexuality that were dominant in her day and identifies as a "sexual invert". Stephen longs to be "real," to be average and accepted. As Esther Newton remarks, "Unlike Orlando, Stephen is trapped in history" (Newton

570). Stephen is a sad figure; she is unable to seamlessly change sexes, no supernatural forces intervene on her behalf, and she is stuck both in her own body and her own homophobic society. In Woolf's *oeuvre* *Orlando* is an intriguing yet minor work. Although she wrote eight novels, *The Well* is the only work for which Hall is known. Modern lesbians and queers likely appreciate Hall's photographs and fashion sense, but are unlikely to ever read any of her other works. *The Well* has become famous for its cultural impact and the events surrounding its publication more than for its literary value, and Hall's legacy has lived on as a lesbian icon more than an author.

Hall's hyper-iconicity has been problematic for lesbians who do not want to be associated with her politically or aesthetically. For example, in "The Semiotics of Sex," contemporary author Jeanette Winterson recounts a story about being approached by a female scholar writing an essay comparing Winterson's work to Hall's. The woman asks if Winterson can offer any helpful insight and she says yes: "Our work has nothing in common." The woman replies indignantly, "I thought you were a lesbian" (Winterson 103). Winterson uses this anecdote to critique the assumption that just because she shares a sexual identification with Hall, there are similarities in their work. She launches an attack on gay critics who read texts solely for their representations of sexuality claiming: "The Queer world has colluded in the misreading of art as sexuality" (Winterson 104). According to her sentiments in this essay, Winterson would contest the fundamental principles behind a specific literary canon composed of books written by authors who have nothing in common besides their sexual orientation, which is exactly the type of canon where Hall currently enjoys pride of place.

Aesthetic critiques of *The Well of Loneliness* are largely unfavorable. Upon its release Virginia Woolf insisted, “the novel lacked literary merit” (Doan and Prosser 6). More recently, Kathryn Stockton described the book as “shockingly flat” both “at the level of the sentence (no sentence is transporting)” and at the larger level of the plot (Stockton 48). Although *The Well* is likely to appear on the syllabi of many “Intro to Queer Literature” courses, Hall’s lasting fame is based on her historical significance, and frank portrayal of same-sex desire, not necessarily her artistic appeal. Winterson advocates a return to form and aesthetics by readers and critics, regardless of their sexual orientation. But if the queer world had not taken such an interest in art as sexuality, it is doubtful *The Well of Loneliness* would be in regular circulation today. Elisabeth Ladenson argues that the critical attention to Radclyffe Hall “has nothing to do certainly, with any suggestion she was a great writer; she was not” (Ladenson 111). By most accounts she was not even a good writer, but since the flourishing of feminist literary criticism, *The Well* has persisted as an object of study.

*The Well* is responsible for generating such a wealth of criticism that it has been anthologized in a dedicated volume. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser, the editors of the 2002 collection *Palatable Poison* write in their introduction, “Read itself as a text, this critical commentary demonstrates the shifts in thinking about gender and sexuality and serves as an index to the changes in feminist thought from 1968 to the present day” (Doan and Prosser 14). The critical attention paid to Stephen Gordon ensures she lives on through different waves of criticism-- from feminist theorizing of the 1970s, to gay and lesbian criticism in the ‘80s, and queer criticism from the ‘90s to the present.

*The Well of Loneliness* can be used to historicize contemporary lesbian and

queer identities. By surveying scholarly criticism we see how Stephen's story has been regularly reassessed according to the needs of modern day lesbians and queers. Despite Jeanette Winterson's urgings that we read texts formally and not translate art into sexuality, readers regularly forge identifications with works of fiction based on a shared sense of identity with the author or characters. Since *The Well of Loneliness* gained its reputation as *the* lesbian novel, it became the book most readily available to those wanting to learn something about their own identities. But as evidenced by vocal feminist critics such as Blanche Wiesen Cook, this search for recognition in *The Well* has historically led to disappointment. Cook writes, "most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon's swagger...But...*The Well* denied joy in the positive choice to live with and love women" (Cook 719). In the 1970s and '80s many lesbians sought such positive affirmation; so they did not feel represented by the text and were not comfortable with Radclyffe Hall being their public face to the world.

The original homophobic argument against *The Well* was founded in a fear that its representation of lesbianism would have a negative impact on the public. Ironically, generations of lesbian readers have shared this same belief, fearful of the image of female homosexuality that the novel perpetuates. Blanche Wiesen Cook and her contemporaries (including Lillian Faderman, Ann Williams, Vivian Gornick, Catherine R. Stimpson) wanted to find positive affirmation for their lesbian identities and were disappointed that Stephen's story was not true to their own experiences of life and love. Elisabeth Ladenson claims Hall, "may have done more harm than good to the

generations of lesbians who turned to her novel to learn about themselves” (Ladenson 111).

The novel’s reputation as the exemplary lesbian novel, and the resulting expectation that the novel represents lesbian experience, created a collective wish that Hall present lesbianism in a positive and affirming way. In the 1977 article “Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Image,” Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams bemoaned the fact that “a book more complex and truer to life than the simplistic and egregious *Well of Loneliness*” did not come to define lesbian life in public consciousness (Faderman and Williams 34). They believe Hall’s depiction of the lesbian as masculine, morose, and doomed had a deleterious effect on feminism. In 1979 Blanche Wiesen Cook made a similar argument, wishing the swaggering Stephen had been a “happier girl” and that all lesbians coming of age in her generation had been exposed to texts representing “woman-loving choices” and promoting “an equalitarian feminist society” instead of to *The Well* (Cook 719-720). Writing in 1981, Catherine Stimpson compared Hall’s novel unfavorably with more contemporary lesbian writings claiming, “new texts are hopeful about homosexuality and confident about the lesbian’s power to name her experience and experiment with literary form” (Stimpson 374). Overall the body of feminist criticism on *The Well of Loneliness* in the ‘70s and ‘80s asserts that Stephen’s male identification makes her anti-feminist, *The Well*’s proto-butch/femme dynamics are retrograde, and the overall sadness and complacency of the text are inherently homophobic. These feminist critics express a common desire that *The Well of Loneliness* should somehow be a different book.

It is as if these disappointed readers opened the book in order to see a mirror image of themselves and were shocked to find sad old Stephen Gordon's face staring back at them. Upon reflection, it is untenable that Hall could bear the burden of future generations looking for positive role models in the queer past. We might have reservations about reading a work of fiction as "factual," and seamlessly applying a text written in 1928 to our contemporary moment, but this occurs frequently in criticism of *The Well*. Kathryn Stockton points out that one effect of Hall's "flatness" is that it makes her work feel more "true." She writes that flatness "has clearly aided those who, since 1928, have wished to read the novel as fairly factual...or to find a fiction 'still true' to butch women" (Stockton 48). If there was not such a persistent conflation of art and life, representation and reality in the criticism, the novel could be read as the fictional rendering it is, contextualized within its historical moment, rather than as a social model for the present.

## MASCULINITY AND MELANCHOLIA

The critiques of *The Well of Loneliness* written in the 1970s and early '80s took offense at Stephen Gordon's masculinity and melancholia. However, it is these very aspects that are later used to queer the book by critics who interpret Stephen as a proto-transsexual (Jay Prosser, *Second Skins*, 1998), a paragon of female masculinity (Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1998), or a rich source of queer affect (Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*, 2009). Arguably these queer readings were all informed and

enabled by Esther Newton, who was the first to challenge the dominant gendered critiques of *The Well*.

In 1984 Newton wrote an influential piece responding to feminist criticisms of *The Well* (such as those by Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams, Blanche Wiesen Cook, and Catherine Stimpson). These lesbian feminist critics were only responding to the book because it had become a famous lesbian text, even though they did not feel the book represented them. Newton states that although these critics are embarrassed by her, they are “[u]nable to wish Radclyffe Hall away” (Newton 559). In Newton’s statement the name “Radclyffe Hall” stands for the author as well as for her novel. Radclyffe Hall the figure, and *The Well of Loneliness* the text are often referred to interchangeably in this way.

The primary problem second-wave feminist readers had with both Hall and her literary protagonist Stephen Gordon was masculinity. Newton points out: “Thinking, acting, or looking like a man contradicts lesbian feminism’s first principle: The lesbian is a ‘woman identified woman’” (Newton 557-558). Although Newton agrees that lesbianism should be defined by sexual object choice, not gender variance, she insists that feminists and lesbians should not disavow those who experience gender cross-identification, or present themselves in a masculine way. Newton emphasizes how the negative responses to *The Well* echo negative responses to masculine women in real-world feminist and lesbian communities. Newton was the first to critically respond to the unique plight of the “mannish lesbian” exemplified by Hall and her masculine heroine.

In her article “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian,” Newton describes the prototypical “mannish lesbian,” “true invert,” or “butch,” and she bears a striking resemblance to

famous portraits of Radclyffe Hall and her contemporaries (who were captured in stylized photographs and the moody paintings of Romaine Brooks). Newton describes this figure: “You see her in old photographs or paintings with legs solidly planted, wearing a top hat and a man’s jacket, staring defiantly out of the frame, her hair slicked back or clipped over her ears” (Newton 558). Newton finds continuity between this historical butch and masculine women in her contemporary feminist moment. For her Radclyffe Hall is the epitome of the butch archetype, the persistent specter that haunts lesbian feminism. Using contemporary terminology Newton names Hall as “an ‘out’ and tie-wearing lesbian” (Newton 559). Here “tie-wearing” metonymically signals Hall’s masculine gender presentation.

Newton pays special attention to clothing because sartorial choices are not merely superficial for the masculine woman; dress is bound up with gender expression. As Newton writes, for Stephen Gordon gender cannot be an “irrelevant game” (Newton 570). We can see that Stephen’s childhood spent dressing up in boys clothing, her meticulously curated wardrobe, and her short cropped hair cut are all manifestations of her sense of self. Stephen’s gender identity is not a playful masquerade. As a child she is traumatized by trying to fulfill the expectations of traditional femininity, symbolized by wearing a dress: “She wrenched off the dress and hurled it from her, longing intensely to rend it, to hurt it, longing to hurt herself in the process, yet filled all the while with that sense of injustice” (Hall 74). The affective intensity attached to clothing throughout the text shows how interconnected Stephen’s outward expression of gender is to her sense of self. Newton’s sympathetic response to Stephen’s masculine gender identity and her suffering, as well as her empathizing with Hall for the very reasons other lesbian

feminist critics rejected her set her apart. Her reading of Hall reflects her desire to validate the masculine lesbian despite the hegemony of the woman-identified-woman. But the impact of Newton's argument extended far beyond her own political moment. Newton's critique contributed to the revaluation of butch-femme identities within the lesbian community in the 1980s and '90s (along with the writings of Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, Cherrie Moraga, Sue-Ellen Case, and Teresa de Lauretis). Her attention to Stephen's gender performance and Hall's impact on the formation of the modern butch identity influenced later queer readings of the novel, particularly those by Jay Prosser and Judith Halberstam.

