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Whither Sexuality and Gender? "What That Sign Signifies" and The Rise of Queer Historicism

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What does the sign of queerness signify in the contemporary landscape of sex and gender? What does it signify in a landscape where academics routinely assert that feminism is dead? In this brief foray, I will be able to answer only part of this Forum's question of *whither*. I also want to ask *whether* and how literary and cultural critics can address the strategic problems of definition that coalesce around the naming of deviant bodies. Where are the names positioned on the continuum between something "essential" and the entirely constructed? Further, to what purposes are we deploying particular categories, especially now, when naming a thing is often perceived as tantamount to reducing its scintillating multiplicity? When, for instance, is a lesbian is a lesbian is a lesbian? For, as Judith Butler argues, it is "'permanently unclear what that sign signifies'" (qtd. in Halberstam 54). My impulse is to return us to visceral experience, admitting of course that experience is always in process, open to interpretive flux. I resist the "postmodern" habit of abandoning tangible embodied lives in favor of the ever-signifying chain of "acts," discretely strung together, without historical or phenomenological richness or backdrop. What I propose in response to this Forum's question of "whither" is how we can combine the more illustrative space of the historical with a fluid understanding of "queerness."

Let me begin by glossing several recent books that I reviewed for *GLQ* last year (McCabe). With the emergence of "homosexuality" as a taxonomic category in the 1870s, modern gay and lesbian identities, for good and for ill, could be newly named as well as newly restricted. Acknowledging their indebtedness to Foucault's model of social construction of sexual identity, one recent trend in cultural and literary criticism steeps itself in historical specificity in order to explore forms of same-sex desire that existed prior to and in excess of criminal law, sexology and psychiatry. The question for me as a modernist is how to reconcile the insights of contemporary queer theory with an urgency to historicize lesbian and gay identity. For instance, in *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (2003), Graham Robb illuminates the thriving and thwarting of "homosexual" existence before it was delimited through our contemporary understanding of identity. Robb avoids creating a coherent "grand narrative" by excavating and drawing together "curious frag-

ments" of a "lost civilization" (35), urgently filling out this tradition, which has been insistently endangered: "at any moment in the 19th century someone, somewhere, was burning the papers of a homosexual relative" (137). Robb's methodology exposes some of the misguided consequences of following too closely the popularized model of Foucault's idea that "the homosexual" as an identity "was a creature invented by Victorian doctors" whereas the "earlier 'sodomite' had simply indulged in certain acts" (42). In fact, he argues that the coining of "homosexuality" in 1868 did not drastically inaugurate an entity so much as rename one, for Robb contends: "there always were people who were primarily or exclusively attracted to people of their own sex. They had no difficulty in identifying themselves as homosexual (or whatever word was used), often from a very early age" (12). Yet how are these pre-"homosexual" bodies to be made visible?

Using a different method than Robb but still engaged in a process of excavation, Kathryn Kent's *Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* explores, in the context of a post-Civil War society, "possible erotic effects of disciplinary intimacy" in sites like the boarding-school, or later, in an organization such as the Girl Scouts, with its purported aim to make girls into women, not lesbians. For Kent, lesbians are "made" out of a number of historical circumstances and emerge as an identity category in modernity; they are not "born." Nevertheless, her argument significantly pivots upon the term "queer" as a destabilizing term, a "transhistoric term that may include any act or protoidentity that exists outside the realm of bourgeois, heteronormative reproduction and its correlative ideology of gender roles. 'Queer' is not meant to carry the same politically radical connotations that it does when used in contemporary parlance: instead, I intend it to be understood as a term that is simultaneously oppositional and non-specific, in a way that 'protolesbian' is not" (2). This distinction allows Kent to disable the notion "that identifications and desires automatically lead to identities" (2), and in contrast to the disciplinary pleasures of a "protoidentity," "queer" can migrate across temporal barriers and a multiplicity of desires. While this model of "queering" risks losing its political urgency, as Henry Abelove explores, it has an enormous appeal for a younger generation of scholars. He is both troubled and amused by his queer students' rejection of what they regard as the tired trope of "marginalization" within gay and lesbian social history and by their preference for multiple "identifications" over claims to "identity" or "authenticity." For them, "the self is a myth, a delusion, a sham, a part of the ideology of humanism" that "has long since been fundamentally and irrevocably discredited" (48). "Queer" appeals to them because it lacks "the suppositious definiteness of 'lesbian,' 'bisexual,' or 'gay'" (33). Yet for these queer students, he contends, "historicizing to destabilizing is arguably just a

