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Chapter 4

Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role

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I

In this essay I propose to investigate some problems raised by the depiction of feminine beauty in Kate O'Brien's fiction. In her novels, the physical descriptions of central female characters extravagantly stress their visual attractiveness. These descriptions typically employ a wealth of allusions to art-objects and icons enjoying classic status in the tradition of Western art, as well as to powerful, sometimes destructive, figures in mythology and to objects of amorous idealisation in European literature. The narrative regularly invokes the rhetoric of beauty as an ideal quality, transcending time and cultural difference, an aesthetic incontrovertible, in the course of these passages. These constructions of O'Brien's protagonists form a complex which associates art, here understood as an instance of the ideal, with the sense of potentially dangerous sexual charisma and with sophisticated sensual pleasures, the arena for the exercise of that bourgeois imperative, refined taste. These pleasures are *metaphorically* conjured up in the guise of flowers, food, and wine, thus presenting the characters

described as delicious erotic consumables; they are simultaneously given a matching *metonymic* context in that insistence by the respective narrators on a lavish upper middle-class *mise-en-scène* which is a hallmark of O'Brien's fictions. There are qualities both of metropolitan glamour and of faintly *risqué* modernity (in a 1920s mode) about many of these portraits of feminine beauty, with their mentions of Renaissance masterpieces on the one hand, and their daring references to paganism in the form of Greek goddesses on the other.

Yet as earlier generations of readers, especially women readers, already recognised, and as Irish and some international feminists are now discerning more and more clearly, Kate O'Brien's work has a strong radical moment, however uneasily it may sit with her sensational–realist mode, near-rococo verbal style and overstuffed settings. Her writings not only take an unmistakably oppositional stance towards the general cultural narrowness, prudery and ruralist exclusions of Free State Ireland – the common targets of all dissident writers and cultural critics in the decades between 1920 and 1955 or so – but also institute an interrogation of the forms of oppression specifically visited on women.[1] This interrogation is conducted in a whole series of novels which are, it should be admitted at the outset, of uneven quality, largely lacking in stylistic elegance and apparently innocent of the great modernists' developments in narrative technique, if not altogether in vision. Yet under the dismayingly wordy surface, O'Brien conducts a delicate and searching examination, even an anatomy, of the constrictions of women's lives and the pain of feminine consciousness. This critique is focused largely on the culture of the Irish provincial bourgeoisie, though O'Brien's work does also sometimes employ European settings, to particularly good effect in the historical novel *That Lady* (1947), in *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and in her last novel *As Music and Splendour* (1958). Evident in her work taken as a whole is an intense interest in the various forms of social regulation which infantilise women, restrict their development and ensure their domination. This project must surely have been influenced, no doubt at some removes, by the great nineteenth-century novels which so vividly render the tragic consciousness of doomed heroines such as Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina and Effi Briest, and perhaps by the pessimistic

determinist naturalism of Zola or Hardy. In O'Brien's early best-seller *Without My Cloak* (1931), the aim is still evidently the faithful representation of the agony of a woman, Caroline Considine – spirited, not without self-awareness – on whom the prison doors of an uncongenial marriage have closed, and who fails utterly to find the means of any self-liberation. Later, however, this vision is altered by the various shapes of new plots, each of them variants on the protagonists' invention, and their wresting free of potentially autonomous but none the less feminine selves from the dominant masculine authority and the given ideological forms.

It is when we put together this quite crisply feminist project, however little it is overtly named as such, with the fictional representation of the physical appearance of these heroines, that a curious contradiction begins to emerge. It is one thing to show women as all surface, glossy, glowing and sumptuous, or as classically perfect of countenance, drawing admiring and envious glances from a chorus of less fortunate female mortals in supporting roles, and from males a mixture of fascination, fear (expressed in Medusa and Gorgon-images), and the desire to possess – a possession imagined, in the time-honoured manner, nakedly and erotically as a form of subjugation. It is usually quite another to concentrate in one's fictional discourse on the interiority of such female characters, on their struggle to recognise themselves as active subjects within the offered social forms, and on the acts and stratagems by which they may aim to seize autonomy and make themselves real in the world. My topic in this essay is to explore that contradiction.

II

Employing the language of our own contemporary feminist critique of representations, we would say that the scopic representation of women as objects of the male gaze is very prevalent in O'Brien. In her fictions the narrator consistently focalises through, that is to say s/he adopts the viewpoint of, male characters in the story. In the extended account in *Mary Lavelle* of Don Pablo's vision of Mary, and subsequently of his son Juanito's, and in Eddy's description in *Without My Cloak* of his sister Caroline, the

salient fact is the astounding beauty of the two women who are the objects of description. That beauty is mystified by a rhetoric which gestures towards the domains both of the (paganised) sacred, in *Mary Lavelle*, and of the radiance and exalted mode of being of art, in both of these and in other texts. The beauty of Caroline and of Mary is seen as constitutive of their respective feminine selves. This apprehension of their personal beauty as an essential, self-defining quality is sometimes even attributed to such characters themselves; it is true, however, that O'Brien does generally mark this as an unreflective, shallow and basically narcissistic form of feminine subjectivity. This is true of the school beauty Molly in *Land of Spices*, and of the heroine Agnes's frilly sister Marie-Rose in the sombre world of *The Ante-Room* (1934):

> Marie-Rose sat at her dressing-table in dim lamplight and brushed her silky gold hair, which curled and lolled very prettily against her shoulder. In spite of weary lines about her eyes, she was looking – she could not but admit – delicious. She ran her hand affectionately along her smooth young cheek, and mused with an impartial pleasure upon the whiteness of her throat. The white frills of her night-dress, the flounces and ruches of her white silk wrap, foamed delicately, and made a dramatic darkness of the shadows in which she sat.[2]

I wish to ask what may seem to be a rather simple-minded question, but is nevertheless a necessary one. Why does a woman novelist, and at that a writer of well-attested lesbian orientation in her own life – and therefore someone whom one might have expected to see women as active or desiring subjects on their own account – perpetuate the representation of women in this objectified way? The inevitable surprise and dismay of a feminist reader at the apparently patriarchal conventionality of her physical descriptions of female characters is generated not only by the evident feminist intention of her work, but also by the decided difference of O'Brien's own sexual orientation from the prescribed norm. The most characteristic project of her work would seem to be to rehearse the attempts at self-liberation of the central female figures; she is clear-eyed and persistent in pursuing a critique of the institutions of Irish bourgeois life and the oppressively sexist ideology underpinning them.

