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Katherine Mansfield and Sexuality

Claire Drewery

In a notebook entry dated eight years after the death of Oscar Wilde, Katherine Mansfield outlined her intention of writing a sketch or short story in which a dual existence enabled the protagonist to discover “the truth of all.” The sketch, she anticipated, would be filled with “climatic disturbance, & also of the strange longing for the artificial.”¹ This pronouncement is an illuminating one in an era which saw traditional, humanist notions of identity increasingly challenged by contemporary intellectual, scientific, and popular discourses. The climactic disturbance referred to in the same 1908 notebook entry conceivably anticipates Mansfield’s own engagement with the epochal shift in beliefs about human subjectivity occurring from around the late nineteenth century and intensifying in the wake of Wilde’s two notorious trials of 1895.² It is thus not coincidental that the pages of the notebook immediately preceding her professed longing for artificiality contain numerous transcriptions from Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), most notably the declaration that “[b]eing natural is simply a pose and the most irritating pose I know.”³

The idea of naturalness as an artificial pose famously characterizes Wilde’s work and is a dominant feature of *Dorian Gray*, as well as his *Intentions* volume of four essays published a year later in 1891. This seeming paradox receives fuller explanation in the artistic manifesto Wilde sets out in the first of these essays, “The Decay of Lying,” in which he writes that “life imitates art rather than vice versa [. . . A] great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher.”⁴ For Wilde, identities perceived as natural are thus artificial, and it is significant that the metaphors he uses here to denote “life’s” means of imitation are those of reproduction, popular form, and publishing. Such a process of perpetuation might be traced through the controversy building around the Wilde trials, when the burgeoning dandy and camp identities increasingly converged and public hostility toward them

intensified, fueled by a censorious media. Ironically, the reviling of the Wildean dandy also served to disseminate its existence, exposing the process by which, as Rhonda K. Garelick has concluded, “[t]o write a dandyist text is to produce more dandies.”⁵ The “dandy” identity is thus reiterated through the repetition of a series of acts, poses, and costumes associated with that image, which are then re-enacted and disseminated through art, literature, and the popular media. Likewise, in Mansfield’s writing, the perpetuation of both normative and taboo identities was to remain as much a preoccupation as the notion that human subjectivity might be interpreted as a series of “acts.”

A consistent emphasis in the work of these writers upon artificiality, performance, and re-enactment marks out both as unmistakable predecessors of late twentieth-century queer theory. Specifically, Judith Butler’s model of identity as constructed through performative acts is a clear articulation of similar representations of subjectivity dominating Wilde’s and Mansfield’s work of almost a century earlier. According to Butler, a necessary condition for successful performativity is “the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force,” perpetuated “through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.”⁶ In Mansfield’s stories, such historically specific, authoritative practices as these—particularly those invested in the theatrical and sartorial fashions of her day—are distinctive features sustained from her early dramatic sketches through to her mature short stories. A striking example is the 1915 sketch “Stay-Laces,” which juxtaposes a frivolous concern with shopping, fashion, and corsetry against the backdrop of the brutality of the First World War. In “Bliss” and “Je ne parle pas français”—two better-known stories begun only weeks apart in early 1918—Mansfield continues to develop this theme, using enhanced, exaggerated artificiality, theatricality, and performance to exploit the comedic trope of Wildean dandyism.

As this chapter will seek to illustrate, the Mansfield stories most obviously indebted to the dramatic form are those in which the metaphoric tropes of performance and clothing frequently and symbiotically recur. Her writing can thus be seen to anticipate not only Butler’s later theories on the formulation and regulation of sexuality, but also studies of fashion such as J. C. Flügel’s *The Psychology of Clothes*, Roland Barthes’s *The Fashion System*, and Anne Hollander’s *Seeing through Clothes*, all of which position clothing as an important site of cultural investment. For Mansfield, contemporary fashion was both politically and poetically symbolic, as evidenced in its consistent representation in her work as a mechanism for physically, metaphorically, and culturally constraining and reshaping the human subject. In other words, clothing is essential to the process

of acting and re-enacting identity, a point made implicitly by Roland Barthes in his assertion that clothes function “simultaneously as the body’s substitute and its mask.”⁷

The mask metaphor for clothing in general is significant in view of its etymological similarity with “masquerade,” which in turn suggests a close affinity between costume and performance. J. C. Flügel’s 1950 study of *The Psychology of Clothes* sheds further light on this connection, using the example of the masked ball to illustrate how masks reduce inhibition, permitting “less restrained expression of certain tendencies.”⁸ As Flügel concludes, “the very word ‘personality’ [...] implies a ‘mask,’ which is itself an article of clothing.”⁹ Clothing thus performs the dual function of disguising the gendered, sexual body, while simultaneously operating as a mechanism for performing gendered identity. In a similar vein, Wilde contended in “The Critic as Artist” that “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”¹⁰

