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0521806887 - Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot

Edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Eliot, gender, and modernity**Cassandra Laity*

Eliot's female contemporary, poet Kathleen Raine, recalled the impact of her first encounter with Eliot's poetry as "instantaneous and tremendous."¹ Muriel Bradbrook similarly exclaimed, "the effect of *The Waste Land* was not gloomy but exhilarating and intensely stimulating . . . [the poem] gave us a new world . . . 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive!'"² May Sinclair admired Eliot particularly for his "disturbing" "genius." He is "dangerous," she remarked, not a poet whom "comfortable and respectable people can see, in the first moment after dinner."³ And, as Gail McDonald's study of Eliot's reception by first-generation college women in this volume establishes, his rise in the academy was concurrent with the influx of women into universities, and many saw "their [own] pioneering energies mirrored in his work." Similarly, with the recent flourishing of queer theory (beginning mainly in the 1990s), gender studies of alternative "masculinities," and the expansion of feminist criticism into issues of race, class, and male sexuality, contemporary women critics are beginning to echo these early perceptions of Eliot's poetry as startlingly rebellious, "dangerous," and compelling. Queer theorist Colleen Lamos observes in *Deviant Modernism* that readers must "fac[e] up to the errant female sexual energies within his . . . poems if we are to continue to read Eliot with something other than hostility or incomprehension."⁴ Feminist critic Bonnie Kime Scott comments in *Refiguring Modernism*, "The subjects of the emotions, the feminine, and the disorder of sexuality recur in Eliot's writing and make him a more confused figure than we found in . . . accounts that cite only his violent texts on women."⁵ And poetry critic Marjorie Perloff concedes in her recent book's defining first chapter, "Avant-Garde Eliot," that whereas she formerly fixed Eliot as the static "symboliste" – against which she posited the more fluid, contemporary "poetics of indeterminacy" – she now encounters a "constructivist" poet in the early Eliot who uses language "as an active compositional agent, impelling the reader to participate in the process of construction."⁶ Both generations of readers, separated by the critical gap

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of feminist criticism/theory, postmodernism, and cultural studies, perceive radical experiment and vitality in the sexual, “feminine,” and linguistic currents of his poetry.

Despite such enthusiastic acknowledgments, however, Eliot’s relation to the early modernist spheres of feminism, alternative masculinities, the feminine, and homoeroticism remains largely unexamined. By contrast, other “hypermasculine” male modernists such as Yeats and Joyce have been substantially reclaimed for sex/gender nuance and careful articulation in the complex gender phenomena of their time (perhaps because their clear association with Irish politics has proffered critics an easy transition to other social concerns).⁷ Eliot’s unusually prolonged association with a monolithically elitist, masculinist, and reactionary conception of early modernist culture may be among the chief critical obstacles to his resituation in the sex/gender/erotic contradictions of his own milieu. However, increasing critical attention to a refocused “modernity” which reenters early modernism alternatively from the perspective of its complex gender dynamics as well as its negotiations between high and low culture brings to view, in this volume, Eliot’s largely unexplored engagement with various public and private worlds of women, eroticism, and the feminine.

Important studies seeking to move beyond polarized versions of modernism and postmodernism toward a redefinition of “the modern” encompassing – among other things – both popular and high culture, misogyny, and new attitudes toward women and “the feminine” include Michael North’s *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (1999), Janet Lyon’s *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (1999), Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Popular Culture* (1998), and Rita Felski’s *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (2000).⁸ As Rainey observes, for example, postmodern studies of mass culture created a false opposition between an “emancipatory” postmodernism that negotiated between the claims of high art and mass culture and a uniformly elitist, “naive and irremediably reactionary” modernism.⁹ Similarly, in sex/gender scholarship, fluid, “feminine,” and nontraditional definitions of desire equated with the postmodern were celebrated over homophobic, misogynist, and hypermasculine forms of desire ascribed to the modern. Accordingly, the era of postmodernism saw a backlash against Eliot who was largely perceived as the progenitor of New Criticism and the exemplar of a “reactionary” modernism.

