

“Nomadic Subjects”: Katherine Cecil Thurston’s *Max* (1909)

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Over the past ten years, a number of major scholarly projects based in Ireland have sought by original research to make visible women’s contribution to culture and society, and have focused critical attention on the importance of feminist research for the field of Irish Studies.¹ As part of the Irish Women’s Movement Project at NUI Cork, we analysed the wealth of documentary material available relating to the Irish women’s movement in the 1970s and 80s.² Intrinsic to the activism and writing which went on within these feminist groups, as well as in related activist projects of the period (such as the lesbian and gay rights movement) was the opening up of social and cultural discourses relating to gender identities and sexualities. Implicit in the cultural and social work of the 1970s and 80s was the assumption that the contemporary generation of activists were the first to explore these taboo areas in their work and their writing. However, as a result of the kind of work ongoing in scholarly projects mentioned above, this assumption has been questioned, as we begin to make connections between the kinds of ideological challenges posed by recent generations of feminists and others involved in the struggle for women’s rights in earlier periods of Irish history.

If we are to trace this line back to earlier feminist voices in Ireland and focus on those who addressed questions of gender and sexuality in the past, one of the key areas of exploration, it seems to me, is that of “New Woman” writers and activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a period in which the construction of gender and sexual identity came under close scrutiny both at home and abroad. From the work of scientists and social theorists, to cartoons in *Punch*, and from popular songs and music-hall acts to the art of “Decadent dandies” such as Wilde, Symons, Beardsley and others, the interrogation of gender roles and sexual identities were at the heart of contemporary concerns.³ The interrogation of sexuality was a major project shared by New Woman writers and the Decadents at the *fin de siècle*, who sought to challenge the heterosocial *status quo* by addressing topics such as women’s rights, gender roles, and sexual expression (particularly in relation to women’s sexuality). Those at the centre of New Woman writing began to publish in the 1860s, but the project came to the fore in the 1890s in tandem with the stirrings of first-wave feminism. Possibly the best-known figure in this movement is Sarah Grand, whose novel, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) is one of the most important novels of this period. Grand’s influence on the New Woman project and on other literary and political movements of the period, has been given much scholarly attention over the past ten years. Other key New Woman texts include Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Mona Caird’s *Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Iota’s *The Yellow Aster* (1894), and Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895). While being best-

selling fiction, New Woman narratives (which focused on class, gender, or ethnic differences) were also critically acclaimed at the end of the nineteenth century, and the experimental work of writers such as George Egerton changed the face of writing in the pre-modernist period. New Woman novelists imagined new relationships and gender roles in the familiar social world. Female characters are often depicted as working in untraditional occupations, or cross-dressing in order to gain more experience of the world beyond the domestic sphere. Marriage resistance was a particular feature of French New Woman novels.⁴

To sketch in broad brushstrokes the Irish context for this material, we need to first take into account the fact that the New Woman project tends to be seen today almost solely as a radical movement within the history of *English* literature, a counterpart to *fin de siècle* Decadence, with its natural home in the 1890s London literary metropolis. Thus, despite the fact that many of the key writers associated with New Woman writing were Irish-based, or had Irish backgrounds, the Irish dimension to their work has, to date, been somewhat neglected by scholarship in the field. Sarah Grand herself (1854-1943) was born in Donaghadee, Co. Down, and brought up in Co. Mayo, and one of her best-known works, the semi-autobiographical *The Beth Book* is set in Ireland. The infamous George Egerton (1860-1945), a writer at the centre of John Lane's radical *fin de siècle* publishing house, The Bodley Head, was born Mary Chavelita Dunne, the daughter of an Irish (Catholic) army captain, and was brought up in Dublin; her groundbreaking *fin de siècle* collection *Keynotes* was written in Millstreet, Co. Cork. Other Irish women working within this "project" or discourse include "Iota" [Kathleen Mannington Caffyn] (*fl.* 1893-1900), who was born and brought up in Co. Tipperary; L.T. Meade (1844-1915), who was born in Nohoval, Co. Cork, and lived in Youghal throughout her life; E.L. Voynich [Ethel Lillian Boole] (1864-1960), author of *The Gadfly* the daughter of the mathematician George Boole and Mary Everest Boole (who was herself a writer of science textbooks for children), born and brought up in Cork; and Katherine Cecil Thurston [née Madden] (1875-1911), the daughter of Paul Madden, Home Rule Mayor of Cork, who spent most of her adult life in Waterford. These writers have been almost completely obscured by the predominantly nationalist character of Irish literary scholarship in the intervening century, in addition to a more general lack of interest in feminist writings until the 1990s.