Her near-obsession with what sometimes almost seems an

abstract, essentialised quality of beauty in women sharply conflicts with the process of representing the achievement of freedom and individual thought by the women in the fictions, because fully interiorised autonomous subjectivity becomes the property of the male viewer, whose noting and appreciation of feminine beauty gives him the status of a connoisseur, and sometimes even the kind of originality of creative perception attributed to an artist. The quality of beauty itself is nearly always, by this move, presented as being *unconsciously* possessed by the feminine object viewed; and, further, in O'Brien's aesthetic discourse beauty is always thrown back to an earlier ideal – a picture, a statue, the notion of a goddess-like distance and aura. It is thus firmly situated, and implicated, in the whole patriarchal system of the scopic and the fetishised which has been so well described both from the feminist and the anti-consumerist viewpoint, in the classic instances by Laura Mulvey and John Berger.[3] O'Brien always presents feminine beauty as a given, an essential quality, and as surrounded, in accordance with European traditions both visual and literary, by a mystique. Nowhere does O'Brien show the slightest interest in relativising the experience of beauty or in exploring – or even recognising – a moment of its social or cultural *construction*. These textual instances of beauty attract, rather, a language of the ineffable, of extreme emotion (felt by the male observer); the language of quasi-mystical experience attaches to them, and they characteristically produce in their generally male recipients an aporia indicating the recognition of an experience similar to the sublime as defined in Romanticism.[4] Dr Curran's admiration of Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* is a good example:

> William Curran fed his eyes with a greed which he thought a life of staring would not satisfy. The long, narrow lines of her body, the girlish thinness of her arms, the sweet young breast, the soft dark fall of hair, her profile, saved from perfection by too much length of bone . . . all these beauties raised in him such a conflict of senses as made victory and defeat alike unbearable. For if he won her, what skill or right had he in such possession, and if he lost – (pp. 66-7)

His experience disorients and obsesses him:

> In regard to her he had left his rules and certainties behind, and lived from hand to mouth without direction, so that when she stood before

> him, though he steered with credit through automatic talk and gestures, his only true awareness was of her starry beauty and of the pounding of his blood. (p. 60)

Her beauty is constantly connected by the narrator, in these passages focalised on Curran, with the notion of an abstract ideal:

> Her face, quite near him, transcended every common thought of beauty. He smiled at the mortal anxiety that shadowed its immortality. (p. 75)

The role of this discourse of beauty is developed further in subsequent novels: in *Mary Lavelle*, as I shall point out, it is especially prominent. Here is one of many possible examples from that text:

> She sat erect, her hands clasped loosely over her crossed knees, her slender body outlined as flowingly as if she were a figure in a dream. The curly edge of her neutral-coloured hair made an angelic nimbus, but there was nothing Christian in the face it framed. Those features came unflawed – oh, impossible marvel – from Greece's most exacting and fastidious time. A virgin, pagan face. The face of untaken Aphrodite.[5]

How may we understand this state of affairs? Must we simply conclude that O'Brien could not, or did not wish to resist the conventional attitudes of her age – and perhaps also of the Victorian and Edwardian ages preceding it, in which some of her texts, faithfully realist in mode, are set? Or is there any room at all for an assumption that while making the scopic gaze of her male characters constitute female ones as objects, she is also interrogating that gaze? Certainly, in her last novel, the underrated *As Music and Splendour*, which deals with the training of two young Irish women as opera singers towards the end of the nineteenth century, and their successful careers in Europe, one might argue that she uses the active position, as artists themselves, of Clare and Rose to show their conscious putting on and off, as opera heroines, of the stereotyped role of women as objects of consumption. Clare has to learn to 'hop and skip and blow kisses and peep and scream', to play gypsies and chambermaids amid the 'lunacies of opera'.[6]

Generally, however, there is little warrant for a comforting hypothesis of ironic deployment on the author's part of these objectivised female forms; instead some other way of resolving, or at least understanding, the contradiction between granting and withholding feminine subjectivity in these texts must be found. We should notice that O'Brien gradually comes to invent more and more self-aware central characters: Agnes in *The Ante-Room* improves on Caroline Considine, and Mary Lavelle on Agnes, and Helen Archer in *The Land of Spices* on Mary. Indeed Helen, the Reverend Mother running the convent school, is an embodiment of considerable female authority who, though she is described as a striking physical presence, partakes not at all of the standard objectivised feminine existence of secular women. In Ana de Mendoza, the heroine of *That Lady* (1947), an inner personal force like Helen Archer's and the intense physical magnetism attributed to other protagonists are made to coexist, and that coexistence is to some extent explicitly problematised in the narrative. So the dazzling surface of the early beauties is increasingly complicated by stronger and stronger intimations of interiority, though the narratives never entirely shed their scopic impulse.

III

Let me examine the problem more closely, and justify my assertions by providing textual instances. Mary Lavelle, in O'Brien's third novel, is a good example of interiorisation and reflexive thought; but there remains a yawning gap between the impression Mary's beauty makes on others, and her own sense of self, for which that beauty is an unthought element. The sensuous narcissism of Marie-Rose in *The Ante-Room* (of which I have already given an instance) or of Molly Considine in *Without My Cloak* causes less of a jar upon the reader's sensibility, but I think this is only because each of them is less fully interiorised, represented as an active, experiencing consciousness, than Mary Lavelle, who is the protagonist of the narrative. Here is a representatively sumptuous description of Molly:

> Their bodies relaxed; Anthony's hand moved over her hair and neck to her warm, silk-covered breast. Familiar, sensual peace crept into them, and they rested a minute together. The man's eyes dreamt over her reflection in the mirror, and she took pleasure in it too.[7]

Male scopic sexuality is not represented as in the slightest degree predatory in this passage, which indeed stresses the couple's mutuality in sensual pleasure. But Molly's own participation in her beauty as spectacle is also evident:

> Cloudily the two saw her reflected . . . her skirts of night-blue silk billowed to the floor; her little bodice, beribboned up and down with velvet and inlet with lace, was faithful to the lovely line of her breasts; pagoda sleeves engulfed her arms, but little jewelled hands gave pretty pledge for them; chatelaine and mighty topaz brooch weighed touchingly upon her slenderness.

