

# THE FRACTURED PAGEANT: QUEERING LESBIAN LIVES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

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This article discusses the fictional and genre-blurring experiments with various forms of life writing by a group of women who were part of the first-wave feminist movement and who have also been identified as comprising a nascent lesbian community in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The identity politics of lesbian-feminism constitutes a visible starting point for the projects in these texts, based as they are on the celebration of women and the covert articulation of an incipient lesbian identity. What becomes clear on closer inspection, however, is that their very attempts to do so frequently call attention to the instability, multiplicity, and the performative nature of identity, and the potential fluidity of the forms that are employed for its enunciation, thus inviting us to read queerly, beyond the logic of identity.<sup>2</sup> Stepping away from auto/biography as a set genre, this essay considers forms of lesbian creativity which retain the exigencies of self-representation and celebration offered by life writing while simultaneously playing with the heterogeneity of selfhood, at times foregrounding performativity over essentialism.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the various examples here can be understood as both an emergent lesbian identity politics, and an approximation of queer theory's methodological approach to identity, perfectly summarised by Lee Edelman's assertion that 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one' (17). As such, the present study attempts to engage some of the demands of lesbian feminist criticism and queer theory.

I begin with a discussion of the little-known lesbian novelist, playwright, journalist, translator and biographer, Christopher St John, *née* Christabel Marshall (1871–1960) who was the lifelong companion of the theatre director Edith Craig (1869–1947).<sup>4</sup> Christopher St John's life story is problematic because it suffers from a double obscurity: her own life and achievements are overshadowed by those of her more famous partner whose life, in turn, has been overshadowed for some time by her more famous mother, Ellen Terry (1847–1928). St John's life has been seen primarily through accounts of Edith Craig, and biographers of her and Ellen Terry have attempted to negotiate the unorthodox nature of their life together, as they were not only lifelong partners but, from 1916,

lived in a *ménage à trois* with the artist Clare Atwood (1866–1962). Representations of these women have been triangulated through auto/biography, leading to manifold impressions of the way in which they lived their lives and conducted their relationship and careers together. The first part of this essay will therefore trace the depictions of St John and Craig in the biographies of Ellen Terry by Roger Manvell, Joy Melville and Marguerite Steen, discussing how sexually unorthodox lives trouble the limits of biographical representation to a greater extent than heterosexual, monogamous lives, which can not only be traced more easily in records, but can also be represented more easily in biography. I use the 1998 biography of Edith Craig by Katharine Cockin as a highly successful example of how lives lost in history can be democratically recovered and critically celebrated.

I then proceed to discuss biographers' reactions to Christopher St John's *Hungerheart: The Story of a Soul* (1915). Owing to the fact that the novel is semi-autobiographical, biographers and critics have frequently attempted to read it as a way to substantiate certain events in Craig's life, in particular the section of the novel which is based on St John's real-life attempt to take her own life following Craig's consideration of a marriage proposal from Martin Shaw, which she later rejected. Moving away from the sensationalism of this episode, I look at alternative ways of reading the gaps, silences, and slippage between fact and fiction in *Hungerheart*. Part fictional *Bildungsroman*, part *roman à clef* that is loosely based on its author's life, this novel traces the development of a protagonist who is covertly represented as a lesbian at a time when lesbian identity was yet to take a coherent form. Indeed, texts like *Hungerheart* demonstrate the process by which lesbian identity began to come into effect as a category through a series of what Alan Sinfield calls 'blind or hesitant approximations' (8). Owing to their authors' fears about censorship and scandal upon disclosure of their sexual or romantic attractions, texts such as *Hungerheart* that purport to be auto/biographical are best understood as one component in a complex and lifelong project of self-inscription. Hence, we can read literary portrayals alongside other forms and genres in which subjects are shown in a nexus of creativity, self, and community. This article, therefore, seeks to foreground alternative genres and ways of knowing about a subject and her community.<sup>5</sup> It concludes by looking at several examples of the allegorical appropriation of historical figures by lesbian women in theatre and literature by women who were also connected to the group: Cicely Hamilton, Radclyffe Hall and Vita Sackville-West.<sup>6</sup> The use of biography-as-allegory effectively exposes the performativity of self-

enunciation by underlining the representational nature of the media at its disposal.

