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Making Something Out of Nothing: Asexuality and Narrative

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING: ASEXUALITY AND NARRATIVE

VOLUME ONE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

ELIZABETH HANNA HANSON

CHICAGO, IL

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the Preface to the New York Edition of *Roderick Hudson*, Henry James famously remarked that “[r]eally, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall *appear* to do so” (qtd. in Cameron 47; emphasis in orig.). This is no less true of the relations that surrounded me throughout the writing of this dissertation than of those within a novel, and I fear that I must inevitably draw the circle too small in acknowledging the many remarkable people I have been blessed to have in my life during my time at Loyola who have helped me to bring this project to fruition.

This dissertation would have been impossible without the encouragement, insight, and patience of my dissertation committee. Above all, I am grateful to Pamela Caughie, my director, for her expert guidance, dedication, and friendship throughout the dissertation process and my time in the graduate program. Peter Shillingsburg approached these chapters at times with avowed ignorance, but always with curiosity, generosity, and wisdom. Steven Venturino brought a careful, critical eye and an extensive theoretical knowledge to this dissertation and refused to let me to get away with sloppy thinking. Robyn Warhol graciously joined my committee when this project was already well underway. She offered narratological expertise and many provocative questions that both enriched what I have written in these pages and pointed the way to possibilities for future scholarship on asexuality.

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Finally, none of this would have been possible without the love and support of my parents, Joe and Mary Lu Hanson, and my brother, Matt Hanson. From a very early age,

my parents encouraged me not only to read but to write—even when the results were maddeningly resistant to meaningful closure. They nurtured the fascination with the way stories are constructed that led to my interest in narrative theory and ultimately to this dissertation project. My family has sustained me throughout my graduate studies in myriad ways both tangible and intangible. I cannot thank them enough.

For Katie, who wanted to understand

Most of these critics who demand “passion” would seem to have no conception of any passion but one.

—William Dean Howells, “Criticism and Fiction”

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INTRODUCTION

(OR, “SUBTEXT: YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO JUMP IN A LAKE”)

There’s more to life than books, you know, but not much more.
—The Smiths, “Handsome Devil”

Several years ago, I was interviewed at a Gold Coast Starbucks by a freelance journalist researching asexuals in Chicago. After about half an hour’s worth of questions about details of my personal life that I had never imagined I would volunteer so cheerfully to a stranger, we chatted a bit about her project, and I asked her how she had become interested in asexuality. (Maybe she’s one of us, I thought, or maybe she has a friend or a relative who....)

She replied, fatally, that she wanted to do a story on some quirky local subculture and she had it narrowed down to either the asexuals or the Polar Bear Club.

While I by no means wish to disparage the physical and mental fortitude necessary for a January plunge into Lake Michigan, this equivalency does not, at first glance, bode well for the general significance of a project like mine. The question as she understood it, the one immediately at stake for both of us during our conversation, was “Why write a story about asexuality?”—or, more precisely, “Why write a story about asexuals?” These are very different questions—the difference is starker than it seems—and this is a dissertation about asexuality, not asexuals.

To write a story about asexuals is to assume a great deal. It is to assume that a group of people exists for whom not experiencing sexual attraction is a determinative

force in their identifications, their self-understanding (or lack thereof), their relationships, the kinds of intimacy they do or don't find meaningful or enjoyable, and the trajectories on which they plot or refuse to plot their lives. It is far easier to imagine writing a story about asexuals than a story about asexuality. To write a story about asexuality would be to write a story about the non-experience of sexual attraction, independent of the fairly well-structured set of concerns of asexual-identified persons I have just described. Its specified content is an absence. How does one write a story about what *doesn't* happen, except to write the happening back in, parenthetically, around its edges? In its most literal form, it might look something like the "Time Passes" section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which depicts the effects of time, weather, and two old cleaning women on an empty house, with the marriages and deaths of major characters noted briefly and parenthetically in the interstices.

Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising, then, that stories *don't* get written about asexuality, and only rarely about asexuals. This "why not" is a question of far greater import to me than its opposite, as the tactics of asexual erasure are far more common in narrative than asexuality itself is. In the next three sections of this introduction, I explore the various ways in which asexuality is put into narrative or resists being put into narrative. I begin by explaining the terms that asexuals have set for their own narrativization and the conditions that have produced these terms by surveying the history of asexuality as a sexual orientation and of asexual-identified people. Then, I discuss asexuality's suppression and erasure by the metaphysics of presence—which asexuality threatens—and I highlight the conflicts between asexual identity and the narratives through which identity is usually constructed. In the third section, I discuss the inevitable

narrative failure of asexual identity politics, why asexual identity narrowly construed is inadequate to the concept of asexuality I formulate here, and why a story about asexuals never quite adds up to a story about asexuality. In particular, asexuality poses an important challenge to identity politics' usual narrative trajectory—and, as we will see in later chapters,¹ narrative trajectory in general. One of the tensions running through the whole of this dissertation is the tension between a commitment to the asexual community and its formulations of asexual identity and a poststructuralist skepticism about the stability of any identity claim. My emphasis will be on the latter, especially as I deploy asexuality in my later chapters primarily as an antiteleological stasis that disrupts the movement of narrative. But, conversely, I do not find a complete abandonment of the former commitment either possible or desirable, if only for personal reasons.

After considering how narrative affects asexual people in the first three sections of this introduction, then, I turn to the opposite case in my final section, in which I discuss why asexuality is relevant to the study of narrative. I will explain the perhaps surprising centrality of the asexual possibility to the study of the novel and the particular

¹ The first-person plural implicates us in unpredictable and sometimes unwelcome ways. My use of “we,” “our,” and “us” in this dissertation betrays my overlapping memberships in and shifting identifications with a number of communities whose interests, at times, are opposed. A similar dissonance results from my implicit addresses to several discrete audiences. At times, I speak with and to the asexual community, at others, theorists of narrative, theorists of sexuality, scholars of Victorian and modernist fiction, etc.

Leo Bersani acknowledges a similar problem in the introduction to *Homos*, although he does not ultimately regard it as such. I follow Bersani's lead here in embracing rather than attempting to negotiate or refine away the instabilities, overlaps, and contradictions, which in my own case speak to the far-reaching disciplinary ramifications of my project and the very real difficulties of situating the emergent field of asexuality studies in relation to these other discourses. Bersani is open, as I am, about the necessary exclusions of any invocation of a “we”:

Rather than deny or apologize for such exclusions, we might more profitably acknowledge them and then try to see the unexpected ways in which an unavoidably limited “I” or “we” also speaks outside its particular perspective. My “we” in this book is constantly crossing over into the territory of other “we's.” (*Homos* 8–9)

That is, Bersani presents the problem he acknowledges not so much *as* a problem as an opportunity for reflection.

fitness of a reading of this possibility for the study of the novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before setting out the overall plan of this dissertation.

I am, for whatever reason, apparently the first to insist on a strict theoretical distinction between asexuality and asexual persons (although asexuality studies is such a nascent field of inquiry that by venturing into it at all, one is bound to be the first to do *something*). It is a necessary distinction, however, when scholarship predicated on identity politics alone is widely regarded within literary studies as reductive and naïve and when the literature one proposes to study predates the genesis of one's preferred identity category by more than a century. The distinction I therefore enforce between content and form, thematics and structure, is itself something of a simplification, but for the moment, it will serve as a useful fiction as I lay my emphasis primarily on form and structure. For to seek asexuality in narrative puts pressure on desire, and desire is a question of aim, of movement, of teleology, and of causality, and these underlie the conditions of modern subjectivity and knowledge, themselves the conditions of that quintessentially modern genre, the novel.

Defining Asexuality

I define asexuality as “the non-experience of sexual attraction” and use this designation to encompass a range of phenomena: asexual-identified people, people who do not experience sexual attraction, situations in which the experience of sexual attraction is absent, and a more structural asexuality that operates at the level of narrative and epistemology, disrupting their movement by its own stasis and suspension of their motive desire. These phenomena can neither be conveniently collapsed nor held neatly separate;

therefore, I embrace the slippages and ambiguities that the use of “asexuality” as a catch-all term to describe them necessarily entails.

Unless otherwise noted, my references to “asexuals” are to asexual-identified persons, a group that has only existed in coherent form since roughly the turn of the millennium. Beyond the bounds of this introduction, the narrativization of such identity is not a primary focus of this dissertation. “Asexuality,” as the non-experience of sexual attraction considered apart from self-identifications hinging upon such non-experience, is more historically portable and, as such, it will receive some consideration in Chapter 1. There, I locate specific instances of asexual erasure in the explaining away of such eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sites of potential-asexuality as the bachelor, the spinster, and romantic friendship, as well as in Freud’s psychoanalytic model of subjectivity. CJ DeLuzio Chasin has proposed enforcing a distinction in the study of asexuality between self-identified asexuals and “potential-asexuals,” whose experiences are such that they may come to identify as asexual but don’t yet have the vocabulary for it at their disposal (721).² It is through the lens of such potentiality that I will view these figures and relationships, while remaining mindful that even the removal of the qualification of self-identification does not wholly alleviate the danger of anachronism. What I call the “asexual possibility”—my focus in my readings of literary texts—also makes reference to this potentiality but points more to the threat that allowing it

² These potential-asexuals and their self-identified counterparts

may all experience the same kinds of attractions and desires (or lacks thereof), but they would undoubtedly make sense of these experiences in different ways. When non-self-identified “asexuals” encounter asexuality for the first time, they gain access to the cultural resources and discourses of asexuality. The order of possibilities they can access expands to include asexuality and they are able to frame their experiences in new ways. In a very basic sense, they *become* asexual. (721; emphasis in orig.)

conceptual breathing room poses to the structures of modern subjectivity, narrative, and knowledge. As such, my readings in Chapters 2 through 4 will deal more with the logic of asexuality than with potentially asexual characters or authors.

My examination of the asexual possibility, then, stretches asexuality rather far from what we have come to expect from asexual-identified subjects and suggests the utility of a proposal like Chasin's "that asexuality may not be as simple as a lack of sexual attraction and may, instead, be a meta-construct, analogous to sexuality" (716). Treating asexuality as such a meta-construct not only accommodates the considerable internal diversity of the asexual population but makes the concept more flexible for applications in which asexuality seems to be structurally opposed not to sexual attraction, strictly speaking, but to the implicitly sexual desire motivating, for instance, the movement of narrative.³ While I rely on a base definition of asexuality as the non-experience of sexual attraction, then, I recognize its boundaries to be somewhat malleable and deploy it, as Chasin suggests, as a meta-construct in my more theoretical and less identitarian applications.

³ In his discussion of a possible overlap between asexuality and hypoactive sexual desire disorder, Anthony Bogaert considers it likely that those who could be diagnosed with a lifelong lack of sexual desire "would not likely have had any sexual attraction to anyone or anything" ("Conceptual" 243). Thus such individuals might be asexuals or potential-asexuals. I discuss HSDD in greater detail in the section on asexuality and identity politics below.

The reverse, admittedly, does not necessarily hold; asexuals may not experience sexual attraction but may still experience sexual desire, albeit not directed toward an object. As such, some asexuals do masturbate, although in many cases, they take a rather functional view of it instead of regarding it as a sexual behavior, as Lori Brotto has remarked ("Mixed Methods" 612).

In general, asexuals distinguish between sexual attraction, an attraction to another person that causes one to desire sexual activity with that person, and sexual desire, the desire for sexual activity. They often implicitly regard sexual attraction as a prerequisite to such desire, or the condition that directs it and renders it socially meaningful by stipulating a determinate object for it. Thus, while we cannot regard sexual attraction and sexual desire as identical or interchangeable, they are largely interdependent, as my close reading of Freud in Chapter 1 will also demonstrate.

The reader may notice, particularly in my discussions of the asexual possibility, that I permit myself some slippage between “attraction” and “desire.” These two concepts are not synonymous, nor are they simply interchangeable. For Anthony Bogaert, in his recent book on asexuality, attraction is “that rather basic, even primal, lure that draws us to someone or something” and sexual attraction is “the ‘sexual’ or lust lure for others,” while “desire” is synonymous with “‘lust,’ or, in more colloquial terms, ‘horniness’—that tingly feeling that makes people engage in sexual activity and, perhaps, have a release of sexual tension: orgasm” (*Understanding* 11; 21). Despite sexual desire’s close relation to sexual attraction, Bogaert explains, the two can be separated: an increase in testosterone can increase desire, but only in the direction of any pre-existent attraction. Basically, sexual desire “activates” whatever sexual attraction a person experiences (21).

Bogaert is willing to give some credence to definitions of asexuality as a lack of sexual desire. However, such definitions overlook the fact that an absence of sexual attraction is a necessary consequence of an absence of sexual desire—without this activating mechanism, an individual may still have hidden, underlying sexual attractions (22). Bogaert points out that a definition of asexuality based on desire is actually more stringent than one based on attraction, although a lack of attraction is a necessary component of it. In other words, counting as asexual those who do not experience sexual attraction *includes* those who do not experience sexual desire, *as well as* those asexuals who masturbate (i.e. who experience sexual desire but not sexual attraction). What this means for my project is that my occasional strategic substitutions of “desire” for “attraction” perform a narrowing function, but as such substitutions pertain mostly to the effects of the logic of asexuality on narrative structure and not to the classification of

particular persons, real or fictitious, as asexual, they do not run the risk of excluding or misrepresenting asexual persons. More importantly, they allow me to engage in direct dialogue with theory and criticism that takes (an implicitly sexualized) desire as a motive force in narrative, and which therefore—according to Bogaert’s formulation—take sexual attraction for granted as well.

The history of the academic study of asexuality is a rather brief one, and one whose definitional work, especially in its early stages, has proceeded largely independently of the asexual movement. In fall 2007, when I first began working on the essay that grew into this project, it was possible to exhaust the existing academic literature on asexuality in a single afternoon. Five years later, the same endeavor now requires the better part of a weekend. The reader will no doubt notice my occasional reliance on internet sources, some of them extremely informal, in the next several sections. This move is necessitated both by the nature of the beast—sexual identity, to this point, has been constituted and theorized primarily in online venues—and the continued dearth of refereed scholarship on asexuality. In the remainder of this section, I will provide a brief overview of the definitions and internal classifications that have developed within the asexual community, then survey academic attempts to define and classify asexuality, finally harmonizing the concerns at stake within both sets of definitional models into my preferred definition of asexuality as the non-experience of sexual attraction, which I will deploy in later chapters to examine asexual erasure and the eronormativity, as I will call it, that underlies this erasure.

One of the chief dangers of coming out as asexual—in the dismayingly recent past—was that some well-meaning acquaintance whose last encounter with the word was

in a high school biology textbook would assume that it meant you could lop off an arm and grow another you. If this sounds preposterous, it means at least that the campaign for greater asexual visibility is making progress. But even assuming the best case scenario, so far as asexual visibility and education go, defining asexuality is no simple task. Asexuality remains a disputed and often misunderstood term, still freighted with pejorative connotations and now also freighted, for asexual-identified people, with the task of uniting under a single sign a panoply of attitudes, positions, desires, non-desires, preferences, inclinations, disinclinations, and indifferences toward sex, intimacy, romantic love, and human relationships generally. Rather than laboriously attempting to disambiguate this diversity or delineate an essentialist asexual subject, my own working definition of asexuality is capable of designating such a subject but is also able to stand free of it.

This definition entails, first, a subtle but significant grammatical shift from the best-known definition of asexuality today, the one given on the front page of AVEN, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, which is the primary online hub for information on asexuality and the asexual community. According to AVEN, an asexual is “a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” Asexuals, however, generally distinguish between sexual and other forms of attraction, which some asexuals experience and others do not. Of these, the most taxonomically significant is the concept of romantic attraction, which describes the desire to form romantic relationships or engage in nonsexual physical intimacy with persons of a particular gender or genders. Thus asexuals typically subdivide according to their romantic orientation: there are heteroromantic, homoromantic, biromantic, panromantic, and aromantic asexuals. These

latter do not experience romantic attraction to anyone; the others may experience romantic attraction to the opposite sex, the same sex, both sexes, or experience romantic attraction without respect to sex or gender. In addition, asexuals espouse a wide range of attitudes toward sexual activity and their willingness (or not) to engage in it for reasons not stemming from sexual attraction—for instance, out of curiosity, to please a partner, to fit in, to conceive children, etc.⁴

The consensus and clarity implied by AVEN’s definition belies the latent diversity of the asexual community and the competing definitions and multi-type classifications elucidated on the AVENwiki,⁵ which have served as the subject of voluminous debate on the forums.⁶ The one alternate definition that enjoys widespread popular usage in the asexual community is the collective identity model, developed by AVEN founder David Jay, in which an asexual is one who “disidentifies with sexuality” and identifies instead as asexual (*AVENwiki*).⁷ This model allows for more flexible

⁴ Such explanations are common in the asexual community and also emerge in studies of asexuals by Lori Brotto and by Nicole Prause and Cynthia Graham (“Mixed Methods” 614; Prause and Graham 345).

⁵ Several scholars have called for greater attention to the considerable heterogeneity of the asexual population, for instance Chasin and Brotto.

⁶ Two such models are more descriptive, but correspondingly more cumbersome. One is the ABCD model, which produces four classifications of asexuals according to the individual’s experience—or not—of sexual attraction and sex drive (*AVENwiki*). Another multi-type model distinguishes between primary and secondary sexual attraction and primary and secondary sexual desire and creates the classification “demisexual” for those who lack primary but not secondary sexual attraction (i.e. “[a] sexual attraction that develops over time based on a person’s relationship and emotional connection with another person”) (*AVENwiki*). Several less technical and less popular definitions exist as well. “Non-libidoism” refers to asexuals who experience neither sexual attraction nor sex drive (*AVENwiki*). The “not interested” model of asexuality refers simply to the vernacular explanation asexuals often give to others of their asexuality as “not being interested in sex” (*AVENwiki*).

⁷ By way of illustration, this model contrasts the condition of “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” first “in an environment where they are free to talk about desire and pleasure, pursue relationships, and go about their lives without their lack of sexuality ever becoming an issue,” and then in one “where they are reminded of their lack of sexuality constantly,” where “things like intimacy and attraction are entangled in a set of sexual ideas which have nothing to do with the person’s life”

application than the more essentialist official definition and the less popular multi-type models (where asexuality stably defines a subject as more or less born-this-way) and also acknowledges the social constructedness of sexuality.⁸

Disidentification proves to be useful for theorizing asexuality, as well as providing a more flexible, if less precise, definition thereof. The primary shortcoming of the collective identity model is that it leaves vague what practices would comprise such a disidentification, which could just as easily characterize celibacy as asexuality. While many asexual people are celibate (and perhaps vice versa), eliding this distinction not only elides asexual identity but also the challenge that not experiencing sexual attraction (not merely choosing not to act upon it) poses to our received ways of thinking about desire, subject formation, and narrative. Nevertheless, incorporating the concept of disidentification into asexual identity is a useful theoretical move on Jay's part.

Although Jay does not make explicit his working definition of “disidentification,” Judith Butler's analysis of the relation between political signifiers and identity—following on her critique in *Bodies That Matter* of Slavoj Žižek's theory of political identity—is applicable in describing the relation that disidentification establishes between asexuality and sexuality. For Butler, disidentification results from the subject's disappointment in the signifier's failure to produce a unity of signification and signified.

(*AVENwiki*). The first environment obviates the need for asexual identity, as there would be nothing in it to cause the individual to feel at all out of step with prevailing social norms. The second environment, however—the one in which we live—is capable of producing feelings of alienation and bewilderment that could lead the individual to identify as—and thus to be—asexual. Asexual identity, in short, is a matter of mutual contrast: it only becomes visible against the backdrop of a sexual culture.

⁸ Andrew Hinderliter attempts to circumvent the circularity of the collective identity model with the “dual-definitional model,” which maps an individual's identification with the AVEN definition or the collective identity model on two different axes (like Storms's model of sexuality, discussed below), as some asexuals may identify with one but not the other (*AVENwiki*).

Political signifiers, then—identity categories such as “asexual,” for our purposes here—are useful in creating new subjects through the commitments of identification and disidentification that they elicit, not in describing fully and accurately those subjects who take them up (*Bodies* 158). Disidentification is an “experience of *misrecognition*,” but nevertheless, “it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference” (166; emphasis in orig.). That is, to disidentify with sexuality is to recognize that one unavoidably stands in relation to it, even if that relation is a discordant one of *méconnaissance*. However, this relation may also be an opportunity for asexuals to provoke critical dialogue, for it asks us to recognize

that asexuality as we know it is a direct result of culturally dominant ideas about sex which are incompatible with our lifestyle. By growing as a community and becoming visible in the public sphere asexual people will challenge those ideas, changing what it means to be sexual and what it means to be asexual. (*AVENwiki*)

The problems of locating asexuality relative to sexuality are just the sorts of problems that the asexual subject works on through the process of disidentification.⁹ This is likewise one of the reasons why it is so important to raise the question of asexuality in queer theory: it provides a vantage point from which to interrogate the construction of sexuality.

However, a markedly different set of definitional challenges dogs scholarly discussions of asexuality (rather than the self-identifications of asexuals themselves). To some degree, these are the same challenges that one encounters in scholarship on

⁹ Ela Przybylo also conceptualizes the asexual subject as functioning as a pocket of resistance within *sexusociety*—Przybylo’s preferred term for the “sexual world,” which better connotes its dispersal and internalization as Foucauldian power—rather than standing outside it (455).

bisexuality. Like bisexuals, asexuals have long been subjected to erasure in models of sexuality founded on the familiar binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, a point that Amanda Udis-Kessler recognizes, albeit in passing, in an essay more concerned with bisexual erasure (52). The mapping of sexual orientation on a one-dimensional continuum of attraction to the same sex and the opposite sex (as on the Kinsey scale), where a bisexual would be a person who falls roughly in the middle of the continuum, is problematic, Udis-Kessler argues. This individual, according to the logic of the Kinsey scale, would be half homosexual and half heterosexual (and therefore not *wholly* anything) (51–52). A related shortcoming of the Kinsey scale is that it gives us no way to differentiate between a bisexual, who may experience sexual attraction to either sex, and an asexual, who experiences sexual attraction to neither sex (52). This ambiguity has made it difficult to understand bisexuality with any precision using Kinsey’s model and has correspondingly made it quite easy to avoid bringing up even the possibility of asexuality, which this model represents as unrepresentable, as an incommensurable x off to the side.¹⁰ Udis-Kessler therefore favors a bidimensional model of sexual orientation

¹⁰ Kinsey is curiously, conspicuously reticent on the subject of his x . It appears in a series of graphs in the section on the heterosexual-homosexual balance in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, where Kinsey uses a continuum with values from 0 to 6 to rate the prevalence of heterosexual and homosexual attraction and behavior, which he finds are mixed more often than they are mutually exclusive. He furnishes at least a paragraph explaining the behaviors of individuals classed under each of the seven numerical values, with the proviso in the legend to each table and graph, “For an explanation of the meanings of the ratings X, 0, 1, etc., see the accompanying text” (640)—yet the accompanying text makes no acknowledgment that the rating X even exists. The legend to the graph that opens the following section—on bisexuality—finally explains that “[p]ercent shown as ‘X’ have no socio-sexual contacts or reactions” (656), but the main text still proceeds without any further discussion of this category.

Considerations of space prohibit me from speculating further as to why Kinsey refuses to acknowledge that his seven-point scale is in fact an eight-point scale, whether the X poses a conceptual threat to his schema that he attempts to suppress or merely because he considers its implications socially irrelevant: did he think the reader wouldn’t notice, or simply that the reader wouldn’t care? In Chapter 1, however, I will devote considerable attention to such silences and suppressions as they appear in Freud’s theories. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that the fact that the X has no place within the numerical

developed by psychologist Michael D. Storms in 1980—the first, to the best of my knowledge, to incorporate asexuality.

Storms’s model illustrates four distinct categories of sexual orientation by graphing levels of homoeroticism and heteroeroticism on separate axes, thus allowing one to differentiate between bisexuals and asexuals (790; see fig. 1).

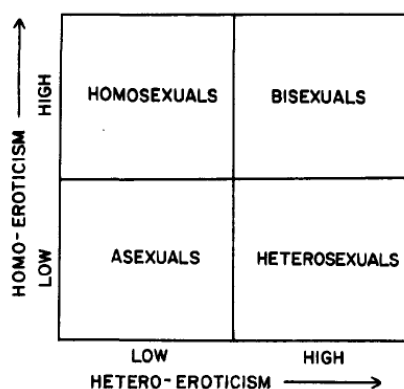


Fig. 1. Storm’s two-dimensional model of sexual orientation from Michael D. Storms, “Theories of Sexual Orientation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38.5 (1980): 783–92, 784.

Storms’s model unfortunately failed to provoke widespread inquiry into the question of asexuality, about which little or nothing was published for nearly a quarter of a century thereafter. Some of this academic silence might be explained by a noticeable defect of both Storms’s and Kinsey’s models, that is, their reinforcement of a gender binary that queer studies has since gone to considerable lengths to problematize and one upon which more recent scholarship on asexuality has generally avoided relying.

My definition of asexuality is a near relation not only to the AVEN definition but to the definitions formulated by psychologist Anthony Bogaert, the most prominent

sequence 0 to 6 except as a destabilizing supplement is at the very least a sort of fable of the incompatibility of the asexual possibility with linear organizations of time, causality, and narrative.

representative of the new academic interest in asexuality,¹¹ an interest which has no doubt been sparked at least in part by the growth of the asexual internet community and the mainstream media's interest in this community.¹² Bogaert defines asexuality in his initial article on the topic as “the state of having no sexual attraction for either sex” and in a second article as “a lack of any sexual attraction” (“Prevalence” 279; “Conceptual” 243).¹³ Here he drops the qualification “to either sex” of his initial definition, which reinforced an oversimplistic gender binary.¹⁴ His purpose in substituting this truncated definition is to exclude consideration of extreme paraphilias, but it remains functionally the same as its predecessor when Bogaert then adopts a definition of sexual attraction as pertaining “*only* to the sex or gender of one's preferred partners” (244; emphasis in orig.).¹⁵ That is, he defines asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction to any sexed or gendered being—but as he points out, of course, the incidence of paraphilias without the

¹¹ Since discovering from a national probability sample of British residents that approximately 1% of the respondents claimed that they had “never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” (“Prevalence” 281; 282), Bogaert has published several articles and a book on asexuality. In this first article, he seeks characteristics within the data from that national probability simple that may be predictors if not causes of asexuality (for instance, religiosity, lower socioeconomic status, shorter stature, etc.).

¹² AVEN members made a flurry of TV appearances concentrated in the mid-2000s, including spots on *The Montel Williams Show*, *CNN Showbiz Tonight*, ABC's *The View*, *Fox News Dayside*, *The Situation with Tucker Carlson*, and *20/20*. Video clips of these appearances are available under the “Media & Press” tab on AVEN's main page. Angela Tucker's 2011 documentary (*A*)*sexual* provides a comprehensive and largely sympathetic portrayal of asexuals. However, it is noticeably prone to the “Polar Bear Club” approach and focuses perhaps disproportionately on the experiences of AVEN founder David Jay.

¹³ This is the definition to which he adheres most strongly in his recent book, *Understanding Asexuality*, although he emphasizes its status as a “working definition and open to change,” since “it is also reasonable to be sensitive to different definitions of asexuality... and self-definitions” and academic research on asexuality is still in its earliest stages (24).

¹⁴ In general, he strikes a more decisive tone in this essay than in the first, seeking to clarify asexuality's definition and argue for its coherence as a sexual orientation rather than a pathology.

¹⁵ Sociologist Mark Carrigan also faults Bogaert for the slipperiness of his definitions, although the primary defect he sees in Bogaert's work is his inattention to the factors that contribute to and result from the assumption of asexual identity (“More” 463).

involvement of a human partner (for instance, sexual attraction to objects¹⁶) is so rare as to be statistically negligible.

Bogaert's definitions of asexuality as "the state of having no sexual attraction for either sex" or "a lack of any sexual attraction" succeed, unlike AVEN's definition, in defining asexuality apart from asexual persons. Each one likewise corrects the other's defects. The second eliminates the gender binary presupposed by the first, while the first describes asexuality without resorting to the word "lack," which rhetorically figures asexuality as a sort of deficiency. "The state of having no sexual attraction," however, implies a passivity and a stability that are not amenable to the kind of analysis for which I require asexuality as a term. The phrase is reminiscent of the same kind of essentialism that routes AVEN's definition of asexuality through the asexual subject. Instead, I favor "non-experience" as the most neutral alternative possible to the pejorative connotations of "lack,"¹⁷ although to define asexuality in some fashion by a negative seems

¹⁶ Asexual blogger Ily, of *Asexy Beast*, has called attention at points to "objectum sexuality," or object sexuality, and its possible affinities with asexuality. Objectum sexuals are admittedly a very small group, who include a woman who married the Eiffel Tower and another who married the Berlin Wall (Ily).

¹⁷ If we read asexuality as a "lack of any sexual attraction," as Bogaert eventually does, what are the ontological implications of such a lack? Is sexual attraction a necessary component of human experience that asexuals are *missing*, or is it something super-added to it for allosexuals (i.e. people who experience sexual attraction to others)? In the first case, it takes dismayingly few steps to pathologize asexuality as a disability of sorts. This sort of pathologization is implicit in the *DSM-IV*'s definition of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), which several AVEN members and allies attempted to revise or remove from the *DSM-V* (reminiscent of the depathologization of homosexuality in the 1970s). In the second case, value judgments are likewise almost unavoidable: from one perspective, allosexuals have the privilege of getting something "extra," and from another, they need that something extra simply to keep up with asexuals, who were already ontologically whole. If we are to leave the proposition intact that sexual attraction is intrinsic to sexuality—a question I do not aim to decide here—one positive alternative may be to think less of attraction and nonattraction in terms of presence and absence and more in terms of lateral difference. Such a model might also facilitate greater attention to changing degrees and changing configurations of attraction and desire not just across groups of people, but within individuals over time. The structure of our language and our affinity for binary oppositions, however, do not make this alternative appear a likely or an imminent possibility.

unavoidable.¹⁸ This inevitable negative positioning helps to explain the threat that the asexual possibility poses to the metaphysics of presence, as I explain below.

Asexuality and the Metaphysics of Presence

Defined by negativity and absence, asexuality functions much like the Derridean trace: the difference, the absence, the radical other preceding any articulation of a presence. It haunts the discourse of sexuality, and indeed, of the modern subject.¹⁹ The trace emerges, in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, as a sort of negative space that makes presence thinkable as such. For Derrida, the efforts of metaphysics to get rid of the trace in pursuit of full presence are the root of all dualisms. The supposedly universal presence of sexuality that queer theory and sexuality studies take for granted must derive its meaning first from its absence, its other. Though the reverse is more obviously true, sexuality's coherence as such depends on asexuality. This interdependence has so far gone unacknowledged. We are accustomed to perceiving sexual orientation as an opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality with bisexuality (and more recently queer sexuality) troubling that opposition in some way. The difficulty, though,

¹⁸ Przybylo considers this sort of definition of asexuality a shortcoming of its current conceptualization, arguing that asexuals focus too much on absence and on visibility and not enough on the substantive changes they might work in the way we understand sexuality—primarily by revaluing acts of non-sexual intimacy and a wider variety of relational configurations (456).

¹⁹ Derrida explains that the play of absence is only thinkable as the outside, the container that presence requires in order to have meaning (50). The trace, accordingly, is unthinkable as presence and “is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the paths that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (61). But instituting trace itself as origin relies just as much on an ideal of transcendentalism as putting a presence there. The trace's introduction of otherness into presence enables difference, which in turn enables the instantiation of form and meaning—but not any particular difference, for “[t]he (pure) trace is difference. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it *does not exist*, although it is never a *being-present* outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign...” (62–63; emphasis in orig.). That is, it isn't wholly accurate to equate asexuality with the trace; rather, the logic of asexuality, being the logic of absence, is the logic of the trace.

for any account of asexuality, is the too-easy assumption that everyone is sexually attracted to *someone*. This is one of the chief problems with the current discourse about sexuality in literary and cultural studies, and a problem that depends largely upon our organizing sexuality along one particular axis. Early in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lists a number of preferences by which we might classify sexual orientation other than the gender of one's object choice, several of which implicitly leave open the possibility of asexuality (for instance, that "[s]ome people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, *others little*" and that "[s]ome people like to have a lot of sex, *others little or none*" [*Closet* 25; emphasis added]). However—illustrating Sedgwick's point—these possibilities have yet to attract much attention.

Instead, asexuality faces conceptual resistance from the "sexual assumption," which Mark Carrigan defines as "the usually unexamined presupposition that sexual attraction is both universal (everyone 'has it') and uniform (it's fundamentally the same thing in all instances) such that its absence must be explicable in terms of a distinguishable pathology" ("Assumption").²⁰ In Carrigan's analysis, the sexual assumption owes its ideological tenacity in large part to its long history of uncontested experiential plausibility. Only with the emergence of the asexual community has the sexual assumption's explanatory dominance been challenged. As a result, "given the centrality of the sexual assumption to our prevailing ways of understand[ing] sexuality, being confronted with asexuality immediate[ly] invites *explanation*" ("Why"; emphasis

²⁰ Carrigan has developed his concept of the sexual assumption considerably in his blog since his first published use of the term in his study of self-identified asexuals' arrival at their understanding of asexual identity. Here, he observes that the "sexual assumption," which sees sex as a culmination of and perquisite for human flourishing, was encountered by a majority of participants. This ubiquitous affirmation of sex, its perceived normalcy and centrality to a healthy life, can preclude self-acceptance as a culturally available option for asexuals because of the concomitant repudiation of asexuality as pathological" ("More" 474).

in orig).²¹ However, as we look to Derrida, we find that there is more than simply force of habit behind the defense of the sexual assumption.

Organized by the dualisms instituted by its suppression of the trace, metaphysics excludes non-presence by constructing it as exterior and thus by treating it as supplement (Derrida 167). This mechanism positions asexuality as supplement as well as putting it in the place of the trace. However, the trace is, in fact, neither presence nor absence, which renders impossible the dream of getting rid of the trace in order to posit an origin:

“Originary differance is supplementarity as *structure*. Here structure means the irreducible complexity within which one can only shape or shift the play of presence or absence: that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think” (Derrida 167; emphasis in orig.). Asexuality, then, is not the trace (nor is writing, in Derrida’s text). Such signifiers are what we make stand in for the trace (167). Even as such a stand-in, though, asexuality functions as a menacing constitutive outside to binary thinking.

The boundaries of metaphysics have been drawn so as to exclude the supplement, to treat it as additive and unnecessary—otherwise, if it *needed* to be added, it would prove that some lack existed within presence that needed to be filled and thus that presence was not in fact wholly presence. That is, the supplement must be figured as

²¹ Several such explanations are possible at that point: one might

drop the ideational commitment [to the sexual assumption] but, given that its usually tacit, few people... can do this immediately—though many, it seems, do so once they’ve reflected upon it. Instead the usual response is to evade the logical conflict by *explaining away* asexuality: its [*sic*] a hormone deficiency, the person was sexually abused, they’re lying, they’re gay but repressed, they’ve just not met the right person yet (etc). (“Why”; emphasis in orig.)

These various modes of explaining away—which predate asexual identity considerably—are a major focus of Chapter 1.

nothing, because *nothing* needs to be added to a plenitude, and if what's added is more than nothing, the plenitude was never really a plenitude. Therefore, metaphysics must reduce the supplement to absence (167). Derrida implies, although he does not state outright, that the metaphysics of presence treats the trace as supplement in order to deny or erase it and preserve the myth of an originary full presence. For our purposes here, this means that the modern sexual subject is a plenitude from which asexuality must be excluded. Modern subjectivity can function as a closed system that is logically consistent and that is ultimately explicable sexually—particularly in light of the dominance for the past century of a Freudian paradigm—only if asexuality is not allowed to disrupt it. Allowing asexuality into that system untethers knowledge and subjectivity from their sexual grounding, which can then no longer be absolute.²² Because our construction of subjectivity cannot then accommodate it, asexuality, as absence, must remain exterior and must be erased.

While asexuality may, by some accounts, qualify as queer by existing beyond the pale of heteronormativity, it is subject to erasure even in this space by a discourse that must maintain the integrity of the sexual assumption, which, given the terms in which we construct sexual orientation and sexuality generally, is an all-or-nothing proposition. Heteronormativity always masks the root cause of asexual erasure: a more deeply rooted, more widespread *eronormativity* expressed most emblematically in the sexual assumption. The terms “sex-normativity” and “sexual-normativity” have gained some traction in asexual discourse, but my own coinage boasts at least two advantages: first, it

²² Przybylo explains the resistance that the asexual subject poses to sexusociety thus: “While such resistance may seem local, it may have political effects because it creates a rupture in a system that wishes itself to be flawless, exposing through this difference of repetition [of the “language, deeds, desires, and thoughts” that comprise sexusociety (447)] the contingency of the entire sexusocial project” (456).

situates eronormativity as always already present in (het)eronormativity—although I will concede that the two are seldom seen apart—and second, a great deal more than sex underlies the pattern of asexual erasure that I am tracing, for the asexual possibility threatens far more structures of modern thought than just the sexual assumption. In particular, “eronormativity,” more so than “sex-normativity,” captures the teleological valence of Freudian Eros, which I discuss in Chapter 1.

Having defined asexuality and outlined some of the metaphysical bases of asexual erasure, I now turn to an analysis of the asexual movement’s reaction against such erasure and how both the logic of asexuality and that of erasure render this reaction problematic.

Identity Without the Politics?

I have never felt comfortable referring to “the asexual movement” except with a sort of imaginary asterisk, ever conscious that something in the term, in the idea, just doesn’t fit. Movements move (and so, according to conventional wisdom, does narrative), and it is generally incumbent upon them—and upon narrative—to move in articulable, purposeful directions. And while the asexual movement seems to have taken lessons in identity politics from other, better-established minorities and learned all the right moves, as it were, the two biggest problems with asexual identity are—and will remain—identity and asexuality.

Identity politics in general has long been the subject of critique, often subverting its supposed aims by its own logic. And this same logic of identity formation proves to be incommensurable with the logic of asexuality. Identity politics depends upon and reacts against shared narratives of oppression, precisely the sort of narrative that asexuals lack.

This point will be my primary focus in this section, but first a word on the curious character of asexual identity in particular and the already acknowledged internal contradictions of identity in general.

Asexual identity is a strikingly recent and almost exclusively online phenomenon,²³ and the present, popular definition of asexuality (as characterizing “a person who does not experience sexual attraction”) is in large part an accident of superior web design. Asexual blogger and linguist Andrew Hinderliter traces this definition’s rise to prominence from among the definitions generated in the asexual movement’s infancy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, concentrated in the asexual community on LiveJournal, the erstwhile Haven for the Human Amoeba, and eventually AVEN. He attributes AVEN’s success to the ease of communication it facilitates among members and its prominence in web search results on asexuality. The definition that AVEN promotes takes on an air of authority from its brevity, its placement on the site’s main page, and the very anonymity of the static content adumbrating it (7). By Hinderliter’s account, these elements become ascribable not to particular individuals but to AVEN as an official entity—to a considerable extent, perhaps, *constituting* AVEN as an official entity. This official discourse then interpellates the asexual or questioning individual—if successfully, producing identification with the AVEN definition, and through shared

²³ Here I refer quite specifically to asexual *identity*, to the rather specific historical moment at the turn of the twenty-first century when people began to look to asexuality on a large scale as a meaningful explanation of the sort of people they were and the group of persons to which they felt they belonged, although one can find earlier, scattered references to asexuality in a number of older works to denote a non-experience of sexual attraction without this identificatory pull. For instance, Esther D. Rothblum and Kathleen A. Brehony’s *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians* (1993) focuses on asexual *relationships* between lesbians, with no consideration of asexuality as a sexual orientation in itself: the book has a great deal more to do with lesbian identity.

identification, community.²⁴ The AVEN definition's prominent placement and its projection of authority contribute to what Hinderliter calls "definitional inertia," which has grown progressively stronger as the AVEN definition has gone on encouraging identification among asexuals and as its stability has facilitated greater popular exposure for AVEN and the asexual community: "In a sense, the asexual community did not create the definition; the definition created the community" (7). This apparent instance of the tail wagging the dog highlights the circularity of asexuality as an identity category, with no more clearly articulated goals than visibility and education—that is, to be blunt, the propagation of the identity category itself.²⁵

However, even before we begin examining the unique contradictions put into play by asexual identity, there is a more basic set of contradictions at work within the concept of identity itself. Identity, first, is as much about the other as it is about the self. It is made up of and produced by identification, which also destabilizes it—identification being "a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable" (Fuss 2; emphasis in orig.). That is,

²⁴ Sociologist Kristin S. Scherrer also credits such an essentialist model of asexuality with serving a validating, legitimizing function for asexuals ("Identity" 629).

²⁵ This tautology is hardly unique to asexuals, as I will point out in my reading of Judith Roof below, but it is noteworthy for being so unabashedly the lynchpin of the asexual agenda. In Przybylo's view, the resistance that asexuality might pose to sexusociety is compromised by its "obsessively declarative stance, its reliance on the surprise effect of these declarations, as on its complete 'neverness' and especially its solely reactive approach" (455). I realize that my own deployment of asexuality in this dissertation is guilty as charged on several of these counts, at least those of surprise, "neverness," and reactivity. However, where I discuss asexual identity at all, it is more in the context of "is" than "ought," and so I focus more on analyzing the effects of the way asexuality *has* been conceptualized than those in which it might be. I also use the ramifications of such a reactive, absence-dominated model of asexuality for the structures of narrative, knowledge, subjectivity, etc. to explain why asexuality has been so seldom conceptualized and why it is so often bracketed as impossible: that is, to examine the conditions that contribute to asexuality's framing in the terms that Przybylo critiques.

because identification produces this infinitesimal difference in the self, to identify *as* is categorically not to *be*, which introduces a contradiction into essentialist claims of identity from the start.²⁶

Beyond this othering within the self, identification is also the subject's point of contact with alterity and the outside world, as Diana Fuss explains, "the entry of history and culture into the subject" (3). But this interface of self and other operates much like the logic of the trace.²⁷ As Judith Roof points out, identities anchor those who adopt them as the "others" constitutively necessary to the oppressive binaries and systems of power against which they define themselves. In addition, identities downplay the inevitable overlap and intersection of identity categories: difference has to be flattened out in order to preserve the sameness and coherence of the category ("Thinking" 1–2).

These contradictions make identity politics problematic in and of themselves, but an asexual identity politics more problematic still. Asexual-identified people have constituted themselves as a sexual minority only within the last ten or fifteen years—well after the critiques of identity cited above became theoretical commonplaces. Furthermore, they have constituted themselves thus by a very different historical path than the ones

²⁶ Similar to the inevitable non-coincidence of identification and identity is the contradiction that passing introduces into identity, according to Pamela Caughie. Caughie observes that the postmodern deconstruction of the self is on a collision course with identity-based studies, where "it is so easy to forget in practice what we so often advocate in theory: namely, that all subjectivity is passing, even the subject position of the teacher-scholar who is engaged in the deconstruction of identity" (*Passing* 2). Caughie argues for a more rigorous distinction between "passing as," which presumes a true and stable identity beneath a feigned one, and passing, "a practice in which an original model or presence can be neither presumed nor assumed" (25).

²⁷ Judith Butler too reminds us that political signifiers are necessarily defined by what they exclude, but that in treating this space of exclusion merely as monolithically, undifferentiatedly constitutive, we risk merely reinforcing the normativity we seek to challenge (*Bodies* 141). Wendy Brown takes a slightly different angle on the necessity of exclusion in producing identity, in which "politicized identities generated out of liberal, disciplinary societies, insofar as they are premised on exclusion from a universal ideal, require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence as identities" (65).

taken by more widely recognized minorities with more obvious or more coherent political aims. The primary reason for this difference is that asexual identity politics has taken shape not in response to a history of oppression, but to one of erasure.

It is on the difference between these two phenomena that the validity of asexual identity politics, as well as the inclusion or exclusion of asexuals from LGBTQ groups, appears to hinge. Granted, some prominent critics, like Lee Edelman, conceive the category of queerness—under which such identities are often grouped—as radically incompatible with both identity and politics and certainly with identity politics. Queerness’s value resides instead in its necessary disruption of identity and its opposition to the politics of “reproductive futurism” (*Future 2*), a function that Edelman attributes to its figuration of the death drive, not its functioning as an identity itself (17). Rather than positing a different political future than the one endorsed by a heteronormative culture, Edelman argues, queerness opposes futurity itself, persisting in an unequivocal negation and refusal of any social determination of value (4). He suggests that

[b]y choosing to *accept* that position [the structural position of queerness], however, by assuming the “truth” of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well, we might undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification (the politics aimed at closing the gap opened up by the signifier itself), which can only return us, by way of the Child, to the politics of reproduction. (27)

Our culture’s politics, Edelman argues, can only lead back to reproductive futurism, and the queer negativity for which he argues entails a refusal of both.

Although Edelman’s argument is useful to me because his formulation of queerness as a site of unequivocal disruptiveness and negativity also describes the

asexual possibility's opposition to teleologically organized narrative structure, Mark Norris Lance and Alessandra Tanesini provide more immediate help in clarifying the difference between oppression and erasure. Lance and Tanesini, writing about queer identities that remain within the realm of the conventionally political, make clear that identity claims are normative, not descriptive. Identity claims encourage certain behaviors, commitments, associations, and efforts to establish coherence between competing claims (174). Oppression occurs, in this view, when society does not facilitate the carrying out of these commitments. Lance and Tanesini argue that not all identity claims are valid—that “straight,” or other positions that endorse the status quo, is not an identity—because the validity of identity claims is determined by whether “genuine political and moral goods are endorsed by making these claims” (179). That is, identity must seek to *do* something.

Whether asexual identity is valid according to such criteria is a vexed question. There is no consensus within the LGBTQ community as to whether to include asexuals. Some welcome asexuals as queer, as the commitments of asexual identity place asexuals at odds with heteronormative values and life schedules (and thus life narratives). Others deeply resent what they see as asexual privilege, as our society tacitly approves of—or at any rate, doesn't impede—asexuals' sexual practices, which it reads, generally, as celibacy.²⁸ Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, seeking to clarify or at least to open the question of asexuality's relationship to feminist and queer studies, note the ways in which asexuality and asexual practices have frequently been taken up as a pawn in

²⁸ A vivid example of such resentment is the *Privilege Denying Asexuals* blog on tumblr, which argues vociferously that demisexuals and heteroromantic asexuals are not queer, are not oppressed, and that “sexual privilege” does not exist.

internal debates in these fields and politicized in ways never intended by asexuals themselves—for instance, in Leo Bersani’s and Michael Warner’s attempts to negotiate the boundaries of queerness and its relationship to sex and to the gay and lesbian movement (660).²⁹ The question that Cerankowski and Milks finally raise, but make no pretense of answering, is this:

How might asexuality fit into a community where sexual culture is at the center? Paradoxical as it may seem, is it possible that not desiring sex can be part of that radical sexual culture? In short, does the asexual person threaten to remove sex from politics all over again, or does she or he challenge the ways we think about sex and desire even within queer communities? (661)

The problem with the debate over asexuals’ right to claim membership in such communities in the first place, however, is that the question “Are asexuals oppressed?” inevitably becomes “Are asexuals oppressed *enough*?” I will take up the consequences of this shift momentarily, but in the meantime, the question of asexual oppression deserves some attention.

The single greatest difference between the LGBTQ community as we know it and the asexual community is that between oppression and erasure. Asexuals can’t do identity politics because, by and large, asexuals aren’t oppressed. The asexual community has

²⁹ Cerankowski and Milks detail these attempts briefly, citing Bersani’s fear that the wide applicability of the term “‘queer’ desexualizes the gay and lesbian movement” and his corresponding call to “define how the sexual specificity of being queer (a specificity perhaps common to the myriad ways of being queer and the myriad conditions in which one is queer) gives queers a special aptitude for making that challenge [that Warner argues queer sexuality can pose to social institutions]” (660; Bersani 72–73). In Cerankowski and Milks’s opinion, Bersani’s acknowledgment of “myriad ways of being queer” opens the possibility of including asexuality among them, and with it, asexuality’s capability of “bring[ing] a focus to the presence or absence of sexual desire as a way to queer the normative conceptions about how sex is practiced and how relationships are (or are not) formed around that practice” (660). Warner’s response to Bersani, in which he proposes “‘a frank embrace of queer sex in all its apparent indignity’ in an attempt to shift the politics of shame and to bring sexual specificity back into queer politics,” leaves far less space to incorporate asexuality into queer politics, and Cerankowski and Milks note that “by the end of his book [*The Trouble with Normal*], the asexual is almost posed as a threat to the sexualized queer movement that Warner imagines” (660).

instead mobilized in response to erasure, which is a narrative concept, while oppression is a political one.³⁰ Erasure is painful, it is unjust, but it is not oppression. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans-identified people have suffered at the hands of a heterosexist society in ways that asexuals simply have not. This does not mean that asexuals have not suffered, nor that they are unworthy of critical attention as a sexual minority, nor that they are not queer (at least by some accounts). It simply means, first, that they must have a proper understanding of the history of the other groups with which they claim an affinity and the challenges these groups face, and second, that in undertaking the academic study of asexuality—especially of asexual identity—we must be cognizant of the markedly different conditions under which asexuals came to be constituted as a sexual minority.

The disqualification of asexuals from oppression as we know it, however, is cause neither for celebration nor for dismissal. Instead, it points to a double bind in which asexuals remain trapped. Asexuals have not been oppressed because they have not yet been narrativized, or, at most, are only beginning to be: you can't oppress a group of people on the basis of a difference whose existence you don't recognize. Marilyn Frye makes the important point that oppression and suffering are not synonymous; the experiences of a person, perhaps even of a group of people, may be painful but still not amount to oppression as such. Rather, oppression is a very specific kind of suffering, constituted by a network of barriers of a very particular kind: "one has to see if [a barrier] is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people. One has to look at how the barrier or

³⁰ Such mobilization is in fact of a piece with Hinderliter's claim that "the definition created the community," as an embodiment of the cycle of erasure and visibility I discuss below.

force fits with others and to whose benefit or detriment it works” (10–11). Oppression is not aimless; there is something to be gained by it (by the oppressor) as well as something lost (by the group oppressed).

Importantly, oppression also targets one as a member of a particular group, not randomly as an individual, which requires that the oppressor “see that individual *as* belonging to a group of a certain sort” (8; emphasis in orig.). The requirement of such group recognition is arguably one of the chief reasons why asexuals aren’t (yet?) oppressed. It remains an open question whether the successful narrativization and making-visible of asexuality will then facilitate the oppression of asexuals, over which the asexual movement will eventually triumph upon adopting a more conventional identity politics (shall we sin more, that grace may abound?). By this logic, asexuals need to get themselves on the map so they can get oppressed so they can get liberated. The trajectory seems plausible if a bit absurd when couched in these terms, mapping an almost evolutionary narrative onto asexual identity: from erasure to oppression to identity politics to a redress of historical wrongs to a place at the table. My hope is that instead, the logic of asexuality itself may force a critical reexamination of such narratives—and of narrative as such—at the level of their very structure, a possibility that will occupy me more fully in Chapter 4.

Asexual identity politics, then, is a strange beast in no small part because asexuals seem mostly to be doing identity without the politics. Cerankowski and Milks note, for instance, that while radical feminists may charge a refusal to engage in sexual activity

with positive political significance,³¹ asexuals have conspicuously avoided doing so (656–57). The chief obstacle to such significance again turns out to be asexual identity itself, the essentializing AVEN definition that seeks to keep asexuality distinct from celibacy and repression: “AVEN’s ‘official’ formulation of asexuality as not a choice, but a biologically determined orientation (a definition that itself opens up the larger ongoing nature/nurture debate in studies of human sexuality) does not easily map on to a theory of asexuality as a chosen, feminist mode of resistance” (Cerankowski and Milks 658). This essentializing move is one of several ways in which the asexual community appears to be following a now-familiar script for establishing its identity as a minority and putting itself on the cultural diversity map. Another is its emphasis on visibility—which, as a near-exclusive focus, is at least somewhat anomalous. Most of the energies of the asexual movement to this point have been concentrated in its efforts to convince the world at large of its existence. This preliminary completed, it is patently unclear what comes next.

Visibility alone has long since been shown to be an inadequate and even counterproductive aim of identity politics. In Judith Roof’s analysis in *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*, visibility is tautological: gays and lesbians value visibility because narrative and identification are charged with the power to produce change, but as Roof points out, no one is very clear about how this change occurs (148–49). In the case of narrative, we have come to assume that “although narrative seems mainly to organize

³¹ Even writing in 1977—and squarely on the side of asexual women—Myra T. Johnson recognizes the appropriation of female asexuality as feminist political consciousness as a mixed blessing at best:

A consensus which praises women who do not have sex with men as politically conscious might alleviate the oppression of traditionally assigned female functions, but would probably create new oppressive functions. The woman who still wants to have sex with men might function as “scapegoat” and the woman who feels asexual or autosexual might function as a political symbol—her identity still lost in the slogans, and her reality going unnoticed. (104)

or recount past events, we increasingly perceive it as an available mode of real-life transformation—something always in progress in which we might participate” (148–49). Identification, in this case, is invested with the same power as narrative, and the logic of visibility in which we locate it “represents another version of the same heteroideological narrative; correct knowledge meets incorrect knowledge and produces a corrected knowledge in the form of visible social change” (149). This change, however, appears to come out of nowhere, dependent upon a sort of sleight of hand achieved by “another and more covert and oblique narrative of identification and empathy with the lesbian and gay personae who embody positive and visible lesbian or gay male identity. Visibility, thus, stands in the place of transformation itself” (149). Visibility, in and of itself, produces not social change but only more visibility.

Beyond the dead end or affirmation of the status quo represented by visibility for its own sake, the asexual movement’s only agenda—and the only arena in which it responds to a recognizable form of oppression—has been to work to de-pathologize asexuality and thereby undo a clinical prejudice that has prevailed since the development of psychoanalysis and sexology. This prejudice finds its most concentrated modern form in hypoactive sexual desire disorder, or HSDD, in which low sexual desire is classifiable as a disorder when it causes psychological distress and is not attributable to another disorder. A team that includes several AVEN members and allies has been working for several years to remove the disorder from the *DSM-V*, but with little success. In the proposed changes to the *DSM-V*, HSDD will remain as a diagnosis for men and disappear as a diagnosis for women, to be replaced by the disappointingly similar Sexual

Interest/Arousal Disorder in Women.³² Except in this one particular, however, asexuals have not historically been discriminated against and are not, so far as I am aware, in need of any legal protections *as* asexuals. The resistances and challenges that asexuals face are more cultural and discursive than legislative and, surprisingly, are masked in one prominent instance by an ostensibly liberatory agenda.

Based on a survey of self-identified asexuals' attitudes toward sexuality and romantic relationships, Kristin S. Scherrer suggests that it may be wise to reconsider the terms of the same-sex marriage debate in light of asexuality. While proponents of same-sex marriage have in mind the commendable aim of extending to same-sex couples the material and symbolic benefits that marriage confers, this extension preserves the status quo (while expanding membership in it) and continues to exclude a number of sexual minorities—sexuals among them—whose most meaningful relationships may not be monogamous, dyadic, implicitly sexual partnerships (“Discussion” 59). Such relationships thus continue to be denied social sanction. Whatever expansion of marriage rights might conceivably be needed to do justice to asexuals, Scherrer’s findings suggest that to continue the discussion in terms of marriage rights at all may be to miss the point.³³ Perhaps for this reason, the asexual community has said notably little about

³² The proposed diagnostic criteria for Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder in Women are “lack of sexual interest/arousal of at least 6 months duration” as demonstrated by at least three of six possible symptoms, “significant distress or impairment,” and the absence of any explanation for this lack of interest/arousal in other disorders, medical conditions, or substances (APA). The diagnostic criteria for Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder in Men are functionally identical, except that they replace the three-of-six-possible-symptoms criterion with the more succinct but less flexible “persistently or recurrently deficient (or absent) sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity.” In short, after a brief terminological game of musical chairs, nothing has actually changed.

³³ Scherrer’s argument also echoes Michael Warner’s concern in *The Trouble with Normal* that the legalization of gay marriage, while liberatory for some, may be still more oppressive for others. Gay marriage threatens to redraw the boundaries of and conditions for gay and lesbian belonging and acceptance: if gays and lesbians are allowed to marry, it will become less acceptable for them—for

marriage. Otherwise, now that its campaign on clinical discourse has—for the time being—reached a rather disappointing dead end, the asexual community as a whole is left with the circular and rather vague project of visibility.

The digression above serves to illustrate, if nothing else, how far removed the interests of the asexual movement often seem to be from those of other sexual minorities and how closely yoked they perhaps ought to be instead, challenging the very terms of pressing and familiar political questions. Yet for visibility—rather than marriage rights or anything else—to be the almost exclusive aim of the asexual movement makes perfect sense if we take visibility to be the logical antidote to erasure.

The root causes of asexual erasure, however, suggest that it is not merely a simple problem with a simple solution—and suggest as well that the one thing needful was to notice that there *was* a problem, i.e. to invent asexual identity. First, erasure acts differently upon asexuals of different romantic orientations. The *Privilege Denying Asexuals* blog on tumblr, authored by a self-described “very angry queer person who is tired of... the idea that queer sexuals are somehow privileged over straight asexuals,” is a reaction against the belief that “sexual privilege” operates independently of straight privilege. What this blogger calls “asexual privilege” accrues chiefly to heteroromantic asexuals and demisexuals, while homoromantic and biromantic asexuals and demisexuals

anyone—not to marry (Warner 112–13). Such a threat ought to be especially troubling to aromantic asexuals, especially since so-called “marital privilege” is well-documented and very real. Such asexuals might be better served by making common cause with the singles rights movement, founded on the idea that “when singles receive less bountiful helpings of perks, benefits, or other good things in life, it is often because of practices that are discriminatory, illegitimate, and unfair. And if that’s true, then maybe the special privileges of married people are actually ill-gotten gains” (DePaulo 249). Such “singlism” manifests, for instance, in discriminatory housing practices that favor couples over singles, in wage disparity, in the U.S. tax code, in Social Security, in obstacles to military promotion, in more expensive health insurance, even in less attentive or less complete medical care (218).

are just as subject to homophobia as their sexual counterparts:³⁴ that is, privilege stems from the “hetero” in “heterosexual,” this blogger claims, not the “sexual.” Although the tone of *Privilege Denying Asexuals* is predominantly vitriolic, many of the points it makes are worth keeping in mind when distinguishing erasure from oppression and eronormativity from so-called sexual privilege. In both of these cases, the salient difference is that between narrative and politics.

While *Privilege Denying Asexuals* overstates its case by downplaying the very real influence of eronormativity in our society—even though it is usually most visible through the screen of (het)eronormativity—its author is right that heteroromantic asexuals do tend to pass as straight, a phenomenon that has received little to no attention within the asexual community so far—probably because asexuals are so few in number as it is that to construct divisive hierarchies of privilege based on romantic orientation would be counterproductive.³⁵ They pass as straight, however, because asexuals on the

³⁴ While this argument might at first glance seem a clear example of asexual oppression, it instead promotes the view that romantic orientation rather than sexual orientation is the more powerful determinant of privilege or oppression.

