

CHAPTER 29

Gender

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'The sex-gender system . . . is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation';¹ it is also historical, imbedded in personal subjectivity and general ideology, and the site of multiple contradictions. Yet throughout significant decades of modernist literary criticism, no one examined sex-gender materials in particular, although sexuality often incurred comment. This was despite fervent debates and social politics about war, suffrage, the new woman, professions opening to women, and many socio-political manifestations of change around gender and sexuality in modernity: sexology, the criminalisation of homosexuality, transgressive feminine masculinities, lesbianism, homoeroticism, eugenicist schemes and fears about virility. Further, no 'gendered' reading exists in isolation from other social materials – in the case of T. S. Eliot, consideration of nationality (twofold), religious culture, sexuality, class and ethnic materials intersect with gender; each inflects the other.

Eliot's biography provides one zone for gender/sexuality readings. Lyndall Gordon points to maternal influence, noting Charlotte Eliot's upstanding late Victorian poems of religious and moral conviction and Eliot's admiration for her work. The singular, strained and even 'possum-like' treatments of women in Eliot's life are striking: from the creatively vibrant but unstable Vivien Haigh-Wood, his first wife, to the woman he admired from afar, Emily Hale, who wanted more than Eliot could give, to Mary Trevelyan, his pal in later life, up until the safe harbour of the marriage of his last seven years with Valerie Fletcher, a figure of love, care, comfort, posthumous editing and executorship. Eliot's early sex-gender attitudes involve torment and yearning: his painful, shaming and aversive bonds with his first wife and his own attitudes (of distaste, recoil, conflict, so far as they may be surmised) to the female body and sexuality. Although Gordon points to the persistence of spiritual crisis and mystical arousals in Eliot's career, she offers temperate, moving summaries of the relations of gender to personal suffering. Other poignant tales, some

with the fervent conviction to 'out' Eliot, track the impact of the death in the First World War of his French friend Jean Verdenal. There is no doubt over Eliot's deep attachment to Verdenal and his sense of loss, but what this means in terms of Eliot's sexuality is unclear. This material and other motifs in his poetry (notably the latter-day gay icon St Sebastian) may suggest that Eliot evinced homoerotic yearnings, struggles and structures of feeling. In Colleen Lamos's formulation from queer theory, the apparently natural binary division between heterosexuality and homosexuality, as well as the apparent ease of identifying objects of desire, are rigid sexual myths, undone by literary works central to modernism such as Eliot's poetry, whose own gender and sexual identifications are complex and 'errant'.² The sex/gender/erotic pressures that Eliot so forcefully and strikingly depicts in the diction, textures and motifs of his poetry are illuminated, but hardly solved, by speculation about his biography.

Some critics have resisted recent sex-gender interpretations and biographical readings with enraged dismissal, seeing these investigations as an unseemly, even prurient revolt against this iconic, canonical writer. But in truth explorations of modernism and sex-gender materials have been critically productive in discussions of Eliot's work.

Eliot began as a modernist and ended as an anti-modernist; in both positions, he diagnosed modernity. Eliot did not champion women's sexual freedoms (as did, variously, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and D. H. Lawrence when it suited them), though he was for liberty of literature in *The Well of Loneliness* case (see [Chapter 9](#) above), and he sponsored, as publisher and editor, some bold women writers (Djuna Barnes, Marianne Moore, and, up to a point, Vivien Eliot). Eliot's depictions of female figures often reveal hostility, shock, distaste and manifest a mordant masochism at female sexual energy and power. Eliot also puts seriously and sympathetically into his poetry transgressive male figures who suspect both their manhood (defined by Eliot as potency and loutishness) and their heteronormativity. 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' (1917) shows an urbane brace of males dismissing a female figure (an amalgamation of H.D. and Katherine Mansfield); this repositioning of the female from considerable cultural producer to – both – muse figure and pretentious fake is a cutting response to a new literary marketplace. This, along with the parallel Fresca-writer-'bitch' materials (excised from *The Waste Land* by Pound), Eliot's retrograde bluster about female professionals in his correspondence, and his association of females with debasements of 'romanticism', contribute to these repeated, sexist attitudes. In short, Eliot was absolutely haunted by sex-gender materials throughout his life and

career, and constructed a variety of resolutions in works that, if personally expressive and even therapeutic, also had a considerable – sometimes unpleasant – socio-cultural impact on Anglo-American modernism.