Often included in the wider genre of Utopian fiction, New Woman texts have a novelty which lies not only in their creation of unfamiliar worlds (as in the case, for example of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*), but also in their introduction of untraditional female figures. The figure of the Boy, or the attribute of "boyishness" is one which comes up time and again in *fin de siècle* narratives. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the Boy within the context of Wilde's work, and that of the Decadents, where a priority value is placed on youthfulness but also on impermanence, and there is a disaffection with nineteenth-

century materialism. The Boy is located at the centre of these discourses – the Boy who loses his youth by growing up, or dying young, or in contrast, those Peter Pan-like figures of the 1890s, such as Dorian Gray who – almost – stays young forever. We also find the Boy in some New Woman fiction, and to some extent, we might argue that “he” is a crossover figure between these tangential *fin de siècle* groups. To the New Woman from the 1880s on, the Boy was one avenue through which she could imagine, or have access to male privilege, at least temporarily. Much New Woman fiction concentrated on the pre-adolescent equality girls enjoyed along with their brothers, and narratives such as Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* depict the New Girl as a tomboyish character, exploring the wilderness alongside the boys. This prelapsarian experience, as it were, is deployed by New Woman writers to illustrate sharply the ways in which such girls are then constricted and contained within the private sphere as they grow older – and Grand’s example of the twins Angelica and Diavolo in *The Heavenly Twins* contrasts their shared childhood experiences with their radically different expectations and social roles in later life.

Several New Woman writers addressed the possibilities for young women in carrying on their exploration of the role of Boy into adulthood, thus opening up a range of social roles within their narratives. This fictional gender-bending was grist to the mill of *Punch* and other satirical periodicals of the day, who were sure of the appeal to the humour of their readers at the idea of cross-dressing women. However, the deployment of instances of female-to-male transvestism served two important functions within New Woman discourses. It illustrated that women were just as able intellectually, emotionally, and physically, to operate within the public sphere and to take on the responsibilities and roles open only to men at the *fin de siècle*. Furthermore, in exposing the ways in which gender roles are constructed, and the ways in which characters in fiction – and moreover, people in society *perform* their gender (to use Judith Butler’s formula), it pointed up the flaws within an essentialist, gender-divided and radically unequal system of social organisation. As Benstock’s research illustrates, women such as Djuna Barnes and Una Troubridge flaunted their “dandyism” in Paris during the same period (48), Radclyffe Hall was famous for her transvestism,⁵ and Vita Sackville-West’s “Julian” walked openly about Mayfair with her female lover.⁶ Doan’s research on 1920s fashion illustrates the ways in which the visibility of masculine women in the European metropolis of the day influenced fashion in general, as women more widely began to favour a “boyish” style.⁷ In other words, this fictional phenomenon is consistent with trends in the contemporary social world and Sarah Grand, in particular, shows that she is aware of this wider context, when, at the heart of episodes of female-to-male transvestism in her novels, she makes mention of George Sand and

