ABSTRACT

CAMP AND CONSOLATION: MODERNIST FEMALE DRAG AS RESISTANT MOURNING IN INTERWAR LITERATURE

by Elise Swinford

This thesis examines the notion of modernist female drag as a means of resisting institutionalized forms of mourning between the First and Second World Wars. By problematizing the Freudian concept of mourning, I explore ways in which non-normative gender performances challenged the forms of mourning available after World War One. Texts considered include Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, as well as the real social drama surrounding the 1917 Maud Allan libel case. At a historical moment when gender roles were in turmoil, the gender performances represented in these texts as well as the social drama of Maud Allan suggest the gaps in normative gender identities that allowed for social and political change.
# Table of Contents

**List of Illustrations** ............................................................... iii

**Introduction** ............................................................... 1

**Chapter 1**  
The Invert, the Bitch, and the Wardrobe:  
Modernist Drag as Mourning in Hemingway and Hall ............... 14

**Chapter 2**  
Subversion, Sapphism, and Sedition:  
The Cult of the Clitoris and Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* ............... 28

**Chapter 3**  
Trans(gendered)formation: *Orlando* as Elegy ............... 47

**Conclusion** ............................................................... 60

**References** ............................................................... 63
Illustrations

1. Promotional postcard for Maud Allan’s *Vision of Salome* (1908) . . . . 28

2. Schechner’s Restored Behavior . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 31

3. *Salome* as Restored Behavior . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 40

   Illustration from first edition of *Salome* (1900) . . . . . . . 44
Camp and Consolation:
Modernist Female Drag as Resistant Mourning in Interwar Literature

Introduction

They say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me,
Sure got to prove it on me;
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
They must’ve been women, ’cause I don’t like no men.

It’s true I wear a collar and a tie,
Makes the wind blow all the while.
Don’t you say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me.
You sure got to prove it on me.

~Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “Prove It On Me Blues” (1928)

Standing behind the red-lipped, arched browed iconic chanteuse Edith Piaf, we see a woman in a man’s tuxedo, pink silk scarf, mascara, and thin moustache penciled above her lip. This woman is not Piaf’s lover, but her life-long friend and companion, Mômone. What is most striking about this image is not Mômone’s drag performance alone, but that, throughout the rest of the film, Mômone appears in the standard feminine styles of the 1930s. In the 2007 film of the life of Edith Piaf, La vie en Rose (La Môme), Mômone’s singular appearance in masculine drag signifies a performative moment of gender subversion that does not necessarily point towards the character’s homosexuality, or to a transgendered identification (though these remain possibilities outside of the film’s plot). Instead, this scene embodies a particular cultural phenomenon that took hold after the First World War.

Much has been written regarding the crisis of masculinity that occurred after the First World War. Considering the unprecedented carnage of this first modern war—one of every eight British soldiers perished on the battlefield, and those who returned home seriously wounded physically or mentally numbered in the millions—the readjustment back into civilian life was difficult and sometimes impossible. A less discussed
consequence of the war was how women—a few of whom served as V.A.D. nurses or donned masculine clothing and surreptitiously joined the military, but all of whom had a husband, brother, cousin, friend, or neighbor who was killed or wounded in battle—attempted to negotiate their roles in a society that had asked them to leave the relatively stable gender roles of late Victorian society to become heads of households, ambulance drivers, and nurses. When the war was over, women lost their places in terms of both the roles they had filled when much of the male population was at war and within the gender roles that organized Edwardian social power structures. In this project, I argue that the phenomenon of modernist female drag we see in British culture and transatlantic literature after the First World War represents a refusal on the part of women to fit neatly back in to the gender identities and roles available to them before the war. As Britain and America began the process toward social and psychic recovery through institutionalized modes of mourning, many women attempted to renegotiate these same power structures that had thrown Europe into a horrific war and continued to support rigid gender roles. These women’s non-normative gender performances represent a resistance toward the power structures of war. All of the women and authors I discuss in this project had hoped for a better world and a better chance at social acceptance after the war. Yet, most were left dissatisfied, disappointed, and alienated.

What I propose is a way of thinking about intersections of femaleness and masculinized gender performance as reactions to and resistance against the power structures that allowed for war and subsequently institutionalized collective mourning through memorializing and advocating a return to “national values” (often involving normative gender roles and identities). The gender subversion that occurred post-WWI is especially notable within this context given the ongoing proliferation of discourses, to borrow Foucault’s phrase,¹ concerning gender and sexuality in the form of sexology and psychoanalysis during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Though the theories of many early sexologists and Freudian explanations of gender

---

and sexuality now seem at least antiquated, at most problematic and heterosexist, the
phenomenon of modernist female drag cannot be adequately discussed within current
discourses of transgender and transsexual studies, or even taxonomies within the
contemporary queer community. While sometimes this gender performance coincided
with non-normative sexuality, the most prevalent feature was its outward expression of
masculinity. With this in mind, the more historically accurate concepts of sapphism and
inversion become useful.\(^2\) Famed sexologist Havelock Ellis described sexual inversion in
women in his *Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (1897) as follows:

> The actively inverted woman differs from the woman of the class just
> mentioned\(^3\) in one fairly essential character: a more or less distinct trace
> of masculinity. She may not be, and frequently is not, what would be
called a “mannish” woman, for the later may imitate men on grounds of
taste and habit unconnected with sexual perversion, while in the inverted
woman the masculine traits are part of an organic instinct which she by
no means always wishes to accentuate. The inverted woman’s masculine
element may, in the least degree, consist only in the fact that she makes
advances to the woman to whom she is attracted. (133-34)

Though the heart of Ellis’s study appears to be homosexuality, the majority of the
chapter “Inversion in Women” is devoted to a “how to tell the inverts among us” style of
thick description and observation. An invert may (or may not) dress in masculine attire,
may (or may not) be inept at domestic work, and may (or may not) be inclined to smoke
cigarettes, or even cigars in accentuated cases. What is notable about Ellis’ work here is
that his fascination with a masculinized performance seems to take precedence—at least
in this chapter of his study—over a study of sexual behavior in female “inverts.” Though
he points out many visual markers of the female invert, he is careful to note that “a
woman who is inclined to adopt the ways and garments of men is by no means
necessarily inverted” (140). In *fin de siècle* England at a time when the “New Woman”

---
\(^2\) The discourse of “inversion,” as I will approach it, is useful in a limited historical sense, precisely
because it fails to identify the “sexual perversion” that it seeks to engage. The inability for Ellis and his
contemporaries to successfully encapsulate homosexuality within the theory of “inversion” points to the
fluidity of gender and non-normative sexuality that I wish to explore.

\(^3\) The “woman of the class just mentioned” is described as often unattractive and easily swayed toward
homosexuality, mostly due to rejection by men.
was quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon, Ellis’ ambiguity is no doubt due, in part, to the growing illegibility of what defined contemporary femininity—as women entered colleges and the workforce in increasing numbers, smoked, and increasingly appeared in public without the protection of male companions, new signifiers were necessary for identifying gender subversion as opposed to fashionable gender-bending.

Sapphism, as far as it will be used within this context, is also subject to the cultural and sartorial fashions of modernity. Though the sapphic in modern discourse is most often associated with lesbianism, it is a specific kind of lesbianism that is referenced. In their study, *Sapphic Modernities*, Laura Doan and Jane Garrity describe modern sapphists as “a select group of British, Anglophone, and European lesbians who hobnobbed with the cultural and the social elites” (9). This definition suggests that not only was sapphism as an identity caught up in issues of gender and non-normative sexuality, but that the sapphic was also performing a sort of female dandyism, a gendered- and class-based performance. In defending their more flexible definition of the sapphic within modernity/ies, Doan and Garrity explain that “scholars in lesbian studies have been inordinately preoccupied with the question of ‘who counts’ or ‘what is it that we count’ in assigning modern categories of sexuality.... [D]uring the interwar period such discrete categorizations and boundaries were far more fluid than has previously been acknowledged” (5). In addressing the question of “who counts” in this study, I suggest that while sapphism is historically and theoretically central to my argument, the occurrence of modernist female drag is not limited by same-sex desire.

Jay Prosser has argued that “what sexologists sought to describe through sexual inversion was not homosexuality but differing degrees of gender inversion” (“Transsexuals” 117). Within this context of inverting traditional notions of gender, I argue that modernist female drag has very little to do with performing maleness and does not entirely negate femininity. Often it intersects with sapphic identities, but is not limited to issues of desire. It does, however, reject the notion of normative gender coherence. Sometimes modernist female drag represents a site of potential change, sometimes it is used as a literary trope to explore a more general sense of attempting to
express what is beyond the possibility of articulation, and sometimes it is used to
reinforce a position within heterosexual desire, thereby resisting the image of femininity
as a smothering (or mothering) threat to men.

**Female Masculinities**

As part of an ongoing effort on the part of many queer and feminist theorists to
challenge notions of gender identity coherence, Judith Halberstam describes the
phenomenon of “female masculinity” as a way to discuss varying identities that
incorporate masculinities and femaleness, including the tomboy, the invert, drag kings,
butch lesbians, and FTM transgender and transsexual identities. Though Halberstam’s
focus in *Female Masculinity* is primarily on images of female masculinities in the last half
of the twentieth century, my work here is inspired by Halberstam’s attempt to expand
ways of talking about gender boundaries and gendered taxonomies in an “attempt to
intervene in hegemonic processes of naming and defining” (8). While Halberstam’s work
takes up the queer subject position, she also notes that “sometimes [female masculinity]
codifies a unique form of social rebellion; often female masculinity is the sign of sexual
alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation…and every now and then it
represent the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional
femininities” (9). Similarly, the primary feature of modernist female drag is that it
represents an alternative to heteronormative hegemonic gender constructions. More
specifically, my work with modernist female drag represents expression of mourning as a
resistant measure to the institutionalized, collective mourning processes of the state
during the interwar period. In coming to terms with the loss of previously accepted
gender roles, modernist writers (and their female protagonists as an extension of this
effort) strived to find a means of mourning outside codifying means available through
institutionalized public mourning.

In the authors’ attempts to express that which is beyond articulation, their
characters push against the limits of representability, in a way disidentifying with gender
roles reinforced by the power structures in place during and immediately after the First
Mourning and Gender

To think about mourning and loss during the interwar period, one must necessarily take into account Freud’s theories of mourning as first outlined in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” Significant to the purposes of this project is one of Freud’s opening questions: “Now in what consists the work which mourning performs?” (154, emphasis added). To say that mourning is performative indicates that it is also a reiteration, a semblance of something that has occurred before. While mourning is of course rooted in a deep sense of pain and loss, and temporary (or permanent, in the case of melancholia) refusal to move on—to replace the lost love object—I emphasize here the performative nature of mourning in order to draw a connection with the performative nature of gender.

If we are to remain in a Freudian framework for understanding loss, the reaction I am describing in conjunction with modernist female drag would best be described as melancholia. Distinct from the normal work of mourning, Freud describes melancholia as occurring when “a loss of the kind has been experienced, but one cannot see clearly what has been lost…. This…might be so even when the patient was aware of the loss…when he knows whom he has lost but not what it is he has lost in them” (155, Freud’s emphasis). The subjects of this study all evoke a general sense of loss—of normativity, of security in one’s social/ economic/ gendered position, of lovers or relationships—yet what, specifically, has been lost in these departures remains ambiguous. The problem with the Freudian notion of loss is the discourse of productivity on which it is based: to be a “success” at mourning, one must turn away from the loss, replacing it with a new love object. All other expressions of mourning that do not take the form of movement away from the lost love object are then deemed unproductive, and thus unsuccessful.

What I propose is a way of resisting thinking about mourning in terms of productivity, thereby allowing mourning to become a process that still involves interiorizing loss, but represents a site of potentiality, of reiteration, as opposed to an unproductive cycle of grief.
In her introduction to *Modernism and Mourning*, Patricia Rae finds the possibility of productive grief in the idea of resistant mourning. She explains that this sort of mourning is “a deliberate decision about how not to respond to loss…a resistance to reconciliation” (17). The basis for this concept is Jacques Derrida’s insistence that the question of mourning is ultimately an ethical question. Derrida sees any sort of reconciliation with loss as disrespectful and indicative of an infidelity with what has been lost, especially as the loss becomes a part of the self. This occurs because “faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us) at once living and dead. It makes the other a *part* of us—and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him *in us*…” (Derrida 35, Derrida’s emphasis). It is through this model that Derrida forms his theory of mourning as an aporia: where success fails, failure succeeds. Though the subject fails to mourn “successfully” for the lost love object by replacing it, this failure indicates a successful fidelity to the dead and to the self, who has internalized the loss.

Whether as a question of ethics or simply a move to “depathologize” mourning, Rae warns that successful mourning typically amounts to a sort of “amnesia” that only serves to maintain current sociopolitical cycles of trauma (19). Resistance to this cyclical model, for Rae, is a resistance against both the Freudian concept of “successful” mourning and against institutionalized public mourning. While the former notion of mourning focuses on the individual’s need to redirect his or her libidinal desire and the latter makes a display of mourning in order to promote national unity, both concepts of mourning imply a “working through” of grief that will at some point end.

