

*H.D. and the Victorian  
Fin de Siècle*

Gender, Modernism, Decadence

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CASSANDRA LAITY

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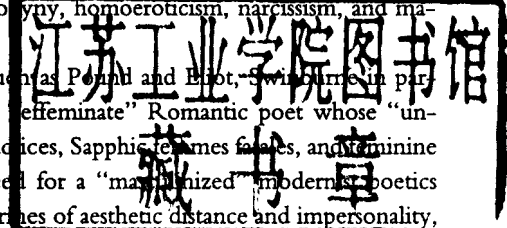
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*H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle*

*H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle* argues foremost that H.D. eluded the male modernist flight from Romantic "effeminacy" and "personality" by embracing the very cults of personality in the Decadent Romanticism of Oscar Wilde, A.C. Swinburne, Walter Pater, and D.G. Rossetti that her male contemporaries most deplored: the cult of the demonic femme fatale and of the "effeminate" Aesthete androgyne. H.D., Laity maintains, used these sexually aggressive masks to shape a female modernism that freely engaged female and male androgyny, homoeroticism, narcissism, and maternal eroticism.

For male modernist poets such as Pound and Eliot, Swinburne in particular personified the type of "effeminate" Romantic poet whose "unhealthy," "vague" language practices, Sapphic *femmes fatales*, and feminine Aesthetes demonstrated the need for a "masculinized" modernist poetics and poetry. Their ensuing doctrines of aesthetic distance and impersonality, Laity argues, attempted to "kill" the dissident subjectivities of the femme fatale and the male Aesthete mask that had dominated their youth. H.D., in contrast, evaded the repressive gender ideologies of male modernism by returning to these twin agents of dissident desires and their attendant "abject" body tropes, poetic forms, and experimental linguistic practices.

Focusing on the early *Sea Garden*, the plays and poetry of the 1920s, and her later epic, *Trilogy*, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle* demonstrates H.D.'s shift from the homoerotic, "white," vanishing tropology of the male androgyne fashioned by Pater and Wilde to the "abject" monstrously sexual body of the Pre-Raphaelite and Decadent femme fatale.



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## Introduction

### *Dramatis Personae*

#### *The Aesthete Androgyne and the Femme Fatale*

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This book argues foremost that H.D. eluded the male modernist flight from Romantic “effeminacy” and “personality” by embracing the very cults of personality in the British fin de siècle that her contemporaries most deplored: the cult of the demonic femme fatale and that of the Aesthete androgyne. As I hope to demonstrate, Swinburne’s decadent Hermaphroditus or the crystal man of Pater’s androgynous, homoerotic Aestheticism lies behind the mask of the “crystalline youth” H.D. adopted throughout the 1920s in *Hippolytus Temporizes* and elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> while in her later work, Swinburne’s and Rossetti’s Pre-Raphaelite femmes fatales inform *Trilogy*’s exploding, abject poetic of reviled Venuses – Venus herself, Lilith, Mary Magdalene, and others.

My study first became organized around the figures of the Decadent femme fatale and the male androgyne because their outlines were almost always discernible behind male modernist denunciations of Romantic personality in favor of modernist “impersonality,” and by contrast, in the active, desiring “I” of H.D.’s shifting feminine modernism. These sexually dissident masks formed a convenient nexus for the ongoing debates about sexuality and gender provoked by such historical or social phenomena as the New Woman, the sexologists’ theories of female inversion, and the crisis in male sexual definition engendered by Oscar Wilde’s infamous trials.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the gendered and competing schemes of Romantic influence configured by contrasting male and female agendas for modern poetry, the fatal woman and the male Aesthete androgyne often enact the



paradigmatic repulsion/attraction to the maternal feminine that literary critics are currently finding inscribed throughout corresponding strains of male and female modernisms.<sup>1</sup>

Although male theorizers of modernism such as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound violently denounced these twin emblems of Romantic linguistic and sexual "morbidity," H.D. was not alone among women writers in her identification with the Decadents' sexual/textual bodies of female desire and male androgyny. Katherine Mansfield's early letters and journal entries reveal an almost obsessive identification with the sexual ambiguities of Oscar Wilde and a devotion to the Decadents that Sydney Janet Kaplan describes as persistently "deeper than fashionability." Wilde's androgyny affirmed the young woman's physical sense of herself as "child, woman and more than half man." And Mansfield's exuberant recordings of Wilde's sexual aphorisms – "for we castrate our minds to the extent by which we deny our bodies" – show us the young writer in the act of assembling a sexually renegade authorial self.<sup>4</sup> Richard Dellamora rightly observes that Wildean Aestheticism helped women writers "like [Katherine Mansfield]" "claim for themselves both a power of utterance and a power over their bodies and relationships."<sup>5</sup> Other women writers appear to have constructed a patchwork feminine tradition that traced a line from Sappho through Decadent renderings of the lesbian femme fatale such as Swinburne's Sappho in "Anactoria" or the titular persona of his autobiographical novel, *Lesbia Brandon*. Renée Vivien's passionate, visceral, lesbian poetic of Decadent goddesses – Venus of the Blind, Madonna of the Plague, the elusive Maitresse of her love poetry – derive from her extensive reading in Swinburne.<sup>6</sup> As Susan Gubar observes in her important "Sapphistries," Vivien regarded Decadence as "fundamentally a lesbian literary tradition."<sup>7</sup>