Molly's luscious, Winterhalter beauty (the novel is set in the 1860s) is explicitly shown as drawing from her a narcissistic response:

> Blue eyes, misty as Anthony's were bright, smiled faintly *from the pool of glass*; the curve of her mouth had a dream's outline, and over *her indeterminate soft face* shone the appeal of lovely transience. *She was all woman, all fragility,* of the type that flowers enhance, and parasols and jewels; pouring out tea she could look adorable, or dancing a quadrille, or singing at the piano; but beauty unfolded from her voluptuously in hours like this; evening and quietude adorned her like a crown. (p. 31; emphasis mine)

The 'pool of glass' is an explicit signal of narcissistic and mythically destructive self-regard; the other passages I have emphasised help to complete the picture of feminine beauty as quintessentially passive and vulnerable. That this passage is focalised upon the man and that these are primarily his observations (in both senses) is clearly revealed by the next sentence:

> Anthony's thoughts turned back inconsequently to the first time he had stood beside her dressing-table; he remembered the rapturous excitement of that hour. (p. 31)

This whole passage seems a perfect instance of the scopic, and of the proxy nature of women's desire as (and if) it is constructed in patriarchy: Molly admires herself in Anthony's eyes.[8] We may add that this particular character is a doomed figure, who dies in childbirth as a result of the concrete sexual expression of the very desire which is so sensuously described in this passage. (Though it is not here our specific concern, we should nevertheless

acknowledge O'Brien's muted but explicit note of protest at the immemorial fate of women in the ages before contraception.)

Mirrors are, of course, themselves deployed in literature and painting as emblematic of the feminine condition; given O'Brien's intense interest in visual impressions, it is not surprising to find her drawing on this traditional item in the vocabulary of Western representation. *Mary Lavelle* contains two significant mirror-moments, but rather different ones from this. Mary's dull pipe-smoking fiancé has given her an antique mirror in which he instructs her to look so as to remind her how she has driven him mad with desire: 'But he liked to bring her random presents – violets or a book of music or silk stocking – or, as one day, an old hand-mirror of thin, exhausted silver. "Look there, my love", he said, "and see why I'm so crazy"'.[9] This scene functions as a patriarchal injunction. There could scarcely be a clearer example of the double-bind in which women are placed in patriarchy: Mary is to learn of her reflected beauty, but precisely as that which is a *danger* to John. That is: she is to apprehend her own destructiveness, over which she has no control but which is meant to oblige her to be subordinate to her lover. This is squarely in the tradition of the compliment-as-threat which pervades Western amorous discourse in general, and courtly and Petrarchan love-poetry in particular. It is founded upon a denial of the woman's agency: she is the vessel of the man's passion, a figure falsely exalted, pure object of fascination and fear combined. Historians of the medieval and Renaissance sub-genre of *vanitas* paintings, which show a woman performing her toilette before a mirror, make the useful point that such images give the viewer scopic pleasure in the depiction of a beautiful, sometimes semi-nude female, while simultaneously – and more or less hypocritically – preserving the alibi of a moralising function.[10] O'Brien's invocation of the topos, at least in *Mary Lavelle*, works rather against this than for it; this characteristic duplicity would seem to arise largely in visual art-forms, notoriously, of course, in cinema.

The other instance of mirroring in this novel occurs when, on her arrival in the Spanish household, Mary is made slightly uncomfortable by the enormous mirror in her room:

> She had been brought up in unself-conscious habits and therefore was not so much regretful as relieved that the mirrors' positions made it

> impossible that she should see herself when arranged for sleep – and yet she had wondered, lying there, how in fact one did appear in such a cloudy resting-place. (p. 12)

It is significant that at this point Mary 'laughed at herself self-consciously' and next takes out and studies her photograph of John: as if she unconsciously invokes him to curb her tendency to independence. I would argue that this, rather different mirror-motif – here as in other narratives concerning personal identity, such as *Jane Eyre* or the writings of Lacan – thematises the individual's obligation to assemble some kind of coherent working selfhood. It thus raises the question of whether, and how, a woman might avoid fitting oneself neatly into the repertoire of roles offered, and more actively, and in the Ireland of the 1930s more transgressively, how one may go about inventing others.

But this particular cautious passage would scarcely justify an argument that the novel adequately addresses the gap between men's appreciation, simultaneously abject and possessive, of Mary's beauty, and the very different nature of her own interest in herself. We would be mistaken if we made too much of it as an indication of a consciousness on O'Brien's part of the gap or disparity I have described above. Elbowing Mary's tentative self-perception out of the way in the text of the novel are the rapturous silent paeans to her beauty by Don Pablo and Juanito, a sample of which I have quoted earlier. This discourse of Mary's absolute beauty – she even pips at the post the Castilian noblewoman Luisa in the unspoken competition which produces some of the novel's sillier passages (pp. 151, 168–9) – is crucially linked with the mystique of the bullfight, described with equal enthusiasm by the narrator, but this time in an extended and eloquent passage which is focalised through Mary herself.[11] The chapter called 'A Corrida' is structurally parallel to the sex-scene between Juanito and Mary which later brings the plot (and the male lead) to a climax.[12] By means of this parallel O'Brien links together intensely erotic images of heterosexual domination-and-submission with a notion of 'art, unconcerned and lawless', as embodied in the violently cathartic spectacle of the bullfight.[13]

There are two further important strands in this complex concoction of desire, death, and aesthetic ecstasy. One is the fact that Mary is brought to the *corrida* by Agatha Conlan, the tormented

lesbian character who, along with John, Mary's Irish lover, his Spanish *alter ego* Juanito, and Juanito's father Don Pablo, has fallen overwhelmingly in love with Mary's beauty. I shall leave till later my consideration of the significance of Conlan's sexual orientation. The other strand is that the passage describing Mary and Juanito's lovemaking is not focalised through Mary, which is what a reading of the book as a rehearsal of feminine self-liberation might lead one to expect, but is narrated from Juanito's perspective; and the description dwells in an undeniably sado-masochistic way on images of Mary's specifically feminine vulnerability and pain *as themselves erotic* and constitutive of Juanito's pleasure:

> He took her quickly and bravely. The pain made her cry out and writhe in shock, but he held her hard against him and in great love compelled her to endure it. He felt the sweat of pain break over all the silk of her body. He looked at her face, flung back against the moss, saw her set teeth and quivering nostrils, beating eyelids, flowing, flowing tears. . . . She was no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian . . . (pp. 308–9)

The images in this dismaying passage vividly recall the violent death of the bull at the *corrida* in their presentation of Mary as animal-like. They also invoke Renaissance paintings of St Sebastian – in which the beautiful, nude young man's body is pierced by arrows, and in which a devotional topic provides a slightly disguised pretext for voyeurism – and reactivate the text's earlier fantasies of Mary as a Greek erotic image of intense and sensual beauty – variously a *kouros* (the genre of statues of young boy-athletes) and Aphrodite, goddess of love:

> Yet, this evening, strolling without premonition . . . he had encountered that against which he believed no man, however old or wise or tired, can be adequately armed. He had met beauty, mythical, innocent and shameless. . . . Her hair . . . was curly and clung to her head like a Greek boy's. Her blue eyes, boyish too, androgynous, were wide and shy, but darkened by dark lashes and by shadows of fatigue. . . . Her carriage . . . most virginal and pagan. (p. 66)

This is from the account of Don Pablo's first vision of Mary; it is supplemented by further mythological allusions, all hinting at the danger to be incurred by viewers of her beauty, which is thus again invested with unconscious destructive potential:

> He would not be afraid of Medusa's face, since it was certainly not his business to play Perseus. He had been smitten by a vision in the garden . . . (pp. 66-7)[14]

Juanito, Don Pablo's son, sees Mary in a strikingly similar way, with the recognisable compound of shock, aesthetic appreciation and sexual desire:

> She sat erect. . . . The curly edge of her neutral-coloured hair made an angelic nimbus, but there was nothing Christian in the face it framed. Those features came unflawed – oh, impossible marvel! – from Greece's most exacting and fastidious time. A virgin, pagan face. The face of untaken Aphrodite. (p. 167)

The climactic sex-scene, then, is a kind of apotheosis of the scopic moments in the book as a whole, and as well as the domination–submission motif, it restates the idea of a continuum, or even an identity, between feminine beauty and the objects of specifically aesthetic experience. So it would seem that in *Mary Lavelle* O'Brien is driven to objectify Mary both scopically in general and erotically in particular through the device of her beauty. The result is that she gives far more imaginative energy to that *relinquishing* of agency to which Mary is moved by her awakened passion for Juanito, than to the representation of Mary's making her own of her life which is the larger concern of the novel.

One must, of course, acknowledge the presence here also of the notion of sexual initiation as a rite of passage into adulthood. We might negotiate this minefield by suggesting that two kinds of liberationist imperative are colliding, and one – the narrative of specifically feminine self-development – comes off worse than the other: the recognition, after Freud, Havelock Ellis and D. H. Lawrence, of the central importance of sexuality in personality, and the determination to speak it, not let it go unrepresented in novelistic discourse. In the 1930s this was, of course, a progressive motive, marking a resistance to Victorian religio-moral repressions. But inevitably *we* read O'Brien's text with a feminist scepticism about doctrines of sexual liberation, hard-won in the post-1960s disillusion with what largely turned out to be a masculinist enthusiasm for indiscriminate sex as a panacea for social and psychological ills, a new form of domination rather than of freedom.[15] In *Without My Cloak* and elsewhere (in Dr Curran's thoughts in *The Ante-Room*, for instance) there is very clear evidence of the presence in O'Brien's mind of the new discourses of sexology, specifically of the rather positivist inheritance of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, if not explicitly of the more humanistic Freud. But acquaintance with these discourses is the perogative of the men. Caroline, the sexually unhappy wife in *Without My Cloak*, is shown as scarcely self-aware, at the mercy of feeling, guilt and desperate impulse and incapable of any analysis, such as, for instance, her brother Eddy can engage in. She is represented by the narrator as driven by almost unconscious natural forces, as in the detached reductionism of this passage, where a mechanical and scientistic perspective is employed:

> and here she was, at forty-two, still beautiful and warm, with nerves frayed to tatters from loathing of a man's desire, from disturbance and frustration of her senses. A physiological commonplace – that was all Caroline's trouble, drench it however the silly creature might in tears and modesty and hesitations. (p. 185)

This passage takes care to adopt the worldly, knowing tone of a man commenting on that whereof he knows; it is precisely a knowledge from which Caroline is debarred by the laws of her femininity. In this context to be feminine is not only to be kept in ignorance of the 'facts' newly established by 'science', but to be 'a silly creature', incapable of knowledge of and for herself.

IV

In the tradition of realist narrative, and specifically of the *Bildungsroman* on which O'Brien draws, the protagonist's struggle for personal autonomy presents her or his internality, the inner reflexiveness at which s/he painfully arrives, as a form of originality. It is that which, within an ideology founded on the idea of the unified subject, guarantees selfhood.[16] But in O'Brien's work this originality – Mary Lavelle's, engaging wilfully in her Spanish adventure, insisting slightly shockingly on a year to herself between daughterhood and wifehood; Ana de Mendoza's, risking the absolutist king's rage in choosing his

minister as her lover – this originality is, for the reader, in tension with the rhetoric of beauty which is persistently employed in the representation of these wilful women. Beauty, as I have suggested above, is recognised in these texts by the observer's sense of being thrown back upon a preconstituted, ideal sphere. In a manner recalling the platonic, it is presented as an absolute about which there could be no dispute; culturally predefined, talked about as a given. There is never any – so to speak, Kantian – sense that it might be as much unconsciously constructed by the viewer as a property of the object beheld. Now, as the feminist critique of culture has abundantly shown, the mystifying language of art, literature, and mythology which surrounds the notion of beauty is itself strongly implicated in the fetishising representations of women which are ubiquitous in patriarchy. Thus the love-scene in *Mary Lavelle*, even as it topples vertiginously towards pulp romance – 'he held her still and murmured wild Spanish words of love' (p. 309) – is quite in the tradition of Renaissance nudes, connoisseurship, and high-class voyeurism.