Despite differing theories on the desired end result of the mourning process, the belief that the lost love object becomes a part of us supports a connection between the process of mourning and the process of gender formation. Judith Butler describes the Oedipal complex and the incest taboo in terms of melancholia; here, the parent becomes the lost love object, and is thus internalized. Both melancholia and gender formation, then, are a matter of identifying with internalized love objects. Butler explains:

Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications
are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexuality. (“Gender” 63)

Butler’s argument allows for the positioning of modernist female drag as a resistant measure as opposed to a *symptom* of a disordered psyche. In this light, one can see the melancholia of gender as an effort to negotiate the various prohibitions—psychic as well as embodied—tied up in gender identification and disposition.

In Chapter 1, I note modernist female drag performances in the characters of Brett Ashley of *The Sun Also Rises* and Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*. As disparate expressions of modernist female drag, these two characters exemplify the wide range of embodiments and reasons for the phenomenon. *The Well of Loneliness* is an obvious place from which to begin a study of female drag during this time period, both due to Stephen Gordon’s melancholic struggle with gender identification, as well as author Radclyffe Hall’s own masculinized gender performance. The obscenity trial of 1928 that marked *The Well* also bridges the gap between literature and real life. As Alison Oram has noted, “it is only after the *Well of Loneliness* trial in 1928 that female masculinity begins to signify lesbianism in culture” (Oram 175). Prior to this, Oram argues, depictions of female masculinity in the popular press were most often treated with a lighthearted tone. Hall’s novel announced to the world the possibility that masculinized dress or appearance in women was not always simply a reflection of the fashions of the time, but could possibly point towards gender identities beyond the heteronormative.

The contrast of the aggressively heterosexual Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* illustrates the strict gender boundaries that even heterosexual women who exhibited a masculinized gender performance encountered. As a victim of domestic violence and an eyewitness to the horrors of the war, Brett’s hyperbolized performance of sexy androgyny becomes an expression of mourning for what has been lost—both that which is perceptible and that which is beyond articulation. Though she is often posited as a fashionable flapper, it is important to note that, in his description of her boyish
appearance, Jake Barnes points out that “[s]he started all that,” referring to the androgynous sex appeal that became *en vogue* in the 1920s (Hemingway 30). Though Brett’s play with androgyny certainly became *en vogue* during the interwar years, Brett’s expression of androgyny is something beyond following the trends.

As I have mentioned, modernist female drag is a part of the renegotiating of gender roles after the First World War. Historians have noted of this period that women’s entrance into the workforce and prevalent images of women as nurses and caretakers led to a sort of backlash against women as nurturers. Thus, the image of the “mothering woman” came to represent a threat to masculine power. Speaking of the turn towards parenting experts placing responsibility on mothers instead of fathers for the psychic well being of (particularly male) children after the First World War, Jennifer Sullivan comments that Brett “reflects this distrust of the excesses of maternal affection” (Sullivan 3). Though Jake appreciates Brett as a non-threatening woman, due in part to his own (literally and figuratively) wounded manhood, Brett’s young Spanish lover, Romero, attempts to make her more “womanly.” In an explanation of why she had to leave Romero, Brett comments, “I’m not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children” (Hemingway 247). Brett rejects the role of feminine, mothering woman, “knowing that mothering would eventually lead to smothering” (Sullivan 3). Brett’s drag performance becomes not only a reaction to the atrocities of war, but also an expression of the tenuous position of non-normative women during the interwar period.

In Chapter 2, I examine the conspiracy of the “Cult of the Clitoris” and dancer Maud Allan’s subsequent libel case of 1917 against right wing MP Noel Pemberton-Billing. Maud Allan attained fame for her seductive “Vision of Salome” dance, which was performed in a jeweled bra-like top and transparent harem pants. Adding to the already salacious reputation of Maud Allan’s escapades, on and off stage, was her intention to play the part of Salome in Oscar Wilde’s eponymous one-act play. The fact that Wilde’s play had never been performed to a public audience in England due to government censorship represents, I argue, a social drama in terms of performance theorist Richard Schechner’s theories on ritual and performance. The Maud Allan case represents a slight
variation of this. Where Schechner outlines the process of a social drama being funneled into a stage drama and the continuing cycle and reiteration of this performance, the Maud Allan case begins with a stage drama, *Salome*, which lead to a social drama, and was reiterated in various forms.

Though Maud Allan did not perform masculinity through her performance of *Salome* per se, neither did she perform traditional femininity. The social drama that ensued as a reaction to Maud Allan’s social and sexual “deviance” points to the still prevalent perceived threat of non-normative gender identity: “they” are everywhere, and can even go largely undetected. If the former prime minister’s wife is one of “them,” then couldn’t anyone be? Havelock Ellis even mentions dancers specifically in his description of female inversion. He comments that, “In theaters the abnormal sexuality stimulated by this association in work is complicated by the general tendency for homosexuality to be connected with dramatic aptitude,” and proceeds to quote an anonymous friend who reportedly wrote him: “Passionate friendships among girls, from the most innocent to the most elaborate excursions in the direction of Lesbos, are extremely common in theaters, both among actresses and, even more, among chorus- and ballet- girls” (130). Oscar Wilde’s own legal battles in conjunction with the Cult of the Clitoris make the intersection of these social and dramatic performances a key point in locating the cultural origin of modernist female drag.

In Chapter 3, I propose we view Virginia Woolf’s satirical biography, *Orlando*, through the form of the elegy. Both this novel and the elegy as form are centered on the subject’s process of metamorphosis. Through this reading, *Orlando* becomes a study of mourning, and also a study in the ephemerality of both stable gender identity and life itself. The character Orlando’s attempt to write a nontraditional elegy in “The Oak Tree” points to Woolf’s thinking on writing androgynously, which, she claims in *A Room of One’s Own*, had not yet been achieved by women writers.

In the range of subjects I treat in this study, I hope to illustrate the very illegibility that characterized modernist female drag performances. These performances represent the growing sense of formerly-accepted gender roles as increasingly unstable. Further,
they are a part of the nascent visibility of European gay and lesbian communities during the early twentieth century. As masculinized gender performances ceased to be regarded as cute female eccentricities and began to represent threats to the power structures of the era, sapphic women formed supportive communities and networks, as best exemplified by the fleeing of writers, performers, and artists to Paris after the war.

What is also notable about all of these cases is the decidedly upper-crust tone to them. Undoubtedly factoring in this phenomenon were the culture wars of the early twentieth century: what many saw as decadent intellectualism as opposed to salt-of-the-earth Englishness—Lord Alfred Douglas described this conflict in the Maud Allan trial as the “real existence” of “roast beef” Englishness—represented to many a threat to “national values” to which many returned in order to cope with the massive loss of the war. In reality, many of the authors and subjects traveled in the same social circles. For example, Pemberton-Billing’s co-conspirator in the invention of The Cult of the Clitoris claimed that he first showed the list of German agents (i.e. moral perverts) to his military superior while overseas, Admiral Troubridge—who was the husband of Una Troubridge, Radclyffe Hall’s long-time lover (Hoare 122). Another social intersection was Pemberton-Billing’s accusation that Alice Keppel, mistress to Edward VII, was herself a member of this cult and was passing messages to Germany. Little did the MP know that Keppel’s daughter, Violet Trefusis had just begun a love affair with Virginia Woolf’s future lover and dedicatee of Orlando, Vita Sackville-West (127).

The intersection of socioeconomic privilege with the greater mobility (social and spatial) that appropriated masculinity afforded these women allowed them to experience the world differently than their traditionally feminine counterparts. Indeed, one subtext of the performances examined herein is that of upper-class drag. From the exaggerated satire of Vita Sackville West’s aristocratic heritage in Orlando, to the facade of Lady Brett Ashley’s nobility in The Sun Also Rises that depends on the support of wealthy suitors and an endless charade of extravagance in European resorts, these women appropriate a masculinized performance that positions them in conflicting positions in relation to upper-class social power structures. As women, especially women who do not
appropriate traditional femininity, they are placed on the margins of social acceptability. As upwardly mobile or aristocratic, they have access to social and/or financial resources that allow them greater freedom to escape the repressive intolerance of their homes, often literally: to Europe (in the case of Maud Allan); Paris for Hemingway, Hall and their protagonists; and to Turkey for Orlando.

**Conclusion**

My goal in this thesis is to open up discursive space in which to discuss moments of female non-normative gender performances during the interwar period. In this pursuit, I have run into several methodological challenges that can most succinctly be expressed in my earlier question: who counts? Or, more specifically, who doesn’t count, and why not? In many similar attempts to discuss non-normative gender, theorists such as Judith Halberstam have rooted their studies in non-normative gender performances as exterior expressions of homosexuality. These efforts have not only been extremely valuable and productive contributions to queer studies, but have been formative in my thinking of modernist female drag. Where my work here differs, however, is that the discursive space I seek to open is intended to be wide enough to include discussions of women who engage in masculine gender performances as an expression of non-normative sexuality, as well as discussions of women who identify as heterosexual and engage in these performances as resistant measures to the confines of heteronormative feminine identities. For instance, instead of claiming Hemingway’s Brett Ashley as a lesbian in order to discuss her gender performance as subversive, how can we see Brett Ashley’s gender performance as subversive, even as it remains within a heterosexual framework? Further, while the masculinized gender performance of Hall’s Stephen Gordon does point to Stephen’s homosexuality, what do the specific characteristics of this masculinized performance suggest about this particular cultural moment?

My examination of modernist female drag is not an effort to create a discursive divide between gender performance and non-normative sexuality, nor is it a sociological study of drag, transvestites, transgender or transsexual peoples. Instead, I hope to
illuminate instances of modernist female drag where gender performance is already divided from non-normative sexuality, as well as instances in which the drag performance does point to non-normative sexuality and gender identities. I examine modernist female drag within this context as it is used by many modernist authors as a trope to express a sense of unrepresentability and disruption of the sex/gender system. This is not to occlude the real women living during and after the First World War—some of whom are mentioned in this thesis—who performed masculinity as expressions of butch, transgender, or non-normative gender identities.
Chapter 1

The Invert, the Bitch, and the Wardrobe:
Modernist Drag as Mourning in Hemingway and Hall

“Have you noticed her...? A queer-looking girl,
very tall, wears a collar and tie—you know, mannish.”

~The Well of Loneliness

_The Well of Loneliness_ has long been treated with ambivalence within feminist and queer theories. Though published at the height of modernism in 1928, _The Well_ reflects the writing style and repressed sexuality of late Victorian writing. It may seem an unlikely candidate, then, for inclusion in a study with the epitome of American “lost generation” texts: Ernest Hemingway’s _The Sun Also Rises_ (1928). Published within two years of each other, both texts document an attempt to mourn the losses—both tangible and intangible—surrounding the First World War. Though not as thoroughly explored as Jake Barnes’s embodied trauma, which, of course, must be taken as a manifestation of a traumatized sense of masculinity, Brett Ashley’s wild antics throughout _The Sun Also Rises_ also follow a process of mourning both the extraordinary losses she witnessed as a military nurse during the war, as well as a sense of not quite fitting neatly into accepted gender roles. Though Jake’s injury is clearly a reflection of his personal sense of loss of self, Brett’s relationship with Jake indicates the slipping of formerly stable gender relations.

Radclyffe Hall’s Stephen Gordon goes through a similar process, which is compounded with the uncertainty Stephen feels her entire life concerning her place within (or outside of) accepted gender performances. Despite having markedly different views
on gender and sexuality, both Hemingway and Hall produced characters that were more similar than immediately apparent. It is in part due to the two authors’ disparate views on lesbianism that make the characters of Stephen Gordon and Brett Ashley, both representative of modernist female drag, so interesting. Both authors expressed something of the interwar zeitgeist through androgynously-dressing, unsettled (and often unsettling), British expatriate female protagonists who find refuge in Paris—this points to a larger trend in interwar culture and literature, especially concerning the second wave of the “New Woman.”

Of this second generation of New Women born in the late nineteenth century, Esther Newton writes:

They drank, they smoked, they rejected traditional feminine clothing, lived as expatriates, and freely entered heterosexual liaisons, sometimes with such disastrous results as alcoholism…. Modernism and the new sex ideas entailed serious contradictions for women. (94)

Though this description appears in a volume of critical essays on The Well, it seems to describe Brett Ashley perhaps more accurately than Stephen Gordon. In considering both The Sun Also Rises and The Well of Loneliness as works of mourning, I propose using Freud’s emerging discourse on mourning and melancholia as a lens through which to examine how both characters use modernist female drag performance to attempt to work through the mourning process. Through this attempt, we see that current theories on “resistant” or non-normative mourning offer the possibility of redemption for these characters.

Freud’s central claim in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) is that, while “normal” mourning and melancholia share several characteristics, the former is a successful process of working through grief while the latter indicates a failed attempt of the libido to sever its ties to the lost love object, thereby forcing the subject into a self-destructive state of perpetual grief. In this paradigm, mourning the loss of a loved one or ideal becomes a process that one must work through, and, thus, complete after a period of time, with the result being the transfer of libidinal energy to a new love object. As
opposed to this process, mourning in the melancholic turns into a “loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (Freud 153). Instead of a transfer of love to a new love-object, this energy turns inward. The melancholic knows who has been lost, but not what she has lost in that person (155). As we see in Brett Ashley’s past, her husband returns from the war with unmanageable trauma that turns into physical and mental abuse toward her. Though we can see Brett’s divorce as a choice, the partner that she knew before the war had, indeed, been lost to her. In leaving him, she rids herself of an abusive husband, but also seems to have lost more than that: she loses a marriage, class position, and a way of life.

