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ASEXUAL DRAMATURGIES: READING FOR ASEXUALITY IN THE WESTERN THEATRICAL CANON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2003
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2007
December 2022

Acknowledgements

I have been extremely lucky to have had the amazing support system that made returning to graduate school mid-career a possibility. More people than I can list deserve my gratitude for their love, support, and guidance through this journey.

First, and foremost, special thanks goes to my dissertation chair, John Fletcher, for challenging me and helping me make it to the finish line with his enthusiastic support, keen editor's eye, and invaluable guidance. Shannon Walsh deserves credit for first pushing me towards this topic as being worthy of a dissertation-length study. Alan Sikes gave me endless encouragement in several classes and through the dissertation writing process. I would also like to thank my committee members from outside of the theatre department, Deborah Goldgaber, Benjamin Kahan, and Rhiannon Kroeger, for their excellent advice and insight.

Additional faculty who warrant recognition are: Kristin Sosnowsky, Femi Euba, Elena Castro, Ashley Mack, and Joy Blanchard. I am also grateful for the faculty from my master's program for giving me a baseline knowledge to help with my return to school: Trish Suchy, Ruth Bowman, Michael Bowman, Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, Stephanie Grey, and Laura Sells. I also wish to thank Paloma Gonzalez for helping me to stay on track with all the endless paperwork.

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students, from both my master's and doctoral degrees, particularly my cohort Aaron Wood, Kyra Smith, Dori Leeman, Sara Christian, Katie Morris, Ben Munise, Simi Fadirepo, Taren Wilson, Heyjin Kwon, and Rachel Aker.

I could not have made it without the encouragement and support of my colleagues at Nicholls State University, especially James Stewart, Farren Clark, Richmond Eustis, Barbara Blake, Gary LaFleur, Linda Martin, Nicki Boudreaux, Chelsea Jackson, Serdave Duncan, Marnya Forbes, and Melissa Giandelone, and many others across campus. My Nicholls students,

including my Nicholls Players theatre students over the years, were a large part of my support system. Thanks also goes to my Thibodaux Playhouse family who gave me the creative outlet necessary to get through my final revisions.

My family and friends were the cheering section I needed, most especially Rya Butterfield, Noël Young Smith, Wendy Armington, Kerri Jones Blache, Kit Heart, Jen LoPriore, Nikkisa Christian, Will Heflin, and Rachel Marsh.

I would like to honor my mother, Sandra Bertoniere, whose absence has been sorely felt over the years. I hope I have made her proud. All the love and thanks to my father, Frank Ruffino, for cheering me on with his love, encouragement, and endless pride.

I could not have undertaken this journey without the love and support of my in-laws, Susan and Larry Broussard, whose graciousness truly knows no bounds. I also appreciate the love and encouragement from my stepson, Toby Broussard, who often got stuck listening to me ramble about theatre history. Lastly, I am eternally grateful to my husband, Hunter Broussard, for his constant love, kindness, and patience in seeing me through another graduate degree.

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Abstract

Asexuality has recently gained recognition and visibility as a legitimate sexual orientation and identity standpoint that is usually defined as lacking sexual desire for any gender. Popular culture and the academy have both seen the emergence of a robust conversation about the definition and import of asexuality, recognizing the term as an umbrella concept covering an ever-diversifying array of identities. Within the nascent critical discourse on asexuality, theorists have sought to identify asexuality as a sexual orientation, to rethink our society's sexual normativity, and to question compulsory sexuality, or the assumption that sexual desire is intrinsic to all people, thus inviting a rethinking of established notions of human sexuality. Using this questioning as a driving force of the field, scholars have begun theorizing a way to use asexuality as a lens to view cultural artifacts and texts to seek out places to find traces or resonances of asexuality throughout history. I propose an asexual critical lens—a practice of reading texts and figures to highlight the influence of and resistance to compulsory sexuality. I apply this lens to examine several theatrical figures from dramatic literature who resist compulsory sexuality. Without defining these characters as asexual in the twenty-first century sense, I argue that framing them in relation compulsory sexualities past and present offers us new insights into those texts and adds to an asexual performance archive that can render asexuality as a possibility throughout history.

Introduction.
Asexual Possibility in Performance

This is a story about gaps, about absences, and about lack. So often these terms are framed in the negative and measured against the more positively associated concepts of fullness, presence, and desire. Instead of looking at such terms in the negative, there are generative possibilities found in framing them differently. Might there be something valuable to examine within an absence? Asexuality, which has recently gained recognition and visibility as a legitimate sexual orientation and identity standpoint, is broadly understood as an absence of sexual attraction for any gender or a lack of interest in sex or sexual desire. These absences are what I am interested in pursuing and studying. I propose centering asexuality as a critical lens and a reading practice to provide new dramaturgical choices for the interpretation of texts. The goal of this dissertation is to create a constellation of interpretations that can offer up new ways of viewing sexuality today while being attuned to the gaps and absences of sexuality, thus resisting sedimentation and welcoming disagreements, additions, and subtractions.

The interpretation of scripts, characters, and themes is the lifeblood of the theatre, vital to bringing a dramatic work to life from the page to the stage or to film. By engaging with a work's dramaturgical choices, theatre practitioners are participating in an act of interpretation. Geoffrey S. Proehl defines dramaturgy as "the name given to that set of elements necessary to the working of a play at any moment in its passage from imagination to embodiment."[1] Dramaturgical choices can thus refer to those made about a playscript in its inception all the way to the performance of the script. For this project, however, I am primarily dealing with matters of

[1] Geoffrey S. Prohel, *Towards a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 19.

interpretation and script analysis, not the subsequent choices made in production. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt likewise view dramaturgy "as being about making connections, moving between elements, forming organic wholes which are continually in process; this also implies attention to audience and context."[2] In other words, to title this project "asexual dramaturgies" means to examine the dramaturgical imaginative possibilities that occur when asexuality is centered as an interpretative option for the study of dramatic scripts and their historical context. I argue that an asexual dramaturgical lens is a valuable and necessary tool for interpreting dramatic texts for the stage and thus interrogating assumptions regarding human sexuality as a whole in various historical contexts.

The present-day performance process, in much of the United States and Europe, involves interpretation at almost every stage of a production: from the first reading that piques a director's interest, to the design choices, and finally to the acting choices made in rehearsals. Performance additionally has a long history of being tied to sexual desire. Sex has infiltrated theatre throughout history, with performers being sexualized throughout the centuries. For instance, Kirsten Pullen notes the long historical linking between female performers and sex work, that have often "slipped discursively into one" throughout the history of western theatre.[3] There is even a link between sex and theatrical training, with Kari Barclay, asexuality scholar and playwright, arguing "that several of the most prominent schools of actor training in the United States posit sexual desire as inherent to subjectivity and task the director with unearthing it in

[2] Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, "Series Preface," in Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Architecture: Theatre, Utopia, and the Built Environment* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), x.

[3] Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

hirself and hir pupils."[4] Due to this omnipresent link between sexual desire and actor training, directors have turned to intimacy choreography in order to better obtain actors' consent in staging sexual or intimate scenes.[5] The field of intimacy choreography is gaining popularity, especially in the wake of the #MeToo movement, noting the abuse of power that can and often does happen when rehearsing sex scenes.[6] The need for and use of intimacy choreography demonstrates the interconnectedness of theatre and sex, especially in contemporary theatre. Of course, the strong ties of between theatre and sex are not inherently wrong or bad; however, it is useful to keep in mind that the libido-theatre link is circumstantial, not essential. It may be that theatre is so often tied to sex and sexual desire because sex has become normalized, especially in the twenty-first century. That is, sexual desire is seen as an omnipresent, fundamental element of human life, to the extent that its absence seems anomalous or pathological.

The driving questions of this dissertation are: what happens when we center asexuality and read for the ways that sex is normalized? How is this normalization of sex wielded in literature and performance? Is there a way to create an asexual interpretative lens with which to read and stage dramatic works? What happens when asexuality or nonsexuality is used as an interpretative choice in theatrical productions? What could this interpretation do for young actors, directors, audiences, or even readers of these plays? How might seeking asexuality in plays throughout history allow for new avenues of creativity that could illuminate the lived

[4] Kari Barclay, "Willful Actors: Valuing Resistance in American Actor Training," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 34, no. 1 (2019): 124, https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2019.0027.

[5] Chelsea Pace, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.

[6] Joy Brooke Fairfield, Tonia Sina, Laura Rikard, and Kaja Dunn, "Intimacy Choreography and Cultural Change: An Interview with Leaders in the Field," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 34, no. 1 (2019): 78, https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2019.0024.

experience of asexuality in our current historical moment? These alternative interpretative options need to be made open to theatre, and this dissertation will examine how such interpretations may have been unthinkable until recently.

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's famous nineteenth century novel *Little Women* is one example of a text that could easily be read through an asexual lens.[7] Alcott's novel has been adapted into performance multiple times, including several stage plays, television series, and feature films.[8] Of the many interpretations of Alcott's novel, Gerwig's 2019 film comes closest to allowing for an asexual reading of the protagonist Jo March. Considered to be one of modern literature's most famous almost-spinsters, Jo is a young woman who laments the limitations of her sex and struggles with the expectations that she become a wife and mother, going so far as to refuse a marriage proposal from her childhood friend. Her story seems to be on the road to ending with her as a spinster, yet she falls in love with a foreign professor at the end of the novel, halting her spinster status and reinforcing the stereotypical role of women as part of a heterosexual marriage. Instead of replicating Alcott's linear progression towards a heterosexual love story, Gerwig's major dramaturgical choice tells the story out of order, presenting it as a memory of Jo's process of writing the story of *Little Women*. In this way, Jo's writing and self-sufficiency are given center stage. Gerwig makes another important alteration to the story: she ends the movie with the publication of Jo's book, titled *Little Women*. The 2019 film shows Jo submitting her book to a publisher who initially rejects it, stating that she cannot end the book with her heroine unmarried. Jo quickly resubmits the "corrected"

[7] *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig (2019, Sony Pictures); Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York: Roberts Brothers, 1868-1869).

[8] Alcott's novel was adapted into a stage play for the first time in 1912. Marian De Forest, *Little Women: The Broadway Play of 1912* (Theatre Arts Press, 2017). There have been at least four feature films, as well as several television broadcasts, a ballet, and an opera.

version with a tacked-on love story with a foreign professor and even frames the romance as a concession, stating, "I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition. Even in fiction."[9] Gerwig's film briefly shows the romance between Jo and the foreign professor, yet it does not give a definitive answer as to whether this relationship is real or is a fiction created for the ending of the book within the movie. In presenting the ending as ambiguous, Gerwig rejects the past that would not allow Jo to remain unmarried and offers up a possible revisioning of this past in our present. Stephanie Carpenter argues that "Gerwig suggests a path for Jo that is more like Louisa May Alcott's own as a never-married author, a path Alcott's publisher and her contemporary readers couldn't abide."[10] Alcott was refused a nonsexual ending for her heroine, but Gerwig creates an open-ended possibility and an adaptation that allows for an interpretation of Jo as an asexual woman, opting to live a contented life as a spinster.

Interpreting texts such as *Little Women* as containing a trace of asexuality does not equate to proving that Jo March is, and always has been, an asexual character. Rather, this dissertation suggests that Jo *could* be interpreted as an asexual character. In so doing, I draw influence from queer theory and queer historians to create this asexual dramaturgical lens, not to establish asexuality as a constant throughout history, but to offer it as an interpretative possibility now, for twenty-first century audiences. The articulation of asexuality as an identity is a recent phenomenon that could arguably be considered the product of the twenty-first century.[11] The asexual pride movement, including discourse surrounding definitions of asexuality, has largely

[9] *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig (2019, Sony Pictures).

[10] Stephanie Carpenter, "Marching On: Rereading *Little Women* and Louisa May Alcott," *The Missouri Review* 43, no.1 (2020): 193, https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.2020.0014.

[11] Ela Przybylo, "Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 445, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406461.

occurred online through websites and social media platforms that did not exist prior to the turn of the century.[12] Asexuality is thus a recently enunciated sexuality and therefore, any interpretative lens that centers asexualtiy must consider how asexuality is defined and conceived of in the current moment.

Literature Review: Asexuality Studies

In order to develop an asexual dramaturgical lens, several key terms and interventions are essential for an understanding of the new and blossoming field of asexuality studies. An exhaustive portrait of the field is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and an excellent overview of the field's history can be found in the introduction to Ela Przybylo's 2019 book *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality*.[13] I pause here, then, to review the literature of the field in terms of three key questions regarding asexuality that will contextualize my project and further focus this asexual lens.

First, what is asexuality? Julie Sondra Decker defines asexuality as "as the experience of not being sexually attracted to others. Less commonly, it is defined as not valuing sex or sexual attraction enough to pursue it."[14] Many asexuality scholars and activists likewise describe asexuality as lacking sexual attraction, while other scholars use similar terms, defining asexuality as an absence or as being framed in the negative, i.e., what it is not or does not do.[15] To further

[12] Kristin S. Scherrer, "Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire," *Sexualities* 11, no. 5 (2008): 622, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1363460708094269.

[13] Przybylo details the various contributions to asexuality studies from asexual activists, social science researchers, queer theorists, and feminist scholars. Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019).

[14] Julie Sondra Decker, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing. 2015), 3.

[15] Agata Pacho, "Estabalishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary, and the Collective," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 10, no.1 (2013): 13, http://www.gjss.org/sites/default/files/issues/chapters/papers/Journal-10-01--01-Pacho.pdf.

broaden and complicate the definition of asexuality, C.J. DeLuzio Chasin suggests that for some, asexuality is seen "as primarily being about a disidentification with sexuality (that is, a strong sense of being *not sexual* or *nonsexual* as opposed to being *sexual*)" while for others, "asexuality is primarily about a positive identification … that is, a strong sense of being *asexual/ace* as opposed to *non-asexual*."[16] These additional conceptualizations revolve around either distancing oneself from sexuality or embracing asexuality as an identity, though for some, asexuality could be a combination of both. Neither option is better or more correct than the other. The variety of definitions of asexuality are arguably an integral part of its complexity.

Defining asexuality has been a primary concern for asexual activists, many of whom point to the creation of the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) as the beginning of the understanding of asexuality as a contemporary identity category.[17] Begun by David Jay in 2001, AVEN has provided an online community for those interested in questioning or exploring this identity and served as a resource for a common vocabulary for asexuality.[18]

For example, asexual activists and scholars have opted to use the term "allosexual" to refer to those who do experience sexual desire for others, as a way of pushing against the assumption that the allosexual experience of the world is "normal," while asexuality is "abnormal." Another important distinction is the difference between being asexual (lacking sexual attraction or desire) and aromantic (lacking the desire to form romantic attachments).

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[16] C.J. DeLuzio Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 407, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23719054, (original emphasis).

[17] *AVEN: The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network.* 2001-2022. https://www.asexuality.org/.

[18] Erica Chu, "Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 87.

While it is generally viewed as its own orientation, aromanticism is still often included under the umbrella of asexuality.

Beneath this umbrella concept, a diversity of asexualities is recognized, delineating sexual attraction from romantic attraction. This split attraction model rejects a simplistic binary spectrum with poles of "has sexual attraction" or "does not have sexual attraction." Asexuality scholars instead propose a rhizomatic network of identity-creating potentials for human love, sex, desire, and lack. The metaphor of a "spectrum" has found widespread usage among asexuality activists and scholars in terms of the multitude of identities under the umbrella concept of asexuality.[19]

Asexual individuals may identify as any of several (ever-diversifying) combinations of an asexual or aromantic variety. For instance, a person might be open to forming deep affectional attachments to the opposite gender (heteroromantic) while not experiencing any sexual attraction to anyone (asexual). Or a person might be open to falling in love with either gender (biromantic). Or again, someone might identify as "aromantic asexual," feeling neither romantic nor sexual attractions to anyone. The split between romantic attraction and sexual attraction is important in terms of actual life experiences of those who identify with asexuality, especially since most asexual people are not simply virgins with no dating history. Other potential micro-labels under the asexuality (or "ace") spectrum include those who feel sexual attraction only to people with whom they have formed a serious emotional attachment (demisexual), those whose orientation is somewhere between asexual and allosexual (gray-asexual or graysexual), or those whose identity fluctuates between asexual and allosexual (ace-flux). There is no single, gold-star definition of

[19] Amanda L. Mollet and Brian R. Lackman, "Asexual Borderlands: Asexual Collegians' Reflections on Inclusion Under the LGBTQ Umbrella," *Journal of College Student Development* 59, no. 5 (2018): 624, https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0058.

an asexual person. While these ever-innovating micro-labels may seem tedious, they can be immensely helpful and meaningful for those trying to map out their own desires.

In defining what asexuality is, it is also helpful to briefly mention what asexuality is not. The term "asexual" has been used in several different ways that do not quite jibe with current definitions of asexuality as an identity category. For instance, feminist scholar Joan Acker notes that the term "asexual" has historically been used as another word for "gender-neutral."[20] While Acker examines the deployment of gender-neutrality in terms of organizational theory in 1990, her use of the term is relevant here. For Acker, when organizations are presumed "asexual" or gender-neutral, they ignore sexuality, especially when it concerns women and non-heterosexual individuals, thus marking "neutrality" as another term for those in a position of privilege and power.[21] Asexuality studies concerns itself with problematizing what is considered "normal" sexuality as well as divorcing the concept of asexuality from this construction of neutrality. Additionally, the term "asexual" is sometimes used interchangeably with being not only gender-neutral, but with lacking sexual organs. For instance, Leah DeVun, in her study on nonbinary individuals in premodern civilization, often uses the term "asexual" to connote a form of androgyny germane to her project.[22] I will be exploring these definitional slips throughout this project in light of the ways that the concept of asexuality has shifted over time and begun to be more broadly understood as an identity.

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[20] Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender & Society* 4, no, 2 (1990): 142, https://www.jstor.org/stable/189609.

[21] Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies," 150-151.

[22] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 122.

Early research into asexuality was primarily concerned with charting out what asexuality is and who identifies with it.[23] Social science researchers who have engaged in interviews with asexual individuals (both in person and through AVEN) have noted that arriving at asexuality as an identity or orientation is a complex process of self-questioning, self-discovery, and self-identification.[24] This research indicates that asexual individuals often lack the vocabulary to adequately describe their experiences and feelings before coming to an asexual identity. The 2011 documentary *(A)Sexual* notes this long process of self-identification and showcases several interviews with asexual people who largely share this long process of self-discovery.[25] For many of these individuals, it took stumbling across AVEN for them to put a name to their experience and their sexual orientation.

I had a similarly long process that took years to finally land on an asexual or gray-asexual identity. Several years ago, after feeling that something about my experiences of sexuality was somehow different in a way I could not articulate, I began with the assumption of a pathology. This was a problem that needed to be solved. Further research brought me to AVEN, and I started to consider the possibility that maybe my feelings did not require a medical diagnosis. I began mining my personal history for hints and traces that I perhaps did not experience sexual desire the same way as others. It took even longer to understand asexuality as something that I

[23] For example, among the early scholarly research into asexuality is Anthony Bogaert's 2004 study which suggested that approximately one percent of the population identified as asexual. Anthony F Bogaert, "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample," *Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 282, http://www.jstor.com/stable/4423785.

[24] Mark Carrigan, "There's More to Life than Sex?: Difference and Commonality within the Asexual Community," *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 473, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406462.

[25] *(A)Sexual*, directed by Angela Tucker (2011; San Francisco, CA: FilmBuff).

could claim as an identity. After much soul searching and long talks with my partner, I came to find a comfortable, yet perhaps slightly fluid, graysexual identity.

While many asexual individuals may share some commonalities in the journey to discovering asexuality, those who come to an asexual identity do not have uniform experiences of what it means to be asexual, to claim the identity, nor how their identity manifests along the asexual spectrum. These experiences are explored in popular press books such as Julia Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation*, Anthony Bogaert's *Understanding Asexuality*, and more recently, Angela Chen's *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex*. In conjunction to the online work of AVEN, these books have helped bring asexuality to a larger audience.[26]

A second key question in the field of asexuality studies asks, what is asexuality's relationship to queerness? As asexuality has gained broader understanding, it has been articulated as a sexual orientation in its own right, oftentimes falling under the LGBTQIA umbrella, with the "A" coming to represent the asexual community.[27] Yet there has still been some resistance to asexuality being defined as "queer" by many in the larger queer community.[28] Even today, debate about this issue fills online forums.

When Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks's article "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice" appeared in the journal *Feminist Studies* in 2010, it

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[26] Julie Sondra Decker, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015); Anthony F Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

[27] Mollet and Lackman, "Asexual Borderlands," 625.

[28] Dominique A. Canning, "Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces," *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015): 67, http://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol8/iss1/6.

was among the earliest academic articles to posit asexuality as a "newly enunciated sexuality" and align it with feminist and queer studies.[29] Their article was also among the first to hypothesize the emergence of asexuality studies as its own academic field, a prediction that proved to be true only four years later with the publication of their edited volume *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. In the book's introduction, they explicitly tie asexuality to queerness, since asexuality articulates the social marginalization of those who prefer not to have sex, as well as explores "new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures."[30] If queerness can be broadly defined to include alternative ways of relating outside of sexual normativity, then asexuality can be considered queer. Asexuality easily fits within Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of queerness as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[31] When queerness is defined as a imagining a plurality of sexualities that resist normative constructions of sexuality, then asexuality can easily be included within such a framework.

Many asexual people, including those who are a part of the AVEN online community, cite asexuality as an inherent part of themselves, similarly to how many queer individuals self-define. Kristin Scherrer's work is one of the earliest to study asexuality as an identity and discuss

[29] Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, "New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice," *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 650, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27919126.

[30] Megan Milks and Karli June Cerankowski, "Introduction: Why Asexuality? Why Now?" in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3.

[31] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

the ways in which it is articulated. She states that asexual identities "are also defined in opposition to celibacy and celibate identities, which are described as a choice."[32] Through interviews with several asexually identified individuals, she discovered that the distinction between asexuality and celibacy was crucial to these individuals, noting the "naturalness of their asexuality" as being important to their overall self-concept.[33]

However, a growing number of scholars in the field, as well as asexual individuals and activists, complicate this distinction. For instance, Breanne Fahs explores the potential of asexuality as a choice, especially what the refusal of sex can offer feminism. Fahs states that women choosing to exercise political asexuality or celibacy can distance themselves from the patriarchal imperative towards heterosexual marriage and motherhood, thus, advocating a freedom *from* sex.[34] Fahs situates this concept in terms of the history of second wave feminism, but she also articulates what it would mean for people to adopt asexuality as a political choice today. Fahs suggests that "framing asexuality as a viable and politically significant choice transforms it into a compelling and depathologized option, particularly as it elegantly mirrors our cultural anxieties, political priorities, and deeply troubled constructions of gender, power, and sexual life."[35] While Fahs's construction of asexuality is by no means a mainstream viewpoint, it does contain interesting possibilities in terms of how identities are formed with regard to choice.

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[32] Scherrer, "Coming to an Asexual Identity," 631.

[33] Scherrer, "Coming to an Asexual Identity," 631.

[34] Fahs is not the first to consider asexuality as a choice for women. The first of instance of contemporary scholarship regarding asexuality at all hints at asexuality as a feminist choice and can be attributed to Myra T. Jonson, who in 1977 describes women who seem "to *prefer* not to engage in sexual activity." Myra T. Johnson, "Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups," in *The Sexually Oppressed*, ed. Harvey L. Gochros and Jean S. Gochros (New York: Association Press, 1977), 97.

[35] Fahs, "Radical Refusals," 458.

Similarly, Benjamin Kahan problematizes the division between asexuality and celibacy, ultimately calling for considering celibacy as a distinct sexual identity. Kahan describes a range of meanings for celibacy, such as a synonym for the unmarried, as a performative vow, as a political self-identification, as a period between sexual activity, and as a resistance to compulsory sexuality.[36] All of these descriptors of celibacy demonstrate a plurality of potential meanings for celibacy. Kahan further argues against conceiving of celibacy as a "'closeting' screen for another identity."[37] This way of conceiving of celibacy as a sexual identity as opposed to being a placeholder for another sexual identity speaks to the project of recognizing asexuality as its own sexual identity formation. Kahan demonstrates that there is "significant overlap between celibacy and asexuality," which neatly aligns with the idea of asexual people choosing to disidentify with sexuality.[38]

The complications to the definitional boundaries of asexuality are reminiscent of arguments regarding "born this way" discourse in the larger queer community, which has similar reverberations for asexuality. Lisa Duggan problematizes the rhetoric of "fixed identity position" of gay rights politics and instead offers a way of articulating queerness in terms of a religion.[39] Duggan thus suggests viewing queerness as analogous to a religious identity. In her view, queerness, like religion, is not a natural or fixed orientation, but it is a deep, non-trivial mode of self that resists suppression or forcible change. Asexuality can function in a similar manner.

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[36] Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); 2.

[37] Kahan, *Celibacies,* 2.

[38] Kahan, *Celibacies,* 151-152 and Cerankowski and Milks, "New Orientations," 659.

[39] Lisa Duggan, "Queering the State," *Social Text* 39 (1994): 4, http://www.jstor.org/stable/466361.

Cerankowski and Milks also echo the push and pull of defining asexuality as a choice vs. a fixed identity position.[40] By viewing asexuality, like queerness, in Duggan's framework, asexuality can be shown as a deep commitment that resists the sort of gatekeeping that an identarian model might foster.[41] I do, however, agree that asexuality should be considered a distinct sexual orientation. Defining asexuality as an identity and sexual orientation has important meaning for asexual individuals, but there is also value in articulating asexuality as a choice. These multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory definitions of asexuality are part of what make it exciting to study as a field. Melanie Yergeau, for example, advocates to "regard asexuality queerly because asexuality regards both desire and identity as fluctuating and transient," even further questioning the stability of sexual identity categories.[42] I follow asexual scholars, then, by rejecting the need to define "the asexual" exhaustively, choosing instead to focus on asexuality's queer existence within and resistance to normative constructions of sexuality.

This leads to the third key question of asexuality studies, which asks, how does asexuality queer and interrogate sexuality? If sexuality can be widely defined as "the desires, relationships, acts, and identities concerned with sexual behavior," then asexuality, understood as a

[40] Cerankowski and Milks, "New Orientations," 658.

[41] For instance, the AVEN online forums often involve debates surrounding the definition of asexuality or who should use what specific label. Sometimes these forums feature people questioning their own identity, asking if they can claim the label based on their experiences. Even among self-identified asexual people, a quick perusal of the forums shows that there are not strict definitional parameters for asexuality. *AVEN: The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network*. 2001-2022. https://www.asexuality.org/.

[42] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) 192.

disidentification with sexuality, can be situated outside of sexuality.[43] In a way then, asexuality questions the normative assumption that sexual desire is intrinsic to all people.

Nathan Snaza, for example, suggests that we consider asexuality queer by understanding it as a "queer *orientation to sexuality*," positing that asexuality is more than merely an addition under the queer umbrella, but in fact questions the normative assumption of sexuality in the first place.[44] This problematization of sexual normativity has been one of the driving themes of asexuality studies as a field and has led a rethinking of ostentatiously basic notions of human sexuality. Multiple asexuality scholars have recognized and defined this normalization of sex through a variety of terms: compulsory sexuality, sexusociety, sexualnormativity, the sexual assumption, and sex-normative culture.[45] Relatedly, Elizabeth Brake defines amatonormativity, which describes "the focus on marital and amorous love relationships as sites of special value," arguing that romantic (and thus, sexual) relationships are assumed to be the most valuable relationships individuals have.[46] Amatonormativity is thus linked to the normalization of sex through its privileging of romantic/sexual partnerships.

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[43] Anna Clark, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.

[44] Nathan Snaza, "Asexuality and Erotic Biopolitics," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 123, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0043, (original emphasis).

[45] For "compulsory sexuality," see: Kristina Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 1 (2015): 132, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681774 and Elizabeth Emens, "Compulsory Sexuality," *The Stanford Law Review* 66 (2014), 306, https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/1786. For "sexusociety," see: Przybylo, "Crisis and Safety," 446. For "sexual assumption," see: Carrigan, "There's more to life than sex?," 474. For "sexualnormativity," see: Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential," 417. For "sex-normative culture," see: Cerankowski and Milks, "New Orientations," 661.

[46] Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

The most widely cited conception of sexual normativity comes from Kristina Gupta, who uses the term "compulsory sexuality," drawing from Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality.[47] Gupta defines compulsory sexuality as "the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity."[48] In other words, compulsory sexuality hinges on the assumption that everyone experiences some form of sexual attraction/desire which thus compels individuals within this system to express their sexuality in order to be legible as human. Compulsory sexuality, then, can be viewed as the process by which individuals are compelled to participate in the system of erotic subjectivity, which has come to be known as sexuality. Instead of viewing compulsory sexuality in terms of the process of claiming an identity, sexuality, and thus compulsory sexuality, can be understood as the organizing principle for which sex and gender are understood and policed.

The evidence of compulsory sexuality is pervasive. Sex is considered so natural and assumed that asexuality has been historically pathologized as a dysfunction. The historical framing of low sexual desire or lack of sexual desire as a "sexual dysfunction" in need of a cure demonstrates compulsory sexuality at work and the history of pathologizing deviant sexualities, which further renders asexuality unimaginable as a subject position.[49] When sexual desire is normalized through the language of pathology and health, a lack of desire is construed as

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[47] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4, (1980): 632, https://doi.org/10.1086/493756.

[48] Gupta, "Compulsory Sexuality,"132.

[49] Jacinthe Flore, "Mismeasures of Asexual Desires," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,* ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 18.

requiring medical and/or psychological attention. While there are those for whom a low libido can necessitate a medical diagnosis, it is the presumption of pathology and the imposition of "sanctions against not wanting sex" (medical or otherwise) that asexual activists find objectionable.[50] By framing desire in terms of health, any deviation regarding a lack or excess of sex is equated with unhealth and therefore undesirable enough to require medical intervention. Within this framework, asexuality is not an option, and is more thoroughly rendered unthinkable. This pathologizing of low sexual desire is arguably the inheritance of psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis was revolutionary in terms of conceptualizations of sexual desire (including psychoanalytic feminist theories), classical psychoanalysis also leaves no room for asexuality.[51] Elizabeth Hannah Hanson describes the unintelligibility of asexuality within Freud's framework, stating "asexuality *does not—cannot*—exist for psychoanalysis."[52] Asexuality is nearly impossible to theorize or interpret within a framework that posits sexuality as a norm for all humans, and asexuality scholars generally resist defining asexuality as a pathology or as repression.[53]

For instance, Melissa E. Sanchez states that asexuality scholars argue for "the possibility that the absence of sexual desire may really be a desire for a sexless existence, not a sublimation

[50] Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality and its Radical Potential," 416.

[51] For an example of a feminist response to psychoanalysis, see: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[52] Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, 2013. "Making Something Out of Nothing: Asexuality." (PhD diss., Loyola Universtiy Chicago, 2013), 83 (original emphasis). Hanson goes into detail regarding the incompatibility of psychoanalysis as an interpretative tool for articulating asexuality in her dissertation.

[53] See: Megan Milks, "Stunted Growth: Asexual Politics and the Rhetorics of Sexual Liberation," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,* edited by Karli June Cerankwoski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107.

or repression of drives that dare not speak their names."[54] Thus, the assumption of sublimation or repression is a function of the overall system of compulsory sexuality. Carter Vance similarly points to the constructed nature of compulsory sexuality, which asexuality exposes "as a socially organized, not innate, phenomenon."[55] In other words, asexuality allows for a deeper look into the ways in which sexuality is assumed for everyone and how that assumption is socially constructed rather than a natural given.

Since asexuality has often been pathologized or seen as a deficit, the fields of asexuality studies and disability studies are deeply intertwined.[56] The relationship between disability and asexuality is complicated, because to suggest that asexuality is disempowering, as Eunjung Kim notes, erases the experiences of disabled people who do identify as asexual. For Kim, asexuality should be "viewed as one of many creative possibilities" within our culture of compulsory sexuality.[57] Kim further explores how asexuality is assumed as a given for disabled people, stating that desexualization "produces a form of objectification and dehumanization that denies the humanity of disabled and neurodiverse people, for it is taken for granted that every normative body – and thus 'all' human beings – possesses sexual 'instincts.'"[58] Kim is careful to note the

[54] Melissa E. Sanchez, "Protestantism, Marriage, and Asexuality in Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare/Sex: Contemporary Readings in Gender and Sexuality,* edited by Jennifer Drouin (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 102.

[55] Carter Vance, "Towards a Historical Materialist Concept of Asexuality and Compulsory Sexuality," *Studies in Social Justice* 12, no. 1 (2018): 149, https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v12i1.1537.

[56] Karen Cuthbert, "You have to be Normal to be Abnormal: An Empirically Grounded Exploration of the Intersection of Asexuality and Disability." *Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2017): 242, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515587639.

[57] Eunjung Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives." *Sexualities* 14, no. (2011): 487, http://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406463.

[58] Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives," 483.

difference between asexuality as an identity and the process of desexualization which ascribes asexuality onto certain bodies and is thus another byproduct of compulsory sexuality, a point which is also noted by Karen Cuthbert.[59] Compulsory sexuality does not merely compel people to be sexual; it polices who is allowed to be sexual and thus desexualizes those it deems unfit for sexuality.

The history of desexualization also has a long history of being tied to race. Ianna Hawkins Owen argues that the discourses of asexuality have been used forcibly desexualize people of color, particularly black women, as a means of controlling their bodies. Owen thus problematizes the growing field of asexuality and challenges the field to avoid erasing previous incarnations of asexuality that have functioned to control the bodies of people of color.[60] In short, the term "asexual" is still haunted by histories of racialized desexualization, which Owen reminds asexuality scholars needs to be fully addressed. However, what Owen describes is more often considered "desexualization," so named by Karen Cuthbert as the preferred terminology to specifically distinguish desexualization from asexuality as orientation.[61] Theresa N. Kenney makes a similar point noting that asexuality is thus intricately tied to race and requires intersectional approaches that avoid "positioning asexuality around whiteness," meaning that scholars of asexuality need to be attuned to the intersection of race with asexuality.[62]

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[59] Karen Cuthbert, "Disability and Asexuality," in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability and Sexuality*, ed. Russell Shuttleworth and Linda R. Mona (London: Routledge, 2020), 374.

[60] Ianna Hawkins Owen, "On the Racialization of Asexuality" in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 121.

[61] Karen Cuthbert, "Disability and Asexuality," 374.

[62] Theresa N. Kenney, "Thinking Asexually: Sapin-Sapin, Asexual Assemblages, and the Queer Possibilities of Platonic Relationalities." *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 17, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0038.

When broadened to further consider intersectional approaches with gender in mind, recent scholarship has begun linking asexuality studies to trans studies. The intersection between people who identify as both asexual and transgender has been noted by Cuthbert, who finds that these studies into the lives of asexual and gender-variant people "highlight the ways in which asexuality is an inherently gendered phenomenon, as it involves understandings and practices of sexual desire, sexual activity, and agency, all of which are intimately tied to gender."[63] Rather than indulge the push to separate out gender from sexuality, Cuthbert demonstrates that for some people, this separation is impossible, and to force such a separation between gender and sexuality renders them unintelligible. Both asexuality and trans studies call for a renewed focus on difference and a relinquishing of our attachment to essentialist definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

The scholarly arguments regarding the above intersections with asexuality will be analyzed more deeply in later chapters. Ultimately, this research on the various intersections of asexuality further questions the shifting definition of asexuality and the constellation of possibilities for asexual identifying individuals.

These three key questions regarding how asexuality is defined, how it relates to queerness, and how it queers sexuality are the starting points that will aid in the creation of an asexual reading strategy that goes deeper than simply finding asexual characters in theatre history. Being attuned to the shifting and complicated definitions of asexuality, as well as reading for asexuality in terms of queerness allows for an expansive conception of what can count as asexuality. Asking how asexuality queers sexuality offers an opportunity to delve into

[63] Karen Cuthbert, "When We Talk About Gender We Talk About Sex: (A)sexuality and (A)gendered Subjectivities," *Gender and Society* 33, no. 6 (2019): 845, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243219867916.

assumptions about human nature, sexuality, and romance often found at the crux of theatre. These three questions regarding asexuality will guide a methodology in terms of finding characters who are resistant to normative sexuality in theatre history.

Methodology: An Asexual Interpretative Lens

Examining representations of asexuality in art, literature, and theatre is one potential avenue for revitalizing our understandings of sexuality as a whole. However, since asexuality is generally considered to be either an invisible orientation or a newly enunciated sexual orientation, there are very few representations of overt asexuality in popular culture. Since representations of asexuality have until recently been scarce, it is rare to find scholars engaging in critique of representations of asexuality in popular culture and history, though this has expanded in more recent years. Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper have mapped out a methodology to broaden the scholarship in asexuality studies to include representation and interpretation by locating what they call "asexual resonances," understood here to mean traces, touches, moments, or ephemeral fragments of asexuality in unexpected places where it may not be overtly mentioned.[64] They state that a "queer broadening of what can 'count' as asexuality, especially historically speaking, creates space for unorthodox and unpredictable understandings and manifestations of asexuality."[65] Rather than focusing on creating a proper or "correct" definition of asexuality, Przybylo and Cooper make room for possibilities of asexuality where it may have been hidden, invisible, or otherwise ignored by a sex normative society. For instance, they reference Valerie Solanas's "SCUM Manifesto" as a work that contains resonances of

[64] Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, 2014. "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 298, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2422683.

[65] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 298.

asexuality, considering Solanas's distrust of the centrality of sex, even though she does not specifically use the term "asexual."[66]

In her book, *Asexual Erotics*, Przybylo continues her project of seeking asexual resonances "to think about the critiques, forms of reading, and modes of relating that are made possible when asexuality is centralized."[67] Her work considers various tropes surrounding asexuality, such as radical feminist political celibacy, lesbian bed death, childhood, and spinsterhood. She views these tropes as places to find asexual resonances that feature different ways of relating. The sites she chooses within these tropes all feature artistic works and texts from the mid-twentieth century to the present, leaving room for other scholars to apply her strategy to texts from other times as well. She analyzes her artifacts from an asexual standpoint, utilizing the metaphor of the "erotic" (as articulated by Audre Lorde) as a critical lens that imagines ways of relating that do not center sex.[68]

Since asexuality is a new concept that is still being articulated, "perfect" examples of asexuality are difficult to find. This holds true for history as well as for contemporary definitions of asexuality as an identity or orientation. Asexuality is defined as a lack of sexual attraction, and thus it is hard to articulate how one can be oriented towards nothing, which makes asexuality trickier to pin down than other orientations. Personally speaking, when I first heard of asexuality, I thought it was nonsense. Even to this day, after all the research and self-reflection, I still question if I am "asexual enough" to even claim the identity. For this reason, the idea of "asexual

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[66] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonance," 309 and Valerie Solanas, SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto (1967)," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 213.