³⁵ Carrigan has noted a mostly harmonious balance of shared experience and internal difference within the asexual community, where

diversity [in romantic orientation, attitudes toward sex, etc.] stands in contrast to the common experiences and needs which bring people to the asexual community, as different individuals in different circumstances nevertheless share common core experiences as they confront socio-cultural contexts which affirm sex and repudiate asexuality. In fact these commonalities facilitate the aforementioned diversity, as similar experiences lead people to the online and offline forums where discussion and debate allows the asexual vocabulary to expand, thus articulating individual difference while simultaneously entrenching participation in the community. (“More” 476)

In this sense, then, the asexual community may model, to some extent, Butler’s disidentificatory ideal, in which the necessarily imperfect fit of the political signifier serves as the starting point, not the culmination, of subject formation.

whole cannot but pass as sexual.³⁶ This inevitable forced passing is the result of the erasure that I examine in depth in Chapter 1.

But if, as I've suggested, the internecine struggle of erasure and visibility never quite produces a political goal, we're left with the question of what, if anything, asexuals *do* want. This question of desire turns out to be largely constitutive of identity, particularly politicized identity. That asexual identity is the product of a very different sort of history than other minority identities—or rather, that it has emerged in spite of a conspicuous *lack* of history—is an important factor in its failure to meet the requirements of this model of identity. Asexuals have missed out on the historical preliminary of a clear-cut sense of past injury against which to position their present identity claims. Furthermore, asexuality has been systematically barred from recognition in ways that have blocked and repudiated its existence as identity category. Asexuality's characterization by the absence of a particular kind of desire, however, is probably the most telling obstacle to its coherence in an identity politics context.

According to Wendy Brown, who makes explicit the imbrication of politicized identity and desire in her critique of a model of identity politics that relies on *ressentiment* as a response to historical injury,³⁷ two of the founding conditions of politicized identity are desire and a narrative of suffering and exclusion, conditions that

³⁶ Chasin, for instance, remarks upon this phenomenon: “the unquestioned presumption of the *sexual norm*—of sexuality as the norm—dictates that asexual people will very frequently pass as sexual people in everyday lives [*sic*] whether they want to or not” (719; emphasis in orig.).

³⁷ As a response to injury, *ressentiment* “is a triple achievement: it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt)” (68). The problem with such an approach, for Brown, is that it offers no possibility of actually putting an end to hurt, only displacing it.

are difficult for asexual identity to meet. In the first case (that of desire), Brown reasons that

if the ostensibly oppositional character of identity politics also render them something of the “illegitimate offspring” of liberal, capitalist, disciplinary discourse, their absent fathers are not, as Donna Haraway suggests, “inessential” but are installed in the very structure of *desire* fueling identity-based political claims: the psyche of the bastard child is hardly independent of its family of origin. (62; emphasis in orig.)

Although Brown does not address asexuality, the model of identity politics she discusses is noteworthy for our purposes here for being grounded in a family romance stemming from a psychoanalytic paradigm that is structurally incompatible with asexuality, for it requires the presence of the desire for a sexual object from infancy as the most basic force in the development and maturation of the subject. So while asexuals might respond to invisibility, for instance, by locating a desire for recognition or belonging in the structure Brown describes, this structure does not permit their existence *as asexuals*, for psychoanalysis figures asexuality as impossible, as I explain in Chapter 1. Quite aside from the scarcity of concrete political desires that follow from asexual identity, then, the framing of identity politics in terms of a psychoanalytic model of desire forbids asexuality’s compatibility with such an identity politics.

While Brown identifies one type of desire, the desire for retribution, as identity’s problem, it is to a different type of desire that she turns for the solution to that problem. She ultimately seeks a reformulation, not an outright rejection, of politicized identity, organized around a desire separate from the desire for wounding or revenge, a recovery of “the memory of desire within identificatory processes, the movement in desire—either

‘to have’ or ‘to be’ prior to its wounding” (75).³⁸ Simply put, Brown seeks to shift the framing of identity-based claims from “I am” to “I want this for us” (75), and asexuals come up short at the point of identifying an object to want, either sexually *or* politically. To reimagine identity in terms more of desire than of identification is to bring the attendant contradictions of asexual identity to a crisis point. Asexuals can “be,” certainly—most of their energy has been concentrated in this effort to this point—but by not desiring, sexually or politically, they are excluded from consideration in models of identity like Brown’s.

It is not only desire that makes asexual identity problematic, but identification as well. In his expansion on Brown’s ideas, David L. Eng takes narratives of shared suffering as the ground of identity politics, then looks to Freud’s theory of melancholia as a resource for understanding the process by which such unresolved suffering comes to constitute identity (1275–76). Eng argues that because “the ego, in fact, is composed of abandoned object-cathexes preserved as identifications,” melancholia turns out to be constitutive of the ego, “which only then can claim the ‘proper’ work of mourning. In this respect, melancholia cannot be regarded as pathological. To the contrary, it must be thought of as entirely normative—as a constitutive psychic mechanism engendering subjectivity itself” (1277). But because the normative heterosexual male subject is “formed through an identification consolidated by the disavowal of loss,” the burden of melancholia is shifted onto minority subjects, whose identities are formed by the same

³⁸ Brown sees promise for such a reformulation in a model of politicized identity in which

[r]ather than opposing or seeking to transcend identity investments, the replacement—even the admixture—of the language of “being” with “wanting” would seek to exploit politically a recovery of the more expansive moments in the genealogy of identity formation, a recovery of the moment prior to its own foreclosure against its want, prior to the point at which its sovereign subjectivity is established through such foreclosure and through eternal repetition of its pain. (76)

mechanism of identification (1277–78). What determines this melancholia, however, is the social unacceptability of the object lost and identified with: “women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials are all coerced to relinquish and yet to identify with socially disparaged objects on their psychic paths to subjectivity” (1278). Insofar as it is the social unacceptability of these objects that stands in the way of recognition of the subject’s loss, Eng argues, melancholia is not merely individual but political (1279). The position of asexuals within this model is a complicated one, one that involves a lot of dancing around back and forth across the identification/desire line. And even if we regard asexual identification as possible within this framework, what objects *do* asexuals have to identify with in the face of a very long history of asexual erasure, in which asexuals have always been explained as or taken for something else?

The systematic exclusion of asexuality and its logic from psychoanalysis is one of the key problems I address in Chapter 1. In the remainder of this introduction, however, I discuss the importance of asexuality and the asexual possibility for the study of narrative theory and the novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Asexuality and Narrative

In the preceding sections, I have strayed rather far from the ostensibly literary focus of my project in order to situate asexuality relative to contemporary discourses on sexuality and identity. I have already noted at several points how this positioning touches on specifically narrative problems, but such problems run deeper than the contradictions of asexual identity alone suggest, and they likewise cannot be localized in asexual identity alone.

To return to my opening anecdote, the question I didn't ask the woman interviewing me, but which compelled me to recount the story here, is what constitutes a valid interest in asexuality? Who gets to write about it, and for what reasons? Are narratives of asexuals—perhaps of asexuality—best left to asexual-identified people, to academics, to casual ethnographers of the quirky? To ask the question at all is to betray a lingering commitment to asexual identity as a privileged site of asexual meaning—a commitment I recognize as deeply problematic but which I am unable to reject completely. Despite my deliberate focus on the asexual possibility rather than asexual persons in this dissertation, I nevertheless feel answerable, to some extent, to the asexual community, to which I owe a personal debt of gratitude and without which I would have been unable even to conceptualize a project like this one.

I find both the journalist's stated explanation for her interest in asexuality (it's quirky) and the one I imagined for her (she or someone close to her is asexual) lacking, as two sides of the same coin: first, that asexuality is interesting chiefly as a curiosity, as a human interest story, with only marginal relevance to the larger business of human life, and second, that an interest in asexuality is properly the province of asexual-identified people and their loved ones—still only of marginal importance to those whom it doesn't personally concern. These, however, are the terms in which asexuals are most often written about.³⁹

³⁹ In the popular media, the stories that get written about asexuals are recognizable by now as following a familiar formula, usually opening with anecdotes of teenage asexuals first noticing that they were different from their peers. A few paragraphs from psychological professionals—both the doubters and those more sympathetic to asexuality—are compulsory, as is the distinction of asexuality from celibacy and from HSDD. The numbers cited will be Bogaert's 1% figure and a headcount of the current AVEN membership (just over 43,000, incidentally, as of the writing of this footnote), and the article will stress the internal diversity of the asexual community in terms of romantic orientation, relationship status, etc., before closing with an emphasis on asexual people's contentment and well-adjustedness or on the gathering momentum of

What I hope to demonstrate instead in the chapters that follow is that asexuality's effects on narrative are much farther-reaching than the narrow subset of stories about asexuals (e.g. asexual coming-out stories, news features, etc.) and academic writing about asexuality as a sexual identity. Asexuality forces us to reconsider a great deal of received wisdom about sexuality, subjectivity, and narrative, which are all closely bound together in modernity. We find their interactions and the mechanisms of asexual erasure in distilled form in the genre of the novel, particularly in the Victorian novel, whose interest in the regulation of sexuality is well-documented.

My emphasis in this dissertation, then, is on modernity in general and the history of the novel in particular, for several reasons. First, as Michel Foucault points out, the discourse of sexuality has crystallized largely in the last three centuries, at the same time that the novel rose to prominence as our culture's foremost narrative genre. This discourse's boundaries mark asexuality as its outside and its other and have facilitated its erasure. I discuss specific instances of asexual erasure during this period, the disappearance of asexuality under myriad other signs and explanations, in greater depth in Chapter 1. The novel, with the breadth of its audience and its preoccupation with marriageability—as well as a more foundational investment in reproductive sexuality

the asexual movement. While treatments of asexuality in print media all tend to hit the same expository notes, their tone is largely respectful, although the blog *Ace Up Your Sleeve* has lampooned the predictable stock photos that generally accompany these stories as falling into the basic categories of “[t]he plastic or ‘sexless’ people camp,” “[t]he stock photo couple camp” (typically photos of couples putting exaggerated amounts of physical distance between them), and the nascent “sad grey ladies camp.” The category that finally earns the blogger's seal of approval is the “the photos of asexual people” camp—the moral of this particular story being that “[a]sexual people are real people.” True enough, of course, but with a decided note of visibility begetting visibility.

TV news and talk show features on asexuality strike a considerably different and often incredulous, exoticizing tone—at best, of the “Polar Bear Club” variety—in their interviews with asexuals, most often David Jay and a handful of heteroromantic couples. In both cases, however, asexuality is positioned as a phenomenon that the reader or viewer has never before heard of or imagined, and which is presumed to cause the audience considerable conceptual difficulty.

inherent in its very structure, which I discuss in Chapter 4—has served as one of the most pervasive and influential instruments of the highly diffuse discursive power that both dictates the bounds of culturally permissible and aberrant sexuality and enacts asexual erasure.

There comes an uncomfortable point in every introduction when one is expected to justify why one has done this thing and not that infinity of other things that one might have done instead. If, as I will demonstrate, asexuality is in direct conflict with the narrative and epistemological centrality of sexuality and desire in modernity, then one could plausibly go looking for asexuality in nearly *any* narrative and be assured of approximately the same results (erasure, resistance, or outright narrative failure). However, I have chosen to focus here on the history of the novel in general and on the Victorian and modernist novel in particular, for reasons I explain below and in the following chapter.

Narrative theory in general is prone to a tendency to privilege the genre of the novel, which stems first from a noticeable bias toward written narrative.⁴⁰ Mieke Bal, in *Narratology*, focuses explicitly on the narrative *text*, excluding oral as well as nonverbal modes of narrative from the scope of her study. In other accounts of narrative, oral narrative frequently receives only parenthetical treatment. Notable exceptions here are Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* and Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." However, because Scholes and Kellogg treat narrative evolutionarily, they must logically devalue oral narrative, treating it as a more primitive stage of development in the trajectory toward the

⁴⁰ One exception to this tendency is Seymour Chatman, who also discusses film in *Story and Discourse*, as Teresa de Lauretis does in "Desire in Narrative."

novel.⁴¹ Benjamin, on the other hand, values oral *over* written storytelling for its communal aspects. He observes, with regret, the loss of this capability for communicating experience and wisdom in modernity. But whether or not we regard the novel as the pinnacle of narrative development, its rise to generic prominence is nevertheless concurrent with the development of a sexually grounded modern subject, a development that it at most facilitates and at least coincides with.

I have restricted my focus in this dissertation still further, however, to the novels of the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period that saw the development of psychoanalysis, as well as fairly rapid and far-reaching changes in sexual mores: in short, a period in which the narrative significance of the non-experience of sexual attraction was very much in flux.

I do not claim to chart the changes in such significance comprehensively or construct an evolutionary narrative of its development, not least because such narratives are inimical to the logic of asexuality itself. Rather, my readings form a loose constellation of several canonical texts' engagements with an absence whose narrative function is variable and contingent. The nature of my project puts me in a rather odd rhetorical position, in that the subject of my dissertation is not only an absence (i.e. asexuality), but the *absence* of that absence (i.e. asexual erasure). When one is looking for what *isn't* there, almost any text will serve for an example, and when one is looking for the effacement of the fact that what isn't there isn't there, the field becomes, if anything, even wider. In my second and third chapters, for instance, I find *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* fruitful starting points for the kind of analysis I

⁴¹ Curiously, however, they also bemoan the fact that "in the middle of the twentieth century, our view of narrative literature is almost hopelessly novel-centered" (8).

undertake because they serve as telling examples of *failed* asexual erasure and because both novels are strongly invested with particular nineteenth-century sexual ideologies: Braddon's novel with the development of bourgeois heterosexual masculinity and Wilde's novel with the representation and disavowal of male homosexuality. These investments mean that the stakes of these novels' struggle against the asexual possibility are necessarily high.

I am also obliged to acknowledge these texts' often conspicuous canonicity. With the exception of Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*—whose exceptionality is a major focus of my reading of it—all of the novels I discuss here are widely studied and taught. My choice to work on such novels is to some extent a deliberate refusal to proceed by constructing an “asexual canon,” predicated on the model of identity politics I have already critiqued and necessarily subordinate to a more privileged canon of more mainstream works presumed to have more general significance (an equally problematic conceptualization of literature). Instead, my readings of these novels show the asexual possibility to have been there all along—a source of anxiety, defensive erasures, and narrative disruptions—not an elusive curiosity whose study requires the recovery of a wholly different subset of texts. All that remained to do was to learn how to look for it, a strategy for which I lay the theoretical groundwork in the chapters that follow.

In the next chapter, I turn from this largely theoretical discussion of asexual identity and erasure to asexual erasure's historical instantiations, particularly as modernity and its concomitant emphasis on sexuality exacerbated their necessity and facilitated their legitimation and reification in the developing genre of the novel. Having distinguished my concept of asexuality from asexual identity, I sketch a somewhat larger

history of asexuality as it relates to the history of sexuality—a sort of Foucauldian after-image—in which I discuss signs and figures that have historically served as alibis or explanations for asexuality: that is, perhaps for potential-asexuals, in Chasin's sense, but more for the bare, disconcerting fact of the non-experience of sexual attraction. I then turn to close readings of a number of Freud's writings to explore why psychoanalysis must structurally exclude the asexual possibility and insist on its erasure in order to preserve its own totalizing authority.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine asexual erasure gone awry in the Victorian novel. In Chapter 2, I argue that Mary Elizabeth Braddon's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to silence the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret* results in a number of awkward and conspicuous departures from conventional novelistic plotting and characterization. I demonstrate that Robert Audley's transformation as a character is neither sufficiently motivated nor explained by his experiences in the novel. Instead, he develops into a (re)productive member of Victorian society through starkly artificial narrative devices and by divine and authorial fiat. Far from reading these defects in his characterization as a realistic modern subject as defects in Braddon's craft as a novelist, however, I contend that they point to the narrative's failure, having introduced the asexual possibility, to discipline it successfully or neutralize it completely.

Chapter 3 sets the asexual possibility and the dynamics of the asexual secret alongside those of coded homoeroticism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I read Wilde's 1891 revisions to the novel as an effort to substitute asexual romantic friendship for homosexual love—although not, apparently, a very convincing effort. The asexual possibility, incompatible with the binary structures of secrecy/disclosure and

surface/depth, not only fails to function tidily as a substitute for homoeroticism but goes on disrupting and superseding these binaries throughout the novel. Asexuality is incommensurable not only with these binaries, but with the motive force of desire that narrative theory frequently takes for granted.

Chapter 4 brings asexuality into direct conflict with the narrative and epistemological centrality of desire in modernity. Numerous theorists—including Peter Brooks, Teresa de Lauretis, René Girard, Ross Chambers, and Susan Winnett—have established narrative’s basic dependence on desire. However, desire’s relationship to asexuality remains unclear—largely due to the apparently widespread assumption that desire’s definition is so self-evident as to go without saying. I seek to clarify that definition through these theorists’ work—along with the definitions and assumptions underlying the concepts of narrative and asexuality. I then elucidate the effect of the logic of asexuality on narrative form, drawing on Judith Halberstam’s concept of queer time as an alternative organization of temporality amenable to asexual modes of life and relationship, as well as Judith Roof’s examination of heteronarrative form and “perverse” or queer narratives that attempt to escape or subvert it, of which my concept of asexual narrative structure is a special type.⁴² I argue that an asexual narrative is static, is a story in which nothing happens, and I illustrate the consequences of such a narrative structure by comparing Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”—a canonical novella in which the asexual possibility the asexual possibility is legible at a thematic level and as an ultimately unrealized threat to meaningful closure—and *The Sacred Fount*—a willfully abstruse and seldom-read novel in which the nameless narrator’s investigation into the

⁴² J. Hillis Miller’s deconstruction of narrative linearity and closure in *Reading Narrative* provides additional support for this subversion of narrative form.

erotic entanglements of his fellow characters ultimately leads nowhere and narrative mastery is forestalled for both him and the reader. Finally, in a brief conclusion, I use a reading of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* to relate asexual narrative's challenge to teleology and linear order to alternative organizations of time and to sketch the possibilities of the nonserious and failure—after Halberstam's provocative suggestion in *The Queer Art of Failure*—as asexual modes of life. And in this conclusion, I must finally consider, in light of the logic of asexuality and its opposition to narrative mastery, whether I have any business concluding anything at all.

This project's implications extend far beyond the study of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, for narrative is not merely a means of imaginative storytelling but one of our most basic epistemological resources, a way of imposing order on perception, experience, and time. Narrative structure is dependent on the logic of desire, and asexuality jams or suspends this logic. Thus, admitting the asexual possibility and its deformations of or its challenges to narrative structure requires a critical reconsideration of our accustomed ways of knowing and of organizing knowledge. As such, my study of asexuality, by complicating the relationship of desire to narrative, is not only theoretically versatile but also has the potential to alter the direction of debates in narrative theory, which often addresses desire's role both as narrative's usual content and as the energy propelling it forward.⁴³

⁴³ Peter Brooks, for instance, regards desire as the motor of narrative on several levels:

Narratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name—never can quite come to the point—but that insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name. (*Plot* 61)

Writing a story “about” asexuality, then, or one about asexuals, entails a strategic disregard for the logic of asexuality. One function of writing such a story is to recast asexuality in a form commensurate with the same eronormative modes of discourse that require the erasure of asexuality as such. While I can offer little more hope of escaping this recasting in literature than in life, I seek at least to expose the mechanisms by which it operates and the ideological and metaphysical stakes of such recasting.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCOURSE ABHORS A VACUUM: THE HISTORY OF A/SEXUALITY

The most universal religion of the West... is the sex religion; the novel supplies it with its doctrine and its rituals, just as the mediaeval romances had done for courtly love.

—Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (136)

What constitutes the limit of the thinkable, the narratable, the intelligible—indeed, what constitutes *the limit of what can be thought as true*? These are, I believe, questions that psychoanalysis has always interrogated precisely because it relies on a form of analytic listening and a form of “reading” that takes for granted that what is constituted as the thinkable realm is predicated on the exclusion (repression or foreclosure) of what remains difficult or impossible to think.

—Judith Butler, “Quandaries of the Incest Taboo” (43)

“What must a woman’s aversion be when it is stronger than her fear of spiders!” he said bitterly.

—Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (213)

In the Introduction, I sketched the history of asexuality in the narrow sense of asexual identity. Here, however, I relax my terms somewhat to consider the history of what, strictly speaking, we ought to call “potential-asexuality” (after CJ Chasin [721]). In my introduction, I referred to this history as a “Foucauldian after-image”: necessarily less brilliant than what it negatively reflects, but granted its own dim, stubborn endurance by that other history’s very brilliancy. The intensification of attention to sexuality in Western modernity depends on a corresponding intensification of asexual erasure.

As Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), it is largely in the last three centuries—the same period in which the novel rose to prominence—that the

cultural injunction to talk about sex has come into being, along with an increasingly sophisticated set of rules for organizing this discourse. This injunction has given a correspondingly greater significance to *not* talking about sex, or to positioning oneself relative to the discourse around it in ways that disavow the power this discourse attempts to exercise over the subject, who nevertheless cannot cut free of this power. Power, as Foucault defines it and as I will use it here, is diffuse, uncentralized, and mobile, as well as multidirectional (that is, not a strictly top-down affair), having its own resistance constitutively built into itself.¹

As my examples below will demonstrate, asexuality and power—as transmitted through all manner of social, juridical, medical, and religious institutions and through both formal and informal channels—are engaged in a sort of hide-and-seek game, in which asexuality can become subject to power on the one hand and cohere conceptually on the other only under various disciplinary signs: bachelorhood, spinsterhood, celibacy, repressed homosexuality, or hysteria, for instance. The cost of coherence, then, is asexual erasure, the erasure of asexuality as such.

It is probably no more than a fortuitous coincidence that, roughly concurrent with Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, a rather coarse-grained history of asexuality appeared in

¹ According to Foucault's own definition, power consists in

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (92–93)

Power relies on the antagonism inherent in the logic of binary opposition, and its formal and institutional expressions are only its most visible aspect.

an essay by Myra T. Johnson in a 1977 collection entitled *The Sexually Oppressed*.²

While Johnson's essay is very much of its 1970s feminist moment and does not recognize a distinction between oppression and erasure (the actual root cause of the "invisibility" Johnson discusses), her argument about the seemingly inevitable historical misreadings of asexuality is an astute one and serves as the starting point for my own analysis in this chapter. For Johnson, any time one thinks one has found a historical asexual, he or she inevitably looks like something else. Eronormativity is above all engaged in explaining away asexuality.

Johnson divides this explaining away into two, perhaps three epochs, predominated by the prevailing influences of Christianity, psychoanalysis, and radical feminism, respectively—each of which is marked by the valuation or devaluation of asexuality (potential-asexuality, for our purposes) under some other sign. She argues first that in earlier times, asexual women may have taken up lives of celibacy for religious reasons, regarding such lives as the only viable alternative their societies offered to marriage and motherhood. They were thus penalized for their asexuality, Johnson contends, by having to adhere to all of the additional obligations these religious vocations entailed (98). Such women at least were revered for their perceived purity and devotion—indeed, as Elizabeth Abbott suggests, extreme asceticism attracted some women as a path toward the prestige of sainthood.³ At the same time, however, this esteem for female

² Ironically, the collection's foreword, while counting asexuals as one of the "hitherto ignored groups" discussed in the volume, frames the "oppression" these groups face as "the denial of the opportunity to enjoy and experience the satisfactions associated with the universal human impulse—the sexual" (Kirkendall xi), when it is precisely this kind of universalizing rhetoric that constitutes, in large part, the "sexual oppression" that asexuals most often complain of.

³ Abbott notes that while sainthood, statistically speaking, remained a rare achievement, the ratio of male to female saints shrank noticeably between 1350 and 1500, although it still did not reach anything close to

celibacy had the corresponding effect of reinforcing the church fathers' denigration of sexuality—and especially female sexuality—as sinful (98).

Johnson locates a radical reversal in the perception of the asexual woman “from a self-disciplined ascetic, to be awed, to a repressed neurotic, to be ‘cured’” at the turn of the twentieth century (98). She attributes this reversal—inferentially, at least—to a psychoanalytic worldview in particular and “[h]istorical changes in dominant definitions of reality” in general (98). As was the case with the ascetic asexual woman, this changed perception of female sexuality—as not only existent, but compulsory (in a certain culturally acceptable form)—also has consequences for non-asexual women, for “all the women who avoid, or are dissatisfied with, their ‘naturally assigned’ functions,” who “could... be construed as violating ‘reproductive, family-oriented morality’” (99). Such morality earns a clinical stamp of legitimacy from psychiatry, Johnson points out. She maintains, however, that “of all these violators..., asexual women seem to be the most invisible” (99). The so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s left asexual women behind or stigmatized them as not yet liberated, helping to frame them as neurotic and reinforce the “psychiatric consensus that women who deny their ‘natural’ female function are just repressed heterosexuals in need of ‘a good fuck’” (100–01). Despite this consensus, though, Johnson observes an additional historical pendulum swing—from reverence to stigma back to reverence again—by which asexuality is recoverable in a radical feminist context as a praiseworthy political consciousness. However, as with asexuality-as-

true gender parity. Even in the face of admittedly steep odds, though, “[s]ainthood was that era’s great challenge, akin to aspiring to the Olympics or a Nobel Prize today. For women severely limited in vocations other than drudging labor or motherhood, the stretch to being the very best practitioner of religion was appealing...” (Abbott 121).

asceticism, a very real risk exists of correspondingly disparaging women who are not asexual (104).⁴

While the general contours of these historical shifts are persuasive, two oversights in Johnson's argument are worth noting briefly here, because they illuminate several key issues at stake in this chapter. First, Johnson dismisses asexual men rather too hastily from consideration: in her own words, "[w]hile recognizing societal oppression of asexual men, the focus here is on the subtle oppression of those women who, because of asexual feelings, have avoided, refused or have not enjoyed the functions women have traditionally been obligated to perform" (97). Such selectivity is not in itself worthy of censure, given Johnson's feminist approach and the breadth of the subject remaining to her even after she makes this qualification. However, this narrowing of her scope is indicative of the very different dynamics at work in the erasure of male and female asexuality. Her recognition of "the societal oppression of asexual men" is concentrated in a remark she notes from an essay by Perry Deane Young in a 1975 issue of *Ms.*, in which Vietnam is described as offering a temporary reprieve for men unwilling or unable to carry out the sexual and romantic imperatives of civilian life: "Any sort of eccentricity (in sexual or other behavior) was tolerated in Vietnam as long as one behaved properly in combat. This allowed for those loners who wanted nothing to do with any kind of sex involving another person" (Young 116).⁵ Here, asexuality is only faintly visible against a

⁴ Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks have also pointed out the tendency in pro-sex and anti-porn feminism to charge female asexuality with value-laden significance. Asexuality gets caught up in these discourses either as repression or as a politically motivated rejection of phallogentric sexuality, a view of asexuality that asexuals themselves generally have not shared (656).

⁵ In the essay, Young comes out to his mother as gay and recounts his conversations with Christopher Isherwood about sexuality and writing. Young writes that he valued his experience in Vietnam both for

wider backdrop of “eccentricities” and is synecdochically extended to make of the asexual man an unqualified “loner.”⁶

I do not fault Johnson for her emphasis on the “subtle oppression” of asexual women, but it is important not to neglect, correspondingly, the often *more* subtle oppression—erasure, for practical purposes—of those *men* “who, because of asexual feelings, have avoided, refused or have not enjoyed the functions [men] have traditionally been obligated to perform” (97). Female asexuality is in some sense a caricature of an ideal of female sexuality—still alive and well, in some quarters—as muted or nonexistent except within the confines of procreative marital hetero sex. That is, up to a certain point, asexual women may in fact look like very good subjects (but after that point, of course, all bets are off). Asexual men, on the other hand, are swimming against the tide of a culture that for centuries has constructed them not only as bad subjects (“eccentricities” and “loners” at best), but as a logical impossibility, given the longstanding structural association of masculinity with active sexuality. The marked difference in the perceptions of, for instance, bachelorhood and spinsterhood and male and female romantic friendship indicates a need for a more comprehensive examination of the effects of gender on asexual erasure than Johnson is able to provide in such a brief essay. This more comprehensive treatment is one of my goals not only in this chapter but in Chapter 2, where I focus especially on the threat that the asexual possibility poses to the formation of Victorian bourgeois masculinity in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, and in Chapter 3, where I

giving him a clearer sense of perspective about his priorities and for affording him relative freedom to explore his sexuality.

⁶ Such characterizations also mark a number of the myths associated with the discriminatory culture of “singlism” whose influence Bella DePaulo chronicles in *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*.

examine the collusion and failed substitution of asexual romantic friendship for male homoerotic desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Second, Johnson's historicization of asexuality is necessarily stylized, given the demands of brevity, but the polar reversal she describes in the perception of asexual women at the turn of the twentieth century elides the multifarious significations of potential-asexuality's misrecognitions in the nineteenth century. I attempt to provide a more detailed account of some of these significations in the sections that follow.

Johnson's objective, overall, is to critique the tendency to regard asexuality through any of the historical lenses she enumerates, and except for the oversights and slippages I have noted above, her evaluation of the problem is a compelling one, in which asexual and autoerotic women's "sexual preferences are explained away in the rhetoric of whatever sexual ideology seems currently to be in vogue" (104). I turn my attention now to those "sexual ideologies" themselves: their epistemological origins and what stake they have in continually rendering asexuality invisible or illegible *qua* asexuality—one of the prime strategies of asexual erasure.

After using readings of Foucault and Ian Watt to illustrate the epistemological importance of sexuality in modernity and its imbrication with the development of the novel as a genre, I examine some of the more specific instances of asexual erasure this discursive formation produced as it minimized or suppressed the asexual possibility in such figures of potential-asexuality as the bachelor, the spinster, and the *flâneur* and such relational formations as friendship (both romantic and otherwise) and flirtation. I conclude this chapter by demonstrating how Freud constructed psychoanalytic discourse

on the very basis of asexual erasure, a construction that has largely set the terms for such erasure both in literary criticism and vernacular contexts today.

The Modern Sexual Subject, the Novel, and Asexual Erasure

Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, is famously less interested in sex than in *discourse about sex*. Rather than seeking the truth about sex, he investigates our reasons for wanting truth in the first place (11–12). His work enables me to begin charting how the rise of sexuality, in modernity, to explanatory supremacy in the construction of the subject has enabled and induced the corresponding articulation and erasure of asexuality. Importantly, the modern subject also developed alongside the genre of the novel, which is bound up with specific ideologies of sexuality and the family and is similarly inimical to asexuality. Those ideologies set the terms for specifically modern erasures of asexuality.

The relation of sex and knowledge—indeed, our understanding of and obsession with sexuality itself—is largely a product of modernity, when sex became a truth to be discovered or misapprehended, not merely a matter of pleasure or prohibition. Our two primary means of access to this truth, Foucault explains, have historically been *ars erotica*, in which pleasure constitutes truth and secrecy is necessary to preserve the intensity of that pleasure (Foucault treats *ars erotica* as characteristic of classical and eastern societies), and in our own society, *scientia sexualis* (57). *Scientia sexualis* is constituted by “procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret,” the confession being the foremost of such procedures (58). Sexuality, which came to be overseen more by scientific than religious authorities between the Reformation and the nineteenth century, *appeared*, as a result of confessional and scientific discourses, to be a

natural phenomenon—masking its constructedness—that would yield up truth when subjected to scientific hermeneutical processes (68). Sex, however, is unable to produce the truth with which bourgeois society came to charge it—the truth of identity and self-understanding—except with that society’s inducements and on its terms (69).

Given the organization of sexuality that Foucault describes, then, we can see that the truth of sex is foundational for narrativizing the modern subject—by which logic, not only are asexuals bad subjects, but it is only tenuously and incompletely that they are subjects at all. Besides establishing some sexual truth as a prerequisite for subjectivity, the procedure of producing this truth has produced pleasures all its own, Foucault suggests, so that *scientia sexualis* has in fact become our *ars erotica* (71). And, I would contend, it is hardly a coincidence that the development of this pleasure of truth—“pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open” (71)—coincides historically with the development of the genre of the novel. The novel’s narrative epistemology has much in common with that of *scientia sexualis* and is likewise engaged in processes of revealing truth and “captivating and capturing others” through the methods that Ian Watt groups under the heading of “formal realism.”⁷ I bring these methods to bear specifically on *Lady Audley’s Secret* in Chapter 2.

⁷ That is, “the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms” (32). The stylistic consequences of this premise include the use of invented rather than traditional plots, specific to particular places and characters (14–15); naming characters to grant them individuality rather than relying on historical or stock names (18–19); grounding the novel in a particular time and allowing past experience to shape characters and their actions (21–22); likewise specifying place and material

This identification of sexuality with truth has fixed asexuality—or, rather, the non-experience of sexual attraction—as an impossible form of subjectivity and as a threat to the forms of knowledge and mastery that sexuality has come to represent, at the same time that this emphasis on sexuality guarantees asexuality’s very existence. In Foucault’s analysis, sex became freighted in modernity with such an ontological and epistemological primacy in explaining and determining the individual “that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood, that the truth of sex became something fundamental, useful, or dangerous, precious or formidable: in short, that sex was constituted as a problem of truth” (56). Thus, asexuality seems to entail an opting-out from this process of knowledge-seeking, insofar as sexual desire is tied, as Foucault claims it is, to the desire for truth. On these terms, asexuality figures as absence or inactivity, cut off from the prospects of knowledge or truth. Its apparent lack of positive content largely excludes it from discussion in a context where the discourse of sexuality is still organized around the repressive hypothesis or its repudiation: the questions are of which sexual desires are sanctioned or not and how they are talked about, not about whether or not one experiences sexual desire—or sexual attraction—at all.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also attests to the yoking of truth/knowledge and sex.⁸ In Sedgwick’s analysis, “closetedness” ascribes a particular significance to silence and ignorance and opens the possibility of multiple ignorances,

objects with greater particularity (26); and allowing characters and their social milieus, rather than generic standards of decorum, to determine the novel’s diction (27–28).

⁸ Her gloss on Foucault’s description of “[t]he process, . . . sharply broadened and accelerated after the late eighteenth century, by which ‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ become conceptually inseparable from one another—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion” reinforces my own reading of Foucault (*Closet* 73).

just as knowledges may be multiple (the two multiplicities, however, need not be symmetrical) (*Closet* 8). A host of other familiar binary oppositions—for instance, secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, and private/public (11)—are then imbricated with the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Sedgwick argues that

[f]or any modern question of sexuality, knowledge/ignorance is more than merely one in a metonymic chain of such binarisms.... Cognition itself, sexuality itself, and transgression itself have always been ready in Western culture to be magnetized into an unyielding though not an unfissured alignment with one another, and the period initiated by Romanticism accomplished this disposition through a remarkably broad confluence of different languages and institutions. (73)

Sedgwick underscores the unique collusion of knowledge and sexuality in modernity in general and in the nineteenth century in particular, the period in which I focus most of my readings of asexuality's incompatibility with such a structure. To begin questioning the givenness of sexual attraction and sexual desire as constitutive conditions of knowledge and the subject is by no means to be assured of satisfactory answers to such questions, but it nevertheless remains worth exploring how those who did not experience sexual attraction were made commensurable with this emerging discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What was made of the non-experience of sexual attraction—of potential-asexuality, of the asexual possibility—as the novel rose to prominence, and where was it to be found?

My goal here is not to populate a speculative pantheon of “historical asexuals” (like those fanciful lists forever mushrooming on the internet) but to interrogate the terms of the suspicion and incredulity focused on instances of the asexual possibility—both by contemporary observers and later interpreters—as indicators of the necessity of asexual erasure to the maintenance of the nexus of subjectivity, knowledge, and narrative I have

described above. My readings in the next two sections and in the following chapters describe, in part, how the figures, characters, relationships, and plot structures in which the asexual possibility erupts were *made* to be part of the system that logically erases it—albeit more successfully in some cases than in others.

Marriage, Sexuality, and the Novel

The most obvious place to begin looking for the non-experience of sexual attraction is in the stubbornly unmarried or unmarriageable—that is, those outside the only socially sanctioned site of sexual attraction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is an erroneous qualification, however, because the asexual possibility is just as likely to emerge within marriage as outside of it, especially at a time when myriad factors *besides* sexual attraction determined individuals' decision—or obligation—to marry⁹: for instance, economic necessity, familial pressure, or the internalization of prevailing social norms. Sexual attraction—at least for women—did not emerge as an acceptable reason for marriage until well into the twentieth century. Romantic attraction has had a longer history, but it is difficult to distinguish in isolation from sexual attraction.

The problem with reading for asexual erasure is that it resists being localized in particular categories of historical persons or relationships. What we have—ideally—learned from similar work on homosexuality is that silence is multivalent,¹⁰ especially in

⁹ To look for asexuality by looking for unmarried persons of any sex, even in our own time, is to give in to dangerous oversimplifications. Even now, many asexuals do marry: occasionally each other, but more often allosexuals (i.e. non-asexuals, people who experience sexual attraction to others). Such couples meet with varying degrees of success in reaching compromises tolerable to both spouses).

¹⁰ To cite two prominent avowals of such multivalence, Foucault considers silence “less the absolute limit of discourse... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the

a case like this one: something one does *not* do can be overlaid with far more excuses and possible explanations than something one does. Effects render themselves up more visibly than causes: abstention from sexual activity is more readily apparent than one's possible motivations for such abstention.¹¹ Asexuality viewed from the outside tends to become indistinguishable from celibacy, with which it is not coterminous, although the two overlap at times. The non-experience of sexual attraction is frequently indistinguishable, to an outside observer, from the decision not to act upon sexual attraction or a lack of opportunity for acting upon it, which contributes to the inevitability of asexual passing that I discussed in the Introduction.

The central question animating all of the instances of disparaged or erased asexuality that I examine here is, what happens when celibacy—which might stem from the non-experience of sexual attraction or from any number of other causes—exceeds its prescribed or expected bounds? What economies do such excesses challenge? What threats, both social and narrative, do they pose? Because the non-experience of sexual attraction is not reliably separable from other motivations, what a study like this one will uncover is not asexuality, or even potential-asexuality, but the *asexual possibility*—one possibility among others, but the possibility that is most insistently and systematically suppressed. This concept obviously points to my debt to the “homosexual possibility” that Sedgwick describes as animating male homosexual panic in *Epistemology of the Closet*—particularly in her reading of James's “The Beast in the Jungle,” which I

strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (27). To Sedgwick, silence is “as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet...” (*Closet* 4).

¹¹ Anthony Bogaert too cautions against reading a historical figure's lack of a partner as evidence of asexuality, because lack of partnered sexual activity may not have been that individual's choice, and more importantly, voluntary abstinence still does not necessarily equate to asexuality (*Understanding* 33–34).

consider in Chapter 4. Whether a comparable “asexual panic” exists is somewhat doubtful, for asexuality—precisely because of its erasure—has, historically, not represented the very tangible threats to those individuals to whom it attaches that homosexuality has. What we might call asexual panic is, instead, a more structural and specifically narrative set of reflexes that come into play when the asexual possibility compromises the integrity of the logic of the novel or the modern subject, reflexes whose effects I analyze in the chapters that follow as well as in my reading of Freud in the final section of this chapter.

To return to my initial caveat, because we cannot presume a coincidence between asexuals as we know them and figures and relationships that lie outside marital and sexual bonds, I refocus attention on those specific instances when such figures appeared as sexual renegades precisely *for* a lack of interest in sexual and/or romantic coupling, and on cultural assumptions about and reactions to such lapses.

The subject matter of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels pertains largely to problems of sexual desire and desirability and usually hinges on a marriage plot, indicating, as Nancy Armstrong argues, the ways that the histories of the novel and sexuality are imbricated. The novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Armstrong argues, responded to and participated in the invention of the modern female subject, exemplified (ideologically if not demographically) by the middle-class domestic woman.¹² Such fiction served simultaneous representational and regulatory functions as

¹² Perhaps indirectly buttressing Armstrong’s argument, Katherine V. Snyder suggests that the widespread fascination in the nineteenth century with the spaces that bachelors inhabited “combine[s] an eroticized fixation on the private lives of single men with anxiety about the future of domesticity in a rapidly modernizing, urbanizing and industrializing age” (34)—that is, a domesticity dominated by consumer culture rather than feminine virtue and self-discipline.

“[t]he novel, together with all manner of printed material, helped to redefine what men were supposed to desire in women and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire to be” (251).¹³ The alignment of masculinity with the public, political sphere and femininity with the private sphere of the home cast the feminine mode of domestic fiction as a supposedly apolitical and ahistorical discourse, thus naturalizing desire, its subject matter, as timeless and universal (9–10). Armstrong argues that by marking off desire in this way, domestic fiction established a ground for the exercise of a specifically feminine agency in negotiating the sexual contract according to the terms of the inner worth (e.g. personal virtue) of the subjects party to it (subjects whose subjectivity was initially enabled by Enlightenment concepts of the individual) (98).

Armstrong’s reading of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* dramatizes this agency taking hold. For Armstrong, *Pamela* is a fiction of the struggle between fictions, between an aristocratic account of reality in which women may simply be possessed bodily on masculine terms, and a new model of the domestic woman’s subjectivity, in which the female subject speaks for herself and reforms male desire (109–10). The code that triumphs in Richardson’s novel is one in which domestic virtues and the relationship between the sexes supersede class inequalities: an apparently universal sexuality takes precedence over more local political and economic concerns.

Like Armstrong, Ian Watt also links the novel to an Enlightenment understanding of subjectivity. He places the genre of the novel in a line of development beginning in the courtly love tradition, but he also notes the way it fuses the conventions of romantic love

¹³ Elizabeth Kraft also registers this emphasis on the regulation of desire and desirability in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction: “The heroine of the realistic novel is no less the object of romantic longing and the purpose toward which action is directed than is her romance counterpart; but, in a significant departure from romance narrative, the realistic novel presents objects of desire as subjects who desire as well” (7).

with the quotidian concerns of formal realism (136–37). Marriage became a viable subject for the novel to treat only when it became a matter of individual choice, aided by the rise of the conjugal family (138). This change of emphasis in kinship relations proved “especially fateful for the woman, because, as a result of masculine dominance in the economic field, and of the social, residential and occupational mobility brought about by capitalism,” her marriage choice “determine[d], not only her most important personal relationship, but also her social, economic and even geographic future” (139).¹⁴ The idealization of romantic love became a necessary scaffolding once marriage involved forgoing the larger support system of the extended patriarchal family (139).

Ruth Perry describes in greater detail the way in which sexualized marital love developed in response to the new social and economic importance the conjugal family accrued in the eighteenth century. This development was in large part an articulation of a new model of female sexuality compatible with the social and financial basis of this kinship structure. Novels, Perry argues, contributed to “a discourse building up a new complex introjected attitude towards sexual experience that would construct women as the right kind of sexual property: neither prude nor coquette but trustworthy and warmblooded” (254). Women, then, had to be conditioned to find sex desirable only under certain circumstances; thus, sexual disgust correspondingly had to be discursively

¹⁴ Ruth Perry also documents the processes by which the conjugal family took precedence over the biological family in the eighteenth century, although she emphasizes that this was a gradual process that required extensive discursive renegotiation of relational obligations and priorities. The novel documents many of the conflicts that ensued between these two models of family organization:

When the “master narrative” of this fiction is understood to be a reconsideration of the basis of membership in a family, it changes how we read the standard plots. The courtship plot begins to look more like the story of women scrambling to find new homes and to negotiate new families, their rights within the consanguineal family having been undercut by a shift in kinship priorities. (7)

constructed as a response to sexual acts and feelings unaccompanied by (marital) love (254–55). The accomplishment of both of these ends required that sex take on a more central ontological importance for the subject.¹⁵ This reframing of female sexuality, however, went on largely in the shadow of the novel’s celebration of romantic love’s importance in marriage. The ideology of romantic love, Perry argues, masked marriage’s new, more financial basis and the individualistic cast that the conjugal family now gave to the inter-generational transfer of property:¹⁶

the material disinterestedness that was an essential ingredient of fictional heroism—that made the triumphal gathering in of love *and* money by the good characters in fictional climaxes all the sweeter—expressed an individualistic drive for economic independence as much as the paramount importance of love in marriage. This plot thus expresses anxiety about money as a source of value at the same time as it celebrates the capitalist virtue of independence. (12; emphasis in orig.)

The eighteenth-century refiguration of sexuality and romantic love responded to models of familial and financial organization in flux. The association of romantic love, sexual desire, the marriage bond, and ideal female subjectivity placed the asexual possibility in opposition to all of these categories—in which it could break in only as a threat—and assigned negative associations to the other sites where it might play.

The Asexual Possibility and the Unmarried

If the shift to a conjugal model of kinship could be a perilous gamble for married women—who were wholly dependent on their spouses and possibly cut off from broader support networks of biological relatives—it dealt more harshly still with the unmarried

¹⁵ That is, through “[t]he cultural work” of “put[ting] sex ‘in mind,’” which “is to make it first and foremost a matter of consciousness—whether desire or guilt—rather than a simple, unselfconscious practice” and to make it “a central and all-defining subjective state” (Perry 271).

¹⁶ Perry also cites the ideological influence of the “highly self-conscious, privatized heterosexual relationships” common in novels as one possible cause for the eighteenth-century increase in marriage and reproductive rates and decrease in age of first marriage (24).

(except women fortunate enough to have independent fortunes). Watt makes the important point that prior to the eighteenth century, spinsters were merely—literally—*spinsters*, women whose craft served a clear economic function. However, as mass-produced textiles became more available and more affordable, unmarried female relatives whose weaving and spinning had once proved an asset to their households became extraneous and, at best, parasitic (145). Perry, too, observes that “the strengthening of marriage as the foundational tie for kin relations meant that persons who remained outside marriage, especially widows or spinsters, experienced new levels of social isolation and impoverishment” (36). A woman who was maritally or romantically disinclined and who would once have been a valued and productive member of her family now became merely a drain on it, if her relatives could afford to support her at all.

And what of the unmarried man? Economically, he was better off, insofar as he still had the means of a livelihood, but he was widely regarded with suspicion and condemnation, both for what he was presumed to be doing—according to the accepted double standard, any man without regular access to marital sex was all but expected to seek it elsewhere¹⁷—and for what he was manifestly *not* doing—repopulating England and the expanding British Empire. Eighteenth-century bachelorhood was seen as a

¹⁷ Of bachelors, Watt notes that “the increase of their number was widely regarded as socially deplorable and morally dangerous” and that the Puritans in particular distrusted their capacity for sexual continence (146). Steven Marcus, in his analysis of William Acton’s 1857 *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, points out that Acton takes for granted that middle-class Victorian men will have had considerable premarital sexual experience but that the accuracy of such an assumption is not assured (*Victorians* 29). Katherine V. Snyder cautions that, taken as a whole, the stereotypes of the nineteenth-century bachelor fail to cohere: “The binaries by which bachelors were stereotyped are most notable for their contrariness: superannuated and boyish; worldly and callow; gregarious and reclusive; overrefined and coarse; sophisticatedly decadent and atavistically primitive; clingy and remote; self-indulgent and miserly; unfeeling and oversensitive; fastidious and slovenly; errant and unbudging; inconsistent and rigid” (28). However, Snyder also notes the frequent nineteenth-century imputation of the bachelor’s predilections for extramarital sex and masturbation (32). The stereotype of the promiscuity of single men is alive and well in popular culture even today and probably accounts, in large part, for the incredulity with which claims of male asexuality are frequently met.

dereliction of civic duty: the gender imbalance in England in the eighteenth century (which worsened in the nineteenth) meant that there were already too few husbands to go around, for those women for whom it was now a more urgent necessity than ever to marry. While heavy casualties in a series of foreign wars and the emigration of large numbers of young men to the colonies were chiefly to blame for the gender imbalance in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England (Perry 274; Faderman 183)—as well as for nationalistic exhortations to reproduce—bachelors were castigated for exacerbating the problem, leading to calls for “bachelor taxes” (Snyder 22; Watt 146).¹⁸ Lillian Faderman describes the predicament of the so-called “redundant” or “superfluous” women of the nineteenth century, who “outnumbered men by the hundreds of thousands and even the millions,” as not only marital but economic:

they were cut off from jobs that had been open to them in previous centuries and the careers which women of their class could enter were overcrowded or required unusual talent (for example, novelist). Since they were middle class, it was unlikely that they would inherit enough money to be self-sufficient, and it would have been a disgrace for them to take a position as servant or factory worker. (183)

By the nineteenth century, middle-class women had less chance than ever of supporting themselves financially and maintaining their social respectability without the aid of husbands, a trend that had begun in the eighteenth century. The emergent genre of the novel both fostered and catered to this marital preoccupation, as both Watt and Perry have shown (Watt 147).¹⁹ The refusal or inability to marry was charged, in this period,

¹⁸ Perry’s focus is not on bachelors, but on the eighteenth-century interest in the rehabilitation of prostitutes, which she construes as an attempt to stave off depopulation. Fears of population decline also fed the emphasis on marriage and reproduction as a British subject’s duty to the nation (274).

¹⁹ Watt positions this preoccupation as a major factor in the popular success of Richardson’s *Pamela*:

with not just sexual but national and economic significance. I focus here on unmarried persons of both sexes not because I assume that that is where our “historical asexuals” have been hiding, but because it is in them that the idealization of marital, sexual, and romantic love threatens most visibly to run aground on the asexual possibility, the possibility of sheer indifference to the sexual basis of modern individual, social, and economic organization. Having established the development of the novel as interrelated with eighteenth-century anxieties over the changing basis of marriage and kinship, I now shift to a narrower focus on asexual erasure in the Victorian period, leading up to the codification that the development of psychoanalysis gave to such erasure.

It is necessary to keep the double standard in mind when charting the considerably different significance of female and male asexuality. While the asexual possibility as manifested in bachelorhood was met in many cases with censure, in women it often went largely unnoticed. By some accounts, middle-class Victorian women were assumed or expected not to experience sexual attraction, which fixed female asexuality as normative. Such accounts, however, did not enjoy universal authority. I contend that this strain of nineteenth-century gender ideology facilitated opposite erasures of female and male asexuality—which in the former case disappeared under its putative ubiquity and in the latter under its putative impossibility—while recognizing this contention to be a strategic caricature useful primarily for illustrating the opposite forms that asexual

Servant girls... constituted a fairly important part of the reading public, and they found it particularly difficult to marry... More generally, it is likely that Richardson's heroine symbolised the aspirations of all the women in the reading public who were subject to the difficulties recounted above. Not only so. Somewhat similar difficulties have since become standard in modern society as a result of the combined effects of economic individualism and the conjugal family; and this would seem to explain why the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage. (148–49)

erasure *can* take, not which it unilaterally *did* take. Those latter forms are of course varied, nuanced, and context-dependent, as are the ones we find at work in the genre of the novel. The following three chapters deal with the novelistic specificity of asexual erasure, while its historical specificity lies mostly beyond the scope of this dissertation. The critical controversy I survey below over the ostensible asexuality of Victorian women, however, at least complicates Johnson's assertion that before the twentieth century, female asexuality was legible only as pious celibacy.

According to Lillian Faderman, "[t]he eighteenth century believed a good woman was sexually dormant, and the nineteenth century promulgated that idea with a vengeance" (154), but this is something of a simplification. It owes much of its credibility to Steven Marcus's foregrounding of William Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* as exemplary of Victorian views on female sexuality, with Acton's assertion

that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally.... The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions. (qtd. in *Victorians* 31)

Here we see the famous stereotype that would erase female asexuality—at least for women of the middle classes—as an almost-universal fact of life, the only conceivable exceptions to which would be either lower-class or pathological (31). Yet Marcus overstates his case. Sharon Marcus points out that “[a]lthough William Acton and others famously asserted that women experienced less sexual desire than men, most Victorians,

including Acton himself, did not believe that women experienced no sexual pleasure at all” (18 n.44). John Maynard also cautions against regarding Acton’s views as exemplary of Victorian understandings of female sexuality generally when “he merely represents one version (a highly articulate one) of the conservative ‘respectable’ sexual attitudes on the attack in the 1840s and 1850s” (52 n.36). That is, Acton provides a convenient thumbnail sketch of one particular tradition of Victorian discourse on sexuality, but this tradition “is in no sense *the* Victorian view, as [Steven] Marcus implied, but is merely that familiar conservative outlook that modernists had labeled Victorian from among many competing (and often far from fully coherent) Victorian perspectives” (Maynard 36; emphasis in orig.). The assumption of normative bourgeois female asexuality was far from a Victorian given, but because greater sexual reserve was nevertheless expected of women than of men, the female asexual possibility lacked some of the disruptive social force of its male counterpart—though not all. In my reading of *Lady Audley’s Secret* in Chapter 2, for example, the asexual possibility for the title character comes with associations of juvenility, ideal femininity carried to a mad extreme, and a disparaged Roman Catholicism. It was largely with the emergence of the New Woman novel that female sexual attraction began to be more widely acknowledged as a possibility. This was correspondingly also the point when the non-experience of it began to become legible as a problem, for instance in the case of Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*.²⁰

²⁰ Sue, described as “quite unfitted by temperament and instinct to fulfil the conditions of the matrimonial relation with Phillotson, possibly with scarce any man” (210), famously jumps out of a window to avoid consummating her marriage (221–22). Previously, she had formed an intimate but sexless relationship with an undergraduate at Christminster, contrary to the arrangement he had hoped for (141–42), and she lives with Jude in similar fashion for years before she finally acquiesces to his desires for fear that the more

Because Victorian men were by *no* account presumed to be asexual, the asexual possibility in their case is most often erased by the mapping of various explanations, excuses, and alibis onto it. The figure of the bachelor—a source of much consternation in this period, as I discussed above—was a site for many such mappings. The asexual possibility sometimes emerges amongst other stereotypes of bachelors as selfish, lazy, generally ineffectual, and at times suspiciously effeminate. In charting the contradictory multiplicity of characterizations of the nineteenth-century bachelor, Katherine V. Snyder enumerates some of the many competing ideologies among which Victorian middle-class men had to negotiate, while noting that such has always been the case; this sort of negotiation is hardly a uniquely Victorian phenomenon (28). Regarding bachelors, she concludes:

While certain motifs appear throughout the period, there is no clear pattern, no clear sense of continuity or development across time. This lack of clarity results in part from the same taxonomic labels, such as “misogynist” or “sentimental,” being used to describe different traits; to indicate cause or effect; to defend bachelorhood or to mark it as indefensible. The very incoherence of these troubled taxonomies registers the difficulties that bourgeois writers and readers experienced in attempting to account for a group that they described as a class, a race, a tribe, and even a species. (29)

What Snyder is able to establish with some stability about bachelors is that they were regarded fairly consistently as selfish, a trait that manifested in either the excess or the deficiency of their expenditures, which were always directed toward the wrong objects.

This view extended as much to their sexual energies as to their money (32). In the figures

sensual Arabella will supplant her (341). Hardy develops both a social and a biological angle to Sue’s status as New Woman, compounding her feminist aversion to the institution of marriage with her characterization as constitutionally unmoved by sexual impulses and resistant to sexual activity. These aversions contribute in large part to the catastrophes that befall Jude and Sue both in their relationship with each other and with their society.

and relationships I discuss throughout this section, the asexual possibility often appears threatening or transgressive for reasons that have to do with a great deal more than sex and are usually legible as the shirking of some sort of economic duty.

The confluence of the financial and the sexual was clear in the reorganization of kinship along conjugal rather than consanguineal lines that I discussed above. It enjoyed continued metaphoric influence throughout the nineteenth century through the “spermatic economy” thought to organize and limit male sexuality. Elizabeth Abbott traces the idea of conserving semen as central to men’s health at least as far back as Hippocrates (198) and she describes a model of “respectable gentlemanly chastity... based on a current economic model” prominent in the nineteenth century, which

proceeded from a general idealization of self-control in all spheres and argued that, like fiscal continence, sexual continence was good and could be achieved through self-control and sublimation, preferably by industrious use of time. The result of this sort of celibacy would be the accumulation of capital. Incontinence, on the other hand, was bad and provoked too early marriages and poverty. (201)²¹

Herbert Sussman sees such a model of chastity as intrinsic to a broader Victorian definition of “maleness as the possession of an innate, distinctively male energy that, in contrast to Freud, [the Victorians] did not represent as necessarily sexualized, but as an inchoate force that could be expressed in a variety of ways, only one of which is sexual” (10). This view produced a “definition of manhood as self-discipline, as the ability to

²¹ Steven Marcus calls attention to Acton’s promulgation of the same model, in which

the body is regarded as a productive system with only a limited amount of material at its disposal. And the model on which the notion of semen is formed is clearly that of money.... [U]p until the end of the nineteenth century the chief English colloquial expression for the orgasm was “to spend”.... Furthermore, the economy envisaged in this idea is based on scarcity and has as its aim the accumulation of its own product. (*Victorians* 22)

control male energy and to deploy this power not for sexual but for productive purposes”

that

was clearly specific to bourgeois man. For the industrialist as for the Pre-Raphaelite artist manliness as control validated the hegemony of the bourgeoisie by valorizing manliness as self-regulation over what was seen through middle-class eyes as the libertinism and idleness of the gentry and the irregularity and sexual license of the working class. (11)

The proper management of male energy was thus thought to serve economic and artistic as well as sexual ends, and its conceptualization as a finite economy meant that imprudent spending would lead to ruin. This metaphoric organization confuses the signification of the asexual possibility, which might figure as bachelor stinginess, as impotent impecuniousness, or, as my reading of Freud below leads me to argue, as a force that jams the economy of sexuality and desire by its inability to be assimilated to it.

However, one mode of asexual erasure took precedence in such cases. By the end of the nineteenth century, any misuse of male sexuality—including disuse—had begun to connote homosexuality (Snyder 33). Such connotation marks the beginning of the sort of oversimplification and false certainty regarding the meaning of moments of *uncertainty* that Christopher Lane has critiqued as a tendency of queer studies (Lane 225). Because asexuality as such can figure only as an unsustainable absence, it is subject to overwriting, as in the case of the celibate bachelor who became understandable only as a closeted homosexual.

Celibacy also carried charged religious meanings for the Victorians, who regarded it as a trapping of the Roman Catholicism that they generally feared and toward which they often saw the high-church Tractarians tending. Ellis Hanson argues that the Oxford movement incited the same anxiety over non-normative masculinities that decadence did

as an artistic movement: both Tractarians and decadents, “like the dandy, posed a challenge to Victorian gender roles, not only because of the constant refrain of homosexuality that resounds through their respective histories, but also because of the androgyny and celibacy of some of their chief personalities” (245). One notable example is Newman, who “was often described in feminine terms, and he presented a figure of the celibate priest as somehow, like the androgynous and erotically self-sufficient dandy, ‘outside sex’” (254). At the same time, however, Sussman locates the celibate monk as the figure of an alternative artistic masculinity that a number of Victorian writers and artists defined in opposition to both femininity and normative bourgeois masculinity (14), useful for relating male sexual and artistic power and for negotiating the problematics of the opposition between male homosociality in the public sphere and heterosexual domesticity (4). “In exemplifying the extreme position in the Victorian practice of manliness as reserve,” Sussman argues, “the monk becomes the figure through whom Victorian men in a mode of historicized psychology could argue their widely varied views about self-discipline, the management of male sexuality, and the function of repression” (3). Such a view of celibacy as reserve and restraint is incompatible with the idea that celibacy might be the outward expression of asexuality. As Snyder, Hanson, and Sussman demonstrate, nineteenth-century celibacy, especially for men, was the site of complex social and religious meanings. Far from functioning simply as a figure of the overvaluation of asexuality, as Johnson argues in the case of female celibacy, male celibacy in the Victorian period might be celebrated on artistic grounds, distrusted on religious ones, or read as a figure of non-normative gender behavior or homosexuality,

but the convergence of these multiple significations amounted to a particularly dense site of asexual erasure.