Like Newton, Jay Prosser responds to lesbian critics' censure of *The Well of Loneliness*, and strives to take Stephen Gordon's gender identity seriously by applying contemporary terminology and conceptual categories to the text. In the 1998 book *Second Skins*, Prosser explores the issue of gender dysphoria in *The Well*, but Prosser doesn't see Stephen as a "mannish lesbian" at all. He argues that "*The Well* is not a butch text" and that by reading the novel in a lesbian context Stephen has essentially been misdiagnosed for decades (Prosser 166). The obscenity trial in 1928 was responsible for defining the book as a lesbian novel for the reading public. "*The Well's* trial crucially set in motion its history of being read as a lesbian novel," and the association of lesbianism with the book has intensified over the history of its reception as it transformed from a lesbian novel to *the* lesbian novel (Prosser 136). Prosser contends that lesbian feminist critics, who objected to the book's idealization of heterosexuality and masculinity and found it to be a bad representation of lesbianism, were really responding to the fact that it is an early record of transsexual experience.

Prosser asserts, “transgender has been the subject of criticism all along...transgender is *The Well*’s stumbling block, that which must be ‘worked’ if the novel is to be made sense of as lesbian” (Prosser 136). The plot of the book, which includes Stephen’s childhood identifications as a boy and dissatisfaction with her female body, parallels the modern diagnostic indicator of transsexuality, which is the narrative one must tell in order to receive medical treatment. Prosser claims: “In recasting Hall’s novel as transsexual, we can see that our dogged attempts to read it as lesbian in spite of its narrative have been a case of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole” (Prosser 168). Prosser argues that despite its history of reception, *The Well* should be read as a transsexual narrative and not a lesbian one, but he also suggests that it be read as a case history and not a novel. The book makes explicit references to sexology, a field that relied on examining case histories of individual subjects. According to Prosser, sexological case histories document the medicalization of transgender narratives. These case histories “propelled the transgendered subject-through narrative- toward transsexuality” (Prosser 139). In the novel, Stephen Gordon comes of age, reads the work of sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, and identifies herself as a sexual invert. Stephen applies the medical terminology of her day to her own sexual identity, and this is a critical stage in the development of her sense of self.

Prosser is intent upon fixing Stephen’s identity as a transsexual, even though that is not the terminology used within the novel (which talks only of inversion) and establishing *The Well* as a transsexual cultural artifact. Prosser believes *The Well* is not only *not* a lesbian novel, but “a narrative that itself contributed to the formalization of transsexual subjectivity” (Prosser 141). In *Second Skins*, Prosser quotes Bryan Tully

who asserts, “Autobiographies of those who might have been transsexuals but did not become so, are not usually written” (quoted in Prosser 177). Prosser echoes Tully’s palpable regret that these would-be transsexual autobiographies do not exist. I think this is a key to understanding why Prosser attempts to read *The Well of Loneliness* as an autobiography instead of a novel, and why reading Radclyffe Hall as one in the same with Stephen Gordon helps him support a reading of *The Well* as a “real-life” transsexual narrative.

Reading *The Well of Loneliness* as a factual transsexual narrative does not distinguish between the fictional representation of Stephen Gordon’s life and self-narrated accounts of lived experiences documented in sexological case histories. Reading fiction as historical fact blurs the lines between art and life, and in *Second Skins*, Prosser blurs these boundaries even further by reading Radclyffe Hall synonymously with Stephen Gordon. Prosser uses close reading to identify Stephen Gordon as a transsexual, but he implies that Radclyffe Hall is transsexual as well (without offering any evidence beyond his reading of her novel).

In a striking moment, Hall’s iconic masculine image is invoked to support his transsexual interpretation, without any references to Hall’s own understanding of her embodiment or gender identity. Prosser quotes Gayle Rubin’s “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries” speculating about the “transsexual potential” of lesbians in history: “It is interesting to ponder what...lesbian forbears might be considered transsexuals; if testosterone had been available, some would undoubtedly have seized the opportunity to take it” (quoted in Prosser 167). Although Rubin does not mention Hall or *The Well* specifically, the image that accompanies

Rubin's article is one of Radclyffe Hall in 1936. The photograph provided without any other context is intended to speak for itself. Hall's image divorced from her life history or her writing emblemizes the lesbian forbears who "might be considered transsexuals."

Prosser describes Hall in this photograph as "at her most passing":

profiled unsmiling in suit and tie, one hand straightening her lapel, the other rigidly holding a cigarette, cropped hair slicked back-- Hall appears like an incarnation of this speculation. If the narratives of homosexuality and transsexuality are entwined as Rubin's essay indicates, the writing of transsexual history will surely depend upon performing retroactive readings of figures and texts that have been central to the lesbian and gay canon (167).

According to Prosser, Hall appears like the incarnation of Rubin's speculation that some lesbian women in the past would have transitioned from female to male had hormone treatments been available to them. He describes Hall as "passing" even though she did not attempt to pass as a male in her lifetime. The image shows only her slick haircut and tailored shirt, and not the skirt she traditionally wore underneath her suit jacket. The same images of Hall that were once used to define her as the prototypical butch lesbian are now used to display her as the incarnation of the proto-transsexual. The photograph of Hall that Prosser describes sounds similar to the "hypothetical" one described by Esther Newton: "You see her in old photographs or paintings with legs solidly planted, wearing a top hat and a man's jacket, staring defiantly out of the frame, her hair slicked back or clipped over her ears" (Newton 558). Just as Esther Newton evoked the image of Radclyffe Hall to illustrate her theories of the "mannish lesbian," Prosser uses Hall's face to epitomize the transsexual.

Radclyffe Hall has many things in common with Stephen Gordon (inherited wealth, troubled relationship with her mother, expatriating to Paris, and so on) but they are not one and the same. *The Well of Loneliness* may be interpreted as a story about transsexual experience, but not as an autobiography. In Prosser's reading of what is probably the second most famous and widely read lesbian novel (a novel that explores the blurry line between modern butch lesbian and transgender identity much more explicitly), Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, he argues that the book is autobiography masquerading as fiction. He writes, "As thinly disguised autobiography the fiction *would* then appear to be based on the life- but the life 'disguised' as fiction" (Prosser 191). Prosser's sustained close reading of the novel supports what he calls a transsexual interpretation, but there is no evidence to support that the book is actually an autobiography. The investment in reading fiction as autobiography reflects a desire to see novels as "real" accounts of transsexual and transgender experience, using the author's gender and sexuality to provide authenticity. In the case of Radclyffe Hall, there are many significant differences between the character and the author.

Prosser situates himself as a "transsexual critic recuperating *The Well* as a transsexual novel," but there is a difference between recuperating a novel and a person. In his description of her photograph he also implies Hall is transsexual herself. Clearly Prosser feels the character Stephen Gordon was one of the individuals who would have sought hormone treatment if it had been available to her, but he makes no distinction between Stephen and Hall in this regard. Hall was a historical figure who lived her entire life as a woman with no expressed desire to live as a man. If the writing of transsexual history depends upon "performing retroactive readings of figures and texts that have

been central to the lesbian and gay canon,” there is still a distinction between real-life “figures,” such as Radclyffe Hall, and “texts” such as *The Well of Loneliness*. This distinction must not be erased if readers want to remain true to the text and to the life of its creator. If critics do not want to commit the biographical fallacy (assuming that one can read the author's life from their work and vice versa), they must take great care not to infer that an author shares the same gender and sexual identity as a literary creation. Reconstructing how a historical figure felt about him/herself requires a different methodology and mode of reading than making claims about a novel. Prosser's transsexual interpretation of Stephen Gordon is supported by close reading text, but his reading of Hall is based only on how her image appears to the contemporary viewer (Prosser 166-167).

As we have seen, the figure of Radclyffe Hall can overshadow her writing and influence readings of her work. In her 1998 book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam performs retroactive readings of both Hall as a figure and *The Well of Loneliness* as a text. Like Prosser, Halberstam believes that Stephen Gordon's identity is closer to what we now call transsexual rather than lesbian. But for Halberstam that does not mean Hall would have sought out medical treatment to change her sex. In her personal correspondence Hall identified herself as a sexual invert, and Halberstam asserts, “the invention of the invert rests on the impossibility of sex change” (Halberstam 106). I think this is an important distinction because it points out that the definitive transsexual label applied by Prosser is anachronistic and that it does not correspond with the terminology that Radclyffe Hall and the character Stephen Gordon identify with. By reading the text as a story of a sexual invert rather than translating it into more contemporary conceptual

categories, we are able to learn more about the text within its historical context and the character's self-identification. The category of "congenital invert" encompassed both what we would now define as butch lesbianism, as well as permutations of transsexual or transgender identity. Modern readers can learn about this now obsolete gender/sexual identity from the text, rather than impose current gender and sexual categories onto it. This is useful for Halberstam as she theorizes female masculinity in its different historical permutations.

Because gender affirming surgeries and hormone treatments were not accessible (or even imaginable within the narrative), Halberstam emphasizes how in the novel Stephen constructs her gender identity using her wardrobe and grooming rituals. Even though Stephen's masculine gender is constructed with careful sartorial styling, Halberstam does not see Stephen as an ersatz man. In her reading, the masculine woman is a viable and sufficient subject whose maleness does not need to be corroborated by her naked body. Dressed in a suit and tie, Stephen Gordon embodies an "authentic" masculinity, and no gender-affirming surgeries or hormone treatments are necessary. Halberstam argues that Stephen is fully capable of enacting masculine desire in her female body. Halberstam claims, "nowhere does the narrative even hint at... the inadequacy of Stephen's masculinity" (Halberstam 104).

YOUR JOHN

In the introduction to *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on the Well of Loneliness*, Jay Prosser responds explicitly to Halberstam's disavowal of a transsexual reading of

*The Well*. Here, Prosser (and his co-editor Laura Doan) attribute the radical difference in Halberstam and Prosser's interpretations to the fact that Halberstam incorporates readings of Hall's personal letters to her lover Evguenia Souline into her critique of the novel, whereas Prosser examines the text alone. Hall met Souline in 1934 and they became lovers despite the emotional turmoil it caused both Hall and her long-term partner Una Troubridge. The record of this affair was published in *Your John: The Love Letters of Radclyffe Hall* in 1997, edited by Joanne Glasgow. These writings play a major role in Halberstam's understanding of Hall. Doan and Prosser assert: "That Halberstam's reading derives from Hall's life and letters as much as from the novel, whereas Prosser's derives exclusively from the novel itself perhaps suggests something for the reasons for the differences between these two readings, as well as their charged overlap" (Doan and Prosser 22).

It is notable that Halberstam refers to Radclyffe Hall as John, the name she used in her personal life and correspondence, not the name she used in her published works. Halberstam brings Hall's perceptions of her own gender and sexuality to bear on her interpretation of the character Stephen Gordon. For example, Halberstam refutes Teresa De Lauretis's Freudian reading of the text in which Stephen experiences her female body as "inadequate to bear the subject's desire in the masculine mode," by appealing to Hall's personal letters (quoted in Halberstam 104). In a letter "John" feels proud that she has deflowered her lover Souline stating, "Through me you are no longer a child" (quoted in Halberstam 104). Halberstam responds, "Obviously, in her own life, John did not experience her masculinity as lack," offering Hall's own sentiments as evidence for Stephen's sexual sufficiency (Halberstam 104).