[67] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 26.

[68] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 57.

resonances" is helpful as a critical stance. Resonances of asexuality do not need to have a definitive asexual definition to be considered asexual enough; they can be imperfect traces. In searching for these imperfect traces, it is helpful to consider a queer rhetorical gesture that imagines queerness (or asexuality, in this case) as a lens for interpretation.

In addition to using Przybylo and Cooper's "asexual resonances" as a starting point, I pattern my methods after Stacy Wolf's reading practice that queers twentieth century American musicals by using a rhetorical gesture to read ostensibly straight characters (and by extension, actors) as "lesbian."[69] For Wolf, "the challenge is to determine how lesbians appear where none officially exist," using "lesbian" as a reading/viewing practice as well as an identity.[70] "Lesbian" then becomes a queer interpretive position from which to engage with a text. She draws in part from Jill Dolan's feminist spectator who views works that are not meant for her and constructs the feminist spectator as both a theoretical standpoint and an identity standpoint.[71] It is in this manner that Dolan uses a critical lens to access theatre that was not made for her as a feminist spectator as well as critique feminist performance with rigor and earnestness. Wolf however, primarily uses her lesbian spectator not as a critical standpoint in the way of Dolan, but as more of a "what if."

Wolf's "what if" is similar to Richard Schechner's concepts of "is" and "as" performance.[72] For Schechner, "something 'is' a performance when historical and social context,

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[69] Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

[70] Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 4.

[71] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Universityy of Michigan Press, 2012), 2.

[72] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 30.

convention, usage, and tradition say it is," meaning that definitions of performance depend on its context.[73] Conversely, he states that "any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied 'as' performance, can be analyzed in terms of doing, behaving, and showing."[74] In other words, if one attempts to study something "as" performance, all that would be needed would be to use "performance" as a lens for analysis. Wolf takes a similar approach with these musicals by reading famous musical theatre actresses and their most well-known performances *as* a lesbian spectator and through a lesbian lens. Wolf claims that in order to read a body onstage as a lesbian, one must first have some identity that comes to mind. Wolf calls this a certain "circular knowledge," suggesting that there must be some already existing representations of lesbians from which to base these readings.[75] Wolf is careful to note that said circular knowledge is often derivative of possibly damaging stereotypes of queer women. To avoid this, Wolf looks for places where she sees lesbianism as being relational, since there are no overt depictions of lesbians in the musicals she analyzes. These instances include women, such as Eliza in *My Fair Lady*, who defy gender norms by not being part of a heterosexual couple, as well as the homosocial environment seen in the convent of *The Sound of Music*.[76]

This brings up an important point regarding how one might read for asexuality onstage: *there is no circular knowledge of asexuality from which to draw upon*. Asexuality is only just now beginning to even be understood as a possibility, and representations of it are so scarce that it lacks the visibility of other queer identities. It is for this reason that the idea of "resonances" or "traces" are so important – these may be the only images of asexuality that are available. In

[73] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 30.

[74] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 32.

[75] Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 38.

[76] Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 151 and 228.

taking a similar approach to Wolf, sites or identities that likewise defy gender and sexual norms or create an eroticism that does not centralize sex can be used to read for asexuality. This approach allows for a look backwards into history, before asexuality or even heterosexuality and homosexuality were articulated, to find these sorts of traces or resonances of asexuality.

Several queer scholars have set a precedent in looking backward into history in order to read for queerness. Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, argues for "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now."[77] In other words, Dinshaw seeks to bridge the queer past with the queer present to illuminate queer possibilities in the present. Through this bridge, Dinshaw is attempting to engage with Muñoz's "backwards glance that enacts a future vision," by looking to the queer past to find ways of envisioning a queer future through traces or resonances of queerness.[78]

Similarly, Christine Varnado uses this backward impulse as a mode for a literary critique of early modern drama. She calls for "a literary trace of queerness" that considers how nonnormative desires are communicated through literary texts.[79] For Varnado, this literary trace of queerness is not the same thing as conveniently "discovering" homosexuality in past contexts that do not resemble our own. Instead, Varnado offers a queer reading practice, that exists as "a meso-level space in between the best-guess reconstructions of historical inquiry (what happened,

[77] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press. 1999), 1.

[78] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press. 2009), 4.

[79] Christine Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy: Reading for Queer Desire in Early Modern Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2020), 8.

and how people thought about it) and the motivated ideations of presentist interpretation (what we read into texts)."[80] Simply put, while it is impossible for us to know authorial intent, we as readers and interpreters of texts can create meaning relevant to our own contemporary audiences. Reading then, for Varnado, is "the reader's act of assembling meaning, through a dynamic process *akin to a performance's realization of a script*, from the repertoire provided by the formal features of the text."[81] This reading practice, the process of finding a literary trace of queerness, lends itself easily to a queer dramaturgical practice of interpretation. While Varnado articulates a trace of literary queerness in dramatic literature, I argue that an asexual dramaturgical lens can be used to follow a similar trajectory. Of course, the pendulum can swing too far in the other direction, meaning that texts should not become open playgrounds wherein any sort of interpretation can be added. That is why the idea of asexual resonances is so important. While it may be next to impossible to find asexual characters in dramatic literature prior to the twenty-first century, characters that may resonate with asexuality or disidentify with sexuality may be easier to locate.

Elizabeth Hanna Hanson engages in a similar attempt to read for an asexual narrative structure, seeking instances of what she terms "asexual possibility" within a story's structure. [82] Rather than searching for an individual character upon which to ascribe asexuality, Hanson resists the pull to find "asexual people in history or literature." Instead, she looks for the possibility of reading for asexuality within a narrative's structure that is identified with stasis and

[80] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 16.

[81] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 21, (added emphasis).

[82] Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 346.

with an absence of desire.[83] She examines two works by Henry James, the short story "The Beast in the Jungle" and the novel *The Sacred Fount*. This asexual possibility as an interpretative gesture, as opposed to pointing to proof of asexuality in past literature, is useful in broadening the potential sites where asexual resonances can be found and explored.

In the Winter 2020 special issue of *Feminist Formations*, Ela Przbylo and Kristina Gupta open up the possibility of putting asexuality into conversation with nonsexuality. "Considering nonsexuality broadly as including those areas where sex and sexuality are not central, are absent, or are questioned, it becomes possible to apply asexuality studies' unique contributions to other fields of study."[84] Nonsexuality, then, would refer to a marked divergence from and resistance to regimes of compulsory sexuality that includes but is not limited to asexual identifications. In other words, and for the purpose of this dissertation, asexuality can be understood as being the term for the twenty-first century identity as a sexual orientation, while nonsexuality can more broadly refer to behavior. Broadening conceptions of asexuality to include nonsexuality allows for a richer understanding of what could be read as asexuality and can help create a "what if" to read for asexuality, similar to Wolf's onstage lesbian. This move also brings asexual possibility into conversation as a potential reading strategy. Instead of looking for perfect images or asexuality that do not exist, nonsexual behaviors can be viewed relationally and more broadly.

In looking to nonsexualities, several adjacent fields can be knitted together to create a richer understanding of asexuality. Works such as Benjamin Kahan's *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, Peter Cryle and Allison Moore's *Frigidity: An Intellectual History*,

[83] Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," 354.

[84] Ela Przybylo and Kristina Gupta, "Editorial Introduction: The Erotics of Asexualities and Nonsexualities: Intersectional Approaches," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): xi, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0034.

Angus McLaren's *Impotence: A Cultural History*, Theodora A. Jankowski's *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama*, Kara French's *Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America,* and Michael Cobb's *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* are just some examples of scholarship that have left a mark on studies of asexuality and contribute to the field through their tie to nonsexualities.[85] These larger works have also engaged in literary criticism and cultural theory regarding various articulations of nonsexuality or asexuality-adjacent subjects.

There are several scholars who have contributed to the search for asexuality and nonsexuality in a variety of literary texts and media, in present and past contexts. While some examine current representations of overt asexuality, others have branched off of Przbylo and Cooper's concept of searching for places in history or literature where asexuality may not be as overtly described. For instance, several chapters in Cerankowski and Milks' anthology *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives* are devoted to an examination of film and literature from an asexual perspective.[86] The Winter 2020 special issue of *Feminist Formations*

[85] Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies*; Peter Cryle and Alison Moore, *Frigidity: An Intellectual History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Kara French, *Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); and Michael Cobb, *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

[86] Cynthia Barounis, "Compulsory Sexuality and Asexual/Crip Resistance in John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus,*" in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,* ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014) 174-198; Jana Fedtke, "'What to Call that Sport, the Neuter Human...': Asexual Subjectivity in Keri Hume's *The Bone People*," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,* ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014) 329-343; and Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," 344-374.

includes several articles that follow a similar impulse regarding asexuality and nonsexuality.[87] Other research examining asexuality or nonsexuality in literature have been appearing with more frequency in the past decade. Some examples of such scholarship include Simone Chess's research on the convergence between asexuality and anorexia in *The Woman Killed with Kindness* and *The Broken Heart*, Megan Arkenberg's examination of the asexuality of Galahad in *Le Morte D'arthur,* and Jordan Windholz's study of queer male chastity in *All's Well that Ends Well*.[88] These works offer up rich critical and theoretical explorations of asexuality, nonsexuality, and compulsory sexuality. They all commonly look to instances of nonsexuality, virginity, or celibacy that seem to queer or to push against the normative (or compulsory) sexuality of the times within which the works appear. Many of these studies tell stories of absence, viewing the lack of overt sexual desire as containing a possibility or traces of asexuality. Megan Arkenberg argues that "reading asexuality anachronistically into historical texts can contribute to contemporary efforts at asexual community building," echoing the queer impulses of Dinshaw, Varnado, and Muñoz. These sorts of backwards glances into literary and

[87] Anna Kurowicka, "'The only story I will ever be able to tell': Nonsexual Erotics of Friendship in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Tana French's *The Likeness*," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 24-50, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0039; Justin Smith, "'[T]he happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem': Asexuality as Resistance to Social Reproduction in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 51-74, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0040; and Min Joo Lee, "Intimacy Beyond Sex: Korean Television Dramas, Nonsexual Masculinities, and Transnational Erotic Desires," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 100-120, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0042.

[88] Simone Chess, "Opting Out: Anorexia, Asexuality, and Early Modern Women," *Early Modern Women,* 15, no. 1, (2020), https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2020.0009; Megan Arkenberg, "'A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood': Galahad's Asexuality and its Significance in *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 24, no. 3 (2014): 3-22, https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2014.0039; and Jordan Windholz, "The Queer Testimonies of Male Chastity in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Modern Philology* 116 no. 4 (2019): 322-349, https://doi.org/10.1086/701950.

dramaturgical sites throughout history have value for readers and audiences today.[89] In a sense, these sorts of backwards glances create a loose archive of sites where asexual resonances can be glimpsed. To quote Przybylo and Cooper, "to be archivable thus means to be self-identified and identifiable;" in other words, to be archivable is to be thinkable.[90] The value of seeking out asexual resonances is that it provides a way to imagine the possibility of living a nonsexual life, in the past, as well as in the present and into the future. This imaginative possibility is vital for those who begin to come to an asexuality identity.

More recently, the "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance: An ACMRS Roundtable" in October of 2020 featured several scholars similarly playing with how to craft an asexual reading strategy, offering up readings of early modern dramatic works, primarily those of Shakespeare.[91] A common theme among the participants dealt with the process of creating this reading strategy and theorizing how to read asexuality onstage. Even though there has been a significant increase in literary analysis of asexuality, there is still a dearth of work on asexuality in performance, leaving performance texts and practices as a largely untapped resource for asexuality studies. As evidenced by the roundtable and few articles mentioned above, this is changing, and the field of asexuality studies is blossoming.

So why attempt to create an asexual reading strategy? What is the significance of creating an interpretive lens to read asexuality into past literary texts? Rather than consider this dissertation as an attempt to overlay asexual identity onto past performance practices

[89] Arkenberg, "A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood," 4.

[90] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 302.

[91] Jeff Wade, et. al, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance: An ACMRS Roundtable," Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, October 20, 3030, video, 1:00:31, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vSgG02fH6M.

anachronistically, instead, I seek to craft an interpretive lens with which to create readings and performances *today*. While these characters may have existed in the past, an assertion that is impossible to prove, we are reading and performing their stories now. Our current moment within which asexuality is newly legible is the moment that we as readers, audience members, and theatre practitioners would be reading and producing these texts. An asexual lens could bring new life to these characters that could be seen on our stages or in our pages. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, for instance, has been adapted well over a dozen times, and each adaptation, particularly the feature films, exists as a microcosm of the time within which it was released. Greta Gerwig's 2019 film comes closest to creating an ending for Jo March where she could live happily as a spinster and an author. It is no coincidence that in 2019 we see a film that gives a trace of nonsexuality, an opening that allows for an interpretation of Jo as asexual. Arguing for Jo's asexuality in 2019 does not ascribe it to Alcott's Jo from 1868, or Katherine Hepburn's Jo in 1933, or Winona Ryder's Jo in 1994.[92] Instead, it is an interpretative possibility for twenty-first century audiences who are newly enunciating asexuality as its own sexual orientation.

Such interpretations provide visible representations of asexuality as a possibility today. When representations of asexuality are made visible, the lived experience can be recognizable and thinkable. And frankly, to make the stakes personal: these interpretations help me recognize myself in an imperfect mirror. It took a long time to discover asexuality as an identity rather than something for which I should seek unwanted medication. While some may consider visibility a trap, for others, having this identity represented and visible is a way of recognizing oneself that does not end in a clinical diagnosis.

[92] *Little Women* directed by George Cukor (1933; RKO Radio Pictures); *Little Women*, directed by Gillian Armstrong (1994; Columbia Pictures).

And yet, power is not automatically granted simply by becoming more visible. There are price tags to visibility. One such price tag is the misrecognition of asexuality and the coopting of the discourse by the toxic masculinity/white supremacy of the incel movement, which treats the absence of sex, what they term "*involuntary* celibacy" as an injury towards (specifically white) men, using the language of injustice to wrest agency from antiracist and antisexist discourse as validation.[93] Casey Ryan Kelly and Chase Aunspach likewise argue that "Incel discourse, along with the discourse of the alt-right, are a logical extension of the demands of compulsory sexuality."[94] Unlike asexuality or political celibacy, the incel movement advocates for and proves the existence of compulsory sexuality.

Another trap of visibility is the danger of positioning asexuality in binary opposition to sexuality, which could flatten out any nuance with respect to the lives of asexual individuals. A further potential danger is that with the proliferation of micro labels under an asexual spectrum, there are more labels with which to misrecognize and misrepresent lived experiences of asexual individuals. Visibility can lead to further examination and surveillance, and always the threat of pathologization. Other possibilities include potential gatekeeping and the push to prove an unassailable identity to have a seat at the table under the asexual umbrella. Micro labels are prone to even further examination and surveillance, and even to commodification and commercialization, as can be seen through the proliferation of pride flag paraphernalia for sale. These dangers are a struggle for the larger queer community, and asexuality is not immune.

A final cost of visibility is the backlash that tends to occur as sexual minorities gain representation and visibility. Amidst the current backlash against the larger queer community,

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[93] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 141.

[94] Casey Ryan Kelly and Chase Aunspach, "Incels, Compulsory Sexuality, and Fascist Masculinity," *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 148, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0044.

asexuality is similarly experiencing backlash, even from within the queer community. On April 6th, 2022, asexual activist and model Yasmin Benoit launched the "Stonewall x Yasmin Benoit Ace Project" which seeks to better understand the experiences of asexual people living in the United Kingdom.[95] Although there was an outpouring of support from the ace community, Benoit has received criticism from not only conservative groups, but also from some members of the queer community, as well as from "gender-critical" feminists, who tend to espouse transphobic, as well as acephobic views.[96] Benoit's work calls for a nuanced understanding of asexuality as an orientation, but also for the recognition of equality for all sexualities and genders.

The point of creating an asexual reading lens from which to interpret characters as asexual is not simply to tout visibility as the paean, but to help create the space for an asexual identity to exist. Since an understanding of asexuality is still developing, there are many people who do not realize asexuality exists as an option until they see asexuality represented, and the popular representations of asexuality are few. Performance makes things visible and possible. As evidenced by the amount of bourgeoning research into asexuality, the field is signaling the future of sexuality studies.

Centering asexuality in literary and dramatic texts can not only be used to view asexual or nonsexual possibilities but can be used to interrogate oppressive structures of our current constructions of sexuality. Using an asexual lens to read dramatic texts also involves an

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[95] Stonewall, "Stonewall x Yasmin Benoit Ace Project," https://www.stonewall.org.uk/stonewall-x-yasmin-benoit-ace-project.

[96] Yasmin Benoit, "I Set up a Groundbreaking Asexuality Project with Stonewall – The Came the Culture Warriors," *Inews Opinion*, April 26, 2022, https://inews.co.uk/author/yasmin-benoit.

interrogation of previously taken for granted assumptions about how compulsory sexuality functioned throughout history. While asexuality can be considered an identity category for the twenty-first century, nonsexuality can be of more use. By using asexuality as a critical lens rather than assuming it as an identity category, sites where nonsexuality is experienced or where compulsory sexuality is resisted can be opened up to examination. This asexual lens also allows for an interrogation of the way that compulsory sexuality works as a tacit interpretative assumption that the behavior of all characters in plays are assumed to be at least in part motivated by and therefore explainable in terms of (usually heterosexual) libido. In using an asexual lens to find resonances of nonsexuality, I aim to unsettle the interpretative assumptions of sexuality as a character motivation.

When asexuality is used as an interpretive lens, it allows for the lived experiences of people who identify as asexual to be made known. While gaining visibility is an important outcome, it is just as important to interrogate and question the mobilization of compulsory sexuality and to imagine what asexuality as an ideality might look like. I think the future of asexuality studies will involve a branching out to imagine possible asexual worlds and literary and dramaturgical sites within which to find more asexual resonances.

Theatre and performance studies also have something to gain by using asexuality as a lens. Performance has become a driving metaphor in theory writ large over the past half century, with gender and sexuality studies using performance as a central metaphor. Performance studies has blossomed into an academic discipline and has expanded concepts regarding what performance does and how it shapes our society.[97] From there, "performance" has been used as a

[97] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge. 1996).

central metaphor for several fields, including feminist and queer theory. Performance as a conceptual tool has thus become embedded in many theories of sexuality.[98] Since performance has been used as a way of theorizing sex and gender, performance is also ripe to articulate how compulsory sexuality is connected to subject formation. The possibilities of how this new lens can enrich studies of dramatic texts is almost endless.

Dramaturgical Sites

The scope of this project is limited to performance texts rather than broadening to include novels, poems, or epistles. I have also limited myself to the western theatrical tradition, to avoid the potential colonizing gesture of applying a sexuality that has primarily been articulated in "WEIRD" (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) countries onto another culture.[99] For instance, in 2018, Two-spirit storyteller Joshua Whitehead was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in the Trans Poetry category and withdrew from consideration, stating "[m]y gender, sexuality, and my identities supersede Western categorizations of LGBTQ+."[100] Trans identities, like asexuality, are western constructions, as are the apparatuses of compulsory sexuality and gender dichotomization, which is not to say that western culture has a monopoly on the lack of sexual desire. However, the ways in which sexuality is defined and deployed in

[98] For example, Judith Butler's foundational work in both performance studies and queer theory argues that we humans perform our sexuality through daily repetition of social acts. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988), http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893.

[99] Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2-3 (2010): 61, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X.

[100] Joshua Whitehead, "Why I'm Withdrawing from my Lambda Literary Award Nomination," *Tiahouse: The Insurgent Architect's House for Creative Writing*, March 14, 2018, https://www.tiahouse.ca/joshua-whitehead-why-im-withdrawing-from-my-lambda-literary-award-nomination/.

western culture is different from that of other cultures. I prefer resisting the pull to ascribe a western construction onto another culture. Limiting the scope to western theatre will allow for an interrogation of the definitions of sexuality and how sexuality is deployed and weaponized against marginalized people.

While this project is limited in terms of culture and location, it is more fluid in terms of eras. It functions genealogically by locating various resonances of asexuality in dramatic literature throughout much of the western dramatic canon. Many of the plays chosen are well known, while some are lesser known. Each of the historical sites contain characters that can be seen to invoke traces of asexuality (as it is understood today), yet these characters do not fit neatly into any one box or identity formation. Consider these to be a series independent case studies wherein asexuality will be centered. In each chapter, I analyze how compulsory sexuality has influenced extant critical readings of specific characters throughout theatre history, specify what sexuality may have meant in the original context of these plays, and offer counter-readings that frame these characters as exiting outside of or in resistance to diegetic and interpretative regimes of compulsory sexuality.

Each chapter also centers asexual resonances that are perhaps more broadly understood as instances of nonsexuality as the starting point. Thus, each chapter will feature recognizable forms of nonsexuality that contain asexual resonances (such as staunch virginity, religious celibacy, agender asexuality, and spinsterhood) as a way of orienting my examination of compulsory sexuality. In this manner, I hope to further Melissa Sanchez's hypothesis that "there may be as many forms of asexuality across different historical, national and cultural contexts as there are of sexuality."[101] Thus, with this asexual critical lens, I aim to create a richer exploration

[101] Sanchez, "Protestantism, Marriage, and Asexuality in Shakespeare," 102.

of asexualityChapter one begins with Euripides's Greek tragedy *Hippolytus*, which features an unwavering male virgin.[102] Hippolytus, a young man who dedicates himself to Artemis and vows to eschew sex, finds himself as the object of his stepmother's desire. He refuses his stepmother's advances, citing his lack of desire for all things sexual, with his refusal culminating in his death. Over the centuries, there have been several interpretations of Hippolytus's virginity. Even though a refusal of incest does not automatically make Hippolytus into an asexual, it is his stringent tie to virginity that allows for reading the character as potentially asexual. This chapter examines the peculiar virginity of Hippolytus, as well as how his virginity has been treated in further adaptations of Euripides's play.

Chapter two focuses on religious dramas as sites where asexual resonances can be articulated. Hrotsvit of Gandershiem, medieval dramatist, writes about the struggles of Christian women, centering these struggles around themes of chastity and virginity. Typically, her plays are read as extolling the triumph of religious celibacy; however, asexuality has not been centered in these discussions. By using an asexual lens, I analyze the ways that religious nonsexuality both resists and upholds the system of compulsory sexuality in the Medieval era.

Chapter three spotlights *The Roaring Girl*, in which Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker present audiences with a strangely ambiguous character: Moll Cutpurse, a cross-dressing woman and thief, sometimes called a "virago" (a masculinized woman), who is used by a pair of young lovers as a foil in a fake marriage plot.[103] In the play, Moll often boasts of her virginity, yet she has not been articulated as espousing an explicitly asexual identity. Further, the character

[102] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, in *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[103] Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl* (1611), in *Thomas Middleton Four Plays*, ed. William C. Carroll (London: Methuen Drama, 2012).

of Moll Cutpurse was based on Mary Frith, a real historical figure and infamous cross-dresser who was a fixture of the London theatre scene.[104] This chapter examines the links between asexuality and transgender studies and considers the implications of putting a real historical figure onstage.

Chapter four examines asexual resonances in two American plays of the early twentieth century: Angeline Weld Grimke's *Rachel* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie.*[105] Both plays feature young women who end their plays as tragic spinsters. Grimke's play features the title character, Rachel, who refuses marriage and motherhood because she does not feel safe bringing a black child into a white world. This play could be seen as a deliberate mobilization of asexuality as a (limited) means of fighting for reproductive justice. In *The Glass Menagerie,* Laura, the main character's younger sister, often described as frail and disabled, fails to secure an eligible suitor for herself, and ends the play unmarried. While being unmarried does not automatically equate to an asexuality identity, Laura's singleness highlights a typical construction of disabled people as automatically asexual. Both plays thus speak to the interconnectedness of eugenics and sexuality in twentieth century America. These plays also speak to the larger American culture of the twentieth century, not just in terms of race and sexuality, but also in terms of the seemingly tragic dissolution of the "American dream" for both women.

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[104] William C. Carroll, "Introduction," *Thomas Middleton: Four Plays: Women Beware Women, The Changeling, The Roaring Girl and A Chaste Maid in Cheapside,* ed. William C. Carroll (London: Menthuen Drama, 2012), xi.

[105] Angelina Weld Grimke, *Rachel* (1916), in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998) and Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), (New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1999).

The conclusion considers the future of asexuality studies. Beginning with contemporary asexual characters, such as Todd Chavez from the animated series *BoJack Horseman*, the conclusion presents the ways that asexuality is currently represented today.[106] Along with exploring current representations, the conclusion also analyzes the current acephobic backlash more fully. Finally, the conclusion offers up a guide for performance practitioners in using an asexual lens as a dramaturgical strategy. By creating more representations of asexuality, either through writing new asexual characters or by reinterpreting existing characters *as* asexual, this project seeks to offer up new directions for future scholarship and performance.

The general interpretative leap of this project then is to question how an asexual lens can be added to the conceptual and heuristic toolbox of an actor, a director, a dramaturg, audience member, or reader. The goal is not to find the hidden asexual individuals in history, but rather to offer up an asexual interpretative possibility, one where asexuality can be read and performed today. What I am proposing here is instead of a backwards queer glance, perhaps a backwards tr(ace) of asexuality. While a queer reading strategy certainly has relevance to asexuality, perhaps it is more fitting to describe an asexual reading strategy that will exist alongside queer reading strategies to help bring light to asexuality as it is understood and experienced today. This constellation of asexual interpretations is by no means exhaustive, nor is it meant to be. Consider this a contribution and a means of articulating how an asexual dramaturgical lens can be applied to theatre.

[106] *BoJack Horseman*, season 4, episode 3, "Hooray! Todd Episode!" directed by Aaron Long, written by Elijah Aron and Jordan Young, featuring Will Arnett and Aaron Paul, aired September 8, 2017, Netflix.

Chapter 1.
A Virgin Soul: The Queer Myth of Hippolytus

Hippolytus is perhaps the character that comes closest to representing asexuality in the Western theatrical canon. As one of the only recognizable and easily marked as asexual (or at least nonsexual) characters in theatrical history, it is natural to begin this exploration of an asexual dramaturgical lens with Euripides' *Hippolytus*.[107] In the play, Euripides tells the story of Phaedra and her unnatural desire for her stepson, Hippolytus. Her lust for Hippolytus is brought on by the goddess Aphrodite, in part because Hippolytus had spurned her by refusing to marry and devoting himself entirely to virginity and the virgin goddess Artemis. His stringent defense of his virginity has been remarked about by several scholars, including Simon Goldhill, who refers to Hippolytus as "the most famous abstinent of classical literature."[108] Other scholars explicitly suggest that Hippolytus exhibits an asexual identity.[109] By using asexuality as a lens with which to read *Hippolytus*, I argue that this lens can be used to interrogate compulsory sexuality as it is understood in Euripidean drama. This chapter thus analyzes the character of Hippolytus and what his potential asexuality says about compulsory sexuality in ancient times, while also analyzing further adaptations of the story of Hippolytus that each deal with compulsory sexuality in their own respective times.

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[107] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, in *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[108] Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 22.

[109] Thomas K. Hubbard and Maria Doerfler, "From Ascesis to Sexual Renunciation," In *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas Hubbard, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) 169.

The City Dionysia of Athens in the fifth century BCE represents an ancestral cultural phenomenon for the modern Western theatrical tradition. While only about three dozen Athenian plays survive in full, they show glimpses of the desires, philosophies, and concepts of citizenship of their society. Alongside other texts from that era, the plays also index Athenians' ideas governing sexuality. The goal of this chapter then is to read the extant script of *Hippolytus* to analyze Euripides's representation of sexuality (and thus, nonsexuality). In so doing, I will rely on the robust critical tradition of interpretations of *Hippolytus* as well as the wealth of scholarship on Ancient Greek sexuality in general.

Yet before considering potential traces of asexuality in ancient drama, an understanding of ancient sexuality is necessary. For starters, most of what is known about sexuality is tinted with a modern Western conception of sexual categories in terms of heterosexuality and homosexuality.[110] David Halperin makes this point, arguing that various "sexual experiences and forms of erotic life are culturally specific," meaning that the ways in which humans make sense of and categorize sexuality is dependent on culture.[111] What this means for the study of ancient sexuality is that contemporary classifications of sexuality do not transfer easily across time and place.

Foucault's multivolume *History of Sexuality* plays an important role in considering how sexuality has been articulated throughout history. There Foucault frames sexuality not as an inherent or cemented biological phenomenon but a cultural production based around how power

[110] While asexuality is the focus of this dissertation, it is a far cry from being considered an assumed category of sexuality, even today. Bisexuality is likewise similarly not as often assumed as a category of identity, but it has had more time and understanding than asexuality. Thus, this comment should not be taken as ace- or bi-erasure.

[111] David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 9.

is conceived.[112] His second volume focuses on the world of Ancient Greece and the articulation of sexuality, in particular, "to take note of some general traits that characterized the way in which sexual behavior was considered by classical Greek thought as a domain of moral valuation and choice."[113] Foucault here was setting out to discuss how sexuality in ancient Greece was conceived of in moral and behavioral terms, and his arguments have become touchstones for later work on classical Greek sexuality. While there have been many scholars who have critiqued Foucault's methods of writing history, his overarching argument in his four-volume work that our concepts of sexuality differ dramatically across cultures is a logical starting point for this analysis.[114] Halperin, for instance, in refining Foucault's argument, explains that "what we call sexuality nowadays is in fact a distinctly modern, bourgeois production" that is not biological in nature but historically produced.[115] In other words, the contemporary notion of sexuality as being tied to identity formation is relatively recent and culturally specific. Contemporary ideas about sexuality—understood as an inherent, durable shape of one's sexual desires—being an intrinsic part of a person's identity did not exist in the ancient world. Halperin points out, "[H]omosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western, bourgeois productions" that cannot be found in classical antiquity.[116]

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[112] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 105.

[113] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 32.

[114] For example, see Patricia O'Brien, "Michel Foucault's History of Culture," in *The New Cultural History* ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 31.

[115] David Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 88.

[116] Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,* 8

If the ancient Greek world is considered "before sexuality," must it also be "before asexuality" as well? Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz argues that the Greeks are not necessarily "before sexuality" but instead are perhaps before *our* sexuality.[117] In other words, while ancient sexuality may look different to how current sexuality is understood, there is still some manner of organizing and understanding sexual and erotic life. Sexuality, referred to as "the cultural interpretation of the human body's erogenous zones and sexual capacities," can be studied with the caveat that contemporary Western understandings of it are radically different from other cultures.[118] Along these lines, Ancient Athens had norms and restrictions surrounding their interpretation of the body's sexual capacities that could be called compulsory sexuality.

In considering how compulsory sexuality may have functioned in the ancient world, Euripides' *Hippolytus* presents an excellent case study. Scholars have long used this play, along with several other works by Euripides, to glean insight into the world of ancient Greek sexuality.[119] Not only is the title character one who resists the system of compulsory sexuality, but the consequences of said resistance are made apparent in the tragic outcome of the play.

Aphrodite and Compulsory Sexuality

Euripides begins *Hippolytus* by giving the prologue to the goddess Aphrodite (occasionally referred to as Cypris in the text) wherein she explains that Hippolytus, the young

[117] Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 18, (original emphasis).

[118] David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin, "Introduction," *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

[119] For examples, see: Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*.

prince of Trozen, has slighted her in not demonstrating proper reverence. She states that Hippolytus calls her "the vilest of the gods. He spurns sex and keeps clear of marriage."[120] She laments his devotion to Artemis, virgin goddess of the wild hunt and vows revenge on the young man for spurning her.

Right away compulsory sexuality appears. For the ancient Greeks, the nearest way of conceptualizing sexuality, in our sense of the word, would be that which is related to the Aphrodite. Marilyn B. Skinner claims that "Greek culture regarded as the preserve of the goddess of love was an ensemble of separate but closely related physical phenomena – sexual acts, urges, and pleasures."[121] Distinguishing this from a modern conception of sexuality, arguably the Greeks viewed sexuality as less an abstract concept that described a person's identity, and instead in more concrete terms, linking sex to the purview of Aphrodite. Similarly, Skinner suggests that Eros, Aphrodite's son, is associated with desire (for both sexual wants and other appetites). [122] The term "eros" is commonly synonymous with desire. Barbara Goff also argues that for the Greeks, "the activities of desire were known as *ta aphrodisia*," aka, under the "sign of Aphrodite."[123] Keeping this in mind, I would argue that Aphrodite is the personification of compulsory sexuality, as it is understood by Euripides. In other words, the figure of Aphrodite makes sexuality an explicitly compulsory affair—Phaedra is inflicted with it, and Hippolytus is punished for denying it.

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[120] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 39.

[121] Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 3.

[122] Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 4.

[123] Barbara E. Goff, *The Noose of Words: Readings of Desire, Violence, and Language in Euripides' Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 28.

More specifically, this compulsory sexuality is more than merely a compulsion towards experiencing and surrendering to sexual desire. Rabinowitz argues that "Aphrodite is not some general sexuality but the sexuality that means heterosexuality for women and the exchange of women between men."[124] In other words, compulsory sexuality exists to police sexuality and constitute individuals into power structures that tend to favor the privileged, i.e., male citizens.

Aphrodite, in vowing revenge against Hippolytus for spurning her power, is thus invoking a form of compulsory sexuality. In the prologue, she declares that "of all who dwell between the Black Sea and the bounds of Atlas and look on the light of the sun, I give precedence to those who revere my power, but those who are arrogant towards me I cast down."[125] Here already her influence can be seen. Silvio Bär maintains Aphrodite's prologue establishes her as one of the more powerful goddesses, noting that "no one is immune to the infliction of sexual and emotional passion; everyone falls in love, and everyone feels sexual lust and physical attraction towards others."[126] Since Aphrodite can be understood as the personification of love and lust, she is arguably also the personification of compulsory sexuality, especially when her influence is questioned. Bär continues, stating that in his rejection of Aphrodite, "Hippolytus does not simply insult the goddess, but he also indirectly threatens to overturn the natural order of things by not submitting himself to the most fundamental emotions and driving forces."[127] Hippolytus thus upsets the natural order of compulsory sexuality. His

[124] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 168.

[125] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 2-8.

[126] Silvio Bär, "I Honour Those Who Reverence My Power": Gods, Humans, and the Breaking of Social and Religious Rules In Euripides' *Hippolytus*." Graeco-Latina Brunensia 25, no. 2 (2020): 23, https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2020-2-2.

[127] Bär, "I Honour Those Who Reverence My Power," 24.

rejection is a threat and must be punished. It is here that Aphrodite explains the "terrible love" that she has inflicted upon Phaedra's heart, causing her to feel a sexual desire towards Hippolytus, her stepson.[128] She openly testifies that this revenge scheme will take the lives of both Phaedra and Hippolytus, desiring her enemy (Hippolytus) to "pay a penalty great enough" to satisfy her, even though Phaedra will be collateral damage.[129]

The depth of the revenge plot against Hippoltyus and Phaedra can possibly be explained by their standing as "other" in Greek society. Both characters have ancestors that strayed beyond the ordinary parameters for sexual relations in Greece. Hippolytus stands to be othered by Greek society, since he is the bastard son of the Amazon Hippolyta (sometimes referred to in subsequent adaptations as Antiope), and it is suggested that he is the product of Theseus' rape of his mother.[130] Phaedra is a foreign-born woman from Crete, whose mother succumbed to a lust for a bull, and thus birthed the minotaur. Phaedra's love for Theseus was also controversial, since her sister Ariadne had originally fallen for Theseus, but he abandoned her after escaping from Crete to marry Phaedra instead. [131] Phaedra's past is thus already dotted with several questionable sexual episodes. Edith Hall argues that due to Phaedra's past, the "implication is that Aphrodite can use her as her instrument in a false rape allegation only because, as a Cretan woman, the daughter of Pasiphae and sister to Ariadne, she is genetically vulnerable to sexual aberration."[132] Her past allows her to be the perfect tool for Aphrodite's revenge, demonstrating

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[128] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 28-29.

[129] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 51.

[130] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 1082.

[131] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 337-339; Seneca, *Phaedra*, in *Six Plays*, trans. Emily Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 114-123.

[132] Edith Hall, "Goddesses, a Whore-Wife, and a Slave: Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Epistemic Injustice toward Women," in *New Directions in the Study of Women in the Greco-*

that subversive or deviant sexual behaviors will be punished, and may even have generational consequences.

This penalty of death for both Hippolytus and Phaedra demonstrates the gravity of any form of subverting the system of compulsory sexuality. Phaedra's foreign ancestry puts her in the precarious position of being "other" in Greek society. Hippolytus's rejection of sexuality renders him dangerous enough to warrant the death penalty, and his status as a bastard makes him expendable. Even his devotion to Artemis, which Aphrodite observes in the prologue, cannot save him from the slights against Aphrodite.

As Aphrodite exists after her opening monologue, Hippolytus enters with his servants, and immediately lays a garland of flowers at the statue of Artemis. He prays to her, asking to remain a virgin and "finish the race of my life as I began it." [133] In essence, he desires to remain virginal for his entire lifetime.

Seeing his reverence for Artemis and not Aphrodite, the young prince is warned by a servant not to spurn the proud goddess Aphrodite, to which Hippolytus replies, "Since I am pure, I greet her at a distance."[134] When he is chastised by his servant for not paying Aphrodite her due honors, Hippolytus replies, "No god who uses the night to work her wonders finds favor with me."[135] So here, early in the play, Euripides sets up Hippolytus's devotion to purity and general disinterest in anything sexual. The distance he puts between himself and Aphrodite further signals his rejection of the goddess and the domain of her influence. Simon Goldhill claims that

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Roman World, eds. Ronnie Ancona and Georgia Tsouvala (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18.

[133] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 12-13.