For Mansfield also, the closely related metaphors of clothing masks and disguise contain within themselves the capacity for superseding performative acts with “truth”. As she states in a journal entry:

So do we all begin by acting and the nearer we are to what we would be the more perfect our *disguise*. Finally there comes the moment when *we are no longer acting*: it may even catch us by surprise. We may look in amazement at our no longer borrowed plumage.¹¹

In Mansfield’s observation, the blurred distinction between act and disguise illustrates the capability of the actor’s “plumage” to mask as well as *unmask* contingent, performative identities. This aesthetic device, clearly translating to her short fiction and owing much to Wilde’s influence, is most striking in her depictions of the contemporary fashions of dandyism and Victorian corsetry, both of which have a symbolic resonance with the transition from Victorian to modernist conceptualizations of identity and sexuality. By the time of Wilde’s 1895 trials for gross indecency, dandyism was beginning to converge with the “camp” discourses which, according to Moe Meyer, already encoded a homosexual subject when the word first appeared in J. Redding Ware’s 1909 dictionary of Victorian slang.¹²

Wilde’s cultivation of his own self-image as an aesthete and dandy undoubtedly contributed to this encoding process, but more immediately he achieved two ends. As David Schultz has noted, Wilde spearheaded “through the media a movement of like-minded men,” but at the same time, this act of dissemination

enabled negative representations of dandyism resulting from the controversy building around the trials. As Schultz further points out, “the mediation performed by the journalistic texts was not only theatrical but homophobic and censorious, creating a stylistic mix of insinuating innuendo and melodrama.”¹³ In the face of these contemporary discourses of aberrant sexuality, Wilde, together with the perceived discourses of effeminacy he stood for, became increasingly subject to public disgust which would later culminate in the convergence of aesthete, dandy, and camp identities into the pejorative label “queer.” By 1922, the transition from contingent discourse to identity-marker had definitively occurred: the first use of “queer” as a colloquialism for homosexuality can be traced to a US government publication of that date.¹⁴

The concurrent process of dissemination and censorship instigated by the Wilde trials, moreover, clearly prefigures Butler’s twofold model of performativity. According to her theory, pre-existing social discourse functions on the one hand as a sanction upholding “desirable” (namely heteronormative) identities; on the other, it operates as “the shaming taboo which ‘queers’ those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction.”¹⁵ By this definition, Butler exposes how media censorship and the reviling of the Wildean dandy also served to perpetuate its existence both within and beyond literature.

The image of the corset is similarly ambiguous, contradictory, and self-perpetuating. Unlike the dandy, however, whose effeminacy was perceived as a threat to patriarchal masculine norms, the corset symbolizes a less subversive, more socially sanctioned image of femininity. This regulatory function is conceivably why the corset received a backlash from Wilde as early as 1882 on the grounds that “there is hardly any form of torture that has not been inflicted on girls, and endured by women, in obedience to the dictates of an unreasonable and monstrous Fashion.”¹⁶ By the early twentieth century, this manner of opposition had grown to the extent that the corset was generating contested meanings, as noted by Jill Fields in her claim that corsetry “affected women’s lives as they struggled to alter the shape of femininity and gender relations.”¹⁷

Mansfield’s “Stay-Laces” negotiates just such a struggle. Published a month after the death of her brother in a grenade explosion, the sketch derives power from its tragi-comic, acerbic representation of the trivialities associated with women of the leisured classes: their superficial gossip, glib attitudes to war, and preoccupation with clothing. It is noteworthy that each of these considerations also underpins Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which a devotion to consumerism, obliviousness to suffering, habit of dominating conversations, and

exertion of a pernicious influence are precisely the vices Lord Henry encourages Dorian to adopt. In “Stay-Laces,” the protagonist embraces similar hedonistic qualities under the mask of the benign activity of shopping and the veneer of respectability she intends to buy, both of which are manifest in the form of the corset. The narrative consists mainly of a one-sided dialogue between the vulgar, opinionated Mrs. Busk, whose conversation focuses almost exclusively on the trivialities of fashion and female-specific medical complaints, and her silent companion, Mrs. Bone.