Indeed, the misogyny and sex-gender agony of Eliot's early poems was both productive for him and culturally decisive within modernism. The deep pain of his early erotic and affective life led Eliot to religious motifs (sin, purgation, humility) and in part motivated his Anglican conversion. However, the universalising, anti-modernist attitudes of his Christianity were less productive precisely because they were less overtly conflicted. When Eliot self-consciously became a spokesperson, notably for an elite leadership of a moral community and a civic (if narrowly constructed) 'idea of a Christian society', he is more studied, hedged, repressive of errant, sordid and sardonic energies and of gender materials.

The early work is richly modern in its formal use of collage and ironic juxtaposition, in the themes of alienation and hidden trauma, in its heteroglossia, mixture of different levels of diction, including jargons, and in a subject matter dealing with the city and male and female hysteria. The mocking urbanity of many early poems – exacerbated sensation and irritation, arid gender relations – opens out to an uncontainable yearning mixing the sexual, spiritual and the existential, which is as quickly closed up or ironised. Impotent connections, incomplete sensations, defensive resistances, frustrating sexual encounters, urban loneliness, self-lacerating crises of being among the obscure and marginalised are his vital modernist themes. This early work also includes the roaring, randy, mannered verses of *King Bolo* in which cartoonish male figures are uniformly priapic, perverse and scatologically productive. Sometimes with difficult sex/gender material, Eliot chose to write in French – with a sour and painful portrait of a honeymoon spent in sexual despair, and an ecstatic self-revealing story told by a dirty, shambling waiter about children who are sexually aroused.

His characteristic mode and findings are captured by the condensed Jamesian stories in verse, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady' as well as in 'Hysteria' and 'Gerontion', dramatic monologues of voices trying to contain an abyss of desire mixed with fear and resistance, splenetic stasis and the failed quest for any exit from being locked in one's own life. The transgressive dandy J. Alfred Prufrock, who cannot manifest the potent will to speak his philosophic/sexual question, the aggressive over-eager, temptingly manipulative lady in 'Portrait', as well as the male figures unable to contain the spill of female hysteria and (dental/vulval) excess in the prose poem 'Hysteria', make all sexual

options appear as impossible traps. The instabilities of the conversations and observations offered in patter-song, irregularly rhythmic, closural stanzas are assisted by the extraordinary light verse rhymes translocated from Laforgue. Such rhymes as 'marionettes/cigarettes' precipitate themes, attitudes and tones – ironic control beyond anguish and guarded undercurrents of judgement.

The quatrain poems of 1917–20 had their origin in a bargain between Ezra Pound and Eliot to 'call to order' the flatness of free verse, which, not coincidentally, they viewed as being weakened because appropriated by poeticising females (most notably, Amy Lowell) and their flaccid, if popular, poetic rivals (for example, Edgar Lee Masters). The grand diagnosis of a 'feminisation' of literature is their motif at this time, demanding resistance to both the effete and the feminine. Eliot thereupon presented satiric treatments first of the churchly forces of order; then of an *über*-male figure of exaggerated proportions and appetites (Irish-inflected Sweeney); and of predatory demi-mondaines; fastidious, denatured *flâneurs* (Burbank) being displaced – even physically tainted – by Jewish bankers (Klein) and by Jewish thugs (Bleistein). The sexual licence of uncontrolled females, impotence of struggling men, mongrelised, cosmopolitan predators, and a failing social hegemony are linked together. The verbal condensation, the attraction/repulsion the author feels towards his mongrel louts and the allusions to socio-cultural tropes give these poems a snap and an energy that make them not only politically charged but aesthetically rich and strange.