The letters indicate that the author Radclyffe Hall believed she was a viable and competent lover, and she explicitly assures Souline that sexual inversion is “natural.” As Halberstam confidently asserts, “John did not experience her masculinity as lack” (Halberstam 104). But Stephen Gordon is never so self-assured. Even if it is societal pressure that makes Stephen force her lover Mary to leave her for a man, her actions and her tormented thoughts in the final harrowing pages of the text belie Halberstam’s claims that Stephen routinely experiences self-sacrifice as a form of pleasure.

Halberstam uses facts about Hall’s life and her social milieu gathered from biographies and personal correspondence to describe female masculinity and how it functioned in the past. “John” Radclyffe Hall is a recurring heroic figure in *Female Masculinity*. As Halberstam describes her:

Hall was an invert, a masculine woman who used her money and independence to dress in elaborate masculine clothing and moved comfortably within an extensive community of cross-identified women; she seems to have had an aggressive sexual response and took a protective attitude toward her lovers. Hall thought of herself as a man but did not try to pass as one. (110)

In the passage above, Halberstam points out that Hall “moved comfortably within an extensive community of cross-identified women” (Halberstam 110). Stephen Gordon also enjoys money, independence, and an elaborate wardrobe. But that is where the similarities end. Most notably, Stephen is uncomfortable amongst other sexual inverts.

When Stephen visits a gay bar, it is not the sultry butch-femme scene of a Brassai photograph that springs up for the reader, but a seedy den of iniquity. Alec’s is described as the “meeting-place of the most miserable of all those who comprised the

miserable army.” Stephen does not celebrate the alternative culture that springs up among the inverts of Paris; she is averse to the subcultural lives celebrated by contemporary queer scholarship as innovative and viable alternative modes of being. After she meets Natalie Seymore, a character modeled after the notorious salonnière Natalie Clifford Barney, Stephen is troubled to think that Seymore only likes her because of her gender and sexual difference. As Winterson said of Hall, even though they are both lesbians, Stephen feels they “have nothing in common.” Stephen does not want to be likened to other sexual outcasts and is tormented by the ominous refrain “like to like” when she is in their company. Stephen never feels more like a social pariah than when she is frequenting the gay bars of Paris. Associating with other inverts does not give her a sense of shared community, but of hopelessness that she will ever be able to fit seamlessly into the normal social world. Straining to fit in with the eccentric lesbian coterie on the Left Bank, she lacks the ease of her days of country living. All she wants are “the simple things that so easily come to those who are normal.” Although it is the urbane Noël Coward character Jonathan Brockett who provides her introduction to Paris, she idolizes the masculine and heterosexual Martin Hallam. We are told, “with this normal man she was far more at ease than with Jonathan Brockett, far more at one with all his ideas, and at times far less conscious of her own inversion.” Brockett’s femininity is unsettling for Stephen because it calls attention to her own sexual difference. She prefers the company of Martin, “the kindly, the thoroughly normal.” In the end Stephen is convinced that Mary should marry Martin so that she can live a heteronormative life.

Stephen Gordon is an unlikely hero for someone as edgy and anti-normative as Halberstam (given Halberstam's celebration of subcultural lives in *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2005; reframing of queer failure in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011; and rejection of gay marriage in *Gaga Feminism*, 2012). Stephen is a character deeply invested in mainstream values. Her primary desire is to be normal. From the outset we are told that Stephen's love for her family home Morton is wrapped up with "her curious craving for the normal." In Hall's letters to Souline she asserts that her love is "normal," but Stephen projects onto Mary her own fears of inadequacy. In these moments she is "seized with a kind of sick apprehension, a sick misery at her own powerlessness to provide a more normal and complete existence." Although Stephen can provide emotionally, physically, and financially for Mary, she cannot legally marry her or impregnate her, and so she does *feel* insufficient. Stephen's "inherent respect of the normal" is one of her defining characteristics. Hall's polemical writing in *The Well of Loneliness* is a plea for social acceptance, and it serves her purpose that her protagonist prizes normality above all else. Stephen wants to fit into society and no longer be a pariah. We know that Stephen wishes she could marry her lover and provide her with children; her valuation of heteronormativity is so high that she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness so as not to deprive Mary of a "normal" life. Unlike contemporary queer theorists such as Halberstam, who champion a queer "way of life" including "subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment" and other "willfully eccentric modes of being," Stephen does not celebrate the odd, the queer, the revolutionary, and seek to disrupt the status quo (Halberstam 1).

Critic Heather Love challenges Halberstam's reading of Hall and *The Well of*

*Loneliness in Female Masculinity*, claiming that “Halberstam’s desire to affirm the possibility of a successful and satisfying female masculinity draws attention away from Stephen’s affective and corporeal experience” (Love 118). Love makes a larger claim that Stephen’s negative affect is even harder for critics to reconcile than her masculinity. Lesbian feminists in particular have struggled with Stephen’s overwhelming sadness because she represents so much of what they hope to overcome, such as assumptions that all lesbians wish they were men, or all gay people are doomed to lead unfulfilling lives. Love points out that even those who embrace *The Well* do not engage with its more troubling elements. She argues: “Only critics who have attempted to ‘retool’ the pathos of Hall’s novel-- to coat its bitterness with a campier, kitschier, and more ironic sensibility-- have more fully embraced *The Well* as an essential and valuable text in lesbian history” (Love 117).

It is notable that Love’s 2009 book *Feeling Backward* does not include any reference to Hall’s personal life or letters and the critic close reads the novel alone. This approach is consistent with the theory Love advances in her book, that texts help us to “feel backward,” making it irrelevant whether or not they are “true” stories, or reflect the sentiments of the author. The book chapter “Spoiled Identity: Radclyffe Hall’s Unwanted Being” begins with an epigraph from Hall’s personal letters:

I sometimes have a queer feeling. I think: ‘Something very like this has happened before.’ The nasty things must not be repeated though. – Radclyffe Hall to Evgenia Souline, 30 July 1937. (Love 100)

But that is the only place the personal letters are mentioned. Love focuses primarily on Stephen and *The Well* throughout the chapter. Without the manifold comparisons to

Radclyffe Hall, this reading is stronger and more sustainable than Love's approach in her own earlier article. Here Love creates empathy for the character herself, without using Stephen as an avatar for Hall's real-life suffering. Love makes *The Well of Loneliness* politically relevant to contemporary queers by showing emotional resonances between Stephen and modern day lesbians and queers experiencing shame and sadness. She also demonstrates how the text can disrupt utopian views of gay pride and overarching progress narratives in mainstream gay rights movements. What I take from Love's reading in *Feeling Backward* counters the widespread expectation that Hall's text should be instructive or self-affirming. Hall should not bear the burden of future generations looking for positive role models in the queer past. While there is no moral imperative to like Stephen Gordon, Radclyffe Hall, or *The Well of Loneliness*, we can still value the book's historical significance and learn from its polarizing role in feminist, lesbian, and queer literary criticism.

## WELL WISHERS

In a 2010 photograph by Paolo Roversi, Tilda Swinton appears dressed in a grey three-piece suit, black bowtie and an oversized coat with fur lapels. Her hair is slicked back as she stares boldly out of the image directly at the viewer. A grey dog lies at her feet, completing the scene of the perfect English gentle(wo)man at home. In other words, Swinton appears in full Radclyffe Hall regalia. Hall was a dog breeder as well as a fashion enthusiast. A caption reads "Tilda Swinton as Radclyffe Hall." This image is not a literal representation of Hall, but a contemporary reconstruction. Hall has become the

archetype of a refined and well-tailored butch. The photograph demonstrates what Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag.” Freeman defines temporal drag as the embodiment of an anachronism. When contemporary models of gender and sexuality do not quite fit, we feel the visceral pull of the past on the present. This kind of drag is not only performative and citational, but also physical and erotic (Freeman 93). The photograph shows how Hall’s iconic image endures and continues to inspire contemporary gender non-conformists. This staged photograph of Swinton seems to portray the same sexy self-assured Hall that Judith Halberstam presents in *Female Masculinity*. Judith “Jack” Halberstam embodies a similar retro butch swagger in a black and white photo by artist Del LaGrace Volcano taken in 1997, chin upturned with pride, adjusting a necktie with one hand covered in rings.<sup>28</sup> When we look at a photograph of Radclyffe Hall, elegantly dressed in a smoking jacket, bowtie, and holding a cigarette casually between her fingers, we see the very embodiment of female masculinity. This image was once used to strike fear in the British public, accompanying a sensationalist screed denouncing *The Well of Loneliness* for promoting female homosexuality. This image once alienated the woman-identified-woman who could not see herself in Hall’s swagger. But now her image evokes more positive associations, as we have seen in the image of Swinton, and the book by Halberstam who both seem to identify with Hall’s refined masculine self-presentation.

Most contemporary queers know little of Radclyffe Hall’s actual biography, including her controlling attitude toward her female partners, her anti-Semitism, and her extreme religious conservatism. Just as modern readers looking to *The Well* for a

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<sup>28</sup> See Judith “Jack” Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano, *The Drag King Book*. Serpent’s Tale. 1999. Print.

lesbian love story might feel let down, those who do their research on Radclyffe Hall are likely to find her lacking as a queer role model. The criticism of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* shows us how easy it is for scholars of gender and sexuality to begin reading Hall instead of her novel, especially since they might not care for the novel all that much. In this body of criticism we see a striking example of how the image of an author can influence readings of her text, and we have the opportunity to differentiate between the critical approach we take towards reconstructing the life of a historical figure, and interpreting a literary text. If we read the novel on its own terms we might feel more pathos for Stephen, and see her in a new light outside out of the shadow cast by her author.