Celibacy, as Snyder demonstrates, is but one of the problematic characteristics ascribed to nineteenth-century bachelors. Snyder considers not just the social but the narrative significance of bachelors, exploring their function as narrators in Victorian fiction. Bachelor narrators are often the homodiegetic-but-not-autodiegetic narrators (i.e. narrators who inhabit the world of the story but are not themselves the principal characters in it) who stand in a secondary, subordinate relation to the “heroes” of the stories they narrate *and* to the more celebrated autodiegetic narrator, Snyder claims (8). She argues that a critique of this relation is also a critique of the perceived secondariness and liminality of bachelors, who, in this narratorial position, introduce more promising, non-hegemonic modes of manhood and sociality than we give them credit for (9). Importantly, insofar as many of these modes locate the bachelor outside the narratively legible economy of sexual desire, they may also be—besides surrogates for the reader-as-voyeur, as was often the case—sites at which the asexual possibility may erupt, as it does in spectacular structural fashion in Henry James’s *The Sacred Fount*, which I discuss in Chapter 4. We see both the asexual possibility and the bachelor narrator’s embodiment of an alternative masculinity in Snyder’s claim that the bachelor narrator’s positioning as superfluous observer renders familiarly triangular scenes of desire quadrangular:

The bachelor narrator as witness is invested in what he sees and tells, yet his identity within the narrative *mise en scène* is not solely constituted in terms of his competition on the marriage market of the novel’s plot. Bachelor narration thus might be said to represent an alternative economy of manhood, even while it also participates vicariously and, one might argue, decisively in the exchanges that constitute the narrative transactions of novelistic discourse. (10–11)

Bachelor observers and their positioning relative to sexual desire and marriage plots force us to reconsider the range of narratively functional masculinities available in the novel.

Such observers are also near relations to, when not fully synonymous with, the emblematically urban and modern figure of the *flâneur*, who stands at the center of John Rignall's *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator*. Rignall argues that realist novelists deployed such observers in their fiction as agents of an internal critique of the social and epistemological premises of realist methodology, to problematize the relationship between seeing and knowing. Pertinent to the study of asexuality, the *flâneur* functions structurally as an outsider to the economy of desire in a similar way to the bachelor narrator—and as the asexual does in our own day—owing his mobility and range of perspective to his conspicuous loitering and his detachment from the object-driven business of commerce and desire. Walter Benjamin has vividly chronicled this phenomenon:

[T]he *flâneur*... demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure. His leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists. It is also his protest against their industriousness. Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. ("Paris" 54)

The *flâneur*, then, rejects the model of masculinity as productiveness that I discussed above. His conspicuous purposelessness has much in common with the logic of asexuality, as does his determination to disrupt the more efficient, deliberate pacing of those around him, a determination that reflects the asexual possibility's tendency to force narrative movement to a halt.

The erotic valence of the *flâneur*'s detachment, which Richard A. Kaye discusses in his study of the narrative effects of flirtation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, also resonates with asexuality. Kaye builds on Georg Simmel's theory of flirtation, in which the coquette, "[l]ike the Benjaminian *flâneur*, ... is aimless, emotionally detached, given over to the 'spectacle of the moment,' a self-conscious spectator rather than an unthinking participant" (Kaye 28). This detachment from participation and preference for observation rather than erotic involvement is a site of the asexual possibility in the novelistic *flâneur*—and indeed, in the flirt as well, as I argue below—a figure whose relational non-commitment and aimlessness position him beyond the reach of the genre's marital and implicitly sexual teleology. My reading of *Lady Audley's Secret* in Chapter 2 focuses on the reform of one such figure to bring him into line with these generic conventions.

Asexuality is diffused as absence across every marital status and mitigating circumstance. Such absences are most noticeable in figures like the ones discussed above, but it is also in such figures that these absences are most likely to be explained in other terms. How might we figure asexuality instead, at least in some cases, as a positivity? What *does* one do, how does one relate to others, when not experiencing sexual attraction? One may, of course, marry and engage in sexual activity anyway, for various reasons and with various consequences. In other cases, though, other, less culturally valued relationships may take a more central place. The potentially asexual dimension of such relationships is my focus in the next section.

The Asexual Possibility and Alternative Modes of Intimacy

A number of studies of Victorian and modernist literature and culture in recent years have sought to bring neglected modes of relationship out of the shadows cast by the far more copious critical attention given to heterosexual—and in some cases, homosexual—coupling. A prominent example is friendship, romantic or otherwise. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman examines how female romantic friendships have functioned as or been distinguishable from love relationships, a distinction figured primarily in terms of genital contact.

Faderman argues that female romantic friendships were socially acceptable, for the most part, until the twentieth century, so long as both friends remained suitably feminine in the gender roles they assumed and did not pose a material, economic threat to patriarchal dominance (17). Lesbianism, in Faderman's view, has never been as reductively sexual as the sexologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would have us believe. She argues that lesbianism and romantic friendship are both chiefly about emotional intimacy and companionship, although sex may be a component of such relationships as well, especially for contemporary lesbians (19). Faderman cautions that the very different understandings of female sexuality that predominated before the twentieth century render the current popular understanding of lesbianism unworkably anachronistic when applied to female romantic friendship in earlier periods (19), although the kinds of relationships she describes have much in common with what we might recognize as homoromantic asexual relationships today. Such attention to the relativism and limited applicability of our present terminology for sexualities and relationships

leaves open the possibility that functionally asexual relationships may in fact have flourished at other times.²²

However, while Sharon Marcus basically agrees with Faderman that mapping our current binary understanding of heterosexuality and homosexuality onto the relationships between historical women produces a fatally distorted view of such relationships,²³ she also faults Faderman for making too sweeping a dismissal of the possibility that sex between Victorian women, under certain circumstances, was not only imaginable but was practiced and tolerated. She cites the documented incidence of “female marriages” between some pairs of devoted lifelong friends. Marcus openly acknowledges that we can’t definitively determine whether or not such women had sex with one another but is also keenly aware that scholars in our critical moment ascribe a centrality to this question that the Victorians themselves wouldn’t have:

The lack of reliable evidence of sexual activity becomes less problematic... if we realize that sex matters because of the social relationships it creates and concentrate on those relationships. In Victorian England, sex was assumed to be part of marriage, but could also drop out of marriage without destroying a bond never defined by sex alone. (44)

²² In the eighteenth century, for instance, not only could women enjoy intense romantic friendship with impunity, but it was also considered highly fashionable for them to do so (Faderman 74). Female friendships were widely regarded as a benign training ground for the qualities that would eventually make a woman a good wife, at a time when women were not permitted to socialize with men, in most circumstances, before engagement: a consideration that recommended to men the value of female romantic friendship (75). Men also, fortuitously, tended to take such relationships much less seriously than women did and “generally doubted that these relationships would be very enduring in any case” (77). Loneliness and spousal incompatibility inevitably followed from marriages that were based more on family and economic interests than love and that were almost impossible to dissolve. Romantic friendship, then, also served many women as a safe alternative to adultery (130), since such friendships were assumed not to be sexual (and in most cases probably weren’t) and would not result in the birth of illegitimate children.

²³ Marcus faults lesbian approaches to female friendship for failing to give adequate consideration to its functioning *within* the frameworks of normative femininity and heterosexuality, not only as rejections of them. She argues that the female hetero/homo divide was functionally irrelevant for the Victorians; on the contrary, “female marriage, gender instability, and women’s erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative institutions and discourses, even for those who made a religion of the family, marriage, and sexual difference” (13).

The social aspects of a sexual relationship, Marcus argues, were the ones in the foreground in female as well as in heterosexual Victorian marriages. She cautions against drawing overconfident distinctions between female friendships with and without a sexual component, for “[t]he language of Victorian friendship was so ardent, the public face of female marriage so amicable, the comparisons between female friendship and marriage between men and women so constant, that it is no simple task to distinguish female friends from female lovers or female couples” (43). What we may conclude from Faderman and Marcus, then, is that while *some* romantic friendships between Victorian women afforded considerable space to the asexual possibility, this possibility hardly enjoyed a more privileged place there than anywhere else, and we may conclude as well that female romantic friendship in this period varied widely in the forms of intimacy it involved.

Romantic friendships between men during the same period, on the other hand, could hardly be undertaken as freely or as innocently as Faderman argues that those between women were. Sedgwick observes that while female homosociality and feminism can coexist harmoniously and continuously (Faderman’s contention as well²⁴), the case is radically different for male homosociality and patriarchy, which is deeply homophobic; for that reason, a “radically discontinuous relation” exists between “male homosocial and homosexual bonds” (*Men* 5). One of the chief consequences of this discontinuous relation is the “homosexual panic” and “blackmailability” that take up residence in the break in

²⁴ Faderman remarks, for instance, that similar ambitions and life experiences tended to produce both nineteenth-century feminists and lesbians, who often ended up being the very same women: “Many feminists could and did find other women to live with and love, and thus became lesbians; and any woman who identified herself as a lesbian, once she thought about women’s problems, realized she had always understood those problems on a gut level—she was a natural feminist” (188).

the continuum: an anxiety demarcating the bounds of the sexual, which lies perilously close to activities sanctioned as venues for culturally appropriate male bonding. This anxiety catches non-homosexually-identified men up in “a coercive double bind” of “being a man’s man” and “being interested in men” (89).²⁵

As double binds go, however, the one plaguing what I will call the “heterosocial continuum” is at least as stubborn, for nowhere is the asexual possibility more energetically erased than in friendships between men and women. Victor Luftig also problematizes the separation or conflation of sex and friendship in *Seeing Together: Friendship Between the Sexes in English Writing, from Mill to Woolf*. Here, he attends to the much-neglected subject of heterosexual friendship, of which the Victorians were every bit as skeptical as our own culture is.²⁶ Luftig, however, concentrates not so much

²⁵ In a similar vein, Leo Bersani notes the way in which gayness produces images of machismo so thorough that they cease to seem serious, explaining that the U.S. military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy may have been provoked by fear that *openly* gay Marines “might begin, like some of their gay civilian brothers, to play at being Marines” through their very fulfillment of that quintessentially masculine role (17):

What passes for the real thing self-destructs from within its theatricalized replication. The imaginary negates the real to which it purportedly adheres. In imagining what he presumably already is (both gay and a Marine), the gay Marine may learn the invaluable lesson that *identity is not serious* (as if what he is imitating never existed before it was imitated). (*Homos* 18; emphasis in orig.)

In my Conclusion, I consider the possibility that asexuals too are advantageously positioned to stop taking identity seriously.

²⁶ The principal defect in Luftig’s study is exemplified by a single word choice. While one of his central claims is that the weakness of “friendship” as an idiom is its preoccupation with the inclusion or exclusion of sex from the relationships it names, his own appellation of “heterosexual friendship” for these relationships perpetuates that same preoccupation. Luftig’s explanation for his preemptive rejection of “heterosocial,” which would seem the logical term for the phenomenon under consideration, is regrettably vague. He argues that, unlike Sedgwick’s analysis of the male homosocial continuum,

[a]n analysis of heterosexual friendship must instead contend with a continuum that is constantly, simplistically, and oppressively accepted as a given—the social dynamic between men and women seen as inevitably (and almost always at the expense of those in subordinate roles) giving way to the sexual, “friendship” inevitably being rendered “just friendship” by the assumption that it must indeed mask or lead to something “more”—and more compromising. (6)

on friendship itself as on the terms in which it was thought possible or impossible during the period he examines and what was at stake in the formulation of those terms.

Heterosexual friendship, Luftig argues, threatens the stability of gender ideology because it multiplies and decenters the ways in which the sexes may be expected to relate to each other and erases distinctions between the spaces of work, domesticity, and sexual attraction (23).

Luftig fixes his scrutiny on our society's longstanding incredulity at claims of friendship between men and women, which is reminiscent of the incredulity that claims of asexuality attract. In focusing on "heterosexual dynamics that subordinate sexual desire" (226), he models a kind of reading that is attentive to the play of the asexual possibility in relationships in which sexual attraction may not be an important factor, if it is a factor at all, and which acknowledges the difficulties of leaving the asexual possibility open in an already problematic and overdetermined discourse of relationship.

Finally, one somewhat surprising site in which the asexual possibility is subject to erasure is flirtation. Attending not to friendship but to desire that does not aim at eventual consummation (and such desire's narrative consequences), Richard A. Kaye's *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* focuses on how the figure of the flirt and the action of flirtation affect narrative form and, in turn, how form

Luftig defends his choice of terminology on the grounds that "in the nominal act of displacing the sexual in favor of the social, 'heterosocial' would seem destined only to recapitulate the fate of earlier idioms for male/female friendship" (7), that is, idioms that compromised their own credibility by defensively denying the presence or relevance of sexual attraction in such relationships.

Yet allowing the sexual to stand in for the social instead—indeed, *displacing* the social in favor of the sexual, rather than the reverse, if Luftig compares his project to Sedgwick's—is merely the opposite side of the same coin, the academic equivalent of the cynical snickering with which the insistence that such a pair are "just friends" is met. He likewise foregoes a useful analogy to the continuum Sedgwick theorizes, in which sociality, of whichever prefix, is always haunted by the perilous proximity and perhaps already accomplished arrival of the eroticism of the same prefix. One can plug in "heterosociality," in these circumstances, every bit as justifiably as "homosociality."

and its material determinants (specifically, serialized Victorian fiction) dispose the novel to preoccupy itself with these figures. Flirtation operates in the novel, Kaye argues, as an erotic deferral, a non-teleologically oriented eroticism opposed to the common equation of marriage and narrative closure in Victorian fiction (32–33).²⁷ However, flirtation also shores up this form of closure by building appropriate mechanisms of delay into Victorian plots (33). Provocatively, Kaye “regard[s] the ceaseless emotional convolutions of Victorian protagonists as the aim, rather than the problem, of nineteenth century subjectivity” (6). Flirtation, on its apparently sexual surface, seems as though it would have little to do with asexuality, but as a codification of potentially infinite erotic delay and a deliberate refusal to take sexuality seriously, it has much in common with the asexual narrative structure and alternative teleologies that I highlight in James’s *The Sacred Fount* in Chapter 4 and Woolf’s *Orlando* in the Conclusion.

What we find, then, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses on gender and sexuality are a variety of ideologies and strategies that facilitated asexual erasure, as well as formations of the subject and of intimacy in which such erasure became necessary. The objection, I realize, could be made to *any* of these suggestions of the asexual possibility that, from a psychoanalytically savvy point of view, I’m just kidding myself, and if I dug a little deeper, I’d find that inevitably, sexual attraction was at play in these examples all along. I answer this objection below, not by flatly refuting it, but by

²⁷ Kaye notes the decline in the narrative use of flirtation alongside greater permissiveness about the publication of sexually explicit material during the modernist period, but he speculates about flirtation’s return in postmodern fiction and about the new dynamic of flirtation enabled by the internet, “in which flirting has the potential to become a thoroughly disembodied adventure in which participants need never meet” (48).

explaining how and why Freud categorically constructs the asexual possibility specifically as *impossibility*, in modernity's most spectacular act of asexual erasure.

Asexuality and Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud has perhaps been the single greatest agent of asexual erasure in the last two centuries. Myra T. Johnson would charge him, damningly enough, with pathologizing asexuality as either a symptom of mental illness or a mental illness in itself, reversing the trend of revering asexual women for their pious celibacy. Although Johnson never engages Freud directly, his implication in the “psychiatric consensus” that she critiques is clear enough (99). However, her reading of asexuality's misrepresentation as neurosis in the twentieth century is only partially accurate. While she correctly identifies a psychoanalytic paradigm as the major culprit for the acephobia (as it has come to be called) that survives as erasure's remainder, she overlooks a more basic point: psychoanalysis *does not*, in fact, pathologize asexuality because, as I will demonstrate below, asexuality *does not—cannot—exist* for psychoanalysis, either as subjective experience or disruptive structural phenomenon.

Given this apparent incompatibility between psychoanalysis and asexuality, then, it would seem that we would either have to reject the validity of psychoanalysis, which would founder on the possibility of asexuality as such, or that of asexuality, which a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity renders impossible. For Freud, sexuality and subjectivity are mutually constitutive, and thus the asexual individual cannot be a psychoanalytic subject, cannot be properly interpreted in terms of the teleological narrative of sexual instincts, cannot be assimilated to a depth model of causation and knowledge.

I don't dare attempt the first possibility. As my discussion of Foucault at the beginning of this chapter has shown, sexuality is a precondition of subjectivity in modernity, and because this model of subjectivity remains current, rejecting Freud outright out of convenience or indignation would be intellectually irresponsible. The "validity" of psychoanalysis I mentioned above derives, if not from its descriptive accuracy as a theory of the subject, then certainly from its influence as one. For instance, the most common dismissals of asexuality that asexuals encounter today (the ascription of frigidity, repressed homosexuality, or histories of sexual abuse to asexuals) are in large part our contemporary inheritance from popular understandings of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century.

When this project was in its very early stages, my dissertation director warned me that as frustrating as I might find Freud, I had to work with his theories anyway, because Freud wrote the dictionary on desire and subjectivity, and you can't throw out the dictionary unless you have something to replace it with. In an illustration of the stakes of this conundrum, Kaja Silverman has undertaken to clarify the implications of a wholesale rejection of a psychoanalytic paradigm. She adumbrates the function of the Oedipus complex as "induct[ing] the subject into the speaking of his or her language of desire" and insists upon the Oedipus complex as the precondition of the subject's being situated in the world at all (150). However, Silverman sees the Oedipus complex and the triangular kinship structure underlying it as opening onto vistas of considerable libidinal freedom. The terms "mother" and "father," she argues, are loci of myriad and contingent associations, both personal and cultural (151–52). The kinship structure they anchor is a sort of *langue* which must be spoken and individuated to be viable but which also opens

up, as *parole*, possibilities of variation and freedom by which we may “make out of it our own language of desire” and “make room in the world for new creatures and things” (152). To abandon the Oedipal kinship structure, Silverman claims, would thus be to give up the only common language we have for talking about desire, as well as sociality itself and any sense of shared experience with others. Most disastrously, it would entail giving up a set of categories and conceptual tools that we could instead use to help us formulate new ways of articulating desire (152–53). Basically, Silverman admonishes us not to throw out the baby of desire with the heteronormative bathwater.

While the opening up of the variability and contingency of the Oedipus complex is useful for the sort of project Silverman proposes—that of finding new ways of articulating desire and of relating our desires to those of other people—its utility is considerably less assured in the case of asexuality, whose relation to desire is by no means assured and depends largely on what we mean by “desire.” I intend here, among other things, to apply critical pressure to Freud’s theories in order to examine what has motivated the assumptions about desire that theorists like Silverman take for granted—for instance, that one *has* sexual desires of some sort to begin with and lacks only a psychoanalytically comprehensible means of articulating them.

Our second option when confronted with the conflict between psychoanalysis and asexuality, as you will recall, was to accept the nonexistence of asexuality as a consequence of the validity of psychoanalysis. Unsurprisingly, I reject this approach as well. I do, however, grant the incommensurability of asexuality with psychoanalysis, so rather than locate the points in Freud’s theories at which he disparages asexuality or treats

it as aberrant—as Johnson might—I will locate the points at which Freud effects its erasure, constructs his model of the mind so as to exclude its very possibility.

But while I cannot hope to correct these exclusions and shoehorn asexuality back into a psychoanalytic account of the subject, I also do not regard them as totalizing or inevitable, for psychoanalysis is one particular historical discourse produced by a particular set of conditions, preoccupations, and anxieties. In short, psychoanalysis is incompatible with asexuality because it has been made so. The prevalence, the insistence of its erasure of asexuality, the show of force that this erasure represents raises the further question: why? In response to what risk is psychoanalysis putting up such resistances to asexuality—nay, *repressing* asexuality? Why must the boundaries of psychoanalysis be drawn so as to render asexuality impossible?

By “repressing asexuality,” I don’t simply mean “marginalizing asexuals,” although the mechanisms of such repression do have this ancillary effect. Rather, these mechanisms are efforts to seal psychoanalysis—and the organizations of knowledge it countenances and depends upon—against the inbreaking not only of asexuality as subjective experience but of the asexual possibility. By its stasis and exemption from desire, asexuality disrupts the structures of linear temporality, teleology, conventional narrative, and the binaries of cause/effect and surface/depth around which subjectivity and knowledge have been constructed in modernity. This last disruption is the one that psychoanalysis is most energetically engaged in repressing, and of which its own epistemology stands as a spectacular, unfalsifiable denial. In fact, by erasing the asexual possibility, Freud actually *produces* it as that which would disrupt his theories.

I begin my examination of Freud's necessary exclusion of asexuality by outlining three theoretical strategies with which to apply critical pressure to psychoanalysis. I borrow these strategies in large part from Judith Butler. Then I survey key concepts in Freud's theories that stand out not just as instruments of asexuality's pathologization but of its erasure or logical exclusion. Four such sites are hysteria, sublimation, frigidity, and the death instinct, although Freud prepares the ground for all of these by positing a sexual basis to the entire range of human experience. Each of these concepts accounts for a phenomenon that might, under different circumstances, have gone by the name of asexuality—but in being accounted for, such phenomena are precisely *not* asexuality, for asexuality is incommensurable with the cause/effect, surface/depth logic of explanation. Having thus shown *how* Freud keeps asexuality out of psychoanalysis, I next investigate *why* he does so. Then, once I have detailed these mechanisms of resistance, I explain how the asexual possibility fatally compromises the totalizing explanatory power to which psychoanalysis aspires.

Before delving into Freud's writings, I make a detour through Judith Butler's work to clarify the strategies I will use in my readings below and the grounding of my skepticism regarding psychoanalysis's inevitability. Questioning the imbrication of gender and the materiality of the body, Butler seeks in *Bodies That Matter* not to negate matter altogether by means of her critique but rather to loosen the certainty of our assumptions about matter. Through my readings below of Freud's defenses against the asexual possibility, I take an analogous approach to a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity and to the sexual basis of knowledge and the mind in such an account, calling into question the inevitability of the organization of subjectivity and knowledge that

Freud establishes. Briefly, then, here are the three lessons I take from Butler to apply in my own readings.

1. *I read psychoanalysis's totalizing explanatory authority as contingent and precarious.* Such precariousness, of course, is not only the result of the asexual possibility. Butler models psychoanalysis's destabilization by interrogating the necessity of the phallus's centrality in morphogenesis.²⁸ She argues that what we find in the Lacanian Symbolic are imaginary effects that we no longer recognize as such, having treated them as the basis of signification itself for so long.

For Butler, the phallus's status as privileged signifier is performative: privileged signification supplies its own prerogatives by calling itself privileged and derives its authority from the alternatives it negates and disavows. The phallus achieves idealization by being neither a body part nor an imaginary effect (*Bodies* 50). By symbolizing the penis, it is itself *not* the penis, yet it also relies upon the penis for its identity, thus including the penis after all (51). The phallus is only a privileged signifier by virtue of being perpetually reconstituted as such, and the imaginary, as the site of the givens by which morphogenesis is constituted, becomes more flexible as we recognize these givens as less given (55–56). Butler, then, uses the recognition of the contingency of the phallus and of the psychoanalytic worldview founded upon it as an opening to imagine the possibility of alternatives to this model of privileged signification—for instance, a lesbian

²⁸ For Lacan, she explains, bodily wholeness cannot occur without entrance into the Symbolic and the support of sexually specific naming, but at the mirror stage, what the child sees in the mirror is not the whole of his body but an image produced by an *ideal* of wholeness (*Bodies* 41; 43). The conceptualization of bodily organs as parts that is supposed to precede such an ideal actually succeeds the perception of bodily integrity. These parts are organized into relationship with the Other by narcissistic investment, and as a result, they “cease to be organs and become imaginary effects” (45). The subject's perception of everything else, his reading of every other object, depends upon them and is registered in relation to the phallus (45–46).

phallus. I will use a similar set of moves to expose the seeming impossibility of asexuality as a function of a disavowal that depends on a contingent model of privileged signification.²⁹

This contingency is not merely logical, however. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong adumbrates the historical and ideological specificity of the emergence of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century, as part of her larger project of historicizing the function of desire in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. Like Foucault, she does not treat sexual desire as universal but rather interrogates the historical determinants by which it came to be regarded as such. In Armstrong's reading, Freud undercuts the mode of feminine desire at work in domestic fiction in order to legitimate his own theory: installed by Freud as the sole object of female desire, the phallus subsumes the sexual contract and obscures the historical genesis of gender delineation so that "gender seems to rest on the one-sided fact of the male's biological nature" (231).

For the phallus to have value, Armstrong explains, the male must be desired by someone, and so psychoanalysis reconfigured feminine subjectivity around the desire for the phallus, whereas domestic fiction had previously located feminine subjectivity in domestic virtue and the middle-class woman's agency in negotiating the sexual contract (230–31). Turn-of-the-century interest in the unconscious coalesced around the question

²⁹ Elsewhere, Butler herself applies the same sort of pressure to psychoanalysis's heteronormativity. In "Quandaries of the Incest Taboo," she argues that the incest taboo is essential for fixing gender identity and heterosexuality. It not only proscribes certain sexual relations but also *prescribes* one normative kinship structure, for incest relies on a particular family structure in order to be intelligible as such, "and the forms of sexuality that emerge at a distance from the norm become unintelligible..." ("Quandaries" 45). Shifting family relations to a linguistic and symbolic register in a Lacanian model masks their social contingency (44). The incest taboo also makes incest, as well as other non-normative sexual expressions, more difficult to acknowledge as occurring as such (45). In short, Butler believes that many of psychoanalysis's normative pronouncements rely on its naturalization of the incest taboo, as others of its pronouncements rely on the naturalization of the phallus as privileged signifier.

of female desire (224). According to psychoanalysis, the bourgeois woman wanted to be seduced, and according to modernist authors, she wanted transgressive sexuality (225). The result of both discourses was the pathologization of the formerly good domestic woman, for her domesticity only distracted her from the all-important phallus (235–36).

For Armstrong, sexuality remains central to the construction of the modern female subject in the nineteenth century, but in a markedly different way than it does for Freud. Both such models of subjectivity therefore stand opposed to asexuality, but their competition and specificity grounds each as a product of a particular set of historical circumstances and marks psychoanalysis in particular as having had to suppress other models of the subject in order to assure the primacy of its own. Psychoanalysis's legitimation of its own authority and its tendency to obscure its contingency is worth keeping in mind in light of the next, related lesson I take from Butler's *Bodies That Matter*.

2. *I show that the boundaries of psychoanalysis have been drawn in a particular way and might have been drawn otherwise.* Butler locates the subject as being formed by the necessity of acceding, and the failure to accede, to the norms of subject construction (*Bodies* 84). She stresses the dependence of subject construction on the mismatch or misalignment of the subject with social norms, which identifications work simultaneously with and against (86). Bodies that don't relate to the phallus through established channels exist unstably and disruptively in the imaginary, which the phallus separates from the symbolic. This separation is all that keeps body parts from signifying in radically different ways not dependent on the phallus, Butler explains (97).

The significance of this discussion for asexuality, again, is the contingency and instability of the model of sexuality that renders asexuality unthinkable. Butler calls attention to the mechanisms by which the boundaries of the articulably sexed body have been drawn and how these boundaries work to keep us from conceptualizing bodies otherwise. My project in this chapter is analogous, showing that the model of the psyche that Freud takes as natural and universal depends on its discursive construction through quite specific oppositions and narrative mappings—and that it is not the only one that was possible. My purpose is not to throw out the dictionary but instead to expose the selectiveness of that dictionary’s composition and the forces that led to its taking a particular form.

3. *I read asexuality as an unnamable inscriptional site for sexuality, as Butler argues femininity has been for the form/matter binary.* For Butler, the body’s relationship to language “is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification” (6; emphasis in orig.). She builds on Luce Irigaray’s critique of Plato’s *Timaeus*, whose form/matter binary does not merely align femininity with the “matter” term of the binary but locates femininity as the ground of that binary’s inscription, which must be overwritten by the binary and excluded from it. Butler likens this configuration to that of the Derridean supplement: “every explicit distinction takes place in an inscriptional space that the distinction itself cannot accommodate,” and “what is excluded from this binary is also *produced* by it in the mode of exclusion and has no separable or fully independent existence as an absolute outside.... It emerges within the system as incoherence, disruption, a threat to its own

systematicity” (12–13; emphasis in orig.). Outside the binary, femininity becomes impossible to conceptualize, neither universal nor particular, not even a Platonic Form, only “nonthemmatizable materiality” (16); even Plato’s naming of it as unnamable

constitutes a primary or founding inscription that secures this place as an inscriptional space. This naming of what cannot be named is itself a penetration into this receptacle which is at once a violent erasure, one which establishes it as an impossible yet necessary site for all further inscriptions. (18)

So Butler’s reading shows this violation of femininity by the act of naming to be the precondition of the concept of matter itself and to institute a disconnect between femininity as the ground of materiality and the feminine materiality later inscribed upon this ground as part of the form/matter binary.

A similar mechanism, I will demonstrate, is at work in the psychoanalytic paradigm. There, the non-experience of sexual attraction—which in Freud’s view can never be originary—is in fact already a term within a sexual regime that has had to overwrite its nonthemmatizable asexual other. Asexuality is an absence, a trace, a supplement that can neither be included within the system nor expelled from it and instead plays within it—as Butler describes—as “incoherence,” “disruption,” and “threat.” The asexual possibility engages in just this sort of disruptive play in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, frustrating the movement of realistic plotting and subject construction, as well as a depth model of knowledge.

Turning now to Freud’s attempts to foreclose the possibility of such disruption with psychoanalysis, our first task is to locate specific sites of this kind of resistance in his theories: where *isn’t* asexuality; where has it been kept out? Where there *seems to be* asexuality—at least as the non-experience of sexual attraction by a subject—it is more or

less pathological. Freud's denial of the asexual possibility as epistemological disruption is far less obtrusive than his denial of it within the human psyche, but this other denial becomes noticeable, for instance, in his penchant for binary thinking and his formulation of the death instinct.

The non-experience of sexual attraction, for Freud, always signals some short circuit of the natural order of things and is, at bottom, not really a non-experience at all. For this reason, it will be helpful as a preliminary to detail this order briefly. For Freud, all desire is sexual and aim-directed, and an asexual object is impossible. His theories are predicated on a dualistic teleology, and his teleological account of sexual aim resembles narrative plotting. While it is conceivable that asexuality is subject to misrecognition under the signs of hysteria, sublimation, and frigidity, Freud constructs all of these phenomena so as to ground them in the concealment or the reshaping of sexual attraction, not the non-experience of it. The death instinct then appears to be the likeliest Freudian equivalent for structural asexuality (as opposed to asexuality as experienced by the subject), but not even the death instinct allows asexuality a space within a psychoanalytic worldview, for instincts are aim-directed, while asexuality operates as a principle of stasis.

Freud assumes a sexual basis to basically the entire range of human psychology. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he develops the idea—quite controversial at the time—that sexual impulses are present in the human subject from birth, taking seriously the sexuality of children and its instrumentality in the development of adult sexuality.³⁰ He likewise broadens the categories of stimulation that produce

³⁰ In his preface to the fourth edition of the *Three Essays* (1920), Freud writes

erotogenic effects and claims that there are grounds for eliding any distinction that may exist between “sexual excitation” and “satisfaction” generally (7: 201). He considers it likely “that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct” (7: 205). Freud admittedly puts no pressure on the question of what constitutes “considerable importance,” but as my readings of novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf in the following chapters will show, the category of the *unimportant* is one of the sites open to the play of the asexual possibility.

Freud expands the reach of the sexual again in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), where he includes in Eros (the sexual class of instincts) not only the sexual instinct strictly speaking and the aim-directed impulses in which it is sublimated, but also the instinct of self-preservation. The death instinct, on the other hand, seeks to return the organism to an inanimate state. Freud classes both instincts, then, as conservative, as attempting to re-establish the equilibrium that the emergence of life disrupted. By this account, Freud reasons, “[t]he emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be a conflict and

that some of what this book contains—its insistence on the importance of sexuality in all human achievements and the attempt that it makes at enlarging the concept of sexuality—has from the first provided the strongest motives for the resistance against psycho-analysis. People have gone so far in their search for high-sounding catch-words as to talk of the “pan-sexualism” of psycho-analysis and to raise the senseless charge against it of explaining “everything” by sex. (7: 134)

Rather than deny this charge, however, Freud instead only reminds the reader that Schopenhauer expanded the influence of the sexual in the range of human achievement long before psychoanalysis emerged on the scene. He appears somewhat surprised, too, that his readers could be so shocked by something that ought to have been, by that time, common knowledge. “And as for the ‘stretching’ of the concept of sexuality which has been necessitated by the analysis of children and what are called perverts,” Freud continues, “anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato” (7: 134). For Freud, then, the best defense is a good offense, and he answers objections to his *conceptual* expansion of the sexual with a still more grandiose *historical* expansion of the sexual.

compromise between these two trends” (19: 41). The result is a dualistic teleology, and at bottom, the dualism and emphasis on teleology in Freud’s thinking are two of the elements in it that I argue are most fundamentally inimical to asexuality—although Freud’s willingness to assimilate all desire to Eros is also a prominent factor in psychoanalysis’s exclusion of asexuality.

Freud’s elaboration of the life and death instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is better known, and it is here that he gives an account of the development of his thinking about the instincts. In its earliest stages, psychoanalysis

kept... to the popular division of instincts typified in the phrase “hunger and love.” At least there was nothing arbitrary in this; and by its help the analysis of the psychoneuroses was carried forward quite a distance. The concept of “sexuality”, and at the same time of the sexual instinct, had, it is true, to be extended so as to cover many things which could not be classed under the reproductive function; and this caused no little hubbub in an austere, respectable or merely hypocritical world. (18: 51)

Here Freud documents a first expansion of the sexual. The conclusion he has arrived at by *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, after several more revisions to his theory of the instincts,³¹ is that all known instincts are libidinal, and “in that case we shall after all be driven to agree with the critics who suspected from the first that psycho-analysis explains *everything* by sexuality, or with innovators like Jung who, making a hasty judgment, have used the word ‘libido’ to mean instinctual force in general” (18: 52; emphasis in orig.).

Unlike Freud, Jung espouses a monistic theory of libido, while Freud’s at this point is more dualistic than ever, as he revises the opposition between ego instincts and sexual

³¹ Next came the theorization of the ego as the reservoir of libido, from which object-cathexes may commence. Discovering the ego, then, to be itself libidinal, Freud discarded the strict opposition between ego instincts and sexual instincts and made the distinction between them topographical rather than qualitative, for the conflict between them still marks psychoneuroses and transference neuroses (18: 51–52).

instincts to one between life instincts and death instincts.³² Freud grants that other, non-libidinal instincts may also exist, although none have been found (18: 53). Thus he makes no effort to deny the charge that psychoanalysis enforces what is functionally a totalizing view of sexuality as the ground of all human behavior and experience.

While binary thinking is to some extent endemic to Western discourse in general, its structural prominence is especially pronounced in psychoanalysis. Because, as James Strachey notes in his introduction to *The Ego and the Id*, psychoanalysis initially developed as a result of scientific inquiry into hysteria in the late nineteenth century, the problem of hysteria helped to dictate the model of the mind that psychoanalysis was able to conceptualize: one that was dualistic and agonistic, a contest between repressed and repressing parts, between the unconscious and the ego (19: 4). Although Freud eventually elaborated a far more complex relationship between these latter two concepts, the foundational dualism of psychoanalysis remained.³³ Critiques of Freud often focus on the historical and ideological contingency of his theories' reliance on the primacy of the

³² Freud defines an instinct in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* as “the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a ‘stimulus,’ which is set up by *single* excitations coming from *without*. The concept of instinct is thus one of those lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical” (7: 168; emphasis in orig.).

³³ According to Strachey,

[t]he historical accident that psycho-analysis had its origin in connection with the study of hysteria led at once to the hypothesis of repression (or, more generally, of defence) as a mental function, and this in turn to a topographical hypothesis—to a picture of the mind as including two portions, one repressed and the other repressing. The quality of “consciousness” was evidently closely involved in these hypotheses; and it was easy to equate the repressed part of the mind with what was “unconscious” and the repressing part with what was “conscious”.... And this apparently simple scheme underlay all of Freud’s earlier theoretical ideas: functionally, a repressed force endeavoring to make its way into activity but held in check by a repressing force, and structurally, an “unconscious” opposed by an “ego.” (19: 4–5).

bourgeois nuclear family,³⁴ but here is an additional layer of contingency: the intellectual starting point of psychoanalysis, the clinical application for which it was originally developed, had a decided shaping effect on its later development, the horizons of what it made thinkable—the horizons at which we will find its resistances to asexuality.

In the *Three Essays*, Freud defines the sexual object as “the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds” and the sexual aim as the “act towards which the instinct tends” (7: 135–36). Asexuality in this schema, then, as the non-experience of sexual attraction, would entail, among other things, not having a sexual object, a condition that is impossible to meet, as Freud’s discussion of infantile sexuality demonstrates. In the oral phase, the earliest phase of sexual development, sexual activity is not yet distinct from eating, and the two activities share one object in the mother’s breast. The aim of incorporating that object prefigures the process of identification (7: 198)—another reason why, as I argued in the Introduction, asexual identity is inherently fraught with internal contradictions. If the process of taking nourishment is from the very beginning of human life associated with the desire for and incorporation of a sexual object, then no space exists in which to think asexuality as a possible mode of human experience.

The “normal sexual aim,” for Freud—at which the subject arrives only after a lengthy process that may go awry at a number of points—is “the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct—a satisfaction analogous to the satiation of

³⁴ See, for instance, Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and Butler’s “Quandaries of the Incest Taboo,” which I discussed above.

hunger” (7: 149).³⁵ This analogy, of course, reinforces the conceptualization I discussed above of the infant’s desire for the mother’s breast as both nutritive and sexual.

Perversions, however, are deviations from the normal sexual aim; Freud defines them as “sexual activities which either (*a*) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (*b*) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim” (7: 150). Implicit in this second category of perversion is a conceptualization of normative sexual aim dictated not only by its direction but by its pacing: another point at which, as Judith Roof has pointed out, Freudian sexuality has a great deal in common with plot.³⁶

The normal sexual aim requires the sexual instinct to be shaped and directed accordingly, Freud explains, an operation accomplished in part by the resistances of disgust, shame, and pain, which oppose libido (7: 159; 162). The sexual aim can usually overpower disgust toward the genitals, except in the case of hysteria, the first site at which Freud mounts a defense against the asexual possibility.³⁷ Freud finds, through his

³⁵ While Paul Robinson acknowledges that Freud’s normalizing discourse produces most of the charges of homophobia against him, he also points out that Freud is himself ambivalent about the desirability of normalcy: “One strain in his thought protested against the libidinal sacrifice that ‘normal’ adult genitality entailed, and, as thinkers like Herbert Marcuse and Norman Brown argued years ago, one can read Freud as, at least in part, a critic of normalization and a prophet of a liberated, ‘polymorphously perverse’ sexuality” (145). However, “polymorphously perverse sexuality”—even if it is unshackled from heteronormativity—nevertheless remains eronormative, and as such it is “liberated” only in a selective and qualified way.

³⁶ “Supplanting the proper conclusion, perversions cut the story short, in a sense preventing a story at all by tarrying in its preparations. But this premature abridgment only has significance in relation to the ‘normal’; we only know the story is cut short because we know what length the story is supposed to be,” Roof explains (*Come* xxi).

³⁷ While Freud notes that feelings of disgust regarding oral and anal sex are fairly common, “[t]hese forces do not as a rule extend to the genitals themselves. But there is no doubt that the genitals of the opposite sex

study of inversion, that sexual instinct and sexual aim are not as tightly bound together as his contemporaries had commonly presupposed.³⁸ For psychoneurotics, illness tends to be brought on by “the demands made upon them by normal sexual life,” or when normal sexual life cannot satisfy their libido, which seeks other channels for its outlet (for instance, the perversions) when the primary one is blocked (7: 170).

Freud roots the cause of psychoneuroses, including hysteria, in “sexual instinctual forces,” and as a result of this causation, “the symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient” (7: 163). Treating hysterical patients, Freud explains, requires removing the repression that blocks the expression of the desires for which the patients’ hysterical symptoms are substitutes, for hysteria is characterized by greater than normal repression and stronger than normal mechanisms of resistance of the sexual instinct. Most pointedly, Freud observes in hysterical patients “what seems like an instinctive aversion... to any intellectual consideration of sexual problems. As a result of this, in especially marked cases, the patients remain in complete ignorance of sexual matters right into the period of sexual maturity” (7: 164). On the face of it, this characteristic would seem to point to an asexuality that Freud has simply misdiagnosed. However, Freud’s rhetoric subtly

can in themselves be an object of disgust and that such an attitude is one of the characteristics of all hysterics, and especially of hysterical women” (7: 152).

³⁸ Freud writes in the *Three Essays* that

in [cases that are considered abnormal] the sexual instinct and the sexual object are merely soldered together—a fact which we have been in danger of overlooking in consequence of the uniformity of the normal picture, where the object appears to form part and parcel of the instinct. We are thus warned to loosen the bond that exists in our thought between instinct and object. It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object’s attractions. (7: 148)

The particularity of the sexual object is, then, secondary to the sexual instinct. Freud explains, to similar effect, in *The Ego and the Id* that in obedience to the pleasure principle, the id harnesses the mental energy it derives from the narcissistic libido to overcome obstacles to discharge, and any discharge will do; the id doesn’t care what the object of its cathexis is (19: 46).

precludes any equation of the asexual as such with the hysteric. First, his “seems.” In the hysterical patient, he implies, there is no “instinctual aversion,” only the appearance of one. The foundationally libidinal character of the instincts for Freud makes the possibility of locating any such aversion in them exceedingly problematic. Furthermore, Freud only considers in this passage an aversion to “*intellectual* consideration” of sexual problems, leaving in abeyance all manner of other sexual aversions. Additionally, by allowing the substitution of hysterical symptoms for sexual activity, Freud provides, by way of metonymic sleight of hand, for the continuation of sexuality under another sign, even where hysteria seems to mark its cessation. In fact, we might go so far as to say that this construction of hysteria is a production of psychoanalysis’s repression of asexuality: not because it affords an explanation of asexuality under another sign, but because it is founded upon a binary opposition that structurally excludes the asexual possibility.

Freud does not allow sexual aversion of any kind to stand unqualified in his discussion of hysteria, because while hysteria is marked by an increase of repression and resistance beyond what is normal, it is also marked by a strong sexual instinct; that is, hysteria is characterized by the opposing traits of “exaggerated sexual craving and excessive aversion to sexuality” (7: 165). Hysteria begins, in Freud’s account, when a person marked by these opposites needs a way out of a sexual situation and finds it in hysterical symptoms. For male patients, Freud grants that the situation may not be outwardly but only implicitly sexual (7: 165). What we find in this description of hysteria is that Freud effectively denies the possibility of asexuality. Far from “not experiencing sexual attraction,” the hysterical patient not only experiences it but may experience it to a heightened degree and only represses it. Freud gives no consideration to the possibility of

sexual attraction not having been there to begin with, only to what the subject does about it.³⁹ His constitutive pair of opposites is thus selective and not the only pair thinkable, or even the pair most opposed: why excessive craving/excessive repression and not excessive craving/deficient craving? In the case of hysteria, Freud does not even dare to think asexuality far enough to pathologize it, instead fixing it as a repressive surface concealing a turbid libidinal depth.

Another question that this discussion of hysteria and asexuality raises is what constitutes “experience” in a psychoanalytic model of the mind, and what, by extension, “experiencing” or “not experiencing” sexual attraction would mean to Freud. The role he ascribes to the unconscious means that the phenomena and processes of which the subject is aware comprise only a small subset of those that actually occur. Even what we recognize as conscious at any given moment, Freud points out in *The Ego and the Id*, has not always been so and may not remain so for very long, although it can later be made conscious (19: 14). Yet there are further effects in mental life, Freud goes on, that cannot be attributed to conscious stimuli and whose cause must therefore lie in unconscious ideas. Freud defines repression as “[t]he state in which the ideas existed before being made conscious” and resistance as “the force which instituted the repression and

³⁹ Additionally, one of three possible responses to the female castration complex Freud discusses in “Femininity” (1932) is for the girl to give up on phallic sexuality after comparing her clitoris to the penis and repress the bulk of her sexuality (22: 126). Once again, we see that repressing something is not the same as its not having been there in the first place. The very concept of repression presupposes what it posits. “Femininity” is part of Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, a series of lectures that he published late in his career, never having delivered, nor intended to deliver, them. They continue and supplement his series of *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* delivered between 1915 and 1917 (Strachey 22: 3–4).

maintains it” (19: 14).⁴⁰ This division points to a depth model of subjectivity and knowledge, the sort of model that asexuality, incompatible with the dynamics of secrecy, threatens to disrupt.⁴¹ The repressed can become conscious when analysis can build in links between consciousness and the unconscious (19: 21). An individual, then, cannot affirm or deny having repressed something; the task of recovering it is turned over to a specialized professional. Asexuality, in a Freudian schema, need never be anything more than the surface condition of someone repressing his or her sexual impulses (more likely hers, and I will discuss the significance of gender for psychoanalysis’s denial of asexuality below), which have only to be excavated by the analyst, whose interpretive framework is of course a thoroughly sexualized Freudian one. The non-experience of sexual attraction, thus subjected to catachrestic misrecognition, becomes relatively easy to pathologize.

For Freud, not only might sexual attraction have been experienced and repressed, but it may also have been experienced and reshaped, redirected through sublimation. Freud himself did not develop the concept of sublimation; rather, he was the first to apply it to individuals rather than to whole civilizations, as some historians had done before him.⁴² At the end of the *Three Essays*, he looks at the ways in which normal sexual

⁴⁰ Dynamically speaking, latent ideas are merely preconscious; repressed ones are unconscious. Unlike unconscious ideas, preconscious ideas can be made conscious through word-presentations, because they are basically perception’s leftovers (19: 20).

⁴¹ In Chapter 3, I use a reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to show how the asexual possibility plays havoc on the metaphor of closetedness and the opposition of secrecy and disclosure.

⁴² Freud recognizes the consensus of

[h]istorians of civilization... that powerful components are acquired for every kind of cultural achievement by this diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones—a process which deserves the name of “sublimation”. To this we would add,

development may go awry and why variations occur in individual dispositions, sexual and otherwise. The process of sexual maturation could stall out at any point for a number of reasons. First, individual sexual constitutions differ, and Freud also ascribes a role to hereditary syphilis in the development of perversions and psychoneuroses (7: 236). Experiential and environmental factors may also influence the individual's sexual development "according to the vicissitudes of the tributary streams of sexuality springing from their separate sources" (7: 237). Any abnormal relation between these "tributary streams" will be amplified in maturity and can produce perversions, especially when the genital zone is weaker than the other erotogenic zones (7: 237). Alternately, elements of an individual's sexuality that are *too* strong may be repressed and redirected as symptoms of a neurosis that accompanies a normal sexual life (as opposed to a neurosis that takes the place of one) (7: 237–38). But an abnormal constitutional disposition may also produce sublimation of excess sexual excitations, which explains, for Freud, artistic aptitude and the variability of individual character (7: 238–39). So the would-be asexual, in Freud's view, could be better explained not only as repressing his or her sexual impulses but as sublimating others of them, of which the individual's very personality can serve as evidence. A psychoanalytic interpretive framework enables one to make of any phenomenon, any trait, a link in a metonymic chain that leads inexorably back to sexuality, if one only follows it far enough; thus one need never be troubled by the asexual possibility.

Freud equates sublimation with what he calls "desexualization" again in *The Ego and the Id*, where he conceptualizes the process in more detail. Here, as in the *Three*

accordingly, that the same process plays a part in the development of the individual and we would place its beginning in the period of sexual latency of childhood. (7: 178)

Essays, he details the overlap of identification and object-oriented sexuality. He theorizes that initially there is no difference between object-cathexis and identification. The difference between them only takes hold when the id takes over responsibility for object-cathexes from the ego, which vets and sometimes represses them (19: 29). The distinction between object-love and identification, then, develops only belatedly, and both the id and the ego draw on the same store of neutral energy that ultimately derives from Eros (19: 44). The conversion of object-libido to narcissistic libido,⁴³ Freud makes clear, entails desexualization and sublimation: he defines narcissistic libido as “desexualized Eros,” noting that “[t]he erotic instincts appear to be altogether more plastic, more readily diverted and displaced than the destructive instincts” (19: 44–45). That is, he rescues for the erotic instincts a protean metonymy that grants them influence over the whole field of human activity and crowds out the play of the asexual possibility.

Freud goes on to make a further defense of the interchangeability of desexualization and sublimation, because the mental energy he has been describing, which can serve a variety of functions,

would still retain the main purpose of Eros—that of uniting and binding—in so far as it helps towards establishing the unity, or tendency to unity, which is particularly characteristic of the ego. If thought-processes in the wider sense are to be included among these displacements, then the activity of thinking is also supplied from the sublimation of erotic motive forces. (19: 45)

Asexuality is unthinkable in Freud’s model of the mind, then, because *thinking itself* is rooted in Eros.

⁴³ The ego is where object-cathexes go to die; their sediment actually comprises it identificatorily. The ego incorporates object-cathexes in this way as a gesture of goodwill toward the id, because it hopes that by making itself resemble the object, it can make the id love it too (19: 29–30).

Another site at which Freud might locate and explain away ostensible asexuality is frigidity, which again represents a departure from normative adult sexuality—in a way that sublimation, in the main, does not. Frigidity is conspicuously gendered female and has no male counterpart in Freud’s writings. He identifies frigidity, in the *Three Essays*, as the frequent result of an incomplete rejection of object-love for the opposite-sex parent and a failure to assert one’s independence from parental authority during puberty.

Individuals who fail to complete this process

are mostly girls, who, to the delight of their parents, have persisted in all their childish love far beyond puberty. It is most instructive to find that it is precisely these girls who in their later marriage lack the capacity to give their husbands what is due to them; they make cold wives and remain sexually anaesthetic. We learn from this that sexual love and what appears to be non-sexual love for parents are fed from the same sources; the latter, that is to say, merely corresponds to an infantile fixation of the libido. (7: 227)

From this explanation we take away the conclusion that in Freud’s view, there is no such thing as “non-sexual love” for parents—only the appearance thereof—and that frigidity is not indicative of asexuality but of an incomplete maturation and redirection of sexuality.

Psychoanalysis undercuts the possibility of a non-sexual love of any kind, particularly in family relations—both with parents and with siblings.⁴⁴ In discussing the centrality of incestuous object choice in the psychoneuroses, Freud speaks with some condescension of “[g]irls with an exaggerated need for affection and an equally exaggerated horror of the real demands made by sexual life,” who

have an irresistible temptation on the one hand to realize the ideal of asexual love in their lives and on the other hand to conceal their libido

⁴⁴ Outside the nuclear family, romantic friendship is likewise assumed to have a sexual foundation as a potential harbinger of inversion; “adolescent boys and girls form sentimental friendships with others of their own sex” as part of the “fumbling” that goes on en route to mature opposite-sex object-choice (7: 229).

behind an affection which they can express without self-reproaches, by holding fast throughout their lives to their infantile fondness, revived at puberty, for their parents or brothers and sisters. Psycho-analysis has no difficulty in showing persons of this kind that they are *in love*, in the everyday sense of the word, with these blood-relations of theirs.... (7: 227–28; emphasis in orig.)

Yet again, asexuality as such—and asexual love—are invalidated, installed as a self-delusive surface concealing a repressed erotic depth, and in the case of this rare instance in which Freud actually uses the word “asexual,” an unattainable ideal. Even so, what Freud calls “asexual” can be denigrated and pathologized only *after* he has reformulated it at a considerable distance from “the non-experience of sexual attraction.”

Freud never remarks upon the gendered asymmetry that frigidity presents as such, but one potential explanation for it lies in his differentiation between the masculine and feminine functions of the libido. In “Femininity” (1932), he observes

that more constraint has been applied to the libido when it is pressed into the service of the feminine function and that—to speak teleologically—Nature takes less careful account of its [that function’s] demands than in the case of masculinity. And the reason for this may lie—thinking once again teleologically—in the fact that the accomplishment of the aim of biology has been entrusted to the aggressiveness of men and has been made to some extent independent of women’s consent. (22: 131)

This difference accounts, in Freud’s view, for women’s frequent sexual frigidity. He proposes a wide variety of more proximate causes for frigidity’s emergence in individual women, owing to environmental, developmental, anatomical, or constitutional factors (22: 132–34). While we might be tempted to search for a misrecognized asexuality beneath these latter two causes, recall that Freud allows no theoretical breathing room elsewhere for a non-experience of sexual attraction owing to any such inherent characteristics and flatly forbids the possibility of innate or unqualified asexuality

through his account of infantile sexuality. Any instance of apparent asexuality in Freud's writings represents a deviation from the sexual norm, and thus it can be recuperated in relation to a trajectory, a chain of cause and effect—a narrative. Asexuality as such—as the non-experience of sexual attraction—is impossible within this framework that can only recognize the repression or refiguration of sexual attraction, not its absence.

Let us return, however, to the passage quoted above. Its implicit indifference to rape, of course, is rather disturbing—although the equivocations of Freud's wording speak to his obvious discomfort with this implication. His emphasis—and probably most readers'—is on the ramification of the gendered functions of libido for female sexuality. But the import of the state of affairs he describes for male sexuality is also striking, not least because for Freud to think teleologically, and to admit to doing so, is a notable departure.⁴⁵ In order to think teleologically, however—ascribing to the masculine and feminine functions of libido the requirement of fitness for a predetermined purpose—he

⁴⁵ In his introduction to the *Three Essays*, Steven Marcus explains that

[a]lthough Freud, like Darwin, was rigorously antiteleological in his formal point of view, there are some moments in this text when the evidence of structure, design, and a coherent and meaningful sequence of developments seem so overwhelming that he (like Darwin again) wrote passages that can only be construed in a teleological way. One of these he later excised. (xxxvi)

Indeed, Freud's revisions to the *Three Essays* document some of his unsuccessful attempts to avoid teleology. These are particularly evident as he endeavors to explain the primacy of the genital zone among the erotogenic zones. In his 1920 revisions to the *Three Essays*, Freud added a footnote that read "In biological discussions it is scarcely possible to avoid a teleological way of thinking, even though one is aware that in any particular instance one is not secure against error" to the passage, "This satisfaction [from the stimulation of the erotogenic zone] must have been previously experienced in order to have left behind a need for its repetition; and we may expect that Nature will have made safe provisions so that this experience of satisfaction shall not be left to chance" (7: 184 n.2). Freud also revised a passage that appeared in the 1905 and 1910 editions as "it is difficult to overlook Nature's purpose of establishing the future primacy over sexual activity exercised by this erotogenic zone by means of early infantile masturbation, which scarcely a single individual escapes" to read "it is scarcely possible to avoid the conclusion that the foundations for the future primacy over sexual activity exercised by this erotogenic zone are established by early infantile masturbation, which scarcely a single individual escapes" (7: 188 n.1). Not only in *The Ego and the Id*, then, does Freud succumb to the temptation to defer to the authority of Nature in establishing a particular order.

must also install an agency that has ordained such a purpose, quietly personifying “Nature” as overseeing the compliance of these functions with “the aim of biology.” But capital-N Nature’s *laissez-faire* attitude to the feminine sexual function opens the door to lapses and failures thereof such as Freud has described, in stark contrast to the implicitly more stringent requirements that “Nature” places on the masculine function. Here the stakes are higher, Freud suggests, for “the accomplishment of the aim of biology” *depends* on masculine sexual aggressiveness. “Speaking teleologically,” then (whether he wishes to admit it or not), Freud neither permits nor acknowledges the kinds of systemic suspensions or refusals of such aggressiveness that male frigidity or asexuality would entail. At the points at which they may occur, Freud will be at pains to restore a sexual basis to them rhetorically or metonymically.

By resorting to a teleological explanation, then, Freud is able to elide the question of the absence of male sexual aggression. This teleology allows him to sidestep the male asexual possibility. The insistence with which he holds the masculine function to the accomplishment of this aim bears a striking resemblance to the compliance to narrative teleology to which Mary Elizabeth Braddon holds the largely indifferent Robert Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret* by any means at her disposal, as we will see in the next chapter. The asexual threat to which Braddon responds, however, is not merely that of a potentially asexual subject, but of a more structural asexuality that endangers linear, causally organized narrative itself. This is the asexual possibility that resembles, but is not reducible to, the Freudian death instinct.

Above, we saw how Freud’s formulation of sublimation helped to lead him to root thought processes themselves—as engaged in the work of “uniting and binding”—in

Eros. So much, in fact, is rooted in Eros that it is only because of the association of sadism with the death instinct and Freud's arguments in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that he is able to maintain a dualistic view of the instincts at all. In any case, he is "driven to conclude that the death instincts are by their nature mute and that the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros" (19: 46). He ranges "clamour" and activity—the stuff of narrative, incidentally—on the side of Eros, and silence, inaction, and the unnoticeable on the side of the death instinct. Were we searching for a metonymic path back to the logic of asexuality within the confines of psychoanalysis, this might seem a likely one, but I would caution against equating asexuality too simplistically with the death instinct. First, the death instinct works too much in concert with Eros to be commensurable with asexuality. Freud details the push and pull of Eros and the death instinct in terms that again recall the requirements of narrative. Eros is always producing tension—much in the same way that Tzvetan Todorov predicates narrative on at least some portion of the cycle of equilibrium, degradation, disequilibrium, the attempt to restore equilibrium, and its restoration (Todorov 29).⁴⁶ The id, motivated by the pleasure principle, seeks to block or alleviate this tension in any way it can. It often does so by seeking release and satisfying sexual impulses, especially and most effectively through sexual discharge. The release of tension thus accomplished resembles death, because once Eros is satisfied, the death instinct has a free hand.

⁴⁶ Todorov grants as entirely possible

a tale that omits the first two elements and begins with a situation that is already deficient; or a tale might omit the last two elements and end on an unhappy note. But we sense that these would be two halves of the cycle, whereas here we have the cycle in full. Theoretical research has shown—and empirical studies have confirmed—that this cycle belongs to the very definition of narrative: one cannot imagine a narrative that fails to contain at least a part of it. (29)

Second, and more importantly, the difference between asexuality and the death instinct is that between stasis and extinction. In seeking to return the organism to its original inanimate state, the death instinct seeks a reversal: it has a goal. Its being an instinct gives it direction and movement.⁴⁷ Asexuality, as the non-experience of sexual attraction, has no aim, no tendency toward movement in any direction, which is precisely what makes the asexual possibility so disruptive in narrative. It stands still. It's the thing one trips over because it's sitting smack in the middle of a novel, unseen (the problem of erasure, the trace, etc.), and it won't budge. Static and yet disruptive, it sometimes makes its presence (or rather, the presence of its absence) felt in narrative by forcing patterns of movement to change around it. This is the manner in which I read the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

But an inconvenience to be tripped over or circumvented seems too slight a threat for psychoanalysis to have counteracted by such varied and elaborate defenses as those I have just surveyed. The danger that the asexual possibility poses is more foundational. As psychoanalysis's constitutive exterior, asexuality threatens its image of comprehensiveness and so must be beaten back emphatically into oblivion. Freud's struggle against the asexual possibility is evident, for instance, in the struggle against teleological thinking I described above. This struggle indicates just how difficult it was for him to theorize subjectivity without turning his theory into plot: a narrative about surface symptoms to be deciphered and deep truths to be unearthed. While this slippage into teleology and plot does not show that he was trying, thereby, to repress the asexual

⁴⁷ In explaining that the death instinct cannot properly be assimilated to dialectical tension, which is the domain of Eros, Jean Baudrillard points out that the death instinct *unbinds* instead of unifying, and it seeks "counter-finality" in returning to a time before the beginning (149).

possibility, it may show just how unthinkable the asexual possibility was for him. He is able to loosen our assumptions about the link between sexual aim and sexual object, but he is never able to escape the assumption that both of these elements are integral to subjectivity.