[134] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 86-87.

[135] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 105.

"Hippolytus' rejection of Aphrodite, then, is not just a desire for chastity or purity, but also a subverting of his passage to manhood."[136] By rejecting the maturity that comes with fulfilling marriage and conjugial duties, Hippolytus essentially rejects society. J.H. Kim On Chong-Gossard also notes the way Hippolytus subverts gender by stating that "his chastity makes his experience of gender problematic," since his chastity is not simply a transitional phase between boyhood and manhood.[137] Since Hippolytus refuses sex and marriage, he is not performing his familial and civic duties, thus bringing his manhood into question.

Sissel Undheim similarly brings attention to the strangeness of Hippolytus's virginity and the traditionally gendered conception of virginity in the ancient world. Undheim states that Hippolytus comes across "as an uncharacteristic male, not only in his devotion to Artemis, but also by his devotion to the goddess' (for him) paradigmatic virginity. It is exactly this unnatural and unmanly disinterest in love and sexuality that in the play is punished by Aphrodite."[138] As virginity is usually the concern of women, Hippolytus is thus transgressing gender norms as well as sexual norms.

When Hippolytus exits, the servant stays behind to honor Aphrodite, noting the foolishness of the young prince and asking for forgiveness. In this, Euripides marks Hippolytus's rejection of Aphrodite and devotion to virginity as unusual. This moment with the servant also stands as a warning to avoid the same mistakes as Hippolytus.

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[136] Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 120.

[137] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 185.

[138] Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginities: Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2018), 111-112.

Phaedra and the Position of Women

The focus of the play is soon turned to Phaedra, Hippolytus's stepmother who has been cursed by Aphrodite to fall in love with him in her husband's absence. The chorus of Trozen women laments that Phaedra has been letting herself waste away, neither eating nor drinking. She soon enters, carried by servants and accompanied by the Nurse, who likewise bemoans Phaedra's condition. Phaedra's monologue recalls Hippolytus's entrance speech in that she describes a longing for nature and the hunt. In his earlier speech, Hippolytus also discussed his love of nature, hunting, and the absence of civilization. Phaedra even prays to Artemis, wishing that she "could be on the ground of your precinct taming Venetian horses."[139] The Nurse refers to her longings as madness and tries to discover the cause of her suffering.

After much coaxing, Phaedra reveals her sickness to be her love of Hippolytus. Both the chorus and the Nurse react in horror to this pronouncement. Phaedra's desire for her stepson is an affront to the social order. In Ancient Greece, sexuality was built upon a hierarchy. Male citizens were at the top of the hierarchy, while women, young boys, and slaves were considered below male citizens and thus sexually available. David Halperin explains that "an adult male citizen of Athens can have legitimate sexual relations only with statutory minors (his inferiors not in age but in social and political status): the proper targets of his sexual desire include, specifically, women, boys, foreigners, and slaves."[140] In this way, compulsory sexuality functioned to keep a strict hierarchy between active and passive partners. It was not uncommon,

[139] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 230-231.

[140] Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 30.

for example, for an older man to consider a younger man sexually desirable.[141] In falling for her stepson, Phaedra is in essence taking on the role of an older male citizen while casting Hippolytus as the object of her affection. Hippolytus, however, was likely aging into manhood and was to be considered eligible for marriage, thus taking his place among the Greek men for whom being the active partner was expected. By refusing marriage, he is refusing to take the man's role in a family. Likewise, by holding a desire for a younger man, Phaedra is taking on the role of the male citizen, and thus reversing the expected sexual order.

In the play, Phaedra is already planning on suffering a slow demise, rather than give into her unnatural desire for her stepson, which is framed as a sickness. One point that should be made is that it is not her sexual desires that are pathological, but that she is desiring her husband's son. Not only is this desire a role reversal, as noted above, but it is also an affront to her husband's honor, who is absent at this point in the play. Thus, Phaedra is thus unable to direct her desires towards an acceptable object. To keep her honor intact, Phaedra explains to the chorus her plan to first endure her desire quietly, and then attempt to "conquer [her] madness through self-control."[142] Rather than speak her desire, Phaedra, up until this point, has chosen instead to suffer in silence. Rabinowitz states that in Phaedra's vacillation "between her initial desire and subsequent shame, her behavior forges links between sexuality and speech, chastity and silence."[143] In other words, Phaedra is trapped between two polarities, confessing her desire or suffering in silence. Even as she confesses, speaking her desire into the world, she realizes

[141] For a deeper exploration of the practices and ethics involved with this sort of relationship, see: Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 10-16 and John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 53-107.

[142] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 399.

[143] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 162.

that she has only one course left: she must die. She proclaims, "my third course – since I was failing to win victory over Cypris by these means – was to resolve on death."[144] In order to keep her honor, and thus Theseus's honor, the only societally acceptable course of action is death.

However, her nurse has other ideas. Out of love for her mistress, the Nurse suggests that Phaedra tell Hippolytus of her desire, in an attempt to save her from starving herself. She even references the power of Aphrodite, stating "no one can bear the force of Cypris when she comes in spate," again affirming the compulsory sexuality that is personified in the goddess.[145] The Nurse goes so far to say that the goddess wants Phaedra to act on her desires, suggesting it to be preferable to death. The Chorus vehemently disagrees with the Nurse and praises Phaedra on her honor. Phaedra then begs the Nurse to not tell Hippolytus of her desire. After swearing to secrecy, the Nurse immediately goes inside and tells Hippolytus of Phaedra's love for him anyway. Phaedra, horrified, overhears the exchange from outside the door and decides that death is now her only option.

Hippolytus reenters in a fury, followed by the Nurse, who quickly reminds him of the vow of silence he took before she told him of Phaedra's unnatural love. He then launches into a misogynist tirade against women, wishing that men could buy children as opposed to needing women for procreation. He goes as far as to state that even hearing about Phaedra's desire "makes [him] feel impure."[146] Throughout this rant, becomes clear that he wants nothing to do with women at all.

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[144] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 400-401.

[145] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 443-444.

[146] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 656.

Rabinowitz takes a feminist reading of the play and suggests that Hippolytus's diatribe against women falls in line with the Greek view of women as the symbolic of the ruin of mankind. Rabinowitz claims that this rant "cannot be discounted as idiosyncratic; rather, it heightens and starkly expresses the cultural beliefs that define the ways in which the female threatens social structures, and therefore define as well the place she is supposed to occupy according to male desire."[147] Rabinowitz further argues that Hippolytus demonstrates the typical hierarchical gendered view of Greek society. In such a view of society, women functioned as objects of exchange. By wishing that men should "buy their children through a means test, each paying an appropriate sum, and they should live in their houses free from women," Hippolytus is in effect desiring to remove women from this system of exchange.[148] For Hippolytus, "it is clear that a woman is a great evil" and that men would be better off avoiding women altogether.[149] Rabinowitz indicates that "buying children would bypass women's sexuality," which while excessive, is not outside of the general purview of Greek society.[150] Women's sexuality was tightly controlled, a point Rabinowiz makes by arguing "[a]ny form of female desire could be perceived as a theatre to the family and the Athenian polis."[151] Phaedra, then, is not merely a threat to Hippolytus and their immediate family, but her desires are a threat to society as a whole.

While I take Rabinowitz's point on Hippolytus's misogyny, I would add that his attitude is not merely misogynist. He desires to remove himself from the system of compulsory sexuality. By wishing to secure offspring in a nonsexual manner, he is desiring for an option outside of

[147] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 157.

[148] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 621-623.

[149] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 627.

[150] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 157.

[151] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 19.

sexuality. Ketevan Nadareishvili argues that "Hippolytus by his action and speech arguing for asexuality and sterility stands in opposition to the marriage institution altogether."[152] Hippolytus does not just wish for a world outside of women, but outside of the marriage and more broadly, society itself. He repeatedly eschews the space of the household for the space of the wilderness, and repeatedly avoids Aphrodite and women in general. His misogynist rant against women confirms his rejection of compulsory sexuality entirely. He ends his speech by stating that if it was not for his oath he swore, he would have immediately told his father of Phaedra's desire. He leaves the palace in a rage, not seeing Phaedra at the back of the stage, who has overheard everything.

This scene where Hippolytus confronts with Nurse is considered one of the changes from Euripides' earlier version of this play, *Hippolytus Veiled*. Though all that remains of this script are fragments, some scholars have suggested that it was one of the less popular plays, and that the extant *Hippolytus* is a correction.[153] According to Hanna Roisman, the original version of this scene is hypothesized to involve Phaedra herself confessing her love to Hippolytus, in which the young man, so ashamed, covers his eyes before leaving the stage, hence the title.[154] Roisman further suggests that not only did Phaedra confess her love, but she also offered Hippolytus the

[152] Ketevan Nadareishvili, "The Conception of Woman in Greek Tragedy in the Context of the Binary Oppositions of Sex Roles," *Phasis* 2, no. 3 (2000): 304, https://phasis.tsu.ge/index.php/PJ/article/view/2188.

[153] Hanna M. Roisman, *Nothing is as it Seems: The Tragedy of the Implicit in Euripides' Hippolytus* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 9. For a full exploration of the first *Hippolytus*, see also: Bruce Snell, *Scenes from Greek Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 29.

[154] Hanna M. Roisman, "The Veiled Hippolytus and Phaedra," *Hermes* 127, no. H.4 (1999): 397, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4477328.

throne in his father's absence, which would have been an even greater reason for his shame.[155] These glimpses of an earlier version of the play give us an insight into Euripides' characterization of Hippolytus and Phaedra. However, since the first *Hippolytus Veiled* exists merely in fragments, these differences are not certainties. Textual evidence that the second *Hippolytus* is a correction also comes from Aristophanes's play *The Frogs* wherein the character of Euripides is criticized for his female characters, most particularly his characterization of Phaedra as an indecent woman.[156]

In both versions, Hippolytus remains staunchly devoted to his chastity, and yet it is Phaedra's honor which changes between the plays. In *Hippolytus,* she is seen as a victim of a goddess's wrath and a woman's betrayal, keeping her honor intact. Following his exit from the stage, Phaedra despairs and makes one more plan to recuperate her honor for the sake of her children: she will leave a note for her husband Theseus, laying the blame for her impending suicide at the feet of Hippolytus by accusing him of raping her. She gains an oath of silence from the chorus of Trozen women, and then exists for the last time and hangs herself, just in time for Theseus to enter to find his wife dead.

Her last act before dying was to write a false accusation of rape. Edith Hall points out the dearth of scholarship examining the false rape accusation and hypothesizes that "that the Euripidean Phaedra's function as archetypal maker of a false rape allegation has drawn less attention from explicitly feminist scholars than it might have done because it has partly been

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[155] Roisman, "The Veiled Hippolytus and Phaedra," 401.

[156] Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, in *Aristophanes: Four Comedies*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961) lines 1054-1055 and J. Michael Walton, *Euripides Our Contemporary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 44.

obscured by her status as stepmother."[157] Hall suggests that the familial relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus takes precedence in most discussions of the rape allegation, more so that any exploration of the false rape allegation has been undertheorized. Much of the scholarship focuses instead on the status of Phaedra as a woman and her silence than on the implications of her written confession.[158] This is perhaps yet another function of compulsory sexuality: while it compels people to participate in society in a way that privileges the sexual appetites of male citizens, it also demonstrates these same male citizens' anxieties over who has the ability to choose and refuse sexuality. Hall contends that perhaps "men watching Hippolytus come away with the conviction that any accusation of rape made by a woman is likely to be untruthful, and that an accused man may be innocent even if he does not use all the legal defenses at his disposal because he may well be an honorable man and have sworn someone an oath of silence."[159] What this means is that plays such as *Hippolytus* do ideological work with regard to sexuality, and that by painting a picture of a false rape accusation, this play implicitly suggests that women who make such accusations do so out of revenge and cannot be believed.

Theseus, however, does believe the accusation, and his anger seems to focus on Hippolytus usurping his place in the marriage bed. He then immediately calls for his son's death by invoking Poseidon to destroy Hippolytus before the young prince has a chance to even defend himself. Even though the chorus pleads for Theseus to renounce his prayer, he refuses. They do not speak up to defend Hippolytus, but instead beg for Theseus listen to his son's words. While

[157] Hall, "Goddesses, a Whore-Wife, and a Slave," 17.

[158] James Harvey Kim On Chong-Gossard, *Gender and Communication in Euripides' Plays: Between Song and Silence* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 134-135.

[159] Hall, "Goddesses, a Whore-Wife, and a Slave," 25.

they know that Hippolytus is innocent, their silence seems to support Phaedra, even though this renders them complicit in the coming downfall of Hippolytus.

Hippolytus and Asexuality

When Hippolytus reenters, he finds his father returned, Phaedra dead, and himself accused. The young prince is stunned at the accusation. He fiercely defends his virginity yet remains silent about Phaedra's desire and the Nurse's confession, thus remaining true to his word. In his defense, he begs his father to believe his chastity and purity. It is here that his potential asexuality is most apparent. He details his innocence and disinterest in all things sexual:

> And one thing has never touched me – the thing through which you believe you have now caught me. To this day my body has been pure, unsullied by sex. I know nothing of that activity apart from what I have heard through talk and seen in pictures. And I am not eager to look at even these since I have a virgin soul.[160]

These lines are the most often cited to explain Hippolytus's peculiar relationship to nonsexuality, with Undheim arguing that by locating his virginity in his soul, "Euripides' Hippolytus enhances his claim of indifference towards sex."[161] This indifference towards sex is seen as peculiar because while female virginity abounds in antiquity, male virginity is almost singularly represented by the myth of Hippolytus. For instance, Chong-Gosserand states that female virgins in tragedy are usually depicted as serving the social roles of sacrificial victims (such as Polyxena and Iphigenia), as spinsters due to circumstance (Electra and Antigone), and lastly as priestesses (Iphigenia and Cassandra).[162] That Hippolytus defies these categories is part of what makes his virginity unique and requires explanation. Various reasons for his virginity have been explored

[160] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 1003-1008.

[161] Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 111.

[162] Chong-Gossard, *Gender and Communication in Euripides' Plays*, 184.

by numerous scholars over the years, with most agreeing that his absolutist position regarding celibacy is peculiar for the Greek world.

One popular explanation for his virginity is that he is dedicated to *sophrosyne*, loosely translated as temperance. Christopher Gill, in his examination of *Hippolytus,* suggests four possible meanings of sophrosyne, which are sexual purity, virtue, self-control, and good sense.[163] Gill suggests that Hippolytus presents this sophrosyne "as a fundamental part of his nature, as something 'assigned' or 'given' to him… but also, in principle, a lifelong property."[164] This innate dedication to temperance and chastity suggests a potential asexuality, which many contemporary asexual people describe as a fundamental part of their nature, as given to them at birth and consistent throughout their lifetime. And yet, this stringent dedication to sophrosyne would have likely been considered excessive to the ancient Greek audiences. Kevin Calcamp suggests that "Hippolytus' chastity—derived from his ability to maintain self-control over his body and mind—gives him a sense of self-righteousness; thus hubris becomes his fatal flaw."[165] Instead of excessive chastity being Hippolytus's undoing, it is the excessive pride that accompanied his chastity that was part of his undoing.

Marilyn Skinner also remarks on the strangeness of Hippolytus's virginity, in that such strict abstention from sex was unusual in Ancient Greek culture. She delves into the possible explanations of his absolute refusal for sex, citing the Orphic religion and a psychoanalytic

[163] Christopher Gill, "The Articulation of the Self in Euripides' Hippolytus," in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, ed. Anton Powell (London: Routledge, 1990), 80.

[164] Gill, "The Articulation of the Self in Euripides' Hippolytus," p. 86

[165] Kevin Calcamp, "Reflections of Hippolytus: An Examination of Sexuality through Adaptation," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 31, no. 1 (2016): 115, https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2016.002.

reading of Hippolytus's attitude towards his father. On the subject of Orphism, she notes that "the Orphics drew an absolute distinction between soul and body" and that "abstention for sex notionally fits into this framework as one additional way to prevent contaminating the soul with an attachment to the body."[166] Even as Skinner proposes this as a possibility, she quickly shows the flaws inherent with her theory, since the extremism demonstrated by Hippolytus was not to be found in Orphism. Also typical of those adherents of Orphism was a dietary abstinence in addition to a sexual asceticism, which Hippolytus the hunter did not follow. Even Theseus does not believe Hippolytus's claim as a follower of Orphism, claiming him to be a hypocrite who will "play the huckster with [his] vegetable diet."[167] Indeed, followers of Orphism would not have called for a full table after a hunt, as Hippolytus does in the beginning of the play. So, Hippolytus being a devotee to Orphism seems an unlikely possibility.

On a similar note, Thomas Hubbard and Maria Doerfleur observe that "comparative study of ascetic practices shows that dietary abstinence is usually accompanied by a degree of sexual abstinence."[168] While they show that dietary and sexual abstinence were both part of the Orphic religion, what is equally important here is the word "degree," suggesting that total sexual abstinence was not typical of Greek religious practices. They further note that this moderate ascetism was "far from a total rejection of family and sexuality"[169] Returning to the idea of sophrosyne, this total rejection could be considered an excess of virginity, which went against the concept of temperance. So even if Hippolytus was citing his chastity as a religious principle, there were no religions at the time that required such a refusal, a point Skinner makes as well.

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[166] Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 135.

[167] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 951-952.

[168] Hubbard and Doerfler, "From Ascesis to Sexual Renunciation," 172.

[169] Hubbard and Doerfler, "From Ascesis to Sexual Renunciation," 172.

Skinner's second possibility relates to a psychoanalytic reading of the relationship between Hippolytus and his father. Hippolytus was born the bastard child of Theseus, who raped his mother, the Amazon queen Hippolyta (dead by time of the events in the play). Skinner suggests that Hippolytus's "chastity could be a reaction against his father's domineering sexuality and his worship of the Amazons' tribal divinity a symptom of a sublimated longing for a mother-substitute."[170] In other words, Hippolytus could be using his celibacy to reject his father's hypersexuality and further bring himself close to his absent mother.

Anne Rankin likewise suggests a psychoanalytic reading of the play, noting both his extreme misogyny, excessive worship of Artemis, and his status as a bastard. For Rankin, "[h]is society's attitude to his illegitimacy has profoundly influenced Hippolytus's character and behaviour, and is one of the main causes of his shame in the sphere of sexuality."[171] By linking his anxiety over his legitimacy with his worship of Artemis, she is suggesting a Freudian identification with the mother. She reasons that Hippolytus takes Artemis as a surrogate mother, stating that this "equation would also enable him to 'restore' his mother's virginity by the unconscious syllogism 'My mother = Artemis; Artemis is a virgin; therefore my mother is a virgin.'"[172] In interpreting Hippolytus's virginity as being tied to shame and a psychoanalytic desire for his mother, she is linking his virginity automatically to shame and pathology. Like the Greeks at the time who would note his virginity as excessive, Rankin here is suggesting the same, and by linking his abstinence to a pathological desire to identify with his mother, she implicitly suggests that a lack of sexual desire needs correcting.

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[170] Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 134.

[171] Anne V. Rankin, "Euripides' Hippolytus: A Psychopathological Hero," *Arethusa* 7, no. 1 (1974): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26307454.

[172] Rankin, "Euripides' Hippolytus: A Psychopathological Hero," 79.

Rabinowitz offers a similar reading of *Hippolytus*, focusing on the title character's misogyny while providing a feminist psychoanalytic reading of the play. Seen from this point of view, Hippolytus seeks identification with his father, and by displacing and disavowing Phaedra, he can form a reconciliation with his father. She continues this reading by suggesting that "[h]orizontal desire for one like oneself is the repressed, unconscious desire of this text; it is gratified by being transformed into a vertical (asexual) desire of father for son."[173]

Here the evoking of the word "asexual" lends itself to some interesting interpretations, considering the hints of psychoanalysis. First, her use of "asexual" connotes a somewhat negative view of the term and is reminiscent of Freud's Oedipal object desire for the father. In this way, her use of "asexual" is not at all in line with contemporary definitions of asexuality, which is understandable considering that her book was written thirty years ago, before asexuality was fully enunciated as a sexual orientation. Also, her psychoanalytic and feminist reading gives no other interpretation for Hippolytus's chastity except for a pathological misogyny, which yet again depicts his commitment to nonsexuality as a pathology in need of correction.

Both Rankin and Rabinowitz point out the inherent misogyny of Euripides' play, and while this is an important feminist interpretive gesture, it should not be the only heuristic option. Neither theorist considers a non-heteronormative approach to the text. Since both theorists implicitly suggest Hippolytus's virginity is a pathology, the level of unthinkability of asexuality is made apparent.

At the end of the play, it is revealed by a servant that Hippolytus met with disaster as he was leaving Trozen in exile. From the sea "the wave sent forth a bull" that spooked Hippolytus's horses and caused him to tangle in their reins. The young prince was thus dragged and fatally

[173] Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 174.

wounded.[174] Artemis swiftly enters in a deus ex machina and affirms Thesus's part in the demise of his innocent son. Soon after, Hippolytus is brought to his father, broken and dying. Artemis affirms the young man's innocence, and father and son share a moment lamenting the cruelty of Aphrodite. Here the play comes full circle: Aphrodite, and thus compulsory sexuality, wins.

I underline, however, that it is not enough to say that it was merely his rejection of Aphrodite that led Hippolytus to his death. He was not killed because he lacked desire or lacked sexuality; rather, his lack is simply not believed. Nonsexuality, in the world of the play, seems unthinkable to everyone except Hippolytus. His potential asexuality and desire to live a nonsexual life are never considered to be genuine or even taken seriously in the play.

Before his death, Artemis vows that he will forever be honored by unwed girls cutting their hair in tribute to Hippolytus before their marriages, and that "maidens' care for [him] will always find expression in song," effectively immortalizing his virginity.[175] While Artemis is considered the virgin goddess of virgins, she also presides over childbirth. For instance, Simon Goldhill points out the importance of Artemis in the life journey of young women, noting the festival of Artemis at Brauron which marked a transitional time for young women before marriage.[176] Jennifer Larson acknowledges another function of the goddess, stating that "Artemis is goddess of transitional periods, and is associated with cases where some aspect of the normal transition goes wrong."[177] Usually this took the form of a young woman dying while still a virgin, dying while avoiding a rape, or failing to make the transition to motherhood by dying in

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[174] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 1214.

[175] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, line 1429.

[176] Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 122.

[177] Jennifer Larson, *Greek Heroine Cults* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). 117.

childbirth. Larson also brings up the hair offerings given to Hippolytus, who she refers to as "a male version of the person failing to make the transition to married adulthood."[178]Artemis then presides over not just the virginal, but the virginal woman's passage into motherhood or a virgin's failure to make the transition into marriage. Artemis functions as part of compulsory sexuality, honoring virginity in service to fertility and reproduction.

Froma Zeitlin comments that "Hippolytus's virginity in the service of the goddess Artemis seems to tell us that the untouched body can only be imagined as feminine, but it also suggests that untouchability bears a metaphysical charge transcending the laws of nature and even gender."[179] His association with Artemis then, effectively feminizes him. It is no wonder then that he is honored in death by female virgins. In this way, it can be said that the social order is restored, and the virginal is reinforced as the purview of women, before their entrance into marriage. Hippolytus, in death, presides over a corrected virginity, which is a temporary state in the lives of women.

Compulsory sexuality can be seen here through both Hippolytus's punishment and reward. As I have argued, Hippolytus's transgressing of the sexual and gender norms by ardently proclaiming himself a celibate was cause for his punishment. This theme was present in several other myths in ancient Greece, though usually these myths occurred with female virgins being punished for refusing either marriage or sexual access to either a man or a god. For instance, Elizabeth Abbot chronicles the tales of these virgins, such as Daphne who caught the eye of Apollo, begged to be made ugly in an effort to preserve her virginity, and was transformed into a

[178] Larson, *Greek Heroine Cults*, 117.

[179] Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 235.

laurel tree.[180] Abbot discusses other virgin myths, including the story of Hippolytus, noting how his story demonstrates the Greek's perspective on love as "the direct outcome of Aphrodite's caprice or will."[181] Like many virgins, Hippolytus is punished for his transgressions against Aphrodite, even though he receives a reward from Artemis.

Compulsory sexuality is also seen in the reward that Hippolytus receives, since he is honored by virgin girls who are in a liminal space before they move on into the world of compulsory (hetero)sexuality of marriage. In other words, Hippolytus is honored after his death by being recuperated into the system of compulsory sexuality. Within this system, virginity exists solely as a transitory space between childhood and marriage—or, specifically, girlhood and motherhood. This suggests that virginity was more often defined in terms of womanhood rather than manhood. In transgressing his culture's sexed and gendered norms, then, Hippolytus could be viewed as queer.

I thus argue for the interpretative possibility of viewing Hippolytus as not merely virginal or celibate, but as queerly asexual. In examining Hippolytus, it is possible to suggest him as being an asexual character, and several scholars have similarly observed his overt asexuality. Thomas Hubbard and Maria Doerfleur cite contemporary definitions of asexualtiy from AVEN and claim that Hippolytus "offers the example of an even more perfected practice of askesis—not in the Foucauldian sense of ongoing struggle, for this play's Hippolytos [sic] never has to struggle with sexual passion at all, but in the form of a complete aversion to sexuality, *an essentially asexual identity*."[182] They further discuss what this means for ancient drama, stating

[180] Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1999), 29.

[181] Abbot, *A History of Celibacy,* 30.

[182] Hubbard and Doerfler, "From Ascesis to Sexual Renunciation," 175, (added emphasis).

"Euripidean drama was interested in exploring all varieties of sexual dissidence, including adultery, incest, bestiality, transvestism, pederasty, and asexuality."[183] This suggests that even for the Greek world, asexuality, though not termed as such and framed as tragically marginalized, was made thinkable in antiquity by Euripides. While it is tempting to identify Hippolytus as asexual, it would be more accurate to suggest that Hippolytus is rather a character who embodies a form of nonsexuality and rejects the compulsory sexuality of his time period. Rather than saying that Hippolytus is asexual, he is easier read as exhibiting resonances or traces of asexuality. In centering asexualtiy as a lens, it allows for the apparatus of compulsory sexuality to be more thoroughly interrogated.

When asexuality is centered, it allows for a rethinking of previously sedimented articulations of sexuality and its functions. By using an asexual lens, these ancient myths can additionally be used to explain asexuality to a contemporary audience. For instance, Chris Mowat uses Euripides' *Hippolytus* as a tool to dispel myths surrounding contemporary asexuality.[184] They reference five myths surrounding asexuality: (1) "asexuality just means virginity," (2) "asexuals think they are better than allosexuals," (3) "you're not asexual, you are just misogynist/misandrist/gay and in denial," (4) you're not asexual because you do [whatever activity]," and (5) "asexuality is a modern invention."[185] Mowat uses *Hippolytus* to move between dispelling these contemporary myths and demonstrating, with their fifth point, that asexuality might be a modern term, but the potential for such sexual diversity existing across

[183] Hubbard and Doerfler, "From Ascesis to Sexual Renunciation," 175.

[184] Chris Mowat, "Queering Hippolytus: Asexuality and Ancient Greece" *NOTCHES: (Re)marks on the History of Sexuality*, May 17, 2018, http://notchesblog.com/2018/05/17/queering-hippolytus-asexuality-and-ancient-greece/. This article was the inspiration for this chapter.

[185] Mowat, "Queering Hippolytus."

time is a distinct possibility. More to the point, Mowat uses asexuality *as a lens* from which to articulate and understand asexuality as a contemporary identity formation. Rather than suggesting that Hippolytus is and has always been an asexual figure, Mowat uses the character of Hippolytus as a tool to dispel contemporary myths surrounding asexuality. These asexual myths also generally happen to coincide with the various interpretations of Hippolytus throughout the years, as demonstrated above.

Further, since Mowat uses drama of *Hippolytus* to discuss asexuality in our time, perhaps it is not too far off the mark to argue that likewise, Euripides uses the myth of Hippolytus to demonstrate a form of nonsexuality that is resistant to the system of compulsory sexuality seen in his time. *Hippolytus* does not merely create a character who disidentifies with compulsory sexuality, but the play also provides a unique look at the sexual anxieties of the time. While a first glance reveals Hippolytus to be resistant to the power of Aphrodite, Phaedra is just as resistant to the goddess's machinations. The play showcases the dangers of resisting the compulsions of Aphrodite, the personification of sexuality, and the consequences to those who do. In *Hippolytus*, compulsory sexuality appears only as a controlling, vengeful force, and functions as an engine of tragedy. In other words, an asexual lens opens up a new and productive interpretation of viewing the play as a demonstrating a negative characterization of sexuality itself.

Interpreting *Hippolytus*

The Hippolytus myth has been retold often over the years, reimagined as plays, operas, ballets, and films.[186] These various adaptations have taken on different lenses with which to tell

[186] Tori Lynn McKee, "A Rich Reward in Tears: Hippolytus and Phaedra in Drama, Dance, Opera and Film" (PhD diss., The Open University, 2017).

the story and articulate contemporary issues surrounding sexuality. Yet before delving into adaptations of *Hippolytus* that come after Euripides, it is worth remembering that *Hippolytus* is Euripides's second attempt at telling the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra. Additionally, Sophocles is said to have written a version of this myth, entitled *Phaedra*, but like *Hippolytus Veiled*, it exists only in fragment form.[187] This evidence suggests that the myth of the virgin prince was popular enough to warrant several dramatic retellings.[188]

For example, Kevin Calcamp examines the story of Hippolytus through the most famous versions of the play by Euripides, Seneca, and Racine. He contends that "Euripides, Seneca, and Racine altered the character of Hippolytus and his sexuality to reflect the cultural attitudes of sexuality, masculinity, and philosophical thought inherent in their societies."[189] He notes that while Euripides's play focuses on the hubris of Hippolytus's pride in his self-control, Seneca's Hippolytus displays the Roman interest in Stoicism, and Racine's *Phedre* reflects Jansenist teachings and contends with the Neoclassical ideals of the French Académie. Racine's adaptation went so far as to significantly mute Hippolytus's asexuality, bringing in a love interest for the young prince in order to make his death garner less pity. Racine thought he "should give him some weakness which would make him a little guilty towards his father," and thus brought in the character of Aricia, the daughter of an enemy of Theseus, who Hippolytus loves against his

[187] Matthew Wright, *The Lost Plays of Greek Tragedy, Volume 2: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 128-129.

[188] Rosanna Lauriola, "Hippolytus," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Euripides*, eds. Rosanna Lauriola and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 443-503. See also Graeme Miles, "Hippolytus, the Lamia, and the Eunuch: Celibacy and Narrative Strategy in Philostratus' Life of Appolonius," *Classical Philology* 112 (2017): 201, https://doi.org/10.1086/691538. This article describes several Greek novels which feature characters based on Hippolytus in their extreme ascetism, again noting how popular the figure of Euripides' Hippolytus was in classical culture subsequent to the play's premiere.

[189] Calcamp, "Reflections of Hippolytus," 125.

will.[190] While Racine did not invent the character of Aricia, his version popularized the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra, and in many subsequent adaptations, Hippolytus's asexuality is virtually nonexistent.

Several adaptations of Hippolytus explore the themes play through theories of sexuality in their own time. For example, a prevailing theory of sexuality in the early twentieth century was Freud's theories of the Oedipal complex and works such as H.D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927) and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) examine the story of Hippolytus through a psychoanalytic lens.[191] Both playwrights were heavily influenced by Freud's theories, using them to transform Euripides's drama into new stories which articulate theories of sexuality in their time. Toril Lynn McKee states that playwrights such as "Eugene O'Neill and H.D., with their close proximity to, and, in the case of H.D., personal relationship with, Freud, were looking for stories with which to showcase the Freudian lens," and thus, they turned to the Greeks, and specifically to *Hippolytus*.[192] H.D. was concerned with the sexual innocence and purity of Hippolytus, and her play features Phaedra seducing Hippolytus by pretending to be Artemis. Conversely, O'Neill's play creates a sexual world of incest and murder, focusing on the reciprocated sexual relationship between Eben (Hippolytus) and his stepmother Abbie (Phaedra). Similarly, Robinson Jeffers's play *The Cretan Woman* (1954), heavily hints that Hippolytus's

[190] Jean Racine, *Phedre*, in *Five Plays, Translated into English Verse*, trans. Kenneth Muir. (London: Hill and Wang, 1962), 176.

[191] H.D., *Hippolytus Temporizes* (Redding Ridge, Black Swan Books, 1927) and Eugene O'Neill, *Desire Under the Elms*, in *Three Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

[192] McKee, "A Rich Reward in Tears," 95.

refusal of Phaedra is not due to his virginity, but due to homosexuality and a lack of attraction to women.[193]

Hallie Flannagan's 1931 production of *Hippolytus* at the Vassar Experimental Theatre emphasized the "triumph of Aphrodite," or the inevitability of desire.[194] Suzanne Walker details the production by Flannagan, known for her work with the Federal Theatre Project, and notes that the production stemmed from her work with classics professor Philip Davis, who she married three years after the production. Walker states that "much of Flanagan's personal work with the Hippolytus was defined by her growing affections for Davis, for she would later admit that her focus on the unstoppable power of Aphrodite was more than a mere artistic choice."[195] Even in production, the story of Hippolytus is so often tied up with lust and desire, that a nonsexual reading is buried.

Modern adaptations tend to turn the focus generally to the character of Phaedra, and the state of Hippolytus's celibacy remains vaguely unclear. Mariana Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* (2011) focuses on how Phaedra's family shaped her by exploring the generational violence that was enacted through her mother's encounter with the bull that birthed the minotaur.[196] While Phaedra still attempts to seduce Hippolytus in this play, his attraction to her in return remains vague and unclear. Some adaptations play explicitly with the hypersexuality of the characters,

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[193] Jeffers, Robinson. *The Cretan Woman*. In *Phaedra and Hippolytus: Myth and Dramatic Form*, edited by James L. Sanderson and Irwin Gopnik (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961).

[194] Suzanne Walker, "'Now I Know Love': Hallie Flanagan and Euripides' 'Hippolytus,'" *The Classical World* 108, no. 1 (2014): 102, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24699889.

[195] Walker, "'Now I Know Love,'" 102.

[196] Marina Carr, *Phaedra Backwards*, in *Plays: Three* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), ix.

such as Susan Yanowitz's *Phaedra in Delirium* (1998) which directs the characters of Theseus and Hippolytus to be played by the same actor, thus using one body to showcase the polarity of a "lusty womanizer at age fourty-five and his own virginal son at age twenty."[197] This double casting of Theseus and Hippolytus shows the difficulty that a young and innocent man could have traversing a hypersexual world. Moving further towards the hypersexualization of the characters is Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996) which is oversaturated with sexual imagery and rape.[198] This play even ramps up Hippolytus's misogyny, painting him as a present-day misogynist, who uses women sexually, even participating in a sexual assault of Phaedra, before ultimately dying at the end. Hippolytus here is far from asexual; instead, he is portrayed as grotesquely pansexual and abusive, which makes Phaedra's lust for him horrifying. Kane's play presents compulsory sexuality as inherently pathological.

Recently, Donna Zuckerberg uses the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra to engage with contemporary rhetoric surrounding men's rights activists and the incel engagement with classical literature to promote misogyny and white supremacy. In particular, Zuckerberg argues that "the use of the ancient world to understand gender and sex is bidirectional: the men of the manosphere see their own misogyny reflected back at them, theorized, and celebrated in ancient literature."[199] As noted above, the story of Euripides *Hippolytus* (and Seneca's *Phaedra*) both heavily feature misogyny and a false rape accusation. These plays articulated the anxieties of ancient Greek and Roman men, and Zuckerberg makes the argument that these plays could

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[197] Susan Yankowitz, *Phaedra in Delirium*, in *Divine Fire: Eight Contemporary Plays Inspired by the Greeks*, ed.Caridad Svich (New York: Backstage Books, 2005), 377.

[198] Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love* (London: Bloomsbury Mentheun Drama, 1996).

[199] Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 6.

similarly articulate the anxieties felt by certain members of our contemporary society, even suggesting that Hippolytus could appear to be an "ancient prototype" of the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) community, i.e. men who have decided to opt out of the sexual marketplace, as a form of misogynist protest against gynocentrism.[200]

A surface level feminist reading could view Euripides' *Hippolytus* as a story that glorifies a hatred of women by showing the destruction of an innocent young man by the lies of a conniving woman. A deeper reading, as I have argued, suggests that this play lays bare the workings of compulsory sexuality that presumes everyone is desiring of sex and fortifies this desire for the benefit and privilege of a few. Ela Przybylo maintains that "compulsory sexuality is not only the celebration of sex or sexual desire but it is the uneven application of this celebration – the idea that white men *deserve* sex and that women owe them this sex"[201] Pryzbylo is specifically discussing the "tyrannical celibacy" of the contemporary incel movement, a point that can be shared with Zuckerberg's argument regarding the MGTOW community. In becoming attuned to how compulsory sexuality functions, a reading such as Zuckerberg's, which models a strategy that could be used to combat the rhetoric of misogynist groups such as the incel movement or the MGTOW community.[202]

The feminist critiques that point out the misogyny inherent in Euripides' drama as well as those that problematize the various adaptations that come after Euripides are important readings into the Greek drama. They illuminate the system of compulsory (hetero)sexuality that had

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[200] Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 166.

[201] Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 138, (original emphasis).

[202] Aven McMaster, "Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age," review of *Not All Dead White Men*, by Donna Zuckerberg, *Atlantis Journal*, 41 no.1 (2020): 86, https://doi.org/10.7202/1074019ar.

written women out of the sexual economy and demonstrate that their position in these tragedies is tenuous at best. These feminist readings are helpful in pointing out men's anxieties over sexual access towards women, their assumptions of women's sexual indiscretions, and their fears of false accusations. However, these feminist reading do not negate an asexual reading lens. First, queerness can exist alongside misogyny. Queer characters are not necessarily feminist, and feminist characters are not necessarily queer-friendly, as seen in the recent explosion of trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourse. Pointing out the possibly queer nonsexuality of a character does not negate a feminist reading of that character. The reverse is also true: Hippolytus's queerness and asexuality do not dismiss his misogyny. While he might be asexual, and thus be heavily discriminated against because he does not perform his masculinity properly in terms of sexual appetite, he is still a misogynist. Secondly, a feminist lens, when read alongside an asexual reading lens, opens up the idea that throughout history, only certain bodies have been able to disidentify with sexuality because only certain bodies have been allowed to claim a sexuality. In order to disidentify with sexuality, one must be able to have access to sexuality and be read as a subject within it. For the ancient Greeks, a very limited section of the population was able to access a form of sexuality that allowed them agency. While this sexuality is not equivalent to the identarian model of sexuality of contemporary western society, there was still a form of compulsory sexuality that created a hierarchy of sexual experiences.