The sketch—one of eight experiments in dialogue Mansfield contributed to the *New Age*—marks one of her earliest experiments in the dramatic form. T. O. Beachcroft has cited Theocritus as a key influence on Mansfield’s work from this point onward, but conceivably her indebtedness to the dramatic form stems at least in part from Wilde.¹⁸ There are marked similarities, for instance, between the narrative structure of “Stay-Laces” and that of Wilde’s essay, “The Decay of Lying,” the latter of which uses Socratic dialogue to interrogate the opposition between art and nature. Although presented as a conversation between an artist and his critic, the essay largely consists of a long monologue by the main speaker, Vivian, punctuated at intervals with the brief observations of an interlocutor.

In “Stay-Laces” the interlocutor does not speak at all. Mrs. Bone’s discourse is represented entirely by ellipses interspersed with punctuation, but the sub-text of her wordless interjections may, nonetheless, be inferred from the protagonist’s responses in the various contexts of expostulation, protestation, or interrogation. Mrs. Busk’s comments on Mrs. Bone’s hat, for instance, are interspersed with “... !” and Mrs. Bone offers no commentary on the corset. She is not defined in terms of her costume except in terms of Mrs. Busk’s interpretation of it, neither does the interlocutor articulate an identity of her own.

The dynamic played out here between speech and silence is complex, however, as Mrs. Bone’s silent, apparently complicit status is nonetheless subversive. Her elliptical, non-linguistic side of the dialogue represents both the narrative and social spaces from which taboo or contingent identities might be recognized, if not articulated; this places her in stark opposition to the regulatory discourses symbolized by the corset. The symbiotic relationship between the two characters is, moreover, evident from their names: Busk and Bone representing separate integral fixtures of the corset, each of which is dependent upon the other. The rigid, inflexible busk suggests that, despite Mrs. Busk’s dominance of the dialogue, her place in the power dynamic is secondary to that of the multiplicity and malleability of the corset boning which, the narrative spaces in the text imply, offer numerous, more flexible, and potentially subversive possibilities.

The corset metaphor illustrates Nancy Gray's point that for Mansfield, objects "often have an almost animate presence that forms a relationship with the characters' selves, one that adjusts and shifts with the contingencies generated by interactions with the socially produced spaces in which the self must encounter its possibilities."¹⁹ The controlling mechanism of the corset as ubiquitous symbol, of both sexual desirability and subservient femininity, is constantly re-inscribed upon the female form in the most powerfully physicalized terms: shortening the breath, altering the waist shape, and displacing the spleen and ribs. At the same time, the changing shape of the corset in "Stay-Laces"—its transition from back lacing to the front-fastening style and ultimate superfluity in the face of changing twentieth-century fashion—is testimony to the role played by costume in the negotiation of changing social spaces and their attendant subjectivities.

In a rare moment of insight, Mrs. Busk recognizes this point. Against the context of the war raging beyond the confines of the text, she acknowledges: "it's awfully bad taste to go on buying just as usual at a time like this."²⁰ Yet the demands of consumerism ultimately take precedence. Mrs. Busk immediately counters herself: "there are necessary things you simply can't do without—like corsets, for instance."²¹ As a symbol of the excesses of consumer culture, an undergarment which remains hidden from view but produces a clear physical imprint on the body is not an arbitrary distinction, a point made manifest through Mrs. Busk's negotiations with the regulatory discourses the corset upholds. Ostensibly, she appears to perpetuate the idealized, middle-class, "respectable" feminine subject, as exploited to comedic effect in an exchange with a fellow-shopper she mistakes for a sales assistant:

Aren't the assistants extraordinary here? I mean lots of them are university women, or daughters of very wealthy men—[...]. Which is the Corset Department, please?

Acid Lady: Ask an assistant. I am trying on a hat.

Mrs Busk: Good heavens! What an awful mistake! But, really, she had something of the shop assistant about her, hadn't she? The earrings—and that enormous colored comb²²

In this dialogue, Mrs. Busk's snobbish misreading of the codes communicated by dress accords with Flügal's observation that clothing superficially reveals something of the wearer's "sex, occupation, nationality, and social standing," and thus enables an adjustment of the observer's behavior accordingly.²³ Inevitably, however, the mask slips. The spectacle of Mrs. Busk trying on a corset, straining at the seams and uncomfortably tight, illustrates the failure of her comic wrestle

with this traditional image of femininity. The scenario appears to pre-empt Butler's point that there is no individual agency in performative acts; the reading of "performativity" as willful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the history of discourse and chain of iteration constitute its power to enact what it names.