On *The Waste Land* (1922) there are myriad observations to make from a sex-gender perspective, including the melodramatic erotic and parturitional metaphors used by Pound as 'midwife' of the poem he helped to shape. It is a social poem trying to penetrate the urban plethora that, in relation both to the horrors of the First World War and to personal grief, was saturated with a sense of doom, devastation and despair. It is a haunted poem, filled with broken tokens of past beauties, systems, myths, in disembodied, mysterious citations. It is a poem of desire, frustration, blockage and sexual cross-purposes, with virtually no release. Fertility has been damaged; a wounded male is limned in the quest myth, intermittently used, of the Fisher-King with a Parsifal-like hero (which Eliot had encountered in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* [1920]). The semi-narrative juxtapositions offer cut-off glimpses and vignettes of bumbling, burned out, grieving or malicious searchers, of the living dead, and of blighted hopes, in a symphonic montage now so classic that one forgets its shocking brilliance.

The fierce problematic of sex-gender in *The Waste Land* is literally everywhere: the Woman Question and neurasthenia, incompatibility and desperation, hysteria, impotence, male wounds, homoeroticism, failures of desire and failures of nerve, commonplaces of abortion, grungy loss of virginity, perversity, degradation, rape, rancour, conflicted passion. To make a site in which a fertile heterosexuality is returned as a centre-piece is the overt (and underachieved) aim; this is wrenched and interrupted by homoerotic yearnings and propositions that do not come from the hegemonies of heterosexuality. The heightened sensibility and arousal of desire (the hyacinth girl – perhaps Jean Verdenal transposed, whom Eliot recalled greeting him with flowers) sometimes takes on a spiritualised not a sexual dimension, but mostly sexuality is just sordid and sorrowful. Finally the sheer unfulfilled burningness of sexual desire seems heightened and beautiful in the regal past, but completely passive, beaten down and ‘supine’ in the low-life present. In many of the vignettes, the speaker proposes an emphatic picture of female figures whose hopeless acquiescence or depressed resistance to sexual contact is a symptom of the morbid lack of fertility that is mourned – and suffered. The poem travels through loss by its séance-like calling up of half-alive voices and half-dead, unrecognised emotions.

The debate as to whether or not Tiresias is the central consciousness of *The Waste Land* involves each reader’s attitude towards being told what to think by Eliot’s own controlling notes and by his ideologically motivated attempt to assert an organising figure. To propose Tiresias as ‘the most important personage in the poem’, despite the poem’s gaps, fragments, plethora and vectors, seems tendentious when figures emerge and withdraw as sporadic presences, revenants and irruptions. Eliot’s statement gathers gender materials up and universalises them (‘all the women are one woman’ [CPP, 78]) to the point of overgeneralising. On the other hand, Tiresias connects the sexual to the spiritual/prophetic aspects of the poem. In Classical myth, Tiresias is given the punishment of blindness and the gift of prophecy for answering ‘Woman’ to the gods’ probing question about whether men or women derive the most pleasure from sex. However, in Eliot’s poem this figure does not bear witness to extremes of sexual pleasure, but rather to sexual pain – indifferent, casual, cruel and anguished. Modernity is, again, loss. Yet as a hermaphroditic, bisexed figure, Tiresias is evidence of how important transgressive sex-gender materials and desires are to this poem.

