> I toiled and moiled until I discharged or gave up trying or I was begged by her to stop.
>
> (Beckett, 2009d, 56)

> But is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes.
>
> (Beckett, 2009d, 56)

> I am by no means a good translator, and my English is rusty, but I simply happen to be able still to write the queer kind of English that my queer French deserves.
>
> (Beckett, 2011, 592)

1 Introduction

The work of Samuel Beckett, well known for its minimalism, philosophical complexity and aesthetic abstraction, might seem unpromising territory for gender and sexuality studies. But how else can we acccount for Smeraldina Rima's insatiability, manifested in her 'sexy sudorem' in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932), a novel in which the 'gehenna of sweats and fiascos and tears and an absence of all douceness' describes not only Belacqua's and Smerry's sexual encounters, but also the distinctly not 'above-bawd' experimentalism of the whole book (Beckett, 1993, 19)? Beyond an uncomfortable laughter, it is hard to know exactly how to react to *Murphy*'s Miss Carridge (to be read as one word) exhorting Celia to drink her choicest Lapsang Souchong 'before it coagulates' (1938; Beckett, 2009e, 45), or the *Whoroscope Notebook*'s esoteric Leibnizian pun on gonads – 'monads in a scrotum of circumstance'– and the 'reductio ad obscenum' of antithetical pairings in the unpublished early poem 'Tristesse Janale' (UoR MS3000, 1r; amended from Feldman, 2006, 64; Beckett, 2012, 44, 329). To move away from the slightly juvenile, misogynistic humour of the early poetry and prose, how do we deal with the discomfort caused by Lousse 'taking advantage' of Molloy (1951/5; Beckett, 2009d)? We might be tempted to think that Didi and Gogo are just making a silly joke about the potential embarrassment of having an erection when hanging themselves despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the Lord Chamberlain thought otherwise: he requested the line to be excised from the English production of the play in 1954 (Beckett, 2011, 479–81; Beckett 2014, 83). There are castratos' screams in the thirteenth of the *Texts for Nothing* (1955/77; Beckett 2010b), an 'obscure obscene joke', echoing Mercutio's erectile jesting in *All That Fall* (1957; Beckett, 2006), Willie in his hole in *Happy Days* (1961/3; Beckett, 2006) and tin openers between 'not very elastic' buttocks in *How It Is* (1961/4; Beckett, 2014, 59–60). In 1964, naked bodies are imagined 'kissing, caressing, licking, sucking, fucking and buggering' in *All Strange Away* (Beckett, 1995, 171); in 1966, a presumed

six-year-old licks the narrator's penis when told to do so (the text is called *Enough*); in *Not I*, words gush from an invisible woman's vulvar lips on the TV screen in 1975; in 1977, we are still taking part in a 'to and fro' movement, 'from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither' (Beckett, 2010b, 167). This Element addresses these issues using feminist, queer, and trans theory, shows Beckett's relevance to contemporary debates in the fields of gender and sexuality, and argues for the need to incorporate them into Beckett studies.

1.1 Insufferable

Gender difference and sexual encounters in Beckett are sources of humour, irritation, desire, friction, discomfort, disgust, hatred, and exasperation: they are insufferable. In the pre-war years especially, the gender politics in the oeuvre are misogynistic and funny in equal measure, while any sexual relation is consistently excruciating, as the heavy-handed Freudian joke about Molloy's mother makes abundantly clear: 'my mother's images sometimes mingled with theirs [Ruth's and Lousse's], which is literally unendurable, like being crucified, I don't know why and I don't want to' (Beckett, 2009d, 58). Sexuality is also only occasionally securely heterosexual: despite Beckett's early interest in Swinburne's unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon* (1859–68) via Mario Praz's *La carne, la morte e il diavolo* (1930), not much attention is given to female same-sex desire beyond the occasional decadent sapphic reference in the early poetry, such as 'icone bilitique' in the unpublished 'Tristesse Janale', a poem in which Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Pierre Louÿs and Max Nordau all make an appearance (Beckett, 2012, 44). A furious anality is central to *How It Is*, and male homoeroticism is often so much in front of our eyes as to have remained almost invisible, as Peter Boxall has shown (Boxall, 2004). Interpreting the figures of Lemuel and Madame Pédale in *Malone Dies*, Stéphanie Ravez found herself nodding along the Alba of *Dream*, who thought all men 'homo-sexy': 'pédale' is a derogative word for homosexual in French slang (Ravez, 2001, 137). We can't, however, dismiss the work as homophobic: heterosexual sex seems the most spectacularly fallible of all. It is also remarkably unstable: Molloy's musings, 'But is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes,' tread the fine line between espousing unadventurous heterosexual assumptions about the relation between 'love' and specific sexual practices and exposing their reifying effects (Beckett, 2009d, 56).