James Barry.⁸ These sumptuary transgressions broach a practice considered by many at the *fin de siècle* to be an outrage, fulfilling all of the dire warnings against the Rational Dress Movement made by *Punch*.⁹ In order to further explore the radical potential of the “Boy” figure and to demonstrate the challenge posed by this fictional discourse to the separate spheres of late-nineteenth-century cultural *and* social worlds, I now turn to discuss Katherine Cecil Thurston’s 1909 novel, *Max*. We meet the eponymous central character as he flees Russia on an overnight train across Europe to Paris. His ambition is to paint, and he has left Russia to begin a new life as an artist, planning to take a studio at the centre of Bohemian Paris at the *fin de siècle*. He strikes up a friendship with an Irishman, Blake, with whom he shares a carriage on the overnight train across central Europe. The episode with which Thurston opens her novel – on the night train – is crucial in two key ways. In terms of the action of the novel, it stages the fateful meeting between the two central protagonists, Max and Blake. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it marks an important point of transition between two countries, two life experiences, and as we soon realize, two gender identities. Marking this liminal space from the outset as a transitional point, Thurston opens the novel with the line: “A night journey is essentially a thing of possibilities”. The possibilities open to this young man on arriving at his destination are clear – he has already mapped out a future for himself in Paris. Similarly, the fixed points of his past, revealed to us in his dreams, are relatively clear – he sets out from the outer court of a house in Petersburg. However, this in-between space of his journey in which he moves from one point to another (the river Neva, a train station in Finland, the port of Åbo (*sic*), then to Stockholm, and finally the train) from one identity to another, is deeply ambiguous, and the reader is made aware of this from the outset. As such, it is an important rite of passage for the young artist, and the charged atmosphere surrounding this boy is indicative of this. His nervousness, even in slumber, is communicated thus: “a something of self-consciousness seemed to cling to him – a need for caution that lay near the surface of his drowsing senses – for once or twice he started, once or twice his straight, dark eyebrows twitches into a frown, once or twice his fingers tightened nervously upon their treasure [a package he carries in his coat pocket]” (2). His fellow passengers on the train, notably Blake, sense the air of mystery clinging to this boy (5). By his clothes, he is marked out as a Russian, yet he clearly understands the English spoken by his travelling companions. Evidently nervous about his clothing and physical appearance, he retreats urgently from the light when one of the others takes off the lamp covers, and virtually burrows down into the cushions in the corner – a scene which finds many parallels in the experiences of transgender people in the public sphere as described by Halberstam¹⁰. As the boy travels from one location to another, and from one gender territory to another, Thurston describes him as a free spirit: “in his soul was the spark of adventure, in his eyes the adventurous look – fearless, observant,

questioning. In composition, in expression and essence, this boy was that free and fascinating creature, the born adventurer – high of courage, prodigal of emotion, capturer of the world’s loot” (5). This is the boy’s rite of passage, and his safe arrival in Paris at the end of this episode marks the end of ambiguity, at least for now, in relation to his identity.

Following their initial meeting in the carriage of the train, Max and Blake become firm friends, with the latter encouraging the development of the boy’s evident talent, as well as introducing him to a social circle of artists and musicians. Over the course of the novel, Blake’s attachment to Max is clear, signalled by the many small kindnesses he extends, alongside a deep and abiding interest in the formation of the youth’s character. Their relationship takes the familiar form of the older, more worldly-wise and authoritative man, guiding and aiding the Boy: “instantly, Blake became the host – the *rôle of rôles* for him” (247). Dijkstra demonstrates the homoerotic undertones of much writing regarding male friendship at this time, and in *Max*, Thurston’s representation of the relationship between the two men, and the language she uses to describe the philosophy of their friendship, links her work with this homosexual subculture of the *fin de siècle*. She describes this comradeship as “Bohemianism at its best ... a spontaneous intermingling of personalities, an understanding, a fraternity as purely a gift of the gods as love or beauty” (159). There are several passages detailing the meeting of minds in this Bohemian subculture of *fin de siècle* Paris, but this gift from the (Greek?) gods is a purely masculine sphere, from which women are specifically excluded in some key moments in the text. This is particularly in evidence during one dinner party held in the apartment of Max’s neighbours when the men are left together for long periods to discuss art, listen to the violin performance of one of their number, and argue about philosophy, while the only woman in the apartment prepares and serves the meal, spending most of the evening alone in the kitchen. The range of readings which are possible to construct from these episodes of Blake’s growing regard for Max, from courtly love to homoeroticism, reflects the spectrum of sexual identities beginning to find textual expression at this point in time.¹¹ From the perspective of the Boy, there is no less affection on his part: “I have wanted to hear you say that I am your friend, your boy, Max” (148).