Asexuality is only now gaining traction as named sexual orientation. My interest lies in using it as an interpretative lens to breathe life into works that contain an asexual possibility as a dramaturgical choice. With this asexual dramaturgical lens, I argue that *Hippolytus* works as an allegory for compulsory sexuality's negative effects. Reading classical works such as *Hippolytus* and its adaptations through such a dramaturgical lens allows for an exploration of compulsory

sexuality that can encompass multiple themes of how sexuality functions. This dramaturgical lens could lead to new directions for future playwrights keen on creating an asexual-centered adaptation the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra or for future directors interested in tackling Euripides's play. Anton Bierl remarks that "Euripides makes hypersexuality and asexuality, hubris and noble ideas, drive and repression meet and collapse on stage," noting the playwright's radical exploration of his contemporary ideas and concepts.[203] Euripides's surviving *Hippolytus* may be the closest thing in ancient dramatic literature to an asexual identity that can be viewed onstage. That this potential asexual resonance takes the form of a privileged male prince with misogynist ideals should not be ignored. Rather, scholars of asexuality must remain attuned to the ways that sexuality is oftentimes imposed on certain individuals through various hierarchical mechanisms, such as gender, race, class hierarchy, and power. *Hippolytus* demonstrates these interconnecting issues through a complex tale of problematic characters that are trapped underneath the yoke of compulsory sexuality.

[203] Anton Bierl, "Phaedra: A Tragic Queen in Turmoil Between Violent Love and Its Chaste Suppression: An Interpretation of Euripides' Hippolytus in Initiatory Terms," *SKENÈ: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6 no. 1 (2020): 80, https://doi.org/10.13136/sjtds.v6i1.270.

Chapter 2.
Laudable Chastity: Hrotsvit's Rhetorical Dramas

Hrostvit of Gandershiem, tenth century canoness and playwright, is widely considered to be one of first extant female playwrights on record.[204] Her six plays extol the virtues of chastity by featuring virginal characters as protagonists and centering themes of celibacy and virginity. There has been much discussion regarding the ideological undertones in her play in recent years from feminist scholars, but one option that has not been considered is the possibility of seeing her plays as exhibiting traces of asexuality. In this chapter, I offer up the possibility of reading her plays through an asexual lens while situating her plays within the larger context of medieval sexuality.

Hrotsvit's six plays are all based on saints lives from the early Christian church.[205] Historians and critics of Hrotsvit have discussed both her use of these hagiographies and her reworking of the comedies of the Roman playwright Terrence.[206] In the preface of her works, Hrotsvit explains her reasoning for modelling her six plays on Terrence's as an act of imitation meant "to glorify… the laudable chastity of Christian virgins in that self-same form of

[204] There has been much variation on the spelling of Hrotsvit's name. For this dissertation, unless quoting from a source, I will use the most widely used spelling: "Hrotsvit," See also: Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 3-4. There are also a variety of names for her six plays that will be discussed, and thus, I will be using the titles found in the translation I will be citing for this chapter. See: Christopher St. John, *The Plays of Roswitha*, trans. Christopher St. John. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966). While Hrotsvit herself named several plays after the female protagonists, the most widely used versions are the titles that later (male) translators/editors chose to name, which I will use for the sake of clarity.

[205] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works*, 10-15.

[206] Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: The Ethics of Authorial Stance* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), p. 55-86. See also Carole E. Newlands "Hrotswitha's Debt to Terence," *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-2014)* 116, (1986) 373, https://www.jstor.org/stable/283926.

composition which has been used to describe the shameless acts of licentious women."[207] By coopting the works of Terrence to make them more palatable for her Christian audience, Hrotsvit is in essence subverting his plays. This argument has been made often by many scholars of Hrotsvit. Most notably, Katharina Wilson, asserts that Hrotsvit "attempted a perfectly logical and masterfully conceived fusion of two mimetically defined genres by grafting her hagiographic plots and liturgical prayers onto the Terrentian form."[208] In short, this decision to blend the two genres was a rhetorical gesture, likely used for pedagogical purposes.[209] This dramaturgical decision highlights the interrelated nature of the mythos Hrotsvit was using for her inspiration.

While the blending of pagan and Christian sources demonstrates a duality at work within Hrotsvit's writing, another duality between sexuality and nonsexuality is also apparent. Her interest in virgins speaks to a common resonance with asexuality, that of celibacy. Asexuality is often confused with celibacy, with those unfamiliar with asexuality often mistaking as merely a religious choice.[210] As noted in the introduction, many asexual scholars and activists have drawn a firm line between asexuality and celibacy, arguing for asexuality to be a distinct sexual orientation. Even so, there is still some ambiguity between the concepts of asexuality and celibacy, as well as definitional haziness among such terms as celibacy, chastity, and virginity. Thus, it is useful to begin with an exploration of how these terms are used currently and how they were used in Hrotsvit's time. Before delving into the definitional slipperiness of these various terms, a few points are worth mentioning.

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[207] St. John, *The Plays of Roswitha*, p. xxvi

[208] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works*, 112.

[209] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: The Ethics of Authorial Stance*, 104.

[210] On the misunderstanding of asexuality as a religious statement, see: Decker, *The Invisible Orientation*, 112-115.

First, while this chapter deals with the particulars of Hrotsvit's dramatic work, it also deals with European medieval sexuality writ large. Hrotsvit was writing in the tenth century, while modeling her plays after the lives of third and fourth century saints and the second century comedies of Terrence.[211] Furthermore, her writings and the ideals for Christian virgins supported the push by other theologians (such as Odo of Cluny) for a celibate clergy, which had reverberations into the eleventh century and beyond.[212] Thus, this chapter deals with medieval sexuality as it applies to a specific instance while also discussing how sexuality functioned across several centuries, thus taking a broad-strokes view of medieval sexuality.

Secondly, since the concepts of chastity and celibacy at this time can be fluid, this chapter also requires a broadening of scope from exploring asexuality as an identarian position to looking at nonsexuality as a lens. Indeed, forms of nonsexuality, including chastity and celibacy, involve traces or resonances of asexuality. So, while asexuality as an orientation may be impossible to ascribe to the characters in Hrotsvit's work, they all exhibit traces of nonsexuality, which refers to a deviation from sexuality that includes, but is not limited to, asexuality. How this nonsexuality manifests itself with the system of compulsory sexuality in the medieval era is the focus and driving question of this chapter.

Chastity, Celibacy, and Virginity

Today, definitions of chastity, celibacy, and virginity are practically interchangeable. Contemporary connotations of "chaste" usually indicate virginity. Likewise, celibacy is typically

[211] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works,* 111-112.

[212] Gary Macy, "Hrotsvit's Theology of Virginity and Continence," in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (fl. 960),* ed. by Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 82.

associated with an individual who has chosen to either remain a virgin or chosen to forego sexual activity.

These three terms are distinct from asexuality, yet these terms are all forms of nonsexuality. To fully understand the nonsexuality of Hrotsvit's characters and their relationship to compulsory sexuality, these terms need to be unpacked and explained in their historical context of early Christianity, as well as situated in terms of what they mean today in contrast to asexuality. As previously noted, the definitions of asexuality are fluid and shifting, with asexuality and celibacy having a fraught relationship. I hope to show that the overlap between the two becomes blurred when viewed from different historical perspectives.

Ruth Mazo Karras delineates the differences between these terms in her study on medieval sexuality. For instance, she claims that term "virgin" was meant to denote a woman who was not yet married (this term was rarely used for men), since "women's sexual activity began with marriage."[213] Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie explain that the use of the term "virginity" (for women or sometimes men) depended on the context, making it an unstable term that could refer to being unmarried, never having experienced sex, biological intactness, or a commitment to religious celibacy.[214] Conversely, in the Middle Ages, chastity "generally meant the absence of sexual activity, but it could also be used to mean the absence of *illicit* sexual activity."[215] In other words, while chastity is typically thought of as the state of biological

[213] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (London: Routledge, 2012) 38.

[214] Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, "Introduction: The Epistemology of Virginity," in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. by Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 16-17.

[215] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 37, (added emphasis).

virginity today, it was possible in the middle ages and early modern era to define a marriage as chaste if both parties (especially the wife) were faithful and used sex only for reproduction. Karras further defines "celibacy" as the unmarried state, meaning that celibacy and chastity, at least in the medieval usage, were not synonymous.[216] However, Karras maintains that while celibacy generally implied chastity, "the term 'celibate' was generally reserved for those for whom the unmarried state was permanent."[217] In other words, "celibate" could signify those for whom an abstinence of sex and commitment to chastity was a valid, lifelong commitment. Karras argues then that "the choice to abstain often came as a result of what medieval people would have described as a vocation or call from God, and what modern people might consider *an inner compulsion or an orientation*."[218] The choice then to commit to celibacy was, for medieval people, akin to a contemporary sexual orientation. Karras further problematizes this assertion, exploring the ways that sexual desire, religious devotion, and sex drive contributed to this commitment to celibacy. For instance, she states that "to a few absence of desire came naturally, for others it was achieved, but for all it meant an identity of chastity that went beyond mere acts (or absence of acts)," noting how sexual desire was a part of an identity that was broader than only sexual acts.[219]

Yet while Karras makes the argument that this commitment to celibacy was akin to a sexual orientation, she does not refer to it as asexuality. Instead, she explicitly argues against reading this as asexuality, stating "the chastity these people sought to achieve was not asexual; it

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[216] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 38.

[217] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 38.

[218] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 38, (added emphasis).

[219] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 49.

was achieved not by repressing their sexuality but by redirecting it."[220] I would argue that this is a misapprehension of asexuality as defined by contemporary scholars. Asexuality does not repress desire; rather, it describes those who do not experience desire. So asexuality, in the contemporary identarian definition of it as a sexual orientation, is arguably in line with Karras's description of the commitment to celibacy.

Benjamin Kahan makes a similar argument for celibacy as a distinct identity formation and "historicizes celibacy as a sexuality in addition to exploring celibacy's impact on and intersection with other sexual formations."[221] In configuring celibacy as a sexuality, Kahan problematizes the distinction many asexual scholars make between asexuality and celibacy, demonstrating an overlap between the two. Celibacy, like asexuality, can be (and often is) experienced as an enduring, innate, and stable mode of life.

What then can be garnered from these overlapping definitions? All of these terms as understood in the Middle Ages and in the early doctrines of Christianity point to nonsexuality as a preferred way of life. Chastity and celibacy, along with lifelong virginity, became markers of the Christian faithful, and strongly influenced the hagiography of the early church.

Hrotsvit's plays all feature hagiographic stories from centuries before her time that contributed to the mythmaking of early Christianity. Elizabeth Abbot states that "early Christianity's major thrust was its preoccupation with sexuality, and with virginity and celibacy in particular."[222] Arguably, this preoccupation with virginity and celibacy became central to the blossoming doctrine and mythmaking of early Christianity. Additionally, this preoccupation with

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[220] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 70.

[221] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 1.

[222] Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 54.

celibacy was part of the striving to distinguish the new religion of Christianity from the pagan religions of late antiquity. Sissel Undheim explores the differences between Christian virgins with the pagan vestal virgins, noting that the early Christian fathers, specifically the writings of Ambrose, sought to distinguish between the two by contrasting the Christian virgins' free choice with the vestal virgin's forced service.[223] In this manner, chosen virginity becomes a marker of distinction for a religion still in its infancy.

The church fathers became legendary for both their writings and their extreme acts of ascetism that included celibacy, fasting, and exposure.[224] Patricia Cox Miller frames the ascetic practices of these desert fathers as a form of performance art, viewing "ascetic persons as performance artists, enacting the spiritual body in the here-and-now."[225] Miller further broadens her view of the desert fathers into a larger performance lens, suggesting that "[c]onceptualizing ascetic behavior as performative practice enables the interpreter to focus on the doing and acting which are creative of meaning in the ascetic context."[226] In other words, the desert fathers performatively enacted and created the beliefs surrounding ascetism as a Christian practice.[227] Miller is therefore arguing that through these performances of ascetic acts, these desert fathers

[223] Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 16.

[224] One such example of extreme ascetic practice is St. Simeon, who lived atop a 60-foot tall pillar to be closer to God. See: Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 88-90.

[225] Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Aestheticism and 'The Body from Nowhere,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 2 (1994): 137, https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.0.010.

[226] Miller, "Desert Aestheticism," 147-148.

[227] I use "performatively" here in the same manner as J.L. Austin, noting that a performative utterance does not merely say or describe something, but through the saying, does something. An example of a performative utterance would be the placing of a bet or an auctioneer making binding legal contracts with speech. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6-7.

actively shaped Christian theological thought that would come to have a great influence on how the Middle Ages viewed expressions of sexuality, and thus, nonsexuality.

In a similar vein, James Whitta describes the process by which "[m]onks, as celibate ascetics, are interpellated into a discourse of *angelic asexuality* developed by fourth-century desert hermits in Egypt and incorporated soon afterwards into Western monasticism by Jerome, John Cassian and others."[228] While Whitta primarily analyzes a late eleventh/early twelfth century liturgical drama, coming a few centuries after Hrotsvit, he also explores how the third and fourth century desert ascetics influenced subsequent interpellations of religious life. Further, it is worth pausing to interrogate Whitta's use of "asexuality" here. Whitta invokes asexuality in terms of "ascetic discipline and liturgical devotion," to achieve a "mimetic transcendence."[229] Though Whitta is likely not using "asexuality" in terms of the contemporary sexual orientation, this definition of asexuality is similar to how celibacy is understood. In other words, Whitta's use of asexuality here shows the fluidity of these two terms, especially in the medieval era. Definitional intention aside, Whitta's argument that the early Christian church founders desire for an angelic asexuality shows the process by which a nonsexual life became a signifier of the Christian faithful.

Sissel Undheim similarly states that "virginity and virgins might have been understood as asexual and 'ungendered,'" suggesting that the gender and status of virginity oscillated between

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[228] James Witta, "Adest sponsus, qui est Christus: Performing the Male Monastic Body in Sponsus," *Didaskalia: The Journal for Ancient Performance* 4, no. 1 (1997): 2, http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol4no1/whitta.html, (added emphasis). On the writings and ascetic practices of the early Christian hermits, see also: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[229] Whitta, "Adest sponsus," 1 and 3.

notions of fixity and flexity.[230] In other words, the gendering and sexuality of medieval virgins was not tied to a fixed identity nor to a particular gender. Leah DeVun similarly explores the idea of nonbinary sex circulating in the premodern and early modern eras and how these ideas mapped onto human reality, noting that "[a]t least some early Christians craved a release from sexual and social conventions, preferring a path toward the agender, asexual emulation of God."[231] This process of transcending social conventions sought by early Christians may have been a way to escape the bounds of socially imposed gender hierarchy. Like Whitta, both Undheim and DeVun are using a different usage of the term "asexual" than denoting the sexual orientation and are instead invoking this idea of transcendence away from bodily limitations of gender. Abbott observes that "even the poorest Christians were offered the virginity of their bodies as vehicles to carry them to an angelic life, with access to the holiest of holies, the one God."[232] Virginity for the early Christians was thus a way of becoming one with God and transcending their earthly constraints to experience a spiritual freedom while experiencing terrestrial repression.

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the church founders, noted the necessity of the soul being guided to bodily purity. He states,

> In such a life, every effort is made to insure [sic] that the loftiness of the soul is not brought low by the insurrection of pleasures, for then the soul turns down towards the passions of flesh and blood instead of occupying itself with lofty things and looking upwards … It was for such a disposition of the soul that the virginity of the body was intended, to make the soul forget and become unmindful

[230] Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 108. On the use of "fixity and flexity," see also: Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 22.

[231] Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex: Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 37.

[232] Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 56.

> of the passionate movements of its nature, affording it no necessity to descend to the lowly guilt of the flesh.[233]

Virginity, then, was necessary to achieve this upwards direction of the soul, and while not everyone chose to work towards this goal, some did. This chosen virginity required effort, both physical and spiritual. Foucault suggests that virginity required constant work and self-monitoring, in a way making "the practice of virginity… as a type of relation to the self, that concerns not just the body, but also the relations of the body and the soul."[234] Virginity thus becomes what Foucault calls a technology of the self, requiring diligence and sacrifice, and "must be not a rejection of the body, but a labor of the soul upon itself."[235] This labor of virginity was spiritual as well as physical.

Jankowski claims that the early church provided an acceptable place for virginity to flourish. She states "Catholicism provided a socially/culturally/theologically acceptable place for female (and male) virgins. Although that place – and the power accorded women – was often contested, it always existed."[236] In other words, religious nonsexuality had a place within the system of compulsory sexuality. This system sometimes allowed for a nonsexual life to be possible for some, but it also likely forcibly desexualized others. John Boswell remarks that "in matters sexual, it would be a mistake to imagine that the theological program of ascetic Christian theologians was instituted uniformly and *en masse*."[237] The practices of chosen celibacy were

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[233] Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginity," *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Gregory of Nyssa Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 28.

[234] Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume 4, t*rans. by Robert Hurley, ed. Frederic Gros (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021), 165.

[235] Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 133.

[236] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 74.

[237] Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 109.

therefore not likely adopted by many across the board. Karras similarly notes that "the fact that chastity is so remarkable in saints' lives would seem to indicate that it was not expected in normal people's behavior."[238] These practices required effort and were meant for the devoted few.

This nonsexuality has traces of asexuality and even blurs the boundaries between asexuality as a sexual orientation and as a choice. This brings me to a specific point regarding the celibate characters of Hrotsvit's plays: they cannot be painted as asexual characters, but they can be read as exhibiting asexual resonances. In other words, they can be read as nonsexual. What nonsexuality in this sense does is allow for a reading of Hrotsvit's characters that registers resistance to the system of compulsory sexuality without necessarily establishing the etiology of that resistance as either an orientation or a choice. As noted by Charles Nelson, the conflicts in Hrotsvit's plays "between male and female conclude either with one or the other or both espousing a virginal, or secondarily, a chaste life; the recalcitrant are damned… *the sexed must become unsexed to lead exemplary lives*."[239] Nonsexuality, then, was part of the system of compulsory sexuality, to the point where it could be expected of certain people in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment, even in the afterlife.

Virgin Martyrs, Chaste Wives, and Celibate Hermits

The centuries between the martyrdom of virgins and the writings of Hrotsvit saw the sedimentation of these martyrs into legends.[240] Abbott states that the Church fathers also helped

[238] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 33.

[239] Charles Nelson, "Hrotsvit von Gandersheim: Madwoman in the Abbey," in *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages: An Anthology of Feminist Approaches to Middle High German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1991), 53, (added emphasis).

[240] Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 52.

shape the new church through these dangers, and through both their acts and the persecutions, the mythos of Christianity developed. While the extreme ascetic practices were one option for achieving an angelic asexuality, martyrdom was another avenue which "canceled out all sin and elevated one to angel status."[241] Jankowski makes an important point regarding these virgin martyrs, stating that while virginal women were afforded a laudable place in terms of their holiness, "a virgin martyr was superior to a virgin nonmartyr."[242] The Christian position on virginity thus lauds the sacrifice of virginity and the dedication to a spiritual triumph over the body.

It is this legendary spiritual triumph that Hrotsvit taps into in the plays *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*. Both plays feature the martyrdom of three young virgins, and while *Sapientia* does not overtly discuss the virginity of the young girls, they are still considered virgin martyrs. *Dulcitius*, on the other hand, centers the virginity of the young women in question, Agape, Chione, and Irene, who choose death rather than renounce their faith and marry Roman men. Their stringent ties to virginity win out at the end. When entreated to deny their faith and marry by Diocletian, Agape tells him not to bother making preparations for marriage, since they will not convert "or let our purity be stained."[243] Diocletian then has them imprisoned to be questioned by the governor, Dulcitius, who immediately lusts after the young women. He orders the young women to be locked in the kitchen so that he may have sexual access to them. In a comedic turn of events, he enters the kitchen at night and ends up fondling the pots and pans instead of the young women, ultimately becoming covered in soot and shaming himself in front of his soldiers. The

[241] Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 51.

[242] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 52.

[243] "Dulcitius," *The Plays of Roswitha*, scene i.

young women watch from another room, noting the absurdity of his error. In his embarrassment, he then orders the young women to be stripped in public, but the soldiers are magically unable to remove their clothing. The two elder sisters are sentenced to burn alive, but since their spirits depart from their bodies, leaving their clothes unscathed, they keep their modesty intact. The youngest sister, Irena, is taken to Count Sisinnius, who threatens to take her to a brothel, to shame her into converting and dishonor her faith. Irena remains steadfast in her faith and declares "[t]he wage of sin is death; the wage of suffering a crown. If the soul does not consent, there is no guilt.[244] The young woman is rescued by angels disguised as soldiers before she is brought to the brothel, yet she is shot by an arrow and dies, knowing that she will be "adorned with the crown of virginity."[245]

In this play, the triumph of virginity and Christian faith over paganism is overt. *Dulcitius* is typically read as a victory of Christianity, but it is also a victory for Agape, Chione, and Irene, who actively choose nonsexuality in the form of chastity. This play's triumphant medieval nonsexuality, I argue, makes it asexually resonant for present-day readers. For instance, Marla Carlson states that the "girls' bodies function as foci of desire but are themselves free from desire. By contrast, the non-Christian men are represented as desiring subjects, which also means they are subject to their bodies."[246] Their freedom from desire is reminiscent of how many asexual individuals define themselves, as lacking sexual desire.[247] While this is a modern definition of asexuality, there is still some overlap between their staunch virginity and the

[244] "Dulcitius," *The Plays of Roswitha*, scene xii.

[245] "Dulcitius," *The Plays of Roswitha*, scene xiv.

[246] Marla Carlson, "Impassive Bodies: Hrotsvit Stages Martyrdom," *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 4, (1998): 479, http://www.jstor.com/stable/25068590.

[247] Pacho, "Estabalishing Asexual Identity," 13.

experience of lacking desire. For instance, Karras notes that "to be chaste was to identify oneself as someone devoted enough to spiritual matters that one could transcend the flesh. This is an even more profound aspect of personal identity than simply a question of whether someone was ritually pure or not." [248] To think somewhat anachronistically, this transcendence of the flesh could easily be considered a lifelong and serious commitment, which Karras claims is not unlike a modern sexual orientation.[249] Thus, that these virgins' lack of desire is buoyed by faith should not negate a potential asexual reading. In fact, their faith further shields them from sexual assault, as evidence by the series of mishaps that befall their would-be defilers. Florence Newman suggests that plays such as *Dulcitius* "consistently deflect or deflate the 'sexing up' of their heroines."[250] This can be seen in the substitution of cookware for the girls' bodies, which ridicules the lustful Dulcitius. Kathryn Gravdal argues that by making Dulcitius grope literal objects, "Hrotsvitha rejects the cultural axiom that women, including saintly virgins, are the cause of sexual transgression in men."[251] Thus, I maintain that Hrotsvit subverts the assumption that women are inherently hypersexual temptresses who use "burning female eroticism," and portrays them instead as virgins rejecting compulsory sexuality and seeking the perfect angelic asexuality of the legendary virgin martyrs.[252]

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[248] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 66.

[249] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 66.

[250] Florence Newman, "Violence and Virginity in Hrotsvit's Dramas," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. by Phyllis R. Brown, Linda A. McMillin, and Katharina M. Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 60.

[251] Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 34.

[252] Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 92.

Like *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*, the plays *Callimachus* and *Gallicanus* feature Christian women converting men through their commitment to celibacy. *Gallicanus* features martyrdom, but it also introduces the notion of a chaste Christian marriage and centers on the conversion of the title character due to his intended wife's steadfast faith and vow of celibacy. Similarly, the play *Callimachus* involves a chaste Christian marriage and the unwavering faith of the celibate wife, Drusiana. Callimachus is an admirer who declares his love for Drusiana, even after his friends tell him that it is fruitless to pursue such a devout woman who has even rejected her husband's sexual advances. He persists and propositions her, but she rejects him, stating, "I have renounced even what is lawful – my husband's bed!"[253] He swears to trap her into bed, but Drusiana, ever devout, prays for death rather than succumb to Callimachus. Even her death is not enough to stop her admirer, who convinces the guard to allow him access to her tomb to have sex with her corpse. Upon entering the tomb, Callimachus and the guard are killed by a serpent before her body can be defiled. The apostle John appears and resurrects Callimachus to convert him. Drusiana is also resurrected, and she prays for the guard to be likewise returned to life, but he chooses death rather than convert to Christianity. The play ends with Drusiana's husband rejoicing with the angel that Callimachus was converted and Drusiana was resurrected.

Callimachus portrays a subversion of the sexual economy. The plot of this play revolves around how the sexual access to a woman is denied to man who goes to great lengths to acquire her. By having Drusiana choose death over seduction, Gravdal observes that "Hrotsvitha shows here the female power to petition and the eternal and perfect justice of the Christian God who unfailingly rewards the faithful."[254] In other words, Hrotsvit is commenting on the ability of

[253] "Callimachus," *The Plays of Roswitha*, scene III.

[254] Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 31.

women to choose chastity as a means for women to, as Sue-Elle Case puts it, "remain outside of the patriarchal order of desire" and be rewarded for their faith and their commitment to chastity.[255] It is even more telling that Drusiana does not merely refuse Callimachus' seduction, but she makes a point to say that she has also refused her husband's bed, demonstrating her complete renunciation of sex. While Drusiana's total renunciation of sex is absolute, so is Callimachus' desire for her body, so much so that Hrotsvit includes necrophilia as a perverse extension of compulsory sexuality. Here Hrotsvit refuses to signal a woman's culpability in the act of male objectification, and by having Callimachus attempt to assault her lifeless body, a literal object, she portrays this victimization as perverse.[256] Drusiana is resurrected and thus rewarded for her celibacy.

The plays *Abraham* and *Paphnutius* also portray men's interest in women's sexuality, but these plays feature men rescuing women who have turned away from chastity. Both plays also feature nonsexual ascetic men converting female sex workers who are made to repent their sins following a time of difficult penance. *Paphnutius* features a desert hermit so concerned for the soul of a prostitute, Thais, that he disguises himself as a lover to gain access to her and convinces her to repent her sinful life by destroying her possessions and living out the remainder of her life in a cloistered cell for penance. *Abraham* similarly features a hermit so worried for the chastity of his young niece that he inters her into a hermitage as a young woman. This play begins with Abraham, along with his friend Ephrem, teaching his young niece Mary the virtues of leading a chaste life. Mary agrees to be locked away in an enclosed hermitage to protect her virtue. Ephrem tells her that "[b]y keeping your body unspotted, and your mind pure and holy," she

[255] Sue-Ellen Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," *Theatre Journal* 35, no. 4 (1983): 537, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406462.

[256] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 537 and Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 32.

would be able to become like the angels.[257] Mary lives in the hermitage until she is about twenty, when she is corrupted (either raped or lured away, depending on the interpretation) by a young man who enters her hermitage disguised as a monk.[258] Ashamed of her transgression, she leaves the hermitage and becomes a prostitute. After several years, Abraham goes after her by disguising himself as a potential lover, and eventually convinces Mary to repent her ways and return to the hermitage where she lives out her days in penance.

Abraham, like *Paphnutius*, focuses on bringing fallen women to celibacy. Albrecht Classen writes, "Hrotsvit skillfully weaves the troublesome topics of sexuality and prostitution into her plays and thereby illustrates for her audience how to cope with two entirely opposite and yet intimately linked aspects in the life of women during the early Middle Ages."[259] The suggestion here is that Hrotsvit was familiar with the various nuances of human sexuality and included representation of sex work as part of her oeuvre. These plays also, Classen writes, "describe the war between the flesh and the spirit, and the long penance which must be done by those who have allowed the flesh to triumph."[260] In other words, they focus the necessary labor, both physical and spiritual, that is required to maintain chastity. That this labor is undertaken by a repentant sex worker demonstrates that anyone can reap the benefits of a celibate life.

While both *Abraham* and *Paphnutius* focus on bringing fallen women to celibacy, they also center the ascetic practices of men. For while there is indeed an overwhelming prominence

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[257] "Abraham," *The Plays of Roswitha*, scene ii.

[258] Newlands, "Hrotswitha's Debt to Terence," 374-375 and Albrecht Classen, "Sex on the Stage (and in the Library) of an Early Medieval Convent: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Tenth-Century Convent Playwright's Successful Competition against the Roman Poet Terence," *Orbis Litterarum* 65, no. 3 (2010): 187, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0730.2009.00973.

[259] Classen, "Sex on the Stage," 192.

[260] St. John, *The Plays of Roswitha*, p. xx.

of celibate women in Hrotsvit's plays, these two plays also center the practices of celibate men, demonstrating the importance of celibacy to both sexes. Pat Cullum notes that "chastity was central to the conception of the role of the hermit."[261] In other words, hermits could arguably be interpreted as nonsexual, or containing asexual resonances due to their transcending sexual desire and nonconformity to compulsory sexuality.

In a sense, both Paphnutius and Abraham not only refrain from sex; they actively recruit otherwise allosexual people into a nonsexual lifestyle. In a sense, they adopt an allosexual drag to disguise themselves as sexual men in order to enter the sexual economy of the brothels and "rescue" sex workers. These men are demonstrating that it is possible to be both nonsexual and patriarchal at once, since their dedication to nonsexuality is forced upon Mary and Thais. These plays then feature male characters who are so concerned with the sexuality of young women that they convince them to lock themselves away for years at a time, in essence, desexualizing them to fit within the sexually appropriate ideal: a virgin. In this way, compulsory sexuality functions as a means to carve out one of only two options for a woman: the virgin or the whore. These nonsexual men thus use desexualization as a means of control in order to force women into a nonsexual life meant to help them transcend earthly desires.

Hrotsvit's plays thus portray nonsexuality in a myriad of ways. Neither a positive nor negative, the chosen celibacy and stalwart virginity was the means to an end of resurrection and cosmic reward, but likely meant bodily suffering. Neither fully normative nor automatically transgressive, celibacy could signal a subversion of repressive ideals, but it could also be used as a means of controlling unruly desires. It is clear, however, that Hrotsvit promoted celibacy as the

[261] Pat Cullum, "'Give me Chastity': Masculinity and Attitudes to Chastity and Celibacy in the Middle Ages," in *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History*, ed. Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 234.

most desirable path for a Christian. This argument is promoted through her characters that are uplifted when they give themselves over to celibacy, such as the three young virgin martyrs in *Dulcitius*, or the chaste wife who dies and is resurrected in *Callimachus*, or the young Mary who is convinced to return to a life of celibacy in *Abraham*.

Reading Hrotsvit

The scholarship surrounding Hrotsvit's plays provides just as much insight into nonsexuality as do her plays. For instance, much of the scholarship on Hrotsvit's plays has focused on how sexuality and virginity are portrayed, as well as on her status as a medieval woman in a religious order. The issues of her agency as a woman of the church and the portrayal of women in her plays have been driving questions of this scholarship, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century which introduced a feminist lens from which to read her work. I find the debates regarding whether or not Hrotsvit can be read with a feminist lens to be important to the utilization of an asexual lens for her plays. What follows then is a brief survey of some of the feminist and queer interpretations of Hrotsvit.

For starters, scholars prior to the twentieth century seemed to express incredulity that Hrotsvit even existed, with A. Daniel Frankforter noting that in "1867 Joseph von Aschbach advanced the thesis that Hroswitha was a historical absurdity and, therefore, an impossibility… that a woman of [her] literary education and sophisticated taste could not have existed."[262] Frankforter further explores other criticism from the early twentieth century, observing the male bias and sexism that permeate the scholarship.[263]

[262] A. Daniel Frankforter, "Sexism and the Search for the Thematic Structure of the Plays of Hroswitha of Gandersheim," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 2, no. 3 (1979): 223.

[263] Frankforter, "Sexism and the Search for the Thematic Structure," 224-226.

Rosamond Gilder, reviewing Hrotsvit's work from a historical perspective in 1931, similarly remarks that her work as a dramatist is extraordinary given the "handicaps with which she was burdened" as a woman during the time of "the dark ages," especially for a woman in the church.[264] Gilder here is operating under the assumption that a woman such as Hrotsvit would have been repressed rather than having some sense of agency. As has been noted by several scholars, at this time in the Ottonian empire, women of religious orders like those at Gandersheim would have potentially wielded a great deal of agency and power compared to their non-clergy counterparts.[265] Additionally, the status of virgin brought about some protections for women and elevated them to a high status within their communities and within the church.[266] Theodora Jankowski suggests that women such as Hrotsvit had amazing powers that were bound up with their positions within the church and sometimes secular hierarchy, noting that "the period from the sixth through twelfth centuries was one of intense and continual negotiation of the virgin's power both from within the Roman Catholic Church and within the monachal system."[267] Religious women were thus afforded some degree of agency, and as noted by Mary Marguerite Butler, Hrotsvit's life at Gandersheim provided her with a considerable classical education.[268]

Sue-Ellen Case, writing in the 1980s, argues for Hrotsvit's inclusion in a feminist theatrical canon. She "attempts to do nothing more than to exemplify the application of a few

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[264] Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Woman in the Theatre* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1931): 20.

[265] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 66-67.

[266] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 64.

[267] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 66.

[268] Mary Marguerite Butler, *Hrotsvitha: The Theatricality of Her Plays*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 65-66.

basic feminist approaches to Hrotsvit and to lay a groundwork for evaluating the performance and reception of her work."[269] In other words, Case reads Hrotsvit's dramas through a feminist lens and counters the argument that the religious life for a woman was the ultimate repression, instead of a potential location for agency for women of the time.

Barbara Gold similarly suggests that Hrotsvit's depictions of women was complex, stating that "she can be credited with expanding the range of possible representations available to religious women in the tenth century."[270] Gold, like Case, is responding to earlier criticism that Hrotsvit is a mere female version of a monk, writing simple stories of chastity or is a "failed precursor of feminist thought."[271] Both of these options, she reasons, ignore her place as a woman writing at this time. For Gold, Hrotsvit vindicated and uplifted her female characters and provided keen insight into the lives of women, again demonstrating evidence of agency within her writings.

Writing in 1993, M.R. Sperberg-McQueen however disputes a feminist reading of Hrotsvit, stating that her plays reinforce patriarchal values and assert men's control over women's bodies. Her criticism is that "the behavior and actions of men determine what happens to a woman's body" in several of her plays.[272] While Sperberg-McQueen applauds her for portraying women positively, she also laments her limitations, stating that because she was

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[269] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 534.

[270] Barbara K. Gold, "Hrotswitha Writes Herself: Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis," in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. by Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 57.

[271] Gold, "Hrotswitha Writes Herself," 44.

[272] Marian R. Sperberg-McQueen, "Whose Body is it?: Chaste Strategies and the Reinforcement of Patriarchy in Three Plays by Hrotswitha von Gandersheim," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 8, no. 1 (1993): 63, https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.1993.0018.

steeped in the tradition of her faith, "she, perhaps inevitably, reproduced patterns from the dominant male discourse that present-day feminists can recognize as detrimental to women's search for personhood and autonomy."[273] For Sperberg-McQueen, her very identity as a member of a religious order negates her agency as a writer. Although I consider Sperberg-McQueen's reading limited, I value her critique of the assumption that Hrotsvit's writing is automatically feminist simply because Hrotsvit was a woman writing about women. As can be seen in these plays, Hrotsvit is not necessarily writing for the glory of women, but for the glory of virginity.

Yet even this observation proves less straightforward than it might seem. Helene Schleck complicates the image of Hrotsvit as champion of virginity over women's agency. She asks, "[w]hen a woman tells the story, however, even a medieval ecclesiastical woman, we need to ask whether she is internalizing the antifeminist thrust of the story and, therefore, taking the masculinist position, or if she is offering a response to that position."[274] For Schleck, stating that Hrotsvit presents merely a masculinist perspective is oversimplified, and that instead, her dramatic treatment of these hagiographic legends challenge the convention female subservience to male patriarchal rule.[275]

As a scholar looking to Hrotsvit for asexual resonances to use in present readings and productions, I value Schleck's arguments for Hrotsvit's transgressive achievement. But Marla Carlson's arguments remind me to moderate my enthusiasm. Carlson problematizes Hrotsvit's political imperatives regarding her plays, arguing that "Hrotsvit's dramas work to contain and

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[273] Sperberg-McQueen, "Whose Body is it?," 63-64.

[274] Helene Schleck, "The Whore as *Imago Dei*: Being and Abjection in Hrotsvit's Rewriting of Thais," in *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 8.

[275] Schleck, "The Whore as *Imago Dei*," 11.

neutralize a potentially subversive energy."[276] She first presents a history of the higher social class within tenth century Saxony that Hrotsvit belonged to, noting the importance of the class and position of power from which Hrostvit was writing. Secondly, she situates Hrotsvit's plays, particularly *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia* that heavily feature martyrdom of virgin women, within the history of the ritual of ordeal. In particular, she relates the history of the ordeal to the relative lack of pain on the part of the tormented virgins in both plays. That the Christian women triumph over pain in these dramas echoes the powerful position of the aristocratic Christian women of the Ottonian empire.[277] She states, "My readings of Hrotsvit's tormented bodies demonstrate, however, that what looks like subversion to a twentieth-century feminist can just as easily be read as a model for covert coercion designed to benefit those in power."[278] In other words, Carlson argues that Hrotsvit's use of the virgin martyrs is normative rather than transgressive in that they exist to contain potential subversions of the social order of the Ottonian empire. Most importantly, by "erasing pain from her representation of martyrdom, Hrotsvit appropriates the voice of the victim to serve as a sign of the Imperial Church's power and her dramatization of passive female triumph serves to reinforce male strength in action," thus, Hrotsvit's virgin martyrs reinforce the patriarchal order of the church's power.[279]

More recently, other theorists have explored the treatment of sexuality, with Albrecht Classen considering the erotic possibilities within her text. His analysis focuses on the very sexual themes of her plays, noting that it is very likely that as opposed to the stereotype of a repressed and prudish religious figure, Hrotsvit was well aware of all sorts of sexual behaviors

[276] Carlson, "Impassive Bodies," 475.