In Beckett studies, the issue of gender has been addressed by contributions on feminism, gender, and women's studies, such as Mary Bryden's groundbreaking study (1993), Linda Ben-Zvi's work on women in Beckett's theatre (1990), Judith Roof on ungendering *The Unnamable* (2002), Anna McMullan on the

female body on stage (1993; 2010), Laura Salisbury on misogyny and comedy (2012), Trish McTighe's study of gender (2019), labour and power in *Catastrophe*, Katherine Weiss' work on the 'tenacious trace' of femininity in the drama (2021), and Hannah Simpson on sexual trauma in *Not I* (2022a). When we come to sexuality, what I call its insufferable quality accounts for two representative critical reactions. On the one hand, a biographical recuperation within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990); this is the process, familiar to readers of Beckett criticism, that naturalises the rather disturbing role of gender and sexuality into an admiration for the author's knowingness. Alternatively, we encounter a polite glossing over anything that can be recognised as queer, as in S. E. Gontarski's well-observed but underdeveloped point about the presence of what he calls 'literary hermaphrodites' in the late prose (Gontarski, 1995, xxx). More recently, however, several studies have become more attentive to the need to account for Beckett's complex views on reproduction (Sheehan, 2006; Stewart, 2011; Salisbury, 2012), homoeroticism (Ravez, 2001; Boxall, 2004), and 'the normal' (Kennedy, 2020). With the exceptions of Leo Bersani and Calvin Thomas, queer theorists have not focused on Beckett; Eleanor Green's work on queer sexuality in the 1960s prose will change the current critical landscape (Green, 2022).

Gender and sexuality are not simply thematic concerns in the oeuvre, but formal, aesthetic, and critical preoccupations. They are also hard work. In the early prose, they make us encounter the cultural force of misogynist humour; in the middle period, they stage forms of 'abortive' textuality, as the author called it; and, throughout, they make us reflect on the place of gender and – especially from the 1960s onwards – sexuality as part of the wider question of the political in Beckett. In short, they put us on the spot.

In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman see sex as the space which enables us to understand how 'relationality is invested with hopes, expectations, and anxieties that are often *experienced* as unbearable' (Berlant and Edelman, 2014, vii). The Beckett oeuvre displays both a sustained, if sceptical, interest in any 'encounter which undoes the subject's fantasmatic sovereignty' and an awareness of the paradoxical regulatory power of any liberatory view of sexuality (Berlant and Edelman, 2014, 2). I adopt the existentialist-inflected 'unbearable' in Section 2.3, in relation to Beckett's correspondence with Pamela Mitchell, but the encounter with sexuality and gender difference is not always one that brings us into 'the anxiety-inducing arena of self-decomposure that sexual activities both beget and represent' (Wiegman, 2017, 219). It is often a comedy of misrecognition, which undoes the formal mastery needed to claim that sex has the power to undo, as is often

assumed instead in the staged dialogue between Berlant and Edelman.[1] The objectless 'insufferable' of my title suggests that Beckett's texts implicate the reader in an irritable, irritating, impatient, sometimes cruel, and often comedic relation to gender and sexuality (Ngai, 2005). At times, but not always, it feels unbearable; often, it is quite fun.

This Element traces a chronological arc which follows Mary Bryden's trajectory from the 'secure deference to sexual polarities' in the early works to the gradual 'hacking away at the notion of gender', but argues, with Eleanor Green, that we have not previously noticed that the 'horribly difficult' *How It Is* marks a clear shift towards sexuality (Bryden, 1993, 14; Beckett, 2014, 252; Green, 2022, 8–37). In developing an interest in the workings of sexuality, Beckett was in step with the cultural climate of early 1960s Paris. However, his 1960s and 1970s work cannot be assimilated to the liberation movements of the time, about which he mused to Theodor Adorno in 1969: 'was there ever such rightness joined to such foolishness?' In the same letter, Beckett joked that he hadn't yet been pilloried by what he provocatively called the 'Marcusejugend', referring to the younger followers of the author of *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, [1964] 2007), whom he admired (Beckett, 2016, 151). Both Herbert Marcuse and Jean-Paul Sartre expressed a keen interest in the relationship between the mechanised repetition of the 'technological universe' and its ability to 'break the innermost privacy of freedom and join sexuality and labour in one unconscious, rhythmic automatism', or as the first lesson in *How It Is* puts it in 1961, 'and that come to think of it almost mechanically at least where words involved' (Sartre, 1960, 290; Beckett, 2009b, 55).