The scope and pervasiveness of the transgressive discourses of "masculine desire" or demonic female eros in nineteenth-century literature, poetry, and poetics have been demonstrated by Victorian scholars such as Nina Auerbach, Richard Dellamora, Thais Morgan, Linda Dowling, and others.<sup>8</sup> As Dellamora claims in his groundbreaking *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, although the category "homosexuality" was first introduced by medical literature (1870), the exploration of new models for male love and gender identification "has a long, complex development in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century poetry" from Shelley

through the poetry of the 1890s (*Masculine Desire* 1). Similarly, Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, cites "a line of nineteenth-century poets [who] cultivated" effeminacy in order to resist "patriarchal pressure" caused by diverse historical phenomena.<sup>9</sup> I would add that in addition to the representation of alternative masculinities, this developing, pervasive strain of Romanticism includes topoi for female narcissism, androgyny, homoeroticism, and role reversal. Further, like Sinfield's "Wilde century" and Dellamora's "Aestheticism," which encompass earlier aesthetic movements of the nineteenth century, my reference to the sexually transgressive poetic, which can be traced from early Romanticism through the 1890s as, variously, "Decadent Romanticism," "Decadence," or "the fin de siècle," is not limited to a single decade. Notably, each movement and its writers display important stylistic, philosophical, and historical differences; however, the experimentation with renegade sex/gender identities through similar masks, image complexes, poetic forms, and linguistic practices persists. For example, Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, and Decadence each deploy the white or crystal boy androgyne, the scarlet femme fatale, language practices deemed "effeminate" by their critics (from Robert Buchanan to T.S. Eliot), neo-Platonic theories of sex, gender, or spiritual "sameness," as well as other Greek encodings of dissident desires.

I will argue that the Decadent topoi of the femme fatale and the male androgyne and their attendant tropes, forms, and linguistic practices in works by the Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde created a "feminine" tradition for modernist women poets who, unlike twentieth-century women novelists, did not claim to think back through their mothers, the strong women poets of the past. Unable or unwilling to recognize a tradition of women poets in the nineteenth century,<sup>10</sup> H.D. and others used the Decadents to fashion a modernist poetic of female desire. In the next generation of male poets, theories of modern poetry authored by Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and others repeatedly raise the specters of the femme fatale and the Aesthete to warn against the "hedonism" they believed had plunged Romanticism into decadence and decay. Women modernists such as H.D., however, responded differently to the powerful feminine subjectivities of their early reading that were presently driving their male contemporaries toward a foreboding masculinization of poetry. The ready agents of a sexually transgressive poetic – the fatal woman and the Aesthete

androgyne – therefore articulated a fluid range of forbidden sexualities, including androgyny, homoeroticism, and role reversal, not available in the modernist poetic of male desire, which, as critics such as Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Shari Benstock have demonstrated, prompted the twentieth-century woman writer to evolve alternative modernisms.<sup>11</sup> As I hope to demonstrate, the dual textual bodies of Decadent transgressive desire, with their attendant grotesque body tropes, disruptive language practices, and sympathetic theories of love and sexuality, effectively countered the major male modernists' anti-Romantic theories of impersonality. These doctrines, at their most conservative, insisted on normative male masks, purgative conceptions of the female image, masculinist theories of love and desire, and closed, self-referential linguistic theories.

From the early *Sea Garden*, H.D.'s poetic narratives of desire shuttle between the erotic masks of the Greek androgyne and the Sapphic femme fatale she had inherited from the Decadent Victorian Hellenists. By contrast, I argue in Chapter One, male modernist essays proposing the virtues of aesthetic impersonality frequently burned in effigy the femme fatale and the "effeminate" Aesthete, revealing what appeared to be a submerged crisis over the issue of sexual masking (my phrase) – the erotic orientation of the poetic "I." Reacting against the very real threat of a poetic legacy that valorized the feminine "I," male theorizers of early modernism socially constructed the Decadent past as a ruinous form of feminine writing emblemized by the seductive siren song of the femme fatale or the sexually ambiguous male Aesthete. Eliot's and Yeats's myths of their poetic development told of their narrow escape from the designing Romantic foremother or "effeminate" forefather whose sorcery had reduced them to mawkish Aesthetes in their impressionable youths. Kermode's *Romantic Image* unwittingly affirms that modernist theories of imagination subsequently sought to purge the monstrous femme fatale of her pathological "excess," reducing her to the passive, remote, and seamless image emblemized by the dancer.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, as we shall see, certain tenets of Yeats's, Pound's, and Eliot's theories of personae or masking ritually stripped away the Aesthete masks worn by their formerly "effeminate" selves. Indeed, if, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and other critics claim, the gendered fallout from Wilde's trials triggered a general crisis of sexual definition and introduced new epistemological categories such as "the [male] homosexual," into rep-

resentation, the male aesthete that had sparked debate in the nineteenth century became a renewed site of anxiety and subversion in the twentieth. Pound's staging of his own Aesthete persona's death in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* as representative of his theory of personae, for example, suggests that in addition to the battle of the sexes, the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition Sedgwick ascribes to Oscar Wilde's trials was strongly affecting the next generation of poets, who were already guilty by association. The ensuing male modernist war on Romantic personality often seemed aimed at snuffing out dissident subjectivities (indeed, Joseph Bristow notes that the word "personality," which Wilde "repeatedly turned to in his trials – both elud[ed] and yet signal[ed] the object of homosexual attraction").<sup>13</sup> The ensuing silencing system may have worked effectively against many women writing, but others were compelled toward these eroticized sites of gender trouble.<sup>14</sup> H.D.'s Decadent revisions helped her, therefore, to create a myth of womanhood counter to the myth of manhood represented by male modernist anti-Romantic programs for poetry.