In "Stay-Laces," clothing itself may be interpreted as such a site of contestation. As noted by Fields, sartorial fashion is "both a system of signification and a set of regulatory practices" and thus "an arena of social struggle over meaning."²⁴ The ferocity of Mrs. Busk's personal struggle is conveyed through this comedic scene, in which the discomfort of trying to squeeze into the "new" style of front-fastening corset leads her to assert: "I don't think it is a good idea to have them fastening down the front. You see, I don't see what is to prevent little blobs of flesh from poking through the holes. One is so much softer in the front than at the back."²⁵

The corset's inability to contain Mrs. Busk, both physically and metaphorically, suggests a good deal about her character. Her name implies rigidity, her title indicates that she is either married or widowed, her thickening waistline hints at the onset of middle age, and her propensity to indulge in fantasy implies her own sexual frustration. For her, the backdrop of war represents merely a convenient opportunity for the removal of social inhibition: to admire men in uniform and indulge in fantasy about an "enormous Indian creature in khaki."²⁶ The "blobs of flesh poking through the holes" are therefore illustrative not only of the subversion of the ubiquitous, narrow-waisted, Victorian feminine silhouette, but also of a subjective identity breaking through its previous generational constraints. Inevitably, then, by end of the narrative the corset has *not* been bought, an indecision appearing to echo the sentiment of Lord Henry in *Dorian Gray* that "the costume of the nineteenth century is detestable. It is so sombre, so depressing. Sin is the only real color-element left in modern life."²⁷

The failure of Mrs. Busk's attempt to bind herself into a restrictive model of Victorian femininity accords, despite her efforts to the contrary, with her asserted rights as a "modern" woman to indulge in sexual fantasy and speak openly about previously taboo subjects. The strains placed upon the corset suggest that, willingly or otherwise, Mrs. Busk is resisting the constraints placed upon her by the demands of respectable femininity. The same dilemma is confronted in "Bliss," which, like "Stay-Laces," draws upon the themes of clothing, tragedy, and theatricality. Also like "Stay-Laces," "Bliss" satirizes superficiality, this time focusing upon a pretentious Bloomsbury clique of "modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets" who ultimately turn out to be shallow, trite, and vaguely ridiculous.²⁸ Through the protagonist's painful negotiations

with her own half-acknowledged bisexuality, the story negotiates not only her inability to recognize and articulate her identity, but also the absence of any available discourse through which to do so.

In “Bliss,” clothing is a prominent reminder of the tension between socially sanctioned modes of sexuality and those which are rendered taboo. Just as Mrs. Busk can’t squeeze into her front-fastening corset, neither the protagonist of “Bliss,” Bertha Young, nor her contemporary, the camp poet Eddie Warren, fits into the molds of gender and sexuality society has cast for them. The tension between Bertha’s latent bisexuality and her desire to maintain her socially designated, heterosexual roles of wife and mother is embodied within her false sense of “bliss,” the motif for which is the pear tree she immediately identifies with as a symbol of her own life. Significantly, the clothing of both Bertha and Pearl Fulton, the friend for whom Bertha cultivates a powerful sexual attraction, emulates the “tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom” standing against the wall in a moonlit garden “as though becalmed against the jade-green sky.”²⁹

Bertha unconsciously mimics the moonlit tree in her clothing, accessorizing her white dress with a “string of jade beads, green shoes and stockings,” whilst Pearl arrives in a moon-like ensemble “all in silver, with a silver fillet binding her pale blonde hair.”³⁰ The connections Bertha later makes between herself, her choice of attire, and the tree’s “wide open blossoms,” together with the sensation derived from her clothing that “her petals rustled softly into the hall” as she moves downstairs to greet her guests, have implicitly sexual connotations.³¹ While strikingly at odds with her status as a frigid wife, however, her costume takes on resonance in the light of the mutual lesbian attraction Bertha is sure she shares with Pearl.

Bertha’s dilemma reflects a social context in which male homosexuality was contingent but female homosexuality was, as Jeffrey Weeks observes, still a generation away from a “corresponding level of articulacy.”³² Hence, while the discourses pitting the hegemonic norms of wife and mother against sexually taboo identities like “lesbian” and “mistress” are conveyed through the figures of Bertha and Pearl, the association between Eddie Warren and the Wildean masks of aesthete and dandy is unmistakable. The inflections of Eddie’s speech, his artistic pretensions, and dandyish dress-sense all accord with Rhonda Garelick’s definition of the “over-acted quality” of camp, albeit in a contemporary context these codes signified effeminacy but not yet homosexuality.³³ Such mannerisms are overtly adopted by Eddie—who is usually in “a state of acute distress”—and are discernible as he first addresses his hostess:

“I have had such a *dreadful* experience with a taxi-man; he was *most* sinister. I couldn’t get him to *stop*. The *more* I knocked and called the *faster* he went. And *in* the moonlight this *bizarre* figure with the *flattened* head *crouching* over the *lit-tle* wheel ...” He shuddered ...³⁴

The affectations of Eddie’s speech and his melodramatic shudder here re-enact the core signifying practices of Wildean dandyism—speech, gesture, and posture—attributable to François Delsarte’s nineteenth-century school of actor training. As Moe Meyer further notes, following Wilde’s turn to Balzacian dandyism and subsequent development of homoerotic representation, he added a fourth code: costume.³⁵ Thus, in addition to his exaggerated speech and the gesture of the shudder, the reader’s first introduction to Eddie sees him adopting the fourth code in taking off an “immense white silk scarf” carefully matched to the “happy socks” that seem in his eyes “to have got so *much* whiter since the moon rose.”³⁶

A further attribute of camp discourse is, according to Alan Sinfield, an appreciation of art, which “fits well because posh culture is recognized, implicitly as being a leisured preserve, though perhaps impertinently invaded.”³⁷ Hence Eddie’s effusive passion for “a *new* poem called *Table d’Hôte*” leads him, to Bertha’s obvious bewilderment, to proffer the interpretation that “[t]omato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal.”³⁸ This acerbic representation of Eddie is doubtless attributable to the fact that he is, as Mansfield’s biographer Antony Alpers points out, a satire of Aldous Huxley, whose letters written from Eton are testimony to his own dandyism, referring to his “jauntily facetious, precocious-schoolboy tone” and “chic” appearance in “tail coats mouldy collars and white ties.”³⁹

Eddie Warren is, however, more than merely a satire of Huxley. He is an experimental canvas on which the contingent identity of “camp”—together with the Delsartean codes of speech, gesture, posture, and costume—is played out. Like Bertha Young and Mrs. Bone, Eddie represents narrative gaps around which contingent subject positions such as dandyism and lesbianism might be formulated. Bertha’s struggles to negotiate these contingencies are palpable, as evidenced in her frequent protestations of “being modern” which are not unlike Mrs. Busk’s pretensions to modern openness about taboo subjects. Yet, like Busk and Bone, Bertha is unable to find a language to express her own urges or physicality. All she can articulate is her frustration toward the social exclusion of regulatory norms with the assertion, “How idiotic civilisation is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?”⁴⁰

Like the corset, Bertha's metaphorical fiddle-case represents an enclosed space, a receptacle for containing conventional femininity and also for satirizing these constraints. By these definitions, Mansfield draws attention to the desires which social strictures render Bertha unable or unwilling to articulate. The inevitable result is the re-assertion of normalizing discourses of sexuality which serve to dismantle Bertha's illusions and restore her back into the paradigm of the middle-class female. This transition occurs in the penultimate scene, when she witnesses a scene appearing to expose Pearl's affair with Harry Young:

He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said: "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: "Tomorrow," and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: "Yes."⁴¹

This scene is particularly striking in that Bertha interprets what she sees and hears on the basis of *gesture*: the tossing aside of the coat; a touch; a smile. The language is corporeal: the phrase "his lips said" as opposed to merely "he said" offers the possibility of a metaphorical interpretation, an impression heightened by Pearl's responding "with her eyelids." Bertha's inability to interpret her own and others' sexuality is magnified in this passage, which is, significantly, communicated through all four Delsartean codes adopted by Wilde in his public and literary articulations of the performative. Moreover, for someone who desires her husband, the depiction of Harry and his "hideous grin" through Bertha's eyes is scarcely complimentary. As a form of performance, with Bertha as unseen audience, this scene comes close to farcical melodrama, a theme receiving earlier emphasis through the dinner conversation of the "theatrical" Mr. Norman Knight whose humorous speech at dinner highlights the centrality of performance as a narrative trope in "Bliss." Alluding to the same theme of gluttony as Eddie's predilection for poetic tomato soup, Norman regales his fellow dinner-guests with the synopsis of a follow-up play to *Love in False Teeth*:

One act. One man. Decides to commit suicide. Gives all the reasons why he should and why he shouldn't. And just as he has made up his mind either to do it or not to do it—curtain. [...]