Of course, Kate O'Brien takes the claims of Art at their own valuation: throughout her work she accepts and celebrates the existence of a sphere of the aesthetic which is set apart from the actual and transcends it. As well as the ample evidence her own texts provide for this view, I am also drawing here on remarks made about O'Brien's thought by her friend the critic Lorna Reynolds, who stresses O'Brien's belief in, and sense of reverence for, an ideal sphere of art and beauty.[17] In particular, she insists that Kate O'Brien would have conceived of such a sphere as utterly removed from, and as above, gender and sexuality. I have no particular reason to doubt that this view is a reliable indication of what O'Brien's theoretical position on these matters would have been if stated discursively, but texts escape the conscious control of their authors, and that they can do so may be, in my belief, the chief promise of a continuing life for them in the minds of future readers.[18] In this essay I may well be reading Kate O'Brien in part against the grain of her own intentions, or privileging some of them at the expense of others, but without, I hope, a lack of sympathy, and unrepentantly. I therefore find myself diverging from Lorna Reynolds's views, in the following way.

O'Brien's implicit theory of the aesthetic is a secularly transcendent one. As for metaphysical matters, while she treats the imperatives of Catholicism with a delicate sympathy, particularly in the rendering of Agnes Mulqueen's emotional suffering in *The Ante-Room*, a degree of modern detachment from Irish and institutional Catholicism is evident on her own part.[19] It is the realm of art which instances a kind of sacredness; and her conception of feminine beauty seems quasi-sacramentally connected to that sphere. I would contend that *in her fictions,* at least, sexuality is not distanced or programmatically excluded from the realm of aesthetic exaltation, as it is in some versions of the aesthetic, Schopenhauer's, for example. Rather, she imbricates erotic motives with idealisation, making one work upon the other in a manner reminiscent sometimes of Spanish mysticism (Teresa of Avila, about whom, it will be recalled, she also wrote, and John of the Cross) and sometimes of Plato's celebration of homoeroticism as an elevating force in the *Symposium* (and of the whole tradition of European writings which stem from it and its Renaissance Florentine avatars). This idealising discourse complicates the task of any critic who would wish to take seriously O'Brien's own developed understanding and intentions, without at the same time relinquishing the disturbing sense the reader has of fetishistic and voyeur tendencies in the texts' depiction of women.

V

At this point it is time to consider the place of Kate O'Brien's own, biographical, sexual orientation in this puzzle, which so far I have done no more than mention. As other contributors show, after a brief and unsuccessful marriage in early adulthood she was predominantly lesbian-identified. In what ways can this be made to relate to the representation of women in her fiction? Later in my discussion, I shall discuss certain more general problems in making that connection. But first I shall stay with the specific issue of the representation of feminine physical beauty. May we deal with the contradiction I have been outlining – between the attempt of her female protagonists to achieve agency, and their

generally simultaneous construction as objects of scopic and aesthetic desire – by arguing that she appropriates the normal discourse of masculine narrators precisely to celebrate a real entity, female beauty, and to express desire for the women whose defining property this is? We would then see her as empowering a female viewer to perceive beauty as, previously, only men were allowed to do; except that her discourse differs from that of men-desiring-women in that it is not consuming, dominant, subjugating an Other, but praising, enjoying, sustaining, the Same. According to this perspective, Kate O'Brien would have chosen not to dismantle the conventions of feminine beauty, but to adopt them and refunction them. To put it otherwise and more promisingly, we might see her as resisting the customary Oedipal plot, predicated as it is on sexual difference and feminine lack, and setting up an alternative narrative of homogeneity and sexual affinity.[20] Should we then try to reread the scopic, possessive, sado-masochistic sexualities of *Mary Lavelle* as fantasy games, conventions which O'Brien means to make slip from their moorings in the actual oppression of women, into a free play of pleasure, a set of multiple and shifting subject-positions which would criss-cross the traditional binary map of human sexual congress? How far is this a viable interpretative option?

There are only two explicitly lesbian references, to my knowledge, in Kate O'Brien's fiction. One is the representation of Agatha Conlan in *Mary Lavelle*, and the other the love between Clare Halvey, joint heroine of *As Music and Splendour*, and her fellow-musician Luisa Carriaga. The two are separated by twenty-one years, and they differ with intriguing sharpness. I shall deal first with *Mary Lavelle*. Agatha Conlan is an example of what Catharine Stimpson calls the 'dyke' stereotype: the haunted, doomed 'invert', who feels herself accursed and cast out, of whom Radclyffe Hall, not many years before O'Brien composed *Mary Lavelle*, had provided the influential archetype in the person of Stephen Gordon.[21] Agatha is sympathetically portrayed, but carefully held in the novel's margins. Her unsatisfied desire generates one of its moving passages, a puzzled meditation by Mary on the sadness of unsatisfied desire and of unwilled mutual injury:

> Mary watched the baize door swing and swing again in the porch of San Geronimo and caught each time the gleam of candles. People going in incessantly to pray, as Agatha did so often, as she did, as Juanito too, perhaps. Seeking strength against the perversions of their hearts and escape from fantastic longings. Seeking mercy, explanation and forgiveness because they are so vicious as to love each other. . . . oh bitter, unforeseen exactions! What an astonishing need there was, as life explained itself, of this incessant in and out to altars. . . . Heart after heart was found to be in pain. . . . Oh, Lord have pity! Help us to have pity on each other, to make some sense sometime out of this tangle of our longings! (pp. 285-6)

But, as we have seen, the plot drives on towards its major resolution in the heterosexual initiation of Mary by Juanito, leaving Agatha as the centre merely, or at least ostensibly, of a subplot, itself the sad pendent to the matching happy outcome of O'Toole's sunny romance with the retired bullfighter Pepe. O'Toole's transgression against class and genteel self-respect, contemptuously rejected by the other 'Misses', is warmly endorsed by the narrator and Mary, and structurally by its place at the close of the novel. The promise of O'Toole's contentment starkly contrasts with Conlan's forsakenness and utter isolation. It is very difficult for readers in these later decades not to go against the grain of the book's overt denouement – Mary's passionate heterosexual fulfilment – and perceive in Conlan's intensity, unhappy and self-condemned, a subtext querying the obligatory discourse of sexual difference. Such readerly tendencies are certainly strengthened by the unusually uncertain and novelettish tone of the Mary–Juanito scene, which I have already noted. But one cannot make bricks out of straw: these readers' responses cannot conjure out of this text any kind of overt rejection of the norms of conventional heterosexuality, with all their implicit subjugation of women, still less a utopian counter-proposal of same-gender affinity to supplant it. *Mary Lavelle*, then, at least, does not seem to offer much support to the argument mentioned above, that O'Brien is appropriating the masculinist construction of women as aesthetic objects with any very confident intention of rehabilitating it as acceptable from within an active feminine subjectivity. Strikingly, she gives Agatha Conlan a love-speech which specifically aligns the nature of her desire for Mary with masculine sexual attraction.