I argue in Chapter One from a selection of essays, memoirs, letters, and other anti-Romantic prose documents produced by H.D.'s male contemporaries Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, that such writings often comprised masculinist "scripts"<sup>15</sup> for modernism. H.D.'s prose and poetic canon, however, appears frequently to vie for possession of the literary future through her inverse allegiance to the presiding geniuses of the feminine past. Thus (contrary to Harold Bloom's Oedipal model of father-son combat), Yeats's, Eliot's, and Pound's anti-Romantic scripts for poetic modernisms construct their Romantic precursors as insidiously possessive, fatal foremothers or forefathers whose influence threatened to feminize both their psyches and their art by entrapping them in the servile, effeminate position of the Aesthete.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, H.D.'s histories of her poetic development reach backward toward reconnection with the early Romantic, feminine, self. Although H.D. did not write essays detailing the dos and don'ts of modernism, her reviews, memoirs, letters, notes, and particularly H.D.'s several fictional autobiographies, provide a career-long gendered narrative of her modernist poetics. In *HER*,<sup>17</sup> H.D.'s 1920s' fictional history of her sexual and aesthetic beginnings, poems from Swinburne introduce the young woman poet to the boyishly androgynous sister/mother love that will articulate her discovery both of her bisexuality and poetic vocation. H.D.'s



second, revised, mid-1940s' myth of Romantic origins, her autobiographical novel set in Pre-Raphaelite London, "White Rose and the Red," imaginatively reestablishes modernist continuity with the Victorian cult of womanhood by recasting her male contemporaries as members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and H.D. as Elizabeth Siddal – prototype of the Decadent mother muse.<sup>18</sup> Following my preliminary discussion of the sex/gender politics inscribed in male modernist, anti-Romantic theories of mask and Image, I explore H.D.'s early deployment of Decadent masks and images in Chapter Two. The remainder of the book traces the course of H.D.'s changing Decadent revisionism throughout her career.

Reinforced, perhaps, by the high visibility of the femme fatale and the Aesthete androgyne in the early programs for male modernism she witnessed at first hand, H.D.'s dissenting poetic of disruptive body troping, sexual masking, and linguistic practices persistently returns to the twin Decadent agents of forbidden desire she first encountered in her early passion for Swinburne, Rossetti, Morris, and others. H.D.'s writings of the feminine body do not therefore engage the seamless, passively sentient icons for sexual/linguistic "unity" often prescribed by male modernism, but effectively defer and disfigure the modernists' most conservative Image/objects of desire by deploying both the evasive, white, vanishing tropology Pater, Wilde, and others had fashioned from the androgynous male ideal of Greek statuary, and the abject, monstrously sexual body of the Pre-Raphaelite femme fatale.

I will demonstrate in Chapter Three that the early H.D., like many other women writers, used a set of codes for the Decadent boy body such as "whiteness," "*diaphaneité*" (transparency), intricacy, and artifice to configure the female body. Later, as I argue in Chapters Five through Seven, H.D. turned to the more visceral, grotesque, and abject femme fatale of poems such as Swinburne's "Anactoria" for refigurations of the mother muse. Further, H.D. avoided her male contemporaries' oppositional, gender-coded masks of love and sexuality through recourse to Decadent maskings based on sex/gender "sameness" found in the Romantic "Platonic" convention of incestuous brother-sister doublings, homoerotic boy-man dyads, and mother-son relations. In addition, the Decadent personae of a shape-changing, sexually renegade "author" who encompasses (his) diverse sexual personae – the Faustines, Venuses, Hyacinths, and so on of dramatic

collections such as Wilde's *Poems* or Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* – offered an example of "split" sexual masking. In H.D.'s volumes of erotic monologues such as *Hymen* (1921) or *Heliodora* (1924), the phantasm of a shaping power, "H.D.," explores a range of emotions and desires, from the maternal eroticism of "Demeter" to the male-male homoeroticism of her "Hyacinth." Related to this, the Aesthete's and fatal woman's poetic vehicles – Decadent quest romance or heretic Victorian monologue – offered an established form for the sexual history that would organize H.D.'s searching narratives of feminine desire in poetry, prose, and long poems such as *Hippolytus TempORIZES*, *HER*, *Trilogy*, and *Helen in Egypt*.

However, H.D.'s feminist revisions of Decadent Romanticism required an extremely careful maneuvering through the straits of the feminist revisionary process. Passive acquiescence to Decadent influence could be dangerous to both the feminist text and the female psyche. Despite his sexually transgressive poetics, the Aesthete poet's possession of a male body, his operation within a male discourse, and his differing power relation to the conventional poetic of male desire gave rise to a set of narrative strategies whose sometime misogyny rendered the woman writer invisible or worse. Internalizing Decadent misogyny or the consciously perverse "religion of vice" might therefore expose the woman writer to the very censure and self-abasement she sought to escape. Sydney Kaplan expresses unease with the young Mansfield's total self-immersion in the persona of the Wildean Aesthete, who "even in his supposed androgyny" remains a "male" figure ("K.M.'s London" pp. 166, 167). Perhaps the implicit denial of her own female body as well as terror of Wildean "perversity" led to Mansfield's agonized letter of homosexual panic in which she denounced her affairs with women as having been initiated under Wilde's demonic influence. She wrote, "Wilde acted so strongly and terribly upon me that I was constantly subject to exactly the same fits of madness as those which caused his ruin and his mental decay."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, co-option by the corrupt femme fatale could be equally devastating: Lillian Faderman goes so far as to attribute Renée Vivien's lurid death by starvation to her identification with Swinburne's Lesbia Brandon, among other Decadent sadomasochistic images of the "doomed lesbian."<sup>20</sup>

Albeit for feminist purposes, H.D.'s early poetry unwittingly embraces the "homosocial"<sup>21</sup> misogyny implicit in some Aesthetic appropriations of

the boy-man Greek mentoring system, which define women's love as base, animalistic, and inferior to the higher love between men. Shakespeare's sonnets to the "foul" Dark Lady and the Fair Youth demonstrate the misogynist pitfalls of this classical construct, which produced in Victorian Hellenists such as Pater a similar split between the coarsely material, vampire femme fatale (Mona Lisa) and the pure boy priest (Marius the Epicurean, the crystal man of his essays, and others) he modeled after the white masculine ideal of Greek male statuary.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, as early as H.D.'s *Sea Garden* (1916), white, shimmering, and chiseled landscape/bodies of androgyny provide space and respite from stifling, overripe Venusbergs of oppressive desire. By the poetic monologues ("Hyacinth"), verse plays (*Hippolytus Temporizes*), and prose (*Hedylus*) of the 1920s, H.D.'s sexual poetic appears largely to revolve around a full-blown dichotomy between the white Aesthete androgyne or his Artemisian counterpart and the corrupt, scarlet femme fatale. Although the early H.D. used the typically Paterian aversion toward the femme fatale – frequently to great effect – in order to pronounce against the conventionally feminine sexuality she perceived as polarizing the sexes and disallowing erotic/spiritual "sameness," H.D.'s poetic of male androgyny threatened to self-destruct in the 1930s, as Susan Friedman and others have demonstrated.<sup>23</sup>