The shards of citation that stud the text are a constant reminder of our pathetic cultural capital and spiritual incompleteness. Eliot uses the

citations to make it seem as if there is some 'secret' that, if one could just decode it, would reveal an answer. Thus the reader is put in interpretative situations of yearning, seeking and urgency that are constantly frustrated, mirroring, in a different zone, the frustrations of the speakers of the poem. Part of the power of this poem lies in the evanescent sense of a final, always postponed answer, due to the contrastive gap between the poem and the notes. These notes are thus a parallel discourse to the poem, rather than extraneous, gratuitous or accidental. It is a discourse in which another authorial voice intones his allusively comprehensive engorgement of the masterworks of European culture, in part by omitting such contributors as Ellen Kellond, the Eliots' maid, who was the principal source for the Cockney dialogue in 'The Game of Chess' section. The notes thus encourage thematically extractive and universalising high cultural readings, saving the poem from its own grotesque display, domestic horror and ecstatic heightening.

These thematic summaries emphasising only sex-gender are incomplete without pointing to a universal mythic nexus that, for Eliot, is fundamental. Given dessication and hopelessness, other – past – cultures may have had better solutions with a traditional ritual order; modernity is left with the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy' (*SP*, 177) whose diagnosis points to Eliot's developing social and religious conservatism. For him, cultural fullness and renewal depended on sexuality and gender being rightly organised – that is, normalised and sublimated unto repression.

The tonality of the spiritual poems of the late 1920s differs stunningly from the montage of *The Waste Land* and from the sardonic minstrel-vaudeville of 'Sweeney Agonistes'. The absolute resistance to anything smacking of the chaotic, the modern, the sexual, the sordid, is as soothing as it is unexpected. This new tonality makes a spiritual remix of the Book of Common Prayer, medieval allegory, genres of psalm, prayer, liturgy, meditation and pilgrimage, and uses the most familiar, oft-evoked female topos – woman as intercessor. In 'The Hollow Men' (1925), male figures reveal spiritual hopelessness, reduced to the physical level of dried bits and the rhetorical level of insoluble riddling paradox, from which a quester moves, as in *Ash-Wednesday* and 'Marina' (both 1930) via the calm spiritual leadership of a female figure, in an allegorical ascent that passes through both devilish ugliness and earthly beauties. This figure is the idealised obverse of those sexualised seductresses who appear in the earlier work. Like a wraith, this female (designated variously sister, mother, Virgin, daughter) seems to precede various speakers into an illuminated landscape of prayer and watchfulness. The transmutations and translations

of religious motifs from Dante and others construct the remarkable 'always already' sound of this work, both uplifting and gender normative. Or almost. In the Ariel Poems, with a rhythm of maternal rocking, Eliot is remothering himself into rebirth. However, the contradiction between the lulling sound and the spiritual anguish is remarkable.

These religiously inflected poems are in dialogue with two poems written in the same period that move in other sex-gender directions. Perhaps because they are called 'Unfinished Poems' in his *Collected Poems*, 'Sweeney Agonistes' and 'Coriolan' have been neglected. 'Sweeney Agonistes' is a negative print of *The Waste Land*, full of posturing sexuality and threat, homosocial jocularity, threatening men, hand-wringing demi-mondaines, tonal potpourri and panache, mocking narration of femicide (getting away with murder), Africanist cannibal-missionary by-play, and the conviction that crime and guilt in relation to females are every *man's* heritage. This work is emphatically Eliot's literary road not taken. 'Coriolan' is a meditation on apparent male power, hidden male powerlessness (with needy cries of 'Mother mother' [*CPP*, 129]), a sense of sacramental or sacrificial doom and, touchingly, the presence of littleness and beauty in nature. These may or may not provide a spiritual or ethical counter-tendency to the robotic, mechanical, parodied – and ominously militaristic – activities of governance. The final demand 'RESIGN RESIGN RESIGN' (*CPP*, 130) goes to the heart of the political-spiritual dilemma of the male hero: does this command finish off his political power or accept a potent spiritual passivity? Among other elements, these poems face Eliot's own growing cultural power combined with a gnawing sense of his unworthiness, thus exemplifying one paradox of masculinity: a sense of powerless power. From the 1930s forward, Eliot's thought became 'politically' (that is, religiously) correct, even theocratic, a measure of his prior anguish.