Even though Freud wants to escape teleological thinking, it is precisely the asexual possibility that forces him into *open* teleology, as opposed to his frequent implicit teleology. At the horizon of what his theory cannot explain—the non-experience of sexual attraction—Freud is forced to confront explicitly the teleology that is implicit throughout his theory of subjectivity and desire. The only alternative would be to recognize that asexuality introduces a remainder that his theory of the subject *cannot* explain and that the asexual possibility is at play within his totalizing explanations, destabilizing them.

Psychoanalysis cannot cohere in the face of asexuality's non-participation in its economy of desire, in which the subject is contained within the social order and made legible *as* a subject by the push and pull of sexual attraction. Psychoanalysis has preordained certain kinds of attraction and ways of acting on them as normative and can accommodate non-normative sexual expressions *as* non-normative, so rebellion against this system by contradicting its terms does not free the subject from it or threaten its structural coherence—as Foucault has argued, power is constituted in part by its incorporation of its own resistance. Asexuality, on the other hand, cannot be reconciled to this economy of object-oriented sexuality. The asexual possibility threatens to take the subject out of circulation. Since psychoanalysis's authority depends on its completeness,

its totality, it cannot survive the implications of any element escaping its reach and must erase such elements, write them into originary non-existence.

We have seen some of this kind of rewriting earlier in this chapter, in the alibis constructed for a variety of alternative modes of intimacy, gender, and single living when they threatened to signify the asexual possibility and render themselves incommensurable with an account of the modern subject. In the next chapter, I read Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* as similarly engaged in the work of asexual erasure, reshaping and rewriting the figure of the bachelor and the *flâneur*. However, the asexual possibility cannot be localized and neutralized in a single character, and Braddon's strategies for eliminating it (for instance, *deus ex machina* and various excesses and superfluities of plot) produce deformations of narrative form and epistemology.

CHAPTER TWO

NEGATIVE VICIES: DISCIPLINING THE ASEXUAL POSSIBILITY IN *LADY*

AUDLEY'S SECRET

If the *flâneur* is... turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”
(40–41)

It is something of a critical commonplace by now that Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novel *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is as much about Robert Audley’s reformation as an obedient bourgeois subject and his integration into Victorian society as it is about Lady Audley’s expulsion from that society.¹ Meanwhile, a number of critics have taken notice of the inconsistencies and gaps in Lady Audley’s development as a psychologically complex human being. Lynda Hart perceives an inverse relationship between Lady Audley’s comprehensibility and Robert’s, where the discovery of all that Lady Audley has been hiding reveals a great deal to the reader about Robert while paradoxically making her more perplexing (4). Greg Howard renders her in Roland Barthes’s terms as “a *writerly* text who opens herself up for a range of interpretations along gender and class lines without specifying with certainty how she might be ‘read’” (45; emphasis in orig.). She frustrates comprehension, he argues, because her ostensible madness never serves its

¹ This emphasis appears, for instance, in readings by Vicki A. Pallo, Simon Petch, Patricia Marks, Rachel A. Bowser, Greg Howard, and Richard Nemesvari.

promised explanatory function but is only “the superfluous answer to a riddle that does not need to be solved. The very ambiguity of this madness—its undecidable quality, its ancillary nature—opens up multiple possibilities for discussing Lady Audley but not for conclusively understanding who, or why, she is” (45). Concurring on the point of Lady Audley’s inscrutability, Rachel A. Bowser has masterfully thematized the superficiality that seems the accident of such unreadable depths in terms of a logic of surfaces that pervades the novel. Indeed, the frustration of a surface/depth model of subjectivity is one of the hallmarks of the asexual possibility whose effects I trace in this chapter and in the following one on Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Lady Audley, however, is not the only character in the novel whose subjectivity is problematic. While some critics, including Patricia Marks, have noticed the irrationality underlying much of Robert’s detective work (as well as his resemblance to the supposedly mad Lady Audley—“Loss of or change in identity; actions that are out of the ordinary; a monomaniacal fixation on one person or behavior: these characterize both madmen and detectives” [Marks 8]), they have mostly proceeded on the working assumption that the change in Robert’s character from happy-go-lucky *flâneur* to legal go-getter is sufficiently motivated, examining this change’s interpretive and cultural significance without putting much pressure on its root causes.² These causes turn out,

² This assumption, like most assumptions, is never explicitly stated, but is retrievable through a variety of rhetorical clues. To give a few examples, Audrey Peterson locates the novel’s implausibility explicitly elsewhere, claiming that “the *only* weakness in the plot occurs in the opening sequences,” in George Talboys’s abrupt abandonment of his family to go to Australia, his cessation of all contact with his wife while he is there, and the size of his fortune (161–62; emphasis added). In Greg Howard’s understanding, “Robert pursues his quest for deeply personal reasons, the recovery of his lost friend George and the love of George’s sister, Clara” (38), disregarding Robert’s avowed incomprehension of what is ostensibly personal and of his attachment to both persons. Pamela K. Gilbert writes of Robert’s “forced growth”: that is,

upon a closer reading, to be located not in determinants within the story but instead in a sort of alchemy that Braddon works on Robert from without, through *deus ex machina* and obtrusive authorial and supernatural prodding. These devices, I argue, are Braddon's attempt to shore up the novel's plot against the incursion of the asexual possibility.

“forced,” rather than freely chosen, on the one hand, but naturalized as an organic process (“growth”) on the other. Furthermore, she argues that Robert's story follows the pattern of the bildungsroman (220–21), which does nothing if not show a character's development *in response to his experiences*. In her interpretation, “Robert's growth is one of [the novel's] primary foci. He is motivated by a personal interest and often questions both the means and the ends of his detecting,” although Gilbert acknowledges the independence of the mystery's solution from the success of any of Robert's methods and that Robert, not Lady Audley, is the one on the brink of madness (226). (Patricia Marks is also wary of Robert's transformation: “While the narrative seems directed toward the making of a hero—the transformation of Robert Audley from a purposeless barrister into a man of action, motivated by ‘simple fidelity’ for his friend and friend's sister—the actions he and others perform out of ‘pure conscientiousness’ seem based in illogic” (10). However, Marks goes on to locate this illogic not in the way the narrative is constructed but merely in the inadequacy of reason *within* the story (12).

In Simon Petch's reading, “Robert Audley's pursuit of Lady Audley's past is also *his own* quest for a professional future” and his “sense of obligation, and of moral trustworthiness” is one he “*gradually acquires*” (1; 3; emphasis added), although Petch does recognize the domestic idyll of the novel's final chapter as “Braddon's teleological imperative for her hero” (1). While Petch locates agency primarily in Robert himself, Vicki A. Palo hedges her bets, so that in her reading he “undergoes a transformation that leaves him in the end a model citizen and embodiment of the social institutions he had heretofore rejected” and “becomes a vehicle by which the will of society is imposed upon Lady Audley, and an advocate for this mode of social control” (466). However, while Palo's language foregrounds Robert's passivity in this transformation, she puts little pressure on the question of what agent might actually be accomplishing it and later tentatively describes the way “he gradually transforms into the very type of person that he formerly resisted” (471). Her ambivalence on this point persists throughout her reading in her frequent recourse to the passive voice and her description of Robert's defining actions as budding detective as “unconscious” or “unwitting” (471; 472) and otherwise taking place without his direct agency: “Robert recognizes the changes occurring within himself” (473), and despite his reluctance, he “is compelled to continue, even while seemingly against his own will” (474). Palo recognizes that Robert—and Robert's experiences—are not what produces the change in Robert, but she is nevertheless silent on the question of what *is*.

Lynda Hart comes closest to a reading of Robert's transformation as exterior to his actions and to the forces acting on him within the story, although she does not make as much of the narrative implications of such exteriority as she might. She argues that after Robert's beginning “in a mock-heroic mode,” “the thrust of the narrative is to reconstruct him as a full-fledged hero who occupies center stage,” and she calls Clara Talboys “a *deus ex machina* to rescue endangered heterosexuality” (6; 8). Her reading does not ultimately locate the agency behind this change in “the narrative” as such statements promise but rather psychoanalyzes his and his society's misogyny and homosexual panic. Notably, she also refers to his plot as that of his “becoming,” a plot in which, “[b]y revealing the truth of [Lady Audley's] past and thus her real identity, we come to know the ‘real’ Robert” (5; 6)—which is to suggest that, far from actually changing, Robert merely assumes his position as, or becomes legible as, something that he was all along.

I could go on conducting the same sort of analysis on other readings of the novel, but these examples should suffice to show that what skepticism critics do express about the plausibility of Robert's transformation is usually either minimal or subordinate to other concerns.

I begin my reading with a perfunctory discussion of the elements of Robert's and Lady Audley's characters that are suggestive of asexuality as such, although recovering them as asexual characters is neither the aim of my reading nor necessary to it. I then devote greater attention to the effects of Braddon's response to the asexual possibility in her novel. As possibility, asexuality works in *Lady Audley's Secret*—and in the other novels I discuss in this dissertation—as an unrealized object of apprehension that characters and plots become preoccupied with managing or suppressing.

The asexual possibility's effects in *Lady Audley's Secret* are generally to be found in superfluities of plotting and disjunctive methods of characterization that preclude the agential involvement of the characters themselves (primarily Robert) or the shaping effects of environmental determinants, in deference to direct divine or authorial intervention. I do not argue, however, that Braddon undertook such desperate narrative measures deliberately or recognized the asexual possibility as such. Rather, the asexual possibility appears throughout the novel through a variety of metonymic associations (not merely inactivity and indifference, as in Robert's case, but childishness, normative femininity, and Catholic clerical celibacy) and more generally as stasis or absence itself. Braddon's response to the asexual possibility, then, is not a peevish refusal to "let Robert be asexual," but rather a determination to keep the plot moving at any cost, as neatly within the constraints of novelistic convention as possible. Sometimes, though, the methods she adopts override even the genre's most basic conventions of causal organization. We see, then, that the logic of asexuality poses a real, discernible threat to novelistic structure, not merely to the content of a novel, although it also has perceptible thematic effects.

The Asexual Possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret*

Critics are nearly unanimous on the actual or potential homoeroticism of Robert's attachment to George Talboys,³ but this attachment is itself an overwriting of Robert's prior indifference to eroticism or romantic feelings of any kind. However, rather than attempt to establish Robert himself as an asexual—past or present—I take his general idleness and lack of ambition as the figure of a *narrative* asexuality—as the principle of absence or stasis at work in the novel, a principle we also see at work in the failure of characters to cohere as subjects in Foucauldian (that is, sexually explicable) terms.⁴

But neither do I read the defects in Robert's characterization as a realistic modern subject as defects in Braddon's craft as a novelist. Instead, I contend that they point to the incommensurability of asexuality and narrative: the asexual possibility, once introduced, cannot be neutralized completely within the strictures of novelistic convention, which rely upon the very formations of knowledge and subjectivity that the logic of asexuality

³ Richard Nemesvari's "Robert Audley's Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley's Secret*" is the foremost article to take this angle. Borrowing heavily from Sedgwick's theorization of the male homosocial continuum in *Between Men*, Nemesvari argues that Robert's repressed homoerotic desire points to "the self-interested and self-protective denial which underlies Victorian patriarchal society" and that Braddon's implicit exposure of such desire serves her "feminist critique of the roles and behaviors forced upon women by men who are unwilling to acknowledge their own motives and insecurities" (516). Herbert G. Klein grants the possibility of such homoeroticism while pointing out that although Robert and George's relationship *may* be homoerotic or homosexual, no evidence exists that it *is* (Klein 164 n.6). Jennifer S. Kushnier, nevertheless, seems fully convinced of it, and her article "Educating Boys to Be Queer: Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*" helpfully historicizes public school homoeroticism in the mid-nineteenth century, as she argues that Braddon is critical of the Victorian expectation that the homoeroticism of boyhood would give way unproblematically to adult heterosexuality: "In short, she questions the notion of homosexuality as a phase" (68). Unfortunately, the arguments Kushnier makes in support of this claim are elliptical and crudely schematic. Numerous other critics, too, note this homosocial/homoerotic dynamic in passing, without making it the focal point of their arguments. Howard notes, for instance, that "Robert ruminates on his friend's disappearance in terms that threaten to elide the distinction between a 'friend' and a 'lover'" (39).

⁴ In true Foucauldian fashion, Robert recognizes that "physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century" (374). And indeed, when he calls Dr. Mosgrave in to evaluate Lady Audley, Mosgrave "looked like a man who could have carried, safely locked in his passionless breast, the secrets of a nation, and who would have suffered no inconvenience from the weight of such a burden" (376). Robert shifts again from a religious to a medical register when he tries—dubiously—to reassure Lady Audley by likening the *maison de santé* to a convent (391).

defies. Beyond Robert's character in particular, Lady Audley's character and even the novel's plot are marked by a striking number of discontinuities, dead ends, and superfluities. These quirks of characterization and plotting—as well as the suggestion of the asexual possibility by the instances of Catholicism, femininity, madness, and absence that the novel attempts to discipline—signal an effort to efface something incompatible with the narrative's own logic. Braddon attempts to surmount this incompatibility by implementing a system of causality that is itself incompatible with the conventions of the novel as a genre.

Lady Audley's Secret is very visibly a novel about the disciplining of renegade gender behavior (although many readings also focus on its preoccupation with the transgression of class boundaries⁵). An impressive amount of critical attention has been devoted not only to Lady Audley's punishment for her violation of the standards of submissive Victorian womanhood,⁶ but also to Robert Audley's initial disregard for and eventual conformity to the standards of bourgeois masculinity. At the heart of each of these transgressive gender performances is asexual erasure, but I will focus greater attention on Robert than on Lady Audley here.

The asexual possibility in Lady Audley herself is worthy of at least brief mention. When she makes her confession to Sir Michael, she explains how she became aware of

⁵ Critics who attend to the dramatization of class conflict in *Lady Audley's Secret* include Howard, Aeron Haynie (who examines the novel's illustration of mid-Victorian anxiety over the invasion of the aristocratic country estate by the middle class), and on a more rhetorical level, Jonathan Loesberg.

⁶ Indeed, one example of such transgression is that many of the stereotypes of bachelors that Bella DePaulo and Katherine V. Snyder delineate (e.g. irresponsibility, effeminacy, selfishness, unwillingness to make emotional commitments), which seem applicable to Robert as Braddon initially presents him, might also be applied to Lady Audley herself.

her physical beauty through others' remarks about it, although she admits, "I suppose I am heartless." She then recounts that

I heard all these things at first indifferently; but by-and-by I listened to them greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world's great lottery than my companions. I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later—I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them. (350)

There are shades of aromantic asexuality in the young Helen Maldon's calculation. She doesn't play for love; she plays to win. She is directed not by attraction but by her sense of her attractiveness to others and how she might turn it to her material advantage.

Although she refers to the marriage market as "the world's great lottery," she construes it as more a game of skill in which merit and beauty are rewarded than as a game of chance: an opposition of causality to randomness with powerful implications for the plotting and epistemology of the novel. Furthermore, for Lady Audley, love is at most a secondary concern: "I think I loved [George] as much as it was in my power to love anybody; not more than I have loved you, Sir Michael; not so much; for when you married me you elevated me to a position that he could never have given me" (351). She subordinates love to financial concerns, making it contingent and equivocal.

Other critics, including Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder, have also noted that Lady Audley does not seem attracted either to George or to Sir Michael; her interest in George extends only so far as he can provide a comfortable lifestyle for her (33), and her marital faithfulness to Sir Michael is attended by sexual indifference (48). In Schroeder and Schroeder's reading, this indifference forecloses the possibility of any link between transgressive sexual desire and mental illness and serves Braddon's critique of Victorian

patriarchy: “By discounting excess of feeling as the cause of her behavior, Lucy implicitly accuses the entire male establishment of misreading female character and female experience” (54). As with Robert, though, I do not read Lady Audley as a potential-asexual; rather, I note Braddon’s ambivalent deployment of asexuality in her character as the stamp of both exemplary and transgressive femininity, a safeguard against infidelity and an exposure of the marriage market *as* market, a mark of female insanity and a repudiation of its familiar etiology. At the end of this chapter, I will return to the implicit association of asexuality with insanity in Braddon’s novel.

This digression into Lady Audley’s character aside, my aim is not to attempt to map asexual identity onto Braddon’s characters or to reject the numerous and mostly salient readings of Robert’s almost obsessive attachment to George Talboys as homoerotic (or homosocial at the uncertain brink of the homoerotic) in favor of a simplistic argument that these readings mistake the signs and Robert Audley is in fact asexual. Instead, I am far more interested in what the signs—those signs that might point to homoeroticism or to asexuality, or any others you might substitute—are doing there in the first place, and why, at points, they clash so jarringly with what we find them pointing to.

Basically, I am in good company in arguing that in stirring him to action and giving purpose to his otherwise aimless life, the process of investigating, prosecuting, and punishing Lady Audley’s crime reforms or transforms Robert Audley into a (re)productive member of Victorian society, for which transformation he is rewarded

with a wife, home, career, reputation, and professional ambition at the novel's end.⁷ We will find the logic of asexuality—as stasis and the suspension of desire—at loggerheads with this sort of teleology, and with narrative teleology generally, in Chapter 4.

Robert's transformation, I will grant, is also attended by the homosocial/homoerotic tightrope act described by Nemesvari and others, as well as by the transference of Robert's desire from George to Clara. Furthermore, such a trajectory—which in its entirety constitutes a repudiation of the asexual possibility—accords with a Victorian view of homoerotic attachments as merely a developmental stage on the way to full heterosexual maturity,⁸ later codified in Freud's narrative of psychosexual development. Judith Roof, in her analysis of this narrative, observes that we have to use both narrative and ideology to understand the relationship between them. She holds up Freud's 1905 theory of sexuality, which I discussed in the previous chapter, as a telling example of the tautology of “performing a politic of sexualities in narrative terms and a

⁷ Critics who have taken this angle are legion. The list I give here aims at exhaustiveness but probably still fails to achieve it. Gilbert regards Robert's emergence into respectable bourgeois masculinity as balancing “Lady Audley's tale, which itself subverts the ‘return to order’ which marks the sensation story and relocates the source of sensation from the disordered and alien individual female body to the male social body of patriarchal sociolegal institutions” (220). In Lynda Hart's view, the traits that mark Robert's effeminacy are thematic superfluities in no way demanded by the novel's detective plot; however, they enable the novel to dramatize his reconstruction as hero (6). Pallo argues that *Lady Audley's Secret* traces the genesis of “modern policing agents” and their disciplinary methods through Robert's transformation (466). Herbert G. Klein focuses on the way Robert achieves conventional masculinity through reasoning and detection rather than physical prowess (161). Howard's reading follows Robert's transition from the values and behaviors of the landed gentry to those of the businessman, although he argues that the novel also problematizes this transition by exposing its negative consequences for those in less privileged social positions (for instance, Lady Audley herself or Phoebe and Luke Marks) (34). Petch also takes a less sanguine view of Robert's trajectory toward bourgeois productiveness, for while in his take on Robert's transformation, Lady Audley is the instrument of professional advancement for him (an advancement Robert achieves by learning to apply various facets of legal knowledge in different social contexts as he conducts his investigation), Petch argues that the novel stalls out before ending properly, with Robert suspended between secure membership in either the gentry or the middle class (10).

⁸ According to Sedgwick, homosocial school friendships often shaded into homosexuality, but these were regarded as something a man would outgrow and come to “associate... not with dissipation, not with viciousness or violence, but with childishness, as an infantile need, a mark of powerlessness, which, while it may be viewed with shame or scorn or denial, is unlikely to provoke the virulent, accusatory projection that characterizes twentieth-century homophobia” (*Men* 177).

narrative dynamic in sexual terms” (*Come* xviii). Roof argues that the normative sexuality Freud posits is normative precisely because it makes such a good story, wherein normative heterosexuality’s linear trajectory toward reproductive fulfillment is continually threatened by perversions that might sidetrack it (xix). Thus it is perfectly consistent with the logic of narrative and the logic of heterosexuality that Robert’s happy ending should ultimately include a wife and a baby.

However, in examining the transformation that prepares Robert Audley for this ending, I enact a subtle shift of focus, away from the aforementioned transference relationship to that that very indifference and inactivity in Robert that both the demands of the novel’s plotting and later criticism continually overshoot or overwrite. A great deal of the criticism on *Lady Audley’s Secret* focuses on the shift of Robert’s desire from George to Clara, to the exclusion of any consideration of the equally important shift of Robert’s desire from no one at all to George.⁹

In this ephemeral, preliminary position, we find one of those caricatures of the Victorian bachelor that Katherine V. Snyder documents, and furthermore, a figure who is continually defined by absences, failures, and stasis. The first thing we hear of Robert establishes chiefly what he is not: “Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister” (32). Translation: Robert Audley is *not* a barrister. Or rather, he is one in only the narrowest, most nominal sense, “[b]ut he had never either had a brief, or tried to get a brief, or even wished to have a brief...” (32). I could catalog here the narrator’s numerous efforts to

⁹ Hart does make a fleeting acknowledgment of this first shift, although she too is ultimately more interested in the second. She reads Braddon’s rendering of Robert’s character, unlike her rendering of Lady Audley’s, as being marked at the outset by “problems [that] are sympathetic and rather endearing,” describing him as “an idle bachelor and a non-practicing barrister whose celibacy and lack of professionalism are constantly linked to a muted discourse of impotency” (5)—impotency, of course, being another alibi by which asexual erasure may be effected.

characterize Robert as detached, unenthusiastic, and unambitious,¹⁰ but suffice it to say that these characterizations dovetail neatly with nineteenth-century stereotypes of the bachelor and the *flâneur* as described by Snyder and John Rignall (the latter characterization is reinforced by Robert's penchant for French fiction¹¹).

Etymologically, the bachelor had, by the eighteenth century, become defined exclusively by what he lacked (i.e. a wife), whereas previously, the word had denoted novice professional standing. This change in meaning “moved the definitional context of bachelorhood into a world and a set of relations—the private sphere, the family, marriage—from which bachelors themselves were nominally excluded” and coincided with the emergence of a career-centered concept of bourgeois masculinity (Snyder 20–21). In Robert's case, his bachelorhood is very nearly diametrically opposed to the ideal

¹⁰ I will touch briefly on a few examples, most of which are supplied by his cousin Alicia's exasperation with “that peripatetic, patent refrigerator” (330), “a lazy, selfish Sybarite, who cares for nothing in the world except his own ease and comfort” (277). As the narrator has it, Robert is “[i]ndolent, handsome, and indifferent” and “took life as altogether too absurd a mistake for any one event in its foolish course to be for a moment considered seriously by a sensible man” (61). The narrator doubts Robert's ability either to recognize Alicia's feelings for him or his for her, if they exist at all: “had he been in love with her himself, I fancy that the tender passion would, with him, have been so vague and feeble a sentiment that he might have gone down to his grave with a dim sense of some uneasy sensation which might be love or indigestion, and with, beyond this, no knowledge whatever of his state” (61). There are shades of John Marcher, the main character of Henry James's “The Beast in the Jungle,” in the hypothetical moribund Robert Audley, but my reading of James's novella will command more space in Chapter 4. The narrator attests, predictably, that “[p]oor Alicia had had many skirmishes with her cousin upon that peculiar temperament of his, which, while it enabled him to go through life with perfect content and tacit enjoyment, entirely precluded his feeling one spark of enthusiasm on any subject whatever”—particularly, in Alicia's view, on love, and she imagines that “[i]f all the divinities upon earth were ranged before him, waiting for his sultanship to throw the handkerchief, he would only lift his eyebrows to the middle of his forehead, and tell them to scramble for it” (56). Finally, not even Robert's apparent infatuation with Lady Audley is sufficient to persuade Alicia otherwise: “The absurd creature turned white as a sheet when he saw her,” Alicia observes and concludes that “he can be in love, after all. That slow lump of torpidity he calls his heart [like “supposed to be a barrister”] can beat, I suppose, once in a quarter of a century: but it seems that nothing but a blue-eyed wax-doll can set it going. I should have given him up long ago if I'd known that his ideal of beauty was to be found in a toy shop” (264). Above all, Alicia insists, Robert is not to be taken seriously.

¹¹ By Rignall's account, the *flâneur* is first and foremost a Parisian figure, so Robert's *flânerie* sits quite easily alongside his French novels. Especially relevant to Robert's situation, the difference between the *flâneur* and the detective, Rignall suggests, is merely that between purposeless and focused observation (7–8), a difference whose consequences *Lady Audley's Secret* plays out explicitly.

of purposeful, productive occupation. In general, the upshot of the developments in the concept of bachelorhood that Snyder describes was bachelorhood's overdetermination as the site of overlapping meanings bound up in ideologies of sexuality, gender, and class; to discipline the bachelor Robert Audley is to discipline him in all of these terms. What makes Robert's bachelorhood still more difficult to decode is the increasing tendency throughout the nineteenth century to take a bachelor's abstention from sexual activity as a sign of homosexuality (Snyder 33)—when such abstention could likewise point to asexuality (but in either case, generally not verifiably).

All of this, once again, is not to establish Robert Audley as a potential-asexual—for one thing, plenty of asexuals *are* ambitious and industrious—and, in fact, this dissertation will find me repeatedly stepping back from the brink of that too-simplistic “Where’s Waldo?” brand of reading (“All right, you found the asexual in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Now see if you can find him at the amusement park, the farmer’s market, and the hot air balloon festival”). Instead, I am interested in the way that Braddon, through her development of Robert Audley’s character, refuses the asexual possibility and dramatizes its incompatibility with and supersession by conventional Victorian plotting. This process brings into relief the Victorian equation of asexuality with irresponsibility, insofar as asexuality entails a refusal of heterosexual teleology.

The Plot Against Asexuality

It is doubtful, I own, that Braddon undertakes this refusal of the asexual possibility consciously or intentionally; the work of asexual erasure is, on the contrary, that of grappling with a phantom, subduing a mechanism of disorder or illogic within the orderly progression of narrative or desire. Erasure, where it succeeds, is not apparent as

such; it is chiefly where it fails, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, that it becomes noticeable.

Braddon is at pains, first, to establish Robert as aloof and unattached and to impute to that aloofness a connotation of social irresponsibility. She makes this imputation mostly retroactively through Robert's own indictments of his prior self. Then she uses his affection first for George and then for Clara to awaken his sense of duty, sexual interest, and professional ambition—and thus to bring him into line with the linearity of plot. That the seams show so prominently as Braddon effects this change suggests that the asexual possibility, once opened in a central character entrusted with the advancement of the plot itself, cannot be silenced without pointedly artificial narrative devices.

This failure manifests itself not only in the skips, gaps, and contradictions in Robert's character as he investigates George's disappearance but in the sheer superfluity of much of the novel's plotting. For instance, Patricia Marks points out that Robert's detective work and his intended journey to Australia to look for George actually have no effect in precipitating his friend's return (11), which George accomplishes himself, quite independently of the novel's detective plot. Pamela K. Gilbert and Rachel A. Bowser have both observed that the detective plot itself is unnecessary for the reader—who can easily guess the mystery's solution from the start (Gilbert 225–26)—and serves instead as an edifying exercise for Robert. Bowser likewise takes the substance of the detective plot to be subordinate to other material at play in *Lady Audley's Secret*:

Lady Audley's double identity is made fairly obvious very early in the novel, and the details of her attempted murder of George are not disclosed until the novel's dénouement, as something of an afterthought. The novel instead presents Lady Audley's secret as her climactic declaration that occasionally she is temporarily insane. As this secret is peripheral to the novel's mysteries, we can assume that the narrative uses Lady Audley and her confession to solve a problem distinct from the presumed murder. (76)

Bowser, then, recognizes a fundamental mismatch between the structure of the detective plot in the novel and the disadvantageous placement—and downright irrelevance—of the kinds of secrets that usually serve as fodder for such plots, a mismatch of form and content that likewise points to the disturbance that the asexual possibility has caused and the excesses of plotting it has occasioned. In the same way, Phoebe Marks's resemblance to Lady Audley receives pointed narratorial comment but serves no plot function whatsoever. The narrator remarks that “there were certain dim and shadowy lights in which, meeting Phoebe Marks gliding softly through the dark oak passages of the Court, or under the shrouded avenues in the garden, you might have easily mistaken her for my lady” (104–05). But neither we nor the other characters are ever given opportunity or reason to do so; Phoebe is an extraneous double.¹²

What's more, Lady Audley—for this reason—is not merely doubled but tripled, and it is ultimately Matilda, the invalid daughter of the woman who cares for Lady Audley's son at Southampton, who stands in for her in any purposeful way. As with Phoebe, though, the likeness is contingent upon favorable conditions: in Phoebe's case, on an obscurity of vision (“certain dim and shadowy lights”) and in Matilda's, on sloppy narration. Lady Audley recounts that “[s]he was fair and slender. Her description, carelessly given, might tally nearly enough with my own, though she bore no shadow of resemblance to me, except in these two particulars” (357). That is, as doubles go, neither Phoebe nor Matilda is particularly convincing. Only one of them, though, is ever called on to be, and then, the equivalency is achieved by the bribery of the parties involved, not by actual persuasive resemblance (357). Matilda Plowson becomes Helen Talboys strictly

¹² Her surname “Marks” marks her as an inscription, a placeholder, but insofar as the function specified for her never comes into play, she is a pallid signifier without a signified.

by the consent of the young woman herself, her mother, Captain Maldon, and Georgey to participate in a falsehood, an unconvincing fiction finally codified as legal fact by the death notice in the *Times*, which suffices to persuade George—even when he is presented, at Ventnor, with material evidence to the contrary: a lock of hair which he recognizes as very unlike his late wife’s, but which the landlady assures him “changes in illness” (42). This is one of several instances in the novel in which a character or the reader is asked to overlook incoherences or discontinuities in identity or narrative in order to foreclose some social ill (in this case, to erase in appearance if not in fact the incidence of bigamy).

Another such instance, obviously, is Lady Audley’s so-called madness, which Dr. Mosgrave all but denies exists in anything but a hypothetical and contingent way (and which the reader likewise has good reason to doubt), but to which he willingly attests anyway in order to have her committed to the *maison de santé*. The change in his opinion that brings him around to compliance with Robert’s plan to get rid of Lady Audley is jarring and largely unmotivated. Mosgrave first points out that

there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. (377)

Lady Audley, that is, embraces exactly the common-sense relationship of cause to effect that is, on a narrative level, otherwise in short supply in the novel. For this, she is punished, although her sentence is by no means the product of any similarly exemplary

sanity. Despite finding all of her actions perfectly rational and comprehensible, the doctor is abruptly convinced by a ten-minute conversation with Lady Audley—which is not related directly or even reported indirectly to the reader—that

[t]here is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time. It would be *dementia* in its worst phase perhaps: acute mania; but its duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous! (379)

Lady Audley need not be mad after all in order to be locked up (who, after all, could be immune to such “latent insanity”: from the possibility of someday—perhaps—briefly succumbing to “extreme mental pressure” under isolated, extraordinary circumstances?), only perceived as a social threat. More importantly, though, we don’t know what—if anything—makes Mosgrave change his mind, only that it is necessary for him to change his mind for Lady Audley to be gotten out of the way, so that Robert can demonstrate his responsibility by completing the task set before him of disposing of her for the sake of Sir Michael’s peace of mind.

Finally, and most extensively, narrative necessity overrides internal determinants in the case of Robert Audley himself. Having already emphatically established his constitutional laziness, the narrator is at a loss for an explanation for his sudden departure from it in his investigation of George’s disappearance, insofar as it might arise from any resources within his own character. To account for it, the narrator has recourse only to a sort of fraud, which—as with the substitution of Matilda Plowson for Helen Talboys—does mask the dissimilarity between Robert’s past and present habits of mind, so long as one does not look into the matter too closely.

If one does, however, the narrator's logic is most perplexing: "With Mr. Robert Audley's lymphatic nature, determination was so much the exception, rather than the rule, that when he did for once in his life resolve upon any course of action, he had a certain dogged, iron-like obstinacy that pushed him on to the fulfilment of his purpose" (89). That is, when once he has resolved to act entirely out of character, he will not content himself with half-measures. Admittedly, this obstinacy may yet be plausible as a facet of his character, but what follows is decidedly less so: "The lazy bent of his mind, which prevented him from thinking of half a dozen things at a time, and not thinking thoroughly of any one of them, as is the manner of your more energetic people, made him remarkably clear-sighted upon any point to which he ever gave his serious attention" (89). There is no reason why the clearest alternative to a disinclination to think desultorily of many things—or why mental laziness should necessarily have this result—should be to devote strenuous attention to only one, yet Braddon forecloses other possibilities for the working of Robert's mind in order to give this shift from idleness to singleness of purpose the air of a logical inevitability.

This rhetorical tactic is characteristic of what Jonathan Loesberg considers one of the prime markers of sensation fiction: its simultaneous adherence to contradictory models of causality, one stemming from providence and the other from the laws of nature (126), for elsewhere, the change in Robert is shown to irrupt almost supernaturally from without.¹³ Although Robert frequently counts his loyalty to George as the reason for his sudden industriousness, it seems more often to arise from some agency beyond either of

¹³ Loesberg stresses the ideological and political valence of these models of causality, both rooted in a "sense of inevitable sequence" that also characterized both sides of the contemporary debate over parliamentary and social reform: the fear of and the hope for the enfranchisement of the working class (127–28).

them and, at points, contrary to Robert's own will. Even this loyalty tends to follow the pattern I have noted, though, as Braddon usually reminds the reader of Robert's attachment to George by showing Robert perplexed by its very possibility.¹⁴ In one notable instance, Robert seems as indifferent to George himself as he is, at the beginning of the novel, to most everything: "I wish I'd never felt any friendliness for the fellow.... I feel like a man who has an only son whose life has gone wrong with him. I wish to Heaven I could give him back his wife, and send him down to Ventnor to finish his days in peace" (86). Projecting himself into Sir Harcourt Talboys's place, Robert imaginatively assumes a position of responsibility and, despite doing so, seems not only indifferent to George, but positively desirous to be rid of him (not desirous *of* him, as so many critics are at pains to demonstrate), so long as he (Robert) could secure George's happiness.

Robert also wonders why he continues his investigation when all he can hope to learn from it is that his friend is dead:

¹⁴ Examples of this phenomenon abound. For example, Robert begins his search for information about George's whereabouts with actions he is unable to comprehend and which he recognizes as uncharacteristic:

If any one had ventured to tell Mr. Robert Audley that he could possibly feel a strong attachment to any creature breathing, that cynical gentleman would have elevated his eyebrows in supreme contempt at the preposterous notion. Yet here he was, flurried and anxious, bewildering his brain by all manner of conjectures about his missing friend, and, false to every attribute of his nature, walking fast.

"I haven't walked fast since I was at Eton," he murmured, as he hurried across one of Sir Michael's meadows in the direction of the village; "and the worst of it is that I haven't the most remote idea where I am going." (82)

Several critics have identified Robert's and Braddon's references to Eton as loci of homoerotic feelings, but here I call your attention instead to the fact that Robert's behavior is "false to every attribute of his nature," for reasons unknown to him, and that his trajectory and his goal remain to be filled in, no matter how fast he is walking.

A few pages later, he marvels incredulously but obediently "that it is possible to care so much for a fellow" (88–89), and again, "Who would have thought that I could have grown so fond of the fellow... or feel so lonely without him?" (161). Whatever his feelings for George, in short, they are imposed upon him from without.

Am I tied to a wheel, and must I go with its every revolution, let it take me where it will? Or can I sit down here tonight and say, I have done my duty to my missing friend; I have searched for him patiently, but I have searched in vain? Should I be justified in doing this? Should I be justified in letting the chain which I have slowly put together, link by link, drop at this point, or must I go on adding fresh links to that fatal chain until the last rivet drops into its place and the circle is complete? I think and believe that I shall never see my friend's face again; and that no exertion of mine can ever be of any benefit to him. In plainer, crueller words, I believe him to be dead. Am I bound to discover how and where he died? or being, as I think, on the road to that discovery, shall I do a wrong to the memory of George Talboys by turning back or stopping still? (157)

In this passage, it is Robert's investigation propelling him forward, not—as you might more reasonably expect—the other way around. Additionally, this reflection occurs shortly after the point in the novel at which *Robin Goodfellow*, the magazine in which Braddon had been serializing it, was discontinued. Braddon then considered abandoning the novel altogether and turned her attention to *Aurora Floyd* before resuming serialization of *Lady Audley's Secret* in the *Sixpenny Magazine* in January 1862, at the request of her readers (Houston 32). The serial in *Robin Goodfellow* ends on Sept. 28, 1861 with chapter 18, "Robert Receives a Visitor." The passage quoted above occurs two chapters later, near enough to this unexpected stopping point for Robert's musings to sound suspiciously like the author's. He displays a striking self-consciousness of the plot in which he is participating and questions whether to continue cooperating with the demands of narrative convention against his inclinations.

While Robert's own uncertainty persists, the narrator, a few sentences later, makes explicit the transformation that the investigation of George's disappearance is working in him:

The one purpose which had slowly grown up in his careless nature until it had become powerful enough to work a change in that very nature, made

him what he had never been before—a Christian; conscious of his own weakness; anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been forced upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go. (157)

This is the first of numerous mentions of a mysterious hand as the force behind Robert's actions, and here, the narrator openly states that Robert has been made into an entirely different person than he was at the beginning of the novel. The sidelong appeal to divine intervention—the hand may plausibly be the hand of God, particularly if it has a vested interest in making a Christian of him—masks how unrealistic such a sudden change seems in earthly, novelistic terms.

The influence of the hand and Robert's uncertainty about his own agency become even more pronounced when he goes to question Captain Maldon after George's disappearance and pauses to wonder, "Why do I go on with this?... how pitiless I am, and how relentlessly I am carried on. It is not myself; it is the hand which is beckoning me further and further upon the dark road whose end I dare not dream of." Then, to Captain Maldon himself: "If I *could* let the matter rest... I would gladly, thankfully do it—but I *cannot!* A hand which is stronger than my own beckons me on" (172; emphasis in orig.). Comically, Robert then begins repeating his statement about the hand verbatim for the next several chapters, in case there was any chance the reader missed it the first two times (199; 257). Howard, reading Braddon's novel as a dramatization of class conflict between the masculinities represented by a decaying aristocracy and a rising capitalist middle class, regards the hand as a rewriting of Adam Smith's famous metaphor, in which the

hand of the market is made not just visible but conspicuous (Howard 38).¹⁵ The hand directing Robert, however, seems just as likely to me to be the hand of God,¹⁶ of the author, or perhaps of novelistic convention, a visible sign of narrative desperation at the asexual possibility's intrusion and of the attempt to counteract it at any cost.

Another hand, of course, is quite visibly at work in the novel from the very start: the single hand of the “stupid, bewildering clock... which jumped straight from one hour to the next, and was therefore always in extremes” in the opening description of Audley Court (1). The country house's clock institutes a jolting, manifestly artificial temporality and is indicative of narrative and temporal discontinuity—like the hand impelling Robert, which is similarly “always in extremes.” Although Bowser also includes Audley Court's notorious clock in her reading of the estate's disordering of time, identifying it as a fully functional but outmoded hour clock (80), I want to call attention as well to the consequent appearance, at the very outset of the novel, of a *single hand*, whose movements—while glaringly discontinuous—nevertheless have authority to influence

¹⁵ Howard points out that the hand is a device that Braddon appears to have taken from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, but with none of the surrounding supernatural connotations which had made it a useful device for Collins,

and so her “hand” serves no apparent dramatic purpose.... [T]he imposition of a metaphysical element only reminds the reader of the Wilkie Collins source material without deepening the mystery in any meaningful way. But the ghostly hand might be seen more clearly in economic terms than as an agent of dramatic tension. The hand pulls Robert along with all the power of the market economy, an invisible (yet quite visible to Robert) entity that refuses to relent until Robert solves the mystery and gets his “man.” (38)

In any case—whether it represents the hand of the market, the hand of the author, the hand of a supernatural force, or all of these and more—the hand intervenes in the story from without and is out of keeping with the more realistic order of events that Braddon otherwise tries to foreground in the novel.

¹⁶ Near the end of the novel, there is in fact explicit reference to a divine hand. Robert reflects, after Luke Marks's confession that he kept the truth about George from both Phoebe and Robert, “His sin has recoiled upon his own head; for had my lady's mind been set at ease, the Castle Inn would not have been burned down. Who shall dare to try and order his own life after this? who can fail to recognise God's hand in this strange story?” (431)

human actions in their very arbitrariness. People rely on clock time, a wholly human invention, to tell them when to do things, and the Audley Court clock seems ridiculous only because it foregrounds this artificiality. Its one hand is the relic of an outdated chronological paradigm just as the hand directing Robert Audley in particular is the relic of an outdated narrative one.

In any case, shifting responsibility for the progression of the narrative from the characters themselves and the presumably causal relationship between their past experiences and present actions (more on this in a moment) to an external and either supernatural or artificial force constitutes a radical suspension of novelistic logic. For Ian Watt, one of the key elements of the “formal realism” that distinguished the novel from prior narrative genres is its particularization of time and “its use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences,” which “tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure” (22). To some extent, the causal ordering of plot dates back even farther, to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: in a tragedy, recognitions and reversals “ought to be so rooted in the very structure of the plot that they follow from the preceding events as their inevitable or probable outcome; for there is a vast difference between following from and merely following after” (55).¹⁷ The grounding of such causality in individual psychology and experience, though, is a distinctly modern development. It appears, then, that Braddon pays lip service to this convention by supplying George as the ostensible

¹⁷ E. M. Forster also famously elucidates this difference, defining a plot as “a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality,” to be distinguished from a story, which is “a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence”; in practical terms the difference between the two would be that between “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” (a plot) and “The king died and then the queen died” (a story) (45). In Forster’s terms, then, *Lady Audley’s Secret* fails as plot at a surprising number of points.

reason for the change in Robert while in fact working the change herself by more direct, if less realistic, means.

Robert's awareness that through no agency of his own, his character is subject to abrupt and inscrutable modifications continues as he returns to Audley Court after meeting Clara Talboys and tells Lady Audley that he intends to proceed, "with a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature—a pitiless embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution" (271). Not only is the disconnect between his past and present selves made explicit here, but Robert is aware of being very nearly allegorized or, at the very least, pressed into the service of an abstract idea in a more pre-novelistic model of character and causation than one in which an individual develops organically in response to his circumstances. In other words, Robert fails as what Bowser calls a "deep character," although Bowser herself overlooks this failure in her more focused analysis of Lady Audley. Deep characters possess cumulative, causally ordered subjectivity, which means that "[d]epth is not, then, literally spatial, but rather binds together psychological interiority and temporal continuity, both of which are metaphorically housed in and dependent on dimensionality" (79).¹⁸ We see Robert's continued perplexity over his characterization and function in the novel—his continued failure as a deep character—as he later wonders to himself why Lady Audley won't simply cut her losses and escape. He insists, "Heaven knows I have no wish to punish. Heaven knows I was never born to be the avenger of guilt or the persecutor of the guilty. I only wish to do my duty" (252). His awareness of having a duty and his desire to do it,

¹⁸ Bowser argues that by contrast, Lady Audley's character is ordered by surfaces, immediacy, and "something like pure pleasure" (79), reminiscent of Roland Barthes's claims about the haphazard, unreflective nature of textual pleasure (23): to explain the pleasure of the text (i.e. to impose depth on it, in Bowser's sense, is to destroy it *as* pleasure.

of course, are both noteworthy changes in his character, but otherwise, this passage raises more questions than it answers, for what, then, *was* Robert Audley born to do? The answer that this novel (like many novels) presents is a marital one.

By the novel's end, with this purpose more securely in view, Robert has the benefit of hindsight to underscore the discontinuity in his character. Marveling at how he has changed, he wonders,

how can I believe that it was I who used to lounge all day in this easy chair reading Paul de Kock, and smoking mild Turkish, who used to drop in at half-price to stand amongst the press men at the back of the boxes, and see a new burlesque, and finish the evening with the "Chough and Crow," and chops and pale ale at Evans's? Was it I to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round? Was it I who was one of the boys who sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud, and work their hardest in the hope of a ride when their work is done? Heaven knows I have learnt the business of life since then; and now I must needs fall in love and swell the tragic chorus which is always being sung by the poor addition of my pitiful sighs and groans. (401)

His almost metaleptic self-awareness in this passage on the necessity of cementing his transformation by marrying Clara—seeming to see outside the story to recognize the generic pressures acting on the narrative¹⁹—announces his obedience to novelistic convention, but at the same time, his general unfitness for it, despite the author's best attempts to remake him. He wonders (to himself, rather than directly to Clara),

¹⁹ For Genette, "[t]he transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation. Any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive" (234). While the most typical metaleptic transgression is a narratorial intrusion into the diegetic universe, Genette grants that the boundary can also be transgressed, on occasion, from the opposite direction (for instance, in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or, to a much lesser extent, in the passage from *Lady Audley's Secret* that I quoted above). Genette explains that this permeability, this violation of the boundaries between narrative levels, makes metalepsis an unsettling device for the reader, for it suggests "that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative" (236). It is precisely this suggestion that we see Robert Audley confronting above.

“What would you say to me if I told you that I love you as earnestly and truly as I have mourned your brother’s fate—that the new strength and purpose of my life which has grown out of my friendship for the murdered man grows even stronger as it turns to you, and changes me until I wonder at myself?” (401)

The transference of his affection from George to Clara here is clear, but more importantly, Robert scarcely recognizes himself—the same problem the attentive reader has.

Once Robert and Clara are engaged, the narrator again sets the contrast between Robert’s past and present selves in recognizably novelistic terms:

How delightful it was to get such splendid opportunities of hinting that if his life had been sanctified by an object, he might indeed have striven to be something better than an idle *flâneur* upon the smooth pathways that have no particular goal; that, blessed by the ties which would have given a solemn purpose to every hour of his existence, he might indeed have fought the battle earnestly and unflinchingly. (436)

Desire, for a particular object, is here coded as the necessary precondition for the sort of teleology upon which narrative relies. This formulation also constitutes a subtle undermining of the course the novel has actually taken. We are led to believe that only heterosexual love can rouse Robert to action, when what has actually done so has been an uneasy combination of his homosocial/homoerotic fixation on George and direct authorial meddling to efface the remnants of the asexual possibility from his character. Here, at the novel’s end, the narrator and Robert himself attempt to cover up the discrepancy between stated and actual causes by convincing themselves it was otherwise—just as with the earlier substitution of Matilda Plowson for Helen Talboys.

In Robert’s view, though, even marriage is ultimately left to forces whose intentions seem arbitrary at best:

Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection out of the nine hundred and ninety-nine mistakes? Who shall decide from the first aspect of the slimy creature, which is to be the one eel out of the colossal bag of snakes? That girl on the kerbstone yonder... may be the one woman out of every female creature in this vast universe who could make me a happy man. (204)

Who is to say indeed? God? A bossy author? Robert foregrounds the attendant problem of agency simply by asking the question. He goes on: “Yet I pass her by—bespatter her with the mud from my wheels, in my helpless ignorance, in my blind submission to the awful hand of fatality” (204). Yet again, Robert submits to the authority of a supernatural hand to pair him off with whomever the plot requires him to be paired off with.

Lest this narrative providence seem to have the plot securely under control, though—my argument in this chapter is precisely that it doesn’t—the narrator elsewhere gives the reader a portrait of the mismatches and remainders left behind when this top-down model of coupling goes haywire. In trying to make sense of Robert’s lack of interest in Alicia, Sir Michael

forgot that there are men who go their ways unscathed amidst legions of lovely and generous women, to succumb at last before some harsh-featured virago, who knows the secret of that only philter which can intoxicate and bewitch him. He forgot that there are certain Jacks who go through life without meeting the Jill appointed for them by Nemesis, and die old bachelors perhaps, with poor Jill pining an old maid upon the other side of the party-wall. He forgot that love, which is a madness, and a scourge, and a fever, and a delusion, and a snare, is also a mystery, and very imperfectly understood by every one except the individual sufferer who writhes under its tortures. (332)

The narrator pathologizes desire and then associates it with the madness that likewise threatens linearity, depth, and causality in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Later in this chapter, however, I will demonstrate that asexuality, as the flipside of desire, has much the same relationship to madness but poses a greater threat to plot.

The discontinuities, of course—both those that Braddon allows to stand and those that she tries to disavow—extend beyond Robert’s character. The same inconsistency also touches the Talboys family. Robert wonders,

How was it that with his father perpetually before his eyes, [George] had not grown up after the father’s disagreeable model, to be a nuisance to his fellow-men? How was it? Because we have Some One higher than our parents to thank for the souls which make us great or small; and because, while family noses and family chins may descend in orderly sequence from father to son, from grandsire to grandchild, as the fashion of the fading flowers of one year are reproduced in the budding blossoms of the next, the spirit, more subtle than the wind which blows among those flowers, independent of all earthly rule, owns no order but the harmonious Law of God. (195–96)

This seemingly routine, pedantic aside to the reader opens Victorian debates on causality both narrative and scientific. On the face of it, the narrator is simply saying that unlike his father, George isn’t rigid, demanding, and generally unpleasant. Narratively and philosophically, however, this passage denies or compartmentalizes the influence of environment on character—a staple of the realist novel²⁰—and the influence of heredity on character. In that respect, it seems also to take issue with the Darwinian arguments that were certainly in the air as Braddon was writing the novel. Most importantly for my reading here, the narrator—in maintaining the primacy of the “the harmonious law of God” over *both* environment and heredity—rejects the novelistic and Aristotelian model of causality discussed above and makes what is tantamount to a defense of *deus ex machina*, of a narrative order in which events occur not as the logical consequence of what has taken place before but by the will of a divine or implied author.

²⁰ Strictly speaking, of course, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is a sensation novel and not a realist novel in the narrow sense, but the assumptions about causation discussed above nevertheless pervade most mid-Victorian novels in any genre.

In keeping with such an order, when Sir Michael entrusts Lady Audley to Robert's care after she makes her confession to him, Robert ultimately takes a view of responsibility very nearly opposite to the one he held at the beginning of the novel and turns heavyhandedly preachy:

[S]urely this much be God's judgment upon the purposeless, vacillating life I led up to the seventh day of last September. Surely this awful responsibility has been forced upon me in order that I may humble myself to an offended Providence, and confess that a man cannot choose his own life. He cannot say, "I will take existence lightly, and keep out of the way of the wretched, mistaken, energetic creatures, who fight so heartily in the great battle." He cannot say, "I will stop in the tents while the strife is fought, and laugh at the fools who are trampled down in the useless struggle." He cannot do this. He can only do, humbly and fearfully, that which the Maker who created him has appointed for him to do. If he has a battle to fight, let him fight it faithfully; but woe betide him if he skulks when his name is called in the mighty muster-roll; woe betide him if he hides in the tents when the tocsin summons him to the scene of war! (367–68)

Obviously, Robert's character is nearly unrecognizable by this point, in comparison with his character at the beginning of the novel,²¹ but this passage also highlights further the minimization of individual choice and self-determination that the narrator has espoused throughout the novel. God—or the author (that ambiguous "Maker")—hands Robert a task, and he is bound to carry it out faithfully. The mandatory nature of the task, though, is no guarantee of its efficacy or worth, for it is still a "useless struggle" from which Robert can no longer abstain in good conscience: one that may not be of any narrative importance. This passage, then, marks the sharp discrepancy between Robert's character at the beginning of the novel and at the end, the supersession of individual agency by the dictates of Providence, and the arbitrariness of these dictates within a novelistic cosmos.

²¹ The narrator has remarked elsewhere that "[a] stranger would never have fathomed the strength of feeling which lay, a deep and powerful current, beneath the stagnant surface of the barrister's character" (213). Neither, without considerable assistance, would the reader.

Having thus established George's merits and most of Robert's by divine or authorial fiat, Braddon shows her characters to seek out for themselves their coherence as subjects themselves through expressly literary channels. Robert's initial impression of Lady Audley early in the novel stirs him—almost—to an unprecedented enthusiasm, but his infatuation with her seems to have a firmer foundation in fiction—and in fiction as such—than in fact: “I feel like the hero of a French novel; I am falling in love with my aunt” (56). What is noteworthy here isn't so much his claim to be falling in love with his aunt but the touch of *bovarisme* in his looking to his novel-reading for a template for his romantic feelings in the first place.²² As with the hand he keeps talking about, it is literally narrative convention that moves him, but in order for it to move him anywhere in particular—and to advance the plot²³ and his burgeoning interests in, well, anything at all—he has to shift to the register of English fiction instead of French. For David Skilton, Braddon's references to French fiction in the novel are

suggestive of a certain moral and intellectual atmosphere.... Robert Audley is presented as so un-English that he is not even interested in sport..., and to indicate his irresponsibility, Braddon makes him a habitual reader of French fiction.... Audley's failing according to Victorian standards is a quite “Continental” lack of moral concern and energy in relation to the serious issues of life... (xiii–xiv)

Skilton speculates that Braddon's references to French fiction “represented for the contemporary readership a surreptitious fingering of forbidden zones of sexuality” (xiv), but even Robert's adherence to the conventions of French fiction is diffident and incomplete, for he assures Lady Audley, quite in earnest,

²² Tellingly, too, the possibility of Robert's falling in love with his aunt is another narrative dead end, as David Skilton has also observed (xiv), much like Phoebe's resemblance to Lady Audley.

²³ At one point, Lady Audley uses the possible impropriety of their closeness to her own advantage to get Robert out of the house, at least temporarily (128–29).

You have no sentimental nonsense, no silly infatuation, borrowed from Balzac, or Dumas *films*, to fear from me. The benchers of the Inner Temple will tell you that Robert Audley is troubled with none of the epidemics whose outward signs are turn-down collars and Byronic neckties. (139)

His taste in neckties notwithstanding, he does accomplish the requisite shift from the conventions of French novels to those of English novels, with generous help from his author in filing down the indolent corners of his square-peg character to fit the round hole of the bildungsroman.

Gilbert concurs that generic conformity is centrally at issue in *Lady Audley's Secret*, arguing that Robert's transformation and Lady Audley's fall are conventional high- and low-culture plots, respectively, both of which are discredited by the detective plot that mediates between them (218). This plot, according to Gilbert, enacts at the levels of both content and form a masculine desire for knowledge of the threatening female body, for sensation fiction itself was denigrated by contemporary viewers in visceral, bodily terms as a hostile agent breaching and opening the modern subject's hygienically closed body—much as desire also does (219). As Gilbert explains, high cultural forms subdue, suppress, or expel the female body as menacing other, which is exactly what Robert must do with Lady Audley on behalf of an embattled, monologic epic narrative. In the course of his guardianship of that narrative, he becomes aware “of his own insanity and of the mad nature of his society,” but he decides “to remain complicit in that madness and to become active in supporting it” (Gilbert 220). That is, Robert is assimilated into a culturally dominant narrative with no real difficulty other than the obtrusive contrivances I have noted, which attempt to overcome or at least mask his unfitness for that narrative.

Lady Audley's story is another matter, and the popular narratives she finds at her disposal continually fail to supply adequate explanation or structure for her character and her experience of the world—she too eludes the epistemology and the logic of causality supplied by novelistic convention. She is well aware of this failure of dominant cultural narratives to account for her as a subject:

Have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder?... My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime. I wonder whether they suffered—those women—whether they ever suffered as—. (297; emphasis in orig.)

Lady Audley tries to distinguish herself from stock villainesses, whose stereotypical malevolence cannot properly describe her more reactive and emotionally invested approach to her misdeeds. Ironically, her problem here is just the opposite of Robert's: she is at variance with the narrative's demands on her because her character responds *too* coherently to her environment (remember the grounds on which Dr. Mosgrave denies that she is mad), while *his* character changes too independently of his environment. Given the contemporary reception of the novel, however, apparently no one but Lady Audley herself believed in her realistic humanity and exceptionality from literary examples.²⁴

²⁴ Hart describes the heyday of the image of Victorian female criminality as being marked by deep contradictions,

a period in which the eruption of violence by women was perceived as a real threat to the social order. While on the one hand audiences were flocking to the courtrooms to witness the trials of real women who had performed acts of violence as or more heinous than their fictional counterparts, on the other hand reviewers were insisting upon the villainous heroines as inferior aesthetic creations on the basis of their incredibility. Reviewers did not simply find characters like Lady Audley revolting, they found them *impossible*. (13; emphasis in orig.)

It is no surprise, then, that Lady Audley herself registers this sort of impossibility as a mismatch between her character and those she might take as models, as well as a mismatch with a society within the novel that, denied the luxury of declaring her impossible (as reviewers could), can at least declare her mad.

The narrator, evidently untroubled by the possibility of such dissonance between literary convention and lived reality, goes on to textualize Lady Audley's inner turmoil before she goes to burn the Castle Inn in vividly material and strikingly impersonal terms:

However verbose I may be in my description of her feelings, I can never describe a tithe of her thoughts or her sufferings. She suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages, in that one horrible night. She underwent volumes of anguish, and doubt, and perplexity; sometimes repeating the same chapters of her torments over and over again; sometimes hurrying through a thousand pages of her misery without one pause, without one moment of breathing time. (314)

The textuality of pain is prolix and yet ineffable, and in any case, the account that the reader is provided is manifestly not as copious as what Lady Audley actually suffers, which, we are told, would be prohibitively tedious and unreadable. Novelistic constraints of length accomplish an openly artificial foreshortening of Lady Audley's interiority,²⁵ and so we are screened by a paragraph's worth of indirect discourse from the sort of emotional detail that might have rendered her a dangerously sympathetic character.

According to Bowser, this limitation of access to Lady Audley's consciousness actually points to a greater aesthetic of surfaces at work throughout the novel. A prime example of this aesthetic is the opening description of Audley Court, which is temporally idiosyncratic and lures visitors to stasis. The narrator describes it as "a place that visitors fell into raptures with; feeling a yearning wish to have done with life, and to stay there for

²⁵ A similar instance of crossover between story and discourse occurs when Robert stands "on the spot at which all record of his friend's life ended as suddenly as a story ends when the reader shuts the book" (226): a foregrounding of George as character and the textualization of his disappearance. At the same time, though, Braddon's simile opens a question of narrative phenomenology. Presumably the story continues for the duration of the written text regardless of the point at which a reader stops reading, yet how could we have any knowledge of its continuation once we have stopped reading? If a book shuts in the forest and no one is around, does the story go on? The arbitrariness of such a stopping point, though, highlights the same disconnect I have been tracing in *Lady Audley's Secret* between the demands of the novel's plotting and the material on which that plotting has to work. Elsewhere, Robert finds Alicia reading a novel—by her avowal, "not particularly interesting"—entitled *Changes and Chances*, which seems just as apropos of the plot Robert has found himself involved in, marked by glaring alterations of his character (changes) and events not ordered by causation (chances) (224).

ever, staring into the cool fish-ponds, and counting the bubbles as the roach and carp rose to the surface of the water..." (2). These visitors "wish to be done with normal life," Bowser makes sure we observe, "wherein days begin and end and activities commence and conclude. They wish to sit, engaged in the same peaceful non-event over and over" (81). The phenomenon Bowser describes here, let me also note, sounds uncannily like the suspension of teleology and of the movement of desire that, I will argue, characterizes the logic of asexuality in Chapter 4 and in my Conclusion. It also receives Robert Audley's implicit approval: "Fishing is much better than shooting; you've only to lie on a bank and stare at your line; I don't find that you often catch anything, but it's very pleasant" (51). Once again, he favors stasis. Furthermore, falling asleep while fishing is how he misses George disappearing, an instance when the homosexual possibility and the asexual possibility are briefly in direct conflict. In keeping with Braddon's representation of Audley Court as asexual chronotope,²⁶ the novel opens on purposeless wandering, perhaps intrusion, on the reader's part—mirrored in the tourists visiting the house at the close of the novel, after its proper inhabitants have moved on (446). I have already discussed the clock's function as a figure of temporal discontinuity, and for Bowser, it likewise serves as a figure of the novel's "surface time," in which history does not accumulate so as to have any causal influence on present action (81).