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Conlan is left in blank, isolated misery, O'Brien herself remaining true to her vision in giving no hint of a possible moral rehabilitation of Conlan in her own eyes. She does, however, give her a strong interest, amounting to a passion, in the spectacle of the bullfight. After witnessing it, Conlan is described as transfigured, almost beautiful. When, later in the novel, she confesses her attraction to Mary, she explicitly says: 'I like you the way a man would' (p. 285). In this character, then, O'Brien gives an example of an aesthetic viewer, someone with a realised selfhood, however agonised, who is a connoisseur and judge of the aesthetic, as are male figures and narrators elsewhere in the novels. The appreciation of the beauty of the *corrida* shown by Conlan is of a piece with her admiration of Mary, openly denominated as sexual. For the reader, this would seem to entail a division of female sexuality within itself into the binary pattern of dominant and submissive roles, viewer and viewed, familiar from the masculine–feminine stereotype.[22] Juanito and Agatha can be lined up as active agents, desiring *subjects*, each opposite Mary, projected as *object* of desire. This is, of course, to oversimplify: one should immediately recall the crucial fact that O'Brien makes Mary exit the novel in a state of entire openness about her own affective, and indeed vocational, future.

The utopian temptation to read a programmatic, or at least conscious sexual dissidence into *Mary Lavelle* is greatly strengthened by 'reading back' into that earlier novel our impressions of the Clare–Luisa relationship in *As Music and Splendour*. This is an example of relatively carefree lesbian activity, into which the question of guilt does not enter, given to pleasure and joy. Clare and Luisa's capacity for play is emphasised, and their affair is surrounded in the description by a context of pleasurable sensuous consumption, specifically of fruit, wine, and fresh Italian coffee. The relationship is represented as flouting the heterosexual imperative of monogamy, at least on Luisa's side; a situation painful to Clare, but which she is shown as accepting. The narrator makes clear Clare's favourable comparison of Luisa's love with that of two male characters, Iago Duarte and Paddy, the gloomy Irish ex-clerical student. It is Paddy who constructs Clare scopically, in O'Brien's familiar aestheticising manner: he thinks of her as 'an angel or a virgin from some Sienese canvas' (p. 108).

Luisa, by contrast, loves Clare as activity rather than as object. The novel frames their mutual affinity by means of the motif of Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, in which they are once cast as the spouses. The role of Orpheus is a cross-dressed woman's role, and the story's invocation of undying love, and vulnerability to change and loss frames the whole Luisa–Clare plot as an intense emotional experience. It is poignantly referred to as 'their one true dress' – a striking phrase which acknowledges the endlessly shifting guises and disguises which compose the emotional lives of people in general, whatever their sexual orientation. The aesthetic moment of Clare and Luisa's joint performance holds their love in solution, fixes and glorifies it, in a celebratory moment which transcends the suffering of their real lives. It is one of Kate O'Brien's best fictional ideas; in this motif she triumphantly effects that very particular merging of sexual and aesthetic motives which characterises her strange, characteristic and paradoxical imagination.

This is the place to take up certain general problems, political and theoretical, which are raised by reading Kate O'Brien's writings as lesbian and which I have postponed until near the end of my discussion. Is it appropriate to expect the literary expression of lesbian sexuality to be an instance of utopian freedom from inauthentic and repressive bourgeois sexual norms? Does this not incur risks in two directions? One is the hidden implication of the possibility of free choice of sexual orientation on which this projection is predicated: a view which would be strenuously rejected by many if explicitly stated.[23] The second potential risk arising from the investing of lesbians with the social optimism and utopian longing of 'straight' women and men is the designation of lesbians from outside to occupy a necessarily dissident position in regard to sexuality, a move which ignores the specificity of women's lives. This would merely replicate the tactic of male writers and critics who project their own utopian wishes on to the mode of existence of women in general, treating the condition of femaleness as a blank, a *tabula rasa* waiting to be inscribed with men's yearning to escape the crushing burdens of masculinity. Frances Restuccia has argued this case well in relation to Joyce:

> Joyce shifts the law over to the mother from the fathers/Fathers so that she can assist him in a finely tuned, precisely controlled subversion,

> not so that he can lose himself . . . It is the fetishised image of the Mother/Virgin that assists Joyce in getting beyond the referential, beyond the Father. But the reality of women remains ignored; fetishised disavowal allows textuality or free play even as it provides for the security of a dominant position – only the son's (disguised as the mother's) rather than the father's.[24]

This is the Lacanian 'lack' or unrepresentable, what Julia Kristeva calls 'the unnameable that one imagines as femininity, non-language or body'.[25] Discussing the controversy in the theory of homosexuality between 'social constructionism' and more essentialist views, Carole Vance remarks that while the social-constructionist approach frees us from 'a naturalizing discourse' tying us to folk knowledge and Victorian and Edwardian scientific ideologies (notions including 'spermatic and ovarian economies' or women's 'innate sexual passivity'), it may also unhelpfully obscure the material reality of the body: 'As sexual subjects, how do we reconcile constructionist theory with the body's visceral reality and our own experience of it?'[26]

There is a further difficulty which is located within more specifically literary theory and practice. Why should lesbians be presumed to be *ipso facto* free of stereotyping and the objectifying gaze – as if they occupied a world magically uncontaminated by the whole human system of cultural significations which is all that makes communication possible? As Mary Ann Doane points out in her consideration of whether the 'gaze' of film spectators can ever be 'female', 'the cinematic apparatus inherits a theory of the image which is not conceived outside of sexual specifications'.[27] Or in other words, there is no willed freedom from the given sign-system for any communicator within a culture. Kate O'Brien is obliged, like other writers however marginal or oppositional in aspiration, to work through the conventions within which social meaning is produced, and these are culturally given.