H.D.'s primary Romantic vehicle for sexual "sameness," the Aesthete androgyne of Victorian Hellenism, eventually exacted a heavy price from the woman poet: While H.D.'s inscriptions of a feminine desire or language in the white, vanishing body of the male androgyne cleared a space for erotic/linguistic play, they simultaneously denied the woman poet the empowering difference of her female body. From the 1930s onward, H.D. cast off her primary mask of boy-androgyne, summoning the power of the abject, the horrific, and often violent tropology of the femme fatale, which would force the maternal feminine body/text into representation.

H.D.'s shift from the mask of the male Aesthete to that of the femme fatale appears to be prompted by the changing purposes, scope, and orientation toward the feminine of the experienced (and battle-scarred) H.D. Harold Bloom, George Bornstein, and others map the phases of Romantic influence demarcating the careers of male moderns such as Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, H.D.'s rejection of the male Aesthete persona for the mask of the Pre-Raphaelite femme fatale (prototype of the Decadent

fatal woman) demonstrates two distinct revolutions in her Decadent revisionism reflecting the shifting sex/gender concerns and psychodynamics unique to the career of a woman writer. Accordingly, I argue in the second half of the book, H.D. generated a second Romantic myth of origins and a later agenda for female modernism in her Pre-Raphaelite novels, supplanting the earlier *HER*. In the meantime, I hope to demonstrate, H.D. became aesthetically reattuned to the persona of the siren (of literature and film) during her immersion in Violet Hunt's biography of Elizabeth Siddal, *Wife of Rossetti*, and during her simultaneous involvement with director Kenneth MacPherson and avant-garde cinema in the early 1930s. A few years later, H.D.'s pivotal psychoanalysis with Freud reconciled her to both her bisexuality and her search for the mother/lover<sup>25</sup>: H.D.'s new figuration of the mother muse as the flagrantly sexual femme fatale informs her unpublished Pre-Raphaelite novel, "White Rose and the Red" (composed 1947–8). A more inclusive, cultural and female-identified modernist agenda is set forth in this fictional autobiography of the prototypical femme fatale – Elizabeth Siddal – which regroups H.D.'s male contemporaries in the composite personae of Aldington-Rossetti, Pound-Swinburne, and Lawrence-Morris around the nineteenth-century cult of womanhood represented by Siddal-H.D. Immersed in the Pre-Raphaelites, H.D. herself professed of her earlier work, "I had actually adjusted my opera-glasses the wrong way round, to the Greek scene," and referred to her current fascination with the Pre-Raphaelite "legend" as a "new direction." She tellingly described the Pre-Raphaelite novels she wrote during the mid-1940s as the "prose phase" that necessarily preceded "the poetry."<sup>26</sup>

I conclude the book with an analysis of the abject femme fatale in H.D.'s major, late poem, *Trilogy*. Drawing upon disruptive theories of body troping such as Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection (*Powers of Horror*), Monique Wittig's writings of the lesbian body (*The Lesbian Body*), and Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of "the grotesque image of the body" (*Rabelais and His World*), I approach H.D.'s epic as a poem of the explosive and exploded body that revels in the monstrous femmes fatales she encountered in Pre-Raphaelite art – Mary Magdalene, Lilith, Venus, and others.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Eliot's listless collection of misfits in an earlier male epic of poetic modernism, *The Waste Land*, H.D.'s "straggling company" of war-torn artist dejects, city dwellers, and prophets are propelled across the divide of epochs

toward a new linguistic/erotic modernity molded from Decadent "bodies that mat(t)er."<sup>28</sup>

The study of sexually transgressive Decadence and its impact on modernist women (and men) writers has just begun. The numerous, thoroughgoing books on male modernism and the influence of nineteenth-century poetry by Harold Bloom, George Bornstein, Frank Kermode, James Longenbach, and others focus rather on modernist continuities with the more sexually conventional theories and theorists of early Romanticism and Victorianism.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, some attention has been given to the influence of the early Romantic imagination on women writers such as Emily Dickinson or Willa Cather.<sup>30</sup> Contemporary feminist inquiries into the possible impact of the sexually renegade Decadents on modernist women writers began in major surveys of the many influences shaping the modernisms of several twentieth-century women writers, such as Susan Gubars and Sandra Gilbert's *No Man's Land*, vols. I and II, and Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*. References to Baudelairean or Swinburnian Decadence have appeared most often in literary studies of Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney. Sydney Kaplan's *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* dwells on Mansfield's relation to Oscar Wilde as part of a larger mapping of literary origins.<sup>31</sup> In addition to these works, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle* has benefited from recent works by Victorian scholars such as Richard Dellamora, Jonathan Dollimore, Thais Morgan, Linda Dowling, and others, which are uncovering the poetic discourses of sexual/linguistic transgression referred to as "Decadence."<sup>32</sup> My critique of male modernism has also been much aided by reassessments of the political implications (although not the sex/gender implications) of the modernist poetics of impersonality formulated by Eliot and Pound. These include Lyndall Gordon's two literary biographies of Eliot, *Eliot's Early Years* and *Eliot's New Life*, Gail McDonald's *Learning to be Modern*, Andrew Ross's *The Failure of Modernism*, and Louis Menand's *Discovering Modernism*. I am also indebted to Elizabeth Butler Cullingford's pathbreaking study of Yeats and gender in *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*.<sup>33</sup>

My purpose in this book, to conduct a sustained exploration into the Decadent revisionism of one modernist woman poet within the larger context of competing male and female modernisms, has given me the freedom to concentrate on the course of an entire career. However, the scope of

this book prevented me from exploring in depth the many women writers I encountered in my research – Willa Cather, Violet Hunt, Virginia Woolf, among them – whose fascination with the transgressive poetics of Oscar Wilde, Swinburne, the Pre-Raphaelites, and others demands further, specialized study.

