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Virginia Woolf's Subversion of the Patriarchy in *Mrs. Dalloway*

On the surface, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* seems like a straightforward read: the story begins with the title character, Clarissa Dalloway, who walks through London as she makes preparations for a party she is hosting later that night. However, the novel is much more complex than a middle-aged, Englishwoman's party preparations as seen in its subtle exploration of class, sexuality, post-war life, and generally how people communicate—most of which is apparent thanks to Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness narrative. This is arguably one of the reasons why some critics claim that the novel is one of Woolf's first "adult" novels; her readers are both engaged and overwhelmed by the narrative's movement that many of her critiques are understated and easy to miss at first glance. Sexuality is one of the major undercurrents of the novel that drives the plot's progression. Woolf barely references sex, and yet it permeates the entirety of the novel, beginning with Clarissa's flashbacks to Bourton. In this paper, I will attempt to untangle the subtext of sexuality in *Mrs. Dalloway* through the examination of how class conventions govern Clarissa's choices and how Clarissa subverts these rules in a feminist, lesbian rebellion through a performance for the patriarchy.

Clarissa's socioeconomic standing has forced many constraints on how her sexuality has developed from the time she was a young woman to the novel's present. Her position as a member of the upper-class is a sort of double-edged sword: unlike characters like Doris Kilman, Clarissa has been given the opportunity of a sexual awakening and the chance to assess it, but the

restrictions previously placed upon her cause her to reject desire and passion and conform to the norms of the world in which she lives. This can be seen in her refusal to pursue an individual relationship with either Sally Seton and Peter Walsh; however, to better understand her character's identity, it is necessary to note that she does not reject them because she lacks feelings for either of them, but rather, she adheres to the role that has been thrust upon her due to her birth status. Essentially, though it appears paradoxical, Clarissa chooses to conform to 20th century England's rules—only it is on her own terms. She ultimately becomes a willing participant of the patriarchy as a way of self-preservation of her soul, which is what makes her a feminist character, though a bit untraditional. Because of this, it is extremely important to differentiate between Clarissa, the young woman at Bourton, and Mrs. Dalloway, the London wife of a government official, especially since Woolf's narrative oscillates between the two. As Ann Ronchetti suggests in *The Artist, Society, and Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's Novels*, the women of the novel

constantly confront the limitations imposed upon them by their rigidly defined roles as wives, mothers, and daughters of their class... Clarissa Dalloway, however, embraces her role, accepting the realities of her social position as an MP's wife and turning them to her advantage... In fact, one could argue that Clarissa has actively sought this role in her deliberate choice of Dalloway over Peter Walsh as her spouse. (51)

Even the title of the novel hints that it is about the momentous building of Clarissa's life to the point where she becomes Mrs. Dalloway, and not just Clarissa or Clarissa Dalloway. Woolf's switching between Bourton and London as the novel's setting also serves as a vehicle to demonstrate how Clarissa circumvents the patriarchy.

The Clarissa that belongs Bourton and her memories is undoubtedly full of possibility. Bourton is located in the countryside where Clarissa has the luxury of being sheltered by what wealth her family has, free to spend her days in idyllic ignorance about the realities of money or class. In this freedom from class responsibilities, she has the capability to become more than her Victorian heritage. It seems the perfect place for intellectual and sexual development considering it is away from the patriarchal structure of London, a city ruled by the chimes of Big Ben. In “Equating Performance with Identity: The Failure of Clarissa Dalloway’s Victorian ‘Self’” In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*,” Shannon Forbes argues that there is significance in the fact that “Big Ben is gendered male” (42). And this is true. In London, Big Ben serves as an interruption to moments where Clarissa’s masked identity has the potential to slip through to the surface, the Clarissa of the past and Bourton. Whereas Bourton seems like the examination of the internal self, London revolves more around the external identity and how one is perceived by others. Bourton is also a place of communication and openness, whereas London is repressed and performative. Nevertheless, away from London, Clarissa is offered the clarity and space she needs to determine the kind of person she wants to be, and true to the trope of the country being a warm and simple place and the city being cold and class-bound, Bourton serves as a romanticized place in Clarissa’s memories. Bourton itself is full of wistful leisure with the horseback riding and strolls through nature. When describing Bourton, Woolf’s imagery is rife with the stars in the sky, mist, and foliage—all indicative of idealism. In her novel *The Victorian Heritage of Virginia Woolf*, Janis Paul suggests, “The physical landscape of Bourton objectifies the youth, possibility, and communication that once took place there; its freedom is expressed in images of natural abundance, flowers, colors, and gentle, wavelike movement” (126).