After Strange Gods (1934) constitutes a moralist's paean to racial and religious purity and to the American South, praised for its resistance to modernisation, heterogeneity, urbanisation, immigration and to certain 'undesirable' groups, notoriously 'free-thinking Jews' (*ASG*, 20) and out-of-place blacks. The modernists who encourage a bad heterodoxy are also those who focus intensively on sex and gender issues; this fastidious touchstone designates their moral limitations. Sheer femaleness produces only the 'feminine', defined by Eliot through consideration of one story, 'Bliss', by Katherine Mansfield, which he describes as a perfect handling of the most 'limited' and '*minimum* material' (*ASG*, 36). No other female modernist is mentioned (not Gertrude Stein, Marianne

Moore, H.D., Djuna Barnes, with whom he had varied but serious literary dealings, not even Virginia Woolf, whom Eliot knew well). One thereby sees a desire to segregate women authors to a 'feminine' mode already disparaged as miniature and therefore culturally and morally inadequate. One also sees a canon being shaped and crafted by careful exclusion of significant practitioners. Such pertinent moments help to explain how, up to about 1975, the modernist canon was mainly mono-gendered, virtually mono-ethnic, and generally hetero-normative.

In *After Strange Gods*, Eliot resisted authors' focus on sexuality. In his discussion of the works of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, the driving narrative force of passionate sexuality is dismissed as reductive. The 'sexual morbidity' (*ASG*, 58) of Lawrence, in particular, in which the female characters might have sex with 'savages' or 'plebeians' (*ASG*, 61), is disdained. (Bearing *The Cocktail Party* in mind, female characters who are crucified by savages are presumably a better narrative bet.) 'Morbidity' is a very striking term for these matters as it is a crossing point for general mental states (gloomy, unwholesome, extreme, unreasonable) and, as a technical medical term, for diseased parts or structures, corrupted, vitiated and infected. From the vantage point of sex and gender issues, the rest of Eliot's career might be seen as avoiding any such 'morbidity' in his work: *Four Quartets* (1943) is post-sex and the later plays are post-gender.

Secular modernism is, for Eliot, hampered by its sexual, materialist focus. *Four Quartets*, an alternative spiritual eternalism, is restrained on the issue of sexuality and normative on gender, devoting more space to mentioning flora and fauna than females. In 'East Coker', 'matrimonie' becomes a vision of dancing, old-fashioned folk, and a good sacrament; a terse 'coupling' – whether of 'beasts' or of 'man and woman' (*CPP*, 178) – has its proper time and uses, noted with acerbic distance. Readers of this poem are addressed as a general set of sinners; further specificity produces lists of males – often 'old men' (*CPP*, 179) or those who are important in the secular world ('the statesmen and the rulers, / Distinguished civil servants' [*CPP*, 180]) but who lack spiritual goals. Otherwise in 'The Dry Salvages', one female is again used as a traditional intercessor. Compared to the anguished, mordant early work, it seems that Eliot uses special restraint to produce these apparently unimpeachable sex-gender 'truths'. Laughing children in a garden present another unquenchable moment of Eliot's unreadable, primal yearning. The mutable public world of men and the fire bombing suffered during the London Blitz are noble tests, and are treated with the sacrificial solemnity of a divine plan revealed. However, the key male figure encountered in 'Little Gidding' is a

fascinating, shimmeringly ambiguous psychic double, combining civic *virtù*, purgatorial resignation and a disenchanting self-critical literariness.