A possible way of proceeding might lie in a kind of compromise, a position negotiated something like this: that there is a moment of radical potential in 'sexual dissidence', in which marginalised people can by virtue of their marginality gain insights probably obscured (maybe mercifully so) from the 'normal' masses. This would be a kind of compensatory privilege, helping to make bearable the subordination and concealment of the marginal state.

But the achievement of such insights in no way amounts to or guarantees a liberation from the sexual signifying systems of the larger culture. Or, to return to the specific problem of Kate O'Brien's feminine and sexual representations, the eroticism of the domination-and-submission, subject-and-object pattern is only occasionally and imperfectly shed in O'Brien's fictional thought. Working within ideology may not disable covert resistances, making the semiotic message ironic or (either deliberately or unconsciously) contradictory. I have throughout my discussion been worrying away at such a recurring contradiction: we might identify its very presence as affording feminist interpretative leverage. While this stops short of attributing systematic *conscious* feminist critique to O'Brien, it opens the way to new readings and new uses of her work for the future.

VI

I shall conclude by commenting on one remaining scene from Kate O'Brien's work. This is the passage in *The Land of Spices* where the heroine Anna Murphy, on the threshold of adult life, has a kind of epiphany in the gardens of the convent school which is the book's main setting. Anna has hitherto felt that her intelligence and personal energy rather lacked a theatre where they might operate in the future. In this passage she discovers a potential direction for her life in the form of a vision of one of her schoolfellows, becoming aware of the girl Pilar

> on a plane of perception which was strange to her, and which during its visitation she did not understand but could only receive – delightedly, but without surprise in fact, and as if she had been waiting for the lead it was to give. She saw her, it seemed, in isolation and in a new sphere. . . . (p. 271)

For all Pilar's schoolgirl silliness, Anna discerns her as

> yet herself a symbol as complicated as any imaginative struggle in verse; a common piece of creation, as exquisite challenge to creativeness; she saw Pilar as a glimpse, as if she were a line from a lost immortal; she saw her ironically, delightedly, as a motive in art. (pp. 271-2)

Anna is herself at that point without understanding of the significance of this 'translation of the ordinary'; the narrator describes her ignorance of the visual arts, but for glimpses of 'old master reproductions in the school library', but nevertheless mentions Mantegna, 'a bright memory of Giorgione', and places Pilar explicitly in the aesthetic system:

> she was a girl of *La Vida Española*, a young girl in Goya, who dances and gathers grapes, and plays blindman's-buff; a small-waisted girl with shining eyes, eternally lifted off in joy from other Goya worlds. (p. 272)

This experience, however inadequately Anna grasps it herself, identifies her as the possessor of an aesthetic sensibility; her vision of Pilar is presented as a definitive, pivotal moment in her life.

> So Anna beheld her; something that life can be about, something with power to make life compose around it. She stared at her in wonder . . . realising her lustrous potentiality . . . that for her, the watcher, this moment was a long-awaited, blessed gift; that in seeing this transience, this grace, this volatility, flung in a sweet summer hour against . . . the evening star, she was encountering, alone and in terms of her secret need, a passage of beauty as revelatory and true as any verse of the great elegy. (p. 272)

In this scene, O'Brien presents Anna as an artist in embryo. Her viewing of Pilar is an instance of the aesthetic gaze, part of a series running through all the novels. The passage presents Anna as witnessing something pre-existing, not for a minute as constituting the aesthetic object by her look; the surrounding narration finds Pilar quite unconscious of her own charms, and Anna smitten by her, in a way which we can readily compare to Don Pablo's shocked appreciation of Mary Lavelle, and many characters' admiration of Caroline in *Without My Cloak* (in particular that of Denis, her artistic nephew, and Eddy, her connoisseur brother).

There is a difference, however, in this scene: Anna views Pilar actively, as 'an exquisite challenge to creativeness', 'a motive in art'. In this, her fifth novel, O'Brien intimates, as hardly anywhere else, the possibility of *female* creativity, an active aesthetic role for a woman; and it is notable that she makes Anna's revelation arise from the sight of another woman. This prefigures Luisa's love of Clare as activity rather than as object, above all in the

performance of her art, and hence the sense in their sexual love of a mutual and equal subjectivity, in the later *As Music and Splendour*. Furthermore, this threshold scene in the late-adolescent Anna Murphy's life, which occurs near the end, forms a structural parallel to the earlier definitive moment in the life of the book's other protagonist, the Reverend Mother, Helen Archer. We are told in a flashback how Helen has become a nun in revulsion from the accidental discovery of her beloved father making love with a young male student friend. (This, incidentally, though narrated with extreme restraint in a single phrase, was the cause of the celebrated banning of *The Land of Spices* by the Irish censors.) That incident plays a major role in determining the course of Helen's life, as Anna's vision of Pilar, we are to realise, will play in hers.

There is no explicit indication in the Anna–Pilar scene that either Anna's perception of Pilar's beauty, or her apperception of its effect upon herself, is a sexualised one; nevertheless, it seems to me, to feel obliged entirely to edit out this aspect of O'Brien's usual construction of feminine beauty from the scene would be the reaction only of a reader determined at all costs to maintain silence on the issue of lesbian sexuality and the relation of O'Brien's writings to it. This again raises the question discussed above of O'Brien's conception of the aesthetic realm, and of its relation – or lack of a relation – to sexuality. Anna's vision of Pilar is a positive, celebratory one, in which Anna perceives a quality she thinks of as immortal underlying the surface frivolity of Pilar's personality. But the scene is also tinged with wistfulness. This is partly because, framed by Pilar's request to have Milton's *Lycidas* explained to her, it represents the completion of a stage in Anna's work of mourning for her beloved brother Charlie who has been drowned; but there is also the sense of an unspoken yearning, which we are perhaps meant to see as creatively unsatisfied: as at the end Pilar drops her and runs off to join her best friend, Anna is left alone, reading 'For we were nursed upon the selfsame hill. . . .' Her radiant glimpse of Pilar as an icon of aesthetic feminine beauty thus also entails a realisation of her own affinity with the other girl, a self-recognition in their common subjectivity. This triumphantly reverses Helen Archer's sad rejection of human bodily contacts, driven by her father's divergence from Freud's Oedipal master-narrative: Anna gets her chance