As more inclusive conceptions of modernism gain currency, however, the critical climate becomes ripe for explorations of Eliot’s connection to a modernity characterized not by rigid binaries, but rather as an “event”

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extending from early modernism into the present and “subject to the very discontinuities of time that its narratives seek to disguise: different ‘times’ co-exist within the same discrete historical moment” (*M*, 203). Such wider-ranging views of modernity restore to early modernism the gender-multiplicity and cross-fertilization between high and low culture formerly considered the preserve of postmodernism.

In his brief history tracing the politically volatile reception of Eliot’s work, Jeffrey Perl perceives the forces gathering behind present redefinitions of modernity, claiming that “a reconsideration of anti-modernist postmodernism has in fact begun.”¹⁰ Indeed, debating and/or redefining Eliot’s relation to “low” culture, gender/sexuality, and race (specifically anti-Semitism) has become a means of defining the nature and shape of literary experience and expression itself for the last two generations. And at this writing, both new articulations of the debate regarding Eliot and anti-Semitism and the first full-length study of Eliot and popular culture, David Chinitz’s *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003), have just appeared.¹¹ Such reconsiderations offer new insights into modernism and further complicate Eliot, treating him as a receptive observer of modern social and cultural phenomena and, as David Chinitz observes, “a multidimensional thinker and artist whose approach to [modern culture] is supple, frequently insightful, and always deeply ambivalent.”¹² Thus, while he formulated a high modernism eschewing “low” culture, Eliot embraced the “modern popular” in his poetry and critical essays; he could be brutally anti-Semitic, yet ponder the cultural/religious complexities surrounding ideas of a Jewish society.¹³ *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot* joins such efforts to recontextualize Eliot’s work and thought, acknowledging that Eliot’s poems, plays, and critical essays are often blatantly misogynist and homophobic, but also seeking to trace their intricate engagements with multiple forms and degrees of desire, contemporary feminism, the feminine, and homoeroticism.

TOWARD MODERNITY: CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Eliot’s critical reception has evolved through a markedly long series of seemingly contradictory yet often similarly exiling phases toward a modernity capable of resituating him in the sex/gender/erotic ferment of his own time. Purist New Critics first isolated Eliot from social, historical, and biographical concerns, restricting readers to “the words on the page” and the “impersonal” realm of a transcendent art. Subsequently, first-wave feminism consigned Eliot and the male tradition to a masculinist limbo, emptied of women writers, feminist protestors, and the feminine.

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As Michael North notes, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land* "had to begin by addressing a [male-defined] version of twentieth-century literature in which there were virtually no women" in order to accomplish "the repair work necessary to bring[ing] . . . Anglo-American women back into the canon" (*RSM*, 10).¹⁴ Confined to the conceptual trope of an entirely male-defined modernism, therefore, early in-depth studies of Eliot focused almost exclusively on his patriarchal images of women, violence against women, and aversions to the female body.¹⁵ Further, perhaps because of the removal from space and time effected by New Critical impersonality and his role as a stock figure for misogyny in feminist overviews, the first full-length studies to consider Eliot's complex relation to women and errant sexuality were biographical. In her first two biographies, Lyndall Gordon traced the opposing projections of Vivien Haigh-Wood and Emily Hale as, respectively, the demonic female and the exalted "higher dream" presiding over Eliot's spiritual journey through the temptations of sickness and sin (Vivien) to the transmutation of personal agony "into something universal and holy" (Emily).¹⁶ James E. Miller first broached at length the subject of Eliot's homoeroticism in his then controversial psychobiography *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons*, which interpreted the poem as an elegy to Jean Verdenal. Published in a relatively conservative critical climate, Miller's book was met with outrage and indignation for its "vulgar" impugning of Eliot's memory. More recently, Carole Seymour-Jones's biography of Vivien Eliot, *Painted Shadow*, largely attributes the failure of Eliot's marriage to his homosexual desires.¹⁷