The plays, too, are made in the wake of 'morbidity', focusing on post-worldly realisations and spiritual struggle. These plays are exacting rather than exciting. Spiritual crises are their topics; their goals are didactic. All the plays concern soul-intense questers, knowers and fulfilled foreknowledge. While they also show conflicts, dialogues and some argument, the foregone conclusions make each drama earnest but far less powerful than the rancid, ambiguous, energetic sexual rage and fear of 'Sweeney Agonistes'. Like the elegantly constructed *Four Quartets* (whose materials involve career synopses and self-allusions), the plays also rewrite many motifs from Eliot's works. The gender extremism – including polarised gender binarism, anger at females, homosexual panic and striking hints of sadism and masochism – of the earlier poetry and *The Waste Land* seem to have been put in the past of the characters, alluded to but impalpable. Shocking events such as the possible murder of a female by a male are not performed, but they do haunt the back story of *The Family Reunion* (1939) and are played out in the shadowy aftermath of family reformation and spiritual allegory.

Notable in all the plays (with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*) is the sense that the real action is taking place elsewhere. The plays exist in a haunted zone of barely named horrors, anxieties, crimes, guilts, and they proceed in a somewhat therapeutic spirit. These are passion plays, not 'well-made' West End dramas, despite being cloaked in the garb of the drawing-room and family discoveries (for example, of adoption); the works enact a pre-plotted religious-spiritual redemptive narrative managed by figures who guide the action but stand outside it. That kind of narrative tends to be gender neutral; the main division occurs between those who 'see' and those who cannot perceive. *Murder in the Cathedral* recounts the historical-spiritual story of the assassination of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. By making the chorus of common folk female, some of Eliot's gender assumptions are revealed. The females are only stunned witnesses. This explicit gendering cuts off their capacity for protest and action; they are caught in an Eliotic limbo of horror and valueless emptiness. The chorus of women is also that group through which sin is verbalised, as great physical disgust and a swoon of spiritual debasement. The male knights are political thugs; they speak a common-sense prose to justify murder. The tempters of Thomas Becket are more poetic and subtle, but as with all the secular figures, the face of action and political decision is made disgusting. This has indirect lessons for all

insurgent groups – of class, gender or ethnicity – and is parallel to the pageant *The Rock* (1934), where the bitterness of the unemployed will be solved by giving them work building and repairing churches, literally and allegorically.

In other plays, families often are doubled: an apparently normal one (rancorous, manipulative and inadequate) and the authentic family based on temperate understanding and spiritual realisation. The plot runs on two planes, rumination and meditative reflection on the past coming to a crisis of transformative action (for example, martyrdom); this is intercut with a plane of superficial characters and their uncomprehending, ironic chatter. Gender does not divide the searchers from those mired in temporal banality; a sense of quest and spiritual acumen is given to a select few of all sorts and conditions – something Eliot symbolises as much with class (even a rich man's chauffeur can see deeply enough) as with gender. In *The Cocktail Party* (1949) daimonic but benevolent spirits – knowing more, seeing more, producing forgiveness – guide the action. These are therapist/priest figures, an obliquely gay male figure of witty compassion and a ditzzy older woman who is treated with a kind respect by the author. All of the knowers in all the plays are engaged in giving spiritual help, in mentor–sufferer relationships that dramatise a pilgrimage out of sin or confusion and towards salvation. This pilgrimage starts when characters distinguish true paths and redemptive values from the morass of social and familial webbing. Any former sense of gender hierarchy is put away. In *The Cocktail Party*, the Christ figure of suffering and sacrifice is female. However, Eliot's pious account of Celia's sacrifice gets inflected with primitive natives; this imperialist melodrama somewhat undermines the well-meant Christian mythography. Eliot's plays certainly move beyond the earlier sexual and gender conflicts and revulsions. In his last works, Eliot took seriously the austere, hegemonically anointed responsibilities of a cultural priest, a position offering him humble yet redoubtable authority. Despite an expiation or exorcism of his former demons, Eliot could (fortunately) never expunge his earlier sex-gender ferocities, which forcefully framed his powerful version of modernism within modernity.

NOTES

1. Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 5.
2. See Colleen Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).