A few years before *One-Dimensional Man*, *How It Is* turned to the 'lubricious ferocity' of sexuality as the formal and mechanical problem of violence, in the context of the Parisian 'Sade Boom' but emerging from Beckett's long-standing fascination with Sade's Dantean 'rigour of composition' (Beckett, 2009c, 117), as demonstrated by Shane Weller (2008), John Pilling (2014), Jean-Michel Rabaté (2020), Elsa Baroghel (2022), and Michael Krimper (2022); evidenced in Beckett's unpublished translations of Sade and Maurice Heine, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot, and Georges Bataille for *transition*; and mediated by his reading of Guillaume Apollinaire, Marcel Proust, and Mario Praz (Krimper, 2022, 1–5). Neither the utopian potential of sexual liberation nor the male fantasies of omnipotence suggested by the notion of rigour fully account for Beckett's fierce economies of repetition that continued in the post-1960 period, however. *How It Is* is not 'sadism pure and simple' and does not follow a Dantean topography, although both Dante and Sade are part of the

[1] I owe the expression 'comedy of misrecognition' to Jackie Stacey, whom I thank.

text's digestive processes of incorporation and expulsion, which keep it alive as if it were an organism, if not quite a body.

Other works from the 1960s restage the sexual as a form of repetition, but prefer harder edges: in *Happy Days* (1961), tragicomic scenes from a marriage take place in the rather graphic landscape of mound and hole – now mutually unreachable; *Play* (1963) stages a love triangle through verbal hammering ('I can smell that bitch off you'); *All Strange Away* (1963) and *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965) engage with the fine line dividing eroticism and pornography via painstaking geometrical arrangements of bodies. Not even in *Breath* (1966) – a farcical skit for an erotic review – does the panting stop (Beckett, 2006 and 2010b).

Despite the development from often questionable gender politics to experimental and queer sexuality, both gender difference and sexual relations remain problems which refuse to go away: the former at first a stubborn presence and, later, a source of doubt, the latter unconsoling, funny, and inevitable. From *Dream* to *Ill Seen Ill Said*, averting our gaze from gender and sexuality means missing important dimensions of Beckett's oeuvre.

The relation between Beckett's work and political issues, including gender and sexual politics, is never one of direct causality, but it is historically significant to note that Beckett's post-war experimentalism found a home with publishers such as John Calder, Jerôme Lindon at Les Éditions de Minuit, and Barney Rosset at Grove Press (Girodias' establishment turned out to be a less hospitable place), who had to deal frequently with censorship legislation when taking the risk of publishing authors ranging from the pornographic to the experimental – and often crossing that divide (Rabaté, 2020, 5–6). Sexual politics are of considerable biographical importance, too, as this Element argues by focusing on an early poem and the Pamela Mitchell correspondence as case studies. I avoid using feminist theory (or any other theory) as a critical yardstick against which to measure Beckett's allegedly wanting behaviour: as pointed out by Paul Stewart, neither regret nor condemnation will get us very far – critically or politically (Stewart, 2011). By making this choice I advocate for an approach that does not underestimate the complexity of gender and sexuality in Beckett's published and unpublished works: their much-flaunted abortive effect is queerly generative.

While not shirking away from what remains disturbing in Beckett's sexual politics, this Element is not interested in recuperating it as a value, or in 'affording storage space to the privileged seats of patriarchy', as Bryden put it (Bryden, 1993, 119). It calls for feminist, queer, and trans theory to attend to the twin dynamics of comedy and discomfort in Beckett's treatment of gender and sexuality. Feminist studies, and especially work on sexual politics, are key to

analyse the prose work up to the late 1950s, the correspondence, the theatre up to the 1970s, and the early poetry, while sexuality studies are discussed primarily in relation to the post-1960 prose and drama.