In *Max*, as the friendship between the two men begins to develop, the suggestions as to the somewhat ambiguous nature of their relationship appears to grow. Blake is something of a solitary character, and at one point he bemoans his lack of luck in finding the “right woman” to love: he calls this theoretical woman the “miracle” of his life. Max responds to this by saying: “But if it comes to pass – your miracle – you will forget me? You will no longer have need of me, is that not so?” (151). At this point, the narrator intervenes thus: “Blake turned to answer in the same vein, but something checked him – some embarrassment, some inexplicable doubt of himself” (151). What is this *something* which acts as impediment to the free

expression of Blake's feeling for his young friend? Is he already aware that his feelings for Max run counter to the heteronormative environment he is accustomed to? His response to this, the narrator tells us is "sharp": "Boy ... we're running into deep waters. Don't you think we ought to steer for shore? I came to smoke, you know, and watch you at your work". Thus, using his pipe as a talisman to ward off the uncharted waters of same-sex desire, Blake resumes his course within the narrow channel of heterosexual manhood. However, the narrator goes on to comment that Blake later gives some considerable thought to his "sudden discovery of the depth of the boy's regard" (152). Unlike the treatment of a similar relationship between two men at the heart of Sarah Grand's important *fin de siècle* novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1894), Thurston's delicate side-stepping of the issue of same-sex desire between men just here is perhaps indicative of the period in which it was written, post-1895 and the Oscar Wilde trials. That is to say, a scant fifteen years earlier, the Decadents were at the height of their powers, and homosexuality in intellectual circles was much more acceptable than it would be after Wilde's trial and imprisonment. The newly available register to describe homosexual relationships, both in a covert and an overt way, may have enabled earlier writers to imagine stepping outside conventional heterosexual ties, as for example Grand had in *A Domestic Experiment* (1891) and would again in *The Heavenly Twins* (1894). By the time Thurston was writing *Max* in the early years of the new century, the social world was a very different place.

Although Thurston here avoids the specificity of a discussion of same-sex desire, she is not wary of describing a fulfilling emotional relationship between men. When Blake later attempts to describe his relationship with Max, he cannot express its quality: "It would be difficult to tell you what he has been to me [...]. Our friendship has been a thing of great value". The couching of his affection for the Boy in terms which cannot be named alerts the reader's suspicions at this juncture, shedding a light on the homoerotic aspect of their friendship¹², even suggesting the Wildean description of "the love that dare not speak its name". At points such as this, it can be difficult to know if Thurston is in charge of the effect achieved by questioning sexual mores in this way. It certainly seems as if she is making a genuine attempt to open up discussion about sexual boundaries, and gender roles, and that she is fully aware of their implications. That she makes such strenuous efforts at the end of the novel to reconstruct the heteronormative social world implies that she fully understood the radicalism of this kind of writing, as well as the potential dangers of challenging society in this way, and deliberately chose to demonstrate her conformity. At the crux of the novel, when Max realizes that his friend has become infatuated with a woman, he rails against Blake thus:

“I have given you my friendship – my heart and my mind, but ... something more is required – something else – something different? [...] I may have as much personality as my sister [...]

I may be as interesting, but you do not enquire. Why? Why? Because I am a boy – she a woman!”

To which Blake responds: “Don’t be fantastical ... We are not holding a debate on sex. If we are to be normal we must declare that man and woman don’t compare!” Thus, by 1909, the clear verdict on ties between men in this social context is that there cannot exist any relationship other than friendship “if we are to be normal”.

Max is, of course, a female-to-male transvestite who, as “Maxine”, fled not only her country but her marriage to a man she had come to despise, along with her place in the rigidly gender-segregated upper-caste world of her birth. Thurston’s *Max* in several ways mirrors an earlier fictional episode in Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* when Angelica cross-dresses in order to gain access to the public world of men.¹³ There is a crucial difference, however, between these two examples of the transvestite Boy in New Woman fiction, as we shall see. In both of Grand’s excursions into the territory of the Boy,¹⁴ she exposes the ways in which girls and women deliberately construct themselves as Boys, detailing lovingly the exact process by which Angelica carries off her gender-swap, from sending her measurements to a tailor to the way she hides her hands in order to distract attention from their diminutive size. With statements such as: “isn’t it surprising the difference dress makes? I should hardly have thought it possible to convert a substantial young woman into such a slender, delicate-looking boy as I make. But it just shows you how important dress is” (452), Grand underlines what Garber defines as the “resistance to the female-to-male transsexual”.¹⁵ Garber suggests that this results from “a sneaking feeling that it should not be so easy to “construct” a man – which is to say, a male body” (102). Just as in Grand’s text, throughout *Max* there are quite specific physical descriptions of the Boy, many of which incorporate traditionally masculine attributes in the description of how he projects himself:

Zeal, endeavour, ambition in its youngest, divinest form ... and none who had known Max ... ever viewed him in more characteristic guise than he appeared on that February morning, clad in his painting smock, the lock of hair falling over his forehead, his hands trembling with excitement, as he executed the first bold line that meant the birth of his idea. (143)

Of course, a painting smock is not a blouse, much less a dress, and as we do not as yet know the secret of Max/ine’s long tresses, the lock falling on the boy’s head is meaningless. However, later in the novel when Max wishes to assert himself, the narrator describes the scene, and his appearance, in this way:

The warm sun fell upon a rigid severity of aspect, as though the room had instinctively been bared for the enactment of some scene. Max himself, in a subtle manner, struck the same note. The old painting

blouse ... had been discarded for the blue serge suit, severely masculine in aspect; his hair had been reduced to an unusual order, his whole appearance was rigid, active, braced for the coming moment. (260)

thus emphasising the need for Max to access, or perform, his masculinity to the utmost if he is to achieve his ambitions.

It seems to me that unlike Grand, Thurston's main interest in this text is not so much in female masculinity, or the ways in which a woman may construct an identity within the guise of a Boy, but rather, the ways in which womanhood is *socially* constructed and delimited. Unable to leave behind his hair, which was ruthlessly shorn from his head on leaving Russia, Max has kept his tresses with him in a parcel – we remember back to the scene in the night train, when the boy clung to this precious package. This potent aspect of his femininity is treated with an almost surreal allure in the text: as Max opens the parcel containing the tresses, we are told: “The seals broke, a gasp slipped from beneath his parted lips, and in his hands lay the symbol of all the imaginings, all the pretty mockery wherewith he purported to cheat Nature” (177). In this episode, we see the power of Max's hair as symbol, unquestionably raised to the level of a fetish object, as though the hair itself were the embodiment of his femininity which he has kept in the closet over a period of several months.

This central episode in the novel is one in which Max's young neighbour Jacqueline (who could be described as “high-femme”) reconstructs Max's femininity and attempts to recreate “Maxine”, the social identity from which Max has been trying to escape. Discussing the information available to readers of transvestite magazines about the act of cross-dressing, Garber notes that: “The social critique performed by these transvestite magazines for readers who are not themselves cross-dressers, is to point out the degree to which *all* women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artefacts” (49) and this point comes across very clearly as Jacqueline imagines and creates “Maxine”, beginning with the twisting of the locks of long hair into Max's boyish cut:

Excitedly, and without permission, she [Jacqueline] began to free Max of the boy's coat [...]. “Now the tie! And the ugly collar!” [...] Max, still passive, still held mute by conflicting sensations, suffered the light fingers to unloose the wide black tie, to remove the collar, to open a button or two of the shirt. “And now the hair!” [...] Jacqueline drew a handful of hairpins from her own head [...] and in a moment had brushed the thick waves of Max's clipped hair upward and secured them with a firm foundation [...] With the gesture and pride of an artist, Jacqueline cast the wide scarf round Max's shoulders and stepped back. (185)

Thurston is careful to construct Max as the passive recipient of these ministrations, and also to gesture toward the “conflicting sensations” he suffers during this reconstruction. Crucially, having first drawn our attention to the *process* by which Max is feminised, Thurston goes on to underline the extent to which the end product is a carefully-constructed archetype: “It was most truly a *picture* [...] the complete *semblance* of the woman – the slim neck rising from the golden folds, the proud head, *seeming* smaller under its coiled hair than it had ever appeared in the untidiness of the boy’s locks” (185-6) [italics mine].

This episode points up the extent to which clothing and gender performativity can cast in doubt assumptions about the “true” gender of the self. As Woolf says in *Orlando*: “There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us, and not we them” (188). In the strictly gender-divided world of this period, Max describes these two parts of his identity as his “two natures – the brother and the sister. Not one of us is quite woman – not one of us is all man”. However, rather than embracing these twin ‘natures’, he defines them as being at odds with each other: “It is a war [...] a relentless, eternal war; for one nature must conquer, and one must fail. There cannot be two rulers in the same city” (183). This statement, and in fact the scene in general, brings to mind a similar moment in a later novel of transgender identity, the mirror scene in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), in which the narrator observes: “It was open warfare, the inevitable clash of two opposing natures who sought to express themselves in apparel, since clothes, after all, are a form of self-expression” (73). Given the highly-charged atmosphere of this key scene in which Maxine’s femininity is reinstated, Jacqueline (and perhaps also the reader) fully expects Maxine to “come out” as a woman. Furthermore, there is something of an implicit assumption in Jacqueline’s words and actions that Maxine will be somehow more “at home” in bodily terms and by extension, in “her” feminine identity, having had the masculine projection torn down. The outright rejection of this course of action by Max tells a different, and it seems to me, more interesting tale. Rather than embracing his femininity, Max determines to “destroy it completely” (186). His repudiation of his feminine self, and the underlying sense of a clear understanding of the traps inherent in “going back” to that self, points up the full extent of Max’s sense of alienation from his female body, but also, the full extent of the powerlessness of women in contemporary social terms, as this is the effect Max sees such a return would have.¹⁶