However, Robert's investigation, Bowser argues, is a process by which he coerces surfaces to testify to depths, and he restores order in the world of the novel by restoring proper communication between the two. Importantly, the object of his investigation, Lady

²⁶ That is, in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, the narrative space-time that is partially constitutive of genre (84–85). Its application to Audley Court is apt because of the estate's imbrication of space and time in producing the conditions of asexual narrative.

Audley herself, is presented with a noticeable deficiency of psychological depth and, indeed, a deficiency of direct representation more generally.²⁷ Lady Audley, in this reading, is subject to the same sort of arbitrary, exterior, and discontinuous characterization as Robert.

Asexuality's Reminders

By this point, a fair question is just what these narratorial and authorial fingerprints all over the substance of *Lady Audley's Secret* have to do with asexuality. I asserted early on that the novel's fault lines are the result of its failure to discipline the asexual possibility successfully. So far, I have focused my attention primarily on those fault lines themselves, but here I would like to clarify the substance of this possibility in Braddon's novel. This possibility attaches most legibly to Robert Audley and persists uneasily underneath his possibly homoerotic relationship with George (the inverse of this scenario will look more familiar to most readers, although I seek to defamiliarize it in my reading of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the next chapter). Traces of this possibility, however, are still legible on a more structural level in the dead ends and excesses of the novel's plotting. In a different and rather troubling permutation of the asexual possibility, Lady Audley's transgressiveness is founded in part upon normative Victorian female asexuality carried to its logical conclusion, but if she perfects her

²⁷ Bowser calls our attention to the fact that

[d]espite being the title character, Lady Audley does not actually command much textual space. We are three-quarters of the way through the novel before getting a chapter that is actually *about* Lady Audley. In this chapter, the reader finds Lady Audley anxious about the impending exposure of her secrets. The reader is also given, for the first time, narration of Lady Audley's psychology. But even this late-coming representation is strangely indirect and mediated, amounting mostly to a narratorial projection of Lady Audley's psychology. (83; emphasis in orig.)

That is, we must again rely on the interventions of the narrator to establish a major character's verisimilitude.

femininity too well in this arena, Braddon does render her safe for the reader again by disqualifying her in others.

The asexual possibility not only attaches to Braddon's characters but also lurks in the connotations of celibacy that cling to the reminders and appurtenances throughout the novel of a banished Catholicism. These, too, we find in the opening description of

Audley Court. Hidden under the nursery is a room

so small that he who hid there must have crouched on his hands and knees or lain at full length, and yet large enough to contain a quaint old carved oak chest half-filled with priests' vestments which had been hidden away, no doubt, in those cruel days when the life of a man was in danger if he was discovered to have harbored a Roman Catholic priest, to have had mass said in his house. (3)

The Victorians distrusted Roman Catholicism for a variety of reasons, and clerical celibacy ranked among them.²⁸ The placement of the vestments under the nursery floor strengthens the insinuation of the asexual possibility as embodied by celibacy. According to Elizabeth Langland, Braddon seeks in *Lady Audley's Secret* "to expose the connections between the ideal upper-middle-class lady and childishness associated, on the one hand, with asexuality and, on the other, with madness" (4). I quote this passage in part simply because another critic has gratifyingly stumbled upon the a-word (albeit without the self-consciousness and theoretical backing that I employ here). More importantly, though, this passage locates asexuality within a web of cultural meaning so tightly woven that Langland's two hands turn out to have been the same hand all along. Asexuality broadly

²⁸ Other elements of Catholicism that alarmed Victorian sensibilities, according to Ellis Hanson, were its ritualism—seen as dangerously sensuous, idolatrous, and/or effeminate—and the allegiance to the Pope that it required, which carried seditious overtones (251).

construed is directly associated with Victorian ideals of childhood²⁹ and femininity, as well as being implicitly related (in Langland's reading and in the novel, as I will demonstrate below) to insanity, while underneath—incidentally, underneath the space in which the doubly culturally asexual girl-child has been given to play³⁰—lie the vestments of a celibate priesthood.

Asexuality, childhood, femininity, and Catholicism are further imbricated by the title of the third chapter, whose "Hidden Relics" turn out to be not religious ones, but Lady Audley's mementos of her son, framing ideal femininity and motherhood in devotional, vaguely ritualistic terms. Later, when Robert escorts her to the *maison de santé*, he reimagines it for her, rather unconvincingly, as a convent:

You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this Catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures unto the end. The solitude of your existence in this place will be no greater than that of a king's daughter, who, flying from the evil of the time, was glad to take shelter in a house as tranquil as this. (391)

The fatal flaw in his analogy, of course, is that Lady Audley does *not* take such a life freely upon herself, and any evil from which she may be said to be flying is one he has

²⁹ According to Foucault, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the putative, idealized asexuality of children both vociferously defended and contested, as evidenced by

a double assertion that practically all children indulge or are prone to indulge in sexual activity; and that, being unwarranted, at the same time "natural" and "contrary to nature," this sexual activity posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers; children were defined as "preliminary" sexual beings, on this side of sex, yet within it, astride a dangerous dividing line. (104)

Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder register the same contradictions surrounding childhood sexuality in documenting the confluence of childlike qualities and sexual allure in the ideal femininity that Lady Audley represents, consequently also representing "a central contradiction in the patriarchal ideal": "[t]he ideal woman" as "the inviolable child whom men clamor to violate" (Schroeder and Schroeder 32).

³⁰ Here, then, we find yet another gratuitous doubling/tripling, as with Lady Audley/Phoebe Marks/Matilda Plowson.

visited upon her himself.³¹ The traces of Catholicism extend still further, though, to Robert's own residue of quasi-religious asceticism.

The narrator asks, as Robert approaches Audley Court with trepidation after receiving news that his uncle is ill,

Is it so wonderful that some wayfarers drop asleep under the hedges; scarcely caring to toil onward on a journey that leads to no abiding habitation? Is it wonderful that there have been quietists in the world ever since Christ's religion was first preached upon earth? Is it strange that there is patient endurance and tranquil resignation, calm expectation of that which is to come on the further shore of the dark-flowing river? Is it not rather to be wondered that anybody should ever care to be great for greatness' sake, for any other reason than pure conscientiousness; the simple fidelity of the servant who fears to lay his talent by in a napkin, knowing that indifference is near akin to dishonesty? If Robert Audley had lived in the time of Thomas à Kempis, he would very likely have built himself a narrow hermitage amid some forest loneliness, and spent his life in tranquil imitation of the reputed author of *The Imitation*. As it was, Fig-tree Court was a pleasant hermitage in its way, and for breviaries and Books of Hours, I am ashamed to say the young barrister substituted Paul de Kock and Dumas *films*. But his sins were of so simply negative an order, that it would have been very easy for him to have abandoned them for negative virtues. (214)

In Chapter 1, I discussed Myra T. Johnson's account of the historical asexual as religiously-motivated ascetic. Robert's asceticism, though, is an asceticism secularized and trivialized, his abstentions figured by implication as "negative vices," lacking only the proper religious coloring to make them over as "negative virtues." Such negativity is figured as unsettling in itself, for the narrator continues sniffing suspiciously around all the absences that Robert's character introduces, as Robert's hesitation to continue on a purposeful narrative trajectory persists. The narrator is hardly eager to search out "negative virtue" in Robert's indifference, instead all but equating it with "dishonesty" in

³¹ Schroeder and Schroeder make the same observation, and point to Robert's analogy as, additionally, "a chilling reminder of a culture and time when men routinely exercised their power to incarcerate female family members in a holy order" (59), a practice that Elizabeth Abbott also documents (138–39).

a rather unconventional reinterpretation of the parable of the talents. And indifference toward what, exactly, we must necessarily ask. The context suggests indifference toward ambition and purposeful action, and thus toward cooperation with the trajectory ordained for him as the novel's protagonist, but the object of his indifference is never made explicit. The narrator later reminds us of Robert's monastic tendencies in the attention he pays to the peacefulness of Mrs. Barkamb's house when he tries to fill in the gaps in Lady Audley's history: "I should like to live here, and tell the beads upon my rosary, and repent and rest" (248). The specter of Catholicism returns with the image of the rosary, but as with Robert's indifference-turned-dishonesty, we are left wondering: repent of what? Those unspoken vices that Braddon establishes as sins of omission rather than commission, perhaps; his guilt seems to consist, suggestively, in what he *doesn't* do rather than what he does.

Repeatedly, my reading has brought up figures of absence or stasis, particularly surrounding Robert's character. The logic of asexuality, as I have established, is the logic of absence, of trace, of the disruption of a teleology ordered by desire and specifically modern ways of knowing predicated on sexual knowledge. Asexuality, then, manifests in narrative not only in the attitudes and relationships of individual characters—where it can generally be established only problematically anyway—but in places where the narrative stalls out, nothing happens, or there ought to be something rather than nothing—but there isn't.

Such absences characterize Robert's initial attitudes toward life, which Braddon and the narrator then exert unnatural efforts to expel. Robert "look[s] upon almost all pleasure as a negative kind of trouble" (62). Later, too, Robert— as "the young

philosopher of the modern school”—“was arguing the favourite modern question of the nothingness of everything and the folly of taking too much trouble to walk upon a road that led nowhere, or to compass a work that meant nothing” (206). Robert here confronts, albeit in deflatingly hyperbolic terms, a pervasive meaninglessness threatening the utility of, or motivation behind, purposeful human endeavor. That same meaninglessness is then an inducement to remain at a standstill rather than “walk upon a road that led nowhere” or “compass a work that meant nothing.”

Most significantly, though, Robert takes an absence, a non-happening, as the most remarkable event of his life: George’s disappearance, or more properly, George’s non-appearance at dinner one fateful evening. Robert marvels, “Of all the extraordinary things that ever happened to me in the whole course of my life, . . . this is the most miraculous!” And accordingly, “[t]he landlord, still in attendance, opened his eyes as Robert made this remark. What could there be so extraordinary in the simple fact of a gentleman being late for his dinner?” (81). This is the asexual possibility undergirding the entire plot of the novel: what doesn’t happen, what isn’t there. This failure of something to happen is of a piece with the novel’s aforementioned superfluties and excesses, the possibilities that lead nowhere. Braddon reacts to the fear that nothing will happen with a surfeit of things that, narratively, don’t need to happen but that happen anyway.

Robert later applies his fear of meaninglessness to his investigation in particular and to the possibility that it cannot cohere as narrative:

Why was it that I saw some strange mystery in my friend’s disappearance? Was it a monition or a monomania? What if I am wrong after all? What if this chain of evidence which I have constructed link by link is woven out of my own folly? What if this edifice of horror and suspicion is a mere collection of crochets— the nervous fancies of a hypochondriacal

bachelor? Mr. Harcourt Talboys sees no meaning in the events out of which I have created a horrible mystery. I lay the separate links of the chain before him, and he cannot recognise their fitness. He is unable to put them together. (254)

The asexual threat to meaning and purpose here merges with stock bachelor hypochondria,³² which Braddon pushes briefly into a comic register (simultaneously disavowing doing so) late in the novel when Robert imagines himself, or tries to imagine himself, haunted by George's ghost: "Do not laugh at poor Robert because he grew hypochondriacal, after hearing the horrible story of his friend's death. There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling. Mad to-day and sane to-morrow" (403). Here Braddon elides the difference between Lady Audley's ostensible "latent insanity" and that which could just as easily descend upon Robert, or even the reader. At the same time, by the narrator's very plea to the reader, Braddon renders Robert's bachelor existence and state of mind fully ridiculous preparatory to his marriage, making a final defense against the asexual possibility in his character (and with it, homosociality and the homosexual possibility, for bachelorhood is overdetermined).

Sir Michael's musings on the possibility that Robert could go mad (at his wife's strategic suggestion) tighten the bonds between insanity and bachelorhood/
homosociality/asexuality:

It was most certain that the young man had always been eccentric. He was sensible, he was tolerably clever, he was honourable and gentlemanlike in feeling, though perhaps a little careless in the performance of certain

³² Sedgwick figures the Victorian bachelor hero as a sort of bathetic successor to the Gothic hero, and his hypochondria is one of his defining marks: "Where the Gothic hero had been solipsistic, the bachelor hero is selfish. Where the Gothic hero had raged, the bachelor hero bitches. Where the Gothic hero had been suicidally inclined, the bachelor hero is a hypochondriac. The Gothic hero ranges from euphoria to despondency; the bachelor hero, from the eupeptic to the dyspeptic" (*Closet* 189).

minor social duties; but there were some slight differences, not easily to be defined, that separated him from other men of his age and position. (331)

The difference between normalcy and potential madness, or even between “eccentricity” and potential madness, is something unnamable and indefinable. Above, I cited Schroeder and Schroeder’s reading of *Lady Audley’s Secret* as challenging the conventional Victorian association of female insanity with sexual passion, pointing to Lady Audley’s assertion that “[t]he mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness...” (354). That is, she delineates for the reader an insanity associated with a *deficiency*, rather than an excess, of sexual desire. And in Robert’s case, Sir Michael drills down to a failure of heterosexual desire and the change in Robert since George’s disappearance as indications of insanity:

Then there was even another point which seemed to strengthen my lady’s case against this unhappy young man. He had been brought up in the frequent society of his cousin, Alicia—his pretty, genial cousin—to whom interest, and one would have thought affection, naturally pointed as his most fitting bride. More than this, the girl had shown him, in the innocent guilelessness of a transparent nature, that on her side at least, affection was not wanting; and yet, in spite of all this, he had held himself aloof, and had allowed other men to propose for her hand, and to be rejected by her, and had still made no sign. (331)

A logical fallacy is at work here that Sedgwick exposes as plaguing criticism on Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”—that a failure to desire one particular woman is tantamount to a failure to desire any woman and a failure to desire at all (*Closet* 201). In addition, though, the passage is marked by a striking preponderance of deictics. Interest and affection “point” (and point “naturally,” no less, although the other pointing we have seen in this novel is anything but), Alicia “shows,” but Robert has “made no sign.” At the beginning of this chapter, I located asexual erasure precisely in the impulse to install

signification in order to mask absence, and it is in the ultimate inefficacy of such signification that Sir Michael thinks he sees the possibility that Robert may be mad.

I do not claim, though, that all signification is expressly an effort to erase asexuality, although as we will see in Chapter 4, signification and the logic of asexuality are fundamentally opposed. Such a claim would be untenable in its reach. However, this mechanism of erasure is manifestly at work in Braddon's novel. Far from arguing that Robert Audley "is," or was at one time, asexual, I have shown instead that Braddon raises the asexual possibility in his character as an accident of his bachelorhood, his representation as *flâneur*, and his general indifference. This possibility, of course, is never articulated as such—how could it be, in 1862?— but were it allowed to stand unchallenged, its consequences would create too much drag on conventional novelistic plotting, ultimately, for Braddon to proceed. (The pressing exigencies of convention are the primary reason I have focused on a work of Victorian popular fiction in this chapter.) Braddon then overcompensates, answering the threat of absence with the imposition of excess, bestowing not one but two love objects on her protagonist and reforming his character not merely by means of his experiences within the world of the novel but through direct supernatural or authorial intervention. She does not ultimately succeed in silencing the asexual possibility, however, given how conspicuous these devices remain.

But asexual erasure makes strange bedfellows, as it were. As asexuality must be forcibly excluded from normative (Protestant) bourgeois masculinity, it accumulates a wide assortment of contrary associations: femininity, juvenility, Catholicism, and insanity—all of them characteristics that *Lady Audley's Secret* (and a great quantity of other Victorian fiction) are engaged in disciplining. Asexuality here proves incompatible

with a particular set of narrative conventions, as it proved incompatible in Chapter 1 with the economy of desire underlying both those conventions and the whole of psychoanalysis, which itself must foreclose and repress the asexual possibility in drawing its boundaries so as to exclude it. In Chapter 4, I will show asexuality to be at loggerheads with the logic of narrative itself, given narrative's basis in an implicitly sexual model of desire. Before continuing on to this analysis, however, I turn now to examine the effects of the asexual possibility—as both a deliberately implemented diversionary tactic and a disruptive force—in a novel better known for its deployment of the homosexual possibility, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE ASEXUAL

CLOSET

*All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.*

—Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (3)

There was one window and another door opposite the door they had come in by. Haze opened the extra door, expecting it to be a closet. It opened onto a drop of about thirty feet and looked down into a narrow bare back yard where the garbage was collected. There was a plank nailed across the door frame at knee level to keep anyone from falling out.

—Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (107)

No doubt you are wondering why I have begun a chapter on Oscar Wilde with an epigraph from a Flannery O'Connor novel, separated from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by more than half a century, the Atlantic Ocean, and a very different set of aesthetic concerns (although we may, with the encouragement of critics like Ellis Hanson, read Wilde as *at least* a crypto-Catholic author [229]). My intent here, though, is not to thumb my nose at the strictures of periodicity. I include this passage from *Wise Blood* because it usefully literalizes what, borrowing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I theorize here as the “asexual closet” and seek to locate in *Dorian Gray*. The asexual closet differs significantly from its gay counterpart in its organization—or more properly its *disorganization*—of knowledge, as my engagement with Sedgwick’s arguments in *Epistemology of the Closet* below will demonstrate.

The dynamics of the asexual closet also necessitate a somewhat different approach to the asexual possibility in this chapter than in the previous two. In Chapter 1, I specified the forms that asexual erasure took in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside and within the development of the novel and the modern sexual subject. In Chapter 2, I showed how Mary Elizabeth Braddon reacted against the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret* with deviations from the conventions of novelistic plotting that obtain under formal realism. The asexual possibility, as we saw, opens up absences in narrative content and structure that can't be closed back up except by patently artificial means. The work of the asexual possibility in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is much the same. However, Oscar Wilde is nothing if not hospitable to artifice, and so his narrative reaction to the asexual possibility accordingly differs from Braddon's.

In *Dorian Gray*, Wilde attempts to use the absence represented by asexual romantic friendship to efface the presence, or the threat of presence, of homoerotic relationships. The reach of the asexual possibility, however, exceeds this narrow function, as it also overruns its bounds in *Lady Audley's Secret*, but for different reasons. Importantly, Wilde's positioning relative to the asexual possibility, in this instance, also differs from Braddon's: he indulges this possibility in his revisions to *Dorian Gray* in order to suppress or mask his characters' homosexual attractions. This conscription of absence into the service of presence, though, is unconvincing. Moreover, the asexual possibility produces farther-reaching narrative effects than just the thematic deployment of asexual romantic friendship. In Wilde's novel, the logic of asexuality overtakes that of the modern sexual subject, disrupting subjectivity and a depth model of knowledge.

In the reading that follows, I don't argue that Wilde turned the asexual possibility loose in his novel to do his aesthetic dirty work for him, nor, contrarily, that the asexual possibility got the better of him and played havoc on what might have otherwise been a more conventional novel—an argument more tenable in the case of a novel like Braddon's, which attempts to operate in a more conventional, popular mode to begin with. Neither do I argue for merely a relationship of metaphoricity between asexuality and the phenomena at play in Wilde's novel—as being unmistakably *like* asexuality but not having anything to do with it on a more immediate level. What I *do* argue in this chapter is that Wilde's attempted substitution of asexual for homosexual relationships necessarily involves a reshaping of asexuality to fit the organization of subjectivity and knowledge that obtains under the logic of the closet, a logic that the asexual possibility otherwise undermines.

These two different functions of asexuality help to explain the overlap of asexual and homosexual possibility in the novel, how asexuality, to a large extent, describes what we might otherwise call the queering of time, narrative, and knowledge in *Dorian Gray*. However, asexuality enacts a very particular *kind* of queering, one that tends to arrest rather than divert narrative movement and that effaces rather than disorders the surface/depth binary, undermining the formations of knowledge on which the modern subject is founded. Queerness and asexuality overlap, just as heteronormativity and eronormativity do. Both entail rejections of heteroreproductive teleologies and hierarchies of relationships. Asexuality, however, differs from other queer sexualities in important ways: for instance, that it is *not* recoverable within psychoanalysis as

perversion or within modern regimes of sexual knowledge without being reshaped and assimilated to the logic of closetedness.

Nevertheless, the reason that the asexual possibility produces the deformations in Wilde's novel that I describe can be traced to the logic of the asexual closet and to asexuality's relationship to knowledge in modernity. In order to elucidate this relationship, I wish to extend Sedgwick's discussion of closetedness, silence, and the stakes involved in coming out to encompass asexuality as well—which, as I have argued, cannot be apprehended by the more familiar hetero/homosexual binary. Locating my formulation of the asexual closet in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I then read Wilde's 1891 revisions to the novel as an attempt to harness the asexual possibility as a means of masking the more pronounced homoeroticism of the 1890 version of the text. However, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the asexual possibility exceeds the bounds set for it by the novelist and disrupts both the flow of time and the surface/depth binary, as well as the logic of causality and the boundaries of the subject. While I begin by elucidating a logic of the asexual closet, I am in effect reading against the closet, demonstrating how this metaphor runs aground on asexuality.

The Asexual Closet

The scene from *Wise Blood* from which I have taken the second epigraph to this chapter, in which Hazel Motes's landlady shows him the room he will be renting, typifies the peculiar logic of the asexual closet—and with it, that of the asexual secret. While for Sedgwick, homosexuality is intimately bound up with modern discourses of secrecy, the asexual secret as such is precisely the *lack* of a secret. Sedgwick characterizes homosexuality as unique in its relationship—indeed, its near-equivalency—to secrecy in

a nineteenth-century context (71).¹ Given the centrality of homosexuality to the secrecy/disclosure binary, we are likely to find it lurking as well in the surface/depth binary, which is central in *Dorian Gray*. Asexuality also exerts a distinctive pressure on this binary. As with secrecy/disclosure, however, homosexual meaning still depends on the legibility of the surface/depth binary *as* binary. In contrast, we recognize the effects of the asexual possibility when this binary's terms decay. What the asexual hides is the fact that s/he has nothing to hide; the asexual closet is empty, is not even a closet. Instead, it has a great deal in common with the misleading, superfluous door in O'Connor's novel that, rather than opening onto a discretely bounded and purposeful room, instead threatens only a nasty drop into undifferentiated space. It is a closet whose door one opens to find asexuality, not contained within four walls, but everywhere and nowhere at once, in much the way it is dispersed in Wilde's novel.

The consequences of this spatial metaphor for the asexual possibility will become clearer once we situate the dynamics of closetedness alongside those of coming out and compare the processes of gay and asexual coming out in greater detail. Sedgwick herself has already made a similar move, using a reading of Racine's retelling of the biblical story of Esther to adumbrate the very different stakes in coming out as gay and coming out as Jewish. The asexual closet I am theorizing here shares some of the characteristics

¹ This avowal stems from Sedgwick's broader analysis in which

the nineteenth-century culture of the individual proceeded to elaborate a version of knowledge/sexuality increasingly structured by its pointed cognitive *refusal* of sexuality between women, between men. The gradually reifying effect of this refusal meant that by the end of the nineteenth century, when it had become fully current—as obvious to Queen Victoria as to Freud—that knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets, there had in fact developed one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy: the perfect object for the by now insatiably exacerbated epistemological/sexual anxiety of the turn-of-the-century subject. (73; emphasis in orig.)

that distinguish Sedgwick's gay closet from Esther's Jewish closet, but not all. Sedgwick discusses seven such differences, of which I will highlight several here, interposing the asexual closet into her comparisons. These differences fall into two broad categories: some concern the epistemological implications of coming out and others its social consequences (although these two categories are not always entirely distinct). The more epistemological consequences have a more direct bearing on my project, which is more centrally concerned with the effects of the logic of asexuality on the structures of knowledge and narrative than with asexual identity and experience.

First, Sedgwick begins, Assuèrus (the king of Persia and Esther's husband) does not question the authenticity of Esther's Jewish identity, whereas a gay—or asexual—individual coming out is often subject to skepticism, to “questions of authority and evidence” (79). Second, Assuèrus's surprise at Esther's self-disclosure is, unproblematically, exactly the reaction she expects of him. By contrast, coming out to someone as gay intersects unpredictably with suspicions that that person may or may not have already held and carries with it a more complicated set of power relations than those involved in Esther's coming out to Assuèrus:

After all, the position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited and empowered one—whether what they think one doesn't know is that one somehow *is* homosexual, or merely that one's supposed secret is known to them. The glass closet can license insult...; it can also license far warmer relations, but (and) relations whose potential for exploitiveness is built into the optics of the asymmetrical, the specularized, and the inexplicit. (80; emphasis in orig.)

The glass closet, however—the closet one presumes to see into, see through—is a decidedly less common phenomenon for asexuals, chiefly because the odds are good that whomever one comes out to has never heard of asexuality and therefore doesn't have the

privilege of thinking s/he knew all along (oftentimes, though, this person will have suspected the asexual of being gay and in denial, which leads to more of the kind of questioning discussed above). Such presumptive knowledge, however, may sometimes be produced retroactively: once the asexual has come out *and* explained what asexuality is, the other person may construct the asexual individual's orientation as having been obvious all along: the signs were there the whole time—only not, one tends to forget, the thing they signified, asexuality having been installed as explanation well after the fact.

Another difference that Sedgwick discusses between Racine's play and the coming-out scenario is that Esther's revelation does not threaten to alter Assuèrus or his relationship with her in any way. Not so in the scene of gay coming out, "because erotic identity, of all things, is never to be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known by anyone outside of a structure of transference and countertransference" (81). A second reason for this difference is the shock waves that such disclosures necessarily send through the structure of compulsory heterosexuality. Once more, though, the situation of asexual coming out differs from both the safe insularity of Esther's revelation of her religious and ethnic identity and the double-edged gay self-disclosure. The effects of asexual coming out are considerably more unpredictable in what significant effects—if any—they will produce in a relationship, because asexuality *is* in some sense what Sedgwick deems impossible, an erotic identity that is not relational, or that is relational—and for that matter, erotic—only negatively. As we saw in Chapter 1, asexuality is non-objectal and inert and cannot be reconciled to a Freudian account of desire organized by structures of "transference and countertransference"—ultimately, by the *movement* of desire from subject to object.

A difference that is uniquely *more* pronounced, however, for the asexual than for the gay individual is that Esther's closeted identity comes with preexisting commitments and relationships to a known community, while theirs do not. Gay people are usually first acquainted with cultural homophobia before they "have with difficulty and always belatedly to patch together from fragments a community, a usable heritage, a politics of survival or resistance..." (81). This patching-together is typically even more difficult and belated for asexuals, who have to contend not only with the problematics of asexual identity discussed in the Introduction, but with their culture's—and often their own—utter ignorance of asexuality as an identity or as the potential ground of a community.

We can see from these examples, then, that the gay closet and the asexual closet are neither equivalent nor wholly distinct. The most salient differences between them—and between the implications of uncloseting for gay and asexual individuals—are rooted in the differences between homophobia and oppression on the one hand and asexual erasure on the other. If at times the asexual closet is unrecognizable *as* closet, it is largely because the asexual secret is unrecognizable as secret and the asexual is unrecognizable as asexual. The "glass closet" of the open secret malfunctions when what it supposedly fails to conceal is invisible or is itself taken to be transparent.

This foray into the partial resemblance of the asexual closet to the gay closet aside, one point of Sedgwick's own reading of *Dorian Gray* perhaps clarifies the effects of the asexual closet best. Sedgwick argues that homosexual desire, whose representation in earlier periods required the installation of some marker of difference other than gender, takes on an aspect of utopian sameness in *Dorian Gray* (160). The meaning of "homo" in the novel accordingly shifts from "same" to "self" and from desire to identification, terms

that become unstable once the distinction erodes between what one is and what one wants (161). However, substituting “identification” for “desire” is a familiar homophobic alibi, Sedgwick reminds us, as is *Dorian Gray*’s recourse to modernist abstraction. Such abstraction is the product of the meeting of the “open secret” (of male same-sex desire) with the “empty secret,” that is, “the cluster of aperçus and intuitions that seems distinctively to signify ‘modernism’ (at least, male high modernism)” and that

delineates a space bounded by hollowness, a self-reference that refers back to—though it differs from—nineteenth-century paranoid solipsism, and a split between content and thematics on the one hand and structure on the other that is stressed in favor of structure and at the expense of thematics. (165)²

As a result, Sedgwick claims, male modernism’s very structures bear the traces of abjected homoerotic desire: Basil Hallward’s aesthetic, for instance, is one that devalues figuration along with sentimentality (166). Expelling figuration in favor of abstraction, for Sedgwick, is tantamount to expelling the erotic male body and is thus the work of homosexual panic (167).

While the meeting of the “open secret” and the “empty secret” is, for Sedgwick, one of the chief markers of modernist abstraction and one of modernism’s prime strategies for disavowing male homosexual desire, this meeting also sounds a great deal like what goes on in the closeting of asexuality. The “empty secret” is perfect abstraction, only the form of a secret, referring self-reflexively to itself alone. It is surface without depth, while the “open secret” is depth without surface. Either one can signify (a closeted) asexuality, for it is only closeting that makes asexuality commensurable with

² Lee Edelman’s “Homographesis” also takes up this specificity, arguing that as they became legible as a distinct group of persons, “[h]omosexuals... were not only conceptualized in terms of a radically potent, if negatively charged, relation to the signifying ability of language, they were also conceptualized as inherently textual—as bodies that might well bear a ‘hallmark’ that could, and must, be read” (191).

the logic of secrecy, and that makes it, in many cases, a convenient screen secret for homosexuality: too inscrutable or benign to figure as a threat. The results, when both homosexuality and asexuality are stuffed into the closet together, are unpredictable.

Sedgwick aligns closetedness not only with secrecy but with silence, defining closetedness as “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech acts that coming out, in turn, can comprise are strangely specific” (3). I have discussed the repercussions of such speech acts above, as well as the further particularity accruing to them in the different scenarios of gay and asexual coming out, but this undifferentiated—or incompletely differentiated—silence is more nebulous. It is occupied not only by homosexuality but by asexuality, as we see in Wilde’s novel and elsewhere. However, the specifying move of mapping closetedness and coming out onto asexuality enacts asexuality’s deformation or erasure.³

Thus producing absence as knowledge and the lack of a sexual secret as a sexual secret, the asexual closet also disrupts the relationship of surface and depth in much the same way that the plotting of *Lady Audley’s Secret* did in the previous chapter, and as I will demonstrate that *Dorian Gray* does in this one: the asexual secret reveals a lack of depth, a lack within depth. It is neither—entirely—the empty secret nor the open secret, since both of these secrets ultimately rely on the coherence of the surface/depth binary.

³ Sedgwick likewise argues for the specificity of ignorance, for “[i]nsofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth” (8; emphasis in orig.). The specification of ignorance is obviously useful for a project like mine, which excavates asexuality chiefly by the ways in which it has gone *un*recognized, but at the same time, this specification represents the same sort of delineation of boundaries as the asexual closet.

As I argued, following Rachel Bowser, in Chapter 2, the restoration of proper communication between surfaces and depths is tantamount to disciplining the asexual possibility that frustrated the fit between Braddon's novel and the conventions of novelistic plotting and characterization. In *Dorian Gray*, surfaces and depths are not merely out of sync but often lack any necessary relationship to one another. The resultant possibilities of meaning for the "open closet" and "empty closet" exceed the demands of their homophobic function and point to a conflict between the asexual possibility and the novel's structure, much as the excesses of Braddon's plotting did in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Both novels are likewise marked by temporal distortion, but where Braddon's novel tries to suppress disruptions of the movement of time—those places where time stands still or lurches ahead discontinuously—Wilde's novel allows idiosyncratic pacing more out into the open, even celebrating it. This difference shows what was very differently at stake for these two authors in the irruption or eruption of the asexual possibility. For Braddon, asexuality is a monkey wrench in the machinery of the detective plot, the bildungsroman, and desire itself. For Wilde, in contrast, it makes for safer narrative content than the alternative; it serves as a means of transmuting the homoerotic into the homoromantic in his 1891 revisions to *Dorian Gray*. Yet just as it did for Braddon, asexuality-as-false-wall in Wilde's novelistic closet refuses to stay put, and it overruns its prescribed bounds with readily perceptible narrative effects.

Wilde's Revisions

If the previous chapter represented my refusal of the "Where's Waldo?" approach to asexuality in literature, this one represents my refusal of the turf-war-with-gay-studies

approach (i.e. attempting the plant the asexual flag in texts and characters already recognized as privileged sites of homosexual meaning), and it involves no less perilous a tightrope act. I am specifically interested here in the coexistence, intersection, or overlapping of the homosexual possibility and the asexual possibility at the same loci of textual meaning and the consequences of each for the interpretation of the other. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* shows what happens when the asexual possibility and the homosexual possibility interact—chiefly through Wilde’s 1891 revisions to the novel. The result of this interaction is a reworking of asexuality as content that conforms to a modern conception of subjectivity and knowledge—but not entirely. As in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the asexual possibility nevertheless continues to play havoc on the structure of narrative by jamming and warping the forward linear movement of time, by deconstructing the surface/depth binary, and by eroding the integrity of subjectivity itself.

In his revisions to the novel for the 1891 book edition from Ward, Lock and Company, Wilde considerably muted the homoeroticism that had marked the 1890 edition in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*—though it by no means disappeared.⁴ He replaced it with something more closely resembling asexual romantic friendship—the instance of the asexual possibility in the novel over which he claimed some control, although such control proved inadequate. That asexuality may be a pose or an alibi for a

⁴ The 1890 *Lippincott’s* text and the 1891 edition are the only two published states of the novel with which Wilde had any involvement. While there is no manuscript extant of the 1891 text, both the holograph manuscript and the corrected typescript of the 1890 version have survived. Wilde made extensive changes to the novel in both the manuscript and the typescript, besides the still greater revisions he made between the 1890 and 1891 editions of the novel (Lawler 424–25). However, based on his examination of Wilde’s corrections to the holograph manuscript, Donald L. Lawler has postulated that it is itself a revision of a still earlier manuscript draft of the novel, now lost (430). Both published states of the novel are reproduced in Michael Patrick Gillespie’s Norton Critical Edition, which also helpfully footnotes many of Wilde’s manuscript and typescript revisions. Unless otherwise noted, my citations come from the 1891 text as reproduced in the Norton Critical Edition.

repressed or disavowed homosexuality is a refrain familiar to any asexual who has come out only to be accused of denying his or her “true” desires. However, I wish here to dig into the prehistory of this commonplace and consider its textual more than its identitarian significance.

This special case reverses the state of affairs I described in Chapter 1, in which asexual erasure was the Victorian norm. In *Dorian Gray*, asexuality is postulated and made conspicuous as characterizing close relationships between men—reminiscent of the romantic friendships between women whose nonsexual character was generally received with credulity until the turn of the twentieth century, as Lillian Faderman has described. Admittedly, this strategy was not particularly successful for Wilde, given the use of the novel as evidence against him at his 1895 trials. My goal here, though, is not so much to examine the effect of such revisions on the novel’s actual reception as to trace a pattern of revisions that suggests a possible—even a probable—intent on Wilde’s part to recast potentially homoerotic material in the more culturally benign light of nonsexual affection.⁵ Yet this positioning of asexuality as having a content, as a surface concealing a depth, actually denatures it *as* asexuality. This attribution of depth to asexuality points us to the effect of the asexual closet *as closet*: by bounding and framing asexuality as secret, the act of closeting gives the nothing of asexuality the shape of a something. Such

⁵ The relationship of art and autobiography is a vexed question within the novel, as it continued to be in its reception and in later criticism. For Elana Gomel, *Dorian Gray* illustrates the troubled relation of the Foucauldian author function and the actual author, which can’t be separated entirely. Art is born out of a sort of violence that severs it from its creator, Gomel argues, yet the reader shadowily holds the two together: “The author and the writer are a self split into a pair of uneasy and hostile conjoined twins who can neither reunite nor completely separate. The aporia of their relationship generates paradoxical and grotesque metaphors and plots” (76), of which *Dorian Gray* is one example. For Gomel, the novel illustrates what happens when a human being gets to live out the fantasy of artistic stability and durability and it allows Wilde to explore the relations of author, audience, and character to the work of art through Basil, Lord Henry, and Dorian, respectively. Gomel points out that the author as ideal self is not disembodied but—like a ghost—*differently* embodied, and it is the vestigial corporeality of a ghost that makes it horrifying, driving home the point that there is no escaping the body without violence (89–90).

boundedness jars against the representation of the asexual closet suggested by my example from O'Connor's novel, but this boundedness is nevertheless the *expectation* produced by the (apparent) existence of a closet in the first place, of a door, of a surface, of a means of concealment. That asexuality comically defies such containment and concealment, that absence *cannot* function unproblematically as knowledge and as secret, points to the stubborn superfluity of the asexual possibility and the narrative and subjective perturbations it produces.

Examples of revisions that enact this attempted substitution are numerous, and Michael Patrick Gillespie has done a thorough job of pointing them out in the Norton Critical Edition of the novel. Even the 1890 *Lippincott's* text mutes the erotic intensity of the relationships between the three male main characters that existed in Wilde's manuscript, in many cases. To illustrate the changes of emphasis and signification that attend the transmutation of the homoerotic into the homoromantic, I will discuss a few of Wilde's more telling revisions before turning to other sites in the novel where homosexuality and asexuality uneasily occupy the same space.

Wilde's systematic evacuation of potentially homoerotic content from the novel (although much of it certainly remains) leaves behind a sediment of asexual romantic friendship or something like it.⁶ In effect, he installs asexuality in the closet as a decoy and thus maps it within a surface/depth dynamic, which, outside of this tenuous

⁶ As we saw in Victor Luftig's *Seeing Together* and Sedgwick's *Between Men*, nonsexual friendship is subject both to widespread critical neglect and to widespread societal skepticism. The failure of Wilde's revisions to quash imputations of homosexuality in his novel illustrates the pervasiveness of such skepticism. Furthermore, the critical silence on the work that these relationships do in the novel when emptied of their sexual content—or as much of it as Wilde is able to empty them of—testifies to this neglect and skepticism alike. Nevertheless, a whole range of significant relationships exists beyond the scope of heterosexual—or homosexual—coupledom that deserves greater critical attention than such relationships have hitherto received.

substitution, it defies. Here, it is important to note, I am distinguishing between asexual *relationships* (which might exist between any persons, asexual or not), persons not experiencing sexual attraction (which we might find anywhere, but seldom verifiably), and asexual-identified persons (who have only existed as such since roughly the turn of the twenty-first century). In this reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I am interested, first, in asexual relationships, and second, in how the asexual possibility—that is, the logic of asexuality floating free of particular subjects—acts on narrative structure.

Most of the revisions that attempt a substitution of asexual friendship for homosexual love concern Basil Hallward's intimacy with Dorian, although there are also others that alter the tone of the relationships between Basil and Lord Henry and between Lord Henry and Dorian. Calling greater attention to the revisions to this relationship by mutual contrast, though, Dorian's heterosexual romance with Sybil Vane receives a considerably expanded treatment in 1891. Lord Henry is likewise given time to reflect on it in the revised text, as he hadn't had in 1890:

[Dorian's] sudden mad love for Sybil Vane was a psychological phenomenon of no small interest. There was no doubt that curiosity had much to do with it, curiosity and the desire for new experiences; yet it was not a simple but rather a very complex passion. What there was in it of the purely sensuous instinct of boyhood had been transformed by the workings of the imagination, changed into something that seemed to the lad himself to be remote from sense, and was for that reason all the more dangerous. (52)

The same flight from the physical into the emotional and the aesthetic that elsewhere characterizes Basil's passion for Dorian here marks Dorian's passion for Sybil, "transformed" by the "imagination" from its grounding in "sensuous instincts" to something altogether inscrutable. But importantly, in this added passage, the passions to

which the narrator has (explicitly) directed the reader's attention are heterosexual in nature and in this respect operate as a decoy or a diversion, much as asexual romantic friendship is made to operate in numerous instances elsewhere in Wilde's 1891 revisions.

Lord Henry's reflection, however, gives way to what is both grammatically and tonally a bizarre intrusion by an otherwise aloof heterodiegetic narrator: "It was the passions about whose origin we deceived ourselves that tyrannized most strongly over us. It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were really experimenting on ourselves" (52–53). The narratorial shift to the past tense creates an odd effect of specificity when compared with the kinds of general pronouncements about human nature usually expounded by the ostensibly communal voice of the Victorian narratorial "we": Wilde's narrator seems here to refer more to distinct personal recollections than to universal truths to which the reader might relate. Such intrusions admittedly are not unprecedented, nor even uncommon, in Victorian novels—George Eliot's and William Makepeace Thackeray's narrators indulge in them frequently—but Wilde's is jarring because it is the only one of its kind in *Dorian Gray*.

The narrator's specificity in this passage points back—despite our best intentions of holding author and narrator distinct—at Wilde himself, who is, of course, himself "experimenting" on Lord Henry, Basil, and Dorian, but who also acknowledges their contiguity with facets of his own personality and public persona. He explains in a letter to Ralph Payne that "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages perhaps" (qtd. in Gillespie, *World* 11). That, by this account, Wilde's ideal self eventually stabs his actual self in the neck is perhaps less important in this instance than the danger of his implicating himself in "the

passions about whose origins we deceived ourselves” and his agency in working to efface the origins of such passions between men in the 1891 edition of the novel, an example of the ways in which, as Elana Gomel claims, “*The Picture of Dorian Gray* may be read as Wilde’s prescient commentary on his own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon” (79). Or, to leave the author out of it, the narrator could just as easily be describing Basil’s fatal dishonesty with himself about his idealization of Dorian.

Besides “the passions about whose origins we deceived ourselves,” other passions accordingly become far less passionate in Wilde’s revisions. The three men’s relationships with each other become less physically demonstrative; no longer do we see Lord Henry “laying his hand upon [Basil’s] shoulder,” nor do Basil and Dorian “walk home together from the club arm in arm” (187; 194).⁷ Wilde’s omissions also serve to mute the intensity of Basil’s obsession with Dorian, not just its physicality. Missing from Basil’s account of his first meeting with Dorian in the 1891 edition is his explanation that “I knew that if I spoke to Dorian, I would become absolutely devoted to him, and that I ought not to speak to him” (190). Still more vividly, Wilde’s manuscript here had “I would never leave him till either he or I were dead” (190 n.5). Throughout Wilde’s revisions, Basil’s relationship with Dorian loses the expectation of exclusivity that

⁷ Even the 1890 edition, however, remains less explicit than Wilde’s manuscript in this regard, omitting, for instance, a cancelled passage in which Basil recounts a time when, as he was working on the portrait, Dorian “leaned across to look at it, [and] his lips just touched my hand” and explains to Lord Henry that “[t]he world becomes young to me when I hold his hand.” The only portion of Lord Henry’s reply that remains legible is “to make yourself the slave of your slave. It is worse than wicked, it is silly. I hate Dorian Gray!” (193 n.6). Gone are both the homoeroticism between Basil and Dorian and Lord Henry’s petulant jealousy. In another place, Basil’s description of “the young man whose personality had so strangely stirred me” (190) is a change from the manuscript’s reading of “the young man whose beauty had so strangely stirred me” (190 n.6).

typically characterizes sexual and romantic relationships.⁸ Correspondingly, Wilde also ascribes to Basil a more stoic reaction to the news of Dorian's engagement in the later version of the text. In 1890, "Hallward turned perfectly pale, and a curious look flashed for a moment into his eyes, and then passed away, leaving them dull" (216). In 1891, this passage becomes simply "Hallward started, and then frowned" (63). And to his statement that Basil "felt that Dorian Gray would never again be to him all that he had been in the past," Wilde adds, in 1891, "Life had come between them..." (220; 69; Wilde's ellipses). That is, he attempts to distract the reader from the strong implication that what has really come between them is a rival by specifying the generality "life," which instead connotes a narrative trajectory from which Basil appears exempt. While Wilde gives more weight to Dorian's heterosexual desire in the 1891 text, he also holds Basil at a greater distance and is more reticent on the subject of the painter's feelings.

More telling than Wilde's cancellations and omissions in his rendering of the relationships between men in the novel, however, are the substitutions and additions that alter the tone of these relationships. The young men for whom friendship with Dorian proves so murkily disastrous in the 1890 *Lippincott's* text get more detailed back stories in 1891⁹—and with them, imputations of scandal that have nothing to do with their

⁸ In another cancelled passage from the manuscript, Basil tells Lord Henry, "Once or twice we have been away together. Then I have had him all to myself. I am horribly jealous of him, of course. I never let him talk to me of the people he knows. I like to isolate him from the rest of life and to think that he absolutely belongs to me. He does not, I know. But it gives me pleasure to think he does" (194).

⁹ As Gillespie explains, the 1890 *Lippincott's* edition met with a far harsher reception from its British than its American audience, in part because the Cleveland Street affair—involving a gay brothel frequented by members of the aristocracy and employing telegraph boys—was still fresh in the memory of the British reading public. American readers, without a recent homosexual scandal in the press, were less primed for the hermeneutics of suspicion ("Reactions" 347–48). In Joseph Bristow's analysis, what made the Cleveland Street affair (and later, the charges against Wilde himself) particularly shocking was that it multiplied the scandal of the corruption of youth by that of sex across class lines, and from one angle

intimacy with Dorian. The accusation that Basil initially makes against Dorian is the same in both editions:

Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent's only son, and his career? I met his father yesterday in St. James's Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him? (126–27; 272–73)

The pertinent difference is that in the 1891 edition, Dorian interjects at this point, attributing acts to these young men—at least to some of them—that have nothing to do with him or his so-called friendship: “You ask me about Henry Ashton and young Perth. Did I teach the one his vices, and the other his debauchery? If Kent's silly son takes his wife from the streets, what is that to me? If Adrian Singleton writes his friend's name across a bill, am I his keeper?” (127). Wilde revises what was something (homoerotic desire) into nothing (asexuality) by doing just the opposite at a textual level: revising what was nothing (silence) into something (explanation). In doing so, he specifies what—in its unspokenness—might have been *anything* as a very particular *something* and effects a reversal in which he installs asexuality in the place of presence to try to force the disappearance of homosexuality as absence. Although the asexual possibility functions thematically here as simple absence, it functions structurally with greater particularity, in its substitutive work. As Wilde, then, relocates scandal from the unspecified gloom of the closet to the more prosaic secrets of forgery and marriage across class lines, the closet in this instance is revealed to be no closet at all, but a purposeless door overlooking the

threatened to efface these lines altogether: if working-class boys and upper-class men could be united by (homo)sexual identity, class divisions would become less tenable (52–53).

garbage cans otherwise plainly on display. The asexual possibility robs the secret of its power to scandalize by bringing it into the broad light of day and severing its constitutive association with sexuality.

We see this kind of severing continue as the tone of Basil's relationship to Dorian also changes with Wilde's attribution of greater specificity to it in the 1891 text: it remains, at some points, a romantic friendship, but at others it takes on an insistently functional aspect. This shift comes about in many cases through subtle changes in wording: substitutions of "the painter" for Basil's name, for instance. His succinct assertion in 1891 that "I couldn't be happy if I didn't see [Dorian] every day. He is absolutely necessary to me" replaces this exchange between Basil and Lord Henry in the 1890 text (12):

"I couldn't be happy if I didn't see him every day. Of course sometimes it is only for a few minutes. But a few minutes with somebody one worships mean a great deal."
 "But you don't really worship him?"
 "I do." (192)

In both versions, Lord Henry replies, "How extraordinary! I thought you would never care for anything but your painting,—your art, I should say. Art sounds better, doesn't it?" (192). Art sounds so much better, in fact, that it stands in for "worship" in many of Basil's dealings with Dorian in the later edition of the novel—although "necessity," which Wilde underscores by the brevity of this revised passage, is decidedly less extraordinary than "worship" in the longer version. In such passages, Wilde noticeably attempts to shift the reader's attention from the fascination that Dorian's person holds for Basil in itself to Dorian's usefulness to Basil's art.

Throughout these changes to the text, a pattern emerges of foreclosing homoerotic possibilities by specifying nonsexual bases for relationships between men, as Wilde installs a strictly functional version of the asexual possibility. Warning Lord Henry not to try to interfere with Dorian, Basil tells him in the 1890 version,

Dorian Gray is my dearest friend.... He has a simple and beautiful nature. Your aunt was quite right in what she said of him. Don't spoil him for me. Don't try to influence him. Your influence would be bad. The world is wide, and has many marvellous people in it. Don't take away from me the one person that makes life absolutely lovely to me, and that gives to my art whatever wonder or charm it possesses. (196)

In 1891, however, Basil tells Lord Henry simply, "Don't spoil him," omitting "for me" and making the danger of Lord Henry's influence a question of spoiling Dorian *in himself*, not in the context of his relationship to Basil. Wilde also removes "that makes life absolutely lovely to me," leaving only "who gives to my art whatever wonder or charm it possesses" and adding "my life as an artist depends on him" (16). Wilde shifts the emphasis of the passage from Dorian's emotional significance to Basil to his artistic utility to him.

We see another example of this shift of emphasis when Basil confronts Dorian about his rumored immoral conduct. In 1890, Basil makes his admonitions on the grounds that "I have been always devoted to you" (274), but in 1891, he has instead "been always a staunch friend" (129). This shift from devotion to friendship is typical of Wilde's revisions, and the confession that Basil makes to Dorian of his feelings for him receives even more extensive revisions.¹⁰ Of Dorian's "extraordinary influence" on Basil, Basil first says,

¹⁰ Wilde omits in 1891 Basil's avowal in 1890 that "[i]t is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. I

I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When I was away from you, you were still present in my art. It was all wrong and foolish. It is all wrong and foolish still. Of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it; I did not understand it myself. (245)

After numerous substitutions and deletions, the 1891 version of Basil's confession of his feelings reads,

I was dominated soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshipped you. I grew jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art.... Of course I never let you know anything about this. It would have been impossible. You would not have understood it. I hardly understand it myself. (95; Wilde's ellipses)

In the second version, Basil loses much of his agency and thus his responsibility in adoring Dorian, who "dominates" him and functions as a Platonic ideal¹¹ and a muse

suppose I never had time" (245), which plainly contrasts Basil's feelings for Dorian with friendship as well as with heterosexual love.

¹¹ Several critics, including Nikolai Endres and Gerald Monsman, have contextualized the men's relationships and Basil's philosophical views in terms of Victorian understandings of Platonic love, which had distinct connotations of homoeroticism. Read in the context of the differences between Wilde's 1890 and 1891 texts, Basil's idealization of Dorian gives the impression of a sort of mind/body dualism that attempts to hold his admiration of his model distinct from sexual desire. It is important to note, however, that such strict dualism does not represent the brand of late Victorian Platonism with which Wilde was familiar, modeled on the asymmetrical relationship of an older man mentoring a younger man who granted him sexual favors (Endres 304). Dorian's name is a nod to this model of Greek homosexuality, Endres argues, and his lack of a father and Lord Henry's lack of a son prime them for it (305). Furthermore, Lord Henry's "influence" is even figured as penetration, to say nothing of the affinity of his New Hedonism with a perverse Platonism (306–07). Basil, however, tries more earnestly than Dorian and Lord Henry to be a proper Platonist, although with no less homoeroticism (309). In Basil's Platonic love, *eros* elevates him to a more contemplative *philia* (Monsman 31). Endres argues that "[i]deally, Platonic love is meaningful, uplifting, lofty," but in *Dorian Gray*, "Plato comes in handy in two different ways: to sugar-coat an otherwise physical relationship, and to convey a homoerotic code to those who 'know'" (Endres 311). Wilde's Platonism in *Dorian Gray*, then, carries an undercurrent of homoeroticism, but especially in Basil's case and in the general pattern of Wilde's revisions, it shows up in contrast to explicit sexual desire.

rather than merely as a more mundane love object.¹² Removing Basil's insistence that his feelings were "wrong and foolish" has the effect of legitimating their innocence by excising what sounds like desperate, defensive self-justification. Basil is further exculpated by the change of verb tense from "I did not understand it myself" (implying that he *does* understand it now) to "I hardly understand it myself" (his understanding *remains* incomplete at best).¹³ As Sedgwick has argued, the play of knowledge and ignorance was often suggestive for the Victorians of the management of the homosexual secret. However, while one of Sedgwick's major points is that ignorance is multiple—and while the heterosexual/homosexual binary is an important one in the organization of knowledge in modernity—her consequent consideration of only one valence of ignorance is too limited. Where ignorance remains unspecified, we find the asexual possibility alongside the homosexual possibility.

¹² In his 1891 revisions to at least one other passage, Wilde systematically capitalizes the word "art" nearly every time Basil utters it (13; 193). The increased emphasis on Basil's art continues throughout Wilde's revisions. Lord Henry's remembrance in the 1890 text that "Basil was really rather dull. He only interested me once, and that was when he told me, years ago, that he had a wild adoration for you" has "and that you were the dominant motive of his art" added to it in 1891 (292; 175). In another passage in the 1890 text, Dorian asks Basil if he can see his "romance" in the altered portrait, which becomes "ideal" in 1891 (277; 131). Later in the novel, reminiscing about Basil after his death, Lord Henry observes (in a passage that Wilde added in 1891) that "his painting had quite gone off. It seemed to me to have lost something. It had lost an ideal. When you and he ceased to be great friends, he ceased to be a great artist" (176). Once again, Wilde stresses Dorian's function as Basil's *artistic* ideal—and as his *friend*—in his revisions.

¹³ As if to try to quarantine any readerly suspicion that yet persists, Wilde's 1891 revisions also frequently have the effect of specifying Basil's affection for Dorian as particular to Basil. For instance, when Lord Henry first sees Dorian in the 1890 text, it is with this reflection, "No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him. He was made to be worshipped" (197). Wilde omits this second sentence in 1891, so that the worship of Dorian is isolated in Basil, not generalized and naturalized.

The same tendency emerges in Wilde's revisions to Basil's own explanations to Lord Henry. One such passage reads, in 1890, "Dorian Gray is to me simply a motive in art. He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is simply a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I see him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and the subtleties of certain colors. That is all" (193–94). The revised passage reads, "Dorian Gray is merely to me a motive in art. You might see nothing in him. I see everything in him. He is never more present in my work than when no image of him is there. He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and the subtleties of certain colors. That is all" (14). Basil hedges noticeably more in the 1891 text, and his judgment becomes more subjective.

Revisions of the same kind continue through the scene of the two characters' parting after Sybil's death and after Dorian refuses to let Basil exhibit his portrait. In 1890, Basil tells Dorian goodbye and initiates this exchange:

"You have been the one person in my life of whom I have been really fond. I don't suppose I shall often see you again. You don't know what it cost me to tell you all that I have told you."

"My dear Basil," cried Dorian, "what have you told me? Simply that you felt that you liked me too much. That is not even a compliment."

"It was not intended as a compliment. It was a confession."

"A very disappointing one." (246)

In 1891, the revised passage reads:

"You have been the one person in my life who has really influenced my art. Whatever I have done that is good, I owe to you. Ah! you don't know what it cost me to tell you all that I have told you."

"My dear Basil," said Dorian, "what have you told me? Simply that you felt that you admired me too much. That is not even a compliment."

"It was not intended as a compliment. It was a confession. Now that I have made it, something seems to have gone out of me. Perhaps one should never put one's worship into words."

"It was a very disappointing confession." (96–97)

I will return to this confession *as disappointment*, as exemplary of the asexual possibility's incompatibility with the structures of the secret and the closet, at the close of this chapter. For the time being, I want to point out the significance, at a textual level, of the change in Basil's affection to artistic admiration and the change in Dorian from love object to art object in the second version. Dorian goes from being the one person of whom Basil has "been really fond" (the manuscript has "whom I have loved" [246 n.1]) to the one person "who has really influenced [his] art," transposing Basil's feelings from the field of romantic or at least affective attachment to that of professional utility. In the revised passage, Dorian is further removed from his centrality as love object to a more instrumental function in Basil's aesthetic productions by his construction as muse:

“Whatever I have done that is good, I owe to you.”¹⁴ It is tempting and probably unremarkable to read such construction as the sublimation of sexual desire in art, but as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, Freud’s concept of sublimation is a major instrument of asexual erasure, one that assumes a preexisting sexual attraction and desire that have been rechanneled and reshaped, a depth that can be made to reappear under any number of possible surfaces. This surface/depth structure to which Wilde tries to fit asexual romantic friendship is the same one that guarantees asexuality’s impossibility as such. So while Basil’s artistic admiration of Dorian may of course be explicable as garden-variety sublimation, such an explanation does not diminish the asexual possibility, only disavows it—having been constructed so as to exclude asexuality from its field of vision.

Several changes to Dorian’s reaction to this confession after Basil leaves are also illuminating in their alteration of the tone of the relationship between the two men. Dorian finds that Basil’s confession clears up a number of perplexities for him: “Basil’s absurd fits of jealousy, his wild devotion, his extravagant panegyrics, his curious reticences,—he understood them all now, and he felt sorry. There was something tragic in a friendship so colored by romance” (247). In 1891, Wilde changes “Basil’s absurd fits of jealousy” to “[t]he painter’s absurd fits of jealousy”—both specifying Basil and his affection for Dorian as professionally determined and distancing Dorian from him through the suppression of his first name—and “[t]here was something tragic” to “[t]here seemed to him to be something tragic,” qualifying the necessity of the tragic effect as a

¹⁴ There is also an undeniable poignancy in Basil’s reflection that “[p]erhaps one should never put one’s worship into words,” in light of the novel’s harsh reception in 1890 and the way Wilde’s own “worship” of another man landed him in prison several years later.

matter of individual perception and judgment (97).¹⁵ The more subjective framing of the relationship's effect and its couching in artistic rather than more exclusively emotional terms both serve to dampen its capability of signifying homosexual love.

In itself, the pattern of revision I have examined above tells us very little about asexuality, except that while close asexual relationships between men were—or were judged by Wilde to be—more palatable to the late Victorian reading public than homosexual ones, and while an artistic basis for one man's admiration of another looked similarly more respectable than a sexual basis, such relationships did not have plausibility to recommend them. As in *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, the logic of asexuality, once introduced, produces much larger temporal and epistemological deformations in the substance of the novel than the mere presence of putatively asexual relationships between its characters would suggest.

The Play of the Asexual Possibility

In Braddon's novel, the suspension or stoppage of time was prevalent particularly at Audley Court. Rather than localizing temporal disruption in this way, however, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is replete with instances of time speeding up, slowing down, or stopping altogether, particularly in conjunction with atypically constructed subjectivities. In much the same way—and often also at the level of the subject—the logic of asexuality also cleaves surface from depth in the novel: at best, rendering the relationship between the two arbitrary and at worst, rendering surface and depth unrecognizable as such.

¹⁵ Even “something tragic in a friendship so colored by romance,” though, is already a revision by Wilde's editor to the typescript of the novel, which had “something infinitely tragic in a romance that was at once so passionate and so sterile” (247 n.2).

The thoroughgoing strangeness of *Dorian Gray*'s treatment of time has been, if anything, markedly understated. Its most glaring example, of course, is the famous transfer of the physical marks of age and the consequences of sensuality from Dorian's own person to the eponymous portrait, a transfer that is violently reversed when Dorian tries to destroy the painting and is found dead by his servants, "withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage" (184). That is, in death, Dorian has changed back into the old man he should have been—really was—in life. Or was he? What has received surprisingly little critical notice is the fact that despite being withered and wrinkled, Dorian is only thirty-eight.¹⁶

A few critics have attempted to account for this discrepancy, including Elaine Showalter, who takes *Dorian Gray* as one of her examples in her study of the different significations of syphilis for male and female authors in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ She argues that Dorian's accelerated decay and his violent, impulsive behavior are couched in syphilitic terms and that Wilde's syphilophobia in the novel comes with an element of social critique: for Wilde, she claims, Dorian falls victim to the grotesque effects of his so-called sin because of societal curbs (underwritten by feminine ideals of purity and marriage) on masculine passion (103–04). More broadly, Wilde, as well as Robert Louis Stevenson and H. G. Wells, saw "sexual disease and syphilitic insanity" as "the

¹⁶ Granted, if we take the portrait to be the physical manifestation of Dorian's soul, its accelerated signs of age are legible as physical manifestations of *moral* decay, but even this explanation does not regularize the temporality of the portrait: first, because the signs of *moral* decrepitude are ultimately transferred to Dorian's *body*—radically disordering the sharp separation he has otherwise effected between it and his soul—and second, because the final condition of Dorian's body, in any such account, nevertheless signals the interchangeability of linear movements along a chronological axis and along a moral one.