In order to embrace an approach to sexuality and subjectivity informed by recent queer theoretical developments in the history of sexuality, it is necessary to move beyond the identity politics of lesbianism and interrogate the multiplicity of subject positions enabled by the appropriation of biography-as-fiction. Such an approach foregrounds the layers of performativity that circulate within textual (and theatrical) representations of queer identity as opposed to the sovereign lesbian subject behind the layers. Importantly, it acknowledges what is now 'known' about the sexual identities of its subjects and their discernible attempts to inscribe that identity evinced in their literary output, but it does so as a tangible reference point in its speculation on the problematising and queering of identity that comprises another way of knowing them. In their hybrid experiments with biography, we can see the emergence of a range of queerly capacious rather than narrow commentaries on identity; yet they are ones that retain the political imperatives of identity politics.

The *ménage à trois* presents a challenge, not only to heterosexuality but also to monogamy, straining pre-existing definitions and means of recognising relationships, even in a specifically lesbian context. Biographers' inability to recognise the possibility of relationships formed as an alternative to marriage but not as an imitation of it has meant that the two women with whom Edith Craig cohabited have been overlooked or written into roles which they did not occupy in life. Steen reduces the mutual bond between Craig and Christopher St John to the following: '[Craig] was surrounded, inevitably, by a group of female sycophants, of whom the chief was her house-mate, Christopher St. John' (325). The description of St John and others as sycophantic implies that such a close female community was juvenile and dysfunctional rather than supportive, and that there is something unnatural or compensatory about such behaviour. This also points towards the inability of language to convey conceptions of intimacy and creative collaboration that exceed the limits of the dyadic relationship, as Cockin has discussed in her biography of Craig:

Creative influences may traffic beyond the couple, towards the triad. Thus, describing the extent of the influence on Craig of those closest to her puts pressure on existing language, demands new terms. (21)

Not only does the triadic relationship expose the limits of language, but it also shows the need to expand the representational possibilities of biography.

Cockin traces depictions of the *ménage* as its members experienced it and as those who knew them saw it. What becomes clear is that the arrangement of the *ménage à trois* represents a territory in which individual identity and group identity are inter-relational:

The common centre of their relationship was membership of 'the artist's world'. The Smallhythe Place *ménage à trois* conformed to dominant representations of lesbians by identifying itself in relation to art. In this context, the ways in which they individually identified with modes of representation seem to have been intimately bound up with their sense of their sexual identities. (25)

This clearly indicates that the terms around which their relationship was structured were both communal and individual; the individual is posited as relational to a community, which itself is resistant to dominant cultural values, and yet is also shaped by the external pressures and possibilities of that culture. There is a distinct emphasis on art as a formative feature of the relationship which is a shared experience, and art as an individual pursuit. This suggests a blurring of the boundary between private and public lives, and a parallel between the relationship as a collaborative enterprise and a production or work of art. Additionally, Cockin foregrounds the performative masculinity of not only St John, but of Craig, Atwood and their friends' sexual expression (22).

Manvell, in his 1968 biography of Ellen Terry, suggests that Craig and St John were merely close friends. According to his interpretation, when Craig's relationship with Martin Shaw ended she sought 'consolation in the devotion of the friend whose torturing jealousy was raised by this threat of marriage' (306). From this perspective, St John's friendship is implicitly both the factor that prevented Craig from 'achiev[ing] a normal love affair' (306) and inadequate compensation for the failure of heterosexual fidelity. Melville, on the other hand, concedes that it is 'possible that there could have been some kind of sexual element in their friendship: certainly Chris, in later years, spent a night with Vita Sackville-West' (191). She also cites *Hungerheart* in which 'Chris portrays herself as a congenital lesbian [and] implies that [Craig] was sexually reversed and that their physical contact was confined to

hand-holding' (191). Here, Craig and St John flicker in and out of view as, by turns, visible friends and invisible lesbians. However, what this uncertainty also makes apparent is the troubling effect they have on categories of sexual identity. Cockin observes: 'It is possible that Craig, St John and Atwood had different senses of their relationship' which may have included comradeship as political and artistic collaborators, and as New Women who were expanding existing models of living (66). This indicates how uncertainty can yield new understandings of how lesbianism was constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Faced with the absence of many of Craig's letters due to the partial destruction of the archive by St John herself, Melville claims: 'Because of the destruction of such evidence, it also cannot be proved whether Craig and St John were sexual lovers' (190–91). From the perspective of lesbian historiography, it is easy to dismiss the account by Steen and Melville as being wilfully ignorant of the 'lesbian evidence' before them; evidence that, for a lesbian historian intent on collating it for the purposes of historicising a knowable and familiar identity category, appears both obvious and crucial. In her most recent book, Laura Doan acknowledges the lesbian historian's familiar obstacle of the missing archive, but gestures towards a 'queer slant [which] might regard loss or disappointment as an opportunity to speculate differently about the meaning of fragments or absence' (x). The Smallhythe *ménage* can be seen as performing a set of artistic roles in their relationship while simultaneously living behind the silence of a missing archive. With this in mind, the pursuit of a definitive 'knowable' lesbian community becomes less important than understanding the ways in which their performativity and unknowability are produced as equally meaningful aspects of sexuality in relation to identity.