Within this framework of melancholia, then, we can see Freud’s assertion that the self-accusations of the melancholic apply more to lost loved ones (or ones the subject was supposed to have loved) than oneself. After leaving her much younger lover in one of the final scenes of *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett exclaims, “I’m not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children” (247). In assuming that her love is of such a nature that it could potentially ruin the intended love object, a traditional Freudian reading would see this as Brett’s “unsuccessful” mourning of the loss of her husband and past life. Her husband’s love indeed ruined the life she knew as a wealthy aristocrat before the war. Brett’s inability to successfully transfer this energy to a new love object then turns inward on the internalized loss of her ex-husband.

The issue many theorists now take with the above explanation of grief and mourning is that the notion of “successful” and “normal” mourning necessarily means that other ways of mourning are unsuccessful, making the mourner both abnormal and a failure. At the heart of this disagreement is the placement of grief into an economic model—that grief can be neatly dealt with and equally exchanged for a replacement becomes problematic in cases where a replacement does not or cannot occur. Freud

---

4 Significantly, Freud later adjusted this position in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), noting that some internalization of loss is necessary in any mourning process.
himself seems to acknowledge this shortcoming when discussing the nature of “normal” grief by admitting that “we do not even know by what economic measures the work of mourning is carried through…” (166). That reconciliation with loss is the only way in this economic model for grief to be productive begs the question: for those for whom normal and/or institutionalized means of mourning are unavailable, can mourning be productive without demanding an end to the process in the form of reconciliation?

I wish to make clear that the work of this project is not to position non-normative gender performance as a symptom of melancholia. This view would only reiterate the pathologizing of non-heteronormative behaviors that has taken place throughout the last century and has most often served to marginalize those who cannot or do not perform heteronormativity convincingly. Instead, I emphasize the idea of modernist female drag as resistance; at this particular point in history, notably marked by a melancholic tone, this resistance is often expressed through performances of mourning. Judith Butler elucidates the connection between gender performance and melancholia in *Gender Trouble*, claiming that both are a matter of identifying with an internalized love object. She goes on to explore the Oedipus complex and the incest taboo as formative of gender and sexual orientation in the terms of melancholia, coming to the conclusion that:

> If feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of the effective internalization of that taboo, and if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and, indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity. (63)

Thus, according to Butler, gendered dispositions are not primary as Freud has argued, but the result of external laws which are then internalized and produce gender performances as effects thereof. It would be remiss to say, then, that the female drag performances I reference here indicate a disordered psychic life. They are instead examples of the melancholic nature of gender intersecting with external triggers of mourning, expressed through the non-normative female body.

As far as the characters of Brett Ashley and Stephen Gordon can be seen as both
expressions of resistant mourning and expressing resistance, Patricia Rae’s description of resistant mourning as “a deliberate decision about how not to respond to loss” is significant (17). After the death of her father, the first major loss of Stephen’s life, Hall writes that that the loss “deprived [Stephen] of three things; of companionship of mind born of real understanding, of a stalwart barrier between her and the world, and above all of love…” (122). These three deprivations continue to haunt Stephen throughout her life and foreshadow the novel’s melancholic ending. For Stephen, “successful” mourning of the death of her father is an impossibility; his death represents the greater loss of safety from public scrutiny and which cannot be overcome through the Freudian model. For Stephen, the death is a pivotal moment in her decision to live publicly as a masculinized woman, and thus represents a site of potential change as well as a site of loss. Stephen refuses to respond to the loss through reconciling herself to it, but internalizes it. This internalization, while potentially psychically damaging to Stephen, also prompts her journey of self-discovery. Brett Ashley’s refusal to respond to loss is more immediately threatening to her psyche. Brett refuses to acknowledge any loss at all, and does not discuss the war or her past marriage, instead disguising her pain with outrageous behavior. Though perhaps not cathartic for her, Brett’s refusal to respond to loss does open up new possibilities in gender identity as far as her mourning process is embodied in her hyperbolized gender performance.

While Hemingway’s characterization of Brett clearly represents a failure to mourn what has been lost and even a form of melancholia in Brett’s self-destructive tendencies, Hall’s thinly-veiled autobiographical character of Stephen Gordon show an attempt towards “successful” mourning in the Freudian sense: Stephen is well aware of what has been lost, and constantly attempts to replace the lost love object. This framework for discussing Stephen is problematic, of course: although it seems to fit the model and indicate a “working through” of mourning, the notoriously dissatisfying end of The Well is blatantly melancholic. Though Stephen is conscious of the loss of her beloved father throughout the novel and constantly tries to fill that void, first with Angela, then with Mary, it seems that Stephen does not know what has been lost in the loss of her father.
Banished from her family’s country home after being exposed as an “invert” by Angela’s husband, Stephen finds in her deceased father’s study a book by Victorian sexologist Krafft-Ebing with her father’s handwritten notes scrawled in the margins. Though we are not told what passage Stephen reads, Baron von Krafft-Ebing’s contribution to the incitement to sexual discourse at the end of the nineteenth century included first differentiating the idea of the “heterosexual” as well as homosexuality, fetishism, masochism, and other “perversions.” Whatever Stephen sees in the book, it prompts her to exclaim to her dead father, “You knew! All the time you knew this thing, but because of your pity you wouldn’t tell me” (Hall 204). Though she emphasizes her father’s pity, it is overshadowed by the fact that he knew the “secret” to Stephen’s “problem” yet never told her. Notably, the next text Stephen opens is the Bible, which “falls open” to “And the lord set a mark upon Cain…,” the passage used by many to place sexual variance within the realm of Christian morality (205). Though she has lost her father and with him unconditional love, there is also an ambivalence about the knowledge or understanding her father never provided her that was lost in his death. Instead of attempting to redeem Stephen’s mourning within the Freudian framework, Stephen’s grieving process seen as a sort of resistant mourning allows room for a productive process that does not necessarily end with reconciliation.

Further troubling Stephen’s place in “successful” mourning, Judith Halberstam sees Stephen’s grief as not simply due to her father’s death, but also due to the loss of her beloved Morton. Halberstam suggests that “After [Stephen] is forced to leave Morton, she carries its memory within her so that inversion now becomes a kind of mourning technique by which Stephen incorporates the places and the people she loses” (“Misfits” 152). Instead of the economic system of replacing the lost love object, Stephen’s mourning process encapsulates the multiple losses of Morton, including her father, a relationship with her mother, Angela, and the feeling of having a secure place in society, at least in the microcosm of Morton. Inversion, or I would argue Stephen’s particular performance of inversion, becomes a means to mourn this loss.

The incorporation of past people and places into the mourning technique
Halberstam notes is most evident in Stephen’s chosen dress, which I call modernist drag performance. I use the term “drag performance” to imply an expanded, often intentionally hyperbolized gender performance as opposed to more specific identities of transgender and transsexual peoples. I do this not to deny The Well’s place within the lesbian and/or transgender canon, but to find a way to discuss it that is true to its historical context of “inversion.” Though Stephen’s sexuality is undeniably significant, Hall’s text seems to be much more concerned with Stephen’s gender performance as evidenced by the lack of sexually-explicit details, yet the overwhelming attention devoted to Stephen’s appearance, dress, and public actions.

One of the first extended descriptions of Stephen’s chosen dress occurs several years after her father’s death as she is first considering the possibility of a relationship with Angela Crosby. The descriptions of Stephen’s shopping trip become a catalogue of her costuming. Significantly, she orders her suits from the same tailor that her father did. While in town, she not only buys men’s clothing, but stylish, tailored men’s suits:

She would wear a black tie—no, better a grey one to match the new suit with the little white pin stripe. She ordered not one new suit but three…; indeed, she spent most of the afternoon in ordering things for her personal adornment. She heard herself being ridiculously fussy about details, disputing with her tailor over buttons…disputing regarding the match of her ties with the young man who sold her handkerchiefs and neckties—for such trifles had assumed an enormous importance. (Hall 136-7)

This literal replacement of her lost father with material indicators of him is caught up in Stephen’s performance of inversion. That “such trifles had assumed enormous importance” demonstrates that Stephen’s chosen means of mourning lies not necessarily in her sexuality but in her embodied performance of what inversion represents to her: an alternative to the suffocating feminine performance she sees in her mother and an embodiment of the legitimacy she sees in her father’s position. That Stephen’s performance is achieved materialistically is no accident. Having come into her inheritance, Stephen can justify her position as head of the Morton household and substitute for her father through her ability to pay for the appropriate performance, including expensive
masculine clothing as well as lavish gifts for Angela. Stephen’s “passing” is not just related to her cross-dressing, but is also a patriarchal/authoritative passing as the property-owning, economically-powerful, lord of the manor.

Stephen’s cross-dressing only becomes more extravagant the older and more authoritative she becomes. Heart-broken due to her unrequited love for Angela Crosby, Stephen turns “in despair to the thought of her useless and unspent money” (186). This despair over her impotent economic power is translated into an elaborate shopping spree:

She bought twelve pairs of gloves, some heavy silk stockings, a square sapphire scarf pin and a new umbrella. Nor could she resist the lure of pyjamas made of white crêpe de Chine…. The pyjamas led to a man’s dressing-gown of brocade—an amazingly ornate garment. (186)

Stephen does not simply buy man’s clothing; she creates a spectacle with the ornate and lavish costume-like pieces. The spectacle is not mannish, but fashionable and gentlemanly, with a noted air of aristocratic class difference. It is through this sort of hyperbolized sartorial performance of gender that Stephen addresses her despair, not necessarily through “sexual deviance.” As Halberstam notes, “Not the closet but the wardrobe, we might say, constitutes the epistemological terrain of the Well of Loneliness” (“Misfits” 151). It is through this performance that Stephen seeks a resistant means of mourning. By resisting the normative mourning of her mother, who remains the lonely, powerless widow at Morton for the rest of her life, Stephen incorporates her grief into a mourning performance that becomes literally productive, first as an ambulance driver during the First World War, one of few “masculine” occupations for women that was acceptable at the time, and later as a successful writer.

Though Hall implies Stephen’s non-normative gender performance and something innate and unavoidable from birth, Brett Ashley—a contemporary of Stephen Gordon’s, originally of the same social class, and a fellow expatriate living in Paris—seems to have drastically changed prior to the beginning of the narrative of The Sun Also Rises. In viewing The Sun as a work of mourning, we can see Brett’s rejection of traditional femininity as a similar iteration of non-normative mourning.
As a young woman widowed early in the war, a witness to the horrors of combat, and a survivor of domestic abuse, Brett reacts to multiple traumas through a sort of androgynous gender performance. It is not until the end of the novel that we are given a sense of Brett’s experiences before joining the expatriate population in Paris. As a reaction to Brett’s multiple affairs, her lover, Mike, drunkenly reveals that

When [Brett’s ex-husband] came home he wouldn’t sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally when he got really bad, he used to tell her he’d kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he’d gone to sleep. She hasn’t had an absolutely happy life, Brett. (Hemingway 207)

Brett experiences the traumatic effects of World War I on two fronts: she faces the carnage and violence of the battlefield as a V.A.D. nurse, and she experiences her husband’s mental trauma after he returns home in the form of a constant threat of violence and total lack of security. Though we are never given the full story of Brett’s life before Paris, one can surmise that a drastic change took place. Brett rejects the maternal, ubiquitously-feminine images of the caring nurse, wife, and aristocratic Lady in favor of a divorced, independent-yet-unstable “New Woman,” which, for Brett, means taking on aspects of masculinity.

In light of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Brett’s post-war behavior becomes a sign of an unsuccessful grieving process, possibly even a form of melancholia. Instead of replacing a lost love object, Brett is unsure exactly what has been lost in the trauma of her war experience, and therefore turns to self-destructive cycles of grief. Because her mourning process is incomplete and does not lead to reconciliation, it is coded as unsuccessful in the psychoanalytic sense. Alternatively, Brett’s refusal to mourn can also be seen as a deliberate act of defiance on her part. Brett takes control over her own grief by acknowledging that the loss is ultimately too great to mourn “successfully.” In resistant mourning lies a tension between recovery and fidelity to the past that, as Rae suggests, creates potential for change as opposed to reiterating a cycle of grief. As with the tension between recovery and fidelity to the past, we see the tension between her redefined femininity and her masculinized gender performance as another site
of potential change.