¹⁷ In general terms, syphilis stood—for each sex—for that sex's victimization and contamination by the other. Syphilophobia likewise compassed the fear of the disease's hereditary transmission—hence *Dorian Gray*'s preoccupation with the corruption of sons by (symbolic or surrogate) fathers: Basil, Lord Henry, and the author of the "poisonous book" that so intrigues Dorian (Showalter 102–03).

excrescences of an unhealthy society, one that systematically suppressed desire and that also produced anxious fathers, febrile art, and divided and disfigured sons” (104–05).

While this reading helpfully places the novel in dialogue with contemporary medical and social discourse, it also requires dislocating Dorian’s changed appearance entirely from chronological age, which seems extreme, given the novel’s preoccupation with temporal movement and stasis.

Kay Heath’s approach to the problem is to read in Wilde’s novel, as well as in a number of other Victorian novels, a relativization of the physical signs of chronological age. Heath examines the way in which age in these novels is not numerically fixed but is largely what a character makes of it.¹⁸ She argues that Dorian’s very preoccupation with the signs of aging in the portrait ages him well beyond his actual thirty-eight years (33).

He perceives aging as a threat because, contrary to the usual dictates of Victorian

¹⁸ Heath finds her grounding for this argument in Kathleen Woodward’s theory of the mirror stage of aging. In this model, the aging adult—unlike the infant at the Lacanian mirror stage—*disidentifies* with his or her reflected image, which projects not wholeness but a progression toward complete disintegration. The aging adult then substitutes an imagined prior youthful unity for this image. This movement may also initiate a dissociation from the symbolic, rather than entrance into it, as it initiates for the Lacanian infant (Heath 29).

Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, like Heath, takes a Lacanian approach to *Dorian Gray*, although her reading treats the novel perhaps too reductively as the record of Wilde’s anxiety and guilt about his own homosexuality. She argues that Dorian’s portrait indicts him by serving as the image of his superego, embodying his moral shortcomings through the commonplace use of old age to represent psychic weariness (488). The novel shows the consequences of one’s ideal self-image and superego being too far out of sync, Ragland-Sullivan argues, consequences tantamount to “death, a falling out of the Symbolic order into a horror-house of unbearable Imaginary lures” (483). For Ragland-Sullivan, the subjectivity of youth and age—as illustrated in the novel—and the timelessness of the unconscious authorize her otherwise anachronistic reading of *Dorian Gray* as a window into Wilde’s unconscious guilt and anxiety over his homosexuality and his inability to decide absolutely upon his sexual identity.

She does observe, importantly, that the portrait’s accelerated aging responds to Dorian’s own disruption of life’s normal temporal rhythm, which is governed by “the expectation that aging and dying should occur gradually,” while Dorian’s disruption of it reflects the clash between the workings of his psyche and the expectations of his society (488). Ragland-Sullivan claims that the novel “is about aging in reverse, about eternal youth” (475), but mistakenly. Eternal youth is stasis—exemplary, as I have shown, of the asexual possibility. It is not “aging in reverse.” In *Dorian Gray*, we see time, at various points, speed up, slow down, and stop altogether: everything, in short, *but* run backward. While Ragland-Sullivan’s psychoanalytic reading of *Dorian Gray* is commendable in its thoroughness, it ultimately provides too narrow an account of the novel’s queering of temporality, and one that is structurally incapable of accommodating asexuality.

masculinity, he constructs his self-worth in terms of his desirability. Heath suggests that the conflation of the signs of age and the signs of sin in Dorian's person may be a critical comment on Wilde's part of a broader-based societal denigration of the aging body (34). In this reading, the passive desire to be desired rather than a more active desire has physically deleterious effects.

Judith (Jack) Halberstam, however, roots the exaggerated change in Dorian's portrait-self not in his subjective self-perception but in a specifically narrative cause: the portrait's anomalous absorption of temporal movement and plot, which opposes the model of artistic perfection otherwise valorized in Wilde's novel.¹⁹ Halberstam summarizes this model, and the resistance it encounters in *Dorian Gray*, thus: "In its most perfect form, art would tell no story; in its Gothic form, it tells too many stories" (*Skin* 74). The portrait becomes overloaded with narrative, with the *stories* of Dorian's sins, Halberstam argues, and this narrative surplus constitutes its ugliness (74).

Halberstam reads *Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as two novels in which "another self is produced through experimentation and that self takes over the original" (70). To treat these other selves as the physical manifestation of sexual secrets—as they would appear to be, in many readings—is too simplistic, however. Instead, Halberstam argues that *secrecy* precedes and prepares the ground for the perversion that these other selves seem to embody, rather than the (expected) reverse scenario (71). For Halberstam, this secrecy itself is a structural effect produced by the Gothic subject's inward-turning scrutiny, so that "the monster, as the subject's double,

¹⁹ "Art, the novel tells us, must be unconscious, ideal, remote, not self-conscious, realistic, too close," Halberstam writes, but "[t]he picture and Dorian and Gothic style, however, infect by revealing the ugliness, the pain, the violence of identity" (74).

represents not simply that which is buried in the self, rather the monster is evidence of the production of multiformed egos. Indeed, it is only the evidence of one self buried in the other that makes the subject human” (71). Gothic monstrosity, Halberstam concludes, is always multiple, never fixed, and it is invested precisely in disrupting projects that seek to stabilize its meaning (84).

I largely agree with Halberstam’s reading, in which secrecy, a product of a modern subject driven to introspective excess, produces perverse embodiments of sexuality—rather than being occasioned by them, as one might expect—which in turn produce narrative. Thus secrecy is central to narrative productions. Yet I depart from Halberstam’s reading insofar as the logic of asexuality *jeopardizes* the surface/depth binary on which secrecy, and the modern subject, also depend. This subtle difference in the function of secrecy and surfaces marks one of the key differences between a queer reading generally speaking and an asexual reading in particular. It is with a model of subjectivity founded on secrecy and the surface/depth binary that I read the temporal stasis in *Dorian Gray* as being in conflict. In Halberstam’s reading, secrecy structurally precedes its content, but the asexual possibility disrupts both temporal sequence and the structure of the secret itself. The problematics of temporality, secrecy and concealment, and the coherence of the modern subject are very closely knit, and these are the spaces in which the asexual possibility plays most visibly in *Dorian Gray*.

Irregularities in the passage and experience of time abound in *Dorian Gray*, even beyond those occasioned by the portrait. If time can be distorted and accelerated through perturbations of chronological age, it can also be vaulted over by a sheer act of will: when Basil is shocked that Dorian would go to the opera so soon after Sybil’s death,

Dorian demands, “What has the actual lapse of time got to do with it? It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure” (90–91). Dorian here has expedited not only the overcoming of his grief but also the resemblance of his ideas to Lord Henry’s: “It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion” could just as easily have come from the mouth of his mentor, whose influence is taking hold more readily than he likely anticipated. Shallowness is elsewhere an instrument of temporal distention, or at least of temporal endurance, for the narrator opines, after describing Dorian’s restored tranquility after a spasm of remorse over his murder of Basil, that “[s]hallow sorrows and shallow loves live on. The loves and sorrows that are great are destroyed by their own plenitude” (166). Where emotion is concerned, shallowness (i.e. a lack of depth) is a guarantee of longevity, of a slowed aging process. The deprivileging of depth distorts the normal progression of time. Furthermore, because asexuality calls into question the pride of place given to sexuality in the construction of the subject, it can function as a recentralizing, a celebration, of the trivial, the unimportant, of “shallow loves and shallow sorrows.” I consider the implications of this function in the Conclusion.

The play of the asexual possibility, though, also manifests itself in contradiction, because dwelling on an emotion can have an effect *inverse* to the one Dorian describes to Basil after Sybil’s death. We see this effect, for instance, during Basil’s solitary reverie on his way to the theater after Dorian tells him of his engagement: “His eyes darkened, and the crowded, flaring streets became blurred to his eyes. When the cab drew up at the doors of the theatre, it seemed to him that he had grown years older” (69). Wilde

furnishes us, then, with yet another instance of irregular aging, albeit an imagined one. Dorian's magic picture by this point seems a sort of diversion from the wider range of chronological distortions taking place all over the novel, a movement analogous to the substitution of romantic friendship for homoeroticism that I have traced in Wilde's revisions.

Superficiality—the surface lacking depth that we saw in Dorian's emotional self-mastery—is not yet the effect that the asexual possibility produces on the surface/depth binary, though, and my focus here is less on temporal acceleration or discontinuity—as in Basil's rapid aging in the cab—than on those instances in which the asexual possibility slows or stops time altogether. Beyond the static time displaced from the portrait onto Dorian's body, a further temporal distortion occurs in the figuration of Dorian as a character in a book that has already been written, as I will examine in detail below. In a literal sense, of course, he *is* precisely that (at least from a reader's perspective), but the text also illustrates numerous blurrings of the boundary between Dorian as subject and the art objects with which he interacts—both the portrait and others.²⁰ As we saw in

²⁰ Critics have paid considerable attention to Dorian's activities as a collector. Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli focus especially on Dorian's collection of jewels as illustrative of the fin-de-siècle anxiety over excessive ornamentation posed by the jewel. Dorian defies this trend, for his aim as a collector, as exemplified in the novel's famous Chapter 11, *is* precisely ostentation and excess; his antiquarianism removes him from commodity culture sufficiently for him to recognize the difficulty of ever out-ornamenting or outshining it, no matter what he tries (201).

Elisa Glick, using *Dorian Gray* to discuss the way in which appearance and essence come together in the modern subject—particularly in the person of the gay male dandy—also pays close attention to the objects Dorian collects. She notes that contradictorily, Dorian seeks an aesthetic escape from bourgeois society *through* his immersion in the commodities he acquires (143). The process of collecting severs his objects from their original purposes and contexts, refiguring them instead as abstracted markers of culture and taste (144). Resisting an object-driven consumer culture, Dorian's art of living—collecting and all—*produces* nothing, and so he “embodies one of the central contradictions of dandyism: aspiring to an aesthetic sensibility that would rise above the commodification of modern life, he challenges forms of bourgeois self-presentation that erase originality, while simultaneously cultivating a stylistic individuality... that is grounded in the social dynamics of class privilege” (145). His collecting both expresses his individuality and threatens it: he becomes indistinguishable from his objects, for the dandy, Glick argues, takes an “if you can't beat 'em, join 'em” approach to commodities and enjoys the life of the

Chapter 1, the asexual possibility endangers the integrity of the subject *as* subject by undermining its construction on a psychosexual foundation and its organization according to object-oriented attraction. And so we can trace a further effect of the asexual possibility in *Dorian Gray* in the erosion of subjective boundaries.

But before we move on to such erosion, a still more pronounced temporal distortion than those we have already considered occurs in the field of art, in a manner reminiscent of the localized freezing and discontinuity of time at Audley Court in *Lady Audley's Secret*. *Dorian Gray* opens on Lord Henry lying in Basil's studio, regarding the image of "the fantastic shadows of birds in flight," which

flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio [*sic*], who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. (5)

The oscillations of art and life, stasis and movement, the suspension and progression of time in this passage are truly dizzying. What Lord Henry is actually looking at are the moving shadows of birds in flight—that is, *not* the birds themselves but images of them created by their blockage of light, the bird-shaped absences that they project onto the curtains.²¹ But by a deliberate act of will and imagination, he sees them *not* in flight but

object (146; 149). By linking Dorian's self-construction so intimately to his consumption of commodities, Glick goes on, "Wilde does not evacuate the queer of materiality, but reconceptualizes the 'essence' of gay identity as both fugitive and contingent, terms we now recognize to be the hallmark of the modern" (154).

²¹ The visual representation of absence is likewise important to Ed Cohen's reading of the novel, in which Cohen considers how *Dorian Gray* and the pornographic *Teleny* (of which Wilde may have been an anonymous coauthor) provide representations of male homosexuality that challenged those of dominant Victorian discourse, although they also reproduced such representations in some senses. Cohen locates the portrait of Dorian as the site of the erotic gaze in the novel, but owing to the difference of medium between a painted portrait and a written text, the picture's presence therein is an ekphrastically demarcated absence, that reinforces the displacement of homoerotic desire in *Dorian Gray* (84). Dorian, unable to distinguish properly between his body and its image and seeking "[t]o maintain his identity as the object of another man's desire..., prays to exchange the temporality of his existence for the stasis of an erotically charged

frozen in time and space as artifice, so as to produce “a momentary Japanese effect,” whose duration in narrative has already far exceeded its momentariness at the level of story.²² Yet the effect that Lord Henry forces upon his perception of the birds is precisely the opposite of the one that they remind him of, for while the Japanese painters, “in an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion,” Lord Henry—and the narrator—seek to *arrest* swiftness and motion in order to aestheticize a reality that is necessarily *mobile*. The medium of this reality’s ultimate rendering is likewise necessarily mobile; narrative is an inevitably temporal art form, both representing the passage of time and experienced over time.²³ Time is both suspended and reactivated in this passage, then, by at least three layers of artifice. Importantly,

visual representation” (81), and so when he and the picture do trade places, he gets stasis and the portrait gets temporality and change (82). Wilde thus names unnameable homoerotic desire by representing its unrepresentability, Cohen argues (84). Although in Cohen’s reading, such absence and stasis serve as a placeholder for homosexuality, absence and stasis as I read them are *also* both the harbingers and the effects of the play of the asexual possibility.

Christopher Craft also notes that we never literally see the portrait, “the most urgently withdrawn visual object in the British literary canon” (120). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in that sense a novel about an absence and thus is primed for the play of the logic of asexuality.

²² In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette acknowledges the practical impossibility of a strict equality between the duration of an event told in narrative and the duration of its telling as experienced by a reader, a point well illustrated by this image of the birds in flight. Given the hopelessness of searching out such an equivalence, Genette turns his attention instead to narrative’s *isochronism* (“steadiness in speed”) and various kinds of departures from it (86–87).

²³ Written narrative in particular is consumed in spatiotemporal movements whose form is fixed, Genette points out:

Books are a little more constrained than people sometimes say they are by the celebrated *linearity* of the linguistic signifier, which is easier to deny in theory than eliminate in fact. However, there is no question here of identifying the status of written narrative (literary or not) with that of oral narrative. The temporality of written narrative is to some extent conditional or instrumental; produced in time, like everything else, written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for “consuming” it is the time needed for *crossing* or *traversing* it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading. (34; emphasis in orig.)

Written narrative’s spatiotemporal linearity, then, is both inevitable and a particular function of its writtenness.

though, not only the birds but even the painters themselves are turned from living beings into art objects, stylized and marked with artifice by their description as “pallid” and “jade-faced.”

Briefly, then, we have: (1) life transfigured as an art that aspires to lifelikeness but which is made doubly artificial by this comparison, (2) the producers of that art themselves reimagined as art objects, and (3) temporal motion represented by temporal stasis even as its representation is transmitted through temporal motion. The eclipse of life by art is typical of a larger pattern at work in *Dorian Gray*, whose relationship to the asexual possibility is clarified by its imbrication with temporal discontinuity, as we see in the contradictory simultaneity of the birds’ movement and stasis.

Paul Morrison, who identifies the central tension for Dorian as that of wishing to be an aesthetic object while being compelled to exist as a psychologically complex subject,²⁴ has conducted a similar reading of this scene, in which Wilde enacts a queering of the distinction between static visual arts and temporal linguistic ones, as Dorian’s rejection of narrative dispensation queers the relationship between the body as signifier and its signified (20). My reading illuminates how such a queering can be specified in asexual terms, as one that not only severs the necessary relationship between signifier and signified, surface and depth, as Morrison argues, but that erodes the distinction between them.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, as these examples demonstrate, is a veritable catalog of ways of disrupting time. It also produces further stylizations and destabilizations of the

²⁴ Morrison explains, for example, that the homosexual as constructed by Foucault necessarily requires a past, but Dorian strives for a “perpetual present,” which is incompatible with narrative temporality. The most he is able to accomplish is the displacement of narrative’s temporal movement onto a static image (18).

subject beyond those we have seen already. For instance, there is Lord Henry's own proposed program for the eternal youth that Dorian ultimately seeks through other channels: "To get back one's youth, one has merely to repeat one's follies" (38). Yet this is an approach whose successful execution by any of the characters in the novel is dubious. Lord Henry himself has not benefited by it, or not enacted it fully, for he later complains explicitly of old age (or rather of incomplete youth): "The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young" (178). The same strategy has mixed results for Dorian, who by some accounts doesn't even attempt to apply it: far from repeating his follies, Dorian goes to great effort and expense to seek out new ones. Of course, if we zoom out to a level of greater generality, Dorian's pattern of trying new things, getting bored, and trying other things could also be read as repetition. The novel's much-studied Chapter 11 (Chapter 9 in the *Lippincott's* text), which serves mainly to enumerate the objects and sensations that Dorian collects, is stubbornly repetitious. It thereby functions, spinning its wheels in this way, as an extended moment of temporal and narrative stasis in the novel, a moment in which the asexual possibility is in prominent view, as juxtapositions and catalogs of objects take precedence over relations between subjects.

For a reader interested in the forward movement of the plot, Chapter 11 is one of the more tedious portions of *Dorian Gray*, and tedium, like temporal stasis, is a fairly reliable indicator of the play of the asexual possibility, although it does not make for a particularly sturdy basis for a narratological argument in itself. Jeff Nunokawa brings boredom and stasis together in his reading of the novel, along with repetition, and clarifies their (mostly negative) relation to desire, although his argument does not couch them in asexual terms. Nunokawa first acknowledges what no one else will: that *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray is a boring book about bored people. Then, he usefully theorizes boredom as marking the time before or after desire and also as fatigue, for the body can't sustain endless desire ("Importance" 153–54).²⁵ Nunokawa's argument allows us to identify a narrative space not governed by desire, marked by desire's absence. It is spaces like this one, I argue, that the asexual possibility opens up, as the suspension of Freudian desire that I described in Chapter 1. We may align boredom, as non-desire, with the asexual possibility, an alignment that also helps to explain why those novels most exemplary of asexually organized narrative structure—for instance, Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*—are also commonly regarded as prohibitively boring to read.

Nunokawa's reading of *Dorian Gray*, while astute, does not go as far as it might in exploring the signification of the stoppages of desire that he locates as the sites of boredom. In Wilde's novel, boredom marks the point at which the repetition of pleasures both succeeds in stopping time's forward movement and fails—in that the cycle of desire and pleasure *as* pleasure has ground to a halt. This point of failure is the point at which the asexual possibility takes over, proliferating things, effects severed from causes.

²⁵ Dorian's portrait literalizes "the body bored to death" ("Importance" 155), exemplary of the body of the dandy. The fact that the dandy enjoys talking about his boredom and about the cessation of desire, Nunokawa points out, sometimes unclosets his desire *for* that boredom and cessation (157). This attitude toward boredom works in concert with commodity culture, because the market requires that objects and desires be invented, proliferated, and quickly replaced (160). But while Lord Henry's endorsement of desire in general hollows out any objectal specificity it might have—thus enabling it to serve as a screen for homoerotic desire to exist as one desire among others—homoerotic desire becomes the one desire in the novel that just won't quit (158; 162–63). This is so because Basil idealizes it and thus unmoors it from the body. This disembodiment renders it safe, from a Victorian point of view, but also inexhaustible, which ushers in the risk of its continuing so long that the desired object decays and becomes repulsive (164–65). Boredom, in Basil's case, would have acted as a safety valve for his desire for Dorian.

Lord Henry's program of prolonged-youth-through-repetition, though, has narrative as well as temporal effects when carried to this extreme.²⁶ Insofar as repetition involves doubling back or digging one's heels in against forward movement, it exemplifies one of the prime resistances that the logic of asexuality puts up to the novel's typical teleological movement. Lord Henry's valorization of repetition, more importantly, entails a rejection of one of the central tenets of the novel's representation of the modern individual, according to Ian Watt: the interpenetration of character and time such that characters are shaped by their experiences and learn from their mistakes, rather than statically repeating them in an infinite loop like the type characters of earlier narrative genres (Watt 21). What Lord Henry proposes is the restoration of pre-novelistic subjectivity as a means of thwarting time, age, and mortality.

I argued in the previous chapter that *Lady Audley's Secret* problematically yoked the conventions of novelistic plotting to a discontinuous and artificial temporality that attempted to override both a disconnect between cause and effect and the asexual possibility's tendency toward stasis. Additionally, the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret* produced surfaces without depths and characters whose personalities were acted upon artificially from without—rather than responding more organically to their environments and experiences—disqualifying them as modern novelistic subjects. The effects of the asexual possibility in *Dorian Gray* are similar but not identical. The

²⁶ For one thing, it is not Lord Henry's only rejection of linear in favor of cyclical—or even stuttering, stalled-out temporality. As he explains, “[r]omance lives by repetition, and repetition converts an appetite into an art. Besides, each time that one loves is the only time one has ever loved. Difference of object does not alter singleness of passion. It merely intensifies it. We can have in life but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible” (163). Not only the repetition of folly but the repetition of feeling and desire performs the same aestheticizing dissolution of subject, object, and linear temporality that is at work elsewhere in *Dorian Gray*—aestheticizing because it “converts an appetite into an art,” rendering desire stylized, performative, and increasingly remote from the desiring subject.

differences owe largely to the positioning of the asexual possibility within the novel. It interacts with, sometimes contends with, the homosexual possibility—an interaction most in evidence in the passages I examined in the previous section. The asexual possibility, it is worth mentioning, is also less at odds with Wilde’s proto-modernist text than with Braddon’s highly conventional (or attempted conventional) Victorian sensation novel.

In my discussion of Sedgwick above, I argued that the convergence she identifies of the “open secret” and the “empty secret” in *Dorian Gray* points to but does not exhaust the asexual possibility, which refuses to respect the divisions of surface and depth and the model of subjectivity on which closetedness depends. Wilde plays with time’s plasticity—as a central thematic concern of his novel—whereas Braddon attempted to restore time’s linearity. These temporal deformations, however, jeopardize the boundaries of the subject—as does the interaction between art and life in Wilde’s novel. When subject and object can no longer be reliably distinguished, neither can the path of desire toward its object, if indeed it has any object at all; the asexual possibility short-circuits it. The same loss of distinction we see in the subject/object binary acts on the surface/depth binary as well, leaving us with secrets that are not only empty but arbitrary or incomprehensible *as* secrets. This deformation of the structure of secrecy and the effacement of the distinction between surface and depth are also the points at which I part company with Halberstam’s reading of *Dorian Gray*. The remainder of my reading of the novel will trace these effects of the asexual possibility, and I will conclude by relating them back to the interplay of asexuality and homoeroticism I discussed above.

The portrait, of course, is the prime example in Wilde's novel of art supplanting life and also of the destabilization of the subject. Dorian, studying the first changes in the picture after he rejects Sybil Vane, muses,

If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity? But the reason was of no importance. He would never again tempt by a prayer any terrible power. If the picture was to alter, it was to alter. That was all. Why inquire too closely into it? (89)

Dorian here elides the distinction between living subjects and inanimate objects through their mutual vulnerability to "influence," at the same time postulating a sort of erotics of matter that proceeds mostly without the subject's conscious awareness, "a secret love or strange affinity." It is by this mechanism, presumably, that Dorian's soul is ejected from his body and comes to inhabit the radically other materiality of the portrait. Importantly, Dorian assents to ignorance of this process's minute particulars, signaling, at one level, a shift from a Victorian desire for explanation and the traceability of effects to their causes to a more modernist embrace of uncertainty. The declaration "That was all" also puts pressure on a surface/depth model of knowledge and the desire to know more,²⁷ to "inquire too closely into it." Even if the surface changes in the picture bear some relation to a hidden depth, Dorian's lack of interest in this depth leaves it unknown, functionally unknowable (to the reader), and irrelevant—not worth knowing, if it is there at all. As the

²⁷ This phrase appears again when Dorian tells Lord Henry that he poisoned him with a book, which Lord Henry considers impossible, explaining, "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all" (180). This is also Wilde's position in the Preface to the 1891 edition, in which he states that "[t]he nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass" and "All art is quite useless" (3; 4; emphasis in orig.). Art, in Lord Henry's view, is impervious, or at any rate indifferent, to action and desire—two constituent parts of novelistic narrative. This indifference, coupled with the "sterility" of the art promoted by the characters, would align this art with the asexual possibility.

salient differences between people and things disappear and subjects lose interest in even accounting for this disappearance, the bases of subjectivity with which we have already become familiar—sexuality, knowledge, mastery—are radically undermined.²⁸

What is also undermined is people's ability to influence each other's interiority. The same sort of reciprocity that we expect to find between characters acting on each other in a novel can here be accorded to *any* object; it makes no functional difference whether it is a painting, a person, or anything else.²⁹ Once the subject is no longer

²⁸ Wilde's revisions also, at points, indicate a reduction of the subject's agency. In the 1890 text, Basil explains his refusal to exhibit the portrait thus:

Because I have put into it all the extraordinary romance of which, of course, I have never dared to speak to [Dorian]. He knows nothing about it. He will never know anything about it. But the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry,—too much of myself! (194)

(In the manuscript, after “the world might guess it,” Wilde deleted “where there is merely love, they would see something evil. Where there is spiritual passion, they would suggest something vile” [194 n.9]—his motivation for omitting this portion of the passage, we may assume, was much the same as Basil's.) In 1891, the revised passage reads,

Because without intending it, I have put into it some expression of all this curious artistic idolatry, of which, of course, I have never cared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He shall never know anything about it. But the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry—too much of myself! (14)

The “dared” of the earlier edition sets the stakes of confession higher than the 1891 text's “cared,” where “romance” likewise turns to the “expression” of an already-repudiated “idolatry,” placed at a further remove by its status as representation. Pertinent to my argument here, though, Basil's implicit volition in putting his romance into the painting disappears in the involuntary insertion of his idolatry into it in the later edition. His heart eventually disappears too—literally—in Alan Campbell's “experiment” (albeit without the use of microscopes).

²⁹ Much later in the novel, Lord Henry radically subordinates this agency of the subject to a physiological determinism over which aesthetic objects and effects ultimately preside, telling Dorian,

Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams. You may fancy yourself safe, and think yourself strong. But a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play—I tell you, Dorian, that it is on things like these that our lives depend. (178–79)

bounded and discrete, desire too becomes ungrounded. Nunokawa correlates the dissolution of the subject and the novel's treatment of homosexual desire, which in *Dorian Gray* does not, as we are accustomed, define its subject's identity so much as obscure or obliterate it ("Effacement" 313).³⁰ Nunokawa points out, for instance, the way desiring characters fade out into the narrator through free indirect discourse and the way "the men who adore Dorian Gray disappear into the impersonal throng of worshippers that grows and grows as the story proceeds..." ("Effacement" 318).³¹ For Nunokawa, the depersonalization of subjects in Wilde's novel is a product of the homosexual desire that

Contradicting his prior statement that the complete art object had no influence on individual character, Lord Henry here accords to its random fragments a powerful but unpredictable effect on the subject. Art may be sterile, but its component materials and the effects it produces are erratic and unforeseeable, with nothing of linear, aim-directed causality about them. Even then, the effects they produce are memories of other aesthetic fragments; Lord Henry gives no indication that "life" ever actually breaks into this volatile metonymic wandering from art object to art object. With this fragmentary reimplementation of causality, Lord Henry's submersion of thought and passion within the mechanisms of the body also reinstates a surface/depth relation between the physical and the emotional.

The problem of the boundaries between subjects is precisely the problem that occupies the narrator of Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*, a novel I will discuss in much greater detail in the next chapter as exemplary of an asexual narrative structure. Katherine Humphreys, meanwhile, has observed that a similar dynamic is at work in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Sacred Fount*, where "[t]hrough the resemblances and exchanges between characters and visual art..., mimesis becomes so powerful that representations of fictional identity hollow out their own terms by calling attention to the status of characters as representations" (533). She argues, provocatively, that the dangerous permeability of the art/life boundary and the art object's influence on the living subject contributed to the harsh reception of Wilde's novel, which reverses the poles of subject and object. By laying bare in this way "the artifice inherent in characterization even as it thematizes the exchange of influence between portrait and subject, novel and reader, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes explicit the characterization inherent in constructions of identity" (527). Wilde's novel effaces meaningful distinctions between artistic constructions and living subjects.

³⁰ Halberstam concurs on this point, cautioning the reader that while Dorian's portrait is a surface that produces illusory depth, "[t]he friction of surfaces... in this text is as likely to erase self as it is to construct another one" (*Skin* 64).

³¹ Christopher Craft reminds us that Dorian's own desire is always narcissistically turned back upon himself, but a self alienated and rendered inaccessible by a multiplication of the mirrors that spatially displace the reflected viewing subject (116). He argues that *Dorian Gray* and the myth of Narcissus "foreground the erotic complications that ensue when the point of vision and desire are the same, and both specify this point as a reflective surface that relays the object of desire as a divided figure of self and same" (113). Dorian, as produced by the portrait, "constitutes not only the narrative's definitive sexual object (everybody wants him), but also its definitively perverse sexual subject: the one who extends his desire toward external objects only so he may then watch it coil back upon the image he loves to watch watching him" (121–22). Dorian, his portrait, and his narcissistic relation to it complicate both the subject and object of desire.

overloads it and finally becomes ubiquitous in it. But the asexual possibility too threatens the integrity of the subject. It also frustrates the reliable movement of sexual desire from one subject to another, frequently by way of detours through or into the art object—from which the subject may very well never return. It is the resultant stasis that I am calling the asexual possibility. The dissolution of the subject and this kind of unmooring of desire, then, are overdetermined—traceable, for example, both to homosexual desire and to the asexual possibility.

One of the qualities in Dorian that Lord Henry values most is his collapsing of the distinction between subject and art object:³²

You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found. I am so glad that you have never done anything, never carved a statue, or painted a picture, or produced anything outside of yourself! Life has been your art. You have set yourself to music. Your days are your sonnets. (179)

While Lord Henry is technically right that Dorian has never created any art object of his own, his statement nevertheless underscores the irony that despite Dorian's apparent artistic unity, he has in fact been cloven artistically in two. That the art object on which his subjectivity has been working all the while is *not* his own creation but Basil's—Dorian appropriates another's artistic creation and incorporates it into himself—is an additional violation of the boundaries of subjectivity in the novel. One can't establish with any authority where Basil or Lord Henry ends and where Dorian begins, or whether the Dorian in question then is the person or the painting. Carried far enough, this blurring of the subject's distinctness as such endangers other familiar properties of the modern subject and becomes more visibly the work of the asexual possibility: the sexual secret,

³² Halberstam provocatively observes that Dorian is also his own secret, insofar as his portrait-soul is what he conceals; he doesn't merely *have* a secret, as Basil does (*Skin* 67).

the walls of the closet—do they distinguish it properly from anyone else’s closet or are they there at all? Or does the closet door open onto the boundlessness of the space outside as in the scene from *Wise Blood*? Does the metaphor of the closet even obtain when the subject is celebrated as art object, as a painted canvas insistently on display that supplants the messy emotional exigencies of subjectivity and time?

These questions of the relationship between the dissolution of subjective boundaries and the surface/depth and secrecy/disclosure binaries attach insistently to Dorian’s brief, voyeuristic infatuation with Roman Catholicism. The narrator reports that “he used to look with wonder at the black confessionals, and long to sit in the dim shadows of one of them and listen to men and women whispering through the worn grating the true story of their lives” (110). Importantly, he wants to hear others confess, not confess himself.³³ Uninterested in expiation for his own sins, he wishes instead to appropriate the sins of others. Ellis Hanson has observed, importantly, that sin itself does not have a specific referent in *Dorian Gray*. It is the empty secret; its only content is that which the reader—or in this case, Dorian himself—assigns to it:

Wilde places us in the position of the Protestant lingering with prurient fascination outside the Catholic confessional. We see only a suggestive closet, draped in black and full of whispers. We are quite sure that we are in the presence of sin, or at least the recounting of sin—its careful construction in Christian terms, with due shame and weighty silences. We have our suspicions about the sins that have transpired, but we are not altogether sure. We do not overhear all that we could wish. Much is left to our imaginations. (Hanson 287)

³³ The perils of hearing, rather than making, confession were at the heart of much of the Victorian distrust of Catholicism. The Victorians feared giving priests privileged access to their marital and family secrets—thus removing these secrets from the exclusive control of the paterfamilias (Hanson 283). Ellis Hanson goes on to argue that these are precisely the sorts of fears that Wilde plays on in *Dorian Gray*, where the prurience of the confessional is no longer spatially localized but pervades the entire novel as a “confessional mode, disseminating its peculiar language of temptation and transgression, shame and remorse, secrecy and revelation, throughout the narrative” (283).

The eavesdropper at the confessional overhears what he wants to hear—the sins that excite him the most. In this sense, the novel itself works as the confessional does for the prurient Protestant. For Hanson, “the sin is not in the transgression, but in the confession that produces the transgression as such” (288). In this construction, what one finds in the closet is only what one has put there oneself—reminiscent of the garbage cans beyond the door of the non-closet in the scene from *Wise Blood*. The closet in fact hides nothing, hides *nothing*, but if one takes a second look, one might catch a fresh glimpse of one’s own waste beyond its threshold—the content, the story that one has supplied in order to make it seem a closet at all.

Dorian’s spectatorship at the confessional is not strictly visual, either, but also aural and, specifically, narrative: apparently unfazed by his inability to *see* the people in the confessionals, he wants to hear “the true story of their lives.” This story’s implicit distinctness from a more public, false story of these people’s lives points to a problematic of surface and depth in the novel (a problematic that was widespread in the late nineteenth century). However, the coherence of these terms is not upheld in Wilde’s novel, and any desire on Dorian’s or anyone else’s part for “deep” or true knowledge must necessarily go unfulfilled.

Heather Seagroatt recognizes the effects of the rejection of a depth model of knowledge on the construction of the subject and on the relationship of cause and effect. She argues that in their scientific theory and practice,³⁴ Lord Henry and Dorian overturn

³⁴ Lord Henry is a *flâneur* turned scientist (but accordingly disqualified as *flâneur* by his pursuit of a particular aim):

He had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others. Human life—that appeared to him the one thing

the surface/depth model common to both the mentalist and behaviorist accounts of psychology current in their day,

because it presupposes a separation between symptom and cause and requires that an individual privilege either interpretation of the “deep” meaning (as the mentalists do), or description and understanding of the outward sign itself (as the behaviorists do). To Harry, the blurry distinctions which result from such definitions confound psychology to imprecision.... (750)

Distinguishing too rigorously between surface and depth, in *Dorian Gray*, results in a faulty account of reality. The logic of Wilde’s novel serves to undermine the stability of the two terms, as it also undermines the distinction between subjects and objects.

Above, I mentioned Dorian’s sense of himself as a character and of his life as already written. We can see more clearly now how such a sense follows from the wider subject/object confusion in the novel, particularly as accomplished in scenes of aesthetic spectatorship in which the nature of the subject’s participation is multiple or undecidable. But in the lengthy account of Dorian’s interactions with various aesthetic objects—both visual and textual—in Chapter 11, the effect on him of this sense of self-as-character becomes more explicit:

one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious. There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the

worth investigating. Compared to it there was nothing else of any value. It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one’s face a mask of glass, nor keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making the imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. (51)

Spectatorship, once again, brings with it the danger of contamination occasioned by the porous or compromised boundary between subject and object. Lord Henry is unable to hold himself remote from his research on others, inevitably skewing his data by clouding his own faculties of detached judgment through his very observation of it. He may talk a good game about the immorality of influence “from a scientific point of view,” but he demonstrates its unavoidability in his own experiments on Dorian (19). Dorian’s own study of pleasure and sensation becomes distinctly scientific later in the novel (although ever with aesthetic overtones), for instance as he makes a deliberate study of perfumes and their effects (111).

record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him, as it had been in his brain and in his passions. He felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous and evil so full of subtlety. It seemed to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own. (121)³⁵

Art here provides an alternative, non-reproductive—and thus arguably a queer—lineage, one that, further, furnishes an additional suspension of time: Dorian is permitted by imagination to inhabit “the whole of history,” well outside the bounds fixed by his biological life span.³⁶ This temporal irregularity, though, signals another instance in the novel in which queer and asexual possibilities of meaning inhabit the same textual space.³⁷ “De-linking the process of generation from the force of historical process is a queer kind of project,” Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure* (70). Asexual lives are a subset of those “queer lives” that “seek to uncouple change from the supposedly organic and immutable forms of family and inheritance,” that “exploit some potential for a *difference in form* that lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness but as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives” (70, emphasis in orig.). This break generates multiple possibilities, which

³⁵ The problem of heredity in the novel is an important one. Contemporary evolutionary thinking also touched on the question of the subject’s agency and the prefabrication of a narrative for the subject’s life, although this problem is beyond the scope of my present reading. For studies of *Dorian Gray* through the lens of late nineteenth-century evolutionary science, see Michael Wainwright’s “Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” and Mary C. King’s “Digging for Darwin: Bitter Wisdom in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and ‘The Critic as Artist.’”

³⁶ I will examine a similarly free-ranging relation to history in my reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* in my Conclusion.

³⁷ Beginning to specify the ways in which asexuality is legible as queer—and likewise specifying the particular structural effects it has when read in this way—may be a useful step toward reversing the nearly unworkable generality that the term “queer” has acquired, as a panel headed by Judith Roof argued at the 2012 M/MLA conference, prompting heated discussion. The conciliatory position the debate suggested to me was roughly this: “queer” is useful when recognized as an umbrella term and a shorthand for the overlap in the interests of myriad persons of non-normative genders and sexualities, but it can likewise obscure the differences and in some cases the directly conflicting interests of such persons and ought therefore to be used with greater care and elaborative precision.

helps to account for the overlap and overdetermination we see of the asexual and the homosexual possibility at the same points in *Dorian Gray*. It is the incursion of narrative stasis and the effacement of the surface/depth binary, however, that mark the unique intervention of the asexual possibility as a suspension of narrative movement and of the formations of knowledge that constitute the basis of the modern subject.

In the passage I quoted above, Dorian can easily trade places—perhaps already has—with the characters he reads about and accrue their experiences to himself, much as the portrait has done to him. He exhibits this tendency most visibly in his response to the “yellow book” that Lord Henry sends him, “the strangest book he had ever read,” modeled on Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours* but not equivalent to it.³⁸ Significantly, “[i]t was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own” (104). That is, it is a novel without linear teleology and without relationality, whose protagonist tries to dislocate himself from his own temporal specificity in favor of a sensual simultaneity that situates him both everywhere and nowhere in time as he spurns his existence in the present. And it so captivates Dorian that

[h]e procured from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition [Wilde’s more conservative estimate in 1890 stood at five (255)], and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control. The hero, the wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became to him a kind of prefiguring type of

³⁸ While Huysmans’s novel was likely the inspiration for the one Dorian reads, Gillespie cites textual evidence that the book that captivates Dorian seems to have been predominantly Wilde’s invention: “The Secret of Raoul by Catulle Sarrazin,” according to passages cancelled in the typescript by Wilde’s editor (Wilde 102 n.8).

himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it. (105)

As we will soon see, Dorian has ample precedent, by this point in the novel, for judging books by their covers, given his privileging of surface and shallowness over depth—and indeed, Wilde’s novel’s exposure of the arbitrariness and artifice of depth.

Dorian likewise dissolves his own subjectivity, agency, and experience in time in that of the novel’s main (and only) character, who in turn abdicates from the present moment altogether. This abdication locates Dorian still more firmly outside of temporal specificity. Admittedly, there is a contradiction here, because his location outside of time is still based on a novel that exists in time, but reliving an already recounted life-out-of-time builds in layers of temporal discontinuity and repetition that oppose a more typical linear novelistic engagement with time. Judith Halberstam, who regards the “yellow book” as an illustration of the gothic monstrosity both of Wilde’s novel and Dorian himself, strengthens the association of plotlessness with triumphant superficiality: “Like the book, Dorian is ‘perfect,’ he is all form and no content. Dorian is in some sense plotless because his life is not written upon his body but upon his portrait. He is beautiful but all surface and without depth” (*Skin* 58).³⁹ The deliberately disordered relation to time that Dorian negotiates, a personal repudiation of plot, is just one of the ways in which *Dorian Gray* is animated by the same problematic we saw in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, in which one thing does not necessarily lead to another and surfaces are not reliable indicators of corresponding depths.

³⁹ Similarly, Morrison argues that Wilde—like Aristotle—subordinates character to plot, but Wilde does not maintain a belief in plot’s resemblance to reality. Instead, plot, for Wilde, “is the imitation of an imitation, a miming of the technologies of self-fashioning and self-knowledge that produce the sexual subjects that purport to subtend them” (31).

This problematic opens up the asexual possibility alongside the homosexual possibility in the novel. Elisa Glick has argued that “gay male identity is for Wilde an ongoing struggle between visible appearance and concealed reality” (155), yet the novel continually suggests that beneath visible appearance, there may not *be* concealed reality, or else the relationship between the two may be dismayingly arbitrary.⁴⁰

The result, for Basil, of Dorian’s inspiration is “the mere shapes and patterns of things becoming, as it were, refined, and gaining a kind of symbolical value, as though they were themselves patterns of some other and more perfect form whose shadow they made real: how strange it all was!” (34). Reality is transfigured for Basil so that nothing can be merely what it is; surfaces cannot remain as such but must lead to depth and fullness of meaning. The question, though, is what meaning, whose meaning? Appearances are charged, for Basil, with the revelation of an ideal, but it is by no means assured that their relation to this ideal is natural or necessary—especially when their

⁴⁰ The erosion of the distinction between surface and depth, or between signifier and signified, invites an engagement with Lacan. Such an erosion creates a signifying chain (“no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification,” a consequence of which is “that there is no existing language [*langue*] whose ability to cover the field of the signified can be called into question, one of the effects of its existence as a language [*langue*] being that it fulfills all needs there” [141]). The signifying chain for Lacan is anything but asexual. Lacan builds on the Freudian unconscious by specifying its linguistic structure, populated by metaphoric and metonymic relations between signifiers. He avers that “[p]sychoanalytic experience consists in nothing other than establishing that the unconscious leaves none of our actions outside its field” (154)—the totalizing impulse in psychoanalysis that I argued in Chapter 1 necessitates its repression of asexuality. Desire, for Lacan, is restlessly metonymic—“caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else* (158; emphasis in orig.)—and is linked to the lack of a signified.

However, as I stated earlier, the asexual secret consists precisely in the *lack* of a secret—the lack of a signified, perhaps, but not in the same sense that Lacan intends, for the asexual closet sends desire’s signifying chain plummeting unexpectedly over the threshold beyond which lies nothing. The non-experience of sexual attraction that subtends asexuality’s location outside the economy of object-oriented desire in a psychoanalytic framework can’t be comprehended by the same metonymic slipping and sliding that the arbitrariness of the sign under Lacanian psychoanalysis attributes to the relation of signifier and signified. While Lacan claims to be talking about fundamental psychological dynamics, he is in fact constrained by the historical demands of modern subjectivity. Although Lacan updates psychoanalysis for poststructuralism, he is constrained—in building on Freud—in the same way that Freud was: by according explanatory supremacy to the unconscious and thus to a model of the subject founded on a depth model of knowledge and the epistemological centrality of sexuality.

“symbolical value” is belatedly grafted onto them and they only *appear* to be patterns of this “*other* and more perfect form.” At an immediate level, the making-real of shadows by appearances establishes the Platonic character of Basil’s relationship to Dorian, but it takes on a much different tone when read in light of my earlier analysis of the shadows of the birds on the curtains: to make real the shadows of this other and more perfect form (leaving in abeyance the oxymoronic character of there being *degrees* of perfection at all) is to convert absence to presence, and to “make real” at all is to admit the prior illusoriness of what lies beyond or beneath appearances (i.e. depth is no more authentic than surface, is functionally no different from it). Halberstam argues too that *Dorian Gray* rejects the conventional association of truth with depth and that it instead locates subjectivity in falsehood and truth in superficiality: identity is skin-deep at most, and reality is too much to ask of life (*Skin* 63–64). For Halberstam, the portrait, as Dorian’s hidden self, disqualifies the “true” self’s authenticity “and makes subjectivity a surface effect” (64). In the same way, the opening image of the birds’ shadows models the way in which Wilde’s revisions make over the asexual possibility as something amenable to figuration, as something at all, as presence. Basil’s affection for Dorian appears to enable the communication of depth through surface, but actually, it calls into question the very existence of that depth.⁴¹ Basil is fully justified in thinking it strange.

This strangeness extends to Basil’s own sometimes contradictory artistic practice, which runs aground on the same set of questions. He maintains that

[a]n artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to

⁴¹ The painting itself embodies the idea that there is nothing but surface, for a painting *is* literally nothing but surface, able to indicate depth only illusorily; no matter how far one looks into, all one is seeing, finally, is more surface, more paint.

be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray. (14)

This prescription contradicts not only what he says just a few paragraphs before about the “madness” of separating soul and body (13)—which Dorian of course will literalize as a very material separation of art and life—but also the portrait that he actually paints, as he acknowledges. For while he claims that “Dorian Gray is merely to [him] a motive in art,” “a suggestion... of a new manner” (14), Basil refuses to show the portrait publicly because he is “afraid that [he has] shown in it the secret of [his] own soul” (9). And so “the finest piece of work [he has] ever done” is, by his own criterion, bad art (26). Or is it? He later decides, as he tells Dorian, “that I had been foolish in imagining that I had seen anything in it, more than that you were extremely good-looking and that I could paint” (96). Basil is unable to decide upon the relationship of the creating subject and the created work of art, whether the secret of that subject may reside beneath and be accessible through the surface of the work—which is, at the time his vacillations stop, almost defiantly nothing more than what it appears (a painting of an attractive young man that declares that it is painted so as to represent an attractive young man).⁴²

Yet the introduction of the motif of secrecy into Basil’s aesthetics builds in an additional complication, a question that Basil both forces and renders unanswerable. In the opening pages of the novel, he tells Lord Henry,

I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvellous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it. When I leave town now I never tell my people where I am going. If I did, I would lose all my pleasure. It is a silly

⁴² Wilde endorses this tautological superficiality in the Preface: “*They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty*” (3; emphasis in orig.).

habit, I dare say, but somehow it seems to bring a great deal of romance into one's life. (8)⁴³

Here, as Basil constructs the surface/depth structure of knowledge-as-secret as a specific formation of modernity, he also spells out quite clearly the workings of the asexual closet: the mere act of hiding *anything*—hiding *nothing*, even—makes it a secret, regardless of whether anyone else would consider it worth hiding. Refiguring the asexual absence on these terms, as the presence of a secret, is also thereby a means of making it pleasurable, which would otherwise seem logically impossible (how does one enjoy nothing?). The pleasure of finding out secrets, however, is ultimately the pleasure of narrative, specifically the pleasure of the novel. The opposition of asexuality to the logic of secrecy and disclosure, knowledge and mastery, pits asexuality against narrative at a very basic structural level, the focus of the following chapter. Wilde's attempt to surmount this opposition by stuffing asexual romantic friendship into the closet in his 1891 revisions, then, was doomed to failure.

More immediately, though, this passage establishes Basil as a wanton purveyor of gratuitous, meaningless, purposeless, contentless secrets. That is, he multiplies empty closets. However, his control over their boundedness, their integrity *as* closets, is limited,

⁴³ This, the 1891 version of this passage, includes several minor revisions to Wilde's 1890 text that alter its tone more than its meaning, but which are still worth noting. The 1890 text has

You know how I love secrecy. It is the only thing that can make modern life wonderful or mysterious to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it. When I leave town I never tell my people where I am going. If I did, I would lose all my pleasure. It is a silly habit, I dare say, but somehow it seems to bring a great deal of romance into one's life. (187)

Aside from the substitution of "mysterious or marvellous" for "wonderful or mysterious," Wilde's revisions make Basil's love of secrecy in the 1891 text more a taste that he has lately developed than a familiar and long-established character trait. Additionally, he speaks more diffidently and personally of secrecy's merits in the later text, whereas in 1890 they are absolute. These changes are in keeping with the larger pattern of revision in the 1891 text in which Wilde emphasizes Basil's views as uniquely and idiosyncratically Basil's, perhaps in an attempt to contain the homoerotic threat that his character posed to the substance of the novel as a whole.

for they turn out to open onto the everywhere-and-nowhere, “no, not that either” boundlessness of the asexual possibility, where the secret as secret disappears in the light of day. When one has nothing to hide, one must settle for hiding anything at all, even hiding nothing, in order to satisfy one’s mania for secrecy or simply to cohere as a modern subject, constructed of surface and depth, constructed by a hidden and presumably sexual truth. Basil Hallward, haphazardly shaping any materials at hand to fit the structure of a secret, lives by the logic of the asexual closet.

We are liable to forget, at times, Basil’s early fear of exposing “the secret of my own soul” in the portrait.⁴⁴ Once Dorian’s soul takes up a more conspicuous residence in it and must accordingly be hidden away, the secret of poor Basil’s soul all but gets shoved clear out of the novel. But lest we remain tempted to go looking for such secrets, I return us, at long last, to that exchange between Basil and Dorian after Basil has confessed his feelings for Dorian and explained how they inspired the portrait. Dorian deems this “a very disappointing confession,” to which Basil replies, “Why, what did you expect, Dorian? You didn’t see anything else in the picture, did you? There was nothing else to see?” Dorian assures him, “No; there was nothing else to see. Why do you ask?” (97). We know that Dorian is lying, and why he should be anxious about what Basil might see—indeed, *will* see—in the portrait, but Basil’s probing is more perplexing: according to all the textual evidence and even all the innuendo that we have to go on, he has made a clean breast of it and is fresh out of secrets. Yet he implies a further secret

⁴⁴ One of Wilde’s seemingly minor revisions here raises a host of questions. The 1890 text has “I am afraid that I have shown with it the secret of my own soul” (188), while the 1891 text has “I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul” (9). Although Wilde’s only change is to the preposition, it forces us to consider whether the picture accompanies, represents, or embodies the secret of Basil’s soul. Since we furthermore don’t know that secret—and don’t even know it to exist for a certainty—the relationship becomes even more difficult to determine.

after confessing the most scandalous one imaginable to a Victorian reader, urges us to return to the picture and go searching for something *else* in it, even when we have presumably already seen into the furthest recesses of the closet. This refusal to stop at the secret—at any secret—figures as neither an open closet nor an empty closet, because on the one hand, there is nothing there, but on the other hand, one goes right on searching for *something* beyond the closet's rear wall, if it may be said to have one at all. The asexual possibility, in this light, is a riddle with no answer, and any answer, any content we might suggest, functions only as the “plank nailed across the door frame at knee level to keep anyone from falling out,” to return to Flannery O'Connor's unwitting allegory of the asexual closet, which is more applicable to *Dorian Gray* than it initially appeared.

This interminable search for secrets, however, is not how one uncovers the asexual possibility, for it is not a piece of knowledge to be concealed beneath the surfaces of the novel. Wilde attempted to make it function as one, in substituting it for its homosexual counterpart in many of his 1891 revisions, but this substitution remained incomplete, unconvincing, and unable to contain the asexual possibility within a conventional novelistic framework. Instead, the asexual possibility ranges freely throughout the novel, deforming familiar organizations of time, subjectivity, and the disclosure of knowledge. The asexual lack of a secret (which is also the lack of an object of desire) disrupts an epistemology and a model of subjectivity predicated on the relation of surface to depth. This relation is a constitutive feature of both the novel as a genre and the modern sexual subject. The interminable search for secrets, to which we are goaded by the passage I discussed above, is nevertheless what narrative is all about. In Chapter 4, I trace the common association of narrative, at every level, with sexual desire and

construct, according to the negations allowed me by such associations, what amounts to an asexual model of narrative structure, organized by stasis and non-event, which threatens in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and predominates in his (consequently) less highly regarded *The Sacred Fount*.

CHAPTER FOUR

ASEXUALITY, DESIRE, AND NARRATIVE

What goes on in a narrative is, from the referential (real) point of view, strictly *nothing*. What does “happen” is language per se, the adventure of language, whose advent never ceases to be celebrated.

—Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (271)

There is, after all, such a thing as the Reader’s Magna Charta, one of the clauses in which is that something ought to happen at some time in a book, or we ought to get our money back.

—Unsigned review of *To the Lighthouse*, *The New Age* Sept. 8, 1927 (224)

LISA. Perhaps there is no moral to this story.

HOMER. Exactly! Just a bunch of stuff that happened.

—*The Simpsons*, “Blood Feud”

When I was in elementary school, I eagerly looked forward to the blocks of creative writing time that my teachers scheduled several afternoons a week. Whether they looked forward to reading what I produced during that time—monsters loose and baggy enough to set Henry James spinning in his grave—is harder to say. My creative writing typically took the form of lengthy, episodic pieces of prose fiction that were entertaining enough, in their way, but that never really went anywhere. My fifth grade teacher (a good Aristotelian) complained that while a story was supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, mine were all middle.

Few phenomena are more frustrating to our sense of narrative integrity than the story that doesn’t go anywhere, that thwarts narrative’s teleological logic, as those

interminable middles did. The aimlessness of such middles suggests the interference of the asexual possibility in narrative's movement toward closure, but a mere middle without an end does not necessarily add up to an asexually structured narrative, the instantiation of the asexual possibility that I consider in this chapter. In Chapter 3, I distinguished the incursion of the asexual possibility as a very particular kind of queering, one that functions as stasis rather than the diversion of narrative movement. Here, I elucidate this difference in greater detail, similarly characterizing the asexual possibility as a *specific* kind of threat, but not the only possible threat, to narrative closure. An asexually structured narrative frustrates both the teleological movement toward closure *and* the aimless desire that may also characterize those narratives that resist closure. Below, I will elaborate further what distinguishes an asexual narrative from narratives of endless desire.

Definitions of narrative frequently begin with some acknowledgment of the basic movement necessary to a concept of plot. Gérard Genette, for example, defines narrative as “the expansion of a verb” (30), Roland Barthes seeks a sentence-based grammar of narrative modeled on structuralist linguistics in his “Introduction to the Structuralist Analysis of Literature,” and Tzvetan Todorov claims that all narratives include at least a portion of the cycle of equilibrium, degradation, disequilibrium, recovery, and reestablishment of equilibrium, as I described in Chapter 1 (29). Aristotle initiates this definitional tradition in the *Poetics* by designating tragedy as “not an imitation of men but of actions and of life” and stipulating a beginning, a middle, and an end (52; 53).¹ In

¹ That is, for Aristotle,

every case, critics and theorists take narrative to involve movement and change. Despite the seeming generality or universality of such a supposition, however, it entails particular valuations of change—most notably as motivated or occasioned by desire. And as modern subjects, we reflexively presume a sexual basis to desire, such that the accounts of narrative available to us are implicitly incompatible with asexuality.

In the previous two chapters, we have seen conflicts between novelistic plotting and the asexual possibility, which dismantles linear temporal movement and causality.² Here I demonstrate that these conflicts are consequences of the structure of narrative as understood by canonical narrative theory since Aristotle. The unthinkability of the asexual possibility in the Western canon of criticism leads me to confront, in the first section of this chapter, several problems that have remained largely implicit in my

a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is a whole and complete in itself and of a certain magnitude—for a thing may be a whole, and yet have no magnitude to speak of. Now a thing is a whole if it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not come necessarily after something else, but after which it is natural for another thing to exist or come to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which naturally comes after something else, either as its necessary sequel or as its usual [and hence probable] sequel, but itself has nothing after it. A middle is that which both comes after something else and has another thing following it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, will neither begin at some chance point nor end at some chance point, but will observe the principles here stated. (52)

Noteworthy in this passage are Aristotle's naturalization of narrative segmentation, which J. Hillis Miller deconstructs in *Reading Narrative*, and his opposition of tragic narrative to the movements of chance. I give fuller consideration to Miller's text and to narrative's reliance on causality later in this chapter.

² It is worth emphasizing that my study of narrative, in this chapter and elsewhere, focuses somewhat narrowly on the traditional novel as a quintessentially modern genre on a collision course with asexuality as a force antithetical to modern formations of subjectivity and knowledge. The asexual possibility might in fact be less at odds with the narrative structures of other, usually older genres: picaresque, dream vision, or children's fiction, for instance. Dominick LaCapra reminds us that although conventional narrative details the "loss" of originary purity in the middle and its restoration at the end, there are many kinds of narrative that challenge this pattern and which reject closure in favor of "an unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces involving a series of substitutions without origin or ultimate referent—an interplay that may enable more desirable configurations that cannot be equated with salvation or redemption" (182). These two extremes—of restoration and unfinalizability—are often held up as exemplary in narrative theory (the latter valorized wherever the former is denigrated), but LaCapra faults critics who universalize the conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel as those of all narrative in order to critique them, or further, who take narrative as the blueprint of all discourse (which in the first place requires an almost unusably broad definition of narrative) (186).

readings to this point: the meaning of “desire” for narrative theory, how narrative theorists have construed desire’s relation to narrative, and how that relation contributes to the erasure of asexuality not merely on a thematic but on a structural level. To that end, I survey a number of theories of narrative and of the novel that rely on desire as a structuring concept—to show where the walls are and how the novel functions to exclude asexuality at the level of structure rather than content. Having thus demonstrated more clearly how the asexual possibility requires us to rethink narrative theory and common assumptions about desire, I attempt, in the second section, to imagine what might lie on the other side of those walls, a narrative structure ordered according to the logic of asexuality rather than that of (het)eronormativity: impossible in its pure form, but more or less a story in which nothing happens. I close by tracing this structure’s implications in two works by Henry James. “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903) is threatened by the asexual possibility in much the same way that I have argued *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are, but my reading of it merits inclusion here because it allegorizes more clearly than those other texts the threat that the asexual possibility poses to narrative structure as such. It forms an instructive contrast to *The Sacred Fount* (1901), a far less popular novel from the same period in James’s career, and one in which the asexual possibility actually structures (or destructures) the plot, rather than merely imperiling its meaningful forward progress. *The Sacred Fount* shows the asexual possibility come home to roost, embedded at a structural level as a principle of pointlessness, of which the narrator (and the unfortunate reader he takes along for the ride) are the hapless dupes.

Narrative and Desire

Many critics have taken the alliance of narrative and desire for granted as they seek to elucidate it, but others have attempted to critique it or at least to expose its ideological underpinnings. All, however, assume desire to have a sexual foundation, either implicitly or explicitly, as my survey of their work below will demonstrate. These are the assumptions in which I later intervene. In a post-Freudian context, a nonsexual model of desire seems untenable, because a sexual model is in fact an accurate account of modern subject formation and the novelistic genre.

Rather than try to redefine desire against the whole weight of the modern account of subjectivity that it structures, then, I seek instead to expose what that account was constructed to keep out and why this gatekeeping function was necessary. This was my goal, as you will recall, in Chapter 1, and in this chapter I circle back to apply the same set of moves to a prominent strain of narrative theory. There, I specified the particular historical and conceptual forms that asexual erasure took during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, concluding with Freud's rigorous exclusion of asexuality from the modes of being and experience that psychoanalysis renders thinkable. Here, I show how narrative theory's focus on desire as both integral to and opposed to narrative structure results in a similar strain of asexual erasure. Granting my focus on a novelistic model of narrative, it is probably accurate that all such narratives are built on desire, and that this desire is conceptualized as sexual. I do not disagree with such accounts of narrative, which are consistent with and illustrative of asexual erasure as a specifically modern formation, the modern sexual subject with its depth model of knowledge, and the genre of the novel as opposed to the play of the asexual possibility.