The way we can interpret literary texts is not the same way we can make claims about historical figures, their lives, and identifications. Examining the critical reception of *The Well of Loneliness* tells us much more about the changing conceptual categories surrounding gender and sexuality over the past thirty years (from lesbian, to butch, to transsexual, to transmasculine, and so on) than it does about the novel itself.<sup>29</sup> Much of the controversy surrounding *The Well* results from the conflation of art and life, author and text. When we read Stephen's story as a novel not a case history, then Stephen can be a "congenital invert" as she defines herself, as well as a fictional character, and not a stand-in for the author. It is valuable to return not to the well of loneliness itself, but to the wellspring of commentary and the fount of controversy that have sprung up around it. If we take a fresh look into the waters of this well we must not

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<sup>29</sup> For an analysis of the changing image of *The Well* across its publication history see Michèle Aina Barale's critique of the covers of various editions of Hall's novel in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge. 1991. 235-258. Print.

expect to see the reassuring image of our own face looking back at us, or the striking image of Hall herself, but something far murkier, and something reflective of the complexities and contradictions of queer life. Surveying the history of criticism surrounding the book draws our attention to some of the most contentious and evocative debates in feminist, lesbian, and queer studies such as what methods and frameworks to use when approaching queer history and reading queer texts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Virginia Woolf's Queer Theory of the Author

"I must not settle into a figure" --Virginia Woolf (*D4* 85)

Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* were both published in 1928 and each book takes a radically different approach to depicting characters with non-normative experiences of gender identity. The trial of Radclyffe Hall is often offered as historical evidence that Virginia Woolf was writing under the threat of censorship. Hall's book had overt lesbian content and was prosecuted for obscenity, whereas Woolf's more subtle Sapphic satire slipped by the censors. In a lesbian reading of Woolf's style, Leslie K. Hankins describes how Woolf "plays an elaborate game of hide and seek with the reader and censor" and suggests love and eroticism between women through "coded lesbian signatures" (181). When critics such as Hankins perceive Woolf's work to be coded, they are compelled to crack it wide open. The sense that Woolf was forced to suppress her lesbian content results in the "decoding" approach to interpretation, motivated by the desire to free the lesbian hidden in the text. However, being suggestive about lesbian possibilities in *Orlando* instead of being literal allows Woolf to achieve a greater variety of artistic effects. As Jodie Medd argues in *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (2012), the *suggestion* of lesbianism allows the book to be about more than just lesbianism and "to serve Woolf's agenda of cultural critique, literary critique, and narrative experimentation" (178). Such an

approach enables the critic to read *Orlando* as more than a sanitized version of *The Well*, and to acknowledge the complexities of Woolf's formal sophistication, as well as her literary and political agenda. There is no doubt Hall's novel offended Woolf's highbrow literary sensibilities; in a letter she called it "that Well of all that's stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other" (L3 555). *The Well of Loneliness* also violated Woolf's aesthetic philosophy. As Woolf stresses in the essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," a work of art must be "complete in itself" and "self-contained" (12). Hall's novel was politically motivated, the narrative a thinly veiled plea for social acceptance. "Hall's middlebrow sauntering between art and life" is in direct opposition to Woolf's ideal of aesthetic autonomy; *The Well* epitomizes the type of autobiographical and polemical writing Woolf outspokenly opposed (Medd 166).<sup>30</sup>

For Woolf, the linkage between art and life is so delicate and slight that it may be "scarcely perceptible" (AROO 50). As she claims in *A Room of One's Own*, fiction "is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly...to life at all four corners" (AROO 50). A spider's web is meticulously constructed, yet incredibly fragile, and if one leans too heavily on the points where the web connects the entire creation will come apart. Placing too great an emphasis on the ways Woolf's fiction is concretely connected to her life and sexual experiences threatens to dismantle the delicate web of fiction she

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<sup>30</sup> See Woolf's essay, "Middlebrow" written in 1932. Woolf uses this very language to discuss the middlebrow, referring to them as "the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige" (*Collected Essays* Vol. 2, p. 199). For criticism on Woolf's concept of the middlebrow and the middlebrow in general, see Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, The Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, and Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*.

labored to create.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the authors that receive Woolf's highest praise in *A Room of One's Own*, Jane Austen and Emily Brontë, have only minimal biographies and readers know very little about their personal lives. This lack of biographical information forces a reader to focus on the fiction, rather than on the woman herself.

Despite Woolf's aversion to biographical criticism and her expressed caution about stressing the connection between art and life, scholarship on Virginia Woolf is strikingly biographical in nature. Surveying the state of Woolf studies in the early 1990s, critic John Mepham claimed: "More than in the case of any other writer, it is impossible to keep the literary analysis of Virginia Woolf's fiction separate from the study and interpretation of her life" (3). Throughout Woolf criticism, the interpretation and study of Woolf's life is almost inseparable from the study of her fiction. Although it is common critical practice to analyze the interrelations between an author's biography and their art, biographical readings dominate feminist and lesbian criticism of Woolf. Virginia Woolf is one of the figures most closely associated with academic feminism, but in their fixation with Woolf as a woman, some feminist literary critics have treated her fiction as a mask that must be stripped away to reveal the truth of her life. As Toril Moi has argued, feminists—particularly those associated with Elaine Showalter's gynocritical approach—praise Woolf "on grounds that seem to exclude her fiction" (18). This is problematic

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<sup>31</sup> For Woolf's views on the "I" when writing essays, see "Montaigne" and her writing about Max Beerbohm in "The Modern Essay," both of which are in *The Common Reader 1*. The conclusion she comes to in these essays is that while the essay is an expression of personal opinion—she says in "The Decay of Essay Writing" that "essays always begin with a capital I—I think, I feel" (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf* Vol. 1, p. 25)—the writing subject or narrator should never be the author plain and simple. One must invent a writing subject and position that subject in a way that represents the argument rather than in a way that represents the mere opinions of the author. It is for this reason that Woolf is so careful about positioning the narrators in her essays, for example in the opening of *AROOO*.

because Woolf's fiction was not simply a veiled representation of her life, but her life's work.

This chapter explores the integral role that biographical interpretation has played in feminist literary criticism of Virginia Woolf from the 1970s to the present, and how recent queer criticism of Woolf takes a different approach. The biographical feminist and lesbian criticism of Woolf written in the 1970s and 1980s is tied to a deep investment in identity, the very kind of sexual identity queer critics have historically sought to trouble and undermine. I will transition from a discussion of how queer readings of Woolf reject the use of biography that has been so dominant in feminist and lesbian criticism, into an analysis of how these queer readings align with Woolf's own critique of biographical criticism in literary studies, and how Woolf practices a queer form of author criticism in her fictionalized literary biographies *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933).

## THE PREVALENCE OF BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM IN WOOLF STUDIES

Since the 1970s, Anglo-American feminist criticism focused on the female literary tradition has been openly biographical in its approach (Showalter 248). In her article "Biographical Criticism and the 'Great' Women of Letters," Alison Booth maintains, "criticism of women's writings has been almost invariably biographical" (86). Studying the lives of women writers has allowed feminists to address the particular historical challenges facing female authors and to contradict abiding theories of aesthetics that have historically devalued the feminine (Booth 89). For feminist literary critics, analyzing women's writing has meant more than critiquing literary effects, because texts by female

authors register the experiences of historical women. Sharon O'Brien argues that "Women's lives have been erased, unrecorded, or represented by patriarchal stories, and biography can be a powerful means for reinscribing women in history" (qtd. in Epstein 5). Writing women's lives has become a central critical project of feminist scholarship. But this interest in women's lives suggests a move away from the study of an author's text and toward the study of the author herself. In *Writing A Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun explains that for feminist scholars, "the consensus about the author's relation to her work... has changed....[B]ecause of our experience with the new narratives of women's lives, our interest in the life has sharpened" (29). As feminist scholars have worked to include the narratives of women's lives in the dominant view of history, they have focused more on the biographical lives of women writers and less on the fictional narratives those women created.

Throughout the 1970s, interest in Virginia Woolf's life grew in proportion with this interest in the lives of female writers. At the time, the leading authority on Woolf's life was her nephew Quentin Bell. Bell had access to a trove of family archives, which he used to compose his 1972 book, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*. Bell recognizes that some readers might be turning to his text to gain a greater understanding of Woolf's literature, but he claims his book is factual and historical, and not a piece of literary criticism. In his Foreword Bell writes, "although I hope that I may assist those who attempt to explain and to assess the writing of Virginia Woolf, I can do so only by presenting facts which hitherto have not been generally known.... In no other way can I contribute to literary criticism" (xv). Inevitably, there are moments when Bell's biography

discusses how Woolf's life informed her writing, and in these moments Bell suggests particular interpretations of her work.

Bell's biography sparked a feminist backlash from readers who were not satisfied with his version of events. Writing in 1975, Elaine Showalter described this feminist dissatisfaction with Bell's account: "A number of primary questions of biographical fact and interpretation generated in the substantial and passionate debate over Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* have yet to be resolved, owing to the tight control Woolf's executors maintain over the publication of manuscript source material" ("Literary Criticism" 439). Writers in the *Virginia Woolf Quarterly* and *Commentary* took issue with the biography's characterization of Woolf's mental illnesses and her personal relationships with her husband Leonard and her sister Vanessa Bell.<sup>32</sup> The controversy over the biography centered not just on Bell's exclusive access to Woolf's archives, but also on the different interpretations of Woolf that arise from conflicting critical impulses. Bell had a vested interest in portraying his family in a positive light (Lee 102). Feminists had their own investment in casting Woolf as the mother of 1970s feminism.

Throughout the 1970s more biographical materials became available to scholars and to the reading public. Beginning in 1975 editors Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann published six volumes of Woolf's letters in six years.<sup>33</sup> As Ellen Moers noted in her *New York Times* review, in their running editorial commentary Nicolson and Trautmann discuss their subject's life but "are relatively uninterested in Virginia Woolf's actual accomplishment as a writer" (nytimes.com). The letters heightened public

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<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Henig, "Quentin Bell," *Virginia Woolf Quarterly* 1 (Winter 1973): 55-69; and Cynthia Ozick, "Mrs. Virginia Woolf," *Commentary* 56 (August 1973): 33-44.

<sup>33</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. 6 vols. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975-1980.

interest in Woolf as a woman, more than as a novelist or critic. That interest was further fuelled when the five published volumes of Woolf's diaries appeared between 1977 and 1984, giving readers an even more personal glimpse into her life and mind<sup>34</sup>. One of the effects, according to Showalter, was a strong sense of personal attachment that female readers were able to feel in relation to these primary source materials, which enables them to imagine a closer relationship to Woolf herself than they could get from the mediated rendering in Bell's biography:

At the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library...the room is filled day after day with women scholars from all over the world, each one raptly reading a volume of Woolf's unmistakable Florentine-paper-covered manuscript diary, each one locked into an encounter both intimate and collective, smiling a private smile over a joke between Virginia and herself. ("Literary Criticism" 439)

Showalter's description of feminists researching in the library suggests these women felt a familiar and emotional connection with "Virginia." Since this experience was at once "intimate and collective," Showalter also captures how feminist scholars connected with one another, united by their affinity for Woolf.<sup>35</sup>

Biographical criticism became central to Woolf scholarship as feminist scholars worked extensively with the letters and diaries. This work created a new dominant vision of Woolf that corresponded with the scholars' own identities, just as Bell's vision of Woolf corresponded with his identity as her nephew. The primary sources represented a

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<sup>34</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. 5 vols. New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-1984.

<sup>35</sup> We might compare this description with Woolf's writing in "Hours in a Library," (*Collected Essays*). Woolf suggests that reading with a plan or a specific goal in mind limits what we take from the texts. Biography presents similar limitations to interpretation in my argument.

new archive, suddenly made accessible and meaningful given the civil rights movement that was affecting women, including academics who found themselves in situations not all that dissimilar to Woolf: fairly well-off, educated beyond levels their mothers had been, primarily heterosexual, in a marriage, working, etc. As a result of such research, 1970s feminist literary criticism of Woolf highlighted her insights into female experience and gender inequities by exploring her depictions of domesticity and married life.