*The Rhetoric of Anti-Romanticism*  
*Gendered Genealogies of Male Modernism*

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For  
Sally Wheelock Brayton  
Jim Hala  
and  
Zachary Laity Hala

Most recent critical commentaries on Eliot, Yeats, and Pound acknowledge their sometime conservative if not misogynist attitudes toward women.<sup>1</sup> However, the complex of literary, historical, and psychosocial events underlying the hypermasculine rhetoric of the modernist poetic enterprise is just beginning to receive attention. Gail McDonald's pathbreaking *Learning to Be Modern* discusses at length Eliot's and Pound's project to "masculinize" the modern image of the poet and his work, although she subordinates the sex/gender issue to the (equally important) matter of class. Identifying the male modernists' compulsion to separate themselves from scribbling women and dandified men with the fall of the (American) "feminized" gentry and the emerging "culture of professionalism," McDonald focuses on the ensuing class war that made it imperative for the male modern poet (and scholar) to remodel himself after "serious, hardworking, professional men who made substantive contributions to the real world." " 'Women,' " McDonald notes, "was code for whatever stood in the way of serious, productive creation" (McDonald 62, 64, 87). In this chapter I suggest that Eliot's, Pound's, and Yeats's highly public "masculinization" of poetic modernism also constituted a response to the crisis of sex/gender identification that critics have attributed variously to Oscar Wilde's infamous trials, the proliferation of women writers, the New Woman, and other twentieth-century social or historical phenomena drawing attention to the epistemology of "sex."<sup>2</sup>

The mainstream poets' professed agenda for modernism appears to have

shared the male modernist novelists' prohibition against sexual or androgynous female images such as the *femme fatale* – a taboo that Gilbert and Gubar attribute to the rise of the New Woman – and against the newly introduced type of “the homosexual” modeled after Oscar Wilde and his association with “leisure, privilege and high culture” in the aftermath of his trials.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, perhaps the most urgent polemic against “effeminacy” issued from the poets who had lionized the late-Victorian Romantics in their youth and now faced the task of erasing the feminine Aesthete from modern memory and reinventing a more acceptable sex/gender image of the poet and his poetics. As Yeats records in his *Autobiographies*, although the *literati* had originally viewed Oscar Wilde as a “triumphant figure,” their approbation turned to expressions of contempt (which Yeats did not share) following the revelations made by his trials. Yeats notes Lionel Johnson's obvious “bitterness” and quotes from a letter in which Johnson furiously denounces Wilde's treachery and imposture: “He got a ‘sense of triumph and power, at every dinner table he dominated, from the knowledge that he was guilty of that sin which, more than any other possible to man, would turn all those people against him if they but knew.’”<sup>6</sup> Yeats recalls that Aubrey Beardsley was dismissed from his art editorship at *The Yellow Book* – although he disliked Wilde and possessed “no sexual abnormality” – because of the public outrage over his illustrations for Wilde's *Salome* (*Auto* 216). Pound's and Eliot's reaction against the feminized gentry, therefore, may also be interpreted as a form of sexual panic on the part of the successors of Oscar Wilde, whose guilty verdict had unmasked the feminine, aristocratic, and insouciant pose of the Aesthete poet as sexually deviant. Before discussing in detail the gendered theories of mask and Image inherent in the early male modernist poetic program, it would be useful to survey the masculinist rhetoric that pervaded male modernist anti-Romanticism in general.

Even a cursory glance at the misogynist rhetoric that attended the male modernists' anti-Romantic program for a renovated modernism suggests familiar dismissals of effeminate men's and women's writing: The charges leveled against the past include sentimentalism, effeminacy, escapism, lack of discipline, emotionalism, self-indulgence, confessionism, and more. T.E. Hulme's famous manifesto, “Romanticism and Classicism,” divided literary history into strict gender categories. The Romanticism of Swin-

burne, Byron, and Shelley was defined as “feminine,” “damp,” and “vague”; Classicism, which formed the model for Imagism, “dry,” “hard,” “virile,” and “exact.”<sup>7</sup> Irving Babbitt, who first made the distinction between Romanticism and Classicism,<sup>8</sup> and authored seminal attacks on the decadent and subversive tendencies of Romanticism, strongly influenced the anti-Romantic and misogynist rhetoric of his pupil, T.S. Eliot.<sup>9</sup> The tension between a masculinist humanism and an effeminate romanticism is discernible in Eliot's famous definition of the Romantic “dissociation” of “thought” and “feeling”<sup>10</sup> – which he specifically assigned to the “feminine type” of writing – and the “unified sensibility” he defined as implicitly masculine. Eliot grouped “Mr. Joyce” among the “strongest” writers who “make their feeling into an articulate external world.” Virginia Woolf, by contrast, demonstrated a “more feminine type,” which “makes its art by feeling, and by contemplating the feeling rather than the object”: “The charm of Mrs. Woolf's shorter pieces consists in the immense disparity between the object and the train of feeling which it has set in motion.”<sup>11</sup> Ezra Pound, to whom H.D. had been briefly engaged, colorfully extended the modernist critique of Romantic writing to a gender-biased construct of literary history. Pound included Dante and the French symbolists under the masculine designation, flamboyantly disclaiming “the softness of the ‘nineties’” for which “I have different degrees of antipathy or even contempt.”<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere he criticized the “theatricals” of the Victorian Romantics for “pestering the reader with frills and festoons of language” (*LE* 270). And during his middle period, Yeats dismissed his earlier “womanish introspection” and temporarily abandoned the Romantic feminine lyric forms he had employed.<sup>13</sup> Other modernists frequently linked Romanticism with women writers in dismissals of both. T.E. Hulme blamed the present decayed state of Romanticism for giving license to the self-indulgent sentimentality, confessionism, and flowery imagery of women writers:

The carcass is dead and all the flies are upon it. Imitative poetry springs up like weeds, and women whimper and whine of you and I alas, and roses, roses, roses, all the way. It [Romanticism] becomes the expression of sentimentality rather than of virile thought.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, H.D.'s then husband Richard Aldington, in his review of a novel by Violet Hunt in *The Egoist*, maintained that women writers were “in-

capable" of the "indirect" method of writing, and could only imitate the confessional mode that he equated with Rousseauan Romanticism, thus relegating them to the "great second class" of writers.<sup>13</sup> Finally, explicit or implicit rejections of feminine writing frequently characterized Pound's and Eliot's praise for the masculine virtues of science, intellectual rigor, unity, objectivity, and concreteness.

This chapter examines those places in the male modernists' rhetorical crusade against Romanticism where aspects of the new poetic program (modernism) are proposed as correctives to the linguistic and sexual "perversities" of the past. I suggest that the current male anxiety about sex/gender identification is apparent in the masculinist predisposition of certain modernist doctrines of poetic identity, language, and the female body formulated in opposition to Romantic effeminacy. These incidences of gender trouble occur in various anti-Romantic expositions on modernist "impersonality," the sex/gender designation of the poet's mask, and on the Image/object — both as it applies to representations of the female beloved and as a theory of metaphor containing gendered notions of language.

The first section on modernist masking specifically concerns those presentations of Yeats's masks, Eliot's objective correlative, and Pound's personae that erect a version of the Romantic hero/poet — a Mauberley, a Hamlet, a Shelley, or the youthful poet himself — and proceed to demonstrate how its particular operations will counteract the subject's effeminacy. Such theories of poetic sexual identity often conjure perverse typologies of both the Romantic effeminate Aesthete and the appropriating femme fatale enacting what the modernists appear to have regarded as the typically Romantic, sexually/textually ruinous pathologies of son-mother fixation, or, more covertly, male-male desire. Here the objective correlative, the mask, or the persona serves as a literary acid test, affording the poet or critic a means to divine the symptoms of Romantic effeminacy, if not provide the curative. Related to this, I will argue that the male modernists' social construction of Romanticism as both a deadly "foremother" and a sexually ambiguous forefather departs from Bloom's Freudian model of father-son combat and more closely resembles Chodorow's theory of male identity formation whereby the son necessarily severs his symbiotic connection with the mother and "the feminine world."<sup>14</sup> In Section II of this chapter, The Sexual Politics of the Image/Object, I examine concep-

tions of the female image, typified by New Critic Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*, that profess to displace the femme fatale in favor of a more passive, "aesthetic" female body. I also explore anti-Romantic linguistic theories of the Image/object claiming to inhibit evasive signification — which feminist criticism has come to associate with women's writing<sup>15</sup> — and to promote a more exacting, masculinist correspondence between "word" and "thing."

In this chapter I am also concerned with the ways in which the masculinist doctrine of impersonality paradoxically summoned the presences of the femme fatale and the male aesthete it was intended to suppress. As Judith Butler suggests in *Bodies That Matter*, if, according to Lacan's and Foucault's shared notion "that regulatory power produces the subjects [and sexualities] it controls," then "the 'threat' that compels the assumption of masculine and feminine attributes" is the feminized male and the masculinist woman (*Bodies* 102, 103). It has become a critical commonplace that modernist impersonality defined itself mainly through opposition to the errors of Romanticism. Peopled therefore by "these [erroneous] figures of hell" (*Bodies* 103), modernist poetics not only alerted women writers to the subversive sexual personae of Romanticism but also unwittingly created a pervasive myth of the sexual woman and the androgynous man.

Finally, my mapping of the gendered narratives of male poetic modernism is selective, and is not intended as an exhaustive study of these complex and often contradictory theories. Very few scholarly examinations of gender and male poetic modernism in Eliot and Pound have yet appeared.<sup>16</sup> My main purpose is to demonstrate that certain tenets of male modernism excluded women writers such as H.D. (and sexually dissident male writers) and defined a strain of male modernist poetics from a female modernism that embraced the masks, images, and linguistic practices of Decadent Romanticism.

However, this proposed model for a "male" anti-Romantic modernism and a "female" Romantic modernism should not be regarded as monolithic. Quoting Sandra Gilbert's sharp division between the "male modernist," who seeks the "consolation of orthodoxy," and the "female modernist," who wishes to "restore the primordial chaos of transvestism," Jessica Feldman notes in *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature*, "men, as well as women, have . . . sought the chaos of transves-



tism."<sup>17</sup> Feldman proposes that the nineteenth-century (French) dandy forms "an icon of modernism."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Pound never abandoned his Whistlerian affectations, and biographer Peter Ackroyd notes that several of Eliot's friends remarked his peculiarly Decadent practice of wearing cadaver-green face powder at private parties.<sup>19</sup> The hypermasculine slogans of male modernist anti-Romanticism often bore no relation to male modernist poetic practice, which was frequently steeped in the "female" and androgynous poetics they outwardly deplored. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford demonstrates in her study of Yeats's feminism (*Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry*), even as the rhetoric of Yeats's poetics lapses into misogynist posturings (Cullingford 8), his love poetry reveals a lifelong experimentation with gender roles and sexuality. Similarly, if all gender is performative, Eliot and Pound's prose often gave conflicting performances, assuming masks of strident virility in their most public pronouncements, while more privately, they "cross-dressed." The modernists' most vociferous pronouncements against "effeminate" Romanticism enacted Chodorow's psychosocial model of male rebellion against the feminine. However, as I will discuss later, Eliot, Pound, and Yeats experienced a strong concurrent pull toward "feminine" Romanticism. Both Eliot and Pound more privately constructed a self-identifying, male homoerotic paradigm of Romantic influence closely resembling the sympathetic, "pre-Oedipal" exchange. Indeed, to women writers such as H.D., modernist anti-Romanticism must have seemed a bewildering about-face, intensifying their sense of exclusion and alienation from the heady intellectual commune of earlier years.