Though Brett should not be cast aside as the anti-maternal bitch figure that many critics have labeled her, Hemingway’s characterization of both Jake Barnes and Brett in relation to homosexuality and homosexuals problematizes the possibility of fully redeeming Brett as a figure of productive resistant mourning. In his characterization of Jake Barnes as impotent, Hemingway necessarily asks us to compare Jake with a male homosexual; both, as we see in Hemingway’s description of gay men, are not quite fully men—Jake by his battle wounds, but gay men by choice.\(^5\) Throughout Jake’s narration, we see that he comes out ahead in this comparison because he mourns his lost (hetero)sexuality and deals with it appropriately by still appropriating a masculine performance of the fishing, drinking, bull-fighting aficionado. Brett, too, is shown in direct comparison with gay men. The parallel between Brett and the young gay men at the *bal musette*, however, serves to emphasize Brett’s alluring transgressive and mutable sexuality, rather than to call her femininity into question. Hemingway famously describes the group of gay men entering a bar in Paris at the same moment that he introduces Brett: “A crowd of young men, some in jerseys and some in their shirt sleeves, got out. …As they went in, under the light I saw white hands, wavy hair, white faces, grimacing, gesturing, talking. With them was Brett. She looked very lovely and she was very much with them” (28). Besides Brett being “with them,” Hemingway describes her as wearing a jersey sweater several pages later, and, likely more than coincidentally, the only man whose name we are told is named “Lett,” a seeming mirror image of Brett. In his study of gender signification in *The Sun Also Rises*, Ira Elliott claims that, in this scene, the feminine’s “appropriation by the male constitutes a gender transgression which in and of itself becomes the visible sign of homosexuality” (80). In contrast, however, Brett’s appropriation of the masculine does not constitute a gender transgression, but instead adds to her image as a “[b]eautiful lady” (Hemingway 80) according to Bill Gorton and

\(^5\) This is the highly problematic association that Hemingway himself makes quite directly in the text. Although the comparison of male sexual impotence with male homosexuality is faulty, it is useful to examine in this context as this sort of thinking is indicative of the sexualized anxiety that Hemingway and many others felt regarding masculinity after the First World War.
what Robert Cohn describes as a “remarkably attractive woman” (46). Hemingway places Brett with the gay men to create an allusion of subversion, yet gives her “curves like the hull of a racing yacht” (30) in order to place her well within the realm of heterosexual desire.

Though we are given a portrait of Brett in relation to male homosexuals, it is perhaps due to the residual skepticism of and even masked anger toward the post-war “New Woman” that has led many critics over the past several decades to assume Brett’s latent lesbianism. In her study of lesbians in American literature, Valerie Rohy suggests that “to place [Brett] in a lesbian context one need not claim that Brett had or desired to have erotic relations with women, for Hemingway provides Brett with the somatic marks and typical gestures that would signify lesbianism to an American public familiar with the figure of the masculinized New Woman and the myth of the ‘mannish lesbian’” (69). The account of Brett’s “obvious” lesbianism is problematic given the historical context—at a time where androgyny was considered more playful and fashionable than a mark of lesbianism, Brett’s gendered performance cannot as easily be coded as lesbian as it might today. Brett is by no means a “mannish” lesbian, mythical or not; her masculine performance might better be described as boyish, taking on the attributes of a prepubescent boy in her slender body, soft curves, and tendency to “play dress up” in men’s hats and masculinized women’s wear. Jake’s assertion that Brett is “damned good-looking” (29) suggests that Brett does not represent an overtly masculinized, anti-heterocentric woman in the post-war masculine imaginary, but the eroticized, anti-maternal and therefore non-threatening New Woman.⁶ Even if we can view Brett on a lesbian continuum that does not require erotic desire, this positioning of Brett only serves to reinforce the notion of lesbianism as a reaction against, and therefore extension of, heterosexuality.

There is a strikingly similar scene to the bal musette in Hall’s account of Stephen’s

---

⁶ In an expanded version of this chapter, I examine the fear of “smotherhood” associated with the traditionally feminine maternal image, which was seen as a threat posed to devour traditional masculinity post war during a time of transition in gender roles.
encounters with the gay nightlife of Paris during the same time period. While Brett is “very much with them [the gay men]” and thus coded as subversive, Stephen is repulsed at what she sees as a scene of degeneracy. Observing the scene of a gay nightclub from her corner booth, Stephen notes:

Of all ages, all degrees of despondency, all grades of mental and physical ill-being, they must yet laugh shrilly from time to time, must yet tap their feet to the rhythm of music, must yet dance together in response to the band…. On more than one hand was a large, ornate ring, on more than one wrist a conspicuous bracelet; they wore jewelry that might only be worn by these men when they were thus gathered together. At Alec’s they could dare to give way to such tastes—what was left of themselves they became at Alec’s. (Hall 387-8)

Stephen hypocritically berates the bar patrons for “giv[ing] way to such tastes” while she herself dresses in extravagant menswear. This disdainful refutation of the men in the bar seems to be partially a rejection of what she sees of them in herself. When one of the men recognizes in her a shared pain, he whispers to her “ma sœur” to which she grudgingly reciprocates, “mon frère” (388-9). It is tempting here to pose Stephen’s disdain as a sort of reverse melancholia: she reviles in the gay men what she truly reviles in herself. As with all melancholia, though, this formation leads to nothing productive, but only a reiteration of a cycle of grief.

In his analysis of *The Great Gatsby* as a work of mourning, Greg Forter challenges the recent move several theorists have taken in construing melancholia as a socially or politically progressive state in and of itself. He reminds us that, for one, “the melancholic can’t *remember* the lost object because s/he does not even know what s/he has lost” (241). Within a medical framework, melancholia as mental depression often produces suicidal tendencies and a lack of desire to move beyond mourning. In this light, I do not find it particularly useful to suggest that Brett and Stephen are performing a disidentification (in the Muñozian sense) with the pathologized condition of melancholia. Instead, I see Brett and Stephen’s similar refusal to mourn “properly” as providing a

---

7 Forter refers specifically to José Esteban Muñoz, who suggests the possibility of disidentifying with melancholia.
space for progress. By integrating loss into a hyperbolized gender performance, both women push against the economic model of mourning that asks for an equal exchange to replace the lost object. I do not suggest this drag performance is a version of “acting out,” but a means of expressing difference that is not accommodated in accepted notions of loss and mourning.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler critiques the notion of drag as a purely subversive act. “At best,” Butler claims, “drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (125). Just as mourning almost always represents a site of ambivalence, especially when the loss is multifarious and complicated, so too a similar resistance to the regimes of power exists in which these characters are implicated through standard, normative means of mourning. Though Brett Ashley does not fully embrace a drag performance, which often involves a more “butch” masculine appearance for women, she takes on traditional masculine attributes—physical but also behavioral—in order to create a hyperbolized gender performance. As with her stylized, slender, anti-feminine body in her initial description, Brett insists on wearing men’s hats and her “hair…brushed back like a boy’s” (Hemingway 30). Hemingway figures Brett’s drag performance as what Butler describes as a reaction to past rejection. Using this logic, Brett’s gender performance is due to her traumatic experiences with men in the past. This is perhaps why many critics pose Brett as lesbian, despite the lack of textual evidence: Brett has been rejected by males, and therefore takes on lesbianism as an expression of hatred of men. “This logic of repudiation,” Butler explains, “installs heterosexual love as the origin and truth of both drag and lesbianism, and it interprets both practices as symptoms of thwarted love” (128). The same logic of repudiation figures Stephen Gordon’s explicit lesbianism as a reaction to the loss of her father and the withheld love of her mother. It is with a hyperbolized gender performance, not sexual deviance, that both Hemingway and Hall’s characters attempt to work through grief and loss. In this framework, we can rescue Brett and Stephen from a heterocentric definition of mourning—reaction to the
loss of male love—and see their performances as potentially progressive.

That Brett’s version of drag seems to work more to reinforce her place as the focus of heterosexual desire than to push against heteronormativity of course calls into question Brett’s potential as a subversive or progressive element. Even in Brett’s feminized drag performance, however, there is still space for redemption. Butler explains that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (125). While Brett may not be able to escape the heterocentric space in which she operates, her behavior and appearance do draw attention to the imitative nature of Jake, Mike, and Robert Cohn’s gender performances. Though Jake ostensibly operates within the realm of acceptable male behavior, Brett’s pastiche of that male behavior calls into question the authenticity of true manhood itself.

Stephen Gordon’s drag performance is somewhat problematic as well. Though Stephen’s gender performance does work in a similar manner as what Halberstam describes as “codifying] a unique form of social rebellion…” (“Masculinity” 9), Stephen also does a sort of conservative social class performance in her materialistic attention to wardrobe choices and constant employment of a house full of servants. Stephen’s ambiguous place as a progressive figure at the least calls into question the hegemonic gender structure that Butler describes. At its best, however, The Well creates space for a resistant mourning that is not tied up in implicitly heterocentric modes of mourning and grief, and provides possibilities beyond a melancholic reiteration of loss.
Chapter 2

Subversion, Sapphism, and Sedition:
The Cult of the Clitoris and Oscar Wilde’s Salome

The Maud Allan Salome scandal of 1918 has become a fascinating for historians and literary critics due to the sensationalism spawned by the performance during a time of national mourning. Espionage, decadence, lesbian affairs, secret lists, codes, cults, world war, and murder combined to create a scenario rivaling a lurid Stanley Kubrick script. Dancer/actress Maud Allan’s revealing costumes and provocative dances—complete with a wax model of a severed head—became the ideal phenomenon on which to impose Britain’s fears of subversion and conspiracy, represented before the First World War by Oscar Wilde’s aura of decadence and public homosexuality, and during the war by the lingering decadence of London’s avant-garde, as made evident by Maud Allan’s great success and patronage by many of Britain’s cultural and political elite.

Though many scholars have discussed the Maud Allan scandal in terms of gendered performance—Maud’s sexualized interpretation of the Biblical Salome, as well as the trial itself a case study of gendered knowledge—my goal in this essay is to examine the nature of the layered performances surrounding the scandal in order address the question of how a
performance by a dancer whom many consider a “one-note” celebrity can be funneled into the unrealized performance of Wilde’s play, which is then transferred into a very real fear of espionage and subversion to a nation embroiled in a world war. What I propose is a sort of palimpsest of performances: beginning with Wilde’s original play and his subsequent trial in 1895, with Maud Allan’s dance performance, *Vision of Salome*, placed on top, and finally the scandal of J.T. Grein’s London production of *Salome* and the surrounding libel trial of Maud Allan placed on top of the first two, creating an accumulated performance that became indicative of the collective anxiety regarding secret/subversive behavior of *fin de siècle* Britain continuing through the First World War.

To this end, I find it useful to revisit Richard Schechner’s theory of performance as restored behavior. In his formative 1985 work, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Schechner attempts to create a cohesive theory that encompasses varied types of performance (social, dramatic, historical, and ritual, among others). Schechner claims that restored behavior—a restoration of some original event, no matter how many restorations removed from the original—is the basis of all performance (36). Significant to my discussion of performance in this context is Schechner’s succinct definition: “Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is ‘twice-behaved behavior’” (37). In a deprecating sense, Maud Allan’s performance of *The Vision of Salome* was indeed not performed for the first time, as it was considered highly derivative of previous Eastern-influenced provocative modern dances of Isadora Duncan and Mata Hari. In a critical sense, however, there were two performances that were performed to the “nth” time concerning *Salome*: the erotically-encoded story of Salome, and the hysteria concerning sexually-subversive behavior made public during the last years of the nineteenth century continuing through the interwar years.

In his effort to add scientific value to the burgeoning field of performance theory, Schechner explains restored behavior through several diagrams. One of these figures that I

---

8 Mata Hari’s execution in Britain for espionage in 1917 is more than coincidental. Both her association with foreign decadence and her mysterious persona, suggesting she had something to hide, set the stage for Maud Allan’s subsequent scandal.
have recreated is particularly useful in this discussion: as the Maud Allan scandal represents an intersection of historical, cultural, and dramatic performances, the visualization of how these varied performances may intersect and function in similar ways provides a framework on which I will position the events surrounding the scandal.

In the figure below, Schechner outlines how a performer achieves a certain performance, whether simply the performance of something or someone other than self (1→2), of the performance of a historical or fictional event/nonevent (see following page for diagram). Schechner explains that the diagram “shows restored behavior as either a projection of ‘my particular self’ (1→2), or a restoration of a historically verifiable past (1→3→4), or—most often—a restoration of a past that never was (1→5a→5b).” (39).

The most useful feature of the diagramming of performance here is the visualization of the multiplicity of performance. The subject (1) can never directly perform the event (4, 5b, or 5c), but follows a path of performance that leads to the restored behavior. As the title of Schechner’s book suggests, his theory as outlined in the diagram was a significant contribution to understanding the nature of dramatic performance as a part of—rather than a phenomenon caused by—the functioning of social or cultural performance. As I will discuss later, this performative path applies both to the story of Salome and the social drama that ensues due to its dramatization (and dramatizers).
Diagram of Richard Schechner’s Performance as Restored Behavior

The Scandal

The events revolving around the Salome scandal span from 1892 to 1918. In 1892, Oscar Wilde wrote Salome: Un Tragedie en un Acte in French to be performed by the much celebrated Sarah Bernhardt and to debut in London. The Lord Chamberlain refused to grant the license for the performance based on a 200-year-old ban against the dramatic portrayal of Biblical characters, and the British debut was cancelled. Though the 1918 producer, J.T. Grein, and Maud Allan would claim that that the play was simply a
dramatization of the Biblical story, Wilde’s interest in Salome and her seductive powers was clearly not confined to an interest in history. While the story as reported in the gospels of Matthew and Mark is brief and does not specifically name the character Salome, Wilde transformed her into a precocious, decadent, sexually charged young temptress.\(^9\)

In the interactions between the princess Salome and the imprisoned Jokanaan (John the Baptist), Maud Allan’s depiction of the character seems fitting (see fig. 2). Salome teases and tempts the bound Jokanaan, cataloguing his first attractive—then quickly repulsive—features:

"SALOME: Jokanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mover hath never mowed.