In the 1980s a subset of feminist critics began focusing specifically on lesbian themes in Woolf's life and work. This proliferation of lesbian readings also reacted against Quentin Bell's biography. Although Bell's biographical account included Woolf's homoerotic relationships with women before her marriage to Leonard Woolf and her passionate attachment to Vita Sackville-West in the 1920s, Bell downplayed the importance of same-sex relationships, and sexuality in general, to Woolf's life. Despite his assurances in the Foreword that he would only provide factual information and not literary interpretation, Bell's discussion of *Orlando* is highly subjective. He begins by stating, "*Orlando*, of all Virginia's novels [is] the one that comes nearest to sexual, or rather to homosexual feeling" (Bell 118). But he goes on to undermine these strains of homo/sexuality, by describing Orlando as an idealized creation, a product of Woolf's romantic nature. Bell insists that it was not sexual attraction that drew Woolf to Sackville-West, and that lust is not the undercurrent running through *Orlando*:

There may have been...some caressing, some bedding together. But whatever may have occurred between them of this nature, I doubt very much whether it was of a kind to excite Virginia or to satisfy Vita. As far as Virginia's life is

concerned the point is of no great importance; what was...important was the extent to which she was emotionally involved. (119)

Perhaps Bell was concerned readers would take a prurient interest in the sexual encounters between his aunt and her female lover and preemptively described their physical relationship as chaste to the point of sounding dull. It is unclear how he could be so sure their love life did not “excite Virginia or satisfy Vita.” And it is even more puzzling why he specifies that this point is of no importance after he himself introduces it.

Bell’s biography depicts Woolf as a sensitive artist, but not as a passionate woman. Indeed, immediately following his reading of *Orlando* in which he acknowledges that the titular character was inspired by Vita Sackville-West, Bell argues that despite her obvious infatuation with Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf still preferred her husband Leonard Woolf. “The reason, I think, is clear,” he states bluntly. “She admired Leonard in a way that she could never admire Vita; she was not insensible to physical perfections and moral qualities but she could not really love without feeling that she was in the presence of a superior intellect” (119). In stressing that Woolf’s connection with her husband is a heady intellectual one, he also seems to imply that “superior intellect” belongs only to men. It is also interesting that Bell seems determined to take the element of sex out of Woolf’s relationships with both men and women, privileging the mind to the near-erasure of the body and of bodily desire.

Lesbian critics helped to break down this “sexless” depiction of Woolf by foregrounding her relationships with other women. They saw themselves as “correcting” the cultural perception of Virginia Woolf as asexual, which Bell perpetuated, by

highlighting the lesbian eroticism in her texts, especially *Orlando* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Blanche Wiesen Cook's 1979 essay, "'Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition" was the first full-scale feminist critique of the heteronormative trivializing of Woolf's same-sex desire. Cook calls out Bell specifically, and formal literary and intellectual traditions more generally, for minimizing and erasing women's friendships, networks, and lesbian relationships from the historical record, and she relies heavily on documentary evidence from Woolf's diaries and letters to support her claims. Cook argues that personal writings are actually the key to interpreting Woolf's literary works. For example, she states that "Orlando, the timeless androgynous changeling was in fact Vita Sackville-West" (719). She suggests that women read Woolf's letters to find proof of her lesbianism, and to use them to interpret *Orlando*. Citing Vita Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicolson who called *Orlando* "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," Cook also reads *Orlando* as an elaborate love letter.<sup>36</sup>

Reading *Orlando* biographically alongside Woolf's letters helps Cook claim Virginia Woolf as a foremother of lesbian feminism, which Cook sees as having a positive impact on the women of her generation who seek historical models of women-loving-women. Cook advises that "feminists may want to read every newly available letter and journal entry to decide for themselves such questions as whether or not Woolf was an elitist aristocrat or a socialist, asexual or woman loving" (726). In other words, readers may turn to the letters and journals in order to claim Woolf definitively as one of their own. And indeed, critics looking for the "woman loving" Woolf began to focus more

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<sup>36</sup> The love letters of Woolf and Sackville West were turned into a play "Vita & Virginia" by Eileen Atkins.

intently on the letters written between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. In her 1982 article “Lighting the Cave: The Relationship Between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf,” Louise DeSalvo analyzed the correspondence between the two women, arguing for the profound impact their love had on both women’s writing. Sackville-West’s influence has continued to be a major critical focus in lesbian scholarship, including Sherron E. Knopp’s 1988 article, “If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?: Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.” Once again, Knopp begins her essay by referencing Nigel Nicolson’s claim that *Orlando* is the “most charming love letter in literature.” She then reads *Orlando* alongside Sackville-West and Woolf’s letters, approaching the book as another form of correspondence between them (rather than a “biography” as its subtitle suggests, or as a work of fiction). One of Woolf’s most vocal lesbian critics, Patricia Cramer employs the same methodology. In her introduction to *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* Cramer claims that in Woolf’s letters “we find more explicit evidence than in the novels of the inspirational role of lesbian love for Woolf’s writing practices” (121). Cramer summarizes the lesbian feminist position:

many readers, influenced by Quentin Bell’s biography and by stereotypes about what constitutes the sexual, miss the articulations of lesbian desire that permeate the novels. External censorship- not personal inhibition- is the primary cause for Woolf’s circumspect treatment of lesbian themes in her writing. (120)

In their resistance to Quentin Bell’s depiction of Woolf, and to social norms that overlook lesbian modes of expressing desire, such contemporary lesbian critics situate themselves as combating censorship and liberating lesbian themes. Freeing the lesbian

in Woolf's writing is, of course, an important political project at a time when discussions of gay rights become largely focused on homosexual visibility. But Cramer makes an interpretive leap when she assures the reader that Woolf had no personal aversion to explicit lesbian content, and that she would have included more had she been writing under different cultural and historical circumstances.

Reading in accordance with Woolf's expressed principles would necessitate seeing the novel as an autonomous creation, but feminist critics of Woolf have continued to read Woolf's characters as stand-ins for historical figures, and her plots as veiled autobiography. In "Notes From the Underground: Lesbian Ritual in the Writings of Virginia Woolf," Patricia Cramer argued that *Mrs. Dalloway* is a coming out story inspired by Woolf's relationship with Sackville-West: "Written during the early stages of their love affair, *Mrs. Dalloway* records the emotional reorientation and joy of Woolf's coming out experience" (179). Cramer quotes a passage from Sackville -West's 1928 diary in which the two women discuss Woolf's romantic history: "Virginia told me the history of her early loves--Madge Symonds who is Sally in *Mrs. Dalloway*" (quoted in Cramer 179). Cramer says "I like to think of Virginia and Vita alone in Paris engaged in this favorite lesbian ritual: disclosing...the story of coming out" (179). Like many feminist readers, Cramer calls the women by their familiar given names "Virginia and Vita." She takes pleasure in imagining this intimate scene between the women. She treats *Mrs. Dalloway* as "a record of her [Woolf's] coming out experience." Thus the novel is approached in the same way as the diary would be, with Clarissa directly expressing Woolf's own feelings about sexuality.

Cramer's reading perpetuates the idea that Woolf's biographical writings are the key to the sexual cipher encoded in her novels. Indeed, much of the scholarship anthologized in the first book devoted to Woolf's lesbianism, *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, published in 1997 and co-edited by Cramer and Barrett, takes this biographical approach. Barrett argues for the ongoing importance of biographical criticism in making visible that which is "ignored, glossed over, explained away--that is lesbianism" (Barrett 204), and her investment in "revealing" the author's sexuality to counteract the historical erasure of lesbianism informs her interpretation of Woolf's writing. For example, in her essay "Unmasking Lesbian Passion," Barrett describes the sensual floral imagery of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a "language that reverberates with Woolf's passion for Madge Symonds" (152). Similarly, in "Outing Mrs. Ramsay: Reading the Lesbian Subtext in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," Donna Risolo writes that "Mrs. Ramsay is associated with flowers, imagery Woolf consistently used to express female sexuality and lesbian desire[...]. Most specific of all the images is the 'folds, purplish and soft,' which is unmistakably a reference to female genitalia" (245). Risolo cites Cramer's piece of biographical criticism "Notes from Underground" as evidence to support her lesbian reading, which explicitly outs both Mrs. Ramsay and, by extension, Woolf herself. The critics' desire to definitively "unmask" and "out" the lesbian implications of Woolf's *oeuvre* are remarkably literal, stripping Woolf's texts of their complex symbolism and using correlations between biography and fiction as justification for doing so.

One of the most strikingly visible attempts to view lesbian desire in Woolf's work as explicitly autobiographical took place at the fourth Annual International Conference

on Virginia Woolf. The event followed the 1992 release of Sally Potter's film adaptation of *Orlando*. Leslie K. Hankins gave a presentation in which she claimed the film minimizes the lesbian subtext latent in the book: "If the book is subtly but pervasively lesbian the film is not" (175). To counteract the "erasure of the lesbian narrative," she described her project as an attempt to "re-Woolf" Potter's version by literally inserting Virginia Woolf into the film's poster image (Hankins 180). That poster features an image of Tilda Swinton as Orlando and Billy Zane as Shelmerdine lying naked in bed together amidst amorously rumpled sheets. Their arms entwined, Zane's face is turned toward Swinton's, his eyes closed, while Swinton gazes forward, staring directly at the viewer. In Hankins's altered version of the image, Vita Sackville-West's face covers Billy Zane's. West nuzzles up to her lover Orlando, who is now Virginia Woolf. An image of Woolf's face appears where Tilda Swinton's used to be. The formerly heterosexual image now shows two women in a post-coital embrace. At the same time we see the character Orlando as the author herself. By altering the film poster Hankins imposes her own biographical lesbian reading onto the text, significantly altering Woolf's vision. In the original printing of *Orlando*, Woolf included photographs of Vita Sackville-West posing above the captions "Orlando on her return to England" and "Orlando at the present time." In Hankins's image, Vita is recast, not as Orlando but as Shelmerdine. Orlando appears to be Virginia Woolf, although Woolf never identified herself with Orlando. Woolf did not include a picture of herself when she published *Orlando*. This is an example of what happens when readers are so invested in the love story of "Vita and Virginia" that it is all they see when reading the story of Orlando. When Hankins wants to restore the lesbian sexuality to the story of *Orlando*, she literally superimposes Woolf

and Sackville-West onto it, providing a visual representation of what I identify as a common critical practice. When scholars want to read *Orlando* as a lesbian novel, they read it biographically as the story of “Vita and Virginia.” When they try to locate Virginia Woolf’s sexuality in the story, they read the fictional protagonist as the avatar of the author herself.