### I *The Mask: The Ritualized Death of the Aesthete Poet*

The male modernists' campaign to reinvest the poet with a masculine identity is apparent in the published, personal accounts of their own narrow escapes from the influence of a devouring feminine Romanticism into an autonomous modernism. Throughout his career, Eliot in particular appears to have suffered from a profound erotic ambivalence toward Romanticism. Eliot most often denounced his former Romanticism as a sexually ambig-

uous "feminine" influence. In his essay, "On the Development of Taste," a late case history of his Romantic origins (1933), Eliot's description of his former thralldom suggests at once both matrophobic and homophobic recoil from excessive self-identification with an all-encompassing fatal foremother or a seducing forefather – neither of which resembles Harold Bloom's father-son combat within the Freudian family romance. Eliot's delineation of his fall into Romanticism begins rhapsodically,

It [the discovery of the Romantics] was like a sudden conversion; the world appeared anew, painted with bright, delicious and painful colors. Thereupon I took the usual adolescent course with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti, [and] Swinburne.

and becomes increasingly disenchanted,

I take this period to have persisted until my nineteenth or twentieth year. . . . Like the first period of childhood, it is one beyond which I dare say some people never advance. . . . At this period, the poem, or the poetry of a single poet, invades the youthful consciousness and assumes complete possession for a time. We do not really see it as something with an existence outside ourselves: much as in our youthful experiences of love, we do not so much see the person as infer the existence of some outside object which sets in motion these new and delightful feelings in which we are absorbed. The frequent result is an outburst of scribbling which we may call imitation. . . . It is not a deliberate choice of a poet to mimic, but writing under a kind of daemonic possession by one poet.<sup>20</sup>

Eliot's characterization of his early Romantic intimacy both as a "daemonic possession" and as an "invasion" places the young poet in a suggestively erotic, feminine, victimized relation to the Romantic foremother/forefather. Under the influence of Romanticism, the young Eliot finds himself absorbed by self-indulgent, erotic fantasy (resembling the experience of first love) in which the other exists as an extension of his own ego. Eliot associates Romanticism with "the first period of childhood" as a passive and implicitly female-identified phase of uncontrolled passions and self-absorption. Eliot cautions that Romantic influence should be nothing more than an adolescent phase of erotic and linguistic experimentation that the young poet properly renounces in his passage to a mature (modernist) man-

hood: "It [the Romantic period of adolescence] is, no doubt, a period of keen enjoyment; but we must not confuse the intensity of the poetic experience in adolescence with the intense experience of poetry" (*TUPTUC* 33).

Although, as Elizabeth Cullingford argues, Yeats was unable to sustain the mask of manhood he undertook during his middle period, Yeats's masculinist reconstruction of the phases of his personal and poetic development, which critics such as Ellmann and Bornstein have accurately traced in his *Memoirs*, the *Autobiographies*, prose essays, and letters, begins with an account of the early Yeats as an effeminate Romantic.<sup>21</sup> Dominated and consumed by his obsession for a masterful woman both in life (Maud Gonne) and art, the Aesthete poet wrote poems of "longing and complaint" to the nineteenth-century femme fatale who ruled his imagination. Yeats would describe his early poetry as effeminate and escapist—"a flight into fairyland . . . and a summons to that flight" (*Letters* 90) — and as overshadowed by a "sentimental sadness" and "womanish introspection" (*Letters* 434). Yeats's depiction of his early Romantic imagination incorporated the common modernist conception of Romanticism as a dangerous, erotic, and potentially unmaning Venusberg that leads the poet more and more deeply into his own solipsistic fantasies and away from the virile forces of sexual energy, will, and intellect. T.E. Hulme warned against the seduction of Romanticism, which he compared to "a drug": "Accustomed to this strange light, you can never live without it" (*Speculations* 127). Similarly, Yeats cautioned George Russell against a nineties' Aestheticism he described as that "region of brooding emotions . . . which kill the spirit and the will, ecstasy and joy equally, [and whose dwellers] speak to me with sweet insinuating feminine voices" (*Letters* 434). Under the spell of Romanticism's siren song, the early Yeats felt powerless and "alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses"; he produced a fragmented and "sterile" art "full of decorative landscape and stilllife." After the turn of the century, Yeats called for "more manful energy" and executed his "movement downward upon life."<sup>22</sup>