[277] Carlson, "Impassive Bodies," 483-484.

[278] Carlson, "Impassive Bodies," 487.

[279] Carlson, "Impassive Bodies," 487.

(e.g. sexual assault, sex work, necrophilia, etc.). He asserts, "despite her clerical status, both she as the author and her audience, nuns or canonesses, were fully in a position to reflect literarily upon the wide range of ordinary life conditions, were well informed about the various manifestations of sexuality."[280] This reading suggests that both she and her intended audience were in a position to understand the relations between sexuality and nonsexuality, and the importance of choosing virginity.

Stephen Walies considers a different reading on the sexuality of her plays, suggesting that they are not about virginity, but about the "conflict of flesh and spirit." Such a conflict bespeaks not a simple dichotomy between abstinence and promiscuity, but a deeper, spiritual sense of the two terms.[281] He refers to the "biographical reductionism" that many scholars make of her work, conflating her life in a virginial community with advancing virginity as a theme of her plays.[282] Wailes argues that this stance ignores the sexuality apparent in the plays, for not all of her protagonists are female virgins. He does suggest that the plays do celebrate chastity, but that they do not necessarily hold chastity to be the utmost human virtue. I point out, however, that this view only considers *virginity*, not the full range of nonsexuality, which includes nonvirginal characters who either choose not to have sex or lack sexual attraction. Both Wailes and Classen are correct in that Hrotsvit's dramas contain a large spectrum of sexuality, but ultimately, most of her characters participate in a refusal of sexual advances and sexual coercion in order to actively choose a nonsexual Christian life.

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[280] Classen, "Sex on the Stage," 193.

[281] Stephen L Wailes, "Beyond Virginity: Flesh and Spirit in the Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim," *Speculum* 76, no. 1 (2001): 3, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2903704.

[282] Wailes, "Beyond Virginity," 26.

Colleen Butler takes a new direction and explores Hrotsvit's work by situating it in the sex/gender system of the Middle Ages. In particular, she engages in a linguistic analysis of Hrotvit's work, analyzing her plays in contrast with the plays of Terrence and the hagiographic myths she used as source material. Specifically, she maintains that "Hrotsvit is arguing that her imitation of Terence's sexual content will help her destabilize gender expectations, and that the destabilization of gender expectations demonstrates the glory of God."[283] In other words, Butler provides a means for using a queer lens to read Hrotsvit's work. Karras similarly explains the importance of queering such work from the Middle Ages, arguing that "'queer' can also signify a new way of looking at medieval texts, rejecting contemporary heteronormativity; approaching a medieval text without assuming that the people and actions depicted in it are heterosexual (unless otherwise noted) can open up a new set of interpretive possibilities."[284] Through using a queer (and by extension, asexual) lens, there are more ways from which to interrogate the system of compulsory sexuality that was at work during the tenth century.

These various lenses are useful in exploring how contemporary scholars can read and interpret Hrotsvit's work. Katharina Wilson, for example, argues that while some may consider Hrotsvit's writing subversive, it should not be considered radical, considering that Hrotsvit never questions the patriarchal paradigm of virginity. Rather, she asserts that Hrotsvit does "appropriate and invert the paradigm," presenting young women often at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of virtue.[285]

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[283] Colleen Dorelle Butler, "Queering the Classics: Gender, Genre, and Reception in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016), 71.

[284]Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe,* 11.

[285] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of her Works,* 121.

Questions about Hrotsvit's political agency have formed a central axis of scholarship about her for some time, and the answers may be rather elusive. Assuming that her devotion to virginity is solely repressive negates potential liberation that could be found through a refusal of sex and the potential safe havens that religious communities could have provided for individuals seeking to live a nonsexual life. However, a solely liberatory lens could blind readers to the repressive desexualization that could occur in chaste environments, such as religious cloisters. Of course, both could be true. One can recognize the patriarchal institution of the church while also being attuned to the avenues of agency that could be found within. It is also important to note the privilege Hrotsvit wielded as an upper-class woman in a position of power. While the church was known to be a patriarchal institution, in Hrotsvit's time, she likely had immense influence. Also noting that she was a member of the upper class is an important point that should not be ignored. While there may be some subversive strands in her writing, she also upholds the normative power of the church.

Hrotsvit's Nonsexuality

The importance of the previous scholarship on Hrotsvit, especially the feminist and queer interpretations, is that they lay the groundwork for reading her plays against the grain, which also allows for reading with an asexual critical lens. So, what use might Hrotsvit be for feminist and queer critics in the present? Is the nonsexuality in her plays a useful touchstone for asexual artists, critics, and activists now? As noted earlier, asexuality studies owes much to feminist and queer theory, and the feminist and queer readings of Hrotsvit's work should be recognized. However, since a good portion of the scholarship on Hrotsvit was conducted before asexuality was articulated as a legitimate sexual orientation, many of these scholars may have taken for granted the assumption of sexual normativity. That does not mean that their analyses are

somehow lacking; rather, their analyses have brought up questions that have been worthwhile to this study, especially in regard to how the system of compulsory sexuality functioned.

A feminist lens tends to view her plays as subverting the patriarchal structures. Likewise, a queer lens of Hrotsvit's plays considers the ways that she subverts the heteronormative structures of premodern Europe. An asexual lens, however, views these plays as subverting patriarchal and heteronormative expectations while also upholding the system of compulsory sexuality that allowed space for nonsexuality. The themes of celibacy and chastity in Hrotsvit's plays were presented as choices where the characters actively choose nonsexuality as an option. While this celibacy is complex, it can still offer some insight into asexuality in the modern sense. By complex, I mean that these works do not separate nonsexuality from faith. In fact, these plays demonstrate that nonsexuality and faith, in the Middle Ages, could not be separated.

While this holds true for the Middle Ages, that link is complicated in today's society. Most asexual activists and scholars draw a firm line between asexuality and celibacy. However, it is important to recognize that even today, nonsexuality (or asexuality) can exist alongside faith. Religious devotion to celibacy does not negate asexuality. Hrotsvit's plays show a society in which religious nonsexuality was a clear option that functioned within the system of compulsory sexuality.

Even though these plays feature a form of nonsexuality that can be read as asexual, it does not mean that they are unproblematic. In staging these works, one must remain attuned to the ways in which nonsexuality is wielded. At times, the proclamation of virginity can be seen as a triumph over oppression, at others, virginity is used as a form of desexualization, wielded against certain characters in order to save their souls while sacrificing their corporeal bodies. For

contemporary readers this resembles repression and abuse, which was also observed by Sue-Ellen Case in her attempts to restage Hrotsvit's plays.

For instance, Case discusses the difficulty she faced restaging these plays (presented as a trilogy she referred to as: "'The Virgin' (*Dulcitius*), 'The Whore' (*Paphnutius*) and 'The Desperate One' (*Callimachus*)" in 1982.[286] For Case's audience, Hrotsvit came to be viewed as an "Uncle Tom" trapped by male values.[287] This comment brings to light the issue of audience and reception, and Case describes her feminist audience as resistant to viewing a Christian play lauding virginity as anything other than repressive. She further mentions that her audience reacted with laughter at certain parts, such as the miracles and resurrections, noting that her audience viewed "them not as stage conventions, but as bygone beliefs."[288] In short, her audience likely understood Hrotsvit's plays in terms of their own attitudes and beliefs towards contemporary Christianity.[289] Considering that her audience was primarily feminists amidst the background of the feminist sex wars and the rise of the conservative moral majority in the early 1980s, this response is unsurprising.[290] As conservative Christian groups were engaged in a backlash against feminism, sex-positive feminism was blossoming, so the idea of a laudable chastity ran counter to the sex as liberatory ideology.

The system of compulsory sexuality in the twentieth century, especially the late twentieth century of Case's production, rendered the possibility of living a nonsexual life invisible. Case's

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[286] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 540.

[287] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 541.

[288] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 541.

[289] Case, "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit," 541.

[290] Lorna Norman Bracewell, "Beyond Barnard: Liberalism, Antipornography Feminism, and the Sex Wars," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 27. https://doi.org/10.1086/686752.

audience could not imagine a world where a nonsexual life, especially a nonsexual life that was closely tied to faith, was anything but repressive, or worse, laughable. Cases's audience response is not necessarily wrong; instead, their response should be viewed as a natural response to unfamiliarity.

Contemporary audiences, as well as the critics of Hrotsvit, have had a hard time understanding the nonsexuality presented in Hrotsvit's plays. Some consider her work to be liberatory, others consider her work to be reminiscent of an oppressive and patriarchal structure. While her representation of nonsexuality could be experienced as liberatory for some, such as the virgin martyrs who transcend their pain and earthly lives, it could also be wielded against others, such as the hermits who force their nonsexuality upon sex workers.

Like Hrotsvit's nonsexuality, asexuality is not essentially or inherently liberatory, nor is it a pathology or symptom of oppression. While asexuality was not enunciated as an identity until very recently in history, the practice of chastity as a choice and a chosen way of life is prevalent. This has significant ties to how asexuality is understood today. Even today, asexuality is still being argued regarding its status as queer, even though most asexualtiy scholars agree that it can be understood as being queer. While it can queer sexuality, i.e., confound our assumptions about human nature, this current articulation of sexuality was not always how sexuality was conceived. Centering asexuality allows for these sorts of conversations regarding sexuality and assumptions about who had access to sexuality to come be brought to the fore. However, asexuality's queerness does not negate the potential slipperiness between the definitional boundaries between asexuality and celibacy. As Hrotsvit's plays demonstrate, these boundaries overlap.

Nonsexuality can be both resistant to and supportive of compulsory sexuality. Nonsexuality can both uphold and resist regimes of control. Regardless of how the technology of self in the Middle Ages understood sexuality, living a nonsexual life was possible. Lifelong celibacy was even part of the system of compulsory sexuality. In other words, there was an acceptable place for nonsexual individuals to live. This nonsexual lifestyle was strictly tied to the church and to religious practices of the day.

Karras contends that "the identities of medieval people were fundamentally shaped by their sexual status – not whether they were homosexual or heterosexual, as today, but whether they were chaste or sexually active." [291] In other words, instead of a heterosexual/homosexual binary opposition, there could arguably have been a married/chaste binary at work in medieval Europe. Though like the heterosexual/homosexual binary that has pervaded modern discourse, there are those individuals and sexualities that exceed the married/chaste binary.

The argument, then, and what can be gleaned from Hrostvit and her plays, is that nonsexuality existed within the normative system of how sex was conceived. Call this compulsory heterosexuality; call this the sex-gender system. The point though is that nonsexuality was not a category that exceeded articulation, like asexuality is today. As noted previously, asexuality confounds current the system of compulsory sexuality, and like bisexuality and pansexuality, it exceeds the heterosexual/homosexual binary. In the Middle Ages, while asexuality as a sexual orientation did not exist, nonsexuality *did* exist, so much to the point that living a nonsexual life was not only possible, but sanctioned and lauded.

Using an asexual lens to examine these plays allows for the anachronistic question of possibility. These characters could have been both deeply committed to their faith and lacked a

[291] Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 11.

desire for sex. While the vocabulary and discursive construction of asexuality did not exist in that time, it is not a stretch to consider the possibility that some people did not feel desire or did not desire sex. Both could exist then, and both can exist now.

There have been many discussions regarding whether or not Hrotsvit's plays were closet dramas meant for private reading or performed for a live audience.[292] Regardless of whether or not her plays were meant to be fully staged or meant for private reflection, their message is no less impactful. For instance, Lisa M. C. Weston contends that "Hrotsvit's virginal bodies are ultimately even more powerful when they become powerful reproducers of new Christian bodies without sexual reproduction."[293] Thus, these nonsexual bodies have the power to produce other virgins through conversion, either on the stage or on the page. As Hrotsvit makes clear in the preface to her plays, her goal was to reimagine the works of Terrance in a way that showcased the triumph of virginity while still building off of the literature of the classics. In so doing, she demonstrates not only her vast classical education, but also reveals how virginity operated along the lines of sex and gender. While critics may differ on the thematic elements of her plays, most seem to agree that she was a talented playwright who was promoting Christian ideals, whether they be a spirituality triumphing over materiality or celibacy prevailing over sexual indiscretions. Colleen Richmond agrees that Hrotsvit was a skilled rhetorician presenting "inspired female characters and an unstoppable Christian message." [294] In this way, Hrostvit's plays could be viewed as pedagogical tools. Katharina Wilson puts forth the theory that while Hrotsvit's plays

[292] Butler, *Hrotsvitha: The Theatricality of Her Plays*, 1-19.

[293] Lisa M. C. Weston, "Virginity and Other Sexualities," in, *A companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (fl. 960): Contextual and Interpretive Approaches*, eds. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 272.

[294] Richmond, "Hrotsvit's Sapientia," 142.

may not have been intended for performance, they may have been intended to be read as dialogues and used for instruction.[295] What is clear, is that Hrostvit's rhetorical virgins provide some insight into sexuality and gender of her time.

[295] Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: The Ethics of Authorial Stance*, 104.

Chapter 3.
Maiden Pride: The Ambiguous Moll Cutpurse of *The Roaring Girl*

The Jacobean city comedy *The Roaring Girl* (1611) by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker features a title character who is based on a real person, Mary Frith (alias Moll Cutpurse), the infamous cross-dressing woman of London. This character becomes involved in a fake marriage plot, wherein a young man, forbidden by his father to marry his true love, pretends to love Cutpurse instead. Cutpurse's inappropriateness forces his father to see that his true love is the correct option for his bride. From here, hilarity and adventures ensue, many of which involve Moll in men's attire dueling other men and cavorting with thieves. The play ends with the rightful couple together and Moll swearing (repeatedly) that she will never marry. Scholarship regarding the play, and particularly the character of Moll Cutpurse often involves critical explorations of her character in terms of gender and sexuality, yet her character has not been explicitly articulated as being asexual in the contemporary, identarian sense of the term, except in passing.[296] In this chapter, I apply an asexual critical lens to this character, asking how that view aligns or departs from traditional feminist and queer criticism about the play.

As one of the more recognizable queer characters in early modern drama, Moll Cutpurse exhibits one version of an asexual resonance: that of the potentially agender asexual. As noted in the introduction, the concepts of asexuality and agender often overlap in recent scholarship. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Moll has been defined as a metaphorical asexual by various scholars and critics. This reading is further complicated by the individual

[296] For instance, see: Victoria Choate, "Queering the Roaring Girl: Gender Ideals and Expectations of Moll," *Merge* 4, no. 2 (2020): 23, https://athenacommons.muw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article =1018&context=merge and Michael Shapiro, *Gender and Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heronies and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 1996), 27.

known as Mary Frith, who in Gustave Ungerer's description "is represented as a transvestite usurping male power, as a hermaphrodite transcending the borders of human sexuality, as a virago, as a tomboy, as a prostitute, as a bawd, and even as a chaste woman who remained a spinster."[297] Simply put, the character of Mary Frith is just as enigmatic as the fictional counterpart, Moll Cutpurse. Thus, I intend to unpack these various interpretations and ultimately offer up an asexual reading of Moll.

In searching for asexual resonances in literary and dramatic works, asexuality scholars have increasingly turned to the early modern era, using a similar methodology to Przybylo and Cooper's.[298] In utilizing asexuality as a critical lens, these scholars explore interconnections between asexuality and anorexia, traumatic pregnancy, Protestant marriage, and queer male chastity in early modern drama.[299] Additionally, the 2020 Early Modern Asexuality Roundtable discussion on YouTube focused primarily on reading for asexuality in the works of Shakespeare, and a 2021 call for papers announced an anthology focusing on Early Modern Asexualities.[300] These forays into asexuality and early modern era point first to Carolyn Dinshaw's "queer historical impulse" to make connections between those left out of sexual categories in the past as well as those left out of sexual categories in the present.[301] Secondly, the

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[297] Gustave Ungerer, "Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature," *Shakespeare Studies* 28 (2000): 42, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A67530774/AONE?u=anon~d005525c&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=31d8f4b3.

[298] Przybylo and Cooper, "Asexual Resonances," 298.

[299] See: Chess "Opting Out;" Cole, "Traumatic Pregnancy, Queer Virginity, and Asexual Reproduction;" Sanchez, "Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality in Shakespeare;" and "Windholz, "The Queer Testimonies of Male Chastity."

[300] See: Jeff Wade, et. al, "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance: An ACMRS Roundtable" and Call for Papers, "Call for Abstracts: Early Modern Asexualities," https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2021/09/08/call-for-abstracts-early-modern-asexualities.

[301] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 1.

impulse to seek asexuality in the early modern era in particular speaks to the era's part in the development of sexuality as it is understood today in the Western world. While there are drastic differences between how sex and sexuality are understood between the seventeenth century and the present, the seeds of contemporary sexuality are arguably planted in the early modern era, as seen in the development of companionate marriage, the nuclear family as an economic unit, and the protestant conception of chastity.[302] Even today, contemporary Western society is still organized around the ideals of companionate marital partnership between two dichotomized genders based on free-choice rather than familial arranged alliances. Thus, the early modern era proves irresistible to queer scholars tracing threads of development in Western sex and gender technologies.

The (Companionate) Marriage Plot

Like other comedies during the Jacobean and Elizabethan eras, *The Roaring Girl* features a marriage plot which centers around trickery and ends with the coupling of two young people. Common examples of the marriage plot can be seen in well-known Shakespearean comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. These comedies tend to showcase the period's anxieties regarding the shifting ideals of marriage from arranged to free choice. For instance, Lisa Jardine argues that the new model of companionate marriage "raised problems in relation to the contemporary understanding of the structural coherence of 'family,' and in particular, produces anxieties concerning the agency of women within it."[303] Companionate marriage thus had destabilizing effects on the understanding of family, on alliance

[302] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 75.

[303] Lisa Jardine, "Companionate Marriage Versus Male Friendship: Anxiety for the Lineal Family in Jacobean Drama," in *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), 114.

building, and on the relationship between men and women. Once women were considered an active part in the choice for marriage partners, their agency in choosing husbands became a source of anxiety.

In addition to companionate marriage becoming the general model for the family unit, Protestant ideals began to set up marriage as the most desirable way to lead a holy life.[304] This meant that institutional virginity was no longer a viable option for those who may be unwilling to marry or uninterested in partnered sexuality. Protestant ideals contrasted with Catholicism's championing virginal status as a path to holiness. Instead, Protestants began to hold marriage as the Christian ideal, citing the impossibility of living a completely virginal life. Theodora Jankowski marks Martin Luther's objection towards total virginity, where he insists that "there has never been a virgin or an unmarried person in the world who has been utterly free from lust."[305] In other words, the total rejection and unthinkability of a potential asexual life were thus integrated into the beginnings of modernity.

Jankowski also claims that this push towards marriage as the utmost success for a Christian life was not merely a result of Protestantism but was also influenced by economics. Due to the increase of the merchant class, marriage and family ties were necessary to ensure economic success. Total virginity as a lifestyle choice became untenable as an economic strategy. This sentiment can easily be seen in another of Shakespeare's works, *All's Well that Ends Well*, where Shakespeare provides the character of Parrolles with a monologue railing against virginity, stating, "It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity.

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[304] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 80.

[305] Martin Luther, "*The Estate of Marriage, 1522*," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1958), (4:263), quoted in Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 92.

Loss of virginity is rational increase, and there was never a virgin got til virginity was first lost."[306] Nature here is being set up as an economic system, and it is not profitable to preserve virginity in this system of compulsory sexuality. In the early modern era, then, a dual religious and economic push occurred to bring institutional, lifelong virginity to an end and position heterosexual romantic coupling in the form of companionate marriage as the ideal way of life.

This system of compulsory sexuality is easily seen in many of Shakespeare's plays, particularly his comedies, which feature a young couple and the complications that arise from falling in love and marrying. A common example of this is the marriage plot in *Much Ado About Nothing*, specifically that of Beatrice and Benedick, who begin the play opposed to marriage but are finally tricked by their friends and family into falling in love with each other. Their courtship is particularly interesting to note, since both parties set themselves apart from romance, declaring their refusal to marry or have anything to do with the opposite sex. As each of them are convinced that the other loves them, they give monologues reflecting on their previous disdain for marriage and their commitment to renouncing their single lives. Benedick admits that his opinions have changed, and he convinces himself by saying "the world must be peopled."[307] Beatrice has a similar monologue, concluding, "Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much? / Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu! / No glory lives behind the back of such."[308] Both of these comments from the two lovers point to the protestant ideals in companionate marriage. Benedick's mention of the world needing to be peopled signals the economic necessity for

[306] William Shakespeare*, All's Well that Ends Well*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), I, i, 128-132.

[307] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), II, iii, 1047.

[308] Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, III, i, 1188-1190.

producing children as a part of the duty towards marriage. Beatrice's words, on the other hand, show the changing attitude towards life-long virginity. By referring to it as "maiden pride" and "contempt," Shakespeare demonstrates the shifting attitude of virginity from holy to almost sinful. Other scholars have remarked on the traces of Beatrice's potential asexuality. Jankowski, for instance, notes her recuperated queer virginial status.[309] Liza Blake explores this theme further in her presentation on *Much Ado About Nothing* as part of the 2020 Early Modern Asexuality Roundtable.[310]

As an example of the marriage plot, *Much Ado About Nothing* shares several features in common with *The Roaring Girl*, mainly the trickery used to secure a heterosexual coupling at the end of the play. However, while Beatrice and Benedick, arguably two characters who seem to demonstrate some traces of nonsexuality, are recuperated into the heteronormative union of marriage, Moll Cutpurse, the character vocally opposed to marriage, is never recuperated into marriage and remains a maiden.

For instance, the inciting incident for the main plot of *The Roaring Girl* involves Sebastian's father, Sir Alexander, refusing to let his son marry Mary Fitz-Allard, whose dowry is too small for his liking. Rather than forsake the woman he loves, Sebastian opts to convince his father that he has fallen in love with the infamous virago Moll Cutpurse, hoping that he will be allowed to choose Mary as the preferred daughter-in-law. When Sir Alexander hears of his son's intention to now marry Moll, he hires a man named Trapdoor to spy on her and cause her

[309] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 159.

[310] Liza Blake, "Asexual Reading, Postcritical Reading, Queer Reading: The Tragedy of *Much Ado About Nothing*," in "Early Modern Asexuality and Performance: An ACMRS Roundtable," Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, October 20, 2020, video, 1:00:31, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vSgG02fH6M.

downfall. Both of these men devote a large portion of the play to tricking Moll into damaging her own reputation, which she consistently thwarts. A secondary plot involves the shopkeepers of London, their wives, and various gallants and thieves, many of whom interact with Moll throughout. The play ends with Sebastian announcing his elopement. He lets his father assume he married Moll, but in the end, he reveals that he indeed married Mary Fitz-Allard.

The marriage plot and the use of the lower-class characters demonstrates a major difference between the romantic comedies of Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* included, and the Jacobean city comedies, such as *The Roaring Girl*. Jacobean city comedies generally deal with the anxieties surrounding the changing landscape of both city life and of marriage. The rise in companionate marriage brought forth anxiety concerning unruly wives and the appropriateness of chosen partners.[311] While the two plots of *The Roaring Girl* feature general marriage and economic anxieties of the time, these plots also heavily center around Moll Cutpurse and her commitment to virginity. She is the center of the trickery plot between Sebastian and Mary, but she also orbits within the shopkeepers' plot, since Laxton, a young man involved with Mistress Gallipot, becomes enamored with her. Most importantly, she expresses a steadfast commitment to virginity throughout the play, despite the many assumptions of her sexual availability. She even goes so far as to dismiss her critics, stating "Perhaps for my mad going some reprove me, / I please myself, and care not else who loves me."[312] In this manner, she can be seen as exhibiting a clear sense of "maiden pride," and perhaps even a trace or resonance of asexuality. Thus, her potential asexuality is a proper starting place for this analysis.

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[311] Mario Digangi, "Sexual Slander and Working Women in "The Roaring Girl"," *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 163, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41917379 and Jardine, "Companionate Marriage Versus Male Friendship," 125.

[312] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, V, i, 310-311.

An Asexual Moll

Moll's asexuality has been mentioned only in passing by several scholars and has not been given centrality as a potential theoretical lens.[313] When considering Moll Cutpurse as a potentially asexual character, it is important to consider how the term "asexual" has been used in earlier scholarship of the play. For example, Patrick Cheney, writing in the 1980s, explicitly uses the term "asexual" to describe Cutpurse, but it is less as an identity and more as a descriptor of her neutral status in terms of sexual expression, stating that "because Moll is a figure embodying both subject and object, balancing reason and passion, she has no real sexual desires herself: she is *asexual*."[314] Yet this descriptor explains her identity away almost as a metaphor for how love works itself out in the play. His naming of her as both a hermaphrodite and asexual is metaphorical: for him, Moll is a tool in service of the marriage plot of the play. [315] He states that "Moll's asexual nature and reconciling function link her with the Eros figure," arguing further that her presence in the play is merely to facilitate the companionate marriage between Sebastian and Mary.[316] While this analysis may ring true in terms of the plot of the play, it is an interesting use of the term "asexual" that requires unpacking.

In Cheney's use of the term "asexual," he is referring to her lack of desire, which is part of the definition of asexuality as a sexual orientation, but he is also invoking assumption of asexuality as meaning neutrality. In the 1980s, asexuality was not fully articulated as a sexual

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[313] For instance: Laila Abdalla, "Roaring Fissures: Marginal Success in Middleton and Dekker's *Roaring Girl*," *Jostes: The Journal of South Texas English Studies,* 3, no. 1 (2011): 15, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/jostes.

[314] Patrick Cheney, "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite in Dekker and Middleton's "The Roaring Girl"," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 7, no. 2 (1983): 130, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43444411, (original emphasis).

[315] Cheney, "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite," 132.

[316] Cheney, "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite," 131.

orientation, at least not in its current definition. By referring to someone as "asexual," that most often meant someone who was sexually neutral or desexualized. Framing asexuality as a means of ignoring sexuality reinforces rigid constructions of normative sexuality by placing those who do not conform to heteronormativity outside of sexuality. In describing Moll as an asexual tool and symbol "of a new hermaphroditic form of comedy" and not as an individual character, he is placing her outside of the realm of sexuality.

It is perhaps her location outside of sexuality that allows for a queer interpretation of Moll Cutpurse. Theodora Jankowski, writing in 2000, explores what she terms "queer virginity" in early modern English drama, and while she does not specifically use the term "asexual" to describe Moll, she does describe her as exhibiting a queer virginity, which is somewhat close to a current understanding of asexuality in contemporary scholarship.[317] Jankowski makes the argument that Moll be considered a queer virgin, based on her refusal to marry and her consistent denial of being a prostitute. Even though Moll is never shown to have any sexual desires, the male characters in the play often project their desires onto her.

When Moll first enters, wearing a woman's skirt and a man's jacket, the character Laxton immediately assumes that she is sexually available and in an aside, alludes to piercing her "maidenhead" with a "golden auger."[318] Eventually, after much coaxing, Moll offers to meet with him. Later, in Act III when they do meet, she challenges him to a fight:

> What durst move you, sir,
> To think me whorish, a name which I'd tear out
> From the high German's throat if it lay ledger there
> To dispatch privy slanders against me?

[317] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance,* 185. While current scholars will agree that asexuality is considered queer, virginity is not a necessary marker of asexuality. However, Jankowski's work stands out among asexuality scholars as a major contributor to the field of asexuality in the early modern era.

[318] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl,* II, i, 171-2.

> In thee I defy all men, their worst hates
> And their best flatteries.[319]

Moll clearly objects to being automatically tied to sex work, instead showing a clear distaste for men and their flattery. By insisting that she defies all men, she is affirming her virginity and nonsexual status. Also in this monologue, Moll chastises Laxton for viewing all women as objects for his pleasure, saying, "th' art one of those/ That thinks each woman thy fond, flexible whore."[320] She then fights him and wins, chasing him offstage. Once she is alone onstage, she gives a brief soliloquy wishing she could meet her slanders in the same manner again affirming that she will remain unmarried. She vows, "My spirit shall be mistress of this house / As long as I have time in't," confirming that she will be in charge of her own autonomy and her own fate as long as she lives.[321]

The scene most often cited as confirming her queer virginal status is Act II, scene ii, where Moll confirms that she does not engage in sexual activity to brush off Sebastian in his initial attempt to woo her. She tells him,

> I have no humour to marry: I love to lie o' both sides o' th' bed myself; and again o' th' other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it… I have the head now of myself and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i' th' place.[322]

Jankowski suggests that these lines indicate that for Moll, marriage for women means giving up their autonomy, in exchanging one (maiden)head for another.[323] In other words, by marrying, women give up not only their virginity, but their autonomy to the male head of the

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[319] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, II, i, 84-9.

[320] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, III, i, 68-9.

[321] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, III, i, 135-6.

[322] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, II, ii, 33-42.

[323] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 188.

household. Most interestingly, it is the line, "I love to lie o'both o' th'bed myself" which for Jankowski indicates that Moll is able to find pleasure by herself, suggesting that this pleasure "could be masturbation, as by lying on both sides of the bed herself she plays both lover and beloved."[324] While this quotation by Moll could suggest a queer bisexuality, it can also be read as a form of asexuality or nonsexuality.[325] Christine Varnado suggests that this quotation demonstrates not just an image of bisexuality, but a third position which "posits an outside to the sexual binary." [326] For Varnado, this third position renders Moll as exhibiting an erotic instrumentality that is a queer mode of relation between Sebastian and Mary.[327] However, this third position outside of the sexual binary could just as easily represent an opting out of the sexual binary, i.e., as a form of asexuality or even autoeroticism. An asexual reading of this line questions any allocentric assumptions that accompany the asexual orientation.

One of the main misconceptions regarding asexual individuals is that they are entirely celibate, to the point of not even masturbating. This misapprehension is profoundly misleading and false, since asexuality is about desire, not about acts. For example, a lesbian would still be considered a lesbian if she has sex with a man; her understanding of her orientation defines her, not her actions. By suggesting that she can find pleasure for herself and by herself, Moll is exhibiting a potential asexuality and autoeroticism. What's more, for some asexual individuals, self-pleasure may what most interests them in terms of sexuality. For example, Myra T. Johnson claims that asexual women with no sexual desires or autoerotic women who prefer to satisfy

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[324] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 188.

[325] For a reading where this line may mean bisexuality, see Jean E. Howard, "Sex and the Social Conflict: The Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*, in *Erotic Politics: The Dynamics of Desire in the Renaissance Theatre*, ed. Susan Zimmerman, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 185.

[326] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 83.

[327] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 52.

them alone are oftentimes dismissed and unrecognized.[328] This admission of loving to lie on both sides of the bed and refusing to marry could arguably be viewed as an asexual or autoerotic potential within the character of Moll Cutpurse. Asexual individuals are not entirely sexless; they can enjoy sexual activity, including masturbation, and still not profess a desire to engage in partnered sexual intercourse.

Asexual individuals are also not entirely prudish either and can engage in sexual play and even sex work. Another instance in which Moll has been read as queerly erotic is the scene where she plays the viol in the presence of Sebastian and Mary, who is dressed in men's attire. This scene is notable for several reasons. First, the act of playing an instrument in public in seventeenth century England would have been seen as an act of sexual display. Linda Phyllis Austern notes that in the Renaissance, "music and womanhood, similarly capable of infinite spiritual benefit or fleshly corruption, required careful control lest they prove whorish and seduce the vulnerable."[329] In other words, musical performance could have easily been considered an act of seduction, and Moll's presentation of a song is just as likely to be read as such. Christine Varnado suggests that the "long song Moll then plays and sings—a bawdy ballad of female economic and sexual agency, about a mistress, her money, her lovers, and her sisters—serves in the scene as a dramatic substitution, or an accompaniment, for a three-person sex act centered on Moll."[330] Varnado imagines this scene to denote a queer triad, an interpretation that depends on a

[328] Myra T. Johnson, "Asexual and Autoerotic Women," 99.

[329] Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Sing Againe Syren': The Female Musician and Sexual Enchantment in Elizabethan Life and Literature." *Renaissance Quarterly*. 42, no. 3 (1989): 424, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2862078.

[330] Christine Varnado, "'Invisible Sex!': What Looks Like the Act in Early Modern Drama?" in *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed James M. Bromley and Will Stockton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 39.

queered view of how sex could be tacitly represented onstage. Varnado further posits that Moll's instrumentality in the plot to help Sebastian and Mary is a queer mode of relation that confounds the sexual binary and gendered power dynamics.[331] By aiding in the construction of "a three-way circuit" between Sebastian and Mary, Moll brings about a sexual dynamic that throws a wrench into the idea of sex existing only between a heterosexual couple.[332]

Imagining this relationship as a queer triad does not, however, negate an asexual reading which should be considered one potential queer reading among many. Asexual people often engage in sex and sexual play and claiming an asexual identity does not automatically render one somehow sexless. While this scene can be read as a metaphor for a queer threesome, it can also be read as an example of a verbal performance of sexual wit, using sexual language to entertain her audience: both in the theatre and in the intimate setting of the scene.

Jean Howard similarly remarks that Moll uses the musical performance of the viol "to appropriate this instrument not so much to make herself an erotic object, as to express her own erotic subjectivity."[333] For Howard, Moll's act of playing the viol is transgressive in that it is an exclamation of her own desires, whether they be for a queer threesome, a bisexuality that enjoys playing both a traditionally-defined male and female role in bed, or an asexual and autoerotic desire for oneself. Either way, it is best to not forget that asexual people have sex, masturbate, and engage in sexual wordplay and performance. What's important in taking an asexual reading of this scene is that while Moll's sexuality is verbally on display, she never acts on it nor expresses a desire to have sexual relations with another character or expresses sexual attraction

[331] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 52.

[332] Varnado, *Shapes of Fancy*, 86.

[333] Howard, "Sex and the Social Conflict," 184.

towards anyone. Even though the very act of her performing the song is sexually suggestive, she refers to it as merely a fantasy. At the end of the song, Moll tells Sebastian, "Hang up the viol now, sir: all this while I was in a dream, one shall lie rudely then; but being awake, I keep my legs together."[334] Her demonstration of her sexuality is imaginative and hypothetical, transgressive in both the expression of sexual words and the refusal of sexual access to her body, here demonstrated by her pronouncement that she keeps her legs closed when she is awake.

It is these moments of sexually explicit performance and cross-dressed costume that causes the other characters to find her sexually transgressive. Sir Alexander, Sebastian's father, finds Moll threatening from the outset, though of course this was the point of Sebastian's plot. Sir Alexander, however, attempts any number of plans to discredit Moll, such as sending a spy, Trapdoor, after her to destroy her reputation through slander or even through sexual assault. When these plans turn out to be fruitless, Alexander turns to trying to set Moll up as a thief, allowing his possessions to be laid out in plain view. Matt Carter notes this shift in Sir Alexander's plans, suggesting that as the play progresses, "Alexander starts recognizing Moll's sexual agency as that of *'impenetrability', rather than hyper-penetrability*, and begins to amend his accusations to criminality over sexual voracity."[335] Sir Alexander assumption of her "hyper-penetrability" (a.k.a. hypersexuality) shifts as he begins to realize that she is sexually impenetrable, or asexual, which confounds the assumption of single, unmarried women as being sexually available. Moll's refusal of sex becomes transgressive not only in terms of her opting out of the system of compulsory sexuality, but it is also transgressive in terms of her refusing to

[334] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, IV, i, 124-125.

[335] Matt Carter, "'Untruss a Point'—Interiority, Sword Combat, and Gender in *The Roaring Girl*," *Early Theatre* 21, no. 1 (2018): 95, https://doi.org/10.12745/et.21.1.3145, (added emphasis).

cooperate in her own demise. In this way, she is also resistant to a patriarchal configuration of women as sex objects that are always available to be penetrated by men.

Further evidence of her nonsexuality comes in at the end of the play, after the lovers, Sebastian and Mary, have convinced Sebastian's father that Mary is the better match for his son than Moll. After Sebastian reveals to his father that his bride is Mary, not Moll, the roaring girl is then asked when she will marry. She answers with a long list of improbabilities:

> When you shall hear
> Gallants void from sergeants' fear,
> Honesty and truth unsland'red,
> Woman mann'd but never pand'red,
> [Cheaters] booted but not coach'd,
> Vessels older ere they're broach'd:
> If my mind be then not varied,
> Next day following I'll be married. [336]

The response to her words is "This sounds like Doomsday," to which Moll agrees, indicating the doubtfulness of her ever marrying.[337] Moll yet again reinforces her desire to remain single and unmarried. Heather Hirschfeld points out this tendency of Moll to frame her sexuality in terms of the negative or lack. She states, "when Moll does, at the play's end, come close to revealing what will spur her to a partner, what might capture her desire, she articulates her interests only in the negative, telling the characters not what she wants but only what she does not want."[338] As noted in the introduction, the word "lack" is oftentimes part of the very definition of asexuality as a concept. So too is the concept of lack part of Moll's characterization of her desires. She frames them in terms of what she does not want. For Hirschfeld, Moll represents a subversive threat in

[336] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, V, ii, 216-223.

[337] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, V, ii, 224.

[338] Heather Hirschfeld, "'What Do Women Know?': *The Roaring Girl* and the Wisdom of Tiresias," *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 140, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41917378.

"a conviction in her own desire and pleasure, that, by remaining unspoken and unsymbolized even as it is continually spoken about, represents a knowledge unavailable to the others."[339] What Hirschfield is arguing is that by hiding her desire and pleasure from others, she creates a subversive threat to the social order. This secret desire could easily be read as a repressed sexuality, rather than a commitment to nonsexuality.[340] I would argue instead that her secret desire is an autoerotic yearning to pleasure herself and remain an autonomous single woman, which is therefore threatening because she is not providing bodily access to the men around her. While she is constantly surrounded by sexual discourse from those that assume she is a sex worker or otherwise a woman of loose morals, she consistently disputes these claims and reinforces her status as a proudly virginal, unmarried woman.

Reading Moll as potentially asexual can help illuminate the various nuances regarding asexuality as it is understood today. Megan Arkenberg states that "understanding the past in terms of the present can confer intelligibility on what previous analyses have found unintelligible."[341] These asexual readings are thus additional possibilities among the chorus of potential queer readings. Middleton and Dekker keep Moll happily unmarried at the end of *The Roaring Girl*, thus subverting the major trope of comedy that is seen in works such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, which ends with two marriages. Jean Howard argues that by allowing her to remain unmarried, what is left for Moll at the end of the play "are the eroticisms of solitary fantasy and self-pleasure."[342] Jankowski, building off her argument regarding nonmarrying queer

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[339] Hirschfeld, "What Do Women Know?," 142.