## THE QUEER WOOLF

Scholars seeking to expose the lesbian in Woolf’s texts rely on a similar set of critical sources and similar assumptions about the relation between author and text, sexuality, and representation. As I have illustrated, much of the lesbian criticism of Woolf takes for granted that art is an expression of personal identity, and that literary works directly reflect the biography and psychology of the author. Such “psycho-biography” draws evidence from Woolf’s life, letters, and diaries to discern and elucidate lesbian moments in her texts” (Roof 93). As Judith Roof argues, “Even when the author plays with history, as Woolf does in *Orlando*, the assumption is that this playing is made necessary by an oppressive culture that restricts Woolf’s free expression of her biographical truth--her love for Vita Sackville-West” (95). Criticism that is invested in gleaning biographical truths from fiction can overlook the significance of literary strategies and their effects. At a panel entitled “New Applications of Queer Theory” in 2000, Roof proposed that queer scholarship might complicate the notion perpetuated by lesbian critics that fiction is merely a smokescreen for material facts. Queer readings of Woolf from 2000 to the present differ methodologically from earlier lesbian interpretations in that they do not

simply claim that Woolf is queer instead of lesbian. Contemporary queer critics do not rely primarily on biographical criticism of Woolf's texts, but instead focus on her critiques of normativity. In *Queering the Moderns*, Anne Herrmann clarifies that "The point is not that Woolf is queer, but that she queers things in a way that is no longer familiar to us" (4). The queer readings of Woolf I discuss in this chapter are based on close reading rather than biographical criticism, an approach that draws attention to Woolf's own critiques of the author biography and its place in literary criticism

One of the earliest queer readings in Woolf studies appears in a 1997 essay by Stephen Barber in the collection *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. A distinguishing feature of his essay "Lip-Reading: Woolf's Secret Encounters," is that Barber does not read biographically. He is not interested in what Woolf was "really" like, but rather in "her stylized selves, these masks, her fictions" (401). By emphasizing Woolf's fictional creations, he honors the aesthetic theory outlined in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" with its emphasis on conveying character. Barber cautions against the impulse lesbian critics have traditionally had to "out" Woolf: "Neither are her masks to be glossed as merely so many dissimulations by a closeted lesbian" (401). For Barber, labelling Woolf a lesbian does not provide the interpretive key to her works, and her fictions do not "hide" a true self that critics must reveal, for, as he points out, "Woolf" only appears to us through her language and literary style. Even the Woolf of the diaries is mediated by writing. In Woolf's hands writing becomes what Barber calls "a queer technology of the self," a way to aestheticize herself and the world. "I am composed," she observes, "nothing is real unless I write it" (qtd. in Barber 402). Woolf's statement foregrounds the performativity of composition. Writing comes into being at the hand of

the author, and at the same time the author is composed through writing. Barber claims the temporal loop of composition is “a ‘moment’ whose timing is queer” (402), and his essay begins to link the work queer critics have done to challenge normativity with the subversion of standard time. He writes, “Queer is doing duty here for a temporal dimension” (438). The argument ends with his claim that “Woolf’s queer work...*is*...a call, which has only to be heard, and whose time is now, and queer” (437). Queer critics have taken up this call and have produced a multitude of new readings exploring how Virginia Woolf has critiqued linear time as well as linear narrative.

For example, queer readings of *Mrs. Dalloway* emphasize the ways in which the novel subverts the traditional narrative of the heteronormative life path, and they do so without recourse to Woolf’s own sexuality. When discussing queer time, critics revisit one of the most frequently referenced passages in lesbian Woolf criticism, the kiss between Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton. Although Clarissa Dalloway outwardly appears to be a typical married woman with a teenage daughter, she prizes this adolescent kiss as the “most exquisite moment of her whole life” (*MD* 30).<sup>37</sup> The kiss does not precipitate Clarissa’s coming out as a lesbian, but that doesn’t mean her lesbian desire is just a phase that she outgrows, which is a common reading. In “Unmasking Lesbian Passion,” Eileen Barrett references the “exquisite moment” of the kiss and claims, “contemporary lesbians would tell her; those exquisite moments...can last a lifetime” (Barrett 162). Her reading of the “moment” is rueful, and one that views Clarissa’s apparently unenduring passion for Sally as a loss of a potentially lifelong sexual identification. In this way, it would seek to stabilize and fix the problem of

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<sup>37</sup> See Kate Haffey, “Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*,” *Narrative*. 18:2. 2010. 137-162.

Clarissa's aberrant desire and the narrative disruption it causes through an appeal to a fixed definition of sexuality itself.

Where lesbian critics seem to fixate on the flowers and flames of this passage, routinely citing them as examples of vaginal and orgasmic imagery inspired by Woolf's lesbian sexuality, queer critics avoid invoking Woolf's own sexual experience through such decoding of imagery, and focus on the persistence of the moment itself. We can see the recurrence of the word "moment" in the passage where the infamous kiss occurs: "Only for a moment; but it was enough....for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over — the moment" (*MD* 28). Focusing on fleeting moments and recurring memories offers an alternative to the traditional mode of recounting a life story.<sup>38</sup> By perpetuating the teleological progress narrative of coming out, lesbian critics prop up a straight sense of time and a coherent sense of identity.

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<sup>38</sup> For more on Woolf's theory of "the moment" see "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*. In it she recounts three moments—a fight with Thoby, a flower in the garden, and news of a suicide—and says of them: "many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive...though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from some enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole...From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no god; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock" (72).

Queer temporality allows for a more complex notion of identity which aligns well with the experimental life narratives innovated by literary modernists such as Woolf.<sup>39</sup>

Woolf's queer temporality connects with her suspicion of biography. In "The Queer Timing of *Orlando*," Melanie Micir argues that by subverting the conventions of traditional biography, Woolf offers an alternative model of a human lifetime. Micir writes, "Biography, as a literary genre, is the gatekeeper *par excellence* of reproductive time, and it is difficult to extract oneself from the normativizing pull of biographical form" (11). Woolf's innovative form of fictionalized biography combines reality and fantasy, which helps her avoid heteronormative tropes of lineage, succession, and generation. The fact that the novel is subtitled "a biography," combined with its satirical self-awareness of biographical conventions, calls generic classification into question, and Suzanne Raitt has argued that "*Orlando* uses the conventional stresses of biography--marriage, death--to question life's and biography's terms" (24). Woolf was openly critical of the genre of biography as a literary form, questioning its ability to capture the complexity of a human life (particularly a woman's). Melanie Micir shows how this literary critique is reflected in Woolf's subversion of generic conventions. Micir's focus on formal aspects of Woolf's text means she does not need to bring in historical or biographical material to support her claims. Like Barber, Micir does not seek direct correspondences between the text and Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West or make specific references to their letters. Close readings of the novels allows these critics to free themselves from pre-existing assumptions about gender, sexuality, identity, and authorship, and thus open up the texts to their own disruption of cultural and social expectations.

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<sup>39</sup> See Woolf's short story of same-sex desire and the suspended or ongoing moment "Slater's Pins Have No Points" for a striking demonstration of queer temporality.

## WOOLF'S CRITIQUE OF BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

In light of Woolf's critical writings, the methods used by critics to "out" Woolf's lesbianism and reveal her fiction as thinly veiled autobiography would offend Woolf's sensibilities as an artist. As Hermione Lee points out, Woolf "sees fiction as a form of life-writing. But she is at pains not to write autobiographical fiction" (*Virginia* 44). I contend that Woolf's assertions about the necessary distance between fiction and autobiography, and her critique of the proper role of the author's biography in literary criticism, have been under-theorized.

The inattention to Woolf's critique of biographical criticism may account in part for the many reductive readings of Woolf's aesthetic philosophy, fiction, and sexuality. The centrality of *Orlando* in such biographical interpretations of Woolf's work cannot be understated. The temptation to read this book biographically stems from the moment of its conception, which was documented in Woolf's diary on 5 October 1927: "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day...Vita; only with a change about from one sex to the other" (D3 161). There is no doubt that Vita Sackville-West provided the inspiration for *Orlando*, and Woolf dedicated the completed manuscript to her. Because of this connection, it is tempting to look for parallels between the protagonist and the muse. For example, the device of *Orlando* changing sexes from male to female could be an attempt to account for the ambiguity of Sackville-West's sexuality. Sackville-West was happily married and raised sons, but at the same time conducted affairs with various women. Both the text's gender play and its basis in Woolf's relationship with Sackville-

West have endeared *Orlando* to lesbian readers and critics. But a fascination with the romantic and sexual affair between Woolf and Sackville-West overshadows their professional and intellectual relationship. As Micir argues, "The possibility that one might now understand *Orlando* as only a love story limits Sackville-West's importance as biographical subject and reduces the formal difficulty of *Orlando* to scarcely more than a set of references to 'the love that dare not speak its name,' which once decoded, becomes unworthy of study except as biographical evidence" (11). In other words, when *Orlando* is read solely as a "love letter," from Virginia to Vita, there is only one possible interpretation of the text, one that takes it out of the realm of fiction. Forefronting Vita Sackville-West's importance as a biographical subject brings new and complex elements of the text to light. For example, the fact that *Orlando* is a literary response to Sackville-West's history of her ancestral home, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, provides opportunities for readings of intertextuality.

As importantly, like Sackville-West, Orlando is a writer, though one who struggles to compose a single poem, his/her magnum opus, "The Oak Tree," for four hundred years. Because Orlando is not just a biography, but an author biography in particular, the novel can be read as a commentary on the relationship between life writing and literary interpretation. Through the fictional account of her life we learn of Orlando's personality and experiences. We follow Orlando's love affairs and travels, and watch her accumulate several lifetimes' worth of experiences that inform the composition of her text, but even though Orlando's identity is bound up with being an author, we never see any of her epic poem "The Oak Tree." Not having access to the text itself means the reader has no idea of the relationship between the action depicted and the content

of the poem. This intentional ambiguity emphasizes Woolf's attitude that though reading about the life of a writer might be entertaining, it does not give us insight into the work that the author has produced.

Woolf's wariness of the public fascination with the lives of female writers is expressed in her 1930 essay on the centenary of poet Christina Rossetti. Woolf writes, "Let us begin with the biography — for what could be more amusing? As everybody knows, the fascination of reading biographies is irresistible" (CE4 54). She concedes that the enduring appeal of the biography as a literary genre is undeniable. But she goes on to describe the experience of reading a biography as an "old illusion":

Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank...as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns ... and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.