Neither of the foregoing narratives of Yeats's and Eliot's struggle to overthrow Romantic influence recall the Bloomian Oedipal combat: Rather, both male modernists appear to be resisting the pre-Oedipal attachment to an eroticized precursor whose hold over the young man must

be broken. Nancy Chodorow's woman-centered model for the formation of male gender identity offers a more plausible psychoanalytic theory for the male modernists' struggle to defend against the "feminine" past. Chodorow's description of the socialization process that forces the boy to forge a male identity through severing his pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother is reflected in both Eliot's and Yeats's accounts of their break from the adolescent phase of an effeminate Romanticism and their consequent willful re-creation of themselves as masculine and mature modernists. Further, the frequently hazy designation of modernism as that which is not-Romantic and therefore effeminate writing, suggests the psychodynamics of Chodorow's model whereby the son struggles "to distinguish and differentiate" himself from "the feminine world" represented by his mother in order to acquire a masculinity he defines abstractly as "that which is not feminine and/or connected to women" (Chodorow 174). Eliot's lifelong yearning toward the self-identifying (pre-Oedipal) relation he associated with Romanticism is demonstrated by an essay written during his most anti-Romantic phase: "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry" (1919) celebrates rather than condemns the sympathetic, "feminine" bond between the younger poet and his literary first love.<sup>23</sup> (Significantly, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Reflections" were published in the same year, but the latter was suppressed in favor of the more oppositional scheme of the now-famous essay.) Although the openly homoerotic male-male scheme of influence demonstrated by "Reflections" does not identify the beloved "dead author[s]" who initiated the younger poet's erotic awakening, the passage quoted earlier from his essay "On the Development of Taste" and other case histories of Eliot's poetic origins suggest that the Romantics provoked Eliot's own youthful "conversion" experience.

Indeed, the passage from "On the Development of Taste" and "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry" would seem to demonstrate the emotional extremes of sexual panic and homoerotic ardor toward the same event — the sudden onset of the younger poet's first romance with the literary past. Like "The Development of Taste," "Reflections" equates the poet's "first [literary] passion" with his development as a poet and a man: "It is possible to say that there is a close analogy between the sort of experience which develops a man and the sort of experience which develops a writer" ("Reflections" 39). In both essays, "the experience" issues

from the younger poet's impulsive engagement with an older master in a mystical, erotic exchange. We recall that Eliot's early Romantic reading had struck him "like a sudden conversion," "the world appeared anew, painted with bright, delicious and painful colors" (*TUPTUC* 33). Similarly, in "Reflections," Eliot's youthful poet is "overcome," "seized" by "a peculiar personal intimacy," a "first passion," for the dead poet precursor that brings him to "crisis" and changes him, perhaps, "within a few weeks" ("Reflections" 39). However, unlike "On the Development of Taste," where the young Eliot's desire for poetic, creative sympathy involves him in delusion, "Reflections" depicts the equally susceptible younger poet's entrance into "a genuine love affair" that is "ineffaceable." If, in "On the Development of Taste," personal autonomy and poetic power depend on escape from feminizing self-identification with the Romantic precursor, the "feminine," male-male, erotic merger of "Reflections" ushers the young poet into artistry, sexuality, and personhood. He is "broadened," "quickened," and metamorphosed "from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person": "We are changed," Eliot concludes, "and our work is the work of the changed man" ("Reflections" 39). The striking contrast between the essays suggests Eliot's acute ambivalence toward his intimacy with the Romantic past and, further, his split personality, between the public spokesperson for a "virile" modernism and the more androgynous poet courting sexual/spiritual "sameness."

Given Eliot's oscillation between combative and sympathetic models of (Romantic) influence, it is not surprising, therefore, that Eliot's scourge against Romantic sameness, "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919) (*SE* 121-6), appeared in the same year as "Reflections." I hope to demonstrate that in "Hamlet and His Problems" Eliot's famous objective correlative constitutes the missing literary device that condemns the Shakespeare of both *Hamlet* and the sonnets to the related effeminate Romantic debilities of son-mother fixation and, Eliot suggests, male-male homoeroticism. Defined as the antidote to Romanticism and contextualized mainly in terms of the mother-son psychological narrative of *Hamlet*, Eliot's objective correlative takes on the problematics of male sexual identity. Eliot's *Hamlet* would seem to represent the archetypal arrested Romantic who cannot detach himself from the demonic mother and remains mired in his obsession with her.

As Eliot acknowledges in the first paragraphs, his essay is conceived in reaction against the most "dangerous" of critics – frustrated Romantic poets who focus vicariously on the psychology of the protagonist – of which Coleridge and the German Romantic Goethe are exemplars: "Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge who made of Hamlet a Coleridge." Eliot's essay may be read as a direct response to Coleridge's *Hamlet* – an attempt to kill Coleridge's Romantic conception of *Hamlet*. For while Eliot contends that the play should be approached historically, his essay fixes both on the psychology of *Hamlet* and specifically on a Coleridgean *Hamlet* whose excessive inwardness and effeminacy he blames for the play's "artistic failure" (*SE* 123). (Coleridge was responsible for the enduring notion of *Hamlet* as a romantic hero, and Coleridge himself declared that "Hamlet . . . was the character in the intuition and exposition of which I first made my turn for philosophical criticism. . . .")<sup>24</sup> Eliot's and Coleridge's contrasting attitudes toward the Oedipal script of *Hamlet* demonstrate the gendered polarities of Romanticism and modernism. Coleridge's Romanticism urges the semiotic modality of the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother, while Eliot's modernism promotes severance with the mother and accession into the Symbolic Law of the father. Coleridge consistently praises what Kristeva would term the more "semiotic" (feminine) modalities of *Hamlet*'s language: He is struck by "the language of sensation" in Scene One "among men who feared no charge of effeminacy. . . ." He is particularly impressed by *Hamlet*'s "aversion to externals," "[his] habit of brooding over the world within him and the prodigality of [his] beautiful words. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, Eliot views *Hamlet* as an unregenerate Romantic, immersed in his paralyzing "feelings" toward his mother. Eliot repeatedly pronounces "the essential emotion of the play" to be "the feeling of a son toward a guilty mother" (*SE* 124) – a "feeling" that he describes as so "inexpressibly horrible" that he wonders "under compulsion of what experience" Shakespeare undertook the theme of *Hamlet* (*SE* 126). Throughout the essay, Eliot suggests that, lacking the intervention of an objective correlative, *Hamlet*'s theme of mother-son eros remains unredeemably "pathological": "The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a subject of study for pathologists. It often occurs in adoles-