It is at Bourton where Clarissa's world changes forever when Sally Seton arrives. Her life is no longer as simple as it used to be, and the world looks different to her. Bourton suddenly becomes a place where she experiences not only her first lesbian awakening, but also a social awakening. Clarissa herself admits that it was Sally "who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex—nothing about social problems" (Woolf 33). Thanks to Sally, Clarissa becomes fully cognizant of the realities of the patriarchal society of which she is a member, and it is with Sally that Clarissa experiences passion. Sally, who has not a penny to her name, opens her up to new ideas about the world, ideas that belong wholly to Clarissa Parry and not Mrs. Dalloway. Sally, who challenges what the residents of Bourton stand for, who rebels against traditional ideas of how a woman should act, who "went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias—all sorts of flowers that had never been seen together—cut their heads off, and made them swim on the top of water in bowls" (Woolf 34), is the sole person who gives Clarissa the "most exquisite moment of her whole life" (35). The Clarissa of Bourton is one full of potential, and her close relationship with Sally seems as if she has opened herself up to the possibility of revolting against the restrictions placed upon her, restraints that probably mirror Woolf's own Victorian heritage. Sally and Clarissa dream of a new world, and like most young people, they desire reform and to correct the mistakes of their ancestors:

There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out. The ideas were Sally's, of course—but very soon she was just as excited—read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelley by the house. (Woolf 33)

Just like Bourton, Sally symbolizes possibility. As a middle-aged woman, Clarissa is still able to remember the feelings Sally invoked, the possibilities that could have been with Sally. There is what she describes as a “purity” (35) to their relationship, something completely different from what she has with Richard or Peter. Like Bourton, Sally is mainly associated with flowers and other feminine imagery in Clarissa’s memories. Together they share “something infinitely precious,” and when Sally kisses her, she feels as if “the whole world might have turned upside down” and that “the others disappeared” (35). Still, she is eventually thankful that Peter interrupts this tender moment, even though she originally feels horrified that the kiss has been interrupted: “‘Oh this horror!’ she said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness” (36). Clarissa’s knowing that the moment would be interrupted shows that she has already made her mind up about resisting homosexuality before the kiss ever happens. A life with Sally would not provide the stability she wants, and she would most likely be ostracized from mainstream society: “And while such freedom might have liberated Clarissa’s controlled emotional life, it would also have cut Clarissa completely adrift from social convection” (Paul 143). Even if she is not conscious of it, she knows that the interruption will happen because she wants it to happen. She is aware that she cannot be with Sally, who opens her world up to possibilities, nor can she be with Peter, who is still in love with her though decades have passed. Peter’s interruption at Bourton mirrors the later interruptions of Big Ben, serving as a reminder of the world that the characters live in and the roles they have to play. Perhaps this is why Clarissa cannot be with Peter, whose pervasive masculinity makes him the ultimate result of the patriarchy. Peter, with his “extraordinary habit” of playing with his pocketknife and his ability to make her feel “too frivolous; empty-minded; a

mere silly chatterbox” (44) would not leave room for Clarissa to keep a part of her identity to herself, since marriage with Peter would be equivalent to giving up ownership of her soul:

For in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in and day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him... But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined, she was convinced. (8)

A life with either Sally or Peter would be much too polarizing for Clarissa, and so she chooses Richard Dalloway. Despite what she feels for the pair, they cannot offer her what she wants in life, which is the preservation and privacy of her soul. Love has no place because it will exterminate her: “Love destroyed too. Everything that was fine, everything that was went... Horrible passion! she thought. Degrading passion! she thought” (Woolf 127).

With Richard’s arrival to Bourton, another facet of Clarissa’s character is revealed. In simple terms, she is a product of her society. She allows the influence of Victorian conventions to dictate the way she views and judges people, which is conceivably one of the most persuasive reasons for why she chooses marriage with Richard. Zwerdling argues that this is the reason for Clarissa’s creation of a “public and private self” (79). However, both Peter and Sally critique her for this quality: Peter believes that she marries Richard because she “cared too much for rank and society and getting on in the world...thought people had no right to slouch about with their hands in their pockets; must do something, be something” (76), and Sally even says “Clarissa was at heart a snob—one had to admit it, a snob. And it was that that was between them, she was convinced” (190). Conversely, I do not believe that it is Clarissa’s snobbery that motivates her to

adhere to the heteronormative standards of marriage; instead, it is her dedication to creating her own space in the English patriarchy of her time. Her compromise of passion for security shows her willingness to adapt to her environment and her rebellion against the prescribed role given to her. Paul proposes that