Postmodernism's recasting of Eliot (and modernism) as a reactionary "elitist" foil for its social, political, and linguistic agendas further insulated Eliot from the rich gender phenomena of his own time.¹⁸ However, psychoanalytic, postmodernist reassessments of Eliot first accessed powerful libidinal currents in his work, albeit through the circuitous route of discovering "the postmodern" in the modern. Thus Christine Froula juxtaposed the overweening desire of *The Waste Land's* homoerotic "lover" "to become . . . woman" against his (self-policed) obligation to enter the patriarchal order of the Law of the Father.¹⁹ Wayne Koestenbaum's study of Eliot and Pound's homosocial collaboration over the hysterical "feminine" text/body of *The Waste Land* explored the conflicted strains of homosociality, homoeroticism, and feminine self-identification fueling that creative combination. And both Maud Ellmann's *Poetics of Impersonality* and Andrew Ross's *The Failure of Modernism* argued that his poetry's perpetuation of narcissistic, "abject," and deferred desires undermined Eliot's rigid, authoritarian identity politics of impersonality.²⁰ Such *post-modern* assessments,

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however – launched, by definition, from a later, emancipatory advantage – left relatively unchallenged the mainstream view of modernism as a “naive and irremediably reactionary” period.²¹ (Ross’s argument for the “failure of modernism” and thus the inevitable reinstatement of Eliot’s authoritarianism is particularly representative of this view.²²)

Until recently, therefore, Eliot scholarship frequently required the critic to maneuver around Eliot’s fixed association with the oppressive first term in a series of binary divides – *male/female*, *reactionary/progressive*, *high/low* – against which feminism, postmodernism, and cultural studies were articulated. Indeed, paradoxically, his fixed symbolic role in the overpowering imaginaries, “male modernism,” “high modernism,” and “reactionary modernism,” served to legitimate the alternative, vital worlds of the feminine, popular, and postmodern spheres by disallowing Eliot himself direct access to them. I will suggest that modernity’s reentry into early modernism from the vantage point of these worlds, “peopled,” as Rita Felski observes, by multitudes of “previously invisible figures” – “suffragettes and shoppers, actresses and rap artists, Indian cricketers and *gay flaneurs*” among them – has enabled this first full-length study exploring Eliot’s interaction with various public and interior sectors of women, desire, and the feminine (*DT*, 57). Moreover, Eliot’s increasing dissociation from New Critical aesthetic transcendence has freed up diverse methodologies – formalist, psychoanalytic, cultural, linguistic – for new readings of Eliot’s life and art both within this collection and elsewhere. The second part of this introduction will suggest that Eliot’s reinsertion into modernity corresponds with a larger, all-encompassing project (of which this anthology forms a part) to dissolve the boundary between aesthetics and society in various venues, including the academy’s methodological divides, for which Eliot long stood.

MODERNITY

Feminist and postmodern binary oppositions crucially made visible the subordinate second term – *male/female*, *high/low*, then/*now* – enabling, still further, the more finely articulated coexistence of both at different “times” in the reconceived stream of a modernity-at-large. This restoration of gender multiplicity and cross-fertilizations between “high” and mass culture formerly reserved for postmodernism now requires critics to entertain the possibility of Eliot’s direct access to the sex/gender complexities and popular culture of his own time.²³ Moreover, such a conjoining of once opposed worlds keeps Eliot’s, and modernism’s, contradictions in play, generating unexpected juxtapositions and startling congruencies.