.....

SALOME: Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. ...It is of thy hair that I am enamoured, Jokanaan. Thy hair is like clusters of grapes.... (56)

.....

SALOME: thy hair is horrible. It is covered with mire and dust. ...It is thy mouth that I desire, Jokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory.... (57)"

The reversal of the young woman lusting after and obsessing over the body of a man under her control would be a disturbing reversal of the male gaze at the time, similar to the anxiety surrounding Manet’s *Olympia*.\(^10\) Perhaps what was also disturbing about Salome’s character was her unintelligibility. Is she in love with Jokanaan? Infatuated? Obsessed? Toying with him? Mirroring the language found in the Song of Solomon, the passage above differs in its indecipherability. The woman of “Song” also catalogues the beautiful parts of her beloved: “My beloved is white and ruddy...His head is like the

---

\(^9\) The versions repeated in Matthew and Mark are nearly identical in length and plot. Both versions come in at a mere twelve verses, and both are included as merely an aside to explain why Herod believes Jesus is John, risen from the dead.

\(^10\) Despite being in most respects a standard full nude, Manet’s painting of a prostitute named Olympia was banned from exhibition because of Olympia’s perceived direct eye contact with the viewer of the audience. In Olympia’s refusal to be placed a product for male consumption and thus disturbing the dynamic of the male gaze, the painting was criticized as pornographic as opposed to classical in nature.
finest gold, his locks straight and black as a raven…His mouth is like sweet honeycombs; his garments are lovely” (Song of Solomon 5:10-16). The difference between the lover in “Song” and Salome, however, is Salome’s devious inconsistency. Salome is an unreadable woman—not faithful or constant, but traitorous and savage.

Obsessed with fulfilling her lust for Jokanaan’s lips, Salome performs the infamous dance for Herod, and receives her wish as her reward. Lord Alfred Douglas’s statement during the Billing libel trial that Wilde intended Salome to be a young woman filled with lust and worked into such a fit of passion that could only be ended through sexual release does not seem far off in the context of the ending of the play. After Jokanaan’s head has been brought to Salome on a charger, Salome gives her final soliloquy:

SALOME: Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bit it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. ….What shall I do now, Jokanaan? Neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. …I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire. …Ah! Ah! (final ellipsis original to publication 117-18)

Though there are no stage directions for Salome at this point beyond her “seizing” the severed head, it is clear from Herod’s reaction to the scene Salome has just made that her interaction with the severed head is disturbing. Herod exclaims to Herodias that “[Salome] is altogether monstrous. In truth what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it was crime against an unknown God” (119). Salome has become a monstrosity, no longer intelligible as a woman. That what happens on stage is not described—especially given the fact that most people read the play instead of saw it performed, making the crime both unnamed and not visually-represented—indicates that Salome’s “great crime” is something akin to Illum crimen quod non nominandum est., often translated as “the crime that cannot be named.” Wilde’s lover (and later, his persecutor) Lord Alfred Douglas, translated the play into English and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley provided
sixteen illustrations for its publication (see figure 2). Though the play was published in several editions, it was not to be performed in Britain for the next 25 years due to British censorship laws. As is well known, Wilde’s trial for sodomy and subsequent sentence of imprisonment ended his literary career, tainted any work associated with his name for years to come, and sped the end of his life in 1900.

*The “Vision” of Salome*

Born Beulah Maud Allan Durrant in Toronto, Canada in 1873, Maud Allan’s life was colored by tragedy and scandal before her entrance into the world of performance. Allan’s brother, Theo was convicted in 1895 of a gruesome double murder of two young women who were found naked and either hacked to death or laid out for examination in the Durrant family’s local church (Theo was a medical student at the time). The event became a quickly became a tabloid favorite across North America, taking on the sadistic aura of the recently popular *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* tale. Theo was hanged for murder and the story quickly became legend.

Maud soon moved to Berlin and changed her name to simply “Maud Allan” to escape her family’s shame and to pursue her studies in dance. Heavily influenced by the famous Russian dancer Ida Rubenstein, as well as Isadora Duncan, Maud debuted in Berlin in 1905, performing dances choreographed to music by Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Schubert. While Maud received generally favorable reviews, it seems that her aptitude at public relations had as much to do with her success as her dancing ability. *The Vision of Salome* debuted in Vienna in 1906, cleverly scheduled to coincide with Mata Hari performing a similar Oriental-inspired dance in the city. *The Vision of Salome*’s Parisian debut soon after was scheduled at the same time as a run of Strauss’s opera, the libretto of which was based on Wilde’s original text (Hoare 74). When *Vision* appeared in London in 1908, it quickly became immensely popular. Maud gave a private performance for

---

11 Though Wilde was not completely satisfied with Douglas’s translation and later had the play translated by someone else, for the purposes of this work I will use the original edition, which was the edition submitted as evidence in the Maud Allan libel trial.
Edward VII, and was quickly ushered in to London’s upper crust of intellectual society, making such friends as Margot Asquith, wife of former Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, among others of London’s avant-garde.

While *The Vision of Salome* made Maud Allan an international celebrity and spurred performance tours all over Europe and America, Maud’s attempts to perform other dance acts fell flat, both critically and in popularity. Realizing that her fifteen minutes were soon coming to an end, Maud sought and accepted the eponymous role of Wilde’s play, which producer and critic J.T. Grein was attempting to produce in London in 1917.

*The Conspiracy*

At the same time, a right-wing Member of Parliament, Noel Pemberton-Billing, was plotting a scandal that would soon destroy any hope Maud Allan had of reviving a legitimate performing career. In his focused efforts to exterminate what he saw as the decadent German infiltration of British morality, Billing befriended Captain Harold Spencer, and the pair came up with a conspiracy theory that would enflame the already raw nerves of a nation four years into a catastrophic war with no end in sight. Billing, with Spencer’s help, began actively propagating the story that an extensive German plot to infiltrate the highest levels of government and society had been uncovered. On 26 January 1918, Billing wrote an article for the reactionary publication *The Imperialist* titled, “The Forty-Seven Thousand.” In the article, Billing writes:

There exists in the Cabinet Noir of a certain German Prince a book compiled by the Secret Service from reports of German agents who have infested this country for the past 20 years, agents so vile and spreading such debauchery and such lasciviousness as only German minds can conceive and only German bodies execute. (qtd. in Hoare 57)

The alleged conspiracy was that this “certain German Prince” had in possession a black book with the names of 47,000 British citizens who had been lost to “Sodom and Lesbia,” and could either be blackmailed by Germany into espionage, or were already agents and already in the process of infecting the British public with their perversion (the exact
details of how “perversion” directly translated into treason were a bit fuzzy, though perhaps unimportant). This association of Teutonic culture with homosexuality seemed less absurd and convoluted at the time than it does to our post Third Reich, post Cold War sensibilities. Phillip Hoare explains that there were allegations that the Kaiser himself was a part of a sexually subversive group of political leaders. When this was exposed, the Kaiser distanced himself from his homosocial group of advisors and was left only staunch militarists to advise him. It has been suggested that this contributed to the outbreak of the war. The German leader’s connection with homosexuality, along with the perception of the decadence of German art and culture, led to the general belief of a German society permissive of any sort of sexual deviance, prompting Marcel Proust to comment that “Do you speak German?” came to be code for “are you homosexual?” (Hoare 42).

Billing continued to spread rumors as fact through his own small newspaper press, the *Vigilante*, that the enemy was at the (bedroom) doorstep. Several months later on March 23, Billing wrote in the *Vigilante* that “Germany has found that diseased women cause more casualties than bullets. Controlled by their Jew-agents, Germany maintains in Britain a self-supporting—even profit-making—army of prostitutes…” that would weaken the British troops and population through physical disease as well as moral corruption (qtd. in Hoare 92). This only contributed to the rising hysteria of a nation looking for an explanation for the massive losses suffered during the war.

Billing escalated his accusations by naming names of the supposed 47,000 in the hope that someone would bring a libel suit against him and provide the stage needed to create the social drama. He found a willing participant in Maud Allan. On February 16, the *Vigilante* published a short article under the title, “The Cult of the Clitoris”:

To be a member of Maud Allan’s private performances in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* one has to apply to a Miss Valetta, of 9, Duke Street, Adelphi, W.C. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt they would secure the names of several of the first 47,000.

After reading the article, Maud and the producer of the performances, J.T. Grein, filed a libel suit against Billing.
By 1918, four years of war had eaten away at national patriotism and gave way to hatred, xenophobia, and suspicion. With rumors of the Germans suing for peace, there was talk of a conspiracy to force Lloyd George out of office and replace him with a more militarist leader. This scenario played out during Maud Allan’s libel case against Billing. The thought was, that by stirring up suspicions against the leftist (and more often associated with the decadence of London’s art scene) members of government, enough public sentiment could be brought against Lloyd George and his backers. Billing was supposedly a part of this plot, and the various segments of British government lined up accordingly—the right wing generals directly backed Billing, providing him with information and instructions throughout the trial, and it is thought that Lloyd George and others (most directly Asquith) were backing Maud Allan in order to discredit and get rid of the persistent Billing.

The Trial

The trial proceeded in May 1918 at London’s Old Bailey. Though Maud Allan gave a dramatic performance suitable to her career on the stand, the courtroom and Maud were taken aback at one of Billing’s first questions. After asking her to state her full—not stage—name, Billing produced Celebrated Criminal Cases of America and asked Maud to confirm the facts stated therein that: a) she was the sister of Theo Durrant, b) he was executed for murdering two women, and c) the women’s bodies were “outraged” after death. Maud had failed to inform her legal team of these facts, which let them unprepared to refute Billing’s claim that Maud was genetically disposed to perversion. Billing’s next line of questioning sought to implicate Maud directly as a sexual deviant. Referring to the offending article, Billing questioned Maud if she knew what “clitoris” meant. She said she did from a medical text. Billing responded: “Are you aware, Miss Allan, that out of twenty-four people who were shown that libel, including many professional men, only one of them, who happened to be a barrister, understood what it

12 Though the intended effect of “outraged” was no doubt the implication of rape or sexual molestation, the bodies were not sexually assaulted.
meant?” (qtd. in Hoare 115). Maud’s knowledge of her own anatomy (but maybe more importantly, of other women’s anatomy) confirmed notion that this cult was indeed a “secret exclusive club” that excluded normative (read transparent, intelligible, patriotic) heterosexuality.\(^\text{13}\) The defense’s own original use and knowledge of such language should have raised some suspicions.

Though the black book itself could not, for various convenient reasons, be produced, Billing and Spencer continued to call witnesses to suggest the names of admirals, politicians, and even Edward VII’s mistress as being represented in it pages. To complete the image of the mass conspiracy, Billing’s final two star witnesses served to draw a direct connection between Oscar Wilde as convicted homosexual and Maud Allan as moral pervert. Dr. Serell Cooke, a tuberculosis specialist who had recently read Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, took the stand to testify that many sexual degenerates cover up their perversions with flowery language and call it spiritual (Hoare 145). This accusation was in direct reference to Wilde, but also could be applied to Maud Allan’s defense of the play as having artistic and historical merit.\(^\text{14}\)

The final and most anticipated witness was Wilde’s “Bosie” himself. After converting to Catholicism and distancing himself from Wilde’s legend of decadence both through multiple libel cases and continuing slander of Wilde’s memory, Lord Alfred Douglas testified that he was informed of what the play was to signify when Wilde was writing it, which was a young girl becoming sexually-enthralled by the sadistic image of the prophet’s decapitated head. After answering affirmatively that Wilde was a sexual and moral pervert, Douglas added that he believed Wilde to have “a diabolical influence on everyone he met. I think he is the greatest force for evil that has appeared in Europe during the last 350 years,” by which he meant, since the Protestant Reformation (qtd. in Hoare 152). Though Douglas’s own association with the writer was aired in order to

---

\(^\text{13}\) Also of contended meaning at a point during the trial was the word “orgasm.” When Captain Spencer stated that Salome’s dance in Wilde’s play was meant to induce orgasm, the prosecutor questioned, “Some unnatural vice?” “No, it is a function of the body,” replied Spencer (qtd. in Hoare 132).

\(^\text{14}\) Hoare notes that there is evidence to suggest that Wilde was indeed influenced by Krafft-Ebing’s work while writing *Salome*. Of particular significance to this case was Krafft-Ebing’s suggestion that religion and sex function similarly in that they both can cause heightened states of excitement.
discredit him as a witness, Billing’s scheme (secretly engineered by the King’s Counsel) was successful. Surprisingly, in the closing statements, Billing attempted to deny that he had ever accused Maud Allan herself of lesbianism; he claimed that “The Cult of the Clitoris” applied only to the 47,000 and the term was never intended to be applied to Allan herself. After deliberating for an hour and 25 minutes, the jury returned a verdict of “Not Guilty” for Billing.