1.2 Gender: Excitable Speech

Anyone interested in gender finds no shortage of evidence to back up Bryden's point that sees the early fiction as 'consistently secure in its deference to sexual polarities as discerned by a centralising male narratorial voice' (Bryden, 1993, 14). In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, we are offered a virtuoso display of the Smeraldina Rima's insatiable sexual appetites:

> The implacable, the insatiate, warmed up this time by her morning jerks to a sexy sudorem, she violated him after tea. When it was his express intention, made clear in a hundred and one subtle and delicate ways, to keep the whole thing pewer and above-bawd. [. . .] The tiffs started. [. . .] Still, bitched and all as the whole thing was from that sacrificial morning on, they kept it going in a kind of way, he doing his poor best to oblige her and she hers to be obliged, in a gehenna of sweats and fiascos and tears and an absence of all douceness. We confess we are so attached to our principal boy that we cannot but hope that she has since had cause to regret that first assault on his privities. Though it would scarcely occur to her, we believe, to relate the slow tawdry boggling of the entire unhappy affair, two nouns and four adjectives, to that lesion of Platonic tissue all of a frosty October morning. Yet it is always on that issue that they tended to break and did break. Looking babies in his eyes, the –, that was her game, making his amorosi sospiri sound ridiculous. (Beckett, 1993, 19)

The passage alternates between ventriloquising Belacqua – defensively reacting against Smerry's procreative obsessions – and occupying a third-person perspective, later identified as a 'we' flaunting its camaraderie towards our principal boy. Despite such an attachment, Belacqua's lack of sexual prowess and coy display of delicate sensibilities cannot escape appearing just as 'ridiculous' as his more general propensity for onanism. If free indirect discourse makes self-pleasure reverberate through the existential loneliness evoked by Giacomo Leopardi's 1829 'Le Ricordanze' (misremembered here as 'Rimembranze'), the narrator's reproduction of Smerry's voice scorns her inability to stay 'above bawd': 'I met Arschlochweh and I had to get him to finger me a bit in my Brahams', the text reports in direct speech (Beckett, 1993, 18; Caselli, 2012). Smeraldina's dubious English, which is elsewhere a cause for Belacqua's aggressive claim to intellectual superiority, is a perfect excuse not only for a cheap laugh, but also, in Bryden's terminology, for a rather secure alignment between the narrative voice and the male perspective. If you are clever enough, you can side with Bel's fragile masculinity and laugh at Smerry's

monstrous appetites while marvelling at the ways in which the bawdy, now uncontained, drifts from Bel's view of Smerry to the narrator's allegedly faithful transcription of her language. The music teacher's proper name, however, makes the whole utterance preposterous in its rude take on both German compound nouns and Dickensian patronyms: any pretence at narratorial reliability is turned into a verbal game of mutual humiliation. The text cannot stay above-bawd: our mastery as readers is threatened by its own fragility, just as the mastery predicated on self-assured heterosexual roles vacillates.

In case we might be led to suspect that *Dream* is an exception, this is how the distinctively less juvenile *First Love* (1946) reads:

> One day she [Lulu] had the impudence to announce she was with child, and four or five months gone into the bargain, by me of all people! She offered me a side view of her belly. She even undressed, no doubt to prove she wasn't hiding a cushion under her skirt, and then of course for the pure pleasure of undressing. Perhaps it's just wind, I said, by way of consolation. (Beckett, 1995, 43–4)

The anti-procreative vein of *Dream* is developed into the arch sarcasm of *First Love*, in which the comedy emerges from the narrator's outraged self-assurance rather than his insecure masculinity. Wind and consolation sit uneasily next to each other, in a clash of registers that adumbrates *Molloy*'s famous *Times Literary Supplement*'s coat lining, effective because impervious to flatulence. In the eyes of *First Love*'s affronted narrator Lulu displays her impudence in announcing her pregnancy, while Molloy succumbs to the dubious charms of Circe-like Lousse:

> It was then that Lousse, taking advantage of my weakness, squatted down beside me and began to make me propositions, to which I must confess I listened, absent-mindedly, I had nothing else to do, I could do nothing else, and doubtless she had poisoned my beer with something intended to mollify me, to mollify Molloy, with the result that I was nothing more than a lump of melting wax, so to speak. (Beckett, 2009d, 45–6)

Lousse, here intent in mollifying Molloy, is accused with alliterative intensity of poisoning him in homeopathic doses with 'miserable molys', the magical drug given to Odysseus by Hermes. 'The antidote to Circe', as Beckett put in in the *Dream Notebook*, appears also in the 1931 poem 'Moly', published in *The European Caravan* in the same year under the different name 'Yoke of Liberty', in reference to Dante's *De Monarchia* and reproduced with two small variants in a letter to the editor of *The Poetry Magazine* in 1934 (Beckett, 2003, 172; Beckett, 2012, 300, 480; Beckett, 2009c, 231). 'Moly' is an eerily anachronistic decadent poem, in which the vulvar grey 'lips of her desire' part 'like a silk