"I think I've come across the same idea in a little French review, quite unknown in England."⁴²

The subtext contained within this brief interjection has numerous significances, not only to the narrative of "Bliss" but to Mansfield's wider oeuvre. The reference

to the “French review” gestures toward the developing culture of censorship surrounding effeminacy and the avant-garde, both of which were influences emanating from France. There is, moreover, a discernible parallel between the theme of suicide in Mansfield’s hypothetical “play” and the actress Sibyl Vane in *Dorian Gray* who kills herself when it transpires the protagonist loves only her art and not the “shallow and stupid” woman he perceives behind her acted parts.⁴³ The name of the actress is clearly symbolic. Her surname, Vane, plays on vanity as well as the changeability of a weather vane, while her forename recalls the mythological Cumaean “Sybil” to whom Apollo granted immortality but not eternal youth. The actress Sibyl’s dependence on her own appearance and the fate of her body as she ages reflect both Dorian’s own vanity and the disfigurement seen on the rapidly degenerating portrait onto which he projects his vices, acting as a reproachful manifestation of the shallow superficiality he despises most in himself.

The interrelated theme of self-absorption and reflection consistent throughout *Dorian Gray* and reflected in “Bliss” through reference to the monologue of one character in the play anticipates both the themes and form of “Je ne parle pas français.” The title of this story recalls the “French review” in “Bliss” and also refers obliquely to France’s perceived association with homosexual discourse.

The story contains numerous parallels with *Dorian Gray*, the most significant of which are emphases on dandyism and narcissism. The book Lord Henry gives to Dorian in Wilde’s novel—unnamed but reputed to be *À Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans—is a key influence upon the protagonist’s increasing hedonistic and narcissistic tendencies and is described in *Dorian Gray* as “a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian.”⁴⁴ “Je ne parle pas français” is such a study: the dramatic monologue of a single character in the shape of the overtly homosexual Parisian dandy, Raoul Duquette. Like Bertha Young and Eddie Warren, Raoul performs in accordance with preconceived discourses, but in contrast to the naïve Bertha he is an arch-manipulator as well as a consummate performer. Living in genteel poverty yet excessively concerned with his appearance, he refers on several occasions to his importance as an aspiring writer whose newest work will “stagger” the critics.⁴⁵ The numerous contradictions he embodies are emphasized through the recurring metaphor of the mirror, an oft-repeated motif in *Dorian Gray*. Dorian’s kissing of his portrait, for instance, is described as a “boyish mockery of Narcissus” with the portrait itself viewed as “the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul.”⁴⁶

Raoul's habit of cultivating his dandy personae is consistently framed within mirrors, such as when he brushes "the velvet collar of my new indigo-blue overcoat" and knots "my black silver-spotted tie" in the mirror.⁴⁷ The double-meaning of the word "reflection" to suggest both duplication and contemplation recurs throughout the narrative, emphasizing its role in the protagonist's identity-formation through both his clothing and performances. These self-observations lead him to contemplate several searching ontological questions: "How can one look the part and not be the part? Or be the part and not look it? Isn't looking—being? Or being—looking? [...] This seemed to me extraordinarily profound at the time, and quite new."⁴⁸

The relevance of Raoul's discovery that looking equates with being and vice versa is conveyed not only through his numerous, consciously performed personae and their attendant sartorial guises, but also through his allusions to theatrical culture. This point is emphasized through a quotation from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, in which Raoul reflects upon his own writing process: "[i]t comes from the pen so gently; it has such a 'dying fall'" (63). The allusion is apt in the light of Viola's exhortation in the play to "conceal me what I am"—resulting in her subsequent disguise as the eunuch Cesario—and her recognition that "such disguise as haply shall become the form of my intent."⁴⁹ For Raoul, disguise and concealment similarly become the means by which his gendered identities, sexuality, and romantic intentions might be fulfilled.

These intentions are invariably thwarted. Ironically, his infatuation with the Englishman, Dick Harmon, leads Raoul to cast aside his disguises, showing his would-be lover "things about my submerged life that really were disgusting and never could possibly see the light of literary day."⁵⁰ These revelations—gradually revealed to the reader through Raoul's cynical, bitter monologue—implicitly result in Dick's abrupt departure from Paris, leaving Duquette feeling, in his own estimation, "as a woman must feel when a man takes out his watch and remembers an appointment that cannot possibly concern her, except that its claim is the stronger."⁵¹ When Dick re-enacts the same scenario, leaving his fiancée "Mouse" in Raoul's company under identical circumstances, Raoul follows suit and leaves her in an act of revenge for his friend's earlier, precisely similar abandonment of himself.