Woolf satirizes the meanings and significance that biography attributes to past events according to its vantage point in the present. She is critical of the order and interpretations retroactively imposed by the biographer onto the past. But more than being critical of the ways life is represented in a biography, or the ways we read and interpret the genre, Woolf is critical of the fact that biography is the first place we turn when we want to remember, understand, or honor a writer. Thus, instead of analyzing the poems of Christina Rossetti, people will first turn to Mary F. Sandars's *Life of Christina Rossetti* to mark her centenary; or as Woolf writes, "We shall read her life; we shall read her letters; we shall study her portraits, speculate about her diseases — of

which she had a great variety; and rattle the drawers of her writing-table, which are for the most part empty” (CE4 54). Rattling the drawers of the writing-table searching for fragments of an author’s life sounds hollow and empty, hardly the description of a productive critical enterprise. Of course, Woolf’s critical statement about reading an author’s life—poring over her letters, studying her portraits, and speculating about her diseases—can be applied to the industry that has risen up around Woolf herself: the publishing of her diaries, the interpreting of her letters, the reproducing of her photographs, and the diagnosing of her mental illness. In hindsight, Woolf’s rejection of biographical criticism is ironic, given that it has been such a commonly applied methodology in Woolf Studies for over thirty years.<sup>40</sup>

As Woolf was composing her essay, Christina Rossetti was one of the most highly regarded female writers of the day. In another essay collected in *The Second Common Reader*, Woolf contrasts Rossetti’s lasting fame to a Victorian poet she felt had fallen out of favor. “Aurora Leigh” centers on Woolf’s assertion that Elizabeth Barrett Browning is now remembered only as “Mrs. Browning,” more famous for eloping with her husband than for her literary works. She claims, “fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer,” and that “Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place” (134). Woolf’s argument, however, is that the long poem, *Aurora Leigh*, is a work that “still commands our interest and inspires our respect,” a statement Victorian scholar Marjorie Stone calls “strikingly iconoclastic” (22). Stone points out that Woolf “advanced this assertion in the face of a spate of books (at

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<sup>40</sup> The prevalence of biographical interpretation in Woolf studies is also tied to cultural capital, for example using Woolf to legitimate the fledgling fields of Academic Feminism and then Lesbian Studies. For more on Woolf as cultural capital see Brenda Silver’s *Virginia Woolf: Icon*, U Chicago P, 1999.

least eight between 1928 and 1931--*The Barretts of Wimpole Street* among them) that enshrined EBB as the sentimental heroine of a romance, not the author of one of the most influential English poems of the mid-nineteenth century" (22). The problem Woolf identifies here is that thousands of people recognize Elizabeth and Robert Browning because of their love story, but that the majority of those people have never read a word of their poetry. Woolf attributes this notoriety to the contemporary literary culture industry: "They have become two of the most conspicuous figures in that bright and animated company of authors who, thanks to our modern habit of writing memoirs and printing letters and sitting to be photographed...are known by their hats, not merely their poems" (CR2). The implication is that memoirs, letters, and photographs distract the reading public from an insightful understanding of the author's literary work.<sup>41</sup> For Woolf, it is a grave misfortune if a writer's significance is seen as "merely historical" rather than literary.

Woolf's essay "Aurora Leigh" is more than a piece of literary criticism; it is a critique of common critical practices. Woolf uses Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a warning against biographical reading, especially against conflating the author with her protagonist. Refraining from such a reading can be particularly challenging for the reader in instances when the author has clearly drawn on their own life experiences in the composition of the text. Indeed, Barrett Browning's novel-length poem *Aurora Leigh* is generally considered to be largely autobiographical. But such traits are considered a failing by Woolf: "Through the voice of Aurora the character, the circumstances, the

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<sup>41</sup> Woolf critiques the idea that our image of an author can overshadow their writing. The contemporary lesbians enamored with the black and white portraits of Radclyffe Hall, but not so much with her prose, might be a case in point here.

idiosyncrasies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning ring in our ears. Mrs. Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself, a sign no doubt of imperfection in an artist" (CR2). Charlotte Brontë receives similar opprobrium in Woolf's section on her female precursors from *A Room of One's Own*. As Woolf claims, "She will write of herself where she should write of her characters" (AROO 84). For Woolf, the purpose of fiction is to convey character. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" she writes, "all great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise, they would not be novelists, but poets, historians, or pamphleteers" (11). She argues that everything conveyed in a novel must be channeled through a fictional character, and that the meaning of a book cannot be removed from this fictional context. The significance of a novel is thus contained within the world of the novel, which is "complete in itself; it is self-contained" ("Mr. Bennett" 12). In asserting that the reader should finish the book him- or herself without recourse to research, Woolf's approach to literature is in line with New Criticism: everything is "inside the book, nothing outside" ("Mr. Bennett" 12). Biographical or historical context is not necessary to understand character: the novel itself should provide that context.

But here, Woolf concedes that even the most methodical literary critic cannot always separate life and art. Indeed, although her essay on *Aurora Leigh* is Virginia Woolf's most explicit statement against the practice of biographical criticism, she also admits, "it is impossible for the most austere of critics not sometimes to touch the flesh when his eyes should be fixed upon the page" (CR2 205-6). Woolf's erotic prose makes the biographical fallacy seem alluring, even irresistible. Although she acknowledges that critics may give in to the temptation to reach for the author, rather than keeping eyes

downcast, the ultimate honor for a writer is to have their work considered in its own right. And although it is unique that an author can invest as much or more in the creative as in the personal, she claims that Elizabeth Barrett Browning “was one of those rare writers who risk themselves adventurously and disinterestedly in an imaginative life which is independent of their private lives and demands to be considered apart from their personalities”(CR2 208-9). Surely Woolf herself was one of these writers, regardless of criticism that fails to draw a boundary between her art and her life.

Virginia Woolf’s thinking about Elizabeth Barrett Browning began when she attended Rudolf Besier’s play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* in 1930 and saw its depiction of Barrett Browning as a romantic heroine, rather than a talented writer. But by the time Virginia Woolf wrote her essay in praise of *Aurora Leigh*, two biographical accounts of Woolf herself had been published. When the first, Floris Delattre’s *Le Roman Psychologique de Virginia Woolf* appeared, she warned herself in a diary entry on 24 March 1932, “[t]his is a danger signal. I must not settle into a figure”(D4 85). The publication of *Virginia Woolf* by Winifred Holtby later the same year must also have caused Woolf to wonder what her own literary legacy would be, and if it would be overshadowed by public fascination with her persona and life story, as Barrett Browning’s had been. Certainly, she was discomfited by Holtby’s inclusion of a black and white photographic portrait of the artist as modern readers have come to know her, sitting in a room of her own, gazing into the distance, hair swept back, angular, lithe, and contemplative. Complaining of this candid snapshot taken by Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf wrote, “I am revealed to the world...as a plain dowdy old woman” (qtd. in Briggs 299). Nevertheless, this image of Woolf has become the iconic image of the

female author, despite her own misgivings about how the photograph represented her, and her larger concerns about the havoc the art of photography might wreak upon the reception of literature in general.

Woolf employed novelistic-- not just essayistic-- means in her queer critique of the privileging of the biographical over the literary. Woolf published *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel in 1933. *Flush* satirizes the public fascination with Browning's private life. Telling the story of the dog, rather than the romance, offers a queer reimagining of the author's life narrative, a new perspective not bound up in society's fascination with her marriage and her "happy ending." Woolf had taken issue with the conventional representation of Mr. and Mrs. Browning as "Passionate lovers, in curls and side-whiskers" (CR2 ). Instead of replicating this clichéd image of the two lovers, so alike, she depicts the queer affinity shared by the woman and her dog. Florid verbal descriptions of Flush's ears intentionally mirror the look of Barrett Browning's iconic side curls: "Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them" (*Flush* 22-23). The climactic moment when we finally see the lovers "oppressed, defiant, eloping," is mediated through Flush's own feelings, creating a strange interspecies love triangle: "He was with them...their hopes, their wishes, their desires were his. Flush could have barked in sympathy with Mr. Browning now" (73). The high drama of Flush's feelings parodies the reader's investment in sentimental romance, but ultimately, Flush throws into relief how little the

story of Barrett Browning's domestic life tells us about her creative process, her inner workings, or her art.

*Flush* is a manifestation of the themes outlined by Woolf in "Aurora Leigh," and in particular her suspicion of biographical criticism and her concern for how female writers are remembered and turned into romantic heroines. These same critical themes inform her earlier satirical author biography *Orlando*. Given Woolf's concern that Elizabeth Barrett Browning was becoming more famous for being a character in a real-life literary love story than a great poet in her own right, it is troubling to think of how lesbian critics have idealized the love story of "Vita and Virginia," and how this romantic notion of Woolf's life has colored interpretations of *Orlando*.<sup>42</sup>

Like *Flush*, *Orlando* is cheeky and self-aware about the ways it flaunts the conventions of literary biography.<sup>43</sup> For instance Woolf's Preface includes a mix of scholarly-sounding names--like an Acknowledgements section--alongside mock-serious references to her nephews and niece. The photographs included in the original edition are staged and parodic. Woolf uses these images to draw attention to the artificial reliability of photography. The failure of the photographic portrait to capture reality reflects the failure of biography to recount the complex nature of a person who is so much more than the image they present to the world. The "truthiness" of a traditional biography relies on snapshots and frozen interpretations--so unlike the dynamic nature of lived experience.

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<sup>42</sup> For an extended discussion of how the publication of *Orlando* impacted Woolf's public image see Kathleen M. Helal, "'I Must Not Settle into a Figure': Woolf and Celebrity Culture." *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*. 2002. 11. 8-22. Print.

<sup>43</sup> See also Schabert, "Fictional Biography, Factual Biography, and their Contaminations," *Biography*. 5. 1982. 1-16. Print.

A key example of the commentary on biography embedded in the novel is the brief cameo by the most famous biographer/subject pairing in the history of English letters. For a moment, Boswell and Johnson stand in metonymically for biography as a genre. In this scene, Orlando walks by a coffee house; from her place on the street she can watch the intellectuals conversing inside without being seen herself. As she watches the shadowy figures through the blinds, imagining their dialogue, she is fascinated by the scene. The narrator remarks, "Never was any play so absorbing. She wanted to cry out, Bravo! Bravo! For, to be sure, what a fine drama it was--what a page torn from the thickest volume of human life!" (162). The next moment the lady Orlando realizes that it is Dr. Johnson and Mr. Boswell that she has been observing. In this scene, what goes on between Boswell and Johnson is captivating and entertaining, but purely speculative, because Orlando catches only a glimpse of the figures and has no real access to their words or thoughts. It is a scene that anticipates her argument in "The Art of Biography" (1939), where Woolf addresses the power of biographies to immortalize one person's representation of an individual, and the process through which that representation becomes accepted as truth. Her primary example in the essay is Boswell and Johnson: "Boswell's Johnson is now Dr. Johnson. The other versions will fade and disappear" (189). Not surprisingly, in her "biography" of Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf does not seek to represent Sackville-West using realistic techniques, which might color the public image of Sackville-West as a woman or a writer. Instead, Woolf produces a satirical work of fiction loosely inspired by someone she knew intimately, and respected intellectually.

Rather than conflate fictional characters with living people--*To the Lighthouse* is “about” the death of Woolf’s mother, Orlando is “in fact” Vita Sackville West --Woolf uses the novel as a means to convey meaning through character. Critics who would see her characters as disposable stand-ins for living people are implicitly suggesting that by, her own definition, Woolf is not a novelist, but something else entirely: a diarist, perhaps, or a biographer. Looking for direct correspondences between Virginia Woolf, the historical woman’s life and her fiction undoes the literary effects that Woolf, the author and artist, worked so assiduously to construct.