**Salome as Restored Behavior**

To return to Schechner’s theory of performance, it is significant in the context of *Salome* that Schechner explained restored behavior as: “Put in personal terms, restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I am someone else’ or ‘as if I am “beside myself,ˮ or ‘not myself,ˮ as when in a trance” (emphasis added, 38). Maud Allan’s trance-like dance of Salome brings together the notion of both sexuality and spiritually as performance. In Schechner’s terms, I suggest that *Salome*/Maud Allan as Salome would look something like the diagram below. Schechner gives the example of how “the historical Richard III” is not as important to a producer or director of Shakespeare’s play as “the logic of Shakespeare’s text” just as the historical or even mythical basis for the story of Salome is not as important in examining the meaning of either Oscar Wilde’s restorative reinvention or Allan’s provocative interpretation as the author or dancer’s “logic” (39).

In my application of Schechner’s theory of restored behavior to the Maud Allan scandal, I place the original event (as recorded in the New Testament) as a mythical “non event” while the “true” story of Salome, whatever it may be, is untouched and unattainable. Even the closest we can come to the original event of Salome—the translation from the original Aramaic—is only a shadow of the cultural meanings the story has accumulated over time. For this reason, I label the event as “mythical,” though this does not affect the significance of the restored behavior.
I place the production of Wilde’s *Salome* in the subjunctive future quadrant as the unattained future performance; although small, private performances of the play were held prior to these events in England, the play was not performed to a public audience as intended in 1918. As seen in the graph, Allan’s performance of the legend of Salome (1→5a) is then transferred into “The Vision of Salome” (5a→5b). This accumulation of performances prompts the interruption of the ultimate performance (5c) due to Maud becoming an easy target for Pemberton-Billing’s accusations.

By placing these events within the same framework of performance, I hope to accomplish two goals. The first is to provide a visual timeline of the performances that transpired and lead to the hysteria that culminated in the Cult of the Clitoris. Each
iteration feeds into the next: Beulah Maud Allan Durrant moves to Europe and becomes the sensational Maud Allan, Maud Allan the dancer performs a version of the mythical Salome in her “Vision of Salome,” Maud as Salome performs the Wildean Salome, and all of these iterations channel into ultimate accusation of the Cult. By using this sort of chart instead of a linear timeline, we see the convoluted nature of the final scandal, and we can also see the “bigger picture” in retrospect. What culminated in a national scandal of sedition, cults, and infiltration had its root in Canadian dancer who performed second-rate versions of Isadora Duncan’s groundbreaking choreography.\(^\text{15}\)

The second goal of this charting is to map the palimpsest of performances I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. To fully chart the performative nature of the scandal would be beyond the scope of this paper and would likely become less useful as a visual aide in its complexity; it would, however, necessarily begin prior to 1900 to include Oscar Wilde’s public performances as a gay man and as a representative of fin de siècle decadence that Pemberton-Billing so reviled. It would include his public relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, which was reiterated on the witness stand, and which contributed to the association of his works with moral perversion to late nineteenth and early twentieth century readers and audiences. Contemporaneous to what is represented on the chart would be the highly performative libel trial, the events of which I described earlier. And, finally, the backdrop to all of this is the First World War.

What is most significant about the web of performances I have outlined is the inextricable nature of social and dramatic performance, which Schechner called his 1977 study, “social drama and staged drama.” This loop can be seen clearly in the contemporary example of the play The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman. Stemming from the social drama of the beating death of Matthew Shepard, the cast of the project interviewed community members in Laramie, Wyoming in order to perform a play based

\(^{15}\) As a purely objective critic, of course, one cannot know with any certainty the true value of Allan’s performances, which leads to the problem of writing about performance at all: all performance, in its very nature is ephemeral and becomes something else after it has passed. My comments here are based on newspaper reviews, as well as subsequent choreographed acts by Maud Allan—acts that incorporated less scandalous costuming and no Biblical reference—which were tepidly received, both critically and popularly.
on the interviews. The process continued when the play was performed in Laramie, Wyoming and the response of the community was taken into consideration and incorporated into later performed elsewhere. The social/staged drama loop then cycles back because the staged drama led to social activism and political action, and, later, a film version of the project.

This cycle is perhaps less clear in the Maud Allan scandal. In the larger sense, the original social drama is the premodern story legend of Salome, which was then funneled through various Western religious and social ideologies over the next millennium, thus becoming manifest in paintings, plays, and music as the sexualized, deviant image with which Salome has come to be associated. These performances, cycled through Western cultural consciousness, have been reiterated as Wilde’s Salome as well as Allan’s Vision of Salome, which both position the protagonist as a coquettish, spoiled, hypersexualized femme fatale. These staged performances cycle ultimately into the social drama of both the censoring of Wilde’s original production as well as the Maud Allan libel case.

**Conclusion**

The events as they occurred leading up to the trial of 1917 could only have been possible for a public that was three years into a war of unprecedented horror, and was facing possible defeat and surrender. This is true in a very direct sense: historians now suspect that both the defense and the prosecution of the case were backed by disparate political interests, including former PM Asquith, various members of Parliament, and Lloyd George’s cabinet. In a more nuanced sense, however, Maud Allan as subversive sapphic became a site of such intense cultural paranoia due to the “crisis of masculinity”—more appropriately “the crisis of gender”—that was beginning to take hold during the last years of the war. While soldiers were being shipped home with missing limbs and severely wounded psyches, the male body became a site of fragility and ephemerality. In this first modern war, national character and brute masculine strength had little meaning in the face of mustard gas, machine guns, and warplanes. Within the national psyche a shift was taking place: maleness no longer represented stability and
normativity; instead the male body was the site of disability: physical, social, and psychic. As Sandra Gilbert notes of this shift, “while men were now invalid and maybe in-valid, their sisters were triumphant survivors and destined inheritors” (434). The literal threat to the male body was internalized as a threat to maleness, an Oedipal threat of castration to masculinity.

Another contributing factor to the increasing instability of masculinity was the anxiety concerning homosexuality in the armed forces during World War I. At a time when massive numbers of young men would live and train together, often abroad, apart from traditional kinship structures for years at a time, homosocial relationships among soldiers was an accepted and expected occurrence. What made this war different than others in terms of homosociality was the cultural precursor to the war, the fin de siècle decadence that Wilde came to represent. The fear that homosociality would slip into homosexuality was clear in the unprecedented organized persecution of homosexuality within the British army. Hoare notes that “[t]he minimum sentence if convicted of sodomy, was ten years; the maximum was life, and officers found guilty of either offence [sodomy or sexual acts in public] would be cashiered before being sentenced” (28). The proliferation of court-martials for indecency from 1914-19 points to a larger fear, originating in the Wildean decadence of a two decades earlier, of British masculinity itself becoming a casualty of war.

The fact that the army statutes hold homosexual sex as an equal offence to public sex is suggestive of the proliferation of public non-normative gendered performances leading up to and continuing after the war. Though Wilde was of course not the first openly gay man in England, he became emblematic of male gay culture entering into the public sphere for the first time.\textsuperscript{16} As publicizing was further manifested through homosocial and homosexual behavior within the ranks, the threat of the queer male body (as embodied before the war through Wilde) was transferred to the queer female body,

\textsuperscript{16} And, of course, Wilde was not openly gay at all as we consider the status today (often marked by a public “coming out”). However, his public expression of decadence and nonnormative masculinity certainly marked him as other-than heteronormative.
which became embodied by Maud Allan, among others.

What better site to place sexualized anxieties of “invalid or in-valid” masculinity than on to the non-normative female body? This placement is represented simultaneously by Maud Allan’s libel case and Maud Allan as Salome. Maud Allan as dancer and member of the social elite became the target of this anxiety because it seemed she was hiding something. It is due to her hyperfeminine performance and feminine persona that her lesbianism became so threatening when revealed. While sexologists had recently identified female masculinity as the outward marker of “inversion,” Allan’s hyperbolized feminine gender performance left no “clues” to her sapphic status. If “they” are everywhere and can go largely undetected, then couldn’t Billing’s story of the “German agents who have infested this country” and have gone undetected also be true? The anxiety surrounding the threat of infiltration is manifold: the Maud Allan case might suggest that the “enemy” in its various forms has already infiltrated the social and political elite, as well as the gendered body.

Maud Allan as Salome represented an equally if not more terrifying image of the threat to masculinity. In Wilde’s play, Salome becomes a literal “Man-eater”: after she takes possession of Jokanaan’s severed appendage (a head only in the most literal sense), she exclaims, “I will bite [thy mouth] with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit” (Wilde 117). This sexualized imagery is made even more grotesque by the Beardsley illustration of
“The Climax” (see figure 5), which pictures Salome savagely grasping Jokanaan’s severed head, while blood oozes into a puddle on the ground, much as the juice of ripe fruit would trickle out of its pierced skin. And later, as she is cataloguing the parts of Jokanaan’s body that misses, Salome confesses, “I love thee yet, Jokanaan, I love thee only….I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for the body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire” (118, ellipsis original). In Salome’s literal and figurative consumption of the male body, we see the location of sexualized anxiety turned to sexualized anger. While Maud Allan’s embodiment of this image in “The Vision of Salome” may have worked to her advantage in its appeal to a freer, “Orientalized,” hyperfeminine sexuality, Maud found herself at the unfortunate intersection of sexual, cultural, and national Otherness and wartime paranoia when she embodied the Salome of Oscar Wilde’s creation. Maud Allan as the visible proof of the Cult of the Clitoris became a signifier of a female sexuality that was poised to consume and destroy normative heterosexual masculinity.

As evidenced by the court’s alleged ignorance of the definition of “clitoris,” The Cult of the Clitoris represented a danger because of the link with lesbianism, but also because of the association with an active female sexuality. While female sexuality in Victorian England was most often considered passive—one need only thing of Queen Victoria’s advice to her daughter to “close your eyes and think of England”—the notion of the clitoris indicated a turn toward a female sexuality not dependent on men, i.e., not based purely on penile penetration. The clitoris suggested a more aggressive sexuality as a phallic counterpart in women. The image of Maud Allan dancing around a man’s severed head combined with the headline “Cult of the Clitoris” (made most public by the media coverage of the trial), was enough to position Allan as a (literally) thinly-veiled threat to British masculinity. Maud Allan’s performance of exposing her own feminine body on stage in a sexualized solo dance, while undeniably rooted in heterosexual desire, also signaled a shift toward the inscrutability of female sexuality. The embodiment of

---

17 This imagery also simultaneously suggests ejaculation, which is supported by the title of the print, “The Climax.” Though the notion of female ejaculation at the time would have been unheard of, one wonders of what comprised Beardsley’s own sexual knowledge.
heterosexual desire juxtaposed with an icon of sapphism fed in to the fear of the inscrutable enemy in their midst.

Though the female body as a site of secrecy is an age-old theme in British literature, the female body as a site of sedition was a terrifying realization. While secrecy implies an unknowing, yet a possibility of discovery, sedition implies conspiracy, the planning and executing of subversion by a group of likeminded individuals from within. As inversion and sapphism became more widely-known terms, female sexuality as the site of national anxiety in a time of international crisis fed the flames of the gender crises in the years to follow. Within the context of modernist female drag, the Maud Allan scandal and the surrounding events were a precursor, a stepping-stone of non-normative gender performances made public.
Chapter 3

Trans(gendered)formation: Orlando as Elegy

[Daphne] cried “O help me,
...Change and destroy the body which has given
Too much delight!” And hardly had she finished,
When her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts
Were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves,...
Everything gone except her grace, her shining.
...and the god / Exclaimed: “Since you can never be my bride,
My tree at least you shall be! /...let the laurel
Guard and watch over the oak, and as my head
Is always youthful, let the laurel always
Be green and shining!”

~Ovid’s Metamorphoses (Book 1, l.544-66)

The fascination many scholars have with Virginia Woolf’s Orlando seems to lie in its refusal to be categorized. From its publication in 1928, Woolf herself had trouble convincing the public of her intended genre. In a diary entry dated September 22, 1928, Woolf writes of the confusion:

But it is a novel, says Miss Ritchie. But it is called biography on the title page, they say. It will have to go to the Biography shelf. I doubt therefore that we shall do more than cover expenses—a high price to pay for the fun of calling it biography. (“Diary” 198)

Along with novel and biography, scholars have since added satire, historiography, feminist fiction, and transgender life-writing to the list of possible categories. I propose an addition to these likely genres: elegy. I make no claim that Woolf herself would have agreed with this categorization. As Suzanne Raitt points out, Woolf intended Orlando in part as a “light-hearted comedy” (30). Despite the novel’s clear satirical tone, there is also, just as present, a melancholia that permeates Orlando’s search for “Life, a lover!” Orlando’s mutable sex and ambiguous gender performance often add to the parodic nature of the form of the novel, but also suggests the parodic nature of gender itself. Woolf resists the notion of fixed representability by creating a character who, of no effort of his
own and with no apparent cause, transforms, metamorphoses. It is through the trope of metamorphosis that *Orlando* becomes also a study in mourning, unlimited by gender, time, nature, or representability.

In his study of the elegy, Peter Sacks identifies the conventions of the genre as “pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity (particularly the sexual myths, and their relation to the sexuality of the mourner), the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection” (2). Though one could easily apply any of these conventions with varying success to the form or content of *Orlando*, it is Sacks’ identification of the vegetation deity in elegy that is particularly illuminating to the gendered metamorphosis of Orlando.