[340] Lloyd Edward Kermode, "Destination Doomsday: Desires for Change and Changeable Desires in *The Roaring Girl*," *English Literary Renaissance* 27, no. 3 (1997): 426, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43447762.

[341] Arkenberg, "A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood," 5.

[342] Howard, "Sex and the Social Conflict," 186.

virgins as "neither desired nor desiring," refers to Moll as "inhabiting the third gender of queer virgin."[343] In other words, even though she may play up her sexuality for her audience, she remains a queer virgin, with her true desires possibly being to lie on both sides of the bed, and pleasure only herself.

An Agender Moll

While this chapter has thus far focused on Moll's potential asexuality, it would be remiss to ignore the trans aspect of this character. A good deal of the scholarship on *The Roaring Girl* from the 1980s onward has focused on Moll's gender and cross-dressing, with Simone Chess noting the "increasing queer approaches toward the character."[344] Queer readings of Moll that offer a transgender interpretation might seem contradictory to an asexual identity, but there is overlap between the two identities. While much of the scholarship on asexuality focus on it as a new orientation, some recent scholarship links asexuality studies to transgender studies. Taken together, these two theories are poised to destabilize notions about biology and humanity that until recently were not only taken for granted but were considered cemented aspects of nature. Ela Przybylo suggests that the burgeoning field of asexuality studies might have particular interest to trans studies, noting that "asexuality studies also trouble, as have trans* studies, the very field of queer and sexuality scholarship by focusing attention on a previously unattended to identity and modes of inquiry."[345] Both asexuality and trans studies call for a renewed focus on

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[343] Jankowski, *Pure Resistance*, 171 and 185.

[344] Simone Chess, "Introduction: Passing Relations," in *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016). 15-16.

[345] Ela Przybylo, "Asexuals Against the Cis-tem!" *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3-4 (2016): 655, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3545347. While Przybylo uses an asterisk after the term "trans," its use is not consistent among transgender scholars. For more information on the use (and disuse) of the asterisk, see: "Asterisk," TSER: Trans Student Education Resources, accessed September 27, 2022, https://transstudent.org/issues/asterisk/.

difference and a relinquishing of attachment to essentialist definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality. These ways of conceiving of sexuality and gender hold the potential to reconfigure much of what is taken for granted in assumed constructions of personhood.

Karen Cuthbert pushes this link between asexuality studies and transgender studies further by specifically exploring the overlap between people identifying as asexual and agender. Cuthbert found this to be particularly true for certain bodies more so than others, specifically "for those participants who had been assigned female at birth, or were read socially as female, asexuality also necessitated a level of agendered or gender-neutral embodiment, because of the relentless sexual objectification and aggressive propositioning experienced under heteropatriarchy."[346] The surveyed participants noted for Cuthbert how presenting as feminine was automatically associated with heterosexuality, sexual availability, and male sexual desire.

In looking at the character of Moll Cutpurse, the assumption of sexual objectification and aggressive propositioning holds true throughout *The Roaring Girl*. Most of the male characters that interact with Moll speak in overly sexual dialogue, for example:

> GOSHAWK: 'Tis the maddest fantastiscall'st girl: - I never knew so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together.
> LAXTON: She slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman's fingers. [*Aside*] I'll watch my time for her.
> MISTRESS GALLIPOT: Some will not stick to say she's a man
> And some both man and woman.
> LAXTON: That were excellent, she might first cuckold the husband and then make him do as much for the wife.[347]

These sexual innuendos demonstrate the general attitude towards her body. The nimbleness and slipperiness that are evoked here suggest that she has had multiple sexual partners. Her gender

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[346] Cuthbert, "When We Talk About Gender We Talk About Sex," 859.

[347] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, II, i, 181-186.

presentation is also the cause of gossip, with the characters further speculating that her gender ambiguousness is evidence of her hypersexuality, with the assumption that she can play the part of both a husband and a wife.

In a later scene with Moll and the tailor, the sexual language and objectification still occur. Sir Alexander, upon hearing Moll getting fitted for a pair of breeches, sexualizes her and is shown to be threatened by the possibility of having a "cod-piece daughter" for a daughter-in-law.[348] Again, Moll is shown to be overly sexualized, even though she has several times professed a virginal status. There is a distinct tension between her lack of sexuality and her lack of clear gender norms, since she appears wearing the clothing of both men and women and being fitted for a pair of breeches that could likely accommodate a codpiece, as noted by Marjorie Rubright, thwarting the gender norms even further.[349]

When she is not being oversexualized, she is made monstrous. Before she appears onstage, Sir Alexander, upon learning of his son's plan to marry Moll instead of Mary, refers to her as "A creature…nature hath brought forth /To mock the sex of woman...The sun gives her two shadows to one shape," to which Sir Davy answers, "A monster, 'tis some monster." [350] Here Moll is referred to as an unhuman creature, mocking the sex of woman due to her differently gendered presentation. When Sebastian feigns that he has fallen for her since he cannot marry his chosen bride, Sir Alexander refers to, "This wench we speak of strays so from her kind / Nature repents she made her. 'Tis a mermaid/ Has tolled my son to shipwreck."[351] Sir Alexander's use

[348] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, II, ii, 87.

[349] Marjorie Rubright, "Transgender Capacity in Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* (1611)." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 63, https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2019.0037.

[350] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, I, ii, 127-8, 132, & 134.

[351] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, I, ii 211-12.

of the term mermaid demonstrates how Moll, according to Tara E. Pedersen, is "a double creature – a mermaid – whose effect on those around her is a source of puzzling scrutiny and whose naturalness (in terms of her gender and sexual identity) are constantly under evaluation."[352] Here Pedersen suggests that in comparing Moll to a mermaid, her ambiguity is made more overt. Mermaids exist outside of the boundaries of classification, at once both monstrous and sexualized. Penderson, in using this metaphor of a mermaid to analyze the character of Moll Cutpurse, points out that Moll herself does not identify as either a woman or a man in the play. Instead, Penderson claims that "Moll exists in a historical location and moment in which many of the scientific understandings of biology which define sex and gender as the century wears on (as well as modern distinction between sex and gender) were still without firm delineation."[353] Given Moll's status as being somehow both man and woman and yet also neither, her existence points to a time where gender dichotomization began to coalesce into two opposite sexes, a process which many point to as beginning in the early modern era and finally fully consolidating in the Enlightenment.[354]

Of course, distinct gender categories were still being formed, and these categories are not so easily defined in this time. Jennifer Higginbotham complicates the assumed gender categories of early modern England by centering girls and girlhood, noting their absence in much of the conversations revolving gender in early modern England. Higginbotham complicates the theories

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[352] Tara E. Pederson, "Identifying Mermaids: Economies of Representation in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*," in *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Parkside: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 39-40.

[353] Pedersen, "Identifying Mermaids," 52-53.

[354] Valerie Traub, "Mapping the Global Body: The Making of the Cartographic Body in the Making of Nations," in *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race and Empire in Renaissance England*, ed. Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse,(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 44.

that have centered around boys, specifically the use of boys playing female characters on the English stage. Higginbotham suggests that "the early modern sex-gender system was organised around a tripartite distinction that defined mature men against women and boys."[355] In setting up the early modern sex-gender system as one between men, women, and boys, girls are thus rendered as absent, while at the same time, the category of woman becomes stable and fixed.[356] Higginbotham's work centers girls, and in so doing, suggests that the category of girl does not merely change the tripartite model into a fourfold model, but instead pulls it apart. Higginbotham states, "[g]irls did not fit into the sex-gender system so much as they disrupted it. By offering an alternative construction of femininity, girlishness exposed womanhood as a social backformation."[357] In other words, by shifting the focus to girls, Higginbotham exposes how girlhood further complicates already unstable gender categories. She brings her analysis of how girlhood functions to the character of Moll, noting that in some contexts, "the term 'girl' seems to have been mobilized to describe adult women who were sexually, but perhaps more importantly socially and politically transgressive."[358] Moll, then, is presented as transgressing numerous social and sexual boundaries, from wearing men's attire to even playing a musical instrument in mixed company. Even the title of the play itself, *The Roaring Girl*, denotes this tendency to ascribe girlishness to transgressive behavior. Roaring boys, or ill-behaved rich young men, were considered a typical staple in London society, but roaring girls were rarer. Moll's

[355] Jennifer Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3.

[356] Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*, 3.

[357] Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*, 9.

[358] Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*, 63.

behavior, seen not only in her dress, but in her use of smoking tobacco and use of thieves cant (slang), shows that she was a rarity.[359]

This reading is further complicated by the fact Moll, a woman in men's clothing, would have been played by a young boy actor, as noted above. There has been plenty of scholarship regarding the erotic positionality of the boy actors on the Elizabethan stage, such as Lisa Jardine, who argues that the actors were sexually enticing as transvestites.[360] What is interesting about the case of *The Roaring Girl* is that the boy actor playing Moll would have been doubly cross-dressed. Instead of a female character (played by a boy) dressing up as a boy for a short time for safety, seen in such plays as *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It,* Moll cross-dresses as part of her identity in her everyday life.[361] Moll's case as an exception to the rule goes even further, as Anthony B. Dawson contends that *The Roaring Girl* "rewrites the Shakespearean transvestite comedy by refusing to reunite the cross-dressed woman with her role."[362] Unlike typical Shakespearean comedies involving female characters pretending to be women, Moll does not revert back to feminine clothing, for there is nothing different about her dress. Moll's cross-dressing is not an act, nor is it pretend; it is her daily life.

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[359] Callan Davies, "Speech: Strange Doctrines in *The Dutch Courtesan*, *Macbeth*, *The Roaring Girl*, and *The White Devil*," in *Strangeness in Jacobean Drama* (London: Routledge, 2021) 68-69.

[360] Lisa Jardine, "Boy Actors, Female Roles, and Elizabethan Eroticism," in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybras (New York: Routledge, 1991) 61.

[361] Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), I, ii, 96-110 and Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), I, iii, 522-534.

[362] Anthony B. Dawson, " Mistris Hic & Haec: Representations of Moll Frith," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33, no. 2 (1993): 391, https://www.jstor.org/stable/451005.

Even more transgressive was the fact that during Moll's time, women dressing in men's clothing tended to look the same as one another out among the streets of London, thus erasing the class differences typically seen in women's dress in daily life. Mary Beth Rose points out that "the female in male clothing served as a leveler… so the phenomenon of women of different social positions dressing in similar male clothing appeared intolerably chaotic."[363] Moll thus is doubly transgressive, thwarting both gender and class expectations, making her especially dangerous. Similarly, Adrienne Eastwood points out that there was a noticeable increase in "female transvestites" appearing in London, perhaps as a means of gaining freedom to interact with men or attain work.[364] Several texts regarding this trend, such as the pamphlets *Hic Mulier* which opposed the practice of women wearing men's clothing and *Haec Vir* which defended the same women, appeared in 1620, almost a decade after *The Roaring Girl* was first performed.[365] This debate demonstrates the increasing anxiety regarding single women who cross-dress and their visibility in the city.

Eastwood further argues is that while the character of Moll reflects the reality of female transvestism, the playwrights also made sure that their play held as its subject "a unique, morally superior character."[366] For while it is possible that Middleton and Dekker sought to create a truly transgressive character, they also ensure, in the prologue, that the character is morally without

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[363] Mary Beth Rose, "Sexual Disguise and Social Mobility in Jacobean City Comedy," in *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 74.

[364] Adrienne Eastwood, "Controversy and the Single Woman in 'The Maid's Tragedy' and 'The Roaring Girl'," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58, no. 2 (2004): 17, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566550.

[365] Rose, "Sexual Disguise and Social Mobility," 70 and *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman (And) Haec-Vir: Or, The Womanish Man* (Exeter: The Rota at the University of Exeter, 1973).

[366] Eastwood, Controversy and the Single Woman," 18.

reproach. While the prologue describes the phenomenon of "roaring girls," they are sure to mention that "None of these roaring girls is ours: she flies / With wings more lofty."[367] Eastwood points out that this emphasizes the exceptional status of their character, thus making her at once more sympathetic and more unbelievable. In this way, her social commentary can be taken with a grain of salt and her transgressions can be dismissed.

Jane Baston similarly questions her transgressive nature, arguing that while "in the early part of the play, Moll does appear to challenge and subvert gender and class norms, a close examination of the final acts reveals that she is gradually contained and incorporated into the prevailing social apparatus of the play."[368] For Batson, her involvement in the matchmaking scheme shows that her attitudes towards the patriarchal structure of marriage are not that radical, and that by the end, she has been recuperated into the sex-gender system. Her existence as a singular exception to the rule ends up reinforcing the predominant systemic norms. Ultimately, while Moll may be transgressive, she is only as transgressive as she is allowed in her time.

A 2014 production of *The Roaring Girl* at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) highlighted her transgressive nature through their various dramaturgical choices.[369] This production was part of the RSC season titled "Roaring Girls" along with the Jacobean plays *Arden of Faversham*, *The White Devil*, and *The Witch of Edmonton* and were produced with

[367] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, Prologue, 25-26.

[368] Jane Baston, "Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 37, no. 2, (1997): 320, https://www.jstor.org/stable/450836.

[369] Emma Whipday, "'The Picture of a Woman': Roaring Girls and Alternative Histories in the RSC 2014 Season," *Shakespeare* 11, no. 3 (2015): 273, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1048279.

female directors.[370] This season was, according to Peter Kiernan, "held up as an exploration of feminist principles at the heart of the RSC" playing with the term "roaring girls" as a way of showcasing the use of women's bad behavior as a feminist political act.[371] The scholarship regarding this play's success seems mixed. Set in the Victorian Era, Kiernan writes that Moll is portrayed "as a woman quite literally out of time, her musical performances alone encompassing '40s jazz, '70s punk and '00s rap battles."[372] Similarly, Emma Whipday states that while Dekker and Middleton "emphasize Moll's chastity… [the 2014 production] took the opposite approach" with the actress playing Moll presenting her as sexually provocative.[373] This production even went so far as to invent a character who served as Moll's maid, existing quietly as a companion, and even sharing a romantic moment with Moll at the conclusion of the play.[374] All of these elements of this production seem to point to Moll as being visibly and outwardly queer, attempting to mark the character as transgressive not only in Middleton and Dekker's time, but also in our time.

For some scholars, Moll is neither transgressive nor normative. Ryan Singh Paul, for instance, argues that "critical debate over Moll's function as either a figure of female empowerment or a means to stabilize the patriarchal culture ignores the fact that Moll is both, if

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[370] Kate Wilkinson, "Girls and Boys: The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2014 Summer Season," *Shakespeare* 11, no. 3 (2015): 242 and 246, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1048276.

[371] Peter Kirwan, "The Roared-at Boys?: Repertory Casting and Gender Politics in the RSC's 2014 Swan Season," *Shakespeare* 11, no. 3 (2015): 250, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1048277.

[372] Kirwan, "The Roared-at Boys?," 258.

[373] Whipday, "'The Picture of a Woman,'" 274.

[374] Kiernan, "The Roared-at Boys?," 259.

not more, and that Middleton and Dekker's play celebrates her final ineffability."[375] Regardless of her transgressive or normalizing status, or her status as both/and, Moll can be viewed as potentially agender as well as potentially asexual. While it is impossible to truly define Moll as either, since these terms are part of a contemporary vocabulary of sexual orientation, seeing her as having resonances of both is well within the imaginative leap of this project. Additionally, the term agender denotes "the experience of feeling like you have no gender or are removed from gender in some way."[376] Moll never fully articulates herself as either a woman nor a man and while she most often answers to and refers to herself as "Moll," she briefly answers to the name "Jack" towards the end of the play.[377] By allowing her gender to remain ambiguous, and by removing herself from the sexual economy that the men seek to put her in, the term agender might be an appropriate lens for reading Moll. Marking her as definitively agender, however, would be to ascribe a contemporary sexual orientation onto a past character, which would be inaccurate. Additionally, I have kept with the use of feminine pronouns of "she/her/hers" to describe Moll throughout, since this is how the character is written in *The Roaring Girl*.[378] So rather than say that Moll is agender, perhaps it is more appropriate to suggest Moll exhibits agender resonances in addition to asexual resonances.

Sex, the City, and Mary Frith

While an analysis of Middleton and Dekker's character of Moll Cutpurse provides ample material to analyze, the fact that she was based on a real individual, Mary Frith, provides even

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[375] Ryan Singh Paul, "The Power of Ignorance and *The Roaring Girl*," *English Literary Renaissance* 43, no. 3 (2013): 539, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6757.12016.

[376] Cuthbert, "When We Talk About Gender We Talk About Sex," 847.

[377] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, V, ii 212 & 215.

[378] For a transgender reading, including the use of "they/them" pronouns for "Moll | Jack," see Marjorie Rubright, "Transgender Capacity," 52.

more evidence to point to the slippage allowed in the system of compulsory sexuality in early modern London. Several scholars have noted the mention of the real Mary Frith in *The Roaring Girl* and have speculated regarding her influence on the creation of the character. Alicia Tomisin, for instance, notes that "Middleton and Dekker's Roaring Girl is unique among dramatized female commoners. She is the only character for whom the historical and dramatic figures exist in such a symbiotic relationship."[379] The possibility of this symbiotic relationship can be seen in the references to the real Mary Frith that is peppered throughout *The Roaring Girl.* The first time Moll Cutpurse is mentioned, before she ever appears onstage, Sebastian says, "There's a wench/ Called Moll, mad Moll, or merry moll, a creature/So strange in quality, a whole city takes/ Note of her name and person."[380] While Sebastian is speaking of Moll the character, this could also be a playful reference to the real Mary Frith, who was indeed well-known around London. The epilogue of the play even promises an appearance by Frith, stating, "The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence, / Shall on this stage give larger recompense. / Which mirth that you may share in, herself does woo you, / And craves this sign, your hands to beckon her to you."[381] The question of whether or not Mary Frith actually appeared onstage has been debated by several scholars.

For instance, Mark Hutchins examines the evidence of Mary Frith actually playing onstage at the Fortune theatre in 1611, giving several possibilities, whether her participation was scripted or improvised.[382] Alicia Tomison also speculates that Moll may have merely performed

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[379] Alicia Tomasian, "Moll's Law," *Ben Jonson Journal* 15, no. 2 (2008): 206, https://doi.org/10.3366/E107934530800028X.

[380] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, I, ii, 92-95.

[381] Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, Epilogue, 34-37.

[382] Mark Hutchings, Mark "Mary Frith at the Fortune," *Early Theatre* 10, no. 1 (2007): 99, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43499292.

a song onstage at the Fortune.[383] Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing also offer evidence that Moll likely sang and played the lute onstage at the theatre in 1612, citing the record in *The Consistory of London Correction Book*.[384] Tomison further speculates that Moll was likely a regular patron of the Fortune, and that Middleton and Dekker "must have assumed that, as a member of the audience, she might have loudly corrected anything she did not like, and her supporters might have done the same."[385] The overall speculation of her involvement in the actual production or in the audience provides more insight into the potentially subversive nature of her character and also her popularity at the time. In fact, *The Roaring Girl* is not the only mention of Moll by her contemporaries; she makes a small appearance in *Amends for Ladies* (1618) by Nathan Field, and is briefly mentioned in John Taylor's poetry (1622), Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), and *The Court Beggar* (1632) by Richard Brome.[386] William C. Carroll also mentions a 1610 book by John Daly (of which no copy survives) entitled *A Booke called the Madde Pranks of Merry Moll of the Bankside, with her walks in Man's Apparel and to what Purpose*.[387]

Her popularity speaks to the draw of those who are somehow othered, and to the draw of female criminals. Melissa Rohrer notes the popularity of crime drama, mentioning that a decade before *The Roaring Girl,* several murder plays were being performed on London stages, such as *Arden of Faversham, A Warning for Fair Women,* and the lost murder plays *Page of Plymouth*,

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[383] Tomasian, "Moll's Law," 214-216.

[384] Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing, "Introduction," in *Counterfeit Ladies: The Life and Death of Mal Cutpurse and The Case of Mary Carelton*, ed. Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing (New York: New York University Press, 1994), xiv-xv.

[385] Tomasian, "Moll's Law," 217.

[386] Todd and Spearing, "Introduction," xv and Tomasian, "Moll's Law," 223.

[387] William C. Carroll, "Introduction," *Thomas Middleton: Four Plays*, xi.

Cos of Collumpton, and *The Tragedy of Thomas Merry*. Roher claims that not only were these plays seemingly popular, but their popularity was tied to their "perceived authenticity."[388] Plays such as *Arden of Faversham* depict female criminals, which seemed to draw audiences in more than depictions of male criminals, especially if they were based on true events. Jessica Landis argues that the "characterization of female criminality as 'scintillating' indicates the allure of the female criminal, especially Frith who clearly captured the collective imagination given the frequency with which she is mentioned in various sources of the time."[389] Frith's popularity could be simply due to her criminality, and very likely her inclusion in *The Roaring Girl* was a ploy to sell tickets.

Marion Wynne-Davies makes a similar argument when referencing characters like Moll Cutpurse and other lower-class women such as orange sellers who were likely well known and vocal fixtures of playhouses, and these lower-class women were also likely to be perceived as sexually transgressive.[390] She states, "while these women might be perceived as challenging the legitimate all-male theatrical activities, dramatists like Jonson, Middleton, Dekker, and Fielding clearly recognized the compelling power of their voices and, tellingly, linked them to applause, 'box office,' and other female members of the audience."[391] In other words, rather than assume women were absent from the theatre, women such as Mary Frith were likely very vocally present

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[388] Melissa Rohrer, "'Lamentable and True': Remediations of True Crime in Domestic Tragedies," *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 20, no. 3 (2019): 5, https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/journal/index.php/emls/article/view/439.

[389] Jessica Landis, "The Allure of Joy and Female Criminals in Early Modern English City Comedy," *Jems* 10 (2021): 215, http://dx.doi. org/10.13128/JEMS-2279-7149-12548.

[390] Marion Wynne-Davies, "Orange-Women, Female Spectators, and Roaring Girls: Women and Theater in Early Modern England," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 22 (2009): 23, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24322796.

[391] Eastwood, Controversy and the Single Woman," 23.

in and around the theatre. Wynne-Davies also points out that these women have been pushed to the background, constructing "a gendered dialectic in which men are legitimate performers within an authorized commercial space and in which women provide an informal "sideshow" in an unlawful market."[392] These sidelined women would have possibly provided a variety of services such as selling oranges or other wares, including sexual services. While Mary Frith was never herself arrested for prostitution, she was a known thief, fence, and bawd who procured male prostitutes for female clientele, so she was very likely participating in an unlawful market at the theatre. Her presence in *The Roaring Girl* could simply reflect the consumerist gaze, considering her popularity at the time.

Matthew Kendrick takes a materialist approach to the character of Moll, suggesting that Mary Frith herself may have used this character to make a spectacle out of herself and fleece the audience with her pickpockets. He suggests that Mary presented herself as a spectacle so that "their eyes transfixed by the monstrous image of Moll, the public fails to notice Mary, the pickpocket, sneaking up behind."[393] Through staging this play about Moll, he posits that the playwrights, actors, and Moll joined together in a very shark-like business arrangement, that was both transgressive and consumerist at once. Kendrick bases this hypothesis on Gustave Ungerer, whose examination of the sparse documentary evidence of Frith's life suggests that Frith's "transvestism was a commercially and professionally motivated ploy to increase her income."[394]

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[392] Wynne-Davies, "Orange-Women, Female Spectators, and Roaring Girls," 20.

[393] Matthew Kendrick, "'So Strange in Quality': Perception, Realism, and Commodification in *The Roaring Girl*," *Criticism* 60, no. 1 (2018): 106, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/715831.

[394] Ungerer, "Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature," 55.

While this speculation regarding her gender identity seems a bit reductive, perhaps the possibility of Moll's transgressive nature is much more complicated than a simple yes or no can provide.

Mary Frith's lived reality as a popular character and object of speculation both today and in early modern London speak to society's fascination with sexually ambiguous characters. Her celebrity and notoriety come from the fact that her gender presentation was criminalized, and she was often penalized for it. Randall Nakayama observes that in her autobiography, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith* (of questionable authorship), Frith provides several instances of being accused of indecency for wearing men's attire.[395] More importantly, Frith's sexual identity may resonate with asexuality in the same manner as that of Middleton and Dekker's Moll Cutpurse. For instance, she admits to having no desire, a point that is remarked upon in the introduction to two different volumes of her autobiography. Randall Nakayama remarks that "Moll Cutpurse simply claims that she had no sexual desires," but explains away her commentary, noting that perhaps due to her "unwinning appearance" she may have "desired heterosexual romance but was unable to achieve it."[396] This reading seems to dismiss the words of Frith as compensation for her being rejected. The story referenced is one where she likely propositioned a friend, owing to "the apathy and insensibleness of my carnal pleasures even to stupidity possessed me."[397] Arguably this apathy Frith speaks of demonstrates a general indifference to romance and a disinterest in the insensibleness of such carnal pleasures. Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing also note a general lack of admitted sexuality, stating that she had many male friends, "the dominant

[395] Randall S. Nakayama, "Introduction," In *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Moll Cutpurse*, ed. Randall S. Nakayama (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), xvi-xvii.

[396] Nakayama, "Introduction," xvii-xviii.

[397] Nakayama, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith*, 58.

tone of these relationships appears to have been the camaraderie of male bonding, with little hint of feminine seduction."[398] The veracity of this story and her sexual identity are thus impossible to determine.

A further complication comes Ungerer who makes mention of her marriage to Lewknor Markham, noting that one of her aliases was that of Mary Markham.[399] Her marriage, however, does not indicate any sort of sexual desire. Ungerer even provides doubt of the veracity of the marriage, stating that it "should presumably be seen as a marriage of convenience contracted with a view to avoiding the discrimination and disabilities resulting from coverture and to exploiting the loopholes in the definition of gender boundaries," even calling into question if they lived together as husband and wife.[400] Steven Orgel, on the other hand, claims that she was never married, thus the existence of this marriage, convenience or not, is still in question.[401]

So what if, rather than dismissing the appearance of a lack of desire as a problem of authorship or an inability of Moll to achieve a heterosexual romance (married or not), we instead were to take Frith at her word? It is highly possible that the real Mary Frith may have been a potential asexual person attempting to live a nonsexual life while being surrounded by the abundant sexual economy of seventeenth century London.

Mary Frith and her fictional counterpart of Moll Cutpurse provide a unique and arguably very queer perspective. Due to her arrests for indecency, Frith was not allowed a place within the system of compulsory sexuality, and she was hypersexualized both onstage and off. The

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[398] Todd and Spearing, "Introduction," xxiv.

[399] Ungerer, "Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature," 48.

[400] Ungerer, "Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature," 53.

[401] Steven Orgel, "The Subtexts of *The Roaring Girl*," *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

fascination and hypersexualization of Moll points to the overall fascination and hypersexualization of those who present as differently gendered, whether transgender or nonbinary. Like Moll, when they are put in the spotlight, their gender and thus their sexuality is put on display, oftentimes hypersexualized for a profit. We are left with the question: is Moll an example of an asexual individual existing, best she can, within the confines of renaissance gender anxiety and compulsory sexuality that would make a spectacle of her? Or is this character a rhetorical and capitalist tool, simultaneously hypersexualized and sanitized for the stage to make a profit? The answer, I would offer, is both. The character of Moll Cutpurse is not neat in any way. Moll is, according to Kendrick, "an 'unfinalizable' character" who demonstrates fluidity through an ambiguous gender identity, an arguably asexual sexuality, and an unstable socioeconomic position.[402]

We do not have access to the lived reality of Mary Frith, but we do have a questionable autobiography as well as a male-filtered dramatic representation of her character. The possibility that both the character and the real person could contain traces of asexuality provides the potential to develop a richer history of asexuality for this emerging identity and sexual orientation.

[402] Kendrick, "'So Strange in Quality'," 117.

Chapter 4.
Barely Tolerated Spinsters: Rachel Loving and Laura Wingfield

The term "spinster" evokes different connotations throughout history. Originally designating a woman who spun wool, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term came to refer to unmarried women.[403] While the idea of the spinster in popular culture has a long history, she came to be considered as "an exemplar of feminine failure" in the middle of the twentieth century.[404] The two plays I examine in this chapter, *Rachel* and *The Glass Menagerie*, feature young women (Rachel Loving and Laura Wingfield) who end up unmarried, and their failure to marry is viewed as tragic. In both plays, the young women in question are portrayed as childlike in their innocence. Both, I argue, contain traces or resonances of asexuality.

While these two plays are vastly different in many ways, their resonances with asexuality speak to the prevailing attitudes of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, including the system of compulsory sexuality. The first play, Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* from 1916, features the black experience of racism by focusing on how it impacts on the title character, Rachel, a young woman on the verge of adulthood. The second play, 1945's *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, focuses on the life of Tom Wingfield as he narrates his experiences with his mother and his disabled sister Laura. While the plays were written decades apart, they both provide a snapshot of the confluence of racism, ableism, and sexism that inflects the early- to mid-American system of compulsory sexuality. In particular, the two characters, Rachel and Laura, model another instance of nonsexuality: unmarried women, otherwise known as spinsters. While these two characters do not begin as spinsters, they end their respective plays

[403] Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002),10.

[404] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*,13.

as tragic spinsters who are sufficiently desexualized. As noted in the introduction, asexuality can and has been weaponized against certain bodies that did not fit the specific ideal of being white and able-bodied. Thus, I will explore how compulsory sexuality intersects with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and ableism, which can be seen in the early twentieth century's fascination with eugenics.

The desexualization and construction of Rachel and Laura as tragic spinsters demonstrate the prevailing attitudes towards single, unmarried women in the first half of the twentieth century and allows for an examination of how compulsory sexuality functioned. As attitudes towards unmarried women shifted, the place of spinsters throughout the twentieth century likewise shifted. Using an asexual lens, I analyze the external forces that construct these characters as tragically desexualized while also leaving room for these characters to be read as asexual. Put another way, I ask how the typical reading of these characters can be overturned when viewing these characters as asexual. In taking this read, I explore the assumptions of compulsory sexuality as well as the intersections of asexuality with race and disability. I argue that reading these characters through an asexual lens rather than as tragic spinsters creates dramaturgical possibilities for agency within and against the multiply oppressive cultural logics represented in the scripts.

Constructing American Womanhood

Before delving into the nature of how compulsory sexuality and asexuality functions in these two particular plays, it is useful to examine the changing shape of compulsory sexuality that came to influence early twentieth century America. I pay particular attention to American womanhood, since both plays deal with unmarried women, so the ways that women are constructed under compulsory sexuality here is important. Additionally, the perception of

women as naturally feeling sexual urges less stringently than men, which has been the modern prevailing assumption regarding human sexuality, requires analysis, especially in light of asexuality.

Before delving into the nature of how compulsory sexuality and asexuality functions in these two plays, it is useful to examine the changing shape of compulsory sexuality that came to influence early-to-mid-twentieth century America. I pay particular attention to the cultural construction of American womanhood under compulsory sexuality, especially as it affected the representation of unmarried women like Laura and Rachel.

Cultural historian Nodhar Hammami exclaims that a form of asexuality was prescribed for U.S. women at the start of the twentieth century, stating that, "woman had to conform to the nineteenth-century ideal of the domestic paragon and be a mere non-responsive and inactive sexual partner. Thus her moral perfection resulted in her asexuality."[405] Far from a sexual orientation or identity marker, Hammami's use of asexuality here is more appropriately defined as a form of desexualization, so named by asexuality scholar Karen Cuthbert as preferred terminology to specifically distinguish this from asexuality as orientation.[406] This framing of asexuality as an ideal of womanhood was part of a specific rhetorical strategy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that was used to code women as being pure and lacking sexual urges. Nancy F. Cott describes this transformation by arguing that "there was a traditionally dominant Anglo-American definition of women as *especially* sexual which was reversed and transformed between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries into the view that

[405] Nodhar Hammami, "The Nineteenth-Century American and British Female Public Performer: A Cultural Study," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 3 (2016): 3, https://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/article/view/48.

[406] Karen Cuthbert, "Disability and Asexuality," 374.

women (although still primarily identified by their female gender) were *less* carnal and lustful than men."[407] Cott attributes this shift away from the medieval idea of women as naturally lustful to a number of factors, most prominently to the changing sphere of morality and religion in the new world and the rise in the middle class. Women were seen as agents of moral reform, and Cott suggests that women's supposed piety was seen as useful for bringing men to Christianity.

This shift also provided women with a slightly greater degree of moral and intellectual agency than prior eras had allowed. Cott starts her examination of this shift in the eighteenth century, pointing out that "by elevating sexual control highest among human virtues the middle-class moralists made female chastity the archetype for human morality."[408] Through being framed as moral agents, women could exert some control over their own sexuality, potentially arguing for more control over their reproductive labor by refusing sexual access to their husbands. Furthermore, as Cott points out, "the positive contribution of passionlessness was to replace that sexual/carnal characterization of women with a spiritual/moral one, allowing women to develop their human faculties and their self-esteem."[409] In this way, women could enter into public discourse, lending their newfound respect as moral agents to causes such as the suffrage and temperance movements.[410] This construction led to the idea of spinsters (unmarried, single women) as being respectable, even if their presumption of celibacy was assumed. While the construction of women as desexualized, passionless moral characters became the ideal of womanhood, sexuality did not simply disappear. Cott points out that while some women used

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[407] Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 2 (1978): 221, ttps://www.jstor.org/stable/3173022, (original emphasis).

[408] Cott, "Passionlessness," 223.

[409] Cott, "Passionlessness," 223.

[410] Kahan, *Celibacies,* 19

this ideology of passionlessness to stay single, most women of the time still got married and became mothers. Heterosexuality, specifically procreative heterosexuality, while not yet named as such, was still considered the norm and expectation for women.[411]

This construction of women as pure and lacking sexual urges was not only tied to femininity, but also to whiteness. Ianna Hawkins Owen points out that "whiteness marshals the concept of asexuality-as-ideal to substantiate its claims to racial superiority as 'fitness' to rule."[412] In other words, sexual purity displayed a form of self-mastery that was assumed inherent for white people, white women especially. Specifically, this "whiteness" described an American-born Western European/Anglo-Saxon, since the Irish, Italians, and other southern/eastern European immigrants were often coded as not-quite-white.[413] Further, in constructing white women as desexualized and passionless, black women were not allowed such a construction, since "a slave woman was imagined as unrapeable," which meant that enslaved black women were often forcibly used to take the place of the prudish wife's lack of sexual interest.[414] Black women were simultaneously hypersexualized and desexualized, often through the use of controlling images used to police black women's sexuality, which Patricia Hill Collins

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[411] Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 3 and 8. Coviello uses the Oscar Wilde trials as the event that invented the identities heterosexual and homosexual.

[412] Owen, "On the Racialization of Asexuality," 122.

[413] For discussions on how various immigrant groups became to be interpellated as white, see: James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (1997), 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27502194.

[414] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2018), 58.

explains comes in four forms: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel.[415] Collins traces the history of these images from the time of enslavement, while also demonstrating how they have carried over into the twenty-first century. This history of these controlling images points to the ways that black women's sexuality was not constructed along the lines of purity and passionlessness but was rather constructed around how they were able to serve whiteness. Owen argues that while the jezebel was the epitome of excessive hypersexuality on the part of black women, the mammy was constructed as an asexual object, which can rather be read as desexualized in service to her ability to mother white families.[416]

The construction of women as passionless seemed narrowly focused to not simply white women, but upper and middle-class domestic white women. This is especially important considering the racial tensions of the post-Civil War era, occurring at a time when America was still a relatively new nation. This national identity attempted to fuse Christian principles of goodness and purity with whiteness, thus tapping into the idea of white fitness to rule. Racial anxiety was high due to the fear of white racial decline.[417] By tying the ideal of chaste (here meaning virginal) femininity to the institution of marriage, white supremacy could be upheld. Compulsory sexuality was tied to a very American imperative to support whiteness and thus gave way to eugenics.

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[415] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 72-84.

[416] Ianna Hawkins Owen, "Still, Nothing: Mammy and Black Asexual Possibility," *Feminist Review* 128 (2018): 74-75, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0140-9.

[417] Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples." 9-10 and Andrew S. Wilson, "'Jews Will Not Replace Us!': Antisemitism, Interbreeding, and Immigration in Historical Context," *American Jewish History* 105, no. 1/2 (2021) 2-4, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/804146.

While an in-depth history of eugenic thought is beyond the scope of this current project, no history of American sexuality can ignore the influence of eugenics on compulsory sexuality and race/gender construction. Daylanne K. English provides an excellent overview of eugenic thinking, including the Malthusian idea of "moral restraint," noting how these theories come to the fore in early twentieth century America.[418] The idea of moral restraint has ties to the construction of passionlessness and its inherent tie to whiteness. As the twentieth century began, English notes how American eugenics arose as anxieties regarding immigration and white racial decline. Eugenics writers sounded alarms that white people were being out-procreated by non-white populations. Such a trend, they warned, would lead to the minoritization or dilution of white populations and thus the decline of moral (i.e., white) national standards.[419] English is also careful to note that eugenics existed in its historical context, and here was not only a racial aspect of eugenics, but it also had a classist and ableist side.[420] At the turn of the century, as anxieties of white racial decline began to rise, the idea of unmarried, upper-class women became less of an ideal for women and more of a contested site, since in remaining unmarried, these women were not fulfilling their expected role as child bearers and mothers. The rise in birth control methods and family planning in the early twentieth century also plays a role in the anxieties surrounding sexuality and motherhood.

Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger campaigned for women to have access to the knowledge and the means for family planning. In her 1917 Introduction to *The Case for Birth*

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[418] Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

[419] Barrett and Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples." 9-10 and Shannon L. Walsh, *Eugenics and Physical Culture Performance in the Progressive Era: Watch Whiteness Workout* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 8-9.

[420] English, *Unnatural Selections*, 24.