step" (54). Abelove, like Kent, taps into an ongoing trend to root the preference for "identifications" over "identity" in history, what I call a queer historicism. In this model, history becomes itself destabilizing.

While few would contest that identity is culturally constructed, queer theory (in the wake of feminism) has opened the possibility of rereading modern sexual taxonomies as a means of undoing the straitjacketing of the homo/hetero binary. Without resolving the critical debate between nature and nurture, essentialism and constructionism, we can say there has been a shift away from a minoritizing approach to one that produces a multiplicity of non-normative identifications. Queer historicism, as I see it, arises out of a desire to analyze and situate historical texts as cultural material, fusing the work of excavation with the recognition that sexualities are contingent. The transhistorical existence of erotic pluralism, in other words, is a history riddled by numerous desires as well as names for sexual experience. This more fluid model offers a literary critic like myself a means of perceiving the "ghost effects," the queerness of lesbian figures in modernism. Evasion of the concrete, as much as clinging to it, becomes apparent in Oscar Wilde's sodomy trial and later in Radclyffe Hall's libel case; in daring to speak the nameless, such events triggered and consolidated what Eve Sedgwick famously has dubbed the homo/hetero divide that governs twentieth-century epistemology. What I would emphasize is that these trials limited and provoked the polymorphous play that is perhaps better described as historically "queer" rather than homosexual or lesbian. The "queer" is thus more appropriately a modern or modernist category than a contemporary one.

Let me give you a concrete example from my own current research as a means of foregrounding the definitional conundrums that face a queer historicist working with a network of possible identifications at odds with the medical or psychoanalytic frames used to identify them. I am currently embarking upon a critical biography of Bryher, a shadowy but highly significant figure in modernist literary culture. Born Annie Winifred Ellerman in 1894, an illegitimate daughter of the richest man in England by the time of his death in 1933, she renamed herself after one of the Scilly Islands. His money (through Bryher's and her wise investments) funded many modernist projects, artists and writers, including Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell, and Sylvia Beach. Her unconventional childhood and education (she traveled with her parents to Egypt, Africa, France, and Italy until she was placed in a boarding school when she turned fifteen, an experience she found enormously constraining. Her entire life pitted her against Edwardian conventions so that her watchwords became action, adventure and exile. She wrote in her autobiography, *Heart to Artemis*, that her first ambition was to be a boy and run away to sea, but by the time she was a teenager, she began to seek out poetic and sexual experimenta-

tion. After memorizing the entirety of H. D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) first volume of imagist poems, *Sea Garden* (1916), she sought the poet out in Cornwall. Upon H. D.'s advice, she went to see Havelock Ellis, who confirmed she was a girl who was really a boy. Bryher "rescued" H. D. from a betraying husband and traveled with the poet to Greece, inaugurating a life-long intellectual/erotic relationship and alternate family ménage that included Bryher's adoption of H. D.'s illegitimate child, Perdita.

Bryher's wish to be a boy led her to don masculine garb, cut her hair, and model herself upon the "girl-page" she wrote about in Elizabethan drama. She identified the need to don male clothing as a means to obtain mobility and adventure, to survive and to travel; yet to perform masculinity, or ambiguous gender, also interacts with desire. Thus, Bryher's story is not just a story of the male-identified woman, or what Judith Halberstam calls "female masculinity": the way her sexuality might have crossed with her gender identifications remains difficult to untangle. One might see her early erotic relationship to H. D. as enacting a "female husband" role — also present in her more known role as patron for modernists, such as Moore and Beach. Bryher not only sought to conserve and shepherd experimental writing and art, she also aided refugees fleeing from the Nazis in the late 1930s, helping at least a hundred Jews (including Walter Benjamin) obtain visas, using her house in Switzerland as a "holding station."

