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Haley M. Fedor
fedor@live.marshall.edu

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Historical Butches:
Lesbian Experience and Masculinity in Bryher's Historical Fiction

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College
of Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
In English

by
Haley M. Fedor

Approved by
John Young, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson
Jill Treftz, Ph.D
Alan Gravano, Ph.D

Marshall University

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Abstract

This project analyzes three of Bryher's historical novels, while also providing background on the shadowy figure of Bryher herself. Looking at *Gate to the Sea*, *Roman Wall*, and *Ruan*, each serves to represent lesbianism in a variety of coded or metaphorical ways. Various geographical locations or landscapes serve to either represent or depict homosexual desire, and also construct queer spaces for characters to traverse. Limited scholarship exists on any of Bryher's works, particularly that which looks at lesbian sexuality. The genre Bryher writes in allows for a cross-writing of lesbian characters, or gendering lesbian characters as male, and displays awareness of masculinity as a social construct. Throughout each of her novels, Bryher manipulates form to encode homosexual desire and non-heteronormative relationships.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Historical Fiction.....	1
Introduction: Bryher.....	7
Chapter One: Gate to the Sea.....	11
Chapter Two: Roman Wall.....	29
Chapter Three: Ruan.....	48
Conclusion.....	65
Appendix—IRB Letter.....	69

Introduction: The History of Historical Fiction and Criticism

In the realm of literary history and canon formation, one of the least studied genres is historical fiction, particularly works by women authors. There has been much critical disdain for the historical novel, particularly women's historical novels, and Diana Wallace and Ruth Hoberman suggest this is due to the fact that it originated as a masculine genre. This critical disdain for women's popular historical novels, Diana Wallace writes, seems to have led to the neglect of a body of historical novels by writers such as Naomi Mitchison, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Bryher, and others (Wallace 5). Thus it lends to the perception that there was an “empty” period of women's writing from 1945-1960. There has been little attention paid to these authors, and the women's historical novel as a whole, especially considering the attention paid to romance or detective novels. This “has much to do with the critical history of the genre itself and the way in which it has been treated as a male tradition” (8). There is dispute amongst scholars about which particular work can be considered the pioneer of the genre, though most cite Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1814) as one of, if not the first historical novel. A historical novel, Wallace suggests, is “historical” in four senses. It uses a particular period for its fictional setting and engages with the historical moment of its writing, whether it be through social, cultural, political and national commentary. The historical novel also relates to the personal life history of the author him or herself, and in its relation to literary history, makes intertextual use of earlier works (Wallace 4). Georg Lukacs and Avrom Fleishman, among others, make a point of studying the genre yet excluding women authors completely. If women authors were mentioned at all by Fleishman or Lukacs, it was done dismissively, as talentless women capitalizing on a popular genre. Despite this, there have been many female authors during the twentieth century who only wrote historical fiction. Writers like Bryher link their interest in the genre to the male historical fiction writers they read as children. For Bryher, the historical novel becomes a space for freedom to explore both non-normative

sexualities and female agency.

The historical fiction genre has allowed women writers much freedom of expression. It “allowed women writers a license which they have not been allowed in other forms” (Wallace 6). Couched in a historical setting, the historical novel “has allowed coverage of normally taboo subjects, not just active female sexuality but also contraception, abortion, childbirth and homosexuality” (Wallace 6). When trying to explore such topics in contemporary settings, women writers would often have to worry about censorship. Naomi Mitchison, frustrated by the response she received when writing about sexuality in a non-historical setting, remarked that “apparently it's alright when people wear wolfskins and togas” (Mitchison 179). For a writer that was not only a woman, but a lesbian woman, it is likely that Bryher would have been constrained when writing expressions of lesbian sexuality in other prose genres. She began writing her historical fiction in 1952, publishing over half a dozen until 1969. Overt lesbian relationships in fiction were censored heavily. During and after WWII, especially in the 1950s, historical fiction “provided an especially important space for erotic or sexualized fantasy” (Wallace 6). This space became important for writers like Bryher, who “used the genre to explore non-heterosexual desire” (7). In addition to non-heterosexual relationships, there is also a greater freedom to explore traditionally masculine arenas such as politics or the military. The genre “has given women the freedom to adopt narrators or protagonists, and to write about the 'male' world of public and political affairs” (7). Because writers like Bryher grew up reading male writers of the genre, the historical novel becomes a site of liberation not just for erotic fantasy, but also for “the 'boy's-own' style adventures on land and sea which they felt denied because of their gender” (7). Bryher herself wrote in her memoir, *The Heart to Artemis*, that “if I wanted to be happy when I grew up I had to become a cabin boy and run away” (Bryher 21). Writers like Bryher “trace their interest in the genre to the impact of the *male* writers of historical fiction they read as children” (Wallace 7). Growing