Control, she declares, "no adult woman who is ignorant of the means to prevent conception can call herself free. No woman can call herself free who cannot choose the time to be a mother or not as she sees fit."[421] While Sanger's critics rightly point out her ties to negative eugenics, her concern focused on lifting women out of poverty. Sanger's campaign for birth control was born out of seeing women in poverty having more children than they could afford. Although she pioneered birth control for women's bodily autonomy, she couched this in terms of the benefits for the family overall. Wesley Buerkle notes that Sanger simultaneously argues "that birth control will provide women with personal freedom and sexual liberation even as she articulates contraception as women's maternal obligation to themselves, their children, their husbands, and their nation."[422] Even Sanger, pioneer of birth control in the early twentieth century, still articulates an obligation towards motherhood, specifically in the context of heterosexual marriage. Thus, compulsory motherhood gets intertwined with compulsory sexuality.

The early twentieth century also saw the emergence of theories of sexuality and sexual heath. Theorists such as Sigmund Freud put forth the notion that sex was a normal part of adult life, and this proliferated in the period between the world wars.[423] Naomi Braun Rosenthal remarks that "in this context, spinsterhood was increasingly seen as one of a number of abnormal conditions that suggested a lack of mental balance or a flight from femininity."[424] In other words, by articulating sex (and the assumption of motherhood) as part of the "normal" impulses for

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[421] Margaret Sanger, *The Case for Birth Control* (Modern Art Printing Company, 1917), 8.

[422] Wesley C. Buerkle, "From Women's Liberation to Their Obligation: The Tensions Between Sexuality and Maternity in Early Birth Control Rhetoric," *Women and Language* 31, no. 1 (2009), 27, https://faculty.etsu.edu/buerkle/pubs/MS%20Lib%20Ob.pdf.

[423] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*, 116.

[424] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*, 117.

humans, a lack of interest in sex was increasingly seen as a sign of pathology. Margaret Sanger also argued that celibacy as a form of birth control was too limiting for women, noting that it was "the cause of many nervous complaints."[425] This pathologization of celibacy and low sexual desire further contributes to the way that compulsory sexuality was constructed.

Since eugenics was such a widespread belief system that English calls the "paradigmatic modern American discourse," it is necessary to begin with eugenics to demonstrate how compulsory sexuality functioned in terms of nineteenth and early twentieth century America.[426] Furthermore, this view is complicated in light of the way that compulsory sexuality was constructed to favor white, affluent, able-bodied heterosexuals. Eugenics did not merely champion white procreativity but also urged (and oftentimes imposed) non-procreativity for people who were nonwhite, disabled, or otherwise "undesirable." The "Asexualization Act" of 1909, for instance, using the term "asexualization" here to mean sterilization, argued for criminals and the mentally ill to be "asexualized" in California.[427] In 1927, the Supreme Court case Buck vs. Bell, ruled that a mentally disabled woman, Carrie Buck, was deemed "feebleminded" and was thus sterilized.[428] These laws were soon used to forcibly sterilize numerous mentally and physically disabled people, people of color, indigenous people, and criminals, with NPR reporting that over 70,000 Americans who were deemed somehow unfit

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[425] Sanger, *The Case for Birth Control*, 8.

[426] English, *Unnatural Selections*, 2.

[427] Jeremy Rosenberg, "When California Decided Who Could Have Children and Who Could Not," *KCET*, June 18, 2012, https://www.kcet.org/history-society/when-california-decided-who-could-have-children-and-who-could-not. See also: Harry H. Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States*, (Chicago: Psychopathic Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago, 1922) for details regarding the legal terminology of these laws.

[428] Adam Cohen, interview by Terry Gross, "The Supreme Court Ruling that Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations," *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, March 16, 2016.

were forcibly sterilized throughout the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.[429]

In discussing plays in early twentieth century America, the ubiquity of eugenics and the pathology of low sexual interest in modern American thought cannot be ignored. Using an asexual lens to view these two plays can illuminate how compulsory sexuality can be weaponized as a tool for eugenic ideals that promote racism and ableism. Owen is keen to stress that asexuality scholars must remain attuned to the ways that asexuality has been deployed in the past, stating, "in addition to expanding beyond 'born this way', asexuality studies must hold critical space for those who are 'constructed this way'."[430] In other words, asexuality has long been interpellated as white and able bodied. Asexuality, through the process of desexualization, has also long been assumed for certain racialized individuals as well as for individuals with disabilities. Though separate from asexuality as a sexual orientation, the use of the term "asexualization" in early legal discourse on forced sterilization demands attention from asexuality scholars. This form of desexualization has reverberations into contemporary discourse surrounding asexuality studies and its intersections with critical race theory and disability studies. Of course, twentieth-century eugenic desexualization is not the same as twenty-first century asexuality as a sexual orientation. However, the historical reality of eugenics needs to be unpacked and recognized as part of the historical context in which passionlessness and spinsterhood (in the particular case of these two plays) functioned.

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[429] Cohen, "The Supreme Court Ruling" and Sanjana Manjeshwar, "America's Forgotten History of Forced Sterilization," *Berkeley Political Review*, November 4, 2020, https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2020/11/04/americas-forgotten-history-of-forced-sterilization/.

[430] Owen, "Still, Nothing," 77.

The two plays in question feature young women who are not only on the verge of spinsterhood but are among those for whom lack of sexual desire or activity has been constructed and imposed. Not only that, but these unmarried women are also considered failures at the end of their respective plays, because they are not upholding the heterosexual ideal of creating the nuclear family. By taking an asexual lens to *Rachel* and *The Glass Menagerie*, I examine how these two women are constructed as tragic spinsters in a world that forces them into a life of nonsexuality.

Rachel, Black Femininity, and Reproductive Justice

Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* centers on an African American woman coming of age in the early twentieth century. The title character, Rachel, begins as a naïve and hopeful young woman who slowly becomes aware of the racist structures that surround her through her interactions with the young black children in her community. As the play's central character, Rachel becomes Grimké's tool for uncovering how racism takes its toll on black women.

At the start of the play, Rachel is seen as joyous, full of love and life, and expressing an enormous love for children. She cares for several children in her community, helping them dress before school, and even acts as a mother to a small boy she helps raise. The Loving family is presented as a respectable bourgeois family, headed by Mrs. Loving, a single, widowed mother. Rachel herself is presented as a naïve but loving young woman, both sympathetic and intelligent. With this characterization of Rachel, Grimké distances her title character from the stereotypical depictions of a black woman as either mammy or a whore.[431] In countering these harmful

[431] Anne Mai Yee Jansen, "Under Lynching's Shadow: Grimké's Call for Domestic Reconfiguration in 'Rachel,'" *African American Review* 47, no. 2/3 (2014): 394, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2458976.

stereotypes, Grimké attempts to speak to white audiences while also depicting a positive example of a black family for black audiences.[432]

At first, everything seems to be looking up for Rachel, until she encounters three stories of racism that profoundly affect her and lead her to make the final decision at the end of the play to forego marriage and motherhood, refusing the societal expectation for women at this time. In the first act of the play, Rachel is seen interacting with a young boy, Jimmy, while her mother, Mrs. Loving, becomes visibly distressed by the presence of Jimmy. By the end of the act, Mrs. Loving tells Rachel and her brother Tom the devasting tale of how her husband and her seventeen-year-old son were both lynched in the south by white churchgoers many years prior to the events of the play. Hearing that story, Rachel begins to realize the terrible injustice that faces African Americans. Rachel tells her mother, "Then, everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hears is three parts – pain."[433] It is in this moment that she begins to doubt her relationship to the expectation of motherhood.

The lynching story is not meant to be mere background information about a supporting character to flesh out the title character. Rather, this story is the decisive moment that casts a shadow over the rest of the play. Grimké wrote this play during a time when lynching was occurring with a horrific frequency and meant for it to serve as a vehicle to speak out against lynching, with some considering *Rachel* to be the first play that kickstarted the antilynching genre of theatre.[434] Rachel's reaction to the lynching story is meant to demonstrate the

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[432] Jansen, "Under Lynching's Shadow," 392.

[433] Grimké, *Rachel*, Act 1, 28.

[434] K. Allison Hammer, "'Blood at the Root": Cultural Abjection and Thwarted Desire in the Lynching Plays and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimké," *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies* 42, no. 1 (2021): 28, https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2021.0005 and Kathy A. Perkins and

cumulative effects of racialized violence over multiple generations. This story has profound effects on Rachel as the play continues.

Act Two begins four years later. Rachel has essentially adopted Jimmy and she also frequently interacts with other young children in her building. She seems to be just as happy, if not a little wearier then in the first act. This changes when Rachel meets Mrs. Lane and her daughter Ethel who come to Rachel to inquire about the schools in her neighborhood, specifically looking to find a new school for her daughter after the little girl's mistreatment at her previous school. From here, Mrs. Lane tells the of how her child was mistreated by the white students and a white teacher at their school. At the end of her tale, Mrs. Lane despairs herself, similarly questioning God and motherhood like Rachel did in Act One. She tells Rachel that she would never have another child, swearing that "if I had another – I'd kill it. It's kinder."[435] Her last piece of advice before leaving is to tell Rachel not to marry. Following right on the heels of this encounter with Mrs. Lane, Jimmy enters and tells Rachel that the white children at school called him racist names and threw stones at him. The injustice of the world finally hits home for Rachel, and she falls into a deep depression.

Act Three begins about a week after Act Two, and Rachel's character has changed. She is no longer the naïve and lighthearted character from Act One. Her outlook has shifted so much that she refuses her suitor, John Strong, when he asks her to marry him. Her refusal of marriage comes at the culmination of a life affected by racial oppression. Rachel says, "We are all blighted; we are all accursed – all of us –, everywhere, we whose skins are dark – our lives

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Judith L. Stephens, "Angelina Weld Grimké," in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1998), 24.

[435] Grimké, *Rachel*, Act 2, 58.

blasted by the white man's prejudice."[436] In this moment, Rachel makes the decision to refuse motherhood in an act of defiance against social expectations and to protect herself from despair.

Her journey through the play, in bearing witness to the suffering of children, demonstrates the devastating affects racism has on black women. As a young woman, motherhood is expected of her, but Rachel, seeing the trap black women fall into having to watch violence inflicted on their children, refuses to bring children into the world. This refusal becomes a radical act of defiance against a racist system with a history of using black women specifically to "breed" black children to propagate the system of slavery. Rachel rejects this legacy and refuses to participate in the imperative of reproduction. She tells John that her unborn children visit her in her dreams, "and beg me – weeping – not to – bring them here – to suffer."[437] The play ends with the sound of weeping in a blackout.

Joyce Meier suggests that black women such as Rachel realize "their powerlessness *as* mothers when through the examples of a relative or a family friend or even a casual acquaintance, they are forced to witness the murder or pain of a young black person."[438] In other words, Meier underlines the intersectional nature of Rachel's oppression, doubly felt not only as a black person, but also as a black woman seeking motherhood. William Storm observes a similar aspect of Rachel's status as a multiply oppressed person. He states, "Grimké's drama, at its most potent, is located in the psychological effects of racism upon the development of a single personality, from early childhood to barren womanhood, and in the impossible circumstances in

[436] Grimké, *Rachel*, Act 3, 76.

[437] Grimké, *Rachel*, Act 3, 77.

[438] Joyce Meier, "The Refusal of Motherhood in African American Women's Theater," *Melus* 25, no. 3/4 (2000): 118, https://www.jstor.org/stable/468239, (original emphasis).

which this character must inevitably find herself at the end of her fated journey."[439] In the end of this journey, she refuses motherhood, seeing no other way to combat her oppression.

While the play functions primarily as an antilynching drama, it also promotes reproductive justice, which refers to the right to choose when one has children and is most often seen through the lens of abortion rights and access to birth control. Rachel's refusal of motherhood has been compared to both birth control and abortion by several scholars.[440] Lourdes Arciniega states that Rachel "aborts the possibility of parenthood by using self-denial as a form of birth control."[441] Thus, Rachel's commitment to non-procreation can be interpreted as a form of reproductive justice.

Further, reproductive justice is not merely limited to preventing or ending pregnancy; it also accommodates the women who feel unsafe having their own children, including when women either refuse to have children through celibacy or through voluntary self-sterilization.[442]

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[439] William Storm, "Reactions of a "Highly-Strung Girl': Psychology and Dramatic Representation in Angelina W. Grimké's *Rachel*," *African American Review* 27, no. 3 (1993): 470, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041935.

[440] Elizabeth Brown Guillory, "Disrupted Motherlines: Mothers and Daughters in a Genderized, Sexualized, and Racialized World," in *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Brown Guillory (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 193 and Helene Keyssar, "Rites and Responsibilities: The Drama of Black American Women," in *Feminine Focus: The New American Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228.

[441] Lourdes Arciniega, "Fixating on and Fixing the African American Woman's Representation of Self in Modern Periodicals," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 44, no. 2 (2017): 238, https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2017.0020.

[442] Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton, "Intersections of Culture, Gender, Religion, and Politics: Problematizing the Notion of Choice in Reproductive Feminicides in Latin America," in *Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas: Intersectionality, Power, and Struggles for Rights* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018), 73. While this book focuses on and interrogates the rhetoric of "choice" in Latin American countries where women are undergoing forced sterilization in the face of extreme gendered violence, the issues regarding reproductive justice are still applicable here.

Since the anti-lynching short story that was the precursor to *Rachel*, titled *The Closing Door*, appeared in Margaret Sanger's *The Birth Control Review*, Grimké was clearly dedicated to exploring reproductive justice in terms of racial justice in the early twentieth century.[443] Her ties to Sanger demonstrate that even though Grimké was championing reproductive justice, it should still be remembered that there is some uncomfortable overlap between reproductive justice movements and eugenics. Furthermore, the original title of this play, *Blessed are the Barren*, highlights Rachel's commitment to anti-natalism even more stringently.[444] Her construction of barrenness as both a blessing and a terrible fate can be read as a bit ableist, especially to those who are lack the ability or desire to have children. With the dramaturgical choice to end the play with the sound weeping in the darkness, audiences are left with viewing the choice, or by extension, the inability to have children as a tragedy. While Grimké seems to frame Rachel as a victim acting out of a sense of powerlessness, Rachel could alternatively be seen as attempting to wrench power back from an unjust system.

In considering Rachel's decision as a form of reproductive justice for herself and her future unborn children, Rachel's anti-natalism becomes an intentional decision that comes in the form of nonsexuality. Anne Mai Yee Jansen argues "her refusal of marriage represents not passive compliance with white society's dominance, but instead active resistance to it."[445] Her decision to remain unmarried and childless butts up against the dominant discourses of her time regarding women's proper place within the system of compulsory sexuality. By actively

[443] Arciniega, "Fixating on and Fixing," 232.

[444] Storm, "Reactions of a "Highly-Strung Girl,'" 468.

[445] Jansen, "Under Lynching's Shadow," 399.

choosing a nonsexual life, Rachel desexualizes herself to resist the racist systems that constrict the flourishing of the black family.

Rachel Nolan focuses on a particular production of *Rachel*: the inaugural performance in March 1916 that was sponsored by the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and held at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School for Colored Girls in Washington, DC.[446] Nolan's analysis focuses on this premiere and on the audience who were mainly upwardly mobile and unmarried black women educators. However, Nolan argues that in staging *Rachel* at this school where most of the teachers were unmarried professional women, it "acknowledges the vaunted promise of bourgeois class formation – and then dashes it."[447] In a way, *Rachel* and its production at the Miner school demonstrate that marriage and a nuclear family may be a pipe dream for young, upwardly mobile black women. Pushing this idea further, *Rachel* also suggests that not only is motherhood doomed to failure, but it is also immoral to enter into it in such a thoroughly racist society.

This production is important because it speaks to the lived reality of single black women at the turn of the century, especially as Grimké herself remained unmarried. K. Allison Hammer uses a queer lens to analyze *Rachel* in light of Grimké's supposed lesbian status, reading the play alongside Grimké's erotic poetry.[448] Hammer also notes that lynching is not an incidental aspect of the play, but that Grimké deliberately spoke of lynching to demonstrate how it was used to police the sexuality of black people.[449] Hammer further states that "the sexual economy of

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[446] Rachel Nolan, "Uplift, Radicalism, and Performance: Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 35, 1 (2018): 1-2, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/696338.

[447] Nolan, "Uplift, Radicalism, and Performance," 6.

[448] Hammer, "'Blood at the Root," 32.

[449] Hammer, "'Blood at the Root," 34.

lynching reveals the multiple ways in which a Black lesbian had no access to 'normativity'— to having children or family or a relation to sexuality whatever. Lynching became the ultimate symbol of this closed circle of sexual relationships."[450] In other words, existing outside of the white heteropatriarchy was dangerous for anyone, and even more so for a black lesbian. For Grimké, her only option was to refuse to participate in the sexual economy that saw black men lynched and black women used as "breeders" and otherwise hypersexualized through the imagery of the jezebel or desexualized through the image of the mammy.[451] Thus, Rachel refuses to participate in adult sexuality, a choice that Hammer argues allows for Grimké to express "the impossibility of domestic life for queer people at this time."[452]

This impossibility was compounded by the intersection of race and sexuality. As noted previously, eugenics was a driving ideology of the early twentieth century, but it was not only built upon white supremacy. Daylanne K. English points out that several leaders of the black community, such as W.E.B. DuBois, were also proponents of a positive eugenics that promoted racial uplift through selective breeding.[453] In fact, *Rachel* had been criticized for going against this ideal, and with some accusing Grimké of promoting race suicide.[454] In her response to these critics, Grimké stated that she hoped that her play would have an effect on white mothers in particular as her primary audience, so that they could understand the effects that racism would have on "the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be" and

[450] Hammer, "'Blood at the Root," 35.

[451] Owen, "Still, Nothing," 74.

[452] Hammer, "'Blood at the Root," 41.

[453] English, *Unnatural Selections*, 16.

[454] Perkins and Stephens, "Angelina Weld Grimké," 23.

would thus help evoke change.[455] Grimké was tapping into the commonality of shared motherhood in order to speak to white audiences, and yet, she was also critiquing the eugenic agenda of the nuclear family. English observes that Grimké and other African American women writers of the early twentieth century were protesting not only interracial violence, but also "a specifically modern intraracial and gendered oppression – that is, African American ideologies of uplift that emphasized black women's domestic and reproductive value."[456] In other words, *Rachel* is not only a critique of lynching, but also of the compulsory sexuality that equates women automatically with motherhood. Rachel's refusal of motherhood is thus a rejection of the role of a breeder.[457]

While Rachel's refusal has been coded as a queer resistance, an asexual reading is still compatible as a form of queer resistance, especially since asexuality has been coded as queer. Additionally, the refusal to participate in a bourgeois heterosexual economy is relevant to the lives of asexual individuals as well. Furthermore, an asexual reading is more in line with the play itself, since Rachel does not express any desire at all, not for another woman, and not even for John Strong, her suitor. Rachel is thus shown to have a marked lack of sexual desire. While she does show some romantic tendencies towards her suitor, that does not negate an asexual interpretation of her character. Asexual people can and often do desire romance and pair bonding. Asexual people also often desire children and family. In the play, Rachel only demonstrates a clear and pressing desire for motherhood which she eschews in a radical act of

[455] Perkins and Stephens, "Angelina Weld Grimké," 23 and Angelina Weld Grimké, "'Rachel' The Play of the Month: The Reason and Symposis by the Author." *The Competitor* 1, no. 1 (1920): 52.

[456] English, *Unnatural Selections*, 122.

[457] Hammer, "'Blood at the Root," 35.

reproductive justice. Her nonsexuality then contains a powerful anti-racist choice to opt out of various and interlocking systems of oppression.

White Femininity and Disability in *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a semi-autobiographical play and also one of his most famous works. Williams portrays the character of Laura Wingfield, the waifish sister of the main character Tom. Laura is known to be based on Williams' sister Rose, who underwent a lobotomy as a young woman and was subsequently institutionalized.[458] While much of the focus and scholarship of the play falls on Tom and his latent queerness, the character of Laura has also been given significant attention from scholars and critics.[459] Recently, Laura has been examined from scholars in disability studies, as well as some scholars noting her potential queerness as well as Tom's.[460] Branching off of the work done by disability and queer scholars, I am interested in the intersection of asexuality and disability, especially in light of the history of eugenics, which in the late 1940s (after the revelation of Germany's genocidal regime) began to acquire an immoral connotation..[461]

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play, narrated by Tom Wingfield, who tells the story of his life with his mother and sister, Laura. The majority of the plot centers on the mother's

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[458] Delma E. Presley, *The Glass Menagerie: An American Memory* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), x-xi.

[459] Michael F. Paller, *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-twentieth Century Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 38.

[460] Alicia Andrzejewski, "Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies in Tennessee Williams *The Glass Menagerie*," *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 16 (2017): 37, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615576 and Ann M. Fox, ""But, Mother – I'm – crippled!': Tennessee Williams, Queering Disability, and Dis/Membered Bodies in Performance," in *Gendering Disability*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchinson (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2004), 234.

[461] English, *Unnatural Selections*, 177.

quest to find her daughter a husband. Laura is described in the stage directions as being fragile with a slight limp or suggested disability, while their mother, Amanda, is described as having a sort of paranoid vitality. From the very first scene, while Tom is positioned as the narrator with the first and last lines of the play, Amanda is the driving force. Her entire purpose for being seems to be centered around finding a suitable husband for her daughter. Not very long in the first scene, Amanda tells her daughter keep herself "fresh and pretty for the gentlemen callers," and alluding to her own girlhood with seventeen men coming to call on her.[462] As Amanda recalls her many young beaus, Laura finally mentions that she doesn't think that she'll be receiving any gentlemen callers that day and says "Mother's afraid that I'm going to be an old maid."[463] Even in the first scene, Laura's status as an unmarried woman is set up, almost to the point that its conclusion seems inevitable. While the term "old maid" is often seen as synonymous to "spinster," Rosenthal notes that it is usually a "considerably less-neutral appellation" for an unmarried woman, especially one that was past the usual age for marriage.[464]

In the very next scene, this fear is brought to light when Amanda discovers that Laura has been failing to attend typing school and lying to her mother about where she goes all day for several months. The ensuing confrontation has Amanda worrying for Laura's future. She tells Laura, "I know so well what happens to unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position in life. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South – barely tolerated spinsters… little birdlike women – without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their lives!"[465] While this statement from Amanda is usually played as the paranoid mother desperately seeking a husband

[462] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, Act I, scene 1, 13.

[463] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, Act I, scene 1, 15.

[464] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*, 10.

[465] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, Act I, scene 2, 18.

for her daughter, there is also a glimpse of a material reality at work here. As noted by Trisha Franzen, opportunities for unmarried women were few and far between.[466] Amanda's worry for Laura's future is a very real and very present fact of their lives, especially considering the constant talk of money throughout the play, and the very real problem of the lights being turned off in the very end of the play. Amanda's concern is not merely about policing Laura's sexuality, nor is it about a desire for grandchildren; it is solely about her fear of her daughter becoming destitute.

She eventually asks Laura if she'd ever liked a boy, and Laura answers that she did, once. Laura the mentions Jim, a young man from high school who nicknamed her "Blue Roses" when he misheard her say "pleurosis."[467] Laura here merely mentions her high school crush, and while this might seem to negate reading Laura through an asexual lens, asexuality does not automatically equate to aromanticism. Asexual people are able to have romantic crushes, and the implication here is that Laura may have simply viewed him as a friend who treated her kindly.

Amanda dismisses Laura's crush and confidently proclaims that she'll end up married, while Laura exclaims "But, Mother… I'm – crippled!"[468] The scene ends with Amanda loudly telling her not to use the word "crippled" and arguing that Laura merely has a slight defect or disadvantage. This dismissal of Laura's disability here is important for several reasons. First, it is deeply ableist for her to suggest that Laura's disability is a defect that she needs to somehow make up for. Secondly, Amanda blatantly ignores Laura's lived reality in favor of a fantasy born out of the system of compulsory sexuality that insists that Laura marry. In positioning the desire

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[466] Trisha Franzen, *Spinsters and Lesbians: Independent Womanhood in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 7-8.

[467] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* Act I, scene 2, 19.

[468] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* Act I, scene 2, 19.

to be married as more important that engaging in Laura's existence as a disabled person, Laura's disability comes to define her as unmarriable. Here again is the subtle foreshadowing that Laura will only ever end up unmarried, and that Amanda's dismissal of her disability and insistence that she cultivate charm to make up for it is nothing more than a fantasy. Third, due to this implicit foreshadowing, Laura is desexualized due to her disability. Scholars in the field of disability studies have noted the assumption of asexuality that is ascribed to people with disabilities.[469] The construction of disabled people as asexual has been especially critiqued by scholars who study the overlap between queer theory and disability studies. Ann M. Fox, for instance, explores how this is read in the work of Tennessee Williams and argues that "both queer and disabled bodies, seen as violations of natural masculinity and femininity, defy a heterosexist ideal of sexuality and its attendant gender roles, although while the queer body is read as deviant, the disabled body is rendered completely asexual."[470] While this critique is valid, it also pathologizes asexuality and connotes it as abnormal.

Asexuality scholars have recently begun problematizing this specific pathologization of asexuality. As noted earlier in this chapter, many scholars have begun referring to the process by which disabled people are constructed as asexual as a process of "desexualization," thus marking this as distinct from asexuality as an identity.[471] This is an important distinction to make, since there is a convergence of people who are both asexual and disabled whose experiences deserve

[469] Godfrey Kangaude, "Disability, the Stigma of Asexuality and Sexual Health: A Sexual Rights Perspective," *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal* 5, no. 4 (2009): 7, https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/188.

[470] Fox, ""But, Mother – I'm – crippled!,'" 235.

[471] Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives," 482-483.

attention.[472] This distinction holds true for those with both physical disabilities as well as for those with mental disabilities or who are neurodivergent.

Laura Wingfield is considered an "iconic figure of disability, the essence of isolation, virginity, and martyrdom."[473] This construction of Laura speaks to the desexualization of disabled characters, especially considering how she is portrayed as innocent and foreshadowed to remain tragically unmarried. In fact, given that the character is filtered through her brother's narration, the audience knows little about Laura's desires. She briefly mentions a high school crush, but nothing further regarding romantic or sexual attraction. Neither her sexuality nor even her desires are overtly mentioned. She is described as shy, but her shyness could easily be interpreted as disinterest. However, the societal pressure of a heterosexual union is still placed heavily upon Laura and Amanda. While Amanda may have unrealistic fantasies about Laura's marriageable prospects, beneath these fantasies are real, socio-economic pressures to find a male-breadwinner for Laura's survival and her own. It is likely that Amanda cannot imagine a life for Laura where she can find material self-sufficiency without a husband. Not only does Laura have a limp in an ableist society, but her social anxiety has also rendered her as lacking the marketable skills necessary to hold down a job. In a way, the play frames Laura's anxiety is just as crippling as her limp.

This reading has been taken even further by Clay Morton who contends that Laura could be read as a neurodivergent heroine.[474] Morton starts with the case of Rose Williams, arguing

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[472] Kim, "Asexuality in Disability Narratives." 482.

[473] Mohd Sajid Ansari, "From Subject to Object: Traumatic Staging of the Disabled Body in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Night Mother*," *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 8, no. II (2017): 682, https://www.the-criterion.com/V8/n2/AM14.pdf.

[474] Clay Morton, "Not Like All the Other Horses: Neurodiversity and Rose Williams," *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 13 (2021), 10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45344159.

that if she was alive today, she would have likely been given an autism diagnosis.[475] This hypothesis adds an interesting take on the character of Laura, especially considering the desexualization that sometimes occurs with autistic and other neurodivergent people, same as with disabled individuals. Melanie Yergeau claims the process of desexualization often assigned to autistic people, describing a moment after confessing a possible asexual identity, they were met with concern that they were playing into autistic stereotypes. They state, "Seemingly, my neuroqueer disclosure had been read as an identification with desexualization, with perpetual childhood."[476] Laura is similarly seen as embodying a perpetual childhood, most notably demonstrated in her inability to find a stable job and her consistent interest in her glass menagerie. Still, her sexuality or desire is never overtly mentioned; she is instead subject to the desire of her mother to secure a husband.

Despite Laura's seeming uninterest in the endeavor, eventually Amanda wangles Tom into bringing over a coworker of his to meet Laura. Act two takes place entirely on the night of the gentleman caller's arrival. Amanda has redecorated their entire apartment in preparation for the visit, attempting to make their home look more impressive for the young man. Amanda suggests that Laura wear pads in her bra, an act of hypersexualization that Laura promptly refuses. When Laura gets wind that the young man visiting is her old high school crush, Jim, Laura refuses to attend dinner. Amanda asks her if she was in love with the boy, but Laura denies this, saying: "I don't know, Mother. All I know is that I couldn't sit at the table if it was him."[477]

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[475] Morton, "Not Like All the Other Horses," 3.

[476] Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018) 192.

[477] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, Act II, scene 7, 45.

Once Jim arrives, there are several aborted attempts to get Laura to join them, but Laura instead rests in the living room while the other three eat.

When the power is suddenly turned off due to Tom neglecting to pay the bill, Jim and Laura are finally left alone to converse by candlelight. The ensuing conversation between Laura and Jim is awkward and stilted at first. Soon, it turns into a friendly conversation as they both reminisce about high school. Laura mentions her self-consciousness at the obviousness of her disability, while Jim insists that her physical disability is not noticeable. He tries to get her to feel confident in herself, even engaging in her interests, such as the eponymous glass menagerie. Eventually he asks her to dance, and as they do, he knocks over the glass unicorn (which is hinted at is Laura's favorite) and breaks its horn off. Laura dismisses his apology, stating that the unicorn will now be less freakish without its horn and will fit in with the other horses.

Towards the end of the evening, Jim kisses Laura on impulse, after which he apologizes and reveals that he is already engaged to another girl. He briefly speaks about how much his love for his fiancée has changed him, offering up a typical amatonormative ideal that is often seen in romantic stories. In her final act of the play, Laura gives Jim the unicorn, as a souvenir. Once Jim leaves, and Amanda realizes that this was a failed opportunity to set up Laura and Jim romantically, she despairs and blames Tom for the whole evening going wrong. Laura only has two more miniscule lines for the rest of the play, suggesting that her story has ended with this one failure to achieve a romantic relationship. The play ends with a monologue from Tom, who mentions that he left both women that night, and yet he still remembers Laura, and apologizes to her. The audience never finds out what becomes of Laura, but the implication is that she remains unmarried. Tom's departure is seen as a half-tragic/half-heroic act of self-making, yet he leaves Amanda and Laura financially destitute. Since the play is filtered through his eyes and through

his memory, the audience is left assuming that Laura lived out her days unmarried, penniless, and unhappy.

In playing into the idea of Laura as an icon of virginity and martyrdom, her character is exemplifying the equation of white femininity with passionlessness that came to the fore in the nineteenth century. Laura then represents the double bind of compulsory sexuality: on the one hand, she conforms to the fragile and virginal aspect of white femininity, but on the other hand, her fragility and virginity are a tragic inevitability due to her disability. Laura is both exhibiting the proper purity and passionlessness expected of a young white woman, but her disability renders her undesirable, so that her purity and passionlessness become forced upon her through desexualization.

Laura is thus articulated as a failed heterosexual likely because of her disability. In this way, her failure to become a proper wife and mother further demonstrates the process of desexualization that occurs for disabled individuals. Laura is upholding the system of compulsory sexuality in that her existence as a disabled person renders her undesirable as both a potential sexual partner but ultimately as a wife and mother. Even though Jim tries to get her to have a better self-image, he still refers to her as being different. He tells her that "being different is nothing to be ashamed of. Because other people aren't such wonderful people… They're as common as – weeds, but – you, well you're – *Blue Roses*!"[478] Jim brings this reference to his old nickname back here, to explain to Laura that her difference, as a shy disabled woman, is part of what makes her unique.

The unusual naming of "Blue Roses" can and has been read through the lens of a queer aesthetic. Alicia Andrzejewski reads this as "her choice to claim irrational forms of naming, and

[478] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* Act II, scene 8, 63, (original emphasis).

in so doing, to step outside the heteronormative aesthetics that fails her and into a queer one."[479] In other words, Laura refuses to conform to a version of femininity that would uphold heteronormative ideals of marriage and motherhood. By identifying as "Blue Roses," Laura, and implicitly, her disability, are cast as outside of the natural world.

This rendering Laura as unnatural speaks to the legacy of eugenics even into the mid-twentieth century. While Laura's disability is meant to be subtle in the play, and while her disability is never mentioned as the reason why she is not able to secure a husband for herself, there are traces of eugenic thinking with how she is framed. Alan Santinele Martino points to a more subtle form of eugenics that has reverberations today, termed neo-eugenics or "newgenics" by scholars and activists, and can be seen in such practices as "forms of prenatal testing, selective abortion and a lack of social policies that support disabled parents and disabled people who choose to get married."[480] What this "newgenics" points to is the tacit ways that disabled people's sexuality and reproductive choices can be and often are undermined. In Laura's case, she is desexualized from the very beginning, with her singleness foreshadowed as an unfortunate consequence of her disability.

Furthermore, presenting disabled characters as desexualized subtly suggests that even someone as "pretty… in a different way from everyone else," is still unfit for marriage and motherhood.[481] This point is challenged in the 2017 production of *The Glass Menagerie* which featured Madison Ferris as the first wheelchair user to perform in a lead role on a Broadway

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[479] Andrzejewski, "Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies," 43.

[480] Alan Santinele Martino and Margaret Campbell, "Exercising Intimate Citizenship Rights and (Re)Constructing Sexualities: The New Place of Sexuality in Disability Activism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Activism*, ed. Maria Berghs, Tsitsi Chataika, Yahya El-Lahib, Kudakwashe Dube (London: Routledge, 2019), 100.

[481] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* Act II, scene 8, 63.

stage.[482] In making Laura's physical disability overt as opposed to a slight limp, this production both highlights and challenges the assumption of Laura's frailty. Yet this production also turns Laura's disability entirely physical and into a matter of mobility, seemingly ignoring her neurodivergent status.

Ultimately, the play desexualizes Laura because she exists in an "undesirable" body. Throughout the play, she is unable to perform as expected, so it comes as no surprise that she ends the play unmarried. Interpreting Laura as asexual highlights the ways that disabled people (either physically or neurodivergent) are often desexualized to the point of being infantilized. An asexual reading also allows for a way to read her position as one that is more than just a tragic spinster who ends the play alone and tragically unmarried. It further lays bare the system of compulsory sexuality that made singlehood societally and financially bleak for many women. Laura is "Blue Roses," someone who does not quite fit inside the system of compulsory sexuality.

The Cruel Optimism of Compulsory (Hetero)sexuality

Both Rachel and Laura demonstrate how compulsory sexuality selects and polices who has access to sexuality. In *Rachel,* the title character makes a choice that forces her into a nonsexual life, desexualizing herself in protest of the racialized violence she sees around her every day. In *The Glass Menagerie,* Laura is remembered as an already desexualized character whose nonsexual life is inevitable. These women's subsequent spinsterhood is seen as a tragedy of life's circumstances, due to racism on the one hand and ableism on the other. Their commonality engages in the different aspects of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth

[482] Seth McBride, "New Production of 'The Glass Menagerie' Stars Wheelchair User Madison Ferris," *New Mobility,* March 9, 2017, https://newmobility.com/glass-menagerie-madison-ferris/.

century and how that helped shaped how America viewed the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family unit as the ideal social structure.

While both plays construct Rachel and Laura as tragic spinsters, I do not mean to suggest that Grimké and Williams engaged in this construction without criticism. Considering that both playwrights were possibly queer, their commitment to upholding the system of compulsory sexuality, which so often resembles compulsory heterosexuality, is tenuous at best. Instead, I would argue that both playwrights criticize this very system, though perhaps not with an eye towards asexuality. An asexual lens explores how these characters are disidentifying with not only heterosexuality, but compulsory sexuality. Hammer analyzes *The Glass Menagerie* using Lauren Berlant's idea of "cruel optimism" and explores how the play can be read "as actively resisting heteronormative narratives of the good life."[483] Branching off of this interpretation, I read both *The Glass Menagerie* and *Rachel* as resisting the heteronormative narrative that promises marriage and the resulting nuclear family to be the primary achievement of a good life.

Lauren Berlant defines cruel optimism as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object," with that object being not merely physical, but also an idea.[484] Arguably, the promise of marriage and children that is set down in the modern era as the pinnacle of happiness could be viewed as this problematic object. In other words, the system of compulsory (hetero)sexuality promises the cruel optimism that everyone will find joy and fulfillment though heterosexual marriage and procreation.

This cruel optimism of compulsory (hetero)sexuality is that it is a fantasy that is only accessible to certain individuals, specifically white, able-bodied cisgender heterosexual people.

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[483] Andrzejewski, "Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies," 37.

[484] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

This is part of the cruelty of the compulsory sexuality: the "good life" is only accessible to certain people. The eugenic thought that permeated much of American society in the modern era (and still continues now) exposes cruel optimism of compulsory (hetero)sexuality. While the myth of the American dream of financial stability and a nuclear family is baked into the zeitgeist of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the reality of eugenics suggests that this option is only suitable for certain bodies. Compulsory sexuality thus policies who has access to this good life through various tactics, such as desexualizing disabled people, such as Laura, or creating the unsafe environment for black women, such as Rachel, to bring children into the world.

Of course, the system of compulsory sexuality works on everyone, not just black and white individuals. This system also functions to police the sexuality of other racialized individuals, such as hypersexualizing Latina women and desexualizing Asian men. This can also extend to fetishizing and/or desexualizing disabled people as well as desexualizing neurodiverse people.

I chose these two characters because they exist outside of the typical construction of an asexual individual (that of a white, able-bodied, cisgender male), while also existing at the intersection of race and disability. Situating these two characters as potentially being asexual allows for a broader reading that can fully interrogate how compulsory sexuality in twentieth and into twenty-first century America is constructed not just in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of race, able-bodiedness, and disability.

Part of the reason why an asexual reading is so difficult is because until the twenty-first century, asexuality has been neglected as a sexual orientation in its own right. As previously noted, the shifting conception of those who remained unmarried, particularly spinsters, rendered

marriage as the pinnacle of happiness. As homosexuality was first named as a deviant or perverse sexuality, heterosexual couple was constructed as the norm.[485] From there, the existence of spinsters and happily unmarried women shifted into a controlling image that sought to justify the system of compulsory (hetero)sexuality.