The cliché of the abandoned woman is again brought to prominence through allusion to theatricality, this time in a reference to Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. The images of ships and shores which dominate Puccini's opera also surround Dick's abandonment of Raoul, from his "lightly swaying upon the step

as though the whole hotel were his ship, and the anchor weighed” to his act of standing “on the shore alone.”⁵² The affectionate letter he later receives from his friend recalls the image of the mirror to reflect another guise, this time the embodiment of the abandoned Cio Cio San as she waits for her husband’s ship to return. Puccini’s opera is overtly alluded to as Raoul poses in a kimono—experimenting with fluid gender identities—and turns his abandonment by Dick into the commonplace tragedy of the abandoned female:

I read it standing in front of the (unpaid for) wardrobe mirror. It was early morning. I wore a blue kimono [...]. “Portrait of Madame Butterfly” said I, “on hearing of the arrival of *ce cher Pinkerton*.”⁵³

Significantly, Raoul’s various guises—each of which transgresses gender boundaries from the effeminacy of the dandy to cross-dressing in the role of the tragic heroine—are contemplated in front of a mirror bought on credit. His efforts to subvert regulatory discourses of sexuality are largely comedic but nonetheless have tragic undertones. The metaphor of the mirror and its flat, two-dimensional reflections conveys these to a degree, but it is through various forms of the empty receptacle that Raoul interrogates the discourses of contingent subjectivities most poignantly.

Raoul’s “submerged life” conceivably relates to the blurred divide in the story between the literary aesthetes and dandies who hover on the borders of social respectability and the illegal sexual activity he alludes to later in the narrative: homosexuality and exploitation. The language used to convey his suggestion of his childhood experiences is revealing in the context of the “African laundress” who buys his affections in the outhouse with “little round fried cake[s] covered with sugar.” Tellingly, Raoul desires to bury his childhood memories “under a laundry basket instead of a shower of roses and *passons oultre*.”⁵⁴ The *Twelfth Night* allusion suggests that concealment is the condition under which clothing, when filled and animated, enables performance to be re-enacted, but the laundry basket is merely an empty receptacle for further receptacles: worn disguises since cast aside.

This suggestion of emptiness colors Raoul’s bleakest assertion. In a passage which recalls Bertha Young’s fiddle-case and Mrs. Busk’s corset as receptacles, he states:

I don’t believe in the human soul. I never have. I believe that people are like portmanteaux—packed with certain things, started going, thrown about, tossed away, [...] until finally the Ultimate Porter swings them on to the Ultimate Train and away they rattle⁵⁵

Here, in a parody of the Faustian pact reminiscent of Dorian Gray's wish to transpose his youth onto an inanimate portrait, the human soul itself is reduced to baggage. Like Duquette's laundry basket, the portmanteaux amounts merely to a void, poignantly emphasizing the empty spaces in Raoul's narrative and his identity. In addition to the train, these metaphors recall the problems of identity posed by the notorious handbag in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Revealed as the metaphorical parental lineage of Jack Worthing, the bag's discovery in a cloakroom in Victoria Station—a potential scene for social indiscretion as the play makes clear—is deemed to show “contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life.”⁵⁶ Empty receptacles in both Wilde and Mansfield resonate with future possibilities, but as revealed through the subtlety of Mansfield's covert allusions to the emptiness of the human soul, these momentary subversions carry a considerable cost.

The position Raoul occupies in his own narrative is thus one held in common with Mrs. Bone, Bertha Young, and Eddie Warren: that of metaphorical spaces, receptacles for spent disguises which nonetheless offer contingent possibilities. Through Raoul's various poses and re-enactment of scenarios from theatrical culture, Mansfield draws attention to the lack of available language through which he might articulate his “submerged life.” The reason for his major epiphany—its centrality to the story emphasized by the use of the phrase which forms its title—thus becomes clear:

If you think what I've written is merely superficial and impudent and cheap you're wrong. [...] If it were, how could I have experienced what I did when I read that stale little phrase written in green ink, in the writing pad?⁵⁷

The “stale” little phrase referred to here is *Je ne parle pas français*, the sole French utterance in a story set in France and which, significantly, is articulated by Mouse, who cannot speak Raoul's language but shares his predicament as the abandoned beloved. The expression, relating merely to a *lack* of capacity for speech, understanding, and translation, causes overwhelming emotion in Raoul, inspiring him to reflect: “Am I capable of feeling as strongly as that?” His inevitable conclusion is that he is unable to find a language in which to express this feeling—“I hadn't a phrase to meet it with!”⁵⁸—thus raising pertinent questions about the narrative gaps falling between socially sanctioned norms of identity for which there is, as yet, no language or place.