at a life both affective and intellectual which Helen denied herself. In *The Land of Spices* Helen, a straight Freudian reading might say, suffers the loss – during her adolescent feminine father-attraction, renewed from infancy after childhood latency – of her 'Oedipal father', by her father's choice of a homosexual lover.[28] In Helen Archer, we may argue (as other critics have done, though from different perspectives), O'Brien is representing a figure of feminine power; I would add that she is also implicitly repudiating the Freudian narrative. Playing a displaced mother-role, but with a marked reversal of the passivity of the feminine stereotype, Helen makes Anna repeat cultural texts – a motif crystallised in the Herbert poem from which the book's title comes. She thus socialises her, introduces her to literary–intellectual culture and gives her access to the institution of aesthetic pleasure – the 'land of spices' – which is ultimately to offer her an adult, though secular, vocation. In this scene, then, the warmth of Anna's attraction to an incarnate creature of the same gender – whether emotional, sexual, or aesthetic, or a compound of all three, as, we might admit, real-world desire must generally be – palliates the isolation and chill of Helen's asceticism and holds out the promise of achieved human beauty and love. So perhaps after all we may locate, behind its delicate veil of discretion, the utopian moment, the instance of a projected freedom and joy, in Kate O'Brien's flawed, compelling texts.

Notes and references

1 The banning of certain of her works in the 1940s indicates that the Irish authorities found her disturbing. The best general discussion of the culture and ideology of the period is Terence Brown's, in *A Social and Cultural History of Ireland 1922–1979*, London, Fontana, 1980.

2 Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (1933), Dublin, Arlen House, 1982, p. 152. Page-numbers will be cited in parentheses at the end of subsequent quotations from this text.

3 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975; John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972. My thinking about these matters in O'Brien was assisted at an earlier stage by discussions with Susan Kirwan; see her unpublished M.A. thesis: 'Feminist Project, Feminine Representation: An Interpretation of Women in the Novels of Kate O'Brien', University College Cork, November 1990.

4 See Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980.

5 *Mary Lavelle* (1936), London, Virago, 1984, p. 167. Subsequent page-references to this text will be cited in parentheses after each quotation.

6 Kate O'Brien, *As Music and Splendour*, London, Heinemann, 1958, p. 240.

7 Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1949, pp. 30–1. Subsequent page-references will be given in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

8 See E. Ann Kaplan, 'Is the Gaze Male?' (1977), Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds.), *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, London, Virago, 1984, pp. 321–38, esp. pp. 327; 328, 328–9.

9 Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (1936), Virago, London, 1984, pp. 33–4. Subsequent page-references will be cited in parentheses at the end of each quotation.

10 See Peter C. Sutton *et al.*, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, Philadelphia and London, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984, catalogue entries on several paintings by van Mieris and Molenaer of women before mirrors, pp. 259–63.

11 Luisa too is herself assimilated into the canon of works of art, in a passage focalised, rather preposterously when one examines it, through the (untravelled and provincial) Mary herself: 'Her hands reminded Mary of the hands of angels in Italian primitive nativities. She was dramatic and enchanting to behold, so happily did she harmonize mondaine with eternal beauty.' (p. 150)

12 The text clearly registers Juanito's orgasm, but so far as Mary's experience is attended to at all in the passage, it is characterised as one of pain (pp. 308–10); see especially the following: 'Mary, more than forgetful of the pain, underwent in her spirit, through sheer love and without physical response, the essential rapture that she gave' (p. 310). See below.

13 For an extremely illuminating discussion of the problem of pervasive patterns of domination and submission and their troubling mapping on to sexual relationships, see Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*, London, Virago, 1990.

14 And see p. 168: ' Pilar's protectress – he smiled – was so beautiful to-night as to seem again Medusa, or a flame-sworded angel at the gate of Paradise.'

15 This, together with other related issues, is discussed with great insight by Patricia Jagentovich Mills in *Woman, Nature and Psyche*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1987; see especially the consideration of Marcuse's thought, pp. 149–70.

16 See Leo Bersani's classic discussion in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, London, Marion Boyars, 1978, Chapter 2, 'Realism and the Problem of Desire'.

17 Seminar discussion at the Kate O'Brien Weekend, 1990, my recollection.

18 The extreme version of such critical positions as this is to be found in the thought of Pierre Macherey, who proposes that it is precisely the fissures and fractures in the smooth surface of writings which offer leverage to a truly productive criticism, and that the conditions of possibility of a text,

which by definition it cannot itself make manifest, are the ultimate object of critical inquiry. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), trans. Geoffrey Wall, London, Routledge, 1978.

19 She always, however, retained a respect for the culture and customs of her class and milieu, however much she found herself placed outside them by her own self-development, intellectual, ideological and sexual. One may read this either as an honourable loyalty to and deep understanding of that social world which in material terms had produced and helped to form her, or as a lingering inability to free herself from class attitudes, a mixture of snobbery and provincialism.

20 This point was suggested to me by Anne Fogarty, in an earlier version, specifically concerned with O'Brien's other novel *The Last of Summer*, of her discussion below. See also Christine Van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender and Authority from Fielding to Joyce*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1987.

21 See Stimpson's pioneering 'Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English', Elizabeth Abel (ed.), *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, pp. 243–59; Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), London, Virago, 1982.

22 This in turn raises the complex problem of butch/femme role-playing in lesbian relationships, and whether it can or should be left behind. See Martha, Vicinus ' "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong": The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity', and Saskia Wieringa, 'An Anthropological Critique of Constructionism: Berdaches and Butches', Dennis Altman (ed.), *Which Homosexuality?*, London and Amsterdam, GMP Publishers, 1989, pp. 171–98, for useful discussions of the issue.

23 At the 1992 Galway Conference on 'Gender and Colonialism', Terry Eagleton's placing of Oscar Wilde in this role of progressive dissidence by virtue of his gay orientation was vehemently and cogently contested by several other participants.

24 *Joyce and the Law of the Father*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 175–6.

25 Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986.

26 Carole S. Vance, 'Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality' (1989), in Altman, *Which Homosexuality?*, p. 23.

27 Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, vol. 23, 1982, pp. 74–7.

28 See Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, James Strachey, ed. and trans. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, pp. 155, 162 ff.; see also his various feminist critics.