Nor is the troubling of gender in this novel confined to the clear crossing of gender lines which can be read in binary terms, with the attendant essentialising of gender identities in the process. In the initial scene before Jacqueline’s interruption, when Max had begun to weave the long hair into his Boy’s haircut, we encounter an interesting ambivalence, a straying into territories between, or beyond the binaries of conventional sex. In this scene, Max does not immediately transform into the feminised “Maxine”, but

instead becomes what Thurston describes as: “a sexless creature, rarely beautiful, with parted tremulous lips and wide eyes, in which subtle, crowding thoughts struggled for expression” (178). Read from the perspective of twenty-first-century theories and social contexts, it is evident that a transgender identity is thus introduced within the text. To follow Halberstam: “identity might best be described as process with multiple sites for beginning and being” (21) and we might conclude that from henceforth it is an ambiguous subject, Max/ine whom we encounter on the pages of this text. Blake later describes Max/ine, as “a creature of eternal beauty [...] a faun-like creature, peeping into the world from some secret grove, ready to dart back at any human touch” (224). This suggestion that Max/ine is part-human, part-creature may gesture towards the unthreatening woodland dryads of myth, but it also has a more unsettling resonance of the not-human, the in-between, and perhaps, the monstrous. As Braidotti reminds us: “The monstrous or deviant is a figure of abjection in so far as it trespasses and transgresses the barriers between recognisable norms or definitions” (65). Categorising her protagonist in this way gives Thurston access to the exotic, the opportunity to introduce that subtle blend of fascination and fear to the centre of her novel, but it will also enable her at the end to close down these ambivalences, to shut off access to this boundary-crossing, and thereby perhaps give her audience a sigh of relief that order has been restored, the monstrous vanquished, at the end.

The words “sexless” and “unsexed” are later applied to Max/ine in the novel, and of course would have been familiar to Thurston’s audience as terms often disparagingly used to describe the New Woman in the pages of *Punch* and the popular press. We are told, for instance, that: “He loved Blake with a wonderful, unsexual love, and he yearned to lay himself at his feet, to offer him of his best – gifts of the gods, given with free hands from a free heart” (246). In her influential 1975 work, Smith-Rosenberg suggests that nineteenth-century middle-class American society, far from having the repressive sexual ethos we tend to imagine, may in fact have been much more tolerant and diverse in the realm of sexual and non-sexual relations than our own. We can see that this certainly seems to have been the case amidst some circles in *fin de siècle* London, but perhaps this tolerance could also be applied to the conditions within which the relationships in this novel are constructed? In such a context, it might have been possible for Max and Blake to have a fulfilling, mutually respectful intimacy outside the bounds of “compulsory heterosexuality” at least for a time. In the scene described above, by rejecting Jacqueline’s attempts to “out” his feminine side, Max questions any essential or “real” gender identity underneath his gender performance and thereby casts doubt upon other elements of his identity, such as his sexuality: by continuing to “pass” as male, his clear self-definition as a Boy has necessary implications in terms of his relationship with Blake. This episode also supports Halberstam’s view that scholars have incorrectly

tended to collapse notions of female masculinity and lesbian identity as one and the same: “the presumption that they [latter-day female masculinities] simply represent early forms of lesbianism denies them their historical specificity and covers over the multiple differences between earlier forms of same-sex desire” (46) and, we might add, of heterosexual desire.