[Clarissa] wants communication, but she fears annihilation; she desires unity with others, but she is afraid of absorption by them... And so she has chosen life with Richard, a life shaped by Victorian conventionality, over life with Peter. For with Richard she can maintain the superficial social relationships that will protect her from complete alienation but will never threaten her internal sense of self. (130)

Indeed, Clarissa chooses to become an active member of the patriarchy for her own gain. This is why Richard and Clarissa seem like an ideal pairing. Unlike with Clarissa and Peter, Woolf's narrative does not offer much reflection of the past or Clarissa from Richard's point of view; the most the reader receives is a few sentences: "He had, once upon a time, been jealous of Peter Walsh; jealous of him and Clarissa. But she had often said to him that she had been right not to marry Peter Walsh; which knowing Clarissa, was obviously true; she wanted support. Not that she was weak; but she wanted support" (117). Marriage between Clarissa and Richard is convenient for both of them. Richard is in love with Clarissa (as much as he can be, because he too is a product of Victorian conventionalism with his inability to even physically say the words "I love you" to her) and has the pleasure of knowing he ultimately defeated Peter as a rival for her love, and Clarissa obtains the stability and individuality she for which she yearns: "In her world, the soul has no public function and can only survive in solitude. But even her marriage to Richard is not really a betrayal of self so much as a compact between two people to live together yet allow the soul a little breathing space" (Zwerdling 80). But the reader knows from the

beginning of the novel that their marriage has been doomed from the start: “Lovely in girlhood, suddenly there came a moment... when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed [Richard]... It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman” (31). Here, the reader can infer that Woolf is referring to a sexual failure, and significantly, this “failure” occurs after the birth of their daughter, Elizabeth. Her role of wife and mother has been completed. Thus there is no longer a need to have sexual relations with Richard—at the point that the novel begins, there is nothing that binds them together besides convenience, which allows Clarissa to maintain “a virginity preserved through childbirth” (Woolf 31). The marriage between the Dalloways is not necessarily a farce; it is more or less a part of Clarissa’s performance as she moves through society. Forbes says, “It is made evident, before one reads a single word of the novel, or even opens the cover, that Clarissa is absolutely defined in terms of the role she has chosen to perform” (39). I believe that this explanation answers the question of why Clarissa decides to even marry considering she and Sally decided long ago that marriage was a “catastrophe” for women (Woolf 34), and perhaps why the Sally Seton that crashes Clarissa’s party is no longer the Sally Seton of Clarissa’s memories.

The performative nature of Clarissa’s identity is almost like an unsexing of her character. It is imperative to note that her awareness of her inner-self’s invisibility in the external world is a purposeful desexing, just like her marriage with Richard. As a way to navigate through the patriarchy, she allows her physical body to play the role attached to her name. Accordingly, her body is not her own—it belongs to the society she lives in, as evident in her shedding of Clarissa and becoming Mrs. Dalloway: “But often now this body she wore... this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible,

unseen... this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (Woolf 11). As readers we cannot forget that this is a choice Clarissa has actively made of her own accord in order to remain a member of conventional society. Like Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Clarissa has unsexed herself of feminine weakness; she becomes Mrs. Dalloway for her advantage. She knows that she has no authority in her society as Clarissa—but as Mrs. Richard Dalloway, she is allowed to move freely. Thus, Mrs. Dalloway is Clarissa’s performative identity, though Mrs. Dalloway does not reflect Clarissa’s inner soul, so to speak.

It is equally important to note that in spite of her willing unsexing, she still allows herself moments where she can interact with her true, lesbian self (her soul). Ironically enough, these moments of unity between Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway occur in the attic of her house where she sleeps, away from her husband. It is clear to me that Woolf is taking the Victorian madwoman in the attic trope and flipping it on its head. In “The Death of Sex and the Soul,” Tuzyline Allan claims, “Just as the open, vibrant spaces of Bourton, here the passion-filled Sally kissed her, have shrunk into a suffocating narrow attic room, so has Clarissa been transformed, from a sexually and intellectually stimulating woman into ‘a nun’” (110). However, whereas Allan believes that Clarissa’s room in the attic is a negative product of her homosexual repression, I believe that it is Woolf’s way of subverting the Victorian tradition that came before her. Bourton may have been the environment where Clarissa and Sally had the freedom to share an intimate kiss, but Clarissa’s attic-room is the space where she can relive that kiss over and over again. If anything, the memory of the kiss is more inspiring for Clarissa than the kiss itself: “Moments like this, along with the memory of Sally’s kiss, alleviate the cracks and sores of her sexless marriage. More significantly, they define the privacy of Clarissa’s soul” (Barrett 159). Indeed,