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Chafing at the strict division between “male” and “female” modernism, for example, feminist critic Janet Lyon, in *Manifestoes*, discerns “strange bedfellows” in such early modern movements as militant suffrage and a vehemently masculinist Vorticism deploring “feminism and women as a category” (*M*, 101). Lyon not only superimposes the two groups’ “energy,” “iconoclasm,” and “revolutionary discourse,” but offers visible evidence of their colliding worlds at, for example, Marinetti’s speeches, which collected “suffrage supporters as well as nascent avant-gardists” (*M*, 100, 101). “From this angle,” Lyon concludes, readjusting the limited time frame and oppositional spatialization of earlier modernist scholarship to a more inclusive modernity, “femininity and modernity *are* locked in an antithetical – albeit dialectical – relation” (*M*, 113; emphasis added). Modernity’s redefinition, as a charged nexus of intersecting cultural sectors persisting to the present, has uncovered similarly surprising contiguities and dialectical relations in recent Eliot studies. Thus Lawrence Rainey’s inquiry into the marketing and dissemination of Eliot’s work (among that of other modernists) concludes that while modernism entailed “a certain retreat from . . . public culture,” it also “continued to overlap and intersect with the public realm in a variety of contradictory ways.”²⁴ Michael North’s *Reading 1922* notes the paradox that Eliot could simultaneously make “American popular culture a legitimate object of criticism” and a subject for art while “formulating the public definition of literary modernism” that would come to exclude mass culture (*RSM*, 141). David Chinitz’s abovementioned *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* plies the once unthinkable “natural associat[ion]” of modernism and popular culture.²⁵ And building on Maud Ellmann’s study of Kristevan, “abject” waste in *The Waste Land*, Tim Armstrong demonstrates Eliot’s engagement with modern technology and the body, cataloguing the poem’s crammed materials of mass culture – gramophones, popular songs, pubs, the throbbing taxi, even the “human engine” – by which Eliot is “simultaneously fascinated and repelled.”²⁶

Such dissolutions between high and low, masculine and feminine, then and now, have made possible this collection’s sustained attention to Eliot’s intricate and multifaceted engagement with various worlds of women, the feminine, homoeroticism, and desire. Organized accordingly under the headings “Homoeroticisms,” “Desire,” and “Modern Women,” questions directing the lines of inquiry in this anthology include the following: what was the impact on Eliot’s work of phenomena such as the New Woman? What personae, motifs, configurations of the body, psychoanalytic or psychological discourses, and language practices informed

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Eliot's pervasive identification with the feminine, his complex negotiations between "thought" and "feeling," erotic attraction and revulsion, or the dynamic of male-male love in his work? How did Eliot's work reflect war trauma and the homoerotic mourning for masculinities lost in the carnage of war? How has Eliot's reputation been shaped by the changing reception of his academic women readers who initially perceived him as empowering to their scholarly and literary pursuits? And what influence did Eliot's mother, Charlotte Stearns Eliot – social reformer, poet, and vital, problematic force in her son's life – have on the maternal characters of Eliot's drawing room plays?

The authors' attention to differentiating Eliot's place in the frequently contradictory gendered spheres and discourses of modernity often yields elective affinities and "strange bedfellows" resembling Lyon's unexpected superimposition of suffragettes and Vorticists or the image of an Eliot mingling with crowds of "suffragettes and shoppers, actresses . . . and gay *flaneurs*." Thus, while Gilbert and Gubar sequestered Eliot as the oppressor of modernist women's writing, Gail McDonald resituates him among early women academics who found his transgressive attitudes toward domesticity and marriage uniquely inspiring. Further, citing Eliot's subversive protestation of the "old," exclusively classical (male) curriculum in favor of more contemporary electives such as contemporary literature, McDonald unsettles Woolf's image of the exclusionary male academic. Rachel Potter links Eliot's career-long critique of liberal democracy with *The Waste Land's* poetic appeal to mass culture and (working) class/gender-inflected idioms she claims he paradoxically employs to flaunt the pretensions of the bourgeoisie. Elisabeth Däumer shows how male anxieties over the social gains of the New Woman clash with the Victorian, spiritually based feminism Eliot gleaned from his mother and expressed in the hieratic women and "richly pagan world of natural forces" of his later plays. Redefining *Four Quartets* as a "serial war poem" mourning the lost masculinities of World War II, Peter Middleton's response to Margaret Higonnet's well-known description of war as a gendering activity yields striking analogies between Eliot's poem and the war writings of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and D. H. Lawrence.²⁷ Michele Tepper discerns competing discourses of imperialism/ postcolonialism and homosociality/homoeroticism in the metaphoric "bodies" circulating through two of Eliot's little-known essays. Such proliferating bodies enact by turns conflicting desires to consume, to be consumed, to encompass, and "to lose oneself in 'something greater.'"