Several critics, Pykett in particular, place New Woman fiction at the centre of a series of early Modernist experiments, and follow the influence of this *avant garde* discourse into the work of Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, among others. Addressing Modernist women writers and their struggles with gender binaries, Gilbert describes their efforts to “define a gender-free reality behind, or beneath myth, an ontological essence so pure, so free, that “it” can inhabit any self, any ‘costume’” (394). It seems to me that in *Max* we find an early Modernist experiment with this same matter. Max’s plan to destroy his femininity takes place at the level of the imaginary. He decides to create a painting of his feminine self, and by thus “materialising” Maxine in art form, to banish what he calls this “evil spirit” from his imagination, as a means to prevent “her” from interfering with his masculine social identity in the material world. There are obvious parallels here with *fin de siècle* texts, notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and in explaining to Blake whom the portrait depicts – his “twin”, Maxine – Thurston’s reliance on a doubling narrative makes intertextual references to other contemporary works such as *The Heavenly Twins* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. As in these other texts, the manifestation of Maxine, even in art, leads to the ultimate destruction of the identity of her maker – in this case Max. To move away from these contemporary resonances, another reading of this narrative may be opened up via Braidotti’s figure of the “nomadic subject”:

The migrant ... is caught in an in-between state whereby the narrative of the origin has the effect of destabilizing the present. This migrant literature is about a suspended, often impossible present; it is about missing nostalgia, and blocked horizons. The past acts as a burden in migrant literature; it bears a fossilized definition of language that marks the lingering of the past into the present. (24)

As well as being an actual migrant, having moved between St. Petersburg and Paris, we could also read Max as something of a refugee in a gender-divided social world. It is clear that he has carried his previous identity and social role from Russia, and he believes that by constructing in some material or artistic way this memory, or latent identity, he may rid himself of its power to force him back to these roots. In other words, by bringing this identity to the surface, allowing it expression, Max hopes to resist its power over him in his chosen identity. Braidotti suggests: “I am arguing that nomadic consciousness is akin to what Foucault called counter-memory; it is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self” (25). Max’s gender resistance could be read in just this way, as a refusal to be assimilated to the gender norm.

As I have already signalled, Thurston “rescues” the novel and her protagonist in the last act from accusations of “inversion” or the possibility that Max is in fact a trans homosexual man. Following a number of plot twists in the final chapters (in which Blake falls irrevocably in love with the portrait of Maxine and demands to meet her), and after a protracted struggle in which Max comes to the realisation that his new-found freedom and “self-actualisation” are much less important to him than the love of a good man, Thurston neatly constructs a normative romantic ending to her plot. Clearly, *Max* is not *Orlando*, nor is it *Nightwood*. However, the portal opened by this early twentieth-century Irish novel into contested territories of sexual and social identity cannot be ignored simply because the narrative resolution is perhaps not as radical as we might have hoped. Granted wider access to texts such as *Max*, we may begin to piece together different perspectives on Irish women’s writing from earlier periods, and begin to construct earlier Irish women authors as the *active* cultural producers and agents they were. Furthermore, by reading the Irish social and cultural world of both the past and the present through texts such as this, we may further develop the resistance in contemporary feminist thought to the appropriation of Irish femininity evident in the more stereotyped constructions which have tended to dominate both in Irish writing and literary scholarship. We may thus complicate and enrich conventional narratives of literary history as well as those of gender and national identities. In reconnecting with these New Woman novelists and the mixed and various Irish, English and other social worlds they moved through, we may discern more fully the hybrid character of Irish writing, but also come to a more nuanced and less prescriptive understanding of social, cultural and gender identities in later Irelands, including our own. In this way, we may achieve the kind of academic rigour called for by Braidotti when she says:

It seems to me that the rigor feminists are after is of a different kind – it is the rigor of a project that emphasizes the necessary interconnecting-connections between the theoretical and the political, which insists on putting real-life experience first and foremost as a criterion for the validation of truth. It is the rigor of passionate investment in a project and in the quest of the discursive means to realize it. (Braidotti, 76)

¹ In addition to the work of individual scholars, collaborative research projects to date have included the compilation of the *Field Day Anthology Vols. IV & V* (2002), the Women’s History Project directory of archival source material (see www.nationalarchives.ie/wh), and the Women and Irish Society Project at NUI Cork (2000-2003) which included individual project strands on the history of the second-wave Irish Women’s Movement 1970-1990, on Women and Work in Munster 1930-1960, and on Munster Women Writers 1800-2000 (see www.ucc.ie/wisp). The recently completed Women in Modern Irish Culture Project (Warwick and UCD) and the Women in Twentieth Century Irish Public Life and Culture project (Queen’s Belfast, UL and UCD) will further extend this work and the material available to future scholars.