Woolf not only shows how the patriarchal society she and Clarissa live in has forced the “madwoman” into the attic through the ridiculous constrictions forced upon women, but also makes a declaratively feminist statement by having Clarissa disrupt forced sexual repression through the remembering of the kiss. The evidence of this can be seen in the fact that the attic-room is where the readers are first introduced to Sally and where her memories of Bourton start to weave in and out of the text: “Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had that not, after all, been love?” (Woolf 32). The attic in the house she shares with Richard is undeniably the reason why she marries him; this is the space where she is allowed her individuality, the preservation of her soul. In this private space, Clarissa is allowed the freedom to embrace her lesbianism, a freedom she would not have been allowed if she had married Peter. The necessity of this separate space also relates to Clarissa’s idea of the public and private self. Without this space, she has the potential to be like Doris Kilman, an explicitly lesbian woman who has no place in the established society because she does not have the luxury of an attic where she can hide away or be in control of her homosexual identity.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the novel is Woolf’s treatment of Doris Kilman since Miss Kilman seems as if she would be the most feminist character in the novel considering she is a single woman who has an actual career and is openly homosexual, but Clarissa’s criticalness towards her makes the reader wary of her. Unlike Clarissa whose “proportion of marriage and chastity enables her both to maintain the appearance of conventionality and to acknowledge her attractions to women” (Barrett 158), there is a disgust related to Miss Kilman and her public, lesbian sensuality. Even the character’s name suggests something ominous: kill man. Still, it is not the men in the novel who become victim to Miss Kilman, but Miss Kilman herself who

becomes subject to her inability to overcome her desire for Elizabeth Dalloway in the same way Clarissa has overcome her desire for Sally Seton.

Miss Kilman serves as a fascinating foil to Clarissa. Clarissa, who is so scared of absorption, finds such disdain in the one character who is fully consumed by her inner self. Unlike Clarissa who is a member of the governing class, Miss Kilman is “ugly, clumsy” (Woolf 128), “poor, moreover; degradingly poor” and resents the fact that she has to “tak[e] jobs from people like the Dalloways; from rich people” like Clarissa (123). She is aware of “the infliction of her unlovable body which people could not bear to see” (129), a result of her inability to sequester her lesbian passion. Whereas Clarissa’s body is invisible, Miss Kilman’s is public for everyone to see. So shouldn’t Woolf champion behind Miss Kilman? But instead of praising Miss Kilman, she paints her as “bitter and burning” (124). Perhaps this is Woolf’s way of signifying that there is a danger in overt sexuality. Woolf’s juxtaposition of the pair creates an interesting conundrum: is it better to be malleable and adapt to the circumstances of society, or should one be decisively singular, regardless of the consequences? True, it may seem like the latter would be ideal—Miss Kilman is unafraid of the cost of her passion, which seems like bravery, but Woolf shows how her unwillingness to adapt turns her into a “monster” (126). Miss Kilman, who does not hate Clarissa, pities her. But the reader calls her morality into question as yearns to bring Clarissa’s homosexuality to the surface:

Fool! Simpleton! You who have known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who have trifled your life away! And there rose in her an overmastering desire to overcome her; to unmask her. If she could have felled her it would have eased her. But it was not the body; it was the soul and its mockery that she wished to subdue; make

her feel master. If only she could make her weep; could ruin her; humiliate her;
bring her to her knees crying, You are right! (125)

Unlike the other characters in the novel, Miss Kilman sees through Clarissa's performance. It is not Clarissa that Miss Kilman hates, but Clarissa's "reserve and her seeming ability to control her own lesbian passion" (Barrett 160)—essentially, Miss Kilman hates Clarissa's willingness to conform. Like Peter Walsh or Septimus Smith, Miss Kilman's character cannot compromise, which causes her to remain stagnant as characters like Sally and Clarissa find ways to outwit the patriarchy: "They turned her out because she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains—when she had German friends, when the only happy days of her life had been spent in Germany!" (Woolf 124). Zwerdling explains that the characters who are unable to "restrain their intense emotions" are "all in serious trouble" because they become "outsiders in a society dedicated to covering up the stains and ignoring the major and minor tremors that threaten its existence" (72). This can be seen as Miss Kilman's obstinacy works against her. She is no longer in Germany anymore, but refuses to adapt. For Clarissa, on the other hand, it is not just her desire for Sally that Clarissa has overcome, but also the patriarchy.