Due in part, perhaps, to the breaks and silences in the archive of Craig and Terry's correspondence, and the enigmatic characters of both mother and daughter, St John's novel has been read as 'evidence' of Craig's relationships with her mother and her life partner where other sources have failed to yield it. Cockin traces the misconceptions about *Hungerheart* and its author which operate in the work of Terry's biographers (64), who have taken it as a veracious portrayal of St John's heartbreak during Craig's relationship with Shaw. Such readings produce a somewhat dubious—not to mention sensationalised—version of events, leading some critics to question the validity of what they take for granted to be her account of events. Additionally, these readings have placed disproportionate focus on the fictional rendering of the real-life Martin Shaw episode which comprises only a very small section of the novel, whilst ignoring other aspects.<sup>7</sup> Both Melville (188) and

Steen (251) emphasise what they perceive to be the hysterical and overly demonstrative emotion of the novel. Same-sex desire is implicated as excessive, constituting itself by an abject outpouring of emotion. It is specifically lesbian desire that signifies this excess and evokes the abject territory it brings with it. Manvell reiterates Steen's account of Christopher's supposed suicide attempt following the Martin Shaw episode, consolidating the impression that the novel transparently relates the events rather than the more likely case that it exaggerates them for the sake of fiction (244). As Cockin remarks, parts of St John's narrative are 'inaccurate, probably because St John needed to dramatise Craig's decision' and that '[i]t is crucial to contextualise this in St John's Catholicism, which can only represent same-sex desire obliquely through the discourse of martyrdom, in terms of pain and suffering' (63). Furthermore, it may be that the fictional treatment of the event in terms that exaggerate and therefore dramatise its circumstances and the emotions it produced can be seen as a form of protest in itself. The novel's representation of masochistic desire can be interpreted as a deliberate foregrounding of Butler's 'theatrical rage' (*Bodies That Matter* 178) as a strategy for communicating the pain of same-sex desire. The excess of hysterical emotion is therefore not only connected to the lesbian as abject, but an instance of the abject as a potentially disruptive site from which to speak in protest. Moreover, such an interpretation foregrounds the performativity of the novel and, more broadly, the performative aspects of queer existence.

Initially, it is tempting to read texts like *Hungerheart* through the lens of identity politics, an approach that could rehabilitate the textual gaps and silences and show them to be indicative of a coded lesbian identity. The detective work of lesbian criticism rooted in identity politics can find a wealth of 'clues' which point towards the embedded narrative of same-sex desire at the heart of the novel. I propose resisting the impulse to read the gaps and contradictions in the novel exclusively into a hidden but composite lesbian narrative and to read it more queerly as an experiment with identity. *Hungerheart* exploits a range of different and, at times, contradictory subject positions including the masculine woman, the devout Catholic convert, and the militant suffragist, and it is narrated by a somewhat unreliable first-person narrator. This, coupled with what Nina Auerbach in her book *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* has implied to be St John's self-conscious construction of multiple subject positions in her lifetime, puts the biographer at some remove from this enigmatic subject. As Sidonie Smith reminds us,

the ‘self’ so often invoked in self-expressive theories of autobiography is not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialized through the text. There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. (108)

Consequently, we can see that performativity and multiplicity might reasonably constitute important aspects of contextualising queer(ed) identity more so than the pursuit of the sovereign lesbian supposedly hidden by history and lurking, unimpeachably, in the archive.

The multiplicity and performativity by which lesbian identity is queerly negotiated is evinced in the following examples of biography-as-allegory. The first of these is Cicely Hamilton’s and Edith Craig’s suffrage play, *A Pageant of Great Women*, which was performed around the country between 1909 and 1911. Craig elected to appear as the lesbian artist, Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), highlighting the diversity of women to which the play appealed. The inclusion of the French artist Bonheur may well have inferred a revolutionary or unorthodox—political and sexual—undercurrent to the *Pageant*. Furthermore, the play’s conflation of theatrical with local spaces around the country, its presentation of famous women by local suffragists, its diversity of subjects, and its destabilising effect achieved through its staging allows it to be interpreted as representing the multiplicity of unity.