Especially considering the change in perception of unmarried women, compulsory (hetero)sexuality sought to erase any opposition to heterosexual marriage during the twentieth century. While queer theorists have long since questioned the heterosexist assumptions that underpin compulsory heterosexuality, I am interested in looking one layer deeper and questioning the assumption of sexual normativity at all. In particular, spinsters have long been assumed to be potential lesbians that resist compulsory heterosexuality. Many spinsters did live with other women or hold secret desires for other women during the late nineteenth and into the mid-twentieth century. However, automatically equating spinsterhood with lesbianism erases and neglects the existence of asexual individuals.

The neglecting of asexuality can arguably be traced to both the shifting image of the spinster and the sexual revolution in the mid-twentieth century. As sex began to be touted as a normal and required human function, sexuality began to be something that all normal humans had and could speak about.[486] A further change saw the decoupling of sex with procreation and marriage, allowing women to be sexual/romantic without having children or have material self-sufficiency without a husband. As the century wore on, a lack of sex or expressions of sex became tied up with repression, specifically in terms of women's sexuality. Rosenthal observes how the spinster was "increasingly depicted as a consequence of repression or a flight from

[485] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43 and 45.

[486] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 18.

femininity – in either case, a problem of psychosexual development."[487] In other words, the increasing discourse about sex and sexuality, gave way to the erasure of nonsexuality and/or celibacy as a viable option for people. Rosenthal even brings up her contemporary students' attitudes towards spinsters, and notes that "young women of my past have recoiled from what was assumed to be a specter of lifelong abstinence; today [2002] they reject the very possibility of its existence."[488] In other words, as the spinster's image has shifted, so too has the idea of asexuality being a possibility, which has led to its erasure and neglect from theories of sexuality.

Asexuality, if not erased as being unimaginable, is additionally sometimes considered immature or repressed. Megan Milks marks this alignment and assumption of asexuality as inherently repressive, stunted, or immature, viewing asexual identifying people as "not-yet-human but also not-yet-liberated."[489] She cites Foucault's repressive hypothesis, which assumes that sex, which was once free, has become oppressed by society, and that the only way for people to become free again is to free sex and seek truth in sexual identity.[490] Foucault however cast doubts upon this process and instead revealed that sexuality is produced by how we talk about and think about sex, noting the necessity to "abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression."[491] For Foucault, the push against repression does not automatically equate to liberation. Milks then, echoes this frustration with the ways in which this idea of sex and liberation being tied together still pervades theories of sexuality.

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[487] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*, 147.

[488] Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*, 5.

[489] Milks, "Stunted Growth," 107.

[490] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 23.

[491] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 49.

Benjamin Kahan notes a similar trend in discussions of sexuality and nonsexuality and puts forth what he calls the "expressive hypothesis" which "posits that the regimes of censorship (the closet, antipornography feminists, etc.) create not only a proliferation of sexual discourse (as Foucault's discussion of the 'repressive hypothesis' suggests) but also a proliferation of perceived sexual expression."[492] In other words, instead of sexuality being repressed, sexuality became something that needed to be expressed specifically to demonstrate that it was not being repressed. In a way, this creates a feedback loop where the push to deny repression ends up laying the groundwork for more repression. Kahan states that "the well-intentioned effort to make certain that nonnormative identities, desires, and pleasures are not suppressed has the unintentional result of canalizing sexuality into forms of sex that aspire to normative sexual acts."[493] So instead of repressing sexuality, Kahan suggests that there was an outpouring of expressions of sexuality, with the goal to make sure that marginalized sexualities were not censored or policed. In doing this, expressing, or more particularly *performing*, one's sexuality became the imperative, and thus left any notion of an absence of sexuality to be equated automatically with repression and censorship, further demonstrating the reach of compulsory sexuality.

The desire to perform sexuality was not necessarily a ploy to erase asexuality, but rather it likely happened unintentionally. As the twentieth century wore on, the need to remove sexuality from censorship became tied to sexual liberation, especially with the sexual revolution of the sixties and the second wave women's movement. From there, into the late twentieth century, the AIDS epidemic became a flash point of sexual expression, since for many AIDS

[492] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 5.

[493] Kahan, *Celibacies*, 146.

activists, silence surrounding sex literally meant death. Around the same time, conservative groups were fighting to ban or censor pornography and other so-called "obscene" works of art, mostly from queer artists, creating moral panics. Joining in on the fight against pornography were the anti-porn feminists who considered pornography to be bound up with gendered violence and oppression. This linking with conservative movements prompted the response from pro-sex feminists and queer activists to link sex with empowerment and liberation. From there, a host of feminist and queer theorists championed the sex-positivity movement. Feminism and queer theory thus became tied to the idea of sex as being liberatory since to suggest otherwise would be to give up hard-won ground in the fight against censorship. In the midst of these concerns, it is no wonder that the idea of opting out of sex was considered a step backward. Simply put, the legacy of compulsory sexuality has reverberations to how sexuality was understood throughout the twentieth century and to how asexuality was neglected until now.

To return to *Rachel* and *The Glass Menagerie*, these two plays speak to the way that our contemporary understanding of compulsory sexuality began. They are also still being produced today, which provides new possibilities for how the characters of Rachel and Laura could be interpreted. While I have explored these characters in terms of their asexual resonances, why not extend this further, and read both characters as purposefully asexual, actively refusing to participate in the cruel optimism of compulsory sexuality on their own terms?

As a final thought experiment, I would like to engage in an interpretation of these plays that has thus far been obscured by compulsory sexuality that has assumed that their concluding nonsexual lives are victimizing choices rather than empowering choices they made for themselves. Could their choices come from a sense of agency, or must they always be a kind of surrender to oppression? While the following counter-readings may run against the grain of both

Grimké's and Williams's plays, I offer a glimpse of an alternative future for both Rachel and Laura.

Instead of viewing Rachel's decision as tragic in its failure to reproduce, why not view her refusal to bear children as a triumphant revolution against the cruel optimism that insists on marriage being the key to happiness? The audience does not get to view the fallout of her decision. What if in weeks, months, or years, she becomes comfortable in her decision to live as an unmarried woman? She could have raised Jimmy as an adopted son and taught him the cruel realities of the racism. Maybe she would have become a happy spinster, secure in her refusal to marry and take part in the system that killed her father and brother.

Instead of viewing Laura as nothing more than a figment of Tom's memory, what if she too was able to live a full life as a single woman? Could Laura have made a quiet life for herself outside of a heterosexual marriage? Perhaps she took Jim's advice about being confident and got a job at a museum or in retail and lived a quiet life away from the pressures to conform to heterosexual marriage. She may have thrived without the constant desire of her mother to marry her off to a gentleman caller. Laura may have created a private life for herself with a room of her own filled with her records and her glass menagerie.

Audiences will never really know how Rachel or Laura may have ended up. Instead, they are both constructed as unhappy spinsters without a choice. While these characters only exist on the page, it is a worthwhile to consider an asexual life for these two women as something other than a tragedy. Reading them in this way helps open up the possibility of an asexual life being something worth living, rather than as a waste of their reproductive potential.

The purpose of this final thought experiment is to not to ascribe an ironclad asexual identity onto these characters, but to envision a scenario where living a nonsexual or asexual life

was a fulfilling possibility. Both Laura and Rachel are typically shown to be heterosexual women who have fallen into spinsterhood, due to a failure of the systems of racism and ableism. While it is tempting to take the position that both characters are, and have always been, asexual, that reading is limiting. However, in using an asexual lens to read these two women, their heterosexuality is not taken for granted. Instead, as I have shown, this lens can be used to interrogate how the systems of racism and ableism work to desexualize (or hypersexualize) those who fit outside of white, able-bodied heteronormativity.

Using an asexual lens to read Rachel and Laura as definitively asexual also involves invented possibilities that are not in the scripts themselves. Imagining these two women as asexual requires an imaginative "what if?" to interrogate the possibilities that their futures were not lost to them. Instead, these reconceived futures bleed off the page and provide a hope for the characters that may not have been previously seen without an asexual lens. So, while an asexual lens can open up possibilities to read the plays in a different way, it also provides an opportunity to imagine possible futures for these heroines that resist compulsory (hetero)sexuality.

Conclusion.
Performing Asexuality

The Netflix animated series *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) made television history by portraying one of the main supporting characters, Todd Chavez, voiced by Aaron Paul, as asexual.[494] Todd is among the first asexual characters to appear on television and is the most well known representation of an asexual person in popular culture. What is unique about Todd's character is that he is given an entire story arc related to his asexual identity that is not limited to a single episode, but rather spans several seasons.

The characters explored in this dissertation are not like Todd. They are not given a coming out story, nor do they ever claim an asexual identity. Instead, they exhibit traces or resonances of asexuality. While some resonate more closely with asexuality than others, their experiences still require an interpretative leap to read them as having traces of asexuality or nonsexuality. At times, an asexual lens works well with the characters explored; at other times, an asexual lens admittedly seems like a bit of a stretch. In general, the characters here are already ones who exhibit particular asexual resonances, through their relationship to virginity, celibacy, queerness, or spinsterhood. Furthermore, the plays examined in this dissertation have all been previously analyzed from a queer lens or a queered perspective. The purpose of this project has thus been to add an asexual dramaturgical lens alongside a queer lens to the toolbox of the scholar and theatre practitioner.

Some of the pieces explored in this dissertation might not work in terms of reading these characters as asexual in the twenty-first century sense of the term. However, I hope to have demonstrated that an asexual lens does not necessarily mean finding asexuals in past dramatic or

[494] *BoJack Horseman*, season 4, episode 3, "Hooray! Todd Episode!"

historical texts. Rather, this lens should work alongside of other queer lenses to further interrogate compulsory sexuality. Even more importantly, an asexual lens shows how compulsory sexuality functions differently throughout history, depending on the overall context. Compulsory sexuality thus is part of how sexuality and thus nonsexuality are deployed.

Some gaps in this study have appeared. An exhaustive list of all possible iterations of asexuality in dramatic literature would not be possible, nor was that the purpose of this project. Instead, consider this one attempt towards using this asexual lens to read and analyze characters and their relationship to compulsory sexuality. I chose characters that already exhibit asexual resonances and or traces of nonsexuality. There are so many more case studies that this lens can be applied to that have been left out. As noted in the introduction, this work is already being done by many scholars in the field of asexuality studies. The present-day increase in asexual representation opens the door to future projects exploring asexuality/nonsexuality in prior eras.

In this conclusion, I examine two aspects of the future of this research. First, I illustrate what the current landscape of asexual representation and backlash looks like. Even though there has been a dearth of asexual representation, there are still some notable exceptions, including two theatrical pieces that have been produced within the past few years. However, with this asexual representation, there has also come some acephobic backlash. Additionally, there has also been vocal pushback against anything that seems to threaten cisheteronormativity, especially with resurgent authoritarian conservative movements in the United States and elsewhere.

Second, moving past representation, I lay out a set of guidelines for theatre practitioners when considering using an asexual lens as a dramaturgical device in the staging of existing plays as well as in the creation new theatre. Since the bulk of this dissertation has been focused on how this lens can be used to read asexuality in dramatic texts, I would like to bring that lens into

practice, and ask what kinds of tools could be used, based on what has been explored and critiqued here, and how these asexual dramaturgies could be used in the rehearsal and/or writers' room. Bringing these two threads of performance together, I hope to project what asexuality studies can offer performance scholars and practitioners for the future.

Our Current Moment: Representation and Backlash

That the most prominent and fully realized representation of an asexual character comes from an animated series about humans and anthropomorphic animals in a fantastical Hollywood is a testament to the power of representation. *BoJack Horseman* is a combination of absurd comedy and unexpectedly poignant drama, where the title character is a half-man/half-horse with severe depression and substance abuse issues. Todd is introduced in the first episode of the series as the loveable slacker who sleeps on BoJack's couch.[495] Throughout the first two seasons, we simply see Todd as an aimless drifter, one of the fully human characters who provides comic relief by engaging in several idiotic and absurd adventures. However, it is season three that begins to explore Todd's sexuality, with the writers giving Todd a coming out episode in season four.[496] Seasons five and six let Todd explore his identity in terms of relationships with other asexual individuals, resulting in him finding a happy ending with a fellow asexual.[497] Todd's

[495] *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 1 "Bojack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One," directed by Joel Moser, written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, featuring Will Arnett and Aaron Paul, aired August 22, 2014, Netflix.

[496] *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 12, "That Went Well," directed by Amy Winfrey, written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, featuring Aaron Paul and Abbi Jacobson, aired July 22, 2016, Netflix and *BoJackHorseman*, season 4, episode 3, "Hooray! Todd Episode!"

[497] *BoJack Horseman*, season 5, episode 3, "Planned Obsolescence," directed by Aaron Long, written by Elijah Aron, featuring Aaron Paul and Natalie Morales, aired September 14, 2018, Netflix and *BoJack Horseman*, season 6, episode 16 "Nice While It Lasted," directed by Aaron Long, written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, featuring Aaron Paul and Echo Gillette, aired January 31, 2020, Netflix.

journey is so unique in that he is given an asexual identity and then allowed to further explore what it means over the course of the series. Julie Kliegman describes this journey, stating, "In Season 3, Todd felt broken. In Season 4, he identified as asexual, slowly came out to people, and met other aces. In Season 5, *BoJack* really sets him loose, offering subtle but hilarious commentary on what it means to be asexual in a hyper-sexualized world."[498] Through Todd's series-long journey, the writers of *BoJack Horseman* created a fully realized asexual character.

The writers of the show expressed a similar journey to coming to Todd's asexual identity. In a 2018 interview from PaleyFest, series creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg describes the slow realization that the character might be asexual. Even writing the show, the intention was not originally to write an asexual character, but in the process of developing the series, the writers discovered this possibility and leaned into it. In this same interview Bob-Waksberg admitted to getting some things wrong (for example, making the most childish character asexual, which is a common stereotype of asexual people), but he expressed a desire to keep learning, going so far as to bring in an asexual woman to help them develop the character more fully, which demonstrates a clear desire to give voice to the asexual community. [499]

Aaron Paul, voice actor for *BoJack Horseman*'s Todd, has given several interviews where he discusses how often he is approached by asexual individuals thanking him for his part in the creation of a visibly asexual character. He states, "I was so proud to represent that community. So many people came up to me, or have been coming up to me, since that came out,

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[498] Julie Kliegman, "Todd's Asexuality On '*BoJack Horseman*' Isn't A Perfect Depiction, But It's Made Me Feel Understood." *Bustle,* September 26, 2018, https://www.bustle.com/p/todds-asexuality-on-bojack-horseman-isnt-a-perfect-depiction-but-its-made-me-feel-understood-12057178.

[499] "*BoJack Horseman* - Anticipating Season 5." *YouTube*, The Paley Center for Media, September 19, 2018, video, 10:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM_SyL3jOlY .

saying, 'I didn't know what I was. You have given me a community that I didn't even know existed,' which is just so heartbreaking, but also so beautiful, you know?"[500]

Todd's asexuality has led to several emotional articles from asexual and queer television critics, many of them commenting on the emotional reactions they have had to the character. Nico W. from *The Mary Sue* website mentions the very visceral and emotional experience that came from witnessing the depiction of an asexual character on mainstream television, stating, "I struggled to find the words to describe my emotions. All I knew was that a character on one of my all-time favorite shows had just come out as asexual, and as an ace person, myself, it was making me feel a lot of different things."[501] The world of *BoJack Horseman* is a clear fantasy world, full of absurd characters and situations. And yet, the show's creators point to a future where asexuality is perhaps not fully understood, but accepted without question, a hopeful future and an ideal to which people can aspire.

Aside from Todd, asexual characters are few. Most characters that identify as asexual come from television, and they are either one-off characters in an episode or their asexuality is discussed, but not outright described as asexual. For instance, the character Lord Varys in HBO's *Game of Thrones* describes himself as being interested in neither sex when questioned about his proclivities, and Raphael from *Shadowhunters* similarly describes himself as lacking interest in sex.[502] *Sex Education,* while only devoting one episode to an asexual character, explicitly named

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[500] Aaron Paul, "Aaron Paul On Returning To Breaking Bad And Saying Goodbye To BoJack Horseman," *AM to DM BuzzFeed News*, October 24, 2019, video, 12:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEPfPAXdmII.

[501] Nico W., "*BoJack Horseman* Delivers the Asexual Representation We Need." *Mary Sue*, August 17, 2016, https://www.themarysue.com/bojack-horseman-asexual-representation/.

[502] *Game of Thrones*, season 4, episode 6, "The Laws of Gods and Men," directed by Alik Sakharov, written by Bryan Cogman, featuring Conleth Hill and Pedro Pascal, aired May 11, 2014, HBO and *Shadowhunters*, season 2, episode 10, "By the Light of Dawn," directed by

and explained the experience of asexuality in a queer positive manner. However, the asexual character in question, Florence, is a small character, and her journey is limited to one episode, though she does appear as a background character in other episodes.[503] Asexual characters also appear in comics, with Jughead Jones being reimagined as asexual in the comic *Jughead* following the *Archie* comic.[504] While these examples are notable, Todd still stands out as a leading character whose asexuality is fully realized.[505]

Many pop culture characters are found to have similar resonances of asexuality and are considered asexual in terms of fan theories and/or fan head canons. Elsa, from Disney's *Frozen* and *Frozen 2* has become an asexual icon, even though the character is never described as asexual or even hinted at lacking sexual desire. She is, however, a princess who does not end her respective movies married to a prince, so many in the asexual community, especially with the release of *Frozen 2*, have looked to her as being an aromantic asexual, or aroace.[506]

Joshua Butler, written by Todd Slavkin and Darren Swimmer, featuring David Castro and Emeraude Toubia, aired March 16, 2017, Freeform and Netflix.

[503] *Sex Education*, series 2, episode 3, directed by Sophie Goodhart, written by Sophie Goodhart, featuring Mirren Mack, Gillian Anderson, and Asa Butterfield, aired January 17, 2020, Netflix and Michele Kirichansaya, "'Sex Education' Season 2 and the Inclusion of Asexuality in Conversations About Sex," *FemStella*, January 23, 2020, https://www.femestella.com/sex-education-season-2-review-asexual-storyline/.

[504] Chip Zdarsky and Erica Henderson, *Jughead*, volume 3, issue 4, Archie Comic Publications, (Pelham: New York, 2016) and Avery Kaplan, "Queerness in Comics: Jughead," *The Beat: The Blog of Comics Culture*, June 27, 2019. https://www.comicsbeat.com/queerness-in-comics-jughead/.

[505] There are other characters that are canonically asexual, so this is a small list of the most popular characters.

[506] *Frozen*, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, (2013; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios) and *Frozen 2*, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, (2019; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios). For an in-depth exploration of how Elsa is a potential asexual icon, see: Hayley Williams, "I Found my Asexual Icon in Disney's Elsa," *SBS*, October 27, 2020, https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/culture/ article/2020/02/06/i-found-my-asexual-icon-

Many popular representations of asexuality come from fandom and fanfiction, with popular characters, some of which are not canonically portrayed as asexual often reimagined as on the asexual spectrum. In fact, the number of fanfiction works featuring the tag for "asexual character" reached over 28,000 on the website *Archive of Our Own* (*AO3*) as of June of 2022, quadrupling since this tag was reported by Lýsa Westberg Gabriel in 2018.[507] Thus, as asexuality is come to be better understood as a sexual orientation, and it is growing in popularity as one option among many queer identities.

In terms of the theatre, two plays that have prominently featured asexuality explicitly are the 2019 Australian musical *Ace of Hearts* and the 2018 play *Can I Hold You?*[508] The musical *Ace of Hearts* features the leading character coming into an asexual identity, centering asexuality in the narrative. Based on the musical's website, the musical itself seems to focus on themes of discovery and self-identification, with references to AVEN and the cast costumed in the colors of the asexual flag: black, grey, white, and purple. It premiered in Melborune, Australia, and hopefully the show garners international attention and enters the mainstream to be more widely accessible. *Can I Hold You?* is a full-length play about an asexual character trying to navigate various romantic and platonic relationships. The playwright and asexuality studies scholar, Kari Barclay, additionally researches "affinities between asexuality studies, which rejects the

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disneys-elsa, and Elle Rose, "Elsa from Frozen is Aromantic Asexual," *Medium*, July 29, 2020, https://scretladyspider.medium.com/elsa-from-frozen-is-aromantic-and-asexual-b36483da9702.

[507] *Archive of Our Own*. The Organization for Transformative Works, 2007-2022. https://archiveofourown.org/. See also: Lýsa Westberg Gabriel, "Slashing the Invisible: Bodily Autonomy in Asexual Fan Fiction," in *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction: Essays on Power, Consent and the Body* ed. Ashton Spacey (Jefferson: MacFarland and Company, 2018), 25.

[508] *Ace of Hearts the Musical*, written by Natasha Pearson & Hayden Dunn, dir. Mudit Shami, MC Showroom Prahran, Prahran, Victoria, Australia, February 1-10, 2019; and *Can I Hold You?* written and directed by Kari Barclay, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, February 1-3, 2018.

universality of sexual attraction, and intimacy directing, which develops intimate choreography based on principles other than spontaneous desire." In other words, their research and creative projects engage with the full spectrum of asexuality for performers and in terms of representation.

Amidst these new and exciting representations, there has been backlash against asexuality as a sexual orientation. In the first place, it took well over a decade from when AVEN founder David Jay first began speaking up on the part of asexuality for it to even be taken seriously as an identity. Jay's early interviews on shows such as *The View*, as well as his appearances in the 2011 documentary *(A)Sexual*, featured multiple people questioning his sexuality, up to the point of disbelieving him entirely.[509]

While asexuality has slowly become accepted as a larger identity, due to the activism and scholarship, it has also seen its share of acephobia, as noted in the introduction. The acephobic backlash from the society at large, as well as from the queer community has been well noted by asexual activists and scholars.[510] The current backlash, however, is coming at a time when all queer people are under attack. While the current conservative backlash is felt most acutely by the transgender community, asexuality is not immune. There has been a distinct acephobic tenor lately to a good deal of conservative discourse against all things queer. For instance, Tucker Carlson recently ran a segment ranting against the redesign of the M&M candy mascots,

[509] Tucker, *(A)Sexual*; "Asexuality on *The View*," *The View*, January 15, 2006, video, 8:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kPfLYuQlL8; and Karli June Cerankowski, "Spectacular Asexuals: Media Visibility and Cultural Fetish," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014) 146.

[510] Benoit, "I Set up a Groundbreaking Asexuality Project with Stonewall" and Amanda Crockett, "The Courage to Say No: Asexuality as a Radical Identity," *New Views on Gender* 16 (2015): 50, https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/iusbgender /article/view/18957.

decrying the lack of sexiness of the female M&M characters.[511] Similarly, in 2018, Alex Abad-Santos noted how the redesign of *She-Ra* angered fans on social media before the show even aired, because the cartoon was not deemed sexy enough.[512]

A general lack of sexiness has been recently cited as a negative in pop culture articles, mainly regarding the lack of heterosexual romance storylines. For instance, *The New York Times* ran an opinion article from Ross Douthat who laments that sex and romance are missing from current popular movies, even mentioning the lack of a love story in children's movies.[513] Showing even children's movies as failing for lacking heterosexuality demonstrates how our society actively promotes heterosexuality. When heterosexuality is not shown as the default, even in a children's movie where sex is deemphazised, this is seen as a threat. Similarly, Raquel S. Benedict notes how contemporary movies promote and fetishize an unattainable body while simultaneously desexualizing it.[514] Benedict points to a general tendency to sanitize everything about modern life, from perfect bodies that do not get horny to our own dangerous obsession with weight loss and body perfection. Benedict's criticism of the dangerous fetishization of the perfect body is astute, but she sees a lack of overt sexuality as an automatic negative, rather than a potential to have stories involve more than just sex.

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[511] *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, episode dated January 21, 2022, featuring Tucker Carlson, aired January 21, 2022, Fox News and Darragh Roche, "Tucker Carlson Mocks M&Ms for 'Gender-Inclusive' Rebrand of Characters," *Newsweek*, January 22, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/tucker-carlson-mocks-mms-gender-inclusive-rebrand-characters-fox-news-1671898.

[512] Alex Abad-Santos, "The Fight Over She-Ra's Netflix Redesign, Explained," *Vox*, July 18, 2018, https://www.wholesalechristmascostumes.com/the-fight-over-she-ras-netflix-redesign-explained/.

[513] Ross Douthat, "What the 2020s Need: Sex and Romance at the Movies," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/opinion/sunday/sex-romance-movies.html.

[514] Raquel S. Benedict, "Everyone is Beautiful and No One is Horny," *Blood Knife*, February 14, 2021, https://bloodknife.com/everyone-beautiful-no-one-horny/.

What these critiques all have in common is the general drummed up hysteria regarding a move away from compulsory sexuality that asexuality brings to light. To make this even more important, the bottom line is that acephobic backlash is part of the overall push towards fascism that is attempting to police sexuality. While some may question if asexual individuals have anything to fear from conservative groups who often promote virginity and celibacy, it is worth remembering the fluidity of meaning behind the terms. Asexuality is not equal to celibacy, even though I have played with the definitional slippage of the terms in this dissertation. The point of celibacy and virginity for conservative groups is meant to ensure a woman's virginity in service to heterosexuality. Asexuality, as a sexual orientation that disidentifies with sexuality and negates the assumption that sex is a biological necessity for all humans, throws a wrench into the current system of compulsory (hetero)sexuality.

Ultimately, the danger of this backlash against asexuality is that it all points in the same direction: the desire to police bodies. Asexuality is threatening because it allows for people to articulate the potential to opt out of sexuality. One thing that must be realized, especially to acephobic skeptics from within the queer community: this all the same fight. The backlash against asexuality is just one part of the rising backlash against the queer community writ large. Worse yet, the attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community, especially in America, are part of the march towards fascism, which feeds off of the flattening of difference. Eugenics was born out of and perfected under fascism. White supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy also go hand in hand with fascism. Splitting hairs about who one chooses to have or not have sex with is beside the point. The entire point of articulating asexuality and using an asexual lens to interrogate texts is that this lens shows who is allowed to opt out of sex, marriage, and reproduction. The systems of white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy want to control who is allowed to have sex and how

they are allowed to do it. That will include who is allowed to choose *not* to have sex as well. Put simply, the fight is for bodily autonomy. The future of asexuality studies needs to contend with the current threat to bodily autonomy that is coming in from all directions. Theorizing and exploring representations of asexuality helps provide possibilities for those who disidentify with sexuality.

For Theatre Practitioners: An Asexual Performance Strategy

The mainstream media and theatrical representations of asexual characters have helped to bring attention to asexuality, yet they tend to focus on the creation of new media and new characters, rather than on reading already existing characters through an asexual lens. I have spent the bulk of this project applying an asexual lens to characters in the canon of western dramatic literature, but I have not articulated how an asexual lens could be applied by a dramaturg in the rehearsal room for performance. I offer here some practical ideas for using an asexual lens for reading characters in dramatic texts, creating new asexual characters, and bringing these readings and creations into performance.

1. *Resist the tendency to hypersexualize characters who are typically presented as "othered."* As noted with Moll Cutpurse, characters who cross-dress, are nonbinary, agender, transgender, or otherwise differently gendered are often hypersexualized. Their gender presentation is frequently taken as an invitation to sex. While these characters may very well demonstrate a robust sexual appetite, that should not be the automatic interpretation.

The same can be said about the tendency to hypersexualize racial others. As has been previously noted, BIPOC women are hypersexualized to fuel the fantasies of heterosexual white men, while BIPOC men are also just as often hypersexualized. This means being resistant to any readings of a character that would assume a hypersexualized reading that is put upon that

character's body, rather than something that is chosen by that character. An exception to this would be if the script is intentionally interrogating compulsory (hetero)sexuality. Ultimately, we should question why certain characters are hypersexualized and who this hypersexualization benefits. Once this hypersexual assumption is questioned, perhaps new interpretative possibilities can be found.

2. Similarly, *resist the tendency to desexualize characters who are typically presented as "othered," either in terms of race or gender presentation*. While some characters who demonstrate non-cisnormative genders are hypersexualized, sometimes these characters are desexualized. Sometimes, these characters are made to be read as sexually unappealing, in order to poke fun of these characters. An example of a desexualized other is the nonbinary character Pat from *Saturday Night Live* (in the 1990s) whose gender was deemed comically indeterminate by their friends and coworkers.[515] Their androgynous gender presentation as well as their sexually unappealing nature was played for laughs, while the character was simultaneously desexualized. While Pat had a significant other and once bought condoms, their sexuality was still met with comedic incredulity.[516] Actress Julia Sweeney, creator and portrayer of Pat, has gone on record stating that the original joke was on the people around Pat who could not abide the ambiguity of the character. Though in time, Sweeney states that the joke became Pat's androgyny, and focused instead on "how Pat was gross and weird and androgynous."[517] She has

[515] *Saturday Night Live*, season 16, episode 7, "Pat at the Office," featuring Julia Sweeney, aired December 1, 1990, NBC.

[516] *Saturday Night Live*, season 16, episode 13, "It's Pat: Pat's Significant Other," featuring Julia Sweeney, aired February 16, 1991, NBC and *Saturday Night Live*, season 16, episode 13, "It's Pat: Pat at the Drugstore," featuring Julia Sweeney, aired April 13, 1991, NBC.

[517] Julia Sweeney, interview by Bill Radke, "Julia Sweeney, 'Older and Wilder,'" *KUNO*, National Public Radio, January 6, 2020.

since stated that if she were to redo anything about the character, she would not make Pat unattractive.[518]

Theatre practitioners should actively resist falling into the trap of desexualizing these types of characters. Rather, they should be considered to have just as rich of a sexual life as other characters. If these characters could be considered asexual, it should not be done as a cheap way to garner laughs.

3. *Asexual characters should not be constructed as bizarre "others," nor should they be met with pity.* Strange villains with complicated backstories or otherworldly geniuses are not the only representations available for asexual characters. The only representations of asexual characters should not be those who are already standing apart from everyone else. Asexuality should not simply be a way of viewing characters as different. Often this "different" comes to stand in for being seen as less than human. This dehumanization tends to take the form of making villains seemingly asexual, i.e., showing a clear lack of sexual desire or attraction for anyone.

In a similar vein, asexual lives are not tragic, nor are they meant to be read as inspiration porn for allosexual individuals. Asexual people do not "have more time" to get things done since they do not think about sex, nor are their lives easier since they "do not worry about sex" or any other potential assumption regarding asexual lives. Asexual characters can have deep loves, strong passions, and reach self-actualization through other means that sex and/or romance. Characters who choose to live a nonsexual life have not somehow failed, and this assumption should be resisted.

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[518] Nicki Gostin, "'SNL' Star Julia Sweeney on what she would change about 'Pat' now," *Page Six*, April 30, 2021, https://pagesix.com/2021/04/30/snl-star-julia-sweeney-gets-s-t-for-pat-character/.

4. *Examine bias in casting, particularly regarding what bodies are cast in typically hypersexualized or desexualized characters*. For instance, an overweight or disabled performer could be cast as a leading love interest rather than as a side character who never expresses their sexuality. Certain body types should not be the only ones that audiences see as experiencing romance. Conversely, if casting calls for a character that is hypersexualized, avoid automatically casting a minority who is already typically hypersexualized. In other words, this means that type casting around certain assumptions surrounding sexuality may have to be reexamined.

5. *Avoid hypersexualizing and desexualizing performers as well as characters.* Creating an asexual performance strategy also means being attuned to the various spectrum of sexualities among performers. This is not to suggest that performers should be compelled to self-disclose their sexualities, regardless of how they self-define. Instead, directors should make use of and negotiate the process of intimacy choreography in productions that involve sexual scenes and themes to ensure the comfort of their performers. While this does not necessitate that asexual actors play asexual characters, especially since asexuality is often more invisible than other sexualities or gender nonconformities, care should still be taken in rehearsal spaces. Intimacy choreography has already garnered a widespread use in many rehearsal rooms, and this signals a step in the right direction.

For instance, intimacy choreographers specifically use the term "desexualize" to develop a toolkit for directors. Chelsea Pace promotes desexualizing the process of staging sex, specifically in terms of using desexualized language when blocking sex scenes.[519] This process of purposeful desexualization might seem counter to my point regarding not desexualizing performers or characters, but the difference is in not desexualizing characters or performers in a

[519] Pace, *Staging Sex*, Intimacy, 10-11.

way that removes their sexual agency from them. In desexualizing the rehearsal *process*, performers are thus not desexualized. Blocking and choreographing actions are some of the most tedious parts of a rehearsal process. When Pace invokes the term "desexualize" she is not seeking to remove sexuality from the production. Instead, the goal is to make the rehearsal experience safer. Desexualizing intimacy onstage is akin to removing the threat of real violence when rehearsing and performing fight choreography. Thus, in order to avoid removing the sexual agency of performers, intimacy choreography is developed to desexualize the process, and make the intimate moment in a show one that is highly choreographed for the safety of the performers.[520]

This does not then mean that producers, directors, or actors should become prudes or paint potential actors (or even characters) as prudish wet-blanket types either. Asexuality is not here to police expressions of sexuality. While some asexual people may be sex-negative or sex-repulsed, many are sex-positive or sex-neutral. Open opportunities for sexuality to meet with and be part of everyone's value system is valid and important. Kari Barclay, for instance, has called for more nuance in intimacy choreography, arguing that desexualizing language can marginalize those who are comfortable speaking frankly about sex, as well as queer people, sex workers, people of color, and sex therapists.[521] Barclay thus argues instead for *depersonalizing* (rather than desexualizing) the process of creating intimate scenes and contextualizing sexualized language within narrative.[522] In this way, the sexualized language can be used when describing

[520] Pace, *Staging Sex*,11-12.

[521] Kari Barclay, "Impersonal Intimacies: Reflections on Desexualized Language in Intimacy Choreography," *Journal of Consent-Based Performance: Praxis and Perspectives on Intimacy* vol 1, no. 1 (2022): (24-34), 26 and 29, https://doi.org/10.46787/jcbp.v1i1.2806.

[522] Barclay, "Impersonal Intimacies," 30.

the overall story of a play or particular scene, while desexualized language can be used to describe the choreography.[523] While the difference between these terms might seem like splitting hairs, the emphasis here is on ensuring the proper care is given to how sexualized language is handled in a way that does not marginalize anyone, regardless of their sexual identity. As noted by Barclay, "performers can enjoy imitating intimacy without finding their offstage sexualities under scrutiny."[524] Sexual stories can easily be told in a way that ensures the consent and comfort for all involved in the rehearsal process.

6. *An asexual lens will not be appropriate to use for every production.* This lens is best applied to pieces that already have characters that have resonances of asexuality or nonsexuality. Applying this lens to the musical *Rent*, for example, would be inappropriate considering that the very overt expressions of sexuality in that show are deliberate choices made in the wake of the AIDS epidemic that should be respected and celebrated.[525] To reiterate, asexuality is not about silencing queer or sex-positive interpretations. An asexual lens should not override or posit itself as the only interpretation. Rather, an asexual lens should be considered one possible interpretative possibility among many. Considering whether or not asexuality is appropriate to use as a lens is an important step in this interpretative and dramaturgical process. Sometimes, certain interpretations do not work.

7. *Hire asexual practitioners and/or and speak with those who claim this identity*, which was done when the creators of *BoJack Horseman* brought in asexual talent to help create Todd's journey, as well as whey they hired Echo Gillette, a self-identified graysexual YouTube content

[523] Barclay, "Impersonal Intimacies," 28

[524] Barclay, "Willful Actors," 137.

[525] *Rent*, directed by Chris Colombus, (2005; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures).

creator to voice Todd's asexual girlfriend, Maude, in season six.[526] As I hope to have demonstrated in this dissertation, there is no one way to be asexual, especially considering the constellation of identities that exist under the asexual umbrella. This is true for individuals creating new stories, as well as those reading and making new dramaturgical choices for already established stories. Asexuality studies is a developing field and there are many new projects that are blossoming into discussions regarding asexuality. A new *Asexualities* anthology is being proposed to mark the ten-year anniversary of the first book, *Asexualities: Queer and Feminist Perspectives*.[527] Research into the intersection of asexuality and theatre is growing, with the work of Kari Barclay calling for intimacy choreography to use "*asexual* approaches to sex, ones that focus on collaborative choreography rather than innate attraction."[528] In other words, asexuality can be used as a lens not only from which to read scripts, but to engage in all levels of production, especially at the level of intimacy choreography. The field of asexuality studies is growing, and the future of the field will hopefully broaden our contemporary ideas of sexuality even further. The research and content are out there, as are the people that can be hired in rehearsal and writers' rooms.

8. *Enjoy and fight for the possibilities.* As I hope to have illuminated with this dissertation, the possibilities in the field of sexuality studies are endless. You can see this in the proliferation of pride flags and microlabels that have popped up in the wake of the enunciation of

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[526] Sarah Belcher, "Todd Has a Potential New Love Interest in Maude on *BoJack Horseman*" *Distractify*, January 31, 2020, https://www.distractify.com/p/maude-bojack-horseman.

[527] Call for Papers, "Call for Papers: Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives Anniversary Edition," https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2022/03/10/deadline-extended-for-asexualities-feminist-and-queer-perspectives-anniversary."

[528] Barclay, "Directing Desire," 6, (original emphasis).

asexuality and the explosion of the gender binary. These microlabels provide a necessary vocabulary that is actively being silenced today, especially in the United States. These possibilities are important not just to theatre practitioners, but especially to those who do theatre work with young people. An openness to difference and acceptance of a radical new way of conceiving of sexual life is vital and necessary in an increasingly hostile environment. In the current backlash towards LGBTQIA+ people, being open to difference might have a significantly positive effect on a young performer's life.

Dramaturgical choices brought forth the possibility of finding asexual resonances in the characters of Hippolytus, Hrotsvit's virgins, Moll Cutpurse, Rachel Loving, and Laura Wingfield. Using an asexual lens to interrogate their nonsexuality and disidentification with sexuality has opened up some exciting possibilities, both as a reading practice and potentially in performance. Dramaturgical choices are also responsible for the reimagining of Jo March as having an ending beyond a heterosexual love story in 2019. These are the sorts of possibilities that can be explored using an asexual lens as an interpretative tool. As an emerging orientation, identity, and even field of study, asexuality has radical potential to change how we conceive of desire, identity, and intimacy. Like performance, the emergent field of asexuality studies is a work in progress.

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Vita

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