Miss Kilman's marginalized life also poses a compelling connection between the status of socioeconomic security and sexuality: "Woolf gives us a picture of a class impervious to change in a society that desperately needs or demands it, a class that worships tradition and settled order but cannot accommodate the new and disturbing" (Zwerdling 72). Do members of society outside of the social elite have the same opportunities regarding choice of sexuality? Arguably, Miss Kilman is just as much a product of Victorian patriarchy as Clarissa and Richard. She too performs for the patriarchy, in a sense—only her role is completely opposite to Clarissa's. Her aversion to conformity can be interpreted as the life that she actively chooses, just

as Clarissa has chosen her own. In contrast to Sally or Clarissa who find ways to accommodate their inner souls to their external worlds, Miss Kilman defiantly rejects this uniformity: “And her mother would come calling to say that a hamper had come from Bourton and would Miss Kilman like some flowers? To Miss Kilman she was always very, very nice, but Miss Kilman squashed the flowers all in a bunch, and hadn’t any small talk” (130-31). Allan states that Clarissa “understand[s] that forbidden passion is a high-risk commodity capable of reducing the investor to pauperism” (107). Miss Kilman’s stubbornness indicates that she is also aware of the disadvantages and “pauperism” she may face in her rejection of what is considered normal, but she chooses to resist regardless: “But why wish to resemble her? Why? She despised Mrs. Dalloway from the bottom of her heart. She was not good. Her life was a tissue of vanity and deceit” (Woolf 128). To Miss Kilman, it is better to have her external identity reflect her internal soul, but this is what ends up being her destruction. Even Elizabeth, the object of her passion, rejects her, choosing her mother instead: “She had gone. Miss Kilman sat at the marble table among the éclairs stricken once, twice, thrice by shocks of suffering. She had gone. Mrs. Dalloway had triumphed. Elizabeth had gone. Beauty had gone, youth had gone” (133). At Bourton, Clarissa is acutely aware of the potentially problematic outcomes of unabridged passion, aware that she does not want to be engulfed by her desires and have her soul warped in the way that Miss Kilman’s has been. With this knowledge, Miss Kilman’s desire to expose Clarissa’s internalized soul to the external world becomes even more offensive and jarring to Clarissa, Woolf, and the reader—and for this reason alone, Miss Kilman cannot be considered a feminist character. Woolf herself keeps the sexuality of the novel at an understated volume, demonstrating that characters like Miss Kilman threaten to offset the balance of public and private lives created by characters like Clarissa.

When contemplating the significance of time and place in the novel, it is critical to look at Big Ben as a male character and also as a tool used by Clarissa. As aforementioned, Big Ben's role is to remind Clarissa of the moment in time she is presently situated in because of her predisposition to lose herself in memory (or her soul). The clock tower itself is a phallic symbol that stands erect in the city of London, and Woolf describes him as "a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate" (48). Indeed, if Big Ben is a symbol of the patriarchy, then his interruptions are necessary, gentle reminders to the unsexed Mrs. Dalloway of her participation in the patriarchy:

The representation of Big Ben within the novel indicates the ordered, dominating world that urban life provides to those like Clarissa who seek such order and stability... Big Ben's dominance and insistence on order interrupts numerous moments when Clarissa finds herself sadly contemplating her lack of a unified self or finds herself forced to confront the unhappiness of the life she has chosen. (Forbes 41)

For example, when Clarissa and Peter meet at the beginning of the novel, Peter wonders if Richard makes her happy, if she loves Richard the way she once loved Peter at Bourton. Seeing Peter in the flesh after so many years proves to be an overwhelming experience for Clarissa, and it causes a quiver in her confident performance of Mrs. Dalloway— for a moment, she cannot remember why she did not marry Peter: "All in a clap it came over her, If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day! (Woolf 47). Fortunately, before she can even ponder his question, the physical manifestation of her commitment to her role walks into the room, interrupting images of Bourton and ideas of love, and soon after Elizabeth's entrance Big Ben chimes, indicating a shift back to conventionality over emotion. Clarissa's focus immediately

centers back onto her party and hostess duties. Forbes supports this idea in her article when she looks at how Big Ben's strikes benefit Clarissa: "The implication is that Mrs. Dalloway thrives in London because the patriarchal status quo of the city validates her choice to relinquish her independence and to become Richard Dalloway" (42).

Mrs. Dalloway fully encapsulates Woolf's ability to call into question the many factors influencing the creation of one's inner, sexual identity and outer, conventional identity. Consequently, Woolf shows that in order to be a successful feminist, one does not have to explicitly draw attention to oneself, just as Clarissa's character has compromised her passion in order to save her soul.

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