In Mansfield's writing, the motifs of corsetry and dandyism serve as clear markers of performativity. The mask *becomes* the masquerade, clothing being a necessary mechanism for re-enacting discourses of gender and sexuality

as dictated by changing fashions and social conventions. Mansfield's short fiction consistently illuminates this process, adopting clothing as a form of sartorial mask which simultaneously obscures, reveals, and aids re-enactment of the subtle, shifting, contingent discourses which radically transformed the modernist representation of the human subject. In the context of Wilde's acknowledged influence on twentieth-century conceptualizations of sexuality, Mansfield's contribution to literary modernism might now be seen as having left its own lasting impression upon this process of transition. The predicaments of Mrs. Busk, Bertha Young, and Raoul Duquette all suggest that the possibility of articulating contingent discourses against regulatory norms of identity is curtailed by an absence of discourse through which to speak. As Butler was later to contend, performativity is not definable as "the efficacious expression of a human will in language"; rather, it is "a specific modality of power as discourse" which amounts to a series of "complex and convergent chains in which 'effects' are vectors of power."⁵⁹

As Butler suggests, the lack of will or autonomy over the discursive powers governing identity means the convergence of aesthete, dandy, and camp and their transition into a discrete homosexual identity could not have been anticipated by Wilde during his lifetime. The chain of signification underpinning his legacy—forged within Wilde's own body, his Delsartean poses, and his cultivation of the dandy image—began its linking process only after his death. Katherine Mansfield's dramatic short fiction forms an important early link in this chain. Considered together, these three stories embody her complex response to the problem laid out in her early notebook: the sense of how "the truth of all" might be glimpsed through the submerged lives and dual existences accessible only by means of masks, masquerades, and performativity. The dramatic form—traceable from her earliest experimental sketches to her most celebrated mature stories—is what made possible Mansfield's subtly intriguing interrogation of sexual identity. It was also, I would suggest, the means through which her "strange longing for the artificial" was ultimately realized.

Notes

- 1 *Notebooks* 1, 112.
- 2 See Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994); Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

- 3 *Notebooks* 1, 99.
- 4 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions* (London: Methuen, 1934), 1–2, 31.
- 5 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), 226–7.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 236.
- 8 J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 1.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Intentions* (London: Methuen, 1934), 185.
- 11 CW4, 344.
- 12 Meyer, *Politics*, 65–6.
- 13 David Schulz, "Redressing Oscar: Performance and the Trials of Oscar Wilde," *The Drama Review* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 45–6.
- 14 William Sayers, "The Etymology of Queer," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 18, no. 2 (2005): 18.
- 15 Butler, *Bodies*, 226.
- 16 Oscar Wilde, "Slaves of Fashion," in *The Woman's World*, No. 1, ed. Oscar Wilde (London: Cassell & Company, 1888), 40.
- 17 Jill Fields, "'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture 1900–1930," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 356–7.
- 18 T. O. Beachcroft, "Katherine Mansfield's Encounter with Theocritus," *English Journal of the English Association* 23, no. 115 (March 1974): 16, 19.
- 19 Nancy Gray, "Un-Defining the Self in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield," in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed. Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber, and Susan Reid (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 84.
- 20 Katherine Mansfield, "Stay-Laces," in CW1, 460.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Flügel, *Psychology*, 15.
- 24 Fields, "Fighting," 357.
- 25 "Stay-Laces," 461.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Simpkin, Marshall Hamilton, Kent & Co Ltd., 1913), 37.
- 28 Katherine Mansfield, "Bliss," in CW2, 145.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 146.

- 32 Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*. 2nd edn (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 115.
- 33 Garelick, *Rising Star*, 144.
- 34 Mansfield, "Bliss," 146.
- 35 Meyer, *Politics*, 79–81.
- 36 Mansfield, "Bliss," 147.
- 37 Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, 79–81.
- 38 Mansfield, "Bliss," 152.
- 39 Antony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 274; Nicholas Murray, *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* (St Ives: Abacus, 2003), 25.
- 40 Mansfield, "Bliss," 142.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 43 Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 99.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 45 Katherine Mansfield, "Je ne parle pas français," in CW2, 117.
- 46 Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 99, 118–9.
- 47 Mansfield, "Je ne parle pas," 122.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 49 Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1.2.9–11.
- 50 Mansfield, "Je ne parle pas," 120.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 56 Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. (London: Penguin, 1986), 268.
- 57 Mansfield, "Je ne parle pas," 118.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 59 Butler, *Bodies*, 187.