Considerations of narrative desire frequently also open questions of narrative closure.

Both narrative desire and asexuality oppose closure, but they differ: desire threatens narrative with aimless or endless movement and asexuality threatens it with stasis.

Previously, I defined asexuality as “the non-experience of sexual attraction,” a reasonably capacious definition consonant with the self-understanding of the asexual population. Here, however, I locally adopt a more stringent definition of asexuality that opposes asexuality not only to sexual attraction but to sexual *desire*, in order to place asexuality more clearly in dialogue with theories of narrative desire.³ Since I am dealing in this chapter not with asexual persons, as in the Introduction and Chapter 1, but with the *logic* of asexuality, this strategic narrowing of my focus affords me a common denominator in my engagement with theories of narrative desire, adding clarity without limiting any claim to represent the experiences of asexual persons.

Such clarity is necessary when many theorists have argued that an intrinsic relationship exists between narrative and desire, if not between narrative and sexuality itself. For Teresa de Lauretis, for example, “the very work of narrativity is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire” (106). The linking of meaning and desire, the identification of meaning as desire’s object or desire’s result, is a prominent aspect of this line of thinking, which furthermore tends, although not exclusively, to privilege narrative closure as a particularly revelatory site of such

³ According to Anthony Bogaert’s formulation, which I discussed in Chapter 1, defining asexuality as the non-experience of sexual desire necessarily involves the corresponding non-experience of sexual attraction, but such a definition excludes those asexuals who experience sexual desire but not attraction. For Bogaert, sexual desire is much the same as sex drive and “activates” whatever sexual attraction a person experiences. An increase of undirected sexual desire, however, cannot produce attraction where none was there to begin with (*Understanding* 22). For this reason, Bogaert prefers to base his definition of asexuality on an absence of sexual attraction rather than sexual desire.

meaning and to fix narrative as purposefully—that is, eronormatively—driven toward an end goal.

In this section, I expose the tendency in narrative theory to treat an implicitly sexual desire as central either to the production or the consumption of narrative, supplying not only narrative's shape but its meaning and its purpose. While some of the theorists I survey below focus on either the writing or the reading of narrative, Ross Chambers's understanding of narrative desire encompasses both. He regards all narratives as "necessarily seductive, seduction being the means whereby they maintain their authority to narrate; and if that is so, then the duplicity of seduction, whereby narrative conforms to the (projected) desires of the other in order to bring about its own desire to narrate, is *constitutive of the narrative situation* as such" (218; emphasis in orig.). That is, while others locate desire as intrinsic to narrative structure or content, Chambers regards it as the basic condition of the narrative act, defining seduction as "the power to achieve authority and to produce involvement (the authority of the storyteller, the involvement of the narratee) within a situation from which power is itself absent" (212). According to this model, asexuality could have nothing to do with the business of narration on either the part of the storyteller or the reader. To narrate is to seduce; to be narrated to is to be seduced.

Not all desires, of course, are sexual, especially when one understands narrative as broadly as Todorov does, for instance, as involving a movement from disequilibrium to equilibrium or vice versa. Seduction, then, might be understood as involving bodily processes other than strictly sexual ones. However, while seduction *may* take the form of various responses to physical needs or disequilibrium, and while I could perhaps

endeavor to evacuate seduction of sexual implications in order to harmonize it with asexuality, I would have little hope of being taken seriously if I did so. Seduction in a rhetorical or a narrative sense is a metaphor, and a metaphor whose most immediate connotations are sexual. The desire that is actually involved for a reader may not be sexual, but the desire that it gets routed through in being framed as seduction *is* sexual.

Furthermore, Chambers aligns the seductive narrative situation with the control of knowledge and the dynamics of secrecy in a way that is incompatible with the logic of asexuality that we have seen at work in my earlier chapters. Narrative seduction is necessary in the first place because narrative authority—any authority—is invalid without an other to respect it, without the investment of that other’s desire (212–13). Storytellers, Chambers argues, exercise a “situational defensiveness” in establishing and maintaining authority by convincing their audiences that their stories have a point. They may obtain authority by presuming to possess it and by possessing desirable knowledge that they may choose to share: “In this connection, secrecy—the claim to be in possession of a secret, together with an implied willingness to divulge it—forms the paradigm of all such tactics of narrative authority” (214). The enticement of secrecy in Chambers’s account is instrumental to narrative authority and readerly desire, which is not surprising, given asexuality’s deformation of the logic of closetedness and the surface/depth binary, as I discussed in Chapter 3. The mere posture of the possession of narrative knowledge—the structure of a secret—suffices to seduce readers, to convince them that the story is leading toward significance (214). The asexual possibility, on the other hand, introduces the threat that there is nothing to be found out, that the story may well lead *nowhere*, as the insistent multiplication of empty secrets in *Dorian Gray* eventually did. For

Chambers, every narrative act is necessarily a seductive act, one that plays upon the desires of both narrator and narratee and one that therefore cannot accommodate the logic of asexuality as a non-occurrence of desire.

The tendency to base narrative in sexual desire, such as we see in Chambers's argument, contributes to the erasure of asexuality both from narrative structure and our accounts of it, although this structure is subject to other critiques from feminist and queer perspectives. Teresa de Lauretis and Susan Winnett, for example, critique narrative structure's basis in masculine sexual desire, while Nancy Armstrong historicizes the novel's role in constructing desire and desirability for the middle-class domestic woman of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Peter Brooks explicates the likeness between narrative structure and sexual desire in psychoanalytic terms. René Girard also ascribes a structuring function to sexual desire in the novel, although the continuation of such desire seems to forbid narrative closure—a problem that D. A. Miller considers in depth. Judith Roof characterizes the sexual desire structuring narrative not merely as masculine, as de Lauretis and Winnett do, but as invested in the ideology of heterosexual reproduction, which the epistemological processes involved in narrative closure affirm.

These models of narrative desire, then, are frequently concerned with when and how novels end. It is fair to say that an asexual narrative is not exactly one that is “all middle”—because middles must end somewhere, if for no other reason than that the writer stops writing—but a narrative in which the middle bears no meaningful relation to the end. So I begin here—partly to be contrary, partly to clarify the significance of desire to narrative on the one hand and asexuality to narrative on the other—with endings.

There is more to an ending than simply the cessation of narration. Marianna Torgovnick distinguishes between endings strictly speaking and *closure*, “the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion or, at least, what the author hopes or believes is an adequate, appropriate conclusion” (6). Even “open” works, Torgovnick argues, can achieve such closure, because closure deals with the meaningful relation of ends to beginnings and middles, not a conclusive wrapping up (6).

Frank Kermode makes a similar argument in *The Sense of an Ending* as he links the relation of narrative middles and ends to narrative’s organization of temporality.⁴ Kermode regards the clock’s tick-tock as “a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize”—unlike the interval between *tick* and *tock*, which forms a very basic sort of plot by relating beginning and end and hence giving significance to the middle separating them (45). This difference between significance and mere successiveness is that between the two kinds of time that Kermode calls *chronos* and *kairos*. Kermode’s *kairos* is time given meaning by its end, which likewise gives meaning to its beginning; it is “felt” time, although *chronos* is necessary to give the impression of reality (50). Kermode argues that in novelistic plotting, successiveness must be filled in with duration and meaning, *chronos* turned to *kairos*, which is “the time of the novelist, a transformation of mere successiveness which has been likened, by writers as different as Forster and Musil, to the experience of love,

⁴ The novel has become increasingly obsessed with temporal realism over the course of its development and increasingly bound to satisfy two sets of desires, Kermode argues: “the form requires that the realism of the ego, and the desires of the lower mind, be simultaneously satisfied,” and so “the novel has to modify the paradigms—organize extensive middles in concordance with remote origins and predictable ends—in such a way as to preserve its difference from dreaming or other fantasy gratifications” (56).

the erotic consciousness which makes divinely satisfactory sense out of the commonplace person” (46). Narrative sense-making for Kermode, then, is erotic, in the same way that Freudian Eros describes not only sexual energy but that more general energy engaged in “uniting and binding” (*Ego* 19: 45).

Closure performs a structuring, meaning-making function, a fulfillment of *kairos*, in Kermode’s terms. The critical appeal of this function, though, has created certain blind spots. D. A. Miller argues that narrative theory’s emphasis on endings has resulted in an inability to process incoherence and discontinuity. This inability fuels ideological critiques of the traditional novel’s support for its own foregone conclusions. Novels are never wholly under the control of closure, Miller argues, and so his focus in *Narrative and Its Discontents* “is the uneasiness raised in the novel text by its *need* for controls, an uneasiness of which problems of closure would only be the most visible symptom” (xiv; emphasis in orig.). Below, I survey several of these ideological critiques, which help to expose the stakes in associating narrative and desire even where they cannot disentangle them. I then turn my attention to an “uneasiness” of a different kind than Miller considers, one that marks narrative’s attempts to bring not just the restless movement of desire and narratibility under its control but the stubborn stasis of the asexual possibility.

Teresa de Lauretis and Susan Winnett make a feminist critique of narrative’s investment in a masculine structure of desire, an investment that narrative theory has repeated. De Lauretis sees desire in narrative as circumscribed by the oppositions that constitute gender, which she argues are foundational to the structures of both desire and

narrative.⁵ Because of the way these oppositions are gendered, the narrative hero must be male at the level of form if not at the level of content (i.e. one could write a novel with a woman as hero, but she would nevertheless obey this masculine logic) (118–19). The only feminine positions available in this structure are those of immobility: obstacle (e.g. monsters like the Sphinx or Medusa) or reward for the hero upon the completion of his transformation. Narrative then imposes on the female subject a compulsory desire for desirability; she must be interpellated into femininity in this way in order for traditional narrative to reach its proper end (134). Thus, for de Lauretis, desire is the instrument of a foundationally masculine, Oedipal narrative logic—and female desire is therefore inescapably problematic. This logic can be disrupted and called into question, however, if not abolished (156–57).

Susan Winnett makes a similar critique of masculinized narrative structure. According to Winnett, narratology systematically ignores women's pleasure; its Oedipal underpinnings inscribe a guiding metaphor of the male sexual experience on narrative structure (506). Winnett argues, however, that female sexual pleasure is structured differently: it is repeatable, and it is not necessarily synchronized with the duration of the sexual act (507). Winnett wants to recall us to the bodily origin of pleasure in constructing metaphor and apply female experience to its pattern of tension and resolution, although other alternatives to masculinized narrative pleasure are also possible (508).⁶ Narrative-economy-as-usual implicates us in a male model of desire, Winnett

⁵ For de Lauretis, the basic structure of narrative is the transformation of the hero (113), which can only occur if the hero is functionally mobile (active) and passes “from inside to outside or vice versa” (119).

⁶ Winnett points to the examples of birth and breastfeeding, which culminate in beginnings, not ends. However, these processes are “governed by the will, desire, and rhythms of another human being” (509).

argues, leaving no room for feminine meanings to prevail (516).⁷ For Winnett, desire in narrative follows differently gendered forms, but she is ultimately interested in recovering narratives structured according to female desire or pleasure, not in questioning narrative's basis in sexual desire in the first place.

Nancy Armstrong also considers gender dynamics in the relation of narrative to desire in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, but she historicizes the function of desire in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel rather than taking a more structuralist approach. Armstrong argues that the novels of this period helped to shape the middle-class domestic woman as female subject and specify the terms of desire and desirability for women, as I discussed in Chapter 1. In short, she shows the intimate association of desire and narrative that many critics take for granted, whether as an object for description or critique, to be a modern historical construct. I contend that it is no less such a construct in narrative theory than in narrative practice. In essence, Armstrong examines the initial linkage of narrative and desire that enables studies such as Peter Brooks's, which I discuss below. However, her reading of the function of desire in the novel shows such linkages to be products of the same modern discourse of subjectivity and sexuality that necessitated asexual erasure.

Brooks argues that narrative follows the logic of the Freudian life and death instincts, which he uses to account for the necessity of a narrative middle between the beginning and the end, in narrative as well as in life (*Plot* 96–97). Brooks argues further that it is appropriate to “conceive of the reading of plot as a form of desire that carries us

⁷ To universalize male pleasure as the basis of narrative structure, Winnett points out, is actually to weaken the validity of such claims to universality. She criticizes Peter Brooks, whose model of narrative I discuss below, for accepting one particular myth of gender and sexuality without recognizing its particularity, one which makes the woman either an Oedipal roadblock or goal, not a subject with desires of her own (511).

forward, onward, through the text. Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification” (37). Brooks thus acknowledges the multiple narrative functions of desire. Incidentally, he is also one of the few theorists to clarify his definition of desire relative to narrative, treating it as something “like Freud’s notion of Eros, a force including sexual desire but larger and more polymorphous,” which operates as a unifying force. At the same time, however, he half-dismisses desire as “a concept too broad, too fundamental, almost too banal to be defined” (37). One of my chief goals in this dissertation has been to denaturalize this putative banality. My account of the asexual possibility has opposed it to such a model of desire, which is sexually grounded but which covers a wider swath of territory including the modern subject, teleology, cause and effect, linear temporality, and a depth model of knowledge. In this chapter I illustrate more clearly the interdependence of all of these concepts under the banner of narrative and the threat that asexuality poses to them in that context.

However, I do not disagree with Brooks, just as I did not, in Chapter 1, disagree with the Freudian concepts on which he bases his model of narrative. Instead, my critique focuses on what such models have been constructed to keep out and why. At this juncture, disentangling narrative from desire for the sake of making room for asexuality is just another way of throwing out the dictionary. Desire doesn’t have to be sexual, after all, but when we theorize it in narrative—which, to us, is functionally to theorize it in the novel—it *is* sexual, because we are modern subjects and the novel is a modern genre. Like Armstrong, I recognize the historical constructedness of the models of desire and narrative available to us, but I also recognize the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of

cutting free of those models by a sheer act of will, and so I describe asexuality in a necessarily antagonistic relationship to them rather than setting it up as the basis of some radical new model of desire and narrative.

It is here that the difference between “sex-normativity” and eronormativity becomes salient. My tendency throughout this chapter to collapse all desire into sexual desire is not without precedent, although the sympathetic reader may have expected better of me (yes, Mom, if all the other narrative theorists jumped off a bridge...). In Chapter 1, I identified asexuality structurally with stasis, placing it at odds with Freudian Eros, which likewise is not reducible to sexuality but encompasses a broader concept of constructive, end-directed movement that is of course recognizable in narrative.

Eronormativity is a sort of arrow-normativity, always pointing somewhere, going somewhere—if only on an endless journey along desire’s metonymic chain—rather than sitting still, the structural implication of asexuality’s lack of an object. It is largely on these grounds that I oppose asexuality to desire here. Similarly, Judith Roof argues that

it is through the metaphorical rather than the literal that sexuality inflects all that seems not immediately sexual. Metaphor accounts for how it is that narrative can convey and situate a sexual ideology while not appearing to represent sexuality at all. Thus, what is important is not so much literal representations of specific sexualities but rather a more pervasive, structured interrelation among sets of terms and values associated with positions and functions within narrative. (*Come* xxviii)

Although Roof here argues that sexuality may be structurally at stake even in narratives in which it is absent at a thematic level, the same arguments can be made of narrative theory—Chambers’s use of seduction as a metaphor for the narrative situation is a fairly obvious example.

However, it is also worth keeping in mind that even in models of narrative desire in which desire may not, *need* not, be sexual, our positioning as modern subjects within an epistemological regime governed by a privileged relation of sexuality to truth and a Freudian concept of an all-pervading sexuality almost inevitably colors desire that way. My use of “desire” as historically inextricable from sexual desire under the current dispensation thus follows Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s in *Between Men*, as “analogous to the psychoanalytic use of ‘libido’—not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (*Men* 2). Sedgwick herself acknowledges the limitations of such usage in *Touching Feeling*, as a product of “the Freudian understanding that one physiological drive—sexuality, libido, desire—is the ultimate source, and hence in Foucault’s word is seen to embody the ‘truth,’ of human motivation, identity, and emotion” (17–18). According to such an understanding of desire, “[t]he nature or quality of the affect itself, seemingly, is not of much more consequence than the color of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination” (*Feeling* 18). I do not mean to attempt to deny such limitations, but I find it strategically useful here to work within them. The object of my critique—a discourse that has frequently suspected all airplanes of, deep down, being the same color anyway—is constrained by the modern understanding of subjectivity and sexuality that allows sexual desire such wide metaphorical play. Desire is not always sexual, but the discourse I have inherited is prone to that simplification, informed by the reification of the sexual assumption and asexual erasure by psychoanalysis and the other modern accounts of

sexuality and subjectivity that I detailed in Chapter 1. Having affixed this asterisk to my invocation of “desire,” I now return to Peter Brooks.

Narrative, for Brooks, is structured by the Freudian life and death instincts, whose interplay is closely linked to the question of closure that I have already highlighted. In both narrative and the life of the individual, Brooks argues, repetition is a means of gaining control over one’s proper end (*Plot* 98).⁸ Brooks explains that for Freud, repetition functions as a binding operation that focuses the inchoate energies of the instincts into narrower, more specific channels that will permit delayed gratification and ultimate mastery (101). Literarily, this binding translates for Brooks into the potentiality that constitutes the narrative middle, with the detours and complications it interposes between the beginning of (literary) desire—“the arousal of an intention in reading, stimulation into a tension” (103)—and the meaning-full ending that corresponds to the proper end sought by the death instinct. Narrative’s death instinct impels it to seek the shortest possible path to its correct end/death while avoiding both detours (unnecessary postponements) and short circuits (premature or incorrect ends) (104). The life and death instincts depend on one another to produce a harmony between deviance and end, whose tension creates the narrative middle (107). This delay is necessary to make sense of the end in relation to the rest of the narrative (111)—to make a mere ending into closure, in Torgovnick’s terms.

Through this extended analogy to the work of the life and death instincts, Brooks treats *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an exploration of a reader’s experience of plot, an

⁸ For Brooks, narrative is always already a (re)telling and hence structurally repetitive, in addition to containing internal patterns of repetition that attribute meaning to and create relationships between its elements (100).

account of why we want narrative to work the way it does, and a model for a psychoanalytic approach to narrative structure rather than to narrative content. Such an approach allows one to speak of a plot's or a text's desire rather than an author's, a reader's, or a character's (112)—the approach I have taken in my readings of the play of the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Thus my argument that *Lady Audley's Secret's* most egregious contrivances of plot are structured by the avoidance of the asexual possibility, for instance, does not mean that Braddon consciously felt threatened by the asexual possibility.

One would think, based on the characteristics that I have attached to the asexual possibility in narrative thus far, that asexuality is inimical to narrative closure. Indeed, insofar as it jams teleology and the linear forward movement of time, it is. However, by some accounts, desire too opposes closure. How both oppositions can be possible and how asexuality nevertheless differs from the motive force of narrative desire thus requires some attention.

René Girard, for example, takes this view of desire and closure as opposites. Girard claims that a great deal of narrative desire is mediated or triangular desire, which involves not only a subject and an object but a mediator, who may act either as a rival or a sort of role model, depending on the distance separating these three figures and the nature of the object (9).⁹ On the whole, Girard presents mediated desire as an agonistic but unavoidable experience, whose unpleasantness makes *his* desire for narrative resolution all the more acute. Rather than leave the problem insoluble, then, he shows the

⁹ His model of triangular desire, for instance, aptly describes the situation in the final cemetery scene in "The Beast in the Jungle," in which John Marcher only becomes aware of the possibility of desiring May through the desire he recognizes in another mourner's grief.

mediated desire he has described extinguished and peace restored at the end of the handful of novels he chooses to examine in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. He flags this kind of conclusion, ordered by renunciation, as characteristic of “great novelists” (299), since he cannot make a tenable claim for its universality with such a small sample size at his disposal. But intrinsic to the way that he says novels work (and the way that he says people work) is the premise that we never *stop* desiring.¹⁰ Desire is prolonged by an endless metonymic drift from object to object (as it also is in Lacan’s concept of desire). However, the sort of closure that Girard holds up as exemplary involves a cessation of desire (298), which represents a sharp break with verisimilitude according to his own logic. He cannot reconcile the movement of desire in narrative content with narrative closure without tension and contradiction.

In *Narrative and Its Discontents*, D. A. Miller takes notice of this contradiction and considers the efforts of several novelists to heal this tension. For Miller, as for Girard, the movement of desire and that of narrative are at odds. He distinguishes between the “narratable” and the “nonnarratable,” between “the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise” and the “state of quiescence assumed by a novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end” (ix).¹¹ This tension obviously resembles that between Eros and the death instinct in Brooks’s Freudian model of narrative. Indeed, Miller elaborates that the motivation of the narratable stems ultimately from “the drift of

¹⁰ That is, if the hero of a novel happens to get one desire fulfilled along the way, he discovers that it doesn’t work the transformation in him that he was hoping for, and so he either finds a new object to desire from the same mediator or a new mediator and a new object and begins the process anew (89).

¹¹ Miller specifies that “[t]he nonnarratable is not the unspeakable. What defines a nonnarratable element is its incapacity to generate a story. Properly or intrinsically, it has no narrative future—unless, of course, its nonnarratable status is undermined...” (5).

desire, continually wandering in a suggestible state of mediation, and the drift of the sign, producing other signs as it moves toward—or away from—a full and settled meaning”

(xi). That is, narrative closure requires a cessation of this drift and of the narratable.

Conventional narrative—for Miller’s purposes, the “traditional novels” of the nineteenth century on which he focuses in *Narrative and Its Discontents*—values happiness, but it can progress toward it only asymptotically. Narrative can never finally reach such happiness, because such happiness ends narrative, is incompatible with it.¹² Only the nonnarratable can provide what narrative seeks, and narrative must dissolve at the point of attaining it.

The impossibility that Miller recognizes of fully harmonizing the narratable and the nonnarratable means that novels are never wholly under the control of closure. Closure and the narratable are mutually exclusive; closure can only accommodate the narratable once the narratable has ended, not in the suspense that it produces when it exists in the present moment (98).¹³ Although desire—which is aligned with Miller’s concept of narratability—and closure may be opposed, however, they remain components within the same novelistic system, which cannot accommodate asexuality as a third term.

¹² Obviously, not all narratives equate closure and happiness. Miller proposes, though, “that traditional narrative is a quest after that which will end questing; or that it is an interruption of what will be resumed; an expansion of what will be condensed, or a distortion of what will be made straight; a holding in suspense or a putting into question of what will be resolved or answered” (4). However, such pursuits are doomed to failure: “Narrative proceeds toward, or regresses from, what it seeks or seems most to prize, but it is never identical to it. To designate the presence of what is sought or prized is to signal is to signal the termination of narrative—or at least, the displacement of narrative onto other concerns” (3).

¹³ Importantly, though, while the narratable might endanger the possibility of achieving a novel’s ideal, proper resolution, it has no real power to threaten that resolution’s status *as ideal*. In Jane Austen’s novels, for instance, “[t]he play of narrative complication is allowed to threaten the possibility of *incarnating* the right settlement, but it can never affect what ought to be as such” (101–02; emphasis in orig.).

The nonnarratable, as a state of rest, would seem to be equivalent at some level to the asexual possibility, but I will explain below why this is not so.

Desire and the asexual possibility, as my reading of Brooks, Girard, and Miller has made clear, have the same function (opposing closure), but they differ in their commensurability with narrative. We see this difference in the latter two epigraphs with which I began this chapter. The *To the Lighthouse* reviewer regards the dearth of event in Woolf's novel as an infringement of the reader's most basic rights: to have nothing happen in a book renders it utterly unsatisfactory as narrative. Homer and Lisa Simpson, however, comment upon the interminable, disorderly middle produced by narratability and desire: events have occurred, but they lack the relationships and the overarching structure that would direct them toward meaningful closure. The difference between these two kinds of narrative failure, which both stand in the way of a meaningful relation between middle and end, is roughly that between stasis and perpetual motion. The asexual possibility may be in tension with narrative closure, but it is not a productive tension. It is not a misdirection or an excess of narrative movement, but the cessation of movement. Neither, however, is it the same kind of stasis that Miller associates with closure, which promises meaning and resolution where the stasis of asexuality cannot: structured by non-desire and non-event, it has nothing to resolve.

That closure must come from outside the progress of the narratable, as Miller describes, suggests that the narratable is unstoppable on its own terms; its cessation cannot occur according to its own logic. Closure requires the suppression of the narratable, and "though it implies resolution, [it] never really resolves the dilemmas raised by the narratable. In essence, closure is an act of 'make-believe,' a postulation that

closure is possible” (267). But in novels that reject the conventions that obtain in the novels that Miller has been analyzing, the disillusioned recognition that closure is impossible itself comes to stand in the place of closure, a danger that plagues modernist fiction as well as Miller’s own text, he recognizes: “Inevitably, it seems, the work of deconstruction comes to reconstruct the dissonances by which it proceeds into a new truth, which reasserts all the stability denied to the old” (282; emphasis in orig.). Miller effectively opposes closure to the play of narrative desire and associates his category of the “nonnarratable” with the same kind of stasis that I have associated with the asexual possibility. Nevertheless, when we examine the process by which closure comes about and the relationship to knowledge that closure entails, we find that the asexual possibility threatens not just the narratable but the nonnarratable as well. For such an examination, I turn now to Judith Roof.

The inevitable reconstruction of meaning and stability that Miller observes is a mark of the practically inescapable logic that Roof calls “heteronarrative.” Like Brooks, Roof argues that narrative (which is always heteronarrative, at bottom) follows the same logic as Freud’s narrative of sexuality. However, rather than attributing this logic to Freud as its originator, she argues instead that Freud merely responded to a pervasive logic of narrative, teleology, and metaphor already firmly entrenched (*Come* xxii). In Freud’s narrative, the progress of the subject and of the narrative toward reproductive heterosexuality is threatened by incorrect or premature termination (as “perversions, chronologically and analogically linked to infancy and foreplay, threaten to substitute

themselves for this normal end pleasure” [xx]).¹⁴ However, the narrative ultimately affirms the value of this end by overcoming these threats—to be emblematic of this logic but also to respond, in metaphor, to a logical necessity already in place: “our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends upon a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic within a reproductive aegis” (xxii). Freud’s narrative merely exposes the reproductive desire fundamental to the idea of narrative closure itself.

Roof grants that this desire need not be explicit on the level of content in order for heteronarrative to be in play: she shows its structuring concepts to operate even in narratives that disavow or ignore reproductive heterosexuality as such.¹⁵ My discussion of the imbrication of sexuality, knowledge, and the modern subject in previous chapters has reinforced the centrality of sexuality—albeit not yet specified as reproductive heterosexuality—to narrative. As such, I find Roof’s account compelling and consistent with my own argument, except that, just as heteronormativity is always already (het)eronormativity, heteronarrative is always already (het)eronarrative.

The specifically heteroreproductive aspect of heteronarrative is this: Roof goes on to explain that insofar as narrative moves toward knowledge or mastery—for the characters or for the reader—it must follow a sense-making pattern in which sameness is repressed for the sake of an ultimate synthesis of differences analogous in structure to heterosexual reproduction (31). In the other accounts of narrative and desire I have

¹⁴ I touched on this point of Roof’s argument briefly in Chapter 2, but it deserves fuller treatment here for its illustration of the collusion between sexuality and narrative structure.

¹⁵ Roof grants that “[i]nsofar as lesbian or gay is linked to perversion, the lesbian or gay narrative might be the perverse narrative. But the perverse narrative’s perversity is not in its subject matter, for that is squarely planted in the realm of narrative, but in the way any such narrative enacts a perverse relation to narrative itself” (xxiv).

discussed, narrative's heteronormativity stemmed from its structuration by change or motion motivated by a desire that is fundamentally sexual, by its structural resemblance to male sexual experience, or by its structuration according to the tension between the Freudian life and death instincts. In Roof's account, narrative's (het)eronormativity runs deeper (although she too builds upon a Freudian analogy), resting at last on the mechanism by which it produces knowledge. As Roof glosses Freud's narrative,

Narrative is the product of tensions that are like psychic tensions, and psychic tensions are like the tensions of a very specific notion of narrative that is in turn dependent upon a certain comprehension of opposition, joiner, and reproduction. The opposition working within this circle is linked to gender and heterosexuality as a naturalized assumption made through the narrowing of sexuality into reproduction at the expense of other options. Through reproduction, a specific heterosexuality supplants the broader possibilities of binary opposition as the operative mechanism of joiner. Occupying the place in the story where same that has become different becomes same-but-different, the model of heterosexual reproduction becomes the way to a correct and timely end. (31)

This model for the production of meaning out of joiner is that of heteronarrative. If one is tempted to dismiss the resemblance of narrative and heterosexual reproduction as mere metaphor, one then finds that the structure of metaphor itself—producing meaning through a combination of disparate elements—also obeys a heteronarrative logic (18). In support of this point, Roof points to Freud's highly selective retelling of Aristophanes' narrative of the origin of sex, wherein

[t]he relation between the sexual instincts and Eros is parallel to the relation between reproduction and sexuality; but while the sexual instincts stand in as only a part of Eros, reproduction substitutes for sexuality, eliminating all nonreproductive sexuality (seen as sameness) to keep the story going. But the sameness attributed to the unexpressed remainder of sexuality and the doubled originary beings is necessary to produce the narrative/life dynamic in the first place as the sameness hetero difference must repress. The result of the elision of sameness is a turn toward what

appears to be an originary heterosexuality that serves as the combinatory principle of both metaphor and life. (29)

This logic then operates, as we see, not merely in literary narrative, but also in academic argument and even our most basic modes of sense-making.¹⁶

In fact, Roof presents such a soberingly ironclad view of the problem (i.e. that narrative is inevitably heteronarrative) that it is only with the greatest difficulty and numerous false starts that she is able to imagine a solution to it, and even then it is a tentative and utopian one. The only real escape Roof can see from the logic of heteronarrative is in narratives that don't tend toward an end and in the cessation of our demand for endings (183–84). Unfortunately, as she notes, the only way to get rid of our desire for closure is to get rid of death,¹⁷ which is impracticable to say the least. Meanwhile, a partial solution lies in “perverse” narratives that deliberately privilege dead ends and wrong answers over heteronarrative closure. Roof's prime example of such a narrative is Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. Roof speculates that

[i]f other modes of organizing language can be recognized as meaningful in a way similar to the way *Nightwood* compels a recognition of its imagistic metonymies and wandering associations, then the hegemony of heteronarrative might be loosened, making it, like Felix's marriage, only one in a number of possible modes of relation, of meaning, suggestion,

¹⁶ I realize that it may look to the reader as if my argument is making precisely the same move that Roof describes here, making the sexuality that forms one component of Eros supplant other dimensions of desire. To a certain extent, I am, but only because modern constructions of narrative and sexuality, at work in the mutually determinative ways that Roof describes, color desire in ways that are not immediately but metaphorically sexual, but—given what Roof says about metaphor—are no less sexual for being metaphorically so.

¹⁷ This argument is similar in some respects to Peter Brooks's claim that the tension of narrative middles and ends is analogous to that of the Freudian Eros and death drives and that

Beyond the Pleasure Principle gives an image of how the nonnarratable existence is stimulated into the condition of narratability, to enter a state of deviance and detour... in which it is maintained for a certain time, through an at least minimally complex extravagance, before returning to the quiescence of the nonnarratable.... The desire of the text is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition of which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text. (108)

and bliss. By providing competing, compatible, and otherwise differing arrangements of language, pattern, and repetition, the heteronarrative might take its place among them rather than dominating and organizing their deployment. (142–43)

I would contend that another narrative that challenges heteronarrative's hegemony, of a special type—not a perverse but an asexual narrative—is Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*. There, the final revelation that might produce narrative mastery is never authorized, and any conclusions that the novel's narrator might draw about the characters he has been observing remain provisional, as his perceptions are neither validated nor (absolutely) invalidated at the novel's end. In the final section of this chapter, I will clarify why this novel's refusal of closure embodies not merely another of Roof's perverse narratives but the activation (as it were) of the asexual possibility at the level of narrative structure. First, however, I prepare the ground for this reading and my complementary reading of "The Beast in the Jungle" by explaining how the logic of asexuality dissolves the meaningful relationship between narrative middles and ends, dragging narrative's forward movement not just off course but to a screeching halt and shutting down the possibility of meaning and closure.

Roof represents an extreme position on the ineradicability of desire—particularly heterosexual desire—from conventional narrative structure, and it is her model that I engage in the greatest detail below, because it comes closest to an explanation of the disruptive work that the asexual possibility does in narrative structure. Such disruption, of course, formed the focus of my previous two chapters, from which my argument in this one differs more in degree than in kind: here I examine the asexual possibility's drag on

narrative movement when it inhabits narrative structure fully, rather than threatening or breaking in on it only periodically.

Roof's view of the relationship between desire and narrative occupies the more pessimistic end of the range of models I have surveyed in this section. This survey has served to illuminate some of the ways in which the asexual possibility is at odds with a narrative structure that mandates object-directed desire within its content, at the level of plot, in the possibilities of identification it offers the reading or viewing subject, and in the epistemological organization of closure. Teresa de Lauretis and Susan Winnett link desire to the deep structures of plot, although they critique the patriarchal basis of these structures. They argue that the salient model of desire for organizing narrative structure and the reader's experience of narrative is too narrowly founded on male sexuality, examining the investments of both narrative and narratology in masculine modes of desire. Nancy Armstrong, however, provides a historical explanation for the impulse to universalize the interaction of desire and narrative, in which desire is a disciplinary construct elaborated by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic novel. For Peter Brooks, who favors a psychoanalytic rather than a historicist account of desire's centrality in the novel, desire is the motive force of plot itself. It serves a similar structuring and motivating function for René Girard, although he is more specific about the form it takes and has difficulty reconciling it to narrative closure. Such difficulty forms the basis of D. A. Miller's study, in which desire and narratability prove antithetical to the state of rest the novel seeks to attain through closure, resulting in an irresolvable tension in traditional nineteenth-century novels. And for Judith Roof,

(heteroreproductive) sexual desire is the basis of the meaning-making procedures on which narrative is founded.

In all of these models, desire serves as a motor either for the construction or the interpretation of narrative. By and large, it is those models in the latter category that seem to open the widest space for the play of asexuality. The former suggest, on the contrary, that asexuality and narrative may be mutually exclusive at a structural level. At the same time, however, Brooks, Girard, and Miller also recognize a tension between *desire* and narrative as a tension between middle and end; they associate desire with the movement of narrative middles. We must establish, then, what goes on in the middle of the story, whether it is the metonymic drift of desire from one object to the next or the outright stasis of the asexual possibility, refusing forward, end-directed movement. If narrative can be structured according to the logic of asexuality, if an asexual narrative is one that is “all middle,” it is a middle of a very particular sort. My basic proposition, then, which I will spend the remainder of this chapter elaborating and qualifying, is that an asexual narrative is one in which nothing happens.

Asexual Narrative?

I now consider the implications, as well as the very possibility, of a narrative structure controlled by the logic of asexuality. Such a structure, in its pure form, is an unreachable limit, but here I intend to detail the conditions of a near approach to it. Judith Roof’s efforts to think narrative apart from heteroideology provide me with a useful foundation, as does J. Hillis Miller’s deconstruction of narrative linearity in *Reading Narrative*. Hillis Miller presents the possibility of narrative undone by the failure of linearity and causality, a possibility that seems to point a way out of the ubiquitous

heteronarrative structure that Roof critiques. These failures are key to the asexual structure that I delineate as a special type of the queer narratives that she posits as resistant to heteronarrative closure. Such “perverse” narratives, for Roof, are structured by desires that do not tend toward heteroreproductive mastery, by movement not directed toward closure. An asexual narrative, on the other hand, is structured by the absence of desire, by stasis.

Hillis Miller suggests that the logic of beginning, middle, and end has its beginning in Aristotle’s attempt to privilege one particular model of causality, whose consequences have been widespread both literarily and epistemologically. Miller deconstructs Aristotle’s reading of *Oedipus Rex* in the *Poetics* to expose the incongruity of the example—a disturbingly *illogical* play that showcases the irrationality and cruel caprice of the gods—to the supremely rational model of tragedy that Aristotle uses it to support.¹⁸ On an even more basic level, *Oedipus Rex* threatens the hermetic integrity of Aristotle’s logic of beginning, middle, and end by “begin[ning] long after the real action has taken place [Oedipus’s birth, abandonment, murder of his father, and meeting with the Sphinx],” by its composition out “of more or less fortuitous and discontinuous encounters” (far from being causally ordered, it is put together according to coincidence and accident), and by being the first play in a trilogy (10–11). The logic of plot, the defining logic of narrative for Aristotle (as it is for many others after him), privileges an order and a teleology artificial and external to the disorder of its materials. Miller’s reading of the *Poetics* demonstrates that the narrative *of* narrative performs much the same operations that it claims its object does by imposing order on the narratives it

¹⁸ Such irrationality and caprice may yet mark “perverse” narrative, in Roof’s formulation, or D. A. Miller’s play of the narratable, although they are incommensurable with Aristotle’s model of plot.

analyzes. The interpretation of narrative, not just its production, requires order and a particular kind of causality to prevail.¹⁹

Judith Roof says nearly the same thing that Miller says about narrative ends, but to very different effect. For Miller, narrative is a postponement of an ending and a postponement of death, just as it is for Roof, and they both find the same support in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as Brooks does as well. But Roof (reading Brooks reading Freud) argues that the fear of death produces the desire for narrative mastery and hence for narrative closure (14). Miller—also reading Freud—links the fear of death to the *resistance* to closure (228).²⁰ The two never engage each other directly, but Miller doesn't seem to credit what Roof would call heteronarrative with quite the tyranny that she does. He either perceives what could be a more realistically achievable solution or, in a less charitable analysis, simply misjudges the scope of the problem. I favor the more charitable analysis—in a qualified sense—for several reasons.

¹⁹ While I have focused here on Miller's discussion of Aristotle's oversights in the first chapter of *Reading Narrative*, he devotes much more of his attention in the volume to the way narratives and interpreters inevitably become entangled in the double line of narrative "happenings." In this first chapter, he argues that the prominence of language as the whole actions of *Oedipus the King* actually gives diction priority over plot, Aristotle's preferred hierarchy notwithstanding. Reading is performative for Oedipus as it is for the audience: "Reading, putting two and two together, as Oedipus does, is an active intervention, even if that intervention is guided by ideological assumptions about what the reader is going to find" (12). Oedipus has no control over the meaning his language takes on, far beyond what he consciously intends (23). It is this situation that produces catharsis, that elicits the audience's pity and fear, for performatives inevitably escape our intentions and control, in life as well as in the play (24–25). The text never assents fully to any reading we make of it, which "means that reading is partly performative, rather than a purely cognitive act. The reader as a result must take responsibility for a reading that is always to some degree imposed on the text, just as Oedipus must and does take responsibility for the consequences of his reading of the data he is given" (39). Oedipus's crime is linguistically constructed, both by the law he breaks and his narrativizing discovery of it: "In this sense, the cause for what happens to Oedipus is not the gods as others, but Oedipus himself as speaker" (42).

²⁰ His reading of Freud points to narrative's characteristic doubleness, which includes not only the fear of death motivating the delay of narrative closure but the secret desire *for* death: "Fear of death, desire of death—the irresolvable doubleness of narrative irony oscillates always between these extremes" (228–29). Of the two, however, the fear of death motivates the delay of closure, while the desire for death motivates narrative, keep narrative moving. Once again, then, we find that asexual stasis stands in opposition to desire.

First, Miller is not one to talk very confidently about “solutions” to begin with, given his skepticism about the effectiveness or givenness of narrative closure. He seeks throughout *Reading Narrative* to explode the supposed rational linearity of narrative, which dissolves in a radical irony that leaves the reader of narrative without a stable point of authority. Where Roof sees an inexorable narrative movement toward heteroreproductive synthesis, Miller sees a great deal more indeterminacy. What is more, Miller claims that in fact,

[i]rony is in one way or another the pervasive trope of narrative. Irony is another name for literature as a constant possibility of the fictional within language. The difficulty in analyzing the narrative line is the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of mastering the unmasterable, the trope that is no trope, the figure not figurable as a turning, crossing, displacement, detour, or as any other line, the trope-no-trope of irony. (177)

Because of this radical irony—which is in some ways simply a characteristic of language’s figurative potential—narrative perpetually resists our attempts to make sense of it. Furthermore, it potentially subverts, in this way, the heteronarrative mastery that Roof deems ubiquitous.

Miller argues that irony animates the indirect discourse that constitutes the greater part of narration (166). Irony creates an interminable oscillation between narrators’ and characters’ language in which the narrative utterance is so thoroughly and intrinsically heteroglot that its authority, the self to which it belongs, is unrecoverable (167), and the unity of the narrative line is always already split. Interpretation can proceed only when one forces a provisional and artificial stop to this oscillation (175). That is, in Roof’s terms, heteronarrative closure requires a denial of the natural ironic movement of narrative—which is characterized by difference to be sure, but then, the *resolution* of this

difference by (re)productive joinder to synthesize meaning and mastery is perhaps the greatest fiction of fiction. In Miller's account, narrative is in fact highly amenable to what I would call the asexual possibility, insofar as it has no necessary end or object. The question remains, however, whether his account of narrative closure or Judith Roof's is the more accurate.

Indeed—and this is my second point—Miller pays only the slightest lip service to the sense-making usually demanded at the end of one's book. His concluding chapter is a "Coda," a designation that marks it more as an appendage to the rest of the work than as something integral to a greater structure, as a conclusion would be—it is not meant to wrap up an argument. Nevertheless, it does so anyway, at least in a certain sense. Having proceeded, to that point, in a loosely connected series of interpretive vignettes, Miller in his coda finally gives away something that looks like a thesis, albeit a negative one: that "both in theory and in practice the assumptions about narrative continuity and homogeneity that are important ideologemes in our culture from Aristotle's *Poetics* to the present do not hold up against a reading of a wide variety of examples" (229). Then, however, in order to end the book, he has to suggest what the reader might make of that claim and supply some sort of take-home message. This message is an admonition to relinquish our nostalgic hope for a unified literary tradition and become more comfortable with "the ironic openness our tradition's stories engender" (230). That is, he closes—with fitting irony—by calling for the abandonment of our desire for closure.

His deconstruction of narrative closure earlier in *Reading Narrative* provides further support for a cautious optimism regarding the possibility of non-(het)eronarrative modes of writing or reading, but the more fully such modes come into being, the more

unreadable is the result. In my previous chapters, I showed the asexual possibility interfering with conventional novelistic plotting. In this one, however, I show asexuality to disrupt narrative much more thoroughly, so as to threaten this structure's very integrity. "The Beast in the Jungle" registers this threat; *The Sacred Fount* realizes it. The threat that the asexual possibility poses manifests in both texts as the possibility of a narrative with no end in sight, which Miller at least recognizes as symptomatic, to some extent, of narrative itself. He shows narrative ends to be arbitrary from both ends, as it were. First, it is impossible to say where the ending of a novel "begins," as distinct from its beginning or middle, because as soon as the story begins, it is already progressing toward an ending and hence is in the process of ending (53). Second, it isn't absolutely necessary that any novel end where it does—the author breaks off as it seems convenient. Miller points out that clearly a marriage is as much a beginning as anything, and even narrated death implies at least one survivor, as someone must still remain to witness and/or narrate it (54–55).²¹ For Roof, however, such arbitrariness is insufficient to endanger the closural efficacy of a narrative's ending, so long as it still brings about heteronarrative mastery.

The salient difference between Roof and Miller, in light of Miller's treatment of irony, is that Roof calls for changes in the way we construct narratives, while Miller calls for changes in the way we read them. He implies as well—good deconstructionist as he is—that heteronarrative carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. In all probability, we stand a better chance of becoming more receptive to irony than we do of

²¹ Long-running soap operas, for instance, might serve as an example of narratives in which the lack of necessity of any ending is prominent—likewise of the resistance of the narratable to closure, in D. A. Miller's terms.

eliminating death, but if heteronarrative *is* as deeply rooted as Roof says—and because it is as much epistemological as it is literary—we would do well not to hold our breath in anticipation of succeeding in either endeavor.

Despite the impossibility of escaping heteronarrative absolutely, Roof is able to imagine a sort of queer counternarrative, in a limited sense, in the form of those “perverse” narratives I mentioned above, which veer away from their proper trajectory and closure, but whose overarching logic still adheres to a Freudian orthodoxy that codes homosexuality, for example, as perversion. Roof reasons that “[i]nsofar as perversity belongs to narrative as the instance of its potential dissolution, the perverse narrative... would be a narrative about narrative dissolution, a narrative that continually short-circuits, that both frustrates and winks at the looming demagogue of reproduction” (*Come* xxiv). Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, she argues, challenges heteronarrative successfully because it is full of disjuncture and clutter, because

narrative is both there and disjointed, dislocated from categorical binaries that continue to exist but that have become irrelevant. This disjuncture among the novel’s narratives, seemingly natural because it is perverse, disconnects the literal cause/effect relation between narrative and production (narrating produces a coherent story where parts relate to the whole) and the more metaphorical relation between narrative and (re)production as that is figured in the joinder of opposites, a return to equilibrium, the production of knowledge, insight, or in death. (141–42)

What then, might a narrative look like that was structured by asexuality, which cannot be accounted for psychoanalytically except as reclaimed and overwritten by frigidity, repression, sublimation, or the death drive?

If a perverse narrative is one ordered and structured by desires other than those countenanced by heteroideology, an asexual narrative logically ought to be one

unmotivated by desire. Such a presupposition appears to be in certain senses, however, a narrative impossibility. Insofar as desire encompasses not only sexual desire strictly speaking but also interest or curiosity, the very conditions of the narrative situation—which, as Chambers reminds us, is one of seduction—forbid a fully asexual narrative according to the understanding of desire that I have adopted in this chapter. We have already seen the stubbornly foundational imbrication of (heterosexual) desire and narrative logic in Roof's account; others, too, as I have elaborated above, have traced a similar pattern. Yet, as we saw in my readings of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, certain narratives nevertheless appear to be constructed in such a way that the asexual possibility orders them and threatens or sabotages (het)eronarrative structure.

I must begin, however, by qualifying my statement that an asexual narrative is one in which nothing happens, for as soon as we stake out such structures as the site of asexual narrative, (het)eronarrative begins encroaching on them again. Like Judith Roof, I lack the epistemological equipment to prevent it from doing so. The first problem with such a proposition is the question of what, exactly, is “nothing,” whether the absence of depth and significance as in my reading of *Dorian Gray*, the non-relation of causes and effects as in my reading of *Lady Audley's Secret*, undecidability, stasis, or all of these. The second problem is what we mean by “happens.” The metaphors of movement and stasis that structure my argument are, after all, metaphors, and they call into question how movement is defined by order and what it means to distinguish between an object and an event. “The Beast in the Jungle,” in fact, is occupied with waiting and stasis. Nothing happens at the level of event; the happening is all epistemological, as Roof's focus on narrative's production of knowledge validates.

The third problem is that to make presence out of absence, narrative out of stasis, is fundamentally a heteroideological maneuver in Roof's schema. This is the project in which "Beast" is engaged and why its stasis is nevertheless recoverable as narrative movement. For this reason, I recognize anything I might venture to call an "asexual narrative" to be qualified and provisional. Roof argues that if there is such a thing as an originary ur-narrative, it is precisely the narrative of installing an origin where one never existed or is unrecoverable, displacing an imagined sameness (of an undifferentiated narrative middle extending beyond the vanishing point) with difference and opposition:²²

Difference is proliferated in oppositions that appear to sustain meaning, change, plot, and narrative in a perpetual displacement of an origin that was already only produced by narrative. This narrative of displacement is the originary narrative repeated in Oedipus, in accounts of meaning, in analyses of narrative, in stories of the emergent subject; it repeats and enacts the mistaken conflation of origins, lack, and sameness. Origins become a lack of origin, which in essence is simply a lack masked by the story of an origin. (*Come* 70)

Thus the foundational binary opposition in Western metaphysics, and the foundational narrative, is the triumph of fullness over emptiness (71). Derrida, of course, whose work is centrally concerned with the play of presence and absence, would concur.

By "nothing," I don't mean literally *nothing*; such a narrative would be unthinkable *as* narrative, and nearly impossible grammatically. Even passages of pure

²² Seeking an alternative to this privileging of difference and the antagonistic model of relations between self and other that subtends it, Leo Bersani attempts, in "Sociality and Sexuality" to imagine new modes of relationship that are not merely reactions *against* existing modes ("Sociality" 642). To this end, he looks to Aristophanes' fable in Plato's *Symposium*—the same one that Judith Roof argues Freud misreads—as a model, where the lack experienced by the beings is a lack not of difference but of sameness, of the self. In this sense, relations begin because they always already have. The self shares an affinity with the world rather than an alienation from it (656).

description do ultimately begin to suggest action.²³ What I do mean is something nearer to “nothing of consequence,” which requires that we clarify what we mean by “of consequence.”²⁴ Judith Halberstam hints at such a reevaluation of narrative teleology in her reading of *Waiting for Godot*

as a defamiliarization of time spent: a treatise on the feeling of time wasted, of inertia or time outside of capitalist production. Waiting, in this play, seems to be a form of postponement until it becomes clear that nothing has been postponed and nothing will be resumed. In Beckett’s play, the future does not simply become diminished, it actually begins to weigh on the present as a burden. If poetry, according to W. H. Auden, “makes nothing happen,” then absurdist drama makes the audience wait for nothing to happen, and the experience of duration makes visible the formlessness of time. (*Time* 7)

Asexual narrative, in this sense, is a narrativization of Halberstam’s concept of “queer time.” Queer time serves as a point of entry into the problems of teleology attendant upon an asexual model of narrative, as well as delineating the logic by which asexuality can be considered queer. Halberstam proposes that

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault’s comment in “Friendship as a Way of Life” that “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex” (310). (1)

By reimagining queerness in this broader sense and reorienting its focus away from specific sexual practices, Halberstam provides us with an opportunity to understand

²³ An interesting test case might be the first chapter of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, whose first three paragraphs consist entirely of sentence fragments predominated by nouns.

²⁴ The “Time Passes” section of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* foregrounds this question by giving greater narrative emphasis to the gradual decay of inanimate objects than to human activity.

asexual modes of living and relating as similar temporal and teleological rejections of the logic of heterosexual reproduction to those she designates as queer. Consistent with this view, Halberstam's working definition of "queer" "refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). We might count among these logics, for example, asexual decouplings of intimacy and committed romantic relationships from sex. I will discuss the alternative temporality suggested by the logic of asexuality at greater length in the Conclusion.

In the meantime, the problem of what counts as "nothing," as asexual, in narrative becomes one of causality and teleology, elements of narrative structure that we have taken mostly for granted since the *Poetics* and which Miller seeks to problematize in *Reading Narrative* by exposing the arbitrariness of narrative's ostensible linearity. An asexual narrative does end—the middle leaves off somewhere—but that end does not function as an epistemological fulfillment, as closure, as a goal toward which the middle has led. It is this sort of ending, I argue, that John Marcher is desperate to avoid in "The Beast in the Jungle" and that, in its actuality, has made *The Sacred Fount* such a baffling novel.

The Asexual Possibility in "The Beast in the Jungle" and *The Sacred Fount*

If one is looking for narratives in which nothing happens, there could scarcely be more fruitful—or fruitfully fruitless—ground for such an investigation than Henry James's late phase, in which James generates hundreds of pages of narrative out of the merest play of perceptions.²⁵ James's novels, furthermore, are often populated by

²⁵ For example, one characteristically bewildered reviewer of *The Sacred Fount* in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* looks back on James's novels with the observation that

characters who are legible as potential-asexuals—in the qualified sense that I discuss in Chapter 1. However, these are the same figures claimed in other readings as more or less closeted homosexuals. I have discussed the overlap of the two possibilities in my reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Chapter 3, but where the overlap in that case was the result of Wilde's deliberate rearrangement of the contents of his closet, here it is more the product of our own critical propensity to make an absence stand for a (particular kind of) presence.

Regarding that propensity, I must once again agree with Sedgwick up to a point before calling attention to the blind spot to which the sexual assumption predisposes her. She observes, regarding James's relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, that

James's mistake here, in life, seems to have been in moving blindly from a sense of the good, the desirability of love and sexuality to the automatic imposition on himself of a specifically *heterosexual* compulsion.... The easy assumption (by James, the society, and the critics) that sexuality and heterosexuality are always exactly translatable into one another is, obviously, homophobic. Importantly, too, it is deeply heterophobic: it denies the very possibility of *difference* in desires, in objects. (196–97; emphasis in orig.)

Sedgwick is right to point out the illogic of presuming that an absence of heterosexual desire *automatically* signifies an absence of sexual desire of any kind, but she is wrong in effectively leaving this possibility off the table. Just as heteronormativity is a particular expression of eronormativity, homosexual desire is not the only alternative to heterosexual desire; the other of desire *might* be a different desire, or it might be *not*

year after year he would set forth a new set of properly drawn, properly tinted, properly grouped, workman-like characters, who passed their entire time in introspection and positively indecent meddling with their neighbors' inner consciousness. They never, by any chance, did anything or said anything worth remembering, and nothing ever happened to them, and no one would have cared if it had, for these characters of Mr. James, while very realistic, were always rather uninteresting individuals. (347–48)

desiring. The blindness at play in this example is not only James's movement "from a sense of the good, the desirability of love and sexuality to the automatic imposition on himself of a specifically *heterosexual* compulsion." Such blindness also marks Sedgwick's presumption of "the good, the desirability of love and sexuality" (and the pernicious fusion or confusion of love and sexuality that the phrase implies), which are undoubtedly good and desirable for some, but not for all. Beneath the heterosexual compulsion lies a more foundational *sexual* compulsion.

It is this sexual compulsion that I keep in mind in considering the work of absence, of "nothing happening," in two works by Henry James, "The Beast in the Jungle" and *The Sacred Fount*. This absence is visible in the content of "Beast" and in the non-fulfillment not just of closure but of teleology generally in *The Sacred Fount*. The level of the text on which the asexual possibility functions in these two works has had significant consequences for their reception. Both texts deal with attempts to uncover a secret or arrive at some unforeseeable revelation. Both are narratives in which nothing happens. Both are potentially asexual narratives. However, they embody this possibility in very different ways. This difference, I argue, accounts for the difference in their reception and canonical status. "The Beast in the Jungle" occupies a respectable place in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, as well as James's New York Edition. *The Sacred Fount*, which does not, is memorable today only for being notoriously tedious and abstruse. The challenge of trying to puzzle out what readers are supposed to get out of it or what prank James was playing on them by writing it has earned it a sort of critical cult following (which I am now privileged to join).

“The Beast in the Jungle” ultimately follows a fairly conventional heteronarrative logic and is held in good canonical repute for it. In the novella, John Marcher finds a lifelong friendship with May Bartram based on her respect for his conviction that something remarkable is going to happen to him. She discovers his fate before he does and dies without revealing it to him, but his vigil—and the reader’s—is ultimately rewarded by his recognition in the final scene that her love was the thing that was to have happened, which Marcher missed entirely. Nothing happens, it is true—that is precisely the point. The fact that it *is* the point, though, that the novella *has* a point and mounts to the *discovery* that nothing has happened, adapts that failure of occurrence to the satisfying, conventional (het)eronarrative logic of knowledge and mastery. The asexual possibility, as absence, is thus converted structurally into (het)eronarrative presence.

The Sacred Fount, generally wondered at for its pointlessness or simply forgotten, produces no such mastery. Here, an unnamed narrator notices, among his fellow guests at a weekend party, that Gilbert Long is inexplicably much cleverer than the narrator remembers him and that Mrs. Brissenden appears much younger and her husband Guy much older. The narrator’s theory is that for the Brissendens, as for other couples,

[o]ne of the pair... has to pay for the other.... Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom, somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy himself? She *has*, by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain, extracted them; and he, on his side, to supply her, has had to tap the sacred fount. (29; emphasis in orig.)

According to the same principle, the narrator reasons, Long must be draining his wit from his own lover, whom the narrator expects will then be identifiable by her correspondingly greater dullness.

Contemporary reviews of *The Better Sort*, the collection of short stories in which “The Beast in the Jungle” first appeared, and of *The Sacred Fount* are a study in contrasts.²⁶ Reviewers praised James’s control and precision in the former work in equal measure as they found him inscrutable in the latter. A reviewer for *The Dial* makes the succinct assessment that “Mr. James is acknowledged to be at his very best in his short stories, and there is nothing better in contemporary fiction than Mr. James’s best” (167).²⁷ Contemporary reviews of *The Sacred Fount*, on the other hand, express almost universal bewilderment. Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, reviewing for the Boston *Evening Transcript*, does not mince words: “Mr. Henry James’s new ‘novel’ (it never could be called one except in quotation marks), ‘The Sacred Fount’... is the most extraordinary book I have read for a long time. To sum the matter up, it seems insane” (339). The reviewer for the *New York Tribune* calls James’s aim in the novel “wellnigh unbelievable in its irrelevance” (338), the *Athenaeum*’s reviewer calls the novel “an example of hypochondriacal subtlety run mad” (346), and the reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian*—like Chamberlin—avows that it “is hardly to be classed as a novel” (347). None, however, puts the case more vividly than the anonymous reviewer in the *Saturday*

Review:

²⁶ The reviews of *The Sacred Fount* that I cite here are anthologized in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes. Reviews of *The Better Sort* are available in page scans of the periodicals in which they first appeared on Google Books.

²⁷ Montgomery Schuyler, reviewing the collection for *The Lamp*, is similarly laudatory; *The Better Sort* is “very nearly,” in his estimation, “a collection of masterpieces” (233), and he declares that “[i]n no book of his has Mr. James interposed fewer obstacles to the appreciation of himself than in this” (235). To the reviewer for *The Literary World*, the collection “stops just short of greatness, undoubtedly; but about it one can say everything else that is good”: it is “brilliant, fascinating, haunting, a book to which one can, and will, return often; always when one wants one’s curiosity excited, one’s faculty of judgment piqued.” (73). Oliver Elton, in the *Quarterly Review*, praises “The Beast in the Jungle,” which “contains, perhaps, the nearest thing in all his prose to a great and superb ‘bravura’ passage... It is clear how the conception of tragic futility, which has been present to Mr. Henry James ever since his first sketches, remains, in a sense, the same; and with what an extraordinary transformation!” (367–68).

Confirmed readers of Mr. Henry James' novels must have, one would think, something of the same strenuous contempt for the adherents of all easier forms of fiction as some ostrich, blandly assimilating a breakfast of telegraph wire, must feel for such poor-spirited creatures as demand an effeminately eupeptic diet of green things or hay. (355)

Even some such ostriches, though, find *The Sacred Fount* too much to digest, celebrating *The Better Sort*'s marked difference from it two years later.²⁸

Reviewers predominantly praised the stories in *The Better Sort* for their well-constructedness, for being a better sort of narrative than the exasperating *The Sacred Fount*. "The Beast in the Jungle" has continued to fare better in memory than this precursor. In more recent criticism, Sedgwick's reading of it is one of the most famous and has been influential on later criticism on homosexuality in James's work. However, as I have already suggested above, this reading relies on asexual erasure. John Marcher's secret—one of them—may either be, as Sedgwick suggests, his insistent rejection of "the homosexual possibility" or, alternately, it may be the asexual possibility. The latter reading, importantly, exposes the conventional (het)eronarrative logic on which the critical success of "Beast" has depended.