up with a taste for adventure, real life opportunities and occupations for Bryher and other women writers like her were non-existent or limiting, and this absence no doubt became a source for frustration. When she was a child, Bryher traveled extensively with her family, visiting places like Egypt and Greece, taking her pen name from the Scilly Isles. After she matured, like many other Edwardian girls of the time, she was sent to boarding school and then confined to the home. Even though she wrote her historical fictions much later in life, they were undoubtedly a site for the freedom of expression she had been denied in her youth. Wallace herself stresses that the “emotional importance of women's reactions to historical novels should not be under-estimated” (Wallace 7). The historical novel for Bryher and her contemporaries became a liberating space that they could occupy and even adopt male voices and perspectives. In this genre, women writers “have had the most freedom to examine *masculinity* as a social and cultural construction” (author's emphasis, 8). They are allowed to look at traditionally “masculine” arenas such as politics and war from an adopted viewpoint, and can examine what it is that constitutes masculinity. Writers like Bryher were able to gain the perspective to examine masculinity as a whole and to “see that gender itself is historically contingent rather than essential” (8). Bryher and her contemporaries gained insight into masculinity and gender roles, and realized that these were cultural constructs. Since these gender roles are products of their cultures, then through the study of history authors of historical fiction see how gender roles shift and change over time. Bryher and her contemporaries came to see gender roles as being “clearly socially and culturally constructed and open to the possibility of further change” (8). With the idea in mind, then, that gender roles are subject to change, the historical novel becomes a site at which Bryher and other women writers could play and experiment. Of course, growing up reading the genre meant it was steeped in a male-dominated tradition, which did not make writing for these women any easier.

In his (then) groundbreaking book *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukacs offered sustained

critical attention to a genre that had been previously ignored or viewed with disdain. Lukacs, along with other critics, cite Sir Walter Scott as the pioneer of the genre, yet completely neglects Scott's female predecessors and influences, even going so far as to dismissively show Scott and his "fashion to quote a long list of second and third-rate writers (Radcliffe, etc.) who were supposed to be important literary forerunners of his" (Lukacs 30). What is lacking in these supposed forerunners, Lukacs argues, is "precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age" (19). It isn't until the French Revolution and after that society enters what he calls a *mass experience* of history, where people "comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" (24). This sense of history as national awakening and consciousness was begun by Scott in Lukacs' opinion, and wasn't something attainable by his female predecessors. Lukacs also considers the period of historical fiction written until 1848 that of the "classical historical novel" and after which, argues writers "no longer have any immediate social sense of continuity with the prehistory of their own society" (Lukacs 244). Lukacs sees the period from Scott's novel *Waverly* to 1848, to be a type of golden age for the historical novel. What comes after is apparently tasteless. He declares that the writing after 1848 simply uses history as a background to play out private fantasies. Lukacs also praises the anti-Fascist historical novels of the 1930's for their democratic humanism, yet deplores their tendency to "turn the past into a parable of the present" (338). He sees them as belligerent allegories, rather than a sophisticated discourse with past eras. Diana Wallace criticizes Lukacs for his "gender-blindness," and suggests his study is limited due to his "narrow understanding and valuation of literature itself" (Wallace 11). Pre-1990s studies of the historical novel have "tended to work with a conception of 'history' which excludes women's novels, thus constructing this as a masculine tradition" (Wallace 13). As seen with critics like Georg Lukacs

and Avrom Fleishman, this holds to be true. While Fleishman does include some women writers, and works like Woolf's *Orlando*, he criticizes Woolf for “reducing” history to the personal, and that texts like it bring “the tradition of the English historical novel to a self-conscious close” (Fleishman 233).

Yet more recent work in the 1990s onward, Wallace says, has “recovered a body of work, much of it by women writers, preceding and influencing Scott” (Wallace 9). This implies that Scott distanced himself somewhat from his influences, the women writers who preceded him. Such a move “positioned him as the father of the historical novel and ultimately of the nineteenth-century realist novel” (9). Other critics suggest that Scott's historical novel was completely different from his female forerunners, and Leslie Fielder lauds Scott for introducing “real history” (Fielder 164) to the genre. Fielder sees Scott's *Waverly* as a redeemer in a genre that had formerly been corrupted by the female pen. He even goes as far as stating that the historical novel is “the 'cleanest' of all the subgenres of the novel thus far, the creation of a self-conscious attempt to redeem fiction at once for respectability and masculinity” (170). For Fielder, only “real” history and depictions of it are masculine, and enough to *save* the genre from supposed female hacks. Of course, Scott himself was overlooked in critical scholarship for a long period of time, due to disdain for his form and use of romance. F.R. Leavis suggests that “out of Scott a bad tradition came” (Leavis 14) which amounts to a dismissal of the historical novel itself as a “bad tradition.” This, Diana Wallace insists, has “contributed to the wider neglect of historical fiction and especially women's historical fiction” (Wallace 10). Continuing with this dismissal is Avrom Fleishman, who ignores 'popular' historical novels in his study, suggesting women writers engage in mere escapism—nothing more. He insists that “avoiding escapism of the popular kind, the serious artist tends to withdraw from the horror of the present to contemplate the horror of the past” (Fleishman xvii). Fleishman implies that female writers in this tradition only engage in mere escapism, since they are associated with the 'popular' writings of the genre. He