The *tableaux*-style presentation of great women is reliant on the impact of the women’s physical embodiment onstage to visually communicate the symbolic presence of women in history, the overall effect of which is described by Cockin: ‘The coercive mark of visibility as power, phallogocentrism, is made visible in the Pageant’ (96). The power of the pageant is achieved by its dramatic use of silence and illumination of an alternative, woman-centred history in place of the traditional male-occupied annals. Cockin asserts:

The whiggish aspects of the play’s history-making are counterpointed by the destabilizing processes of the play’s performances. The fantasy of greatness enacted by women seemed to reinforce individualism, but this was undercut by the circumstances of the play’s performances.... The diversity of women was emphasized by the collective acting out of greatness by local suffragists. (105)

Cockin argues convincingly that the play was successful in subverting and fracturing the idea of a singular humanist subject in place of women as a multifaceted group. The *Pageant* may be said to constitute a celebration of women's greatness based on identity politics, but the play's emphasis on fragmentation, performativity, and the rupturing of taxonomies such as class underwrites the importance of strategies of undoing as well as reinforcing identity for showing the multiplicity of femininity.<sup>8</sup> It is this very multiplicity which could be seen as subversive, following Smith's elucidation of how interiority, or 'self', came to be culturally constructed:

the specificities of flesh determined the degree and kind of interiority assigned the self-regulating subject. Interiority became an effect, and not a cause, of the cultural regulation of always already identifies bodies, bodies that were sexed and gendered...bodies that were located in specific socioeconomic spaces, bodies that were deemed unruly or grotesque...and the cultural affirmation of a normative 'self' became an effect of the evacuation of unruly heterogeneity within the individual and within the body social and politic. (109–10)

Part of the play's strategy, then, hinges upon a foregrounding of this very unruly heterogeneity, staging a resistance to the cultural notion of an already identified woman by emphasising the transgressive diversity in a theatrical setting. Hence, the play can be said to problematise the idea of woman's essential interiority by troubling the idea of her monolithic exteriority.

*A Pageant of Great Women* exemplifies the way in which biographical appropriation may serve as a democratisation of the historical annals and the many experiences recorded there. Permitting women from different backgrounds to access a variety of historical role models, the play offered an empowering opportunity for identification with eminent figures. Meanwhile, its staging helped to enact the shifting, fragmentary and performative nature of the identities on display, as Cockin's comments above make clear. This empowerment based on identification is echoed in Suzanne Raitt's comments on the shift in attitudes towards and reception of biography in the early decades of the twentieth century: 'Readers of biographies began to feel that they might have not only common emotional experiences with the famous, but even common sexual experiences' (26). A salient example of such

identification with a particular biographical subject is the treatment of Joan of Arc (1412–31) by lesbians at this time. The martyr was beatified in 1909 and canonised in 1920, leading to her increased significance for women as both a political figure and a personal role model. The suffragists adopted her as a symbol of ‘spiritualised militancy’ (Tickner 211), with her virginity, and her militant and spiritual fortitude, making her the ideal allegorical figure for the suffragettes’ ideology. Perhaps more than any other quality, it was her martyrdom that appealed most strongly to the women involved in the cause. Apart from serving as an important symbol of liberation for women, Joan of Arc also inspired identification on a more personal level. Raitt has discussed the personal resonance Joan held for Vita Sackville-West, who published a biography of the saint in 1936 (127–30). Sackville-West notes both female masculinity and religious awakening as aspects of Joan’s life. Such features also provided Sackville-West herself with a means of understanding her own sexuality.

Sackville-West’s sexual identification with Joan of Arc both overlaps and is at odds with the suffragists’ symbolic appropriation of her, since for them the saint represented women’s ‘natural’ virtue in militant form. Martha Vicinus discusses this ideology of martyrdom in some aspects of the women’s suffrage movement:

In effect, the WSPU woman was willing to sacrifice her body through numerous and varied militant actions in order that her spirit might triumph. Her moral force (seen by some as moral violence) would bring justice to women and thereby give women space in the political arena, where they rightfully belonged. (252)

Rather than inverting or arguing against women’s prescribed moral essentialism, the movement utilised this assumption as a pre-existing tool with which to forge a public image for what had been a private position. The fact that women could see simultaneously in the figure of the martyr a correlative for their sexual expression and a figurehead for a collective politics exposes the arbitrariness of modes of self-expression. In showing how the apparatus used for self-expression (in this case allegorical representation) is contingent and accrues different meanings in different contexts, this coincidence shows how the very notion of the self is also relational and subject to different coalescences at different points, giving the outward impression of a sovereign interiority, as Smith explains:

There are many stories to be told and many different and divergent storytelling occasions that call for and forth contextually marked and sometimes radically divergent narratives of identity.