This possibility first threatens when May asks whether the thing that was to happen to Marcher might simply be the experience of falling in love and he rejects the idea, having found the experience underwhelming. He reasons that "if it had been that, I

²⁸ The reviewer for *The Literary World* describes the collection as being "in James's 'latest manner,' not so blind as in *The Sacred Fount*; perhaps not so involved as in *The Wings of the Dove*" (73). Montgomery Schuyler, reviewing *The Better Sort* for *The Lamp*, considers James's narrative craft to be improved by "the Procrustean conditions of magazine publication, the hard-and-fast-ness of the limitation which may be good for a writer almost in proportion as it irks him. When Mr. James manages to transcend it, and the short story is writ large, the results are apt to justify the limitation," for instance in *The Sacred Fount* (231). Schuyler is more charitable in acknowledging this novel's existence than the similarly-minded reviewer in *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, who manages to blot it from recollection amongst James's other recent fiction altogether, recognizing "a delicacy and freshness in [*The Better Sort*] which goes far to compensate for the prolixity of 'The Wings of the Dove' and 'The Awkward Age'" (630).

should by this time know.” May assumes that, in that case, he might “want something all to [him]self—something that nobody else knows or has known,” which again isn’t quite right. Marcher explains that “[i]t isn’t a question of what I ‘want’—God knows I don’t want anything. It’s only a question of the apprehension that haunts me—that I live with day by day” (360). In this exchange, Marcher states outright his failure to desire and his conception of his apprehension as something that has nothing to do with his desiring—which, considering that its ultimate referent turns out to be precisely his failure to desire, is oddly correct. As in my discussion of Robert Audley in Chapter 2, I don’t intend to argue for Marcher as a potential-asexual, but as in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, the play of the asexual possibility is crucial for the unfolding of the novella. While Sedgwick’s argument is at least instructive in discouraging us from too quickly narrowing the range of possibilities of meaning that an absence may hold, she overlooks the asexual possibility.

“The Beast in the Jungle” not only relies upon the play of the asexual possibility but also contains a sort of understory about the marginalization of asexual relationships (which likewise disappear under suspicious scrutiny in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as I argued in Chapter 3). Marcher finds his lifelong friendship with May insufficient to gain him access to her sickroom during her final illness or, later, to legitimate his grief.²⁹

Marcher discovers during the last days of May’s illness

how few were the rights... that he had to put forward, and how odd it might even seem that their intimacy shouldn’t have given him more of them. The stupidest fourth cousin had more, even though she had been nothing in such a person’s life.... Strange beyond saying were the ways of

²⁹ Isabel Archer’s friendship with Ralph Touchett is similarly discounted after his death in *The Portrait of a Lady*, at least as his mother attempts to reconstruct his loyalties in life from the provisions in his will: she tells Isabel that “he has left considerable sums to persons I never heard of. He gave me a list, and I asked then who some of them were, and he told me they were people who at various times had seemed to like him. Apparently he thought you didn’t like him, for he hasn’t left you a penny” (627).

existence, baffling for him the anomaly of his lack, as he felt it to be, of producible claim. A woman might have been, as it were, everything to him, and it might yet present him in no connexion that anyone appeared obliged to recognize. (392–93)

May is unrecognizable as having been “everything” to Marcher outside the bonds of kinship, of marriage, of sexual or romantic relationship. Their friendship likewise proves insufficient to give the proper gravity to his mourning:

Not only had her interest failed him, but he seemed to find himself unattended—and for a reason he couldn’t sound—by the distinction, the dignity, the propriety, if nothing else, of the man markedly bereaved. It was as if, in the view of society, he had not *been* markedly bereaved, as if there still failed some sign or proof of it, and as if, none the less, his character could never be affirmed, nor the deficiency ever made up. (393)

The shortcoming in this second instance seems to stem more from Marcher’s own feeling than from a societal failure to validate it. His friendship with May, though, while undeniably selfish—and this is the probable root cause of his inadequate bereavement—is not so much illegitimate as *illegible*, asexual attachments not having the same cachet that a heterosexual relationship with May might have had.

Because the novella rehabilitates Marcher’s lack of desire as the fulfillment of the reader’s desire to find out what May knew and he didn’t, however, it remains a safely, conventionally (het)eronarrative text. Furthermore, it is in some sense an allegory of (het)eronarrative construction itself, for John Marcher’s great failing is that he lacks May Bartram’s narrative acumen.³⁰ He inhabits a static narrative middle to which she supplies beginnings and ends. When they first (re)encounter each other at the beginning of the novella (tellingly, she remembers their first meeting; he doesn’t), she

³⁰ I am among several critics who have considered “Beast” as preoccupied with the interpretation of narrative. Others include Barry Stampfl and Gert Buelens.

affected him as the sequel of something of which he had lost the beginning. He knew it, and for the time quite welcomed it, as a continuation, but didn't know what it continued, which was an interest, or an amusement, the greater as he was also somehow aware—yet without a direct sign from her—that the young woman herself had not lost the thread. (352)

Marcher is at best an inattentive and at worst an inept reader of narrative, from the perspective of traditional (het)eronarrative convention. For the whole of the story, May is entrusted with his “thread,” which—far from having lost it—he doesn't even *find* until James's final paragraphs, when he likewise discovers the end of his story, which May has known and he has not.

It is not until Marcher is confronted with May's terminal illness and then with the danger of losing her authority over his story that he first recognizes (het)eronarrative's high teleological stakes and the risk he faces—and that she faces, for having offered him her assistance.³¹ He confronts the question, “What did everything mean—what, that is, did *she* mean, she and her vain waiting and her probable death and the soundless admonition of it all—unless that, at this time of day, it was simply, it was overwhelmingly too late?” (378; emphasis in orig.). He seeks proper narrative closure, a suitably significant revelation of the thing that is to happen to him, in order to give meaning to May, to her death, and to her life.

Marcher here recovers desire, of a sort, in his old age, not wanting any *particular* thing to happen to him—or, conversely, not wanting to avoid any particular happening—

³¹ Gert Buelens, too, recognizes May's narrative necessity to Marcher at this point in the novella, when he “realizes... that he has become utterly dependent on her presence to give meaning to the narrative of his existence” (24).

but simply wanting there to be something rather than nothing in order to supply him with meaning.³²

It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything. And so, in the dark valley into which his path had taken its unlooked-for twist, he wondered not a little as he groped. He didn't care what awful crash might overtake him, with what ignominy or what monstrosity he might yet be associated—since he wasn't, after all, too utterly old to suffer—if it would only be decently proportionate to the posture he had kept, all his life, in the promised presence of it. He had but one desire left—that he shouldn't have been “sold.” (379)

That is, the only desire remaining to Marcher is the desire for narrative, the desire not to have been cheated out of the closure he feels he is owed. Owed by whom is a pertinent question, exacerbated by James's use of the passive voice in this passage. It creates a sense of Marcher's awareness of some superhuman agency responsible for structuring his narrative from without, much like Robert Audley's awareness of the powerful hand in *Lady Audley's Secret*. By this point, Marcher is bargaining with the narrative for a satisfactory ending, one that will justify the middle he has supplied.

However, as I have pointed out, he is disastrously inept at beginnings and endings. The story has, in a sense, *already* ended by this point—as May has perceived—although its conclusion at the level of narrative, with the knowledge it produces for the reader, is to be Marcher's belated discovery of what he was waiting for. Despite May's hints, he remains oblivious of her attraction to him until long after her death. His realization, in the cemetery at the novella's end, that May has loved him and that he has not loved her is finally an external and a metaphorically textual event—but one strikingly

³² John Bruns has observed this sort of dynamic at work in James's fiction as a whole, where “meaning... often finds its fullest expression in things not happening, in failures, flaws, finitude, incompleteness, and (particularly in ‘The Beast in the Jungle’) the ‘tragically necessary blindness’ of characters” (4).

not ordered by Aristotelian causality. First, he arrives at this realization by recognizing in the face of a stranger a genuine grief incongruous with his own. He thus happens to see “the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself,” but this knowledge “had not come to him... on the wings of experience; it had brushed him, jostled him, upset him, with the disrespect of chance, the insolence of an accident” (400–01). The story of desire does not break in on him with the logical necessity of causally ordered events in linear (het)eronarrative fashion, but rather by chance. That is, it does so *for Marcher*, whereas for the reader the felicity of the coincidence is already subsumed by (het)eronarrative logic. This is Hillis Miller’s point as well, that random events seem *not* to be ordered by Aristotelian causality “unless you accept the idea that... the language is the action...” (11).³³ Coincidence at the level of story can be reclaimed and reshaped as causal necessity at the level of narrative.

Indeed, in the next moment, Marcher has resolved his chance realization as narrative and as text as he regards May’s tombstone:

he had before him in sharper incision than ever the open page of his story. The name on the table smote him as the passage of his neighbor had done, and what it said to him, full in the face, was that *she* was what he had missed. This was the awful thought, the answer to all the past, the vision at the dread clearness of which he turned as cold as the stone beneath him. Everything fell together, confessed, explained, overwhelmed; leaving him most of all stupefied at the blindness he had cherished. The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance—he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of the time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. That was the rare stroke—that was his visitation. So he saw it, as we say, in pale horror, while the pieces fitted and fitted. So *she* had seen it, while he didn’t, and so she served at this hour to drive the truth home. It was the truth, vivid and monstrous, that all the while he had waited the wait was itself his portion. (401; emphasis in orig.)

³³ By way of example, Miller catalogs the many coincidences, all that “just happens” in *Oedipus the King* (11).

(Het)eronarrative order—its falling-together, its explanations, the fitting of its pieces—prevails, by subsuming asexual narrative, the inaction and purposeless waiting that threaten to frustrate closure. But insofar as this closure does occur, and Marcher receives his visitation at last, we find that what he has been waiting for *is* precisely narrative—event, meaning, knowledge—and that his horror was horror at the threat of the asexual possibility intervening at the level of narrative structure, the threat that his story will not finally be propelled toward meaningful closure, that nothing will have happened to him or that the thing will happen to him without his awareness. As such, the asexual possibility is at work in “The Beast in the Jungle” at the level of narrative structure,³⁴ but it is presented in opposition to the (het)eronarrative logic that ultimately prevails: as a dreadful, incomprehensible absence that is finally reconciled to narrative order by the installation of presence. Just as Wilde attempted to fit the asexual possibility to the logic of the closet in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, James here presents the asexual non-event, the nothing that has happened to John Marcher, as that very something that will reward both his anticipation and the reader’s.

The Sacred Fount offers no such reconciliation. At the same time, it affords much less space than “The Beast in the Jungle” for potential-asexuality at a thematic level—except, perhaps, in the case of the unnamed narrator³⁵—since the novel’s whole (slight)

³⁴ This structural possibility is inherent to some degree in the very circumstance of the novella’s plot. As Leo Bersani—who reads “Beast” as dramatizing something like the analytic encounter between two persons whose aesthetic, disembodied virtuality proves to be no hindrance to such a relation—helpfully puts it, John Marcher and May Bartram “wait for that something lying in wait for him” (“Love” 207). The stalemate that inevitably results from this doubled waiting then takes on the look of asexual stasis.

³⁵ The narrator at one point remarks that

[o]ne had always affairs of one’s own, and I was positively neglecting mine. Such, for a while, was my foremost reflection; after which, in their order or out of it, came an inevitable train of

action consists in his attempt to identify Long's lover and thus to validate his theory.³⁶

Surprisingly, though, *The Sacred Fount* turns out to be much more under the control of the asexual possibility than "The Beast in the Jungle," precisely because the narrator never knows whether he validates his theory—or never knows for sure whether he does so.

The novel ends with Mrs. Brissenden's own counterexplanation for the phenomena the narrator has witnessed, her destruction of his theory, and her skepticism about his sanity (which the frustrated reader has probably already begun to doubt). The homodiegetic narrator, however, lacks the disinterested perspective that would allow him to adjudicate objectively and definitively between her position and his own. The reader never achieves the epistemological mastery of seeing either one of them proven right or wrong.³⁷ The novel's radical irony blocks (het)eronarrative closure, and the carefully

others. One of the first of these was that, frankly, my affairs were by this time pretty well used to my neglect. There were connections enough in it which had never failed. A whole cluster of such connections, effectually displacing the centre of interest, now surrounded me, and I was—though always but intellectually—drawn into their circle. (89)

In short, he seems a great deal more interested, here as elsewhere, in studying the amorous relationships of others than in forming his own.

³⁶ Michael Wood puts the case succinctly: "Nothing happens to the narrator... he makes sure of that—but he does become the curator of the museum where things happen to other people and where what happens is always life and nearly always sex" (262). The similarity that Wood detects between *The Sacred Fount* and "The Beast in the Jungle"—specifically, the similarity between their central characters—is also instructive: the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*

is tempted, frightened, and fascinated by the very idea of love, and in this respect he begins of course to resemble a number of other Jamesian heroes, like John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," for example, and Herbert Dodd in "The Bench of Desolation." Both of them, for the greater part of their stories, are men to whom nothing has happened—one because he is waiting for an extraordinary event and the other because he is sure he will experience no such thing—and it is extraordinary how thoroughly the idiom of happening echoes through *The Sacred Fount*. (262)

³⁷ Peter Brooks's conclusions about both *The Sacred Fount* and "The Beast in the Jungle" in *The Melodramatic Imagination* are similar to my own in this regard. With Marcher and May "scrutinizing a blank at the center of existence that evidently contains the key to existence if one only knew how to read its

plotted heterosexual economy that the narrator has searched out among his fellow guests collapses in its undecidability and the inconclusiveness produced by the asexual possibility, which introduces the threat of meaninglessness, irrelevance, and non-occurrence into the chain of evidence that he has labored to construct and maintain.

Criticism on *The Sacred Fount* almost inevitably falls back, in order to supply this lack, on the extratextual evidence of a March 1901 letter from James to Mrs. Humphry Ward, in which he dismisses the novel as one that “isn’t worth discussing,” “a remarkably accidental one, and the merest of *jeux d’esprit*,” and its subject as “a small fantasticality” (185–86). James explains that he only completed it for commercial reasons,³⁸

trying only to make it—the one thing it *could* be—a *consistent* joke. Alas, for a joke it appears to have been, round about me here, taken rather seriously. It’s doubtless very disgraceful, but it’s the last I shall ever

message,” the novella “demonstrates how James transcends the problem of discrepancy between motive and result, the excess of emotion in respect to its vehicle, through a thematization of the problem itself, through a metaphorical construction where the vehicle evokes a tenor that is both ‘meaninglessness’ and the core meaning of life” (175). Brooks recognizes, as I do, the centrality of the process of creating narrative meaning rather than the particular content of such meaning in “Beast.”

Brooks sees a similar void of content in *The Sacred Fount*. The melodrama of *The Sacred Fount*, in his reading, “is perfectly and purely the melodrama of a heightened and excited consciousness that must find the stuff of an impassioned drama in the field of observation set before it” (176–77). In Brooks’s view, it can be said “that the story ‘fails’ because its vehicles have been so overcharged and its tenor has become so hidden and absent that the reader feels duped. Yet if he is willing to play a game of unverifiable interpretations resting on uncertain epistemological foundations, he may find an inner melodrama of disturbing implications” (177). Such unverifiability, Brooks argues, simply comes with the territory when one reads James, for he is centrally concerned “with the content of the moral occult, which, through its very unspeakability, determines the quest for ethical meaning and the gesture in enactment of meanings perceived or postulated” (178).

Shlomith Rimmon demonstrates the thoroughgoing ambiguity of *The Sacred Fount* with narratological precision: the reader has no information about characters’ relationships besides what the narrator provides and thus has no hope of producing a solution to the problem the novel poses independent of him (168). To make matters more hopeless, the other characters ultimately don’t stand by their statements of agreement *or* disagreement with his ideas—all of the confirmations and repudiations of them cancel each other out (173–74).

³⁸ The frustration of James’s reviewers seems not to have been altogether alien to James himself, in the presumably still more tedious task of writing the novel, which he only “hatingly finished”: he writes to Mrs. Ward that “my hand-to-mouth economy condemned me to put it through in order not to have wasted the time already spent” (186).

make! Let me say for it however, that it has, I assure you, and applied quite rigorously and constructively, I believe, its own little law of composition. (186; emphasis in orig.)

Over these protestations, then, the critics have continued taking it rather seriously, expending the bulk of their labors in trying to determine in what the “consistency” of the joke consists, as well as its law.³⁹

The joke may, at last, be on us, consisting in nothing more than the critical wild goose chase that James initiated by dropping these clues to Mrs. Ward: the many attempts to tease out the novel’s law of composition by scholars who fail to recognize themselves in positions like the narrator’s.⁴⁰ This irony is epitomized in the novel’s fourth chapter, usually treated as a crux of the novel and dramatizing, if anything, the way that

³⁹ A few of *The Sacred Fount*’s contemporary reviewers appear to have detected—eventually—James’s jocular intention. The experience of the admirably determined reviewer from the London *Times* was this:

The exact intention of the author having seemed to escape us upon a first reading, we read it again. Still finding ourselves hazy about the meaning, a third perusal was adventured. And now, after so much hard, mental effort, after solitary wrestling, and after consultation with other readers, we are bound to admit that we have the dimmest of notions as to what “The Sacred Fount” is all about. The only explanation that seems possible is that Mr. James, annoyed by the folly of shallow admirers, who praise his books for their least praiseworthy qualities, has gone about to parody himself, and that he is now laughing in his sleeve at the sham enthusiasts who pretend to think is [*sic*] a great work. (356)

The *Academy*’s reviewer also reads *The Sacred Fount* as a self-parodying novel:

Had anyone but Mr. James written this book, his admirers might well have cried: “Oh, ‘tis sacrilege.” But since Mr. James himself is the author, what can we say but that he has, in his own brilliantly tedious way, with his own inimitable art, and with his own occult knowledge of what the lifting of an eyebrow or the movement of a back *may* mean—succeeded triumphantly in an elaborate satire on himself—that is, on his own obsession? (342; emphasis in orig.)

⁴⁰ Indeed, Laurel Bollinger suggests that the joke may be the plausibility of the obvious conclusion, against all temptations to develop theories as elaborate as the narrator’s about the meaning of the novel (a sort of hermeneutical “why did the chicken cross the road?”):

James’s “consistent joke”... leaves open the possibility that the narrator is seeing exactly what he says he is.... One thing is certain: so long as we confine our attentions to looking for what is “really” going on, the novel will seem to have gone to some effort to obscure our vision. Only the theory itself is laid out for our clear inspection. (53; emphasis in orig.)

Implicit in Bollinger’s critique is the charge that we do assume that *something* must be “going on,” that we infer event and meaning where there seem at first to be none, or none worthy of our consideration.

interpretation itself is up for grabs in *The Sacred Fount*. In this scene, the narrator, Gilbert Long, Mrs. Server (his suspected lover), and the painter Ford Obert puzzle over a portrait of a young man holding a mask, although neither his gender nor the object he holds is immediately apparent. The narrator calls it “the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter” (55). With its significance thus announced to the reader, the characters all make their attempts but can reach no consensus as to what the mask means,⁴¹ or, in the narrator’s case, even what it is made of: he describes it as

an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view becomes a representation of a human face, modeled and coloured, in wax, in enameled metal, in some substance not human. The object thus appears a complete mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and worn. (55)

This resoundingly tentative piece of ekphrasis eventually resolves its initial ambiguity, but not that of the material of the mask; whether it is a complete mask or only appears to be one; or whether it *was* “fantastically fitted and worn,” only that it “might have been.” Already there is no stable ground of empirical observation on which to construct an

⁴¹ William F. Hall’s reading of this scene establishes, whatever he intends, that one finds in a work of art whatever one happens to be looking for (a principle that applies no less to Hall’s reading or mine than to the characters examining the painting):

That the narrator, already defined as one of James’s “collectors,” should see the mask as Life, the human face as Death, confirms the impression of him as an individual whose world is artificial, self-created. That Obert sees May Server’s face in the mask suggests his preoccupation with her, the nature of that preoccupation, and—since he sees the mask as artificial—his opinion of the nature of her beauty and her self. The narrator’s confirmation of Obert’s impression emphasizes the degree of his suggestibility, especially as he admits, at the end of the episode, that it is of Brissenden he himself had thought (p.58). May Server’s reaction is a reflection of her sensitivity. It is primarily an attempt to retaliate and to disown the imputation implied in the attribution of the likeness. The final agreement on the resemblance between the face in the painting and that of Brissenden reflects the characters’ common relief at the escape from ambiguity. The reluctance of the narrator and May Server to share in that agreement indicates the quality of their “tone,” their reluctance to make that escape. (173)

interpretation, and the resultant undecidability is instructive.⁴² The most we ever learn about any character in the novel, with any certainty, is—from Guy Brissenden—that Mrs. Server’s “circumstances are nothing wonderful. She has none too much money; she has had three children and lost them; and nobody that belongs to her appears ever to have been particularly nice to her” (119). Even here, however, being shades inevitably back into appearance, and it is appearances that reign supreme at Newmarch (the country house, whose owner is never identified, at which the novel is set), both enabling the formation of the narrator’s theory and discouraging the application of it, while challenging the assumption—as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* did—that surfaces necessarily conceal underlying depths.

The narrator realizes at dinner on his last night at Newmarch that such a setting is no place for his theory at all, that

[t]his especial hour... had always a splendour that asked little of interpretation, that even carried itself, with an amiable arrogance, as indifferent to what the imagination could do for it. I think the imagination, in those halls of art and fortune, was almost inevitably accounted a poor matter; the whole place and its participants abounded so in pleasantness and picture, in all the felicities, for every sense, taken for granted there by the very basis of life, that even the sense most finely poetic, aspiring to extract the moral, could scarce have helped feeling itself treated to something of the snub that affects—when it does affect—the uninvited

⁴² Bollinger has already observed that “[f]acts are not at issue in [the narrator’s] theory, which depends upon psychological verisimilitude for its strength—and so contradictory facts cannot erase the psychological truth of what the narrator has seen and guessed” (62). That is to suggest that the painting and the theory nevertheless have value, despite the indeterminacy of their content. Adeline Tintner, meanwhile, deals with the paucity of fact in *The Sacred Fount* much as Sedgwick reads absence in “The Beast in the Jungle,” as a very specific kind of ignorance, as a screen for a repudiated presence. For Tintner, the joke is on the narrator, whose error is to assume that the relations he seeks between his fellow guests are heterosexual ones. The search is ultimately left up to the reader, who

must detect and select the true evidence behind the narrator’s back. If this depends on the absence of any overt connection between the lovers, we the readers must recognize the details in the *lack* of connection which is the necessary condition for their relation. We then become aware of those persons with the absolute *lack* of connection who take care, by *not* meeting and by *not* talking to each other, that they are not observed. (233; emphasis in orig.)

reporter in whose face a door is closed. . . . We existed, all of us together, to be handsome and happy, to be really what we looked—since we looked tremendously well; to be that and neither more nor less, so not discrediting by musty secrets and aggressive doubts our high privilege of harmony and taste. (156–57)

This apotheosis of surfaces forbids the narrator's passion for analysis, meaning, and mastery—even the work of the imagination striving for (het)eronarrative order.

Newmarch is marked rather by the beauty of the way things have fallen together without additional intellectual arrangement. Its aesthetic is one that resists moralizing, one in which appearances suffice and there is nothing to discover, correspondingly nothing to hide. It is, in short, a site at which the epistemology of the asexual closet that I described in Chapter 3 is fully at play: it is not even a place where superficial appearances take the place of underlying depths, because not even appearances can be reliably established there.

This asexual frustration of a depth model of knowledge and subjectivity notwithstanding, narrative desire predominates at Newmarch, where *both* of the threats to narrative closure I have identified in this chapter are at play. Newmarch stands out clearly as a suspension of normal narrative logic, a place where that logic will always be suspended, disordered, or denied, as the narrator contemplates the effect of his impending departure as an absolute break with his theory as well as with the house:

If I was free, that was what I had been only so short a time before, what I had been as I drove, in London, to the station. Was this now a foreknowledge that, on the morrow, in driving away, I should feel myself restored to that blankness? The state lost was the state of exemption from intense obsessions, and the state recovered would therefore logically match it. If the foreknowledge had thus . . . descended upon me, my liberation was in a manner what I was already tasting. Yet how I also felt, with it, something of the threat of a chill to my curiosity! The taste of its being all over, that really sublime success of the strained vision in which I

had been living for crowded hours—was this a taste that I was sure I should particularly enjoy? Marked enough it was, doubtless, that even in the stress of perceiving myself broken with I ruefully reflected on all the more, on the ever so much, I still wanted to know! (192–93)

The narrator here is prey to a sort of (het)eronarrative anxiety about the sort of closure his story is to have, if any, as the disorder of the asexual possibility encroaches on the normal trajectory of narrative desire. It is akin to the anxiety that Marcher experiences, but not identical. Marcher knows he wants narrative closure but is uncertain if or how it will come about. The narrator of *The Sacred Fount* doesn't even know that much. Faced with his imminent return to the nonnarratable, in D. A. Miller's terms, he begins to question the satisfactoriness of narrative closure—of “the taste of its all being over,” of “sublime success”—wondering whether he might instead prefer the endless narrative desire that Newmarch affords him. Yet he also regards the “blankness” of closure and the nonnarratable as freedom. Insofar as the narrative middle still attracts him and is organized by what he still wants to know, he remains in the grip of narrative desire and in the grip of (het)eronarrative, which likewise draws him toward the promise of closure.

As stasis and meaninglessness, however, the asexual possibility stands in the way of *both* alternatives. Movement and the desire for movement can give meaning to the point at which movement stops in a way that sitting still, not desiring, nothing happening, cannot. The positioning of the asexual narrative possibility as a threat to the progress of desire and knowledge is typical in the novel as a genre, but this threat is seldom so thoroughly realized as in *The Sacred Fount*. The asexual possibility takes up residence in spaces of non-occurrence and irresolvable ignorance, of thwarted closure, as when the

narrator—and the reader—are left not knowing whether Mrs. Brissenden is right or whether the narrator’s theory is valid.

In Chapter 3, I cited Jeff Nunokawa’s reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which he argued that boredom obtains where desire does not. *The Sacred Fount*, curiously, is chock full of desire—both thematic and narrative—but is notoriously boring. Our boredom, I would like to suggest, marks the place where (het)eronarrative desire and asexuality meet, and where asexuality’s non-desire, its indifference toward any object of desire, not only frustrates the movement of (het)eronarrative desire but casts it as irrelevant, trivial, an empty exercise in the formal and narrative moves that make up a Henry James novel, as *The Sacred Fount*’s early reviewers perceived. Because we don’t know whether the narrator is right, whether he has perceived what he thinks he has perceived, we—and he—don’t in fact know whether anything has happened in *The Sacred Fount*. By the time we reach the end of the novel, we have considerable reason to suspect that it hasn’t. The novel ends—because all novels must, as a matter of practical necessity, end somewhere—but the state of rest at which it arrives is stasis without closure, the asexual possibility finally reducing narrative movement to a standstill.

In these two works, then, narrative desire is quite visibly the desire *for* narrative. In the face of this desire, the asexual possibility looms as the threat of narrative without meaningful closure, of closure not organized by this desire and thus incommensurable with the mastery and quiescence of the (het)eronarrative end. The asexual possibility threatens the structure of both works; the difference is that it is resolved more satisfactorily, for readers and critics, in “The Beast in the Jungle” than in *The Sacred Fount*, and that has made all the difference in their canonical fortunes. The asexual

possibility, as stasis and non-event, is untenable, strictly speaking, as narrative structure. It is defeated by paradox in “The Beast in the Jungle,” although it is upheld by the radical irony of *The Sacred Fount*. Asexually structured narrative opposes forward movement, closure, and intellectual mastery and embodies stasis, the suspension of desire, the non-event, and indifference toward closural disclosure. Producing these effects, it invites a reconsideration not only of the demands that we make of narrative but of the entanglement of temporality with teleology, of what the asexual possibility might do to our sense of time. I take up such a reconsideration in my reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* in the Conclusion.

(IN)CONCLUSION: “NO LUCK EVER ATTENDS THESE SYMBOLICAL
CELEBRATIONS”

So we carried all the groceries in while hauling out the trash
And if this doesn't make us motionless, I do not know what can
—Modest Mouse, “Spitting Venom”

How many asexuals does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
None. They'd rather just talk.

In my preceding chapters, I have distinguished asexual identity from asexuality as an intractable but erased epistemological challenge to modern narrative, pointed out the shortcomings of asexual identity as a basis for the study of asexuality in literature, and highlighted the structural contradictions plaguing the construction of asexual identity itself. These contradictions result in part from asexuality's construction as absence and its positioning as trace relative to the metaphysics of presence and in part from the erasure, rather than the oppression, of asexuals. The historical coincidence and mutual reinforcement of the modern sexual subject and the genre of the novel have contributed to the erasure of asexuality and to its rewriting under various signs and alibis. Nowhere were this erasure and rewriting undertaken more insistently than in the development of psychoanalysis, which structurally excludes asexuality and disqualifies it, positioning it as a logical and subjective impossibility.

But asexuality still threatens to disrupt those logics constructed to keep it out: not merely the thoroughly sexualized logic we find in psychoanalysis, but also the dynamic, teleological order organized by depth and causality that undergirds the novel. For this

reason, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's effort to discipline the asexual possibility in *Lady Audley's Secret*—most prominently displayed in Robert Audley's character—produces defensive distortions not only in characterization but in plotting and in the models of knowledge and subjectivity at work in her novel. These distortions are similar but not identical to those that emerge in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which illustrates the incompatibility of asexuality with the metaphor of the closet and the depth model of knowledge that subtends it. The substitution of asexual romantic friendship for homoeroticism in Wilde's 1891 revisions to the novel proves imperfect and unconvincing, and the asexual possibility enacts a particular kind of queering in *Dorian Gray's* structure, one that produces temporal stasis, erodes the boundaries of the subject, and renders the distinction between surface and depth untenable.

Besides performing these sorts of disruptions, asexuality is inimical to the structure of narrative itself, especially as narrative structure has historically been theorized, given this structure's relationship to desire and that desire's construction as implicitly sexual. While some theorists have opposed desire's endless metonymic peregrinations to narrative closure, asexuality stands opposed to *both* closure and desire, the tidy ending and the endless meandering middle; at the level of narrative structure, it produces stories that go nowhere. Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" allegorizes narrative's struggle against the pointlessness and stasis that the asexual possibility threatens to produce, while *The Sacred Fount* shows the structural triumph of this pointlessness and stasis, at the expense of the novel's satisfactoriness as narrative. Given the conclusions I reached about asexuality's incompatibility with narrative closure in the previous chapter, I am deeply suspicious of the (het)eronarrative entanglements of

conclusions of any kind, and so I offer here an assortment of rather *inconclusive* reflections on humor, time, and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928).

The question of asexuality and humor has been on my mind ever since I recounted the anecdote with which I began this dissertation to an acquaintance at an academic conference several months ago. She looked dismayed when I got to the part about quirky local subcultures and positively horrified by the time we reached the Polar Bear Club. "What did you *do*?" she asked.

I tried to think back to that afternoon in 2009, of which my recollection was dimmer than I had expected. How difficult had it actually been, at that moment, to remain polite? Not particularly, I realized. "Well... nothing." (How wonderfully, hopelessly asexual of me.)

Watching her react to the story, though, I thought that if I could have lived it over, I probably ought to have stormed indignantly out of that Starbucks then and there. I didn't, though. I just sat there, replied with some formulaic pleasantries, and struggled mightily to keep a straight face.

In *Understanding Asexuality*, Anthony Bogaert devotes a chapter to the questions raised by asexuals' relationship to humor. Bogaert is particularly interested in how asexuals react to sexual humor, but his largely speculative exploration of this topic also provides some insight into the anecdote I have just recounted. According to Freud, he says, sexual humor may result from sexual tension; Bogaert notes that furthermore, laughter produces a pleasurable release of tension similar to orgasm (*Understanding* 136). Beyond this tension-release theory, Bogaert points out that humor also has an important cognitive component, wherein besides "an effective use and release of tension,

the humorist must provide a satisfactory and meaningful resolution to the puzzle or situation raised in the joke” (139). This resolution requires that the joke’s audience possess not just an understanding of the content of this situation, but a certain level of *narrative* competency. A modern theory of humor that Bogaert cites holds that what is funny is the incongruity that results from a benign violation of rules (139).¹ Bogaert points out that because there are so many rules governing sex, it is particularly ripe for these kinds of humorous violations. But according to both the tension theory and the “benign violation” theory, he surmises that asexual people are less likely to “get” sexual humor or to find it funny than their sexual counterparts, experiencing less sexual tension and having less experiential knowledge of the kinds of situations on which the incongruities of such humor plays (141–42).

The tension fueling humor, however, may be based in anger or resentment rather than sexual feelings, and “[h]umorous put-downs of an ‘out-group’—the group to which we do not belong—are sometimes enjoyable because they allow our group to achieve ‘positive distinctiveness,’ a sense of superiority that we, as a group, have a special distinction that sets us apart, and even above, other groups” (143). Bogaert considers the possibility that asexual laughter at sexual humor may be of this variety, a means for asexuals to express anger toward the more numerous and powerful sexual out-group (144).

¹ Whatever the root cause of humor, Bogaert sees no value in playing “gotcha” with asexuals and sexual humor (i.e. using asexuals’ inclination or disinclination to laugh at sexual jokes as a litmus test to determine whether they are “really” asexual); instead, “if it turns out that asexual people do appreciate, even laugh at, sexual jokes (and [Bogaert] expect[s] that many do), this may say more about our sexualized society and how everyone—sexual or not—is caught in its web of influence than it does about any hidden motives of (self-identified) asexual people” (144).

My goal in this dissertation, of course, has never been to assert claims of asexual superiority, but given the reception of the Polar Bear Club anecdote that I just described, some serious consideration of the question “what’s so funny?” does seem to be in order. What I had to realize, precisely, as I reconsidered my own actions that afternoon, was my failure in that situation to take identity seriously (for which I was, of course, given precedent by my interlocutor, herself trivializing asexuality as “quirky”). And this position—one of failure, triviality, a repudiation of the serious—is one that may be worth dwelling on, and one to which asexuality may be particularly amenable.

Perhaps a conclusion is the wrong place to dwell on failure, but at the conclusion of a project largely concerned with the reading of stasis, triviality, insignificance, erasure, and stories that go nowhere, it’s a fair question whether presuming to conclude anything at all is disingenuous, as I suggested above. It seems fitting, too, to give some consideration here to humor, given the consensus among reviewers and critics—reinforced by James’s own admission—that *The Sacred Fount* is his unabashed joke on his readers.² And so I ask, what if asexuals are in a uniquely privileged position to stop taking identity, sex, subjectivity, time, and teleology so seriously?

In imagining this possibility, I am indebted to Judith Halberstam for locating “the queer art of failure” in “the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy” (*Failure* 187). Failure and silliness, I argue, are another site at which we may locate considerable overlap between asexual practices and queer practices more broadly speaking. Success, Halberstam observes, is narrowly defined in

² *The Sacred Fount*, too, is at least a threefold failure: the narrator’s failure to prove his theory, the failure of the narrative to reach meaningful closure, the failure of the novel to achieve critical or canonical acclaim.

heteronormative capitalist terms, and given the state of affairs to which an ideology of success has led contemporary American society, it is long overdue for critique (2). Halberstam argues that “[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Although failure is *also* experienced negatively, it frees us from an ideology of positive thinking that implicitly or explicitly blames victims and reinforces class disparity (3). Halberstam promotes a turn to “subjugated knowledges,” in Foucault’s terms (those ways of knowing that have been institutionally disqualified and devalued), and challenges us to “resist mastery,” especially by means of failure and stupidity; to “privilege the naïve or nonsensical,” especially by means of oppositional pedagogies; and to “suspect memorialization,” which tends to map narrative order onto experiences of disorder and make its own ideologically freighted emphases (13–15).³

The texts upon which Halberstam focuses her readings of failure’s potential to map queer modes of being and resistance are primarily Pixar animated films and “dumb guy comedies” like *Dude, Where’s My Car?*, as she deliberately attempts to privilege the silly over the serious:

³ As an alternative to memorialization, Halberstam promotes forgetting, which “becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription” (15). Forgetfulness for women and queer people, Halberstam argues, can be a resistance and suspension of dominant modes of knowing and organizing time. She finds this to be especially true in light of women’s central place in generational transmission of memory, for by contrast, “queer lives seek to uncouple change from the supposedly organic and immutable forms of family and inheritance; queer lives exploit some potential for a *difference in form* that lies dormant in queer collectivity not as an essential attribute of sexual otherness but as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives” (70; emphasis in orig.). Family, normative temporality, and Oedipal transmission are bound together, and the valuation of certain kinds of relationship is imbricated with the valuation of duration (73). Queer culture, on the other hand, follows horizontal, antidevelopmental models of change, opposed to memory and futurity (75).

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness;... they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (6)

I want to reflect here on what such flights of fancy, frivolity, and irrelevance (if perhaps not promiscuity) might have to do with asexuality—which has a disruptive relationship to modern structures of knowledge and meaning-making, as I have demonstrated, and which is certainly stamped with irrelevance and frivolity when equated with the Polar Bear Club. The narrative tendencies with which I have associated asexuality in the preceding chapters have, more importantly, been opposed to “tried and true paths of knowledge production” (stasis, the rejection of a depth model of knowledge, and the unmooring of cause from effect, for instance), and the “desire to be taken seriously” can be seen to underlie many of the maneuvers of modern asexual erasure that I have described.

For most of this dissertation, I have couched the interactions between asexual possibility and erasure in the rather grim, agonistic terms of threat and disruption, while privately regarding my interventions in psychoanalytic and narrative theory as mischief and play. What if we reimagined the work of the asexual possibility in these terms, instead of taking umbrage at the imputation of quirky non-seriousness to asexuality? In a society that ascribes such transcendent importance to sex and sexuality, to live as an asexual is almost necessarily to embrace those practices and relationships that it marks by implication as *unimportant*. To live in our culture perpetually offended by its misplaced priorities is a position too exhausting to sustain; asexual practices, instead, might consist

in the refusal to take these priorities seriously, even as such refusal is coded as failure to meet (het)eronormative benchmarks for relational success.

The disciplinary and institutional constraints of the genre in which I am writing (the doctoral dissertation, intended to demonstrate my mastery of a field of knowledge and my significant contribution to it in pursuit of a degree) admittedly discourage a self-conscious performance of failure. My attempt, accordingly, has been conflicted and limited. It consists in a display, in my own text, of the tendency towards stasis, the dragging of one's feet that the asexual possibility produces in the progression toward knowledge and mastery.

You may have noticed, in the preceding chapters, a tendency to signpost and preview my arguments in later chapters to a degree that seemed at times excessive, a strategy of persistent delay and deferral, always looking ahead to what is to come while stalling and dawdling in the process of actually getting there. My repeated announcements, without further elaboration, of the arguments I *would* make in later chapters often displaced and delayed whatever argument I *was* making in the chapter at hand. This strategy (not always a conscious one), I would like to argue, embodies an asexual relationship to time. On a crude level, of course, it is something like the rhetorical equivalent of "Not tonight, dear; I have a headache." On a more sophisticated level, it is a more realistic embodiment—a more livable embodiment—of the asexual possibility than what we see, for instance, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: not magically stopping time, but dragging as dead weight against its forward pull and pushing progress ever farther into the future. As we saw in my readings in Chapters 2 through 4, asexual stasis fails more often than not in its pure form, more often appearing as an impediment to

teleological movement than its absolute cessation. My characteristic delays worked in a similar fashion, because I did eventually make good on my promises to discuss particular texts or concepts in later sections or chapters. In real time, asexual stasis may slow narrative down, but it is rare that it stops it altogether.

And indeed, now I have delayed my reading of *Orlando* as long as I can get away with. *Orlando* is, fittingly, a novel that does not take itself too seriously,⁴ and it models the enactment of the asexual possibility that I have been considering here. *Orlando*'s approach to time, writing, and progress is similar to my own, and its engagement of the asexual possibility as temporal stasis is partial and equivocal but not anxious or hostile.

Time, in *Orlando*, moves ineluctably forward, but Orlando's aging process is out of sync, lagging behind the forward march of calendar time and varying unpredictably in tempo:

It would be no exaggeration to say that he would go out after breakfast a man of thirty and come home to dinner a man of fifty-five at least. Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most. Altogether, the task of estimating the length of human life (of the animals' we presume not to speak) is beyond our capacity, for directly we

⁴ D. A. Boxwell, who examines the racial and gendered complexities of the politics of camp in *Orlando*, describes how

from its very inception, *Orlando* was to establish a carnivalesque and fantasy-laden matrix of exoticized sexuality and location through 'dream'-like displacement. Everything was grist for Woolf's bright, satiric mill, and her intention that the novel would defy a complete sense of closure, although not the eventual ending, is carried through in the novel's spirit of open and inconclusive inquiry and ludic historiography, in which the boundaries establishing class, race, and gender, and sex differences are deconstructed and rearranged. (316)

It need hardly be said, at this point, that *Orlando* is not asexual in content, nor even perhaps in structure. Boxwell, however, helpfully calls attention to its playfulness and its resistance—albeit its *incomplete* resistance—to closure, two elements that do not inevitably bespeak the asexual possibility but which are nevertheless not hostile to it, as many of the narrative and epistemological structures I have discussed in this dissertation have been.

say that it is ages long, we are reminded that it is briefer than the fall of a rose leaf to the ground. (99)⁵

At a less fantastic level, Orlando shares the authorial tic that I noted above of not merely forestalling the ending, but of not even beginning, or at least of forever re-beginning, continually writing and rewriting his/her poem “The Oak Tree” over a period of three hundred years and in response to wildly fluctuating stylistic demands.⁶

Largely owing to the fantasticality of Orlando’s very long career as a poet, the novel shares a number of the characteristics that Christopher Ames identifies as typical of “modernist canon narratives,” “fictional texts that present chronological readings or surveys of literary history overlaid upon another narrative” (390).⁷ Orlando’s perennial

⁵ A paragraph earlier, the biographer/narrator notes the discrepancy between the experience of time and the passage of time—which Orlando acts out in spectacular fashion—thus:

But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. But the biographer, whose interests are, as we have said, highly restricted, must confine himself to one simple statement: when a man has reached the age of thirty, as Orlando now had, time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long; time when he is doing becomes inordinately short. (98)

⁶ For instance, as the seventeenth century progresses,

it is for the historian of letters to remark that he had changed his style amazingly. His floridity was chastened; his abundance curbed; the age of prose was congealing those warm fountains. The very landscape outside was less stuck about with garlands and the briars themselves were less thorned and intricate. Perhaps the senses were a little duller and honey and cream less seductive to the palate. Also that the streets were better drained and the houses better lit had its effect upon the style, it cannot be doubted” (113).

Erica L. Johnson argues that “‘The Oak Tree’ maintains a running dialogue with literary movements of the times in such a way that Woolf riddles literary history with interruptions and reveals its absences” (123). This observation supports Johnson’s reading of *Orlando* as full of hauntings and also points to a modernist preoccupation with absence and discontinuity.

⁷ Ames argues that such narratives were of particular importance to modernist writers, with their acutely felt need to situate themselves deliberately and self-consciously within a literary tradition or to participate in the construction of that tradition (391).

concern with style and reception conveys a sense of “modernist belatedness,” to use the term that Ames borrows from Perry Meisel (391). In many ways, Orlando is a modernist before his/her time, who spends centuries revising a single poem as the literary tradition accretes around him/her and seeps into “The Oak Tree” in all of Orlando’s revisions and rewritings. It is “The Oak Tree” that is the true canon narrative in *Orlando*, except that we are never actually permitted to read the poem, and Orlando undertakes it without the self-consciousness and parodic spirit that Ames observes in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* and the “Oxen of the Sun” episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In effect, Orlando presumably ends up with a poem much like *The Waste Land* that is made up (in this case, by necessity) of heteroglot fragments. It is an index of T. S. Eliot’s “historical sense,”⁸ which *Orlando* as a whole dramatizes and which “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (Eliot 119). Woolf starts, in *Orlando*, with the literature of the Elizabethan period rather than Homer, but Orlando otherwise literalizes this simultaneity, carrying the English literary tradition not merely as background knowledge but as lived experience.

Woolf takes the embodiment of literary tradition still farther by rendering the spirit of each age atmospherically. Changes in language and values are palpable in the air,

⁸ Ames also recognizes this echo of Eliot (398–99).

the light, and the weather—an embodiment of time that Elizabeth Freeman also recognizes.⁹ In the Elizabethan age, the biographer reminds us,

their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even.... The brilliant amorous day was divided as sheerly from the night as land from water. Sunsets were redder and more intense; dawns were whiter and more auroral. Of our crepuscular half-lights and lingering twilights they knew nothing. (26–27)

But when Orlando looks out across London in the clear cold light of the eighteenth century, “[u]pon this serene and orderly prospect the stars looked down, glittering, positive, hard, from a cloudless sky. In the extreme clearness of the atmosphere the line of every roof, the cowl of every chimney was perceptible. Even the cobbles in the streets showed distinct from one another...” (223–24). And it is a change in atmosphere that then ushers in the nineteenth century: “As the ninth, tenth and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion” (224–25).¹⁰ The texture of time in *Orlando* is palpable, historically variable, and keyed to epistemological and stylistic change.

Ames argues that this comprehensive, active rendering of the past gives way in the modernist canon narrative to a chaotic rendering of the present, although the canon narrative typically has an undertone of optimism about this chaos and fragmentariness

⁹ In *Orlando*, “the protagonist him/herself experiences historical change as a set of directly corporeal and often sexual sensations. In a parody of the kind of historiography that speaks knowingly of a given era’s zeitgeist, Woolf literalizes political or cultural climate as weather” (Freeman 107).

¹⁰ Thus *Orlando* illustrates the tendency that Ames also sees in “Oxen of the Sun” and *Between the Acts* for “the vast reaches of the historical and literary past [to] communicate the inconsequentiality of individual writer or era. Modernist belatedness is here figured in cosmic terms” (398). Woolf admittedly flies in the face of this convention of individual inconsequentiality by endowing her protagonist with superhuman longevity that allows him/her to witness multiple atmospheric shifts of zeitgeist firsthand, but their cosmic scope is nevertheless clear.

serving as a safeguard against tradition's hegemonic potential (399). In the final chapter of *Orlando*, the technological marvels of the twentieth century press upon Orlando perhaps a bit too frenetically, but they are still legible as marvels—cars, airplanes, department stores (with their carnival of things), elevators, and so on. This new (dis)order alters language and perception much as the atmospheric spirits of previous ages did, but its result is acceleration, compression, (violent) truncation, and incoherence as Orlando motors through London:

Streets widened and narrowed. Long vistas steadily shrunk together. Here was a market. Here a funeral. Here a procession with banners upon which was written in great letters “Ra—Un,” but what else? Meat was very red. Butchers stood at the door. Women almost had their heels sliced off. A woman looked out of a bedroom window, profoundly contemplative, and very still. Applejohn and Applebed, Undert—. (306–07)

Orlando's experience of the present itself becomes an expression of modernist belatedness and the expansion of the canon beyond what a single individual is capable of taking in or making sense of: “Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish. What was seen begun... was never seen ended” (307). This disappearance of beginnings and ends may aid us in muddling toward at least a partial reading of the ending of *Orlando*, although according to these criteria, it might categorically not be an ending at all.

Here I have, of course, digressed somewhat, once again putting off getting to the point and explaining what this reading of *Orlando* as modernist canon narrative has to do with failure, delay, and asexual stasis. These phenomena converge—however infelicitously, for my purposes—in the novel's conclusion. It is here that Orlando, having neglected to bring a trowel, fails to bury her book beneath the eponymous oak tree on her

estate. The oak tree has aged in much the same way that Orlando has, but, being a tree, has thereby maintained a far more orderly, organic relationship to time.¹¹ Orlando's intentions, now made clear, clearly go unfulfilled and are shown to have been bound for failure: besides the forgotten trowel, "[t]he earth was so shallow over the roots that it seemed doubtful if she could do as she meant and bury the book here. Besides the dogs would dig it up. No luck ever attends these symbolical celebrations, she thought" (324). The symbolic and meaningful conclusion she has intended is thwarted by forgetfulness and the material exigencies of mundane reality (shallow earth, curious dogs). Following close on this failure is an elaborate queering of time, in which asexually structured stasis is involved but does not predominate.

After failing to bury her book, Orlando has a vision of the earlier landscapes of the novel vying with and superseding each other, the whole montage building to an obviously erotic climax as Shelmerdine's ship sails safely around Cape Horn, Orlando cries out "ecstasy!," and stillness is restored (326–27). Again, in the resulting stillness, "[h]e was coming, as he always came, in moments of dead calm; when the wave rippled and the spotted leaves fell slowly over her foot in the autumn woods; when the leopard was still; the moon was on the waters, and nothing moved between sky and sea. It was then that he came" (328). Once more, I make no pretense of reading this scene in light of asexuality—except to note that, despite the prevailing motionlessness of the scene, asexuality has failed here. And then Shel appears again, this time jumping to the ground, to meet Orlando, from an aeroplane that "rushed out of the clouds and stood over her

¹¹ Orlando observes that "[t]he tree had grown bigger, sturdier, and more knotted since she had known it, somewhere about the year 1588, but it was still in the prime of life" (324), just as s/he has grown in experience, in literary complexity, and into a more knotted embodiment of gender while aging chronologically only from adolescence to the age of thirty-six.

head” (329). This is to say that the aeroplane is hovering in midair, which—barring a very strong headwind—no plane that existed in 1928 was mechanically capable of doing. The only way for Shel’s plane to hover is for *time itself to stand still*.

In terms of a literary modernity characterized by a sense of the overcrowded simultaneity of the canon, the aeroplane may be doing precisely that. The images that Orlando sees here relate to one another as unstably as those she glimpsed as she drove through London a few hours earlier, but if nothing can be read from start to finish, it is impossible to close off a modernist canon narrative—the literary past, grown large and unwieldy, must be regarded from a literary present, which in turn insists upon a literary future (hence why Orlando doesn’t bury her book)—except by some incredibly artificial device like stopping time in its tracks to make the aeroplane hover. The conversion of Orlando’s estate (a Jamesian “house of fiction,” perhaps) into a museum performs a similar sort of congealment.¹²

This moment of temporal stasis is soon broken, however, as “there sprang up over his head a single wild bird,” the “wild goose” that has eluded Orlando throughout the novel, “[a]nd the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight” (329). The novel closes on a literal wild goose chase—the pursuit of an object of desire abstracted as a cliché of an object of desire, but a pursuit proverbially destined to fail, to yield up nothing—and closes as well on time’s sheer self-referentiality, void of incident.

¹² It is also worth noting that in 1927, E. M. Forster had conjured, in his *Aspects of the Novel*, the image of a great assembly of English novelists seated simultaneously in the rotunda of the British Museum, too absorbed in the material immediacy of their writing to respect the niceties of periodicity (21–22). Woolf, who quotes portions of this passage in her essay on *Aspects of the Novel*, “Is Fiction an Art?,” was obviously familiar with this image.

By ending on the striking of the clock in this way, *Orlando* jams the temporality of closure, for it marks, at once, an end, a middle, and a beginning. The final stroke of twelve announces, in exaggerated fashion, the end of the day, but before it has finished reverberating, another day has already begun, and the day in question, October 11, 1928, has none of the closural significance of the final stroke of midnight. Instead, it is very much in the midst of things. Strictly speaking, however, it may in fact be the future.

Earlier in the chapter, the biographer remarks that

for some seconds the light went on becoming brighter and brighter, and she saw everything more and more clearly and the clock ticked louder and louder until there was a terrific explosion right in her ear. Orlando leapt as if she had been violently struck on the head. Ten times she was struck. In fact it was ten o'clock in the morning. It was the eleventh of October. It was 1928. It was the present moment. (298)

In “It was the present moment,” Virginia Woolf has written possibly the most temporally and grammatically bizarre sentence in the history of the novel, fixing the present as already past, but if we take the present moment to have occurred at 10:00 in the morning on October 11, the twelfth stroke of midnight on the same day must catapult us into the future. Past, present, and future—which we may take as beginning, middle, and end—are simultaneous, then, in what is supposed to be the end of *Orlando*. In this supposed ending, we are presented with the insistently empty forms of time and desire, those forces to which I have shown asexual stasis to be opposed.

The biographer/narrator has remarked before on the emptiness of the form of time, trying to chronicle Orlando’s long period of seclusion in the company of his dogs and his oak tree after Nicholas Greene takes advantage of his patronage to lampoon him in verse:

Here he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw—but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow and how every tree and plant in the neighbourhood is described first green, then golden; how moons rise and suns set; how spring follows winter and autumn summer; how night succeeds day and day night; how there is first a storm and then fine weather; how things remain much as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that “Time passed” (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened. (97–98)

The biographer reduces the supposedly organic and cyclical time of nature to a predictable narrative convention tending toward needless padding. The dust, the cobwebs, the old woman sweeping up, the brackets, “the simple statement that ‘Time passed,’” and the absence of incident are of course Woolf’s quiet self-mockery, referring to the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*. The passage of narrative time without event is not to be taken too seriously.

In Chapter 4, I referred briefly to Halberstam’s theorization of “queer time” as hospitable to asexuality, for she ties queerness not to specific sexual practices and desires but to “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (*Time* 1)—phenomena we also see in *Orlando*. For Halberstam, “the concept of queer time” can

make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. And so, in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity. (4)

Orlando parodies this valorization of longevity through Woolf's portrayal of a transgender subject who has lived several centuries—and counting—in the prime of life, but with its reproductive imperatives and her own children pushed to the margins.¹³

Orlando is marked by the same kind of “alternative temporalities” that “[q]ueer subcultures produce... by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (*Time 2*). Woolf deemphasizes marriage and reproduction and leaves conventional birth and death out of her parodic biography altogether. Orlando's beginning is obscured, for we first meet him/her as a teenager, and his/her end is nowhere in sight at the close of the novel.

Elizabeth Freeman has also read a queering of time into *Orlando*, but for her, it is more explicitly eroticized than Halberstam's “queer time,” which is capacious enough to include asexual lives in its rejection of heteronormative life schedules, whereas Freeman's more sexualized readings of time do not. Importantly, Freeman is wary of the antisocial turn in queer studies—as exemplified, for instance, by Lee Edelman's arguments for queer opposition to “reproductive futurism” in *No Future*—for this branch of queer studies' insufficient attention to queerness as a *bodily* phenomenon, whose history and efficacy she seeks to recover and foreground (xxi). My reading of asexuality as a negativity interfering with forward movement is admittedly closer to Edelman's version of queerness than Freeman's, and it finds little foothold in her reading of

¹³ Pamela Caughie has also observed that “Orlando's relation to parents, husband and child are no more significant—indeed, with the exception of Shel, much less significant—than her relation to lovers, servants, dogs, trees, and objects” (“Force” 33).

Orlando.¹⁴ Freeman and Halberstam illustrate, then, the manner in which asexuality slips in and out of queerness depending on how one defines the word and draws its boundaries, although Freeman's theory, at a more general level, nevertheless has components that can speak to the queerness of an asexual experience of temporality.¹⁵

A prime example is Freeman's concept of *chrononormativity*, which consists of "the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life" (xxii). In its routinizing work, chrononormativity naturalizes historically specific ways of organizing time, the "chronobiopolitics" that bind temporalized bodies to teleology and narrative and give lives their very narratability (4–5). Chronobiopolitics does this not just in terms of the state but in psychiatric, legal, and medical terms as well, so that "having a life entails the ability to narrate it not only in these state-sanctioned terms but also in a novelistic framework: as event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations" (5). We see this process, which thus constructs asexuality as beyond the bounds of the narratable, vividly illustrated and foregrounded *as* process in *Orlando*.

After Orlando's marriage in the nineteenth century gives her the stamp of respectability she requires in order to write in peace, the biographer/narrator is nevertheless compelled to mark the passage of time as she continues writing. He

¹⁴ In the relation between the biographer and Orlando, who stands in for the past in general, Freeman reads "the writing of history... as a seduction of the past and, correspondingly, as the past's erotic impact on the body itself... Woolf's methodology... centers on an avowedly erotic pleasure: an *ars erotica* of historical inquiry that takes place not between the hearts of emoting men, as in Burke, but between and across the bodies of lusting women" (106). Freeman's reading is astute, but it is not one in which asexuality or the asexual possibility really count.

¹⁵ Freeman is wary of the simplistic identification of queerness with whatever is most avant-garde, which betokens a defensive, preemptive mastery. Instead, she suggests looking for the queer at "the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless" (xiii). Such a strategy is suggestive of asexual stasis as dawdling, as lagging behind.

apologizes, after a paragraph consisting of nothing more than a recitation of the months of the year, that “[t]his method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps” (266) and complains of the biographical inutility of Orlando’s contemplative inaction before parodically foregrounding the construction of life and its narrative coherence as dependent on incident, unable to make anything of stasis:

Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore—since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now—there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one’s beads, blow one’s nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind. Or if a butterfly had fluttered through the window and settled on her chair, one could write about that. Or suppose she had got up and killed a wasp. Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. For there would be blood shed, if only the blood of a wasp. (267)

The slightest motion would suffice to resume narrative’s movement, even the shifting of objects or the lives (and deaths) of insects. Sitting still is novelistically inadmissible. But although death, whatever its object, is adequate grist for the narrative mill, “life” in narrative is subject to more stringent conventional requirements. The biographer asks,

Must it then be admitted that Orlando was one of those monsters of iniquity who do not love? She was kind to dogs, faithful to friends, generosity itself to a dozen starving poets, had a passion for poetry. But love—as the male novelists define it—and who, after all, speak with greater authority?—has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry. Love is slipping off one’s petticoat and—But we all know what love is. Did Orlando do that? Truth compels us to say no, she did not. If then, the subject of one’s biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her. (269)

The biographer highlights the narrowness of the kind of love that registers as narratively significant, which leaves out the richness, variety, and generosity of Orlando's many other loves. The biographer lets us glimpse the range of possibilities—of the kind that frequently assume a central place in asexual lives—before sweeping them away with a tongue-in-cheek avowal of their worthlessness according to the narrative conventions of modernity, in which only sexuality and violence (reminiscent of Freud's great dualism of Eros and Thanatos), are significant.

What I am finally left with, I find, is a playful, temporally fantastical novel in which the asexual possibility is legible but hardly predominant, discernible within the texture of much larger patterns of queerness. I feel, at the end of this dissertation, that I ought to be left with somewhat more, but if this reading has led me only to a series of slightly connected musings rather than an ambitious, overarching statement that binds together my argument as a whole, perhaps that is for the best, for what I have argued for here is a letting-go of seriousness about sexuality, subjectivity, and knowledge and a greater openness to modes of living and knowing that are not assimilable to dominant models of success. My previous chapter was also an exhortation to be suspicious of closure, at the brink of which I now rather awkwardly stand.

The great irony of *Come as You Are*, which Judith Roof must have recognized and manipulated deliberately, is that her very attempt to find a way out of heteronarrative takes the form of a heteronarrative maneuver, as she reaches for a satisfying resolution to the problem she has described in order to end the book. While she proposes a denial of closure as such an escape, the escape is structurally paradigmatic of the model of closure she has critiqued. I realize, likewise, that I have been continually in danger throughout

this conclusion and throughout this dissertation of making the same move. The conventions of rhetorically effective academic prose compel me to impose order on the preceding pages, pull the disparate elements of my argument together, and make something of them, leave you with some closing insight, write a satisfying ending for this story. But suppose I didn't. Suppose I left them where they lay, dragged my feet, stopped dead, failed to conclude. And now what? If I venture any farther than this supposition, I will have passed out of the queer, non-teleological, inconclusive framework of asexual narrative and back into (het)eronarrative.

No, not tonight.

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