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TO THE AESTHETIC

The enormous expansion of modernist studies brought about by a more inclusive, all-encompassing modernity thus reaches backward to restore and enrich early modernism's thriving social, ideological, and cultural milieu. However, it appears to be working forward as well. Recent critics, from Marjorie Perloff and Elaine Scarry to Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Andreas Huyssen, are calling for a return to aesthetic issues coupled with postmodern, cultural, or social critique.²⁸ The recent announcement of PMLA's forthcoming special topic "On Poetry," for an issue scheduled to appear in January 2005, anticipates such an aesthetic revival:

Although many psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories are grounded in poetic discourse, critics . . . [invoking] these paradigms have seemed reluctant to take poems as objects of analysis. Has the time come to revisit the relevance of poetry and the pleasures of the poetic in this changed interpretive universe?²⁹

In answer, I will demonstrate that critics of modernity are already theorizing ways to intermesh attention to the text as aesthetic "object" with postmodernist and cultural approaches. Bridging the time-honored gap in literary history between aesthetics and the social, critics are seeking to regain what Rachel DuPlessis has described as "the nuanced pleasurable textiness of texts" and/or to rescue a rapidly (globally) expanding field from incoherence and superficiality.³⁰ Outside the academy, the recently termed "poetry renaissance of the 1990s" indicates the larger, all-embracing project under way to break down the conceptual divide between aesthetics and the social. Marjorie Perloff, Jan Clausen, and others have written on the contemporary flourishing of poetry in "extra-academic venues." Clausen's "The Speed of Poetry" pronounces poetry a "star of popular culture," citing the proliferation of internet poetry and websites, the success of US poet laureate Robert Pinsky's Favorite Poems Project, television documentaries on poetry, and the popularity of "slams."³¹

Perhaps the inauguration of Eliot – New Criticism's last stronghold – into modernity proffers an index to the revival of poetry both within and outside the academy. Indeed, Eliot serves as a pivotal figure for the changing attitude of literary criticism toward the poem/literary text's value as an aesthetic "object." The reluctance of postmodernism (and I would add cultural studies) "to take poems as objects of analysis" frequently turned on its disenchantment with transcendent conceptions of art linked to his "impersonality" and "objective correlative." Correspondingly, the present, increasing

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desire to revalue the textual “object” without regressing to notions of aesthetic transcendence, I will argue, has liberated mixed methodologies – formalist, historical, postmodern, social – affording new readings of Eliot’s poetry and provocative redefinitions of aesthetic doctrines such as impersonality, dissociation, and the “unified” sensibility in this collection and elsewhere. I begin here by summarizing postmodern and cultural indictments of the aesthetic that turned on the axis of Eliotic impersonality and the objective correlative. I then briefly illustrate the turnabout in some contemporary propositions for modernity and move to ways in which this anthology joins endeavors to bring Eliot full circle.