In each instance, then, narrative performativity constitutes interiority. That is, the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling.... And those expressions of interiority are effects produced through the action of public discourses. (109)

As with the *Pageant's* use of biography-as-allegory, this is identity as performance, as historically specific rather than essential.

The final part of this article analyses the famous scene of childhood drag from Radclyffe Hall's lesbian-themed novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) in which the lesbian protagonist, Stephen Gordon, dresses up as Admiral Nelson in order to win the heart of the housemaid in an injurious travesty of commemoration-as-performativity. Stephen's performance is cruelly marred by her knowledge of her own lack of 'authentic' masculinity, and the failure of the masquerade becomes a failure of the self:

Even Nelson had suddenly become quite remote. What was the good of trying to be Nelson? What was the good of dressing up any more—what was the good of pretending? (22)

Stephen's masculine identification leads her to adopt the great military hero as her role model; but such a bastion of hegemonic masculinity does not readily permit itself to impersonation by a member of the 'third sex', and an abject and derided figure in society.

This episode also exposes the constructed nature of historical greatness and the symbolic power of its figureheads. Stephen hopes to don a uniform and be endowed with the stature and greatness she emulates; but the power of Nelson's allegorical presence belies the complexity of the individual and only serves to compromise her identity even as she tries to announce it. When the illusion that she is Nelson fails, she becomes even more agonisingly aware of her own deficiencies, and the failure leaves only questions in its wake rather than answers about her self-identity. In showing how Stephen gravitates towards certain roles in attempting to construct and express her identity in relation to her burgeoning desires, Hall underwrites the performative

aspects of the way in which identity is mediated or disturbed by queerness, particularly through the child protagonist's masquerade-as-failure. Part of the way in which queerness is experienced, then, persists in an *undoing* of identity.

The many renegotiations of biography are diverse, creative, and take various forms; but they can all be seen as part of a project of a community and a project of the self, contributing to the emergence of an identity which is both personal and shared. The result is a trans-historical community of women who are linked through an affective engagement with biography. Decisions about who is celebrated, adopted or immortalised are never arbitrary, particularly for lesbians who, in portraying women from history, were invested in the process of forging their own identities. Whom they chose to represent and the ways in which they did so is of particular significance at a time when identification with historical figures provided one of very few available narratives for the coding of same-sex desire. Yet by reading auto/biographical interventions as an unfinished, playful process of the self rather than a completed product, we can move from a reading of the genre and its numerous semi-fictional manifestations as being rooted in identity politics to a more fascinating interpretation of its potential for queer performativity. Lesbians' use of auto/biography in the early twentieth century serves not, or not solely, to consolidate an unimpeachable lesbian identity. Instead, it shows the performativity of identity in relation to the contingency of individual experience and the regulative powers of culture, thus destabilising ways of knowing a subject even as we strive to know them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism* for a full account of the evolution of lesbian subculture in the early twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> The queer theoretical work by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on queer performativity is a backdrop here.

<sup>3</sup> Recent feminist studies prefer the more capacious term 'auto/biography', a concept that is influential here. See Nicky Hallet's *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/biography in the Twentieth Century* (1999). See also Liz Stanley's *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> See Cockin's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>5</sup> 'In the early decades of the twentieth century individuals might have navigated any number of power structures—the law, media, government, military, family, church, or medical establishment—through the

differentiations of nation, empire, race, class, age, gender, and education'; 'rethinking how categorization dictates and curtails the way the gendered and sexual past is made knowable highlights compellingly the need for interpretive leeway so that gender and sexuality can be positioned in relation to the multiple social differences of lived experience' (Doan, *Disturbing Practices* 192, 101). The imperative to question and supersede the over-investment in the logic of identity with an analytical framework open to inconsistencies is predicated on the danger that, if we look backwards using only the taxonomising apparatus of our own time, we will only ever see ourselves.

<sup>6</sup>For an account of the community and their contemporaries see Cockin, and Raitt for Vita Sackville-West; also Sally Cline's *Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John* (1998). See also Lis Whitelaw's *The Life and Rebellious Times of Cicely Hamilton* (1990).

<sup>7</sup>Cockin has called the novel a *roman à clef* (23).

<sup>8</sup>According to Butler, 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (*Gender Trouble* 24).

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