- ² Linda Connolly and Tina O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2005) was one of the outcomes of this project. See also Linda Connolly, *The Irish Women's Movement: From Revolution to Devolution* (London: Palgrave, 2002).
- ³ See also Tina O'Toole "Keynotes from Millstreet, Co. Cork: George Egerton's Transgressive Fictions", *Irish Women Novelists 1800-1940*, ed. Anne Fogarty, spec. issue *Colby Quarterly* 2 (June 2000), pp. 145-156; and "'Hermaphrodite by Force of Circumstances': The New Woman Project of the 1890s", *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies* 5.1&2 (2003), pp. 111-124.
- ⁴ Colette Yver's novels, such as *Les cervelines* (1903) and *Princesses de Science* (1907) challenged accepted notions about male/female relationships. Louise-Marie Compain in *L'un vers l'autre* (1903) discusses the schooling of a 'new race' of women. See Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Stephen Hause, *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque* (Nebraska: U Nebraska P, 1994), pp. 210-217; 94.
- ⁵ See Sally Cline, *Radcliffe Hall: A Woman Called John* (London: Murray, 1997), p. 22.
- ⁶ See Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Futura, 1973), p. 112.
- ⁷ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001).
- ⁸ For further discussion of this issue, see Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids* (London: Harper Collins, 1989). Grand was probably familiar with Ellen Clayton's popular historical treatment of the subject, which was used as an argument in favour of suffrage, see "Female Warriors", *Memorials of Female Valour and Heroism from the Mythological Ages to the Present Era*, vol. 1 (London: Tinsley, 1895), p. 3.
- ⁹ The Rational Dress Movement is primarily associated with suffrage activism in the 1870s when feminists attempted to create a space which would enable them to break away from 19th century fashions for women. Women's clothing of the period tended to restrict movement, made it impossible for women to ride bicycles, for example, as well as frequently causing deformation, illness and even death. Amelia Bloomer was possibly one of the best-known names associated with the movement. Conservative magazines of the day decried such unladylike attire as bloomers, seeing them as harbingers of gender confusion and an end to civilised society.
- ¹⁰ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998).
- ¹¹ Jonathan Dollimore demonstrates that, before the nineteenth century, individuals were regarded as performing deviant sexual acts, rather than having an intrinsic homosexual identity attributed to them. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. xxxvii.
- ¹² Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*, written between 1864 and 1867 but not published until 1952, enacts a similar transvestite passion. The main theme of the novel is the life of Herbert ("Bertie") Seyton and his unrequited love for Lesbia Brandon. Emphasis is laid throughout on Bertie's girlishness: 'he looked at times too like a small replica of his sister, breeched and cropped'. When Lesbia finally falls in love with Bertie, it is because he has cross-dressed and she loves 'him' as a woman. On finding out the truth of his gender, she tells him that she could only love him if he were a woman. For further discussion of this novel, see Peter Farrer, *In Female Disguise* (Liverpool: Karn, 1992), p. 23.
- ¹³ Which I have discussed in more detail in "The New Woman and the Boy in *fin de siècle* Irish Fiction", *New Voices in Irish Criticism* 5. Ed. Connolly, Ruth, and Ann Coughlan. (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2005), pp. 129-137.
- ¹⁴ She deals with female-to-male transvestism in both *The Heavenly Twins* and her later novel, *The Beth Book* (1895).
- ¹⁵ For further discussion of sumptuary laws in Britain see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 174.
- ¹⁶ Cross-dressing and disguise is used in a similar way in other New Woman novels, such as Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*, Lady Florence Dixie's *Gloriana; or the Revolution of 1900* (1890) and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), perhaps more unusually, it is a man who cross-dresses in order to claim female privilege. Here, Gregory Rose takes on the role of a nurse in order to be at the heroine, Lyndall's, deathbed. Assuming female clothing confers a certain dignity on this rather pathetic character who certainly lacked such dignity as a man. As a woman, he takes on not only a new role, but also new characteristics. It seems as if, in an ideal world, these authors suggest, Max would make a much more able man and Gregory Rose a better woman.