Set against this cultural role and relationship to women, her affective relationships with men also have to be taken into account. Her first marriage of convenience to Robert McAlmon (cover for her relationship to H. D.) functioned as an "escape" from her parents' pressures to conform. This convenience quickly became inconvenient. Increasingly drained by his boheminan habits of drinking and drug use, she later divorced McAlmon: at one point, she thought of using the grounds of her "technical virginity," but finally agreed to let McAlmon plead that he had been abandoned. Extensive letters between McAlmon and Bryher, written from multiple geographical locations and during McAlmon's many affairs with men, make vivid the elaborate machinations the couple engaged in to preserve the myth of marriage for the benefit of the Ellerman family. This kind of arrangement is not new, of course, but the idea of the marriage of convenience as a closet is not so easily discerned in her next marriage to Kenneth Macpherson (bisexually identified). Their creative partnership engendered *Close Up* (the first film magazine in English). When they formed a ménage with H. D. in Switzerland for a time, H. D. had an affair with Macpherson; when the latter abandoned her to pursue his more specifically homosexual life in Capri (sporadically between living with Bryher in Switzerland and traveling to Berlin), a traumatized H. D. went into psychoanalysis with Freud (funded by Bryher). Meanwhile letters between Bryher

and Macpherson bear the marks of affection that verge on erotic: a semi-coded language between them identifies her as "small dog" and him as "big dog" and H. D. as "Kat." This brief sketch gives you some idea of the layers of "queer" relations that complicate a more conventional understanding of the lesbian. In Bryher's as well as in H. D.'s case, triangular desire might be both the result of homophobic discourse as well as the means of expressing intimate desire in a still Edwardian culture. Bryher called herself an "L." She engaged in breaking multiple conventions even as she remained tied to them; experimented with plural erotic identifications even as she covered them with two marriages. Freud and Ellis may have illuminated Bryher's sense of a sexual/gender predicament, but she also wanted (like H. D.) to refashion the theories of her day. She aimed to become a lay analyst, sponsored many of her friends in analysis, and specifically objected to Freud's founding his theories on the bourgeois "family."[1]

Bryher lived until 1983 and wrote sixteen well-received novels in the '50s and '60s. Her life, with its panoramic sweep, is paradigmatic of the changing sex and gender definitions across the century. (In the '50s, she saved clippings regarding the first sex-change operations.) While my examples from the life of Bryher are idiosyncratic, they are symptomatic, making concrete what I suspect is present in lives that precede the taming of such difficulties with the coherent signs of "lesbian," "gay," even "queer": lives are far more volatile than the words we have been using to describe them. Bryher is both like Nancy Cunard (another modernist who funded the arts through a shipping fortune) and Radclyffe Hall, and not like these women. My portrait here of Bryher is necessarily stilted and cramped, but I think it conveys the almost dizzying contours of her gendered life, much informed by the aesthetic and psychoanalytic models of her time. Her manipulation of the signs of masculinity and femininity go beyond (even as they are before) our current classifications. The new popular series "The L Word" boldly abbreviates (even erases) the messy field of sexual desires, while simultaneously confessing them. Perhaps the study of both moderns and contemporaries demands a greater elasticity of meaning and expressivity. Thus, a "queer historicism," a contemporary understanding of nuanced "identifications," might help us to uncover the specific contours of embodied lives. It is necessary then to excavate the fragmentary life, up against and enmeshed within the culture it so very often belies and too strictly limits. An "L" is an "L" is an "L."

Note

1. See Susan Stanford Friedman for an extensive and detailed portrait of the lives of Bryher, H. D. and Freud in the crucial years of 1932-1933.

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