Early in the novel, we are given an image of Orlando as a young boy attempting to compose a poem:

At last…he came to a halt. He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more. (16-17)

Though he writes furiously in his notebook of “Vice” and “Misery,” he is unable to proceed once nature enters his imagination. This passage is doubly significant for the reading of *Orlando* as an elegy. Woolf’s purposeful use of the laurel bush in the context of an attempt at poetry is an allusion to the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Daphne’s father, the river-god Peneus, transforms Daphne into a laurel tree to escape Apollo’s impassioned pursuits. Realizing the metamorphosis, Apollo mourns the loss of Daphne in her female, human form by making the laurel an emblem, representing, among other virtues, poethood. Orlando’s own metamorphosis in physical form is closely tied to discourses of nature and, just as Daphne in her altered form, Orlando remains in essence, the same. Further, that Orlando “could write no more” when he sees the laurel bush, the sign of poethood, indicates that Orlando is halted in his poetic venture because he has not yet properly ascended to the role of Poet. In order to join the ranks of the great poets
throughout history, the Poet must first figuratively replace his predecessor by mourning him through the writing of an elegy.

Sacks views the elegy as well as the story of Daphne and Apollo within the framework of the Freudian model of mourning. The elegy is a work, he says, both in the sense of a text, and in Freud’s concept of “the work of mourning” (Sacks 1). Within this model, the laurel tree as a signification of Daphne becomes a substitute for Apollo’s lost love object. Sacks explains that “[o]nly when Apollo turns to the projected founding of a sign, the laurel wreath, does he appear to accept his loss” (Sacks 4). Apollo’s turning from Daphne to a sign of her indicates, then, Apollo’s working through the loss a part of the successful mourning process. Significantly, Sacks points out that Apollo is exceptional in his “success” in mourning among his fellow grievers in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. He parenthetically notes that “[t]he fact that they are, after all, gods may tell us something of Ovid’s pessimism regarding the difficulty of their task” (6).

That only two of a multitude of gods possess the potential to grieve “successfully” may speak more to the inherent flaw in the binary of successful/unsuccessful mourning than to the impossibility of the mourning process itself. By any account, Orlando would be an unconventional elegy. There is no named lost love object. For that matter, the identity of the elegist him or herself is debatable. If Orlando is a part of the canon of works of mourning created by many modernist writers during the interwar period, however, Sacks’ conventions of elegy serve to shed light on what is being mourned and how Orlando’s resistance to resolution and representation become indicative of a modernist melancholia.

As discussed in the first chapter, Freud’s economic model for grief suggests that reconciliation with loss is the only way to grieve successfully and allowing one to lead a productive life. This presents a problem for many of the authors and fictional characters I discuss, for whom normal and/or institutionalized means of mourning are unavailable or, as we see in Orlando, for whom representability itself stands in the way of replacing lost

---

18 Among successful grievers, Sacks names Apollo’s mourning of Daphne as well as Pan’s mourning of Syrinx, who transforms to marsh reeds, thus giving Pan the basis for his pipe. The multitude of unsuccessful grievers includes Cynus, Pyramus, Thisbe, Egeria, Niobe, and Orpheus, who “fail to in invent or accept an adequate figure for what they have lost” (Sacks 6).
love objects. Within this context, I propose instead using Patricia Rae’s concept of “resistant” mourning in order to allow us to view *Orlando* as a work of mourning without requiring a reconciliation, which Woolf herself resists in the very form of the book and her intentionally unresolved ending.

Within the scope of *Orlando* as an unconventional elegy, it is useful to turn again to Ovid’s account of Daphne’s transformation. In his moment of ultimate suffering over the loss of his beloved Daphne and her metamorphosis into a laurel tree, Apollo exclaims, “Let the laurel / Guard and watch over the oak, and as my head / Is always youthful, let the laurel always / Be green and shining!” Throughout Orlando’s centuries of life, it is “The Oak Tree”—both the poem and its physical representation on Orlando’s estate—that represents Orlando’s struggle with figuration, both through words and through his own changing physical manifestation. In light of Apollo’s elegiac declaration of the laurel watching over the oak, we see in *Orlando* a reversal of this convention—the laurel, the sign of traditional (read patriarchal) poethood, is subordinated to the oak tree, the document Orlando carries in his male then female bosom, and the tree that provides refuge throughout the nearly 400 years of Orlando’s life the biographer covers.

It is the oak tree in both of its manifestations that provide the 30-year old Orlando safe haven after his betrayal by Nick Greene. Notably, the figure of Nick Greene appears first as a contemporary of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Donne, and then, in the Victorian age as a famous literary critic. Greene becomes the personification of “Glawr”: as he explains it, “the spur of noble minds” and “fine writing” (90). Woolf’s mocking of “Glawr” is evident in Greene’s aping of true genius; first, it is Cicero and the Greeks who possess the secret of “Glawr,” and then, 300 years later, he claims it is the Elizabethan writers he once mocked who, alone, understood “Glawr.” That Greene aspires to “imitate [Cicero’s] style so that you couldn’t tell the difference between us” suggests that Woolf is skeptical of the glorifying of traditional, i.e., male, patriarchal, literary genius.

After reading Greene’s biting satire of him, Orlando performs a sort of purification through fire, during which he “burnt in a great conflagration fifty-seven poetical works, only retaining ‘The Oak Tree,’ which was his boyish dream” (96). This process strips
Orlando of what he calls “a vast mountain of illusion” (97). The idea of illusion as a theme of existence returns throughout the text: literature is illusive (and elusive) to Orlando at this point in his life (Orlando calls all literature a “farce”), just as gender will come to be an illusion for Orlando later; Orlando is after all, unaltered in identity and “precisely as he had been” after he changes sexes (138).

Woolf’s pairing of gender and literature as illusions suggests two things: first, just as the illusive nature of Orlando’s gender is not an obstacle, but rather another vehicle through which he gains varied life experiences, literature as illusion does not necessarily carry with it the negative implications of a lie or deception—literature is deceiving to the point that all language is a deception, a necessary but often hindering tool of self definition. The second thing that Woolf’s positioning of gender and literature as illusions suggests is the indelible connection between literature, gender, and loss. I established in the introduction that all gender(ing) is melancholic to the extent that both melancholia and gender formation involve an internalization of the original lost love object. From the Lacanian perspective, one’s psychosexual development is dependent on one’s entrance into language. This entrance into language necessarily involves loss: for Lacan, it is the loss of the Real.

Orlando’s failed foray into literature—his attempt at representability through language—causes him to be thrown into a melancholia from which he does not recover until his transformation. After the dramatic burning of the volumes of poetry, Orlando “flung himself under his favourite oak tree and felt that if he need never speak to another man or woman…he might make out what years remained to him in tolerable content” (96-7). Orlando burns the volumes of poetry—the form associated with laurel—and keeps only “The Oak Tree,” a vague work that does not seem to take any one literary form, but becomes a testament to the phases of Orlando’s life by the end of the novel. In his desire to “never speak,” again, Orlando turns from “The Oak Tree” as language (the poem), to the literal oak tree. Just as Apollo mourns by turning from Daphne to the signification of Daphne in the laurel wreath, so too does Orlando begin a process of mourning by turning from the lost object—literature—to its signification in the oak tree.
In this initial turn toward melancholia, Orlando knows what has been lost—his poetic aspirations—but not what he has lost in the dissolution of his ability to write. After the incident of Nick Greene’s “Visit to a Nobleman in the Country” coupled with his previous loss of Sasha, the Russian princess, Orlando sinks into a melancholia that lasts for centuries. Though these specific events can be used as markers in Orlando’s work of mourning, Woolf describes him from the beginning as having dark inclinations. Even during his passionate affair with Sasha as a young nobleman in James’ court, Orlando inexplicably falls into deep bouts of depression. In the midst of their exploration of the carnival King James has created over the frozen Thames during the “Great Frost,” Orlando would fall into one of his moods of melancholy; the sight of the old woman hobbling over the ice might be the cause of it, or nothing; and would fling himself face downwards on the ice and look into the frozen waters and think of death. For the philosopher is right who says that nothing thicker than a knife’s blade separates happiness from melancholy. (45)

This vacillation between happiness and melancholy, between satire and elegy, returns repeatedly throughout the novel. Soon after the incident quoted above, Sasha and Orlando see a production of Shakespeare’s Othello, after which Orlando again falls into a melancholic mood. Tears streaming down his face, Orlando thinks to himself that, “[r]uin and death, he thought, cover all. The life of man ends in the grave. Worms devour us” (57). Though there is no tone of satire in Orlando’s dark thought, Woolf’s jokes here serve again to blur the line between satire and elegy: death, of course, will not cover Orlando, neither does he follow a typical path to the grave; in fact, his life as a man ends not in the grave, but in a Turkish palace.

In this attempt to place Orlando within the framework of the elegy, it is important to acknowledge the work many scholars have done to examine the novel as a work of queer and also transgender narrative. My belief is that these categorizations along with that of elegy are not mutually exclusive, but are mutually beneficial in illuminating the phenomenon of modernist female drag as a way of pushing against the
limits of representability as a resistant measure to the often heteronormative, codifying means available through institutionalized public mourning. The trope of the oak tree as representative of nontraditional elegy also lends itself to the debate over essentialism that Woolf satirizes. Christy L. Burns points out Woolf’s reference to John Locke’s philosophy of essential identity in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Burns notes that, in Locke’s use of the “oak” as a metaphor for human identity, “the exterior’s alteration (being ‘lopp’d,’ amputated, or—as figuratively in *Orlando*—castrated) does not effect any change in the person’s interior self” (348). It is perhaps due to the parodic nature of the text that is difficult to tell if, indeed, no interior change has taken place. While the most fantastic change does occur to Orlando’s body, Orlando does, in fact, change (both as a character, and significantly, in her gendered apparel) during the documented 400 years of his biography. The biographer seems to corroborate Locke’s and Burns’ positions. When the man Orlando awakes from his seven-day trance, he finds that his body has been transformed: “Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (138).

During the moment of realization, Orlando is “precisely as he had been.” Yet, as in much transgender and transsexual life-writing, Orlando’s physical alteration, while not altering his interior self, is the necessary step for the altering of Orlando’s future interaction with the world.

What, then, are we to make of Orlando’s biological transformation from a man into a woman? To turn again to my positioning of the Lacanian entrance into language as the primary loss, it is particularly significant that, at the point of Orlando’s transformation, he arrives into the world as a woman in a way suggestive of a child entering subjecthood. After a pseudo-gestation period of seven days in a dark, warm room, Orlando wakes with a blast of trumpets, announcing “The Truth!” (137). Though Orlando is, in essence, the same, she re-enters the world with a reawakened subjectivity. As we are unable to remember our own existence prior to our entrance into subjecthood, Orlando’s memory “went back through all the events of her past life” yet, “[s]ome haziness there may have
been, as if a few dark drops had fallen into the clear pool of memory; certain things had become a little dimmed (138). Orlando’s process of self-recognition consists of the moment in which she “Looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (138). In this version of the Lacanian mirror stage, Orlando identifies her own image as herself, and then reenters the world.

The important difference here is that Orlando’s recognition of herself as I in her reflection back as a coherent subject is not fraught, as in the Lacanian mirror stage, but is notably without any discomposure. Though the trumpets announce “The Truth!”, this announcement is not a shocking, anxiety-inducing shift away from primary narcissism, but a brief acknowledgement of a shift in embodiment. Though this shift represents an elegiac “beginning again,” it is without the angst of moving away from the disordered self. The “truth,” then, that Woolf seems to suggest, does not lie in biological sex, but in how we treat gender discursively. Orlando is the same—her meaning has changed only due to the cultural baggage attached to gender. The ease with which Orlando transforms also points to a process of mourning that, unlike Daphne’s transformation, is not destructive. To begin again, Orlando does not distance himself from his original state, but internalizes it (as far as Orlando’s interior is always already stable) and moves forward.

Significantly, this moment and the proceeding days Orlando spends with the Turkish gypsies are marked by silence. When Orlando is again quoted, it is with an awkwardness, a sense that words cannot adequately express one’s perception of the world. As she sits around the campfire with the Turkish nomads and views a beautiful sunset over the hills, Orlando exclaims:

“How good to eat!”
(The gypsies have no word for ‘beautiful.’ This is the nearest.)
All the young men and women burst out laughing uproariously. The sky
good to eat, indeed! (142)

Though the gypsies recognize this outburst as the foreign “disease” of a love of nature, it also points to the difficulty of representing experience through language. It is after this,
Orlando’s (re)entrance into language, that she again feels compelled to compose in her manuscript, “The Oak Tree,” which she has retained throughout her now centuries of existence.

As Orlando is now infected with this foreign “disease” of the need to express nature through language, Orlando is compelled to return to England. Though it seems that her life with the gypsies allowed her to remain somewhat androgynous (the Turkish robes are of the kind worn by both men and women, and Orlando participates in both basket-weaving and goat herding, duties of women and men, respectively), her return to English society necessitates a more rigid feminine gender performance in clothing and social behavior. As a woman, Orlando soon realizes that neither she nor the world’s reaction to hers is as it had been.