It has become a critical commonplace that the purist New Critics considered incursions of the author’s biography, personal feelings, or politics detrimental to the “impersonal” creative process whereby the author’s disinterested discovery of a form (objective correlative) exactly matches an “aesthetic emotion.” On the other side, as Tim Dean lucidly demonstrates in this volume, postmodern interpretations of Eliotic impersonality frequently evacuated the doctrine of its aesthetic value, interpreting impersonality rather as a pretense or “ruse” devised to deflect readers from the author’s personal “deviant” desires or to exclude (sex, gender, race) difference from art. Epitomizing the former approach, James E. Miller suggested that Eliot’s evocation of poetry as “an escape from emotion” “seems not shaped by the ‘impersonal theory’ but by a personal anguish (and the possible need for concealment)” caused by obsessive homoerotic desires.³² Similarly, for Terry Eagleton, the impersonal “escape from emotion” masked “an extreme right-wing authoritarianism,” potentially culminating in fascism.³³ And Maud Ellmann stressed impersonality’s inborn “conservative” nature.³⁴

By extension, postmodern readers frequently condemned the objective correlative’s insistence on the “exact” correspondence between “word” and “thing” as a further policing of sexual/textual free-play that ensured entry into the oppressive symbolic order and the Law of the Father. Edward Larissy impugned the objective correlative’s emphasis on “immediate presence of meaning” for halting “the difference and deferral of the signifying chain,” adding that the “application of word to thing” is synonymous with “the law of the phallus and phallic sexuality.”³⁵ Entitling a chapter of his *Discovering Modernism* “Problems about Objects,” Louis Menand similarly objected to Eliot’s implication that language aims straight for the object of its desire “like an arrow” (and thus suggested the phallic association).³⁶ For purist New Critics, then, social issues and biographical particularities encroached upon aesthetic creativity, while for many postmodernists and cultural critics formalist aesthetics merely camouflaged social prejudice.

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From either perspective society canceled out art, and both pivoted, albeit at different angles of incidence, on Eliot's doctrines.

However, cultural and postmodern critics are increasingly concluding that a text's association with a socially prejudiced author need not contaminate its value as an aesthetic object or negate its attendant poetics.³⁷ Indeed, without attention to "what is said *as* poetry," the poem risks lapsing into a "message system for delivering ideas" ("PMM," 389). Seeking to "appreciate" modernism – both in the market and aesthetic sense – or to infuse an expanding field with aesthetic depth and coherence, therefore, current scholars of modernity are consciously formulating previously unthinkable merges of (New Critical) formalism with social critique.³⁸ Thus, in her recent book on modern poetry, DuPlessis urges a postformalist poetics she terms "a social philology," "offering reading strategies that can mediate between the [social,] historical terrain and the intimate poetic textures of a work."³⁹ Protesting that cultural criticism often sacrifices the joy of the unparaphrasable, she advocates a poetics that specifically links formal moves rejected by New Criticism – "social substance, biographical traces [and] historical debates" – with "New Critical care" and technique ("PMM," 389). DuPlessis's social philology embraces the intricate and proliferating mechanics of "the words on the page" first formalized by the New Critics and containing the following:

line break, stanza break and other segmentivities, caesurae, visual image and semantic image, etymology, phonemes, lateral associations, puns . . . including transliteral puns, its own particular genres, the diegesis with its actors and pronouns, and the whole text with its speaker or persona.⁴⁰

Her ensuing analysis of the subtle, intertwining misogynist and racist strands within the "textures and fabric" of Eliot's poetic language demonstrates that artistry can accompany, even inform, the warp and weave of social prejudice. Indeed, Anthony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* similarly converges social concerns with aesthetics, arguing controversially that Eliot's genius animated stale, racist clichés into art.⁴¹ And Marjorie Perloff, who formerly dismissed Eliot as a racist, misogynist, and linguistically fixed, Symbolist poet, now yokes the early "avant-garde Eliot" with cubism, surrealism, and postmodern linguistic free-play, reinstating him as a precursor to Gertrude Stein and contemporary artists.⁴²

Such crossings of art and society are also occurring at the furthest reaches from the canon, in modernity studies of non-Western mass culture. Gesturing toward recent materialist studies – the abovementioned works on Eliot among them – Andreas Huyssen acknowledges the dissolution of the