#### QUEER BIOGRAPHICAL CRITICISM

Virginia Woolf was not only an author, but also a formidable literary critic. In this chapter I have shown how Woolf’s critical writings and two fictionalized author biographies critique the role of author biography in literary interpretation. *Flush*, Woolf’s biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Cocker Spaniel, is rarely discussed through a queer lens, but it effectively queers the author biography by giving us a strange, subversive, and non-heteronormative perspective on the life of a woman writer.<sup>44</sup> The critical framework that emerges from this reading of *Flush* helps us see the satirical and critical elements that are also present in *Orlando*, a text that has been interpreted biographically for years. Readers enamored with the love story of “Vita and Virginia” fail to see that *Orlando* is more than just an account of their relationship, or proof of Woolf’s

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<sup>44</sup> See Kathryn Bond Stockton’s writing on dogs as “companions in queerness” in *The Queer Child*. Durham: Duke UP. 2009. 90. Print.

lesbianism. Reading *Orlando* as a subversive biography opens it up to all new interpretations.

What I am calling Woolf's "Queer Theory of the Author" is based on her irreverent approach to writing author biographies and her critiques of biographical criticism. Even Woolf acknowledges that serious critics will sometimes be tempted "to touch the flesh" rather than focusing solely on literary works. Making this same concession, I do not intend to reject biographical criticism of Woolf outright, nor the rigorous historical and biographical research conducted by earlier feminist and lesbian critics of Woolf. I simply suggest that Woolf's own writings point to a queer method of literary criticism that does not seek to stabilize the author's personal or sexual identity.

The interpretive tactics displayed in the contemporary queer readings I have discussed open up previously unexplored possibilities in Woolf's *oeuvre*. Queer critics are picking up the gauntlet Woolf laid down in the 1930s, approaching life narratives in non-linear ways and engaging with the formulations of non-normative sexuality outlined in Woolf's novels, rather than the personal experiences she describes in her diaries and letters. In this instance, queer readers are not attempting to define and pin down Woolf's sexual identity. I have demonstrated some of the possibilities that open up when queer critics stop reading into the identity of the author, and point to Woolf herself as an early theorist of this queer method. Revisiting Woolf's writings on the role of author biography in literary criticism helps suggest a queer method of literary study that does not look for hard facts supported by biographical evidence, but instead responds to Woolf's call in "The New Biography" that critics should do justice to the "queer amalgamation of dream and reality" that constitutes modern life (*E4* 478).

## EPILOGUE

### Oscar Wilde in the Queer Moment

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.  
Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.

-- Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*

A space ship whirrs down to earth and deposits an anonymous bundle on the doorstep of a darkened home. A subtitle reads "Dublin 1854 birthplace of Oscar Wilde." Buried in the baby's swaddling clothes is an emerald brooch that shines with an otherworldly luster. This is the opening sequence of Todd Haynes's 1998 experimental glam musical *Velvet Goldmine*. The film flashes forward to the young Wilde in school, as he stands up and proclaims, "I want to be a pop idol." This cinematic prologue posits Wilde as glam-rock's progenitor; his descendants inherit his legacy over a century later. Wilde's preternatural style and swagger are bequeathed to the rest of the movie's wanton pop icons as they pass the emerald brooch to one another. Wilde's brooch symbolizes the flagrant display of queer otherness, and how his spirit of iconoclasm, irreverence, and self-creation continues to inspire artists a hundred years after his death. Haynes's script is replete with the queer temporality of anachronism; Wildean phrases flow freely from the painted lips of his androgynous heroes. The decadence of the glam 1970s is traced back to Wilde, whose influence implicitly extends into the 1990s when the film was made. Temporality is queered by the child Oscar's ambition to be a pop idol in the 1900s, and by the modern men parroting Wildean prose. The

concept of family is also queered because in this prologue we see Wilde marooned from the stars, an interplanetary invader, rather than a mere mortal. He is an ethereal orphan who disrupts the very concepts of “home” and “family” from the start; he is not bound by nationalism or filial piety. He is not born, he is self-made and that is the legacy he endows to the queer kindreds that follow him.

As an auteur in the “New Queer Cinema” of the ‘90s it is significant that Haynes evokes Oscar Wilde. In an interview after the release of *Velvet Goldmine* Haynes explained, “this film commemorates Oscar Wilde as the original glam rocker, the one who knew to speak the truth only through the most exquisite of lies”.<sup>45</sup> Haynes calls attention to how Wilde inspired underground gay culture to reject what is considered natural in society. Haynes also celebrates how Wilde paradoxically used “exquisite” lies in order to tell the truth about himself and his culture. In this way, Haynes preserves the power of art to reveal meaningful insights, without attempting to strip away the layers of fiction the artist uses to express himself.

These aesthetic philosophies and cultural critiques are reflected in Haynes’s creative methods. The film *Velvet Goldmine* is largely a fictionalized biography of David Bowie. However, Haynes demonstrates how fiction, fantasy, and allusion can better capture the life of an artist than a linear factual narrative. By invoking Wilde as a mythic figure or informing spirit, Haynes shows how Wilde’s aesthetic philosophies, which criticized stable identity and prioritized art over reality, live on in contemporary queer art production. Haynes displays a queer relation to Wilde as an author, and also applies a queer biographical method to recounting the lives of revolutionary rock stars on screen.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in the official Miramax Films press kit for *Velvet Goldmine*.

## CONCLUSION

### Queer Biographical Criticism

Throughout this dissertation I have suggested ways that queer literary criticism can help us theorize the critical relation to the author in literary studies and new methods of engaging with author biographies in literary interpretation.

I have provided examples of how feminist criticism and gay criticism are both highly biographical and rooted in identity politics. I have also shown that although queer theory claims to undermine identity politics and stable identity categories, queer literary criticism is still invested in the author. This dissertation has argued that we can read the author as a construction of the text, and in this way we do not need to choose between reading the author and the text. We can see the author as something “worked out” in the text, just as we can focus on the erotic images and themes in texts without labeling them as evidence of the author or the characters’ sexual identity.

I have outlined a model of the author from Roland Barthes in which the author lives within his own text, the paradigmatic illustration being Marcel Proust, and I have demonstrated how this type of relation to the author also works with queer figures such as Oscar Wilde and Henry James. The key application of this queer method is Eve Sedgwick’s work on James, which has subsequently influenced James’s afterlife in queer literary criticism. I call literary criticism that attends to the author’s textual body (or corpus), instead of stripping away the fictional or constructed elements of the writing, queer biographical criticism.

Queering the critical relation to the author helps to redefine identity and sexuality, incorporating queer theory's most subversive possibilities for destabilizing notions of the self. The "queerness" of this relation to the author stems in part from the fact that desiring the author is taboo in light of the principles of literary criticism adopted from the New Critics. As critic Vincent Quinn argues:

The author is a fiction we desire, but also one that we must repudiate. And, whatever our critical persuasion, the 'actual' author remains as elusive as the words that the author writes. Just as there can be no definitive textual interpretation, so too can there be no final recognition of the author's aims or identity. (Quinn 78)

Quinn's assertion that the author's identity is never settled, just as the text is never definitively interpreted, echoes Barthes's theories in "The Death of the Author."

By focusing on authors and literary criticism, I have also explicated the relation between eroticism and aesthetics that is specific to queer criticism in the humanities (and not queer theorizing as it is broadly applied across disciplines). I advocate that readers do the hard work of encountering a text in all its particularity (looking at its use of language, syntax, metaphor, imagery, etc.) rather than using sexuality to "decode" the hidden meaning, or biography to provide an answer to what is "really" happening. In this way we can find new and innovative meanings and interpretations in texts such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *De Profundis*, and *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* that have not been illuminated before, even though Wilde's personal sexuality has been discussed at length.

The queer theory of the author developed in this dissertation encompasses not only the critical methods of Barthes, Sedgwick, and those who came after such as Kevin

Ohi, but also the theoretical formulations of modernist writers themselves. For example, the queer theories of biography developed by Virginia Woolf, who believed that one needs both “granite” and “rainbow” in order to tell the story of a life, a comingling of fact with fiction. In *Orlando* and *Flush* Woolf shows how developing a fictional persona can be the best way to convey truth in a narrative. Woolf wrote that every individual contains many selves, and struggled to articulate the multiplicity of identity and experience in her writing. In her diary she remarked “how queer to have so many selves—how bewildering!” (IV.329). Woolf’s theories about biography maintain this sense of earnest bewilderment, and also point to innovative methods of telling life stories. There is not one “truth” of a person; instead there are many variations that can be told from different perspectives.<sup>46</sup>

In each chapter I have attempted to show how literary criticism can attend to the particularities of a text without stripping away the elements of craft that make it a work of art. Throughout this project I have tried to provide a model of criticism that does not make us choose between the author and their work, since I enjoy reading the stories of author’s lives, and I understand the desire to learn more about the authors that we love. Reading the queer author as the implied author, an author who is a construction of the text, lets the critics have it both ways. I hope that this in some way accounts for how the same girl who is compelled by the New Critics’ ideas about the integrity of the text as a standalone work of art, could also be the one who laid lipstick kisses on Oscar Wilde’s grave.

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<sup>46</sup> Director Todd Haynes’ *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *I’m Not There* (2007) are both examples of biographical films that fictionalize narratives of artists’ lives and employ multiple perspectives in order to create a sense of the multiplicity of identities expressed by an individual subject.



Figure 2: Oscar Wilde's tomb, Paris. Personal photograph by author. 2009

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- . *Mrs. Dalloway*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981. Print.
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#### Book Review

Mel Y Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. 2012. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, (In Press).

#### Encyclopedia Entry

“Virago Press.” *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*. Ed. Stephen Ross. Routledge, (In Press).

#### Online Journal Article

“Something Much Dearer: Surpassing Romantic Female Friendship Through the Writings of Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat” in *MP: International Feminist Journal*. Volume 2, Issue 2, July 2008.

### PRESENTATIONS AND CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

#### Invited Talks

"Radclyffe Hall and the Marketing of Lesbian Pulp Fiction," Washington State University Vancouver, October 22, 2015

"Returning to *The Well*: Radclyffe Hall and the Marketing of Lesbian Pulp Fiction," University of Saskatchewan, September 13, 2015

### **Panel Organized**

Queer Theory and the Modernist Author, Modern Languages Association, January 2015

### **Papers Presented**

"Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Anorexia," Modernist Studies Association, November 2015

"Redressing Radclyffe Hall: The Critical Legacy of *The Well of Loneliness*," MLA, January 2015

"Are Queers Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf, June 2014

"Redressing Radclyffe Hall," Midwest Modern Languages Association, November 2013

"Oscar Wilde and Queer Theory," Modernist Studies Association, October 2012

"Wilde's Queer Tutelage," Rice University English Symposium, September 2012

"Proust's Gay Outlaws and Lesbian Spies," The Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, February 2011

"Trouble Ahead: Power, Pleasure, and the Future of Queer Pornography," The Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference, October 2011

"Marcel Proust's Reconnaissance from Sodom and Gomorrah," University of Pennsylvania Graduate Student Conference, September 2010

"At Ease in Stranger Skin: The Reflection of Desire in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*," Points of Exit: (Un)conventional Representations of Age, Parenting, and Sexuality, Maastricht University, The Netherlands, March 2009

"Something Much Dearer: The Writings of Margaret J.M. Sweat," Lewis & Clark College Gender Studies Symposium, March 2008

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## **PROFESSIONAL AND UNIVERSITY SERVICE**

Coordinator of the Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2010-2013

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## **HONORS AND AWARDS**

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