In her quest for “Life, a lover,” Orlando strips herself of feminine accoutrements to reenter London society appearing as a man (186). With the image of Orlando dressed in “her neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary nobleman” on her way to London, the biographer comments that:

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with [certain susceptibilities asserting themselves or diminishing]. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us. (187)

Whoever the unspecified “they” are, Orlando’s clothes—and, I would argue, her entire masculine gender performance during these outings—signal a metamorphosis from Orlando’s previous self as a country gentleman that is not limited to outward appearance or biology. Woolf refuses to answer the question of constructed versus essentialist self because this is not the main issue of Orlando’s metamorphosis. Orlando is not limited by gender, at least not gender alone, but by her (in)ability to fit within the limits of representability.

In this respect, Orlando can only be used to suggest a pattern of ambivalence to the essentialist self in relation to transgender narratives. As a genre, however, transgender narrative does shed life on Orlando’s relationship to laws of “nature.” In her study of
transgender narratives, Melanie Taylor compares *Orlando* with transgender life-writing, noting that within the conventions of this genre, Woolf “emerges as the ideal sex reassignment surgeon, not only refashioning existing materials into new although reassuringly familiar shapes but effecting complete biological authenticity” (202). Taylor is careful to point out, however, that a direct analogy between *Orlando* and transgender life-writing would be unfair to both, noting that the main and most obvious difference between the two is that “there is no indication that Orlando is unhappy with his body or its designated gender prior to the transformation and…there is no real suggestion of agency in that process” (Taylor 203). By way of distinguishing *Orlando* as other than transgender narrative yet genealogically related in genre, Taylor’s argument points back to the broader literary phenomenon I have already established as modernist female drag performance.

Turning back to Peter Sacks’ conventions of the elegy, Orlando’s female drag performance becomes relevant again to the mourning process in the form or her altered sexuality. In discussing the altered sexuality of the mourner as illustrated in the myth of Apollo and Daphne, Sacks explains:

> [O]ne of the most profound issues to beset any mourner and elegist is his surviving yet painfully altered sexuality. Although it is crucial for the mourner to assert a continued sexual impulse, that assertion must be qualified, even repressively transformed or rendered metaphorical, by the awareness of loss and mortality. Indeed, our consoling images are most often figures for an immortal but metaphorized sexual force. (7)

Sacks speaks here specifically of the alteration in the object of desire—Apollo and Pan are mourning the transfiguration of the original love objects (Daphne and Syrinx) into the altered objects, represented by their inventions of the laurel wreath and the reed pipe, respectively. The same convention can, with little difficulty, be applied to Orlando’s altered self. I have previously identified the object lost as the inspiration to write. As with many instances of melancholia, this central loss is compounded by subsequent losses, both of the self as it used to be as well as exterior losses. The loss for Orlando is not a loss of sexuality or desire. As Taylor, points out, Orlando does not seem to be
unhappy with his designated gender prior to his metamorphosis, nor does she seem to be
unhappy as a direct result of her new gender. The important thing in Sacks' description is
that the sexuality of the mourner, while altered, remains intact. But it must be
transformed in order to continue.

Woolf examines this continuity of Orlando’s sexuality through the trope of nature,
both Orlando’s connection to nature through her love of the country and her life-long
work of “The Oak Tree,” as well as the laws of “nature” that sexologists such as
Havelock Ellis were drudging up in emerging discourses of “unnatural” sexuality. While
Sacks, of course, uses nature within the context of the vegetation god and the seemingly
divine power of nature to regenerate itself, Woolf’s constant references to nature within
the discourse of “natural” laws are directly related. As Orlando’s search for “life, a lover”
leads her to the literary and social circles of eighteenth-century London, she entertains the
next incarnation of the torchbearers of “Glawr”: Pope, Addison, and Swift. Woolf
parodies the notion that the essence of the writer can be found in his writing by quoting
famous texts by these men to illuminate their characters. Woolf quotes Joseph Addison’s
“Trial of the Petticoat”:

I consider woman as a beautiful, romantic animal, that may be adorned
with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. The lynx
shall cast its skin at her feet to make her tippet, the peacock, parrot and
swan shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea shall be searcher for
shells…and every part of nature furnish out its share towards the
embellishment of a creature that is the most consummate work of it. All
this I shall indulge them in, but as for the petticoat I have been speaking
of, I neither can, nor will allow it. (Woolf 210)

Already we are given the description of woman as an animal, her adornments given freely
by nature. It is an image reminiscent of Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” as she rises fully
formed from the sea, attended by flora, fauna, and one of the Horae, goddesses of the
seasons. Given Sacks’ almost exclusively masculine-oriented explanation of the (male)
vegetation god mourner mourning the (female) metamorphosed lost love object, it is worth
considering that Orlando possesses both positions in Sacks’ framework for this elegiac
convention. Orlando is both the “beautiful, romantic animal” of the metamorphosed,
mourned female love object as well as the male, immortal, vegetation god mourner.

To understand the full breadth of Woolf’s cleverly obscured reference to Orlando’s “perversion” of natural law, let us refer back to Addison’s “Trial of the Petticoat.” Below is the passage of Addison’s from the *Tatler* that directly proceeds Woolf’s selection:

I would not be understood that (while I discard this monstrous invention) I am an enemy to the proper ornaments of the fair sex. On the contrary as the hand of nature has poured on them such a profusion of charms and graces, and sent them into the world more amiable and finished than the rest of her works; so I would have them bestow upon themselves all the additional beauties that art can supply them with, provided it does not interfere with, disguise, or pervert those of nature. *(Tatler 116, 1709)*

In Addison’s estimation, specific female attire has the ability to “pervert” or disguise the nature of women. Woolf no doubt found Addison’s words particularly ironic given the fashions of the mid 1920’s (which she certainly would have been aware of given Vanessa Bell’s forays into fashion design), which were widely criticized for perverting the nature of women, making them, according to the more socially conservative, virtually undistinguishable from men. Though Addison’s scope of what is natural for women is obviously quite limited, Orlando still becomes a “perversion” of the multiple discourses of nature in several ways. She dresses in drag to enter the London nightlife, thereby “perverting” the natural beauty of the “fair sex” as well as the “natural” law of heteronormative gendering. She is also quite literally a challenge to nature as a man who transforms into a woman, and lives for over 400 years. Woolf parodies the notion of natural law; despite interfering with the essentialist discourse of “nature” in terms of sexuality and gender, Orlando embodies nature as the representation of the immortal vegetation god as well as the metamorphosing love object.

The question of course persists: how can a work of high camp, of “fantasy and jokiness”¹⁹ be placed among the highly elegiac works created during the interwar years?

---

¹⁹ Hermoine Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 517.
Her other works written around this time—*To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*—take on the subject of death with no comforting satire or joking. Speaking of *Orlando*’s relatively utopian ending, Hermoine Lee adds that Orlando “doesn’t die. *Orlando* is the only of her books with no deaths, turning away from the elegiac mood” of the aforementioned works (520). It is what is left out, what is unrepresented, that points to loss. One such moment occurs soon after Orlando’s famous revelation of: “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’” she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried….‘I am a woman,’ she thought, ‘A real woman, at last’” (253). At the moment of ultimate gender ambiguity, Woolf cannot find or backs away from the words that would represent true gender subversion:

> For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; …the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion. (254)

In addition to the modernist dilemma of an inability to express that which is beyond articulation, we have the bittersweet notion that Orlando’s space is “filled to repletion,” yet the space representing it to the reader is void of representation. Despite or perhaps because of the nature of the satirical biography, the biographer postpones resolution, both in what happens in the blank space mentioned above, and in the final words of the novel. Woolf ends the novel with Orlando, at the age of 36, having a vision of a wild goose flying over Shelmerdine’s head as he arrives home from a journey at sea. In ending a story of a life in this unconventional way, Woolf presents a sense of moving on and moving forward. Orlando’s elegiac work of mourning—here I mean work as in a text and in a concerted effort—does not end in destruction, in an abandoning of the lost love object. Instead, it ends in a revelatory acknowledgement of Orlando as constantly transitioning, as seen in Shelmerdine’s exclamation of “‘You’re a man, Orlando!’” followed by Orlando’s realization of being a “real” woman (253). The biographer’s comment that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language is poignant here: Orlando’s entrance into womanhood is ultimately achieved through language, not biology.
Conclusion

But slowly towards the verge the dim sky clears,
For nobler men may yet redeem our clay
When we and war together, one wise day,
Have passed away.
—Vera Brittain, “The War Generation: Vale”

Though Great Britain came out on the winning side of the war, the resulting peace after Armistice stood in contrast to the expected aura of masculine victory in the battlefield in several key ways. As opposed to previous military engagements, World War I was not an overwhelming victory in the sense of gaining land, protection, or liberty. Instead, the end was a welcome relief from an otherwise unrelenting cycle of violence and death which took millions of lives on both sides of the conflict, as emphasized by the mere yards of land that men fought and died for in the trenches. Physical and psychic violence of this magnitude called for immediate restorative measures.

In contrast to the masculinity of battle, both loss and mourning suggested a sort of feminization—loss in the sense of Freudian phallic absence, mourning as an outpouring of emotion. While the work of mourning was, before, placed within the feminine realm as seen in elaborate Victorian mourning rituals, mourning attire, and sentimentalized elegies, the work of mourning after the First World War became a necessary process for the nation as a whole. This national mourning often took the form of collective memorializing, erecting monuments, and a consolidating of what the war was to mean in national memory in an effort to give meaning and coherence to losses that were beyond comprehension. The institutionalization of mourning was to function as a restorative measure to the losses suffered through death, as well as the losses to a coherent masculinity. What was most often not addressed through these efforts was the corresponding growing incoherence of femininity.

To an extent, Radclyffe Hall and Ernest Hemingway were both trying to answer

---

20 From Testament of Youth, epilogue.
the question of what was lost in the “lost generation,” not just for men, but for gender
dynamics between and among men and women. For Hemingway, the perceived threat of
smothering female sexuality was countered in the embodiment of Brett Ashley. While
Brett as a dysfunctional character who seems to be caught in destructive cycles of grieving
seems to suggest Hemingway’s own view on the possibility of new iterations of
femininity, Brett does achieve a sort of forward movement. As opposed to Jake Barnes
settling in to post war melancholia—he comments that he has “considered it from most of
its various angles” and was “through with the subject” (Hemingway 35)—Brett actively
leaves the war behind her by leaving her husband and distancing herself from the nurturing
feminine image of the wife and nurse she was before. Brett’s drag performance may not
successfully break the cyclical nature of grieving, but it does resist the notion of the work
of mourning being a reentrance into the social order.

The work of Radclyffe Hall—both her literary work and her life—is an important
inclusion in a study of modernist female drag because, among many other reasons, it
troubles the positioning of drag as purely a literary trope within my framework. I first
considered The Well of Loneliness to be an expression of the melancholia indicative of the
post war period, and a work of mourning that resists a return to a prior social order.
While The Well is certainly a cultural articulation in response to social upheaval, it is also
the story of a transgender person—someone who, while mourning various losses in her
life, is primarily concerned with feeling not right in her own body. The Well is about
transgender embodiment as much as it is about a process of self-discovery and working
through grief. This does not lessen its value as a work of modernist female drag, but
pushes against the framework I have established in a useful and productive way.

The scandal over Maud Allan and the Cult of the Clitoris further allows for an
examination of what hyperbolized gender performances say about the embodiment of
non-normative sexuality. The unfocused fears of feminization, infiltration, and
homosociality turned homosexuality all intersected in the embodiment of an active female
sexuality in Maud Allan. As one of the originating cultural moments of hyperbolized
gender performance that fed into the phenomenon of modernist female drag, the Maud
Allan scandal emphasizes the power dynamic of secret and exposure that became a necessary feature of non-normative gender performance of the interwar period. Female drag represented a cultural inscrutability that was always about to be made visible. The perceived secret of female sexuality—represented both at the time of the trial by the lack of knowledge of the clitoris as a well as “cultish” nature of female homosexuality—was always kept in balance by the threat of male exposure.

While *The Well* and the Cult of Clitoris demand a reading of embodiment, *Orlando*, despite describing a physical sex change, is an examination of the discursive nature of gender. As Jay Prosser comments in *Second Skins*, as opposed to *The Well*, “*Orlando* is not about the sexed body at all but the cultural vicissitudes of gender” (169). In Orlando’s easy, fluid transition between maleness and femaleness, Woolf provides insight into the elegiac nature of mourning as transition as opposed to a mourning process that demands destruction or abandoning of the internalized lost love object. *Orlando* as elegy is not anxiety filled, nor is it reconciliatory to loss. Orlando’s transitioning to new eras and new iterations of gender facilitates a moving forward instead of cycling back.

Of all of the iterations of female modernist drag I have discussed, Woolf’s provides the most salient possibility of moving on and forward. While others seem to be somewhat stuck in the modernist dilemma of negotiating a way of remaining faithful to the past while still moving forward, *Orlando* offers a way to begin again in a different way. Instead of a melancholia that insists on a destructive transformation, Orlando’s nondestructive melancholia suggests a way to move beyond grief without abandoning the past. Evidence of the sustainability of this version of resistant mourning appears in reactions to subsequent tragedies of the twentieth century: from the Holocaust, to the AIDS epidemic, to threats and enactments of terrorism by foreign and domestic powers, we find a movement towards new processes of mourning in ways that allow for moving on, that often operate outside of institutionalized mourning practices, and that remain faithful to what has been lost.
References