considers other writers in the genre to be more serious, that they can contemplate darker themes that women apparently couldn't conceive. Aligning their works with the popular or frivolous, women writers have since been “doubly excluded from the established canon” says Wallace, pointing out that their works have been given no real consideration until recently (Wallace 10). Women have consistently been excluded from categorization within the genre they write, and authors like Lukacs and Fleishman have actively excluded most of these writers according to their own masculinist understanding of the genre and literary canon. Wallace's only complaint about twentieth century discussions about the genre is that they tend to be concerned with only certain areas and certain writers, rather than anything overarching about the form itself (Wallace 14). Wallace tends to be all-inclusive of women writers. Rather than specifically focus on one type of historical novel, or one historical period that women writers focus on, she instead traces “connections between the different uses to which women have put history” (Wallace 15). She calls out for women's engagement with history to be studied without adherence to a “male-defined model” (15).

Historical fiction has been an arena in which authors like Bryher could employ devices and portray heroines that didn't comply with traditional gender roles. The girl-page in Elizabethan literature provides a good example, becoming “an important symbol of freedom from gender constraints” (Wallace 20). A female character in male disguise “gave liberty in an age when freedom was unknown to women” (Bryher 442). These girl-pages, for Bryher, represented “the very spirit of adventure” (452). In the woman's historical novel, the “cross-dressed heroine is as important a figure as the tragic queen” (Wallace 21). Wallace also suggests that the cross-dressed character can be a stand-in for the female novelist herself, writing across gender boundaries to “enter into the 'masculine' sphere of history” (21). Just as the girl-page cross-dresses, so too does the author. Instead of doing so to take part in a play, however, authors like Bryher write across these boundaries to take part in a

historically masculine tradition and genre. Called the “costume novel,” it's meant to be a derogatory term that associates these historical fictions with the splendor of a period and nothing more. Yet these types of novels suggest a transgression of gender boundaries, and the “possibility of flexible gender identity acted out through clothes” (21). The 'costuming' in such novels, particularly of a girl dressing in boy's clothing, makes connections “in an especially suggestive way to feminist theories of gendered subjectivity as socially, culturally and, above all, historically constructed” (21). The masquerade in women's, particularly Bryher's, novels can be seen as a performance that is “aware of its own theatricality” and also suggests “an understanding that masculinity itself is a masquerade” (21).

Scholars tend to look only at women's historical fictions and point out a lack of autonomous female characters. Wallace sharply states that “feminist criticism has been relatively slow to start looking at the ways in which women writers have used male protagonists and characters to explore masculinity, as well as femininity, as a social construction rather than a 'norm' (21-22). In this, the historical novel is well-suited for such explorations, given the need for circumspection on behalf of writers like Bryher. The historical novel, for Bryher and her peers, offered “a way of writing about masculinity” as well as a way to explore “the complexities and attractions of power, both political and sexual” (22).

Introduction: A Look at Bryher

Despite the efforts of scholars there are many authors, particularly women, whose work become neglected before disappearing altogether. While many women writers of the modernist period have been or are in the process of being reclaimed, Winifred Bryher has not been one of them. Critically acclaimed in their time, her works have largely been forgotten and nearly all of them are out of print.

Born Annie Winifred Ellerman in 1894, Bryher was the illegitimate daughter of a shipping magnate, Sir

John Ellerman, and had an unconventional childhood upbringing—one that profoundly influenced and shaped her body of work. Her father didn't marry her mother until 1909, when Winifred was fifteen and her younger brother about to be born (Hoberman 89). Until that point, her family traveled extensively, particularly in the Middle East, “giving Winifred idealized memories of a rootless, adventure-filled childhood” (89). She recounts in one of her memoirs, *The Heart to Artemis*, of the many visits her family paid to Egypt and experiencing everything from merchants to parties of raiders:

The whirlwind swept towards us, it turned into a group of shrieking Bedouin, they flourished matchlocks, some had swords...I was not frightened, I was very, very happy. I snatched a stick, I kicked my donkey's sides. I was ready and willing to meet the charge... “Keep quiet,” my father commanded, producing a revolver to our intense surprise, “and remember, whatever happens, the British army will avenge us. (Bryher 86).

She declared from a young age that when she grew up, she was going to be a sailor (9). Partly influenced by her father's shipping trade, Bryher remained fascinated with the sea and adventure, but laments in her autobiographical novel *Development* that “Her one regret was that she was a girl” (Bryher, *Development*, 6). Believing that adventure and exciting occupations were only available to boys, she writes often in her autobiographical works of her yearning for those things seemingly unavailable to her due to her sex. Her persona in *Development* yearns “not to watch but to battle with the waves. Yet the door was locked; she could only wait at the window, desolate with a boyishness that might never be put to sea” (160). Bryher felt that, to be happy in adulthood, she “had to become a cabin boy and run away from the inexplicable taboos of Victorian life” (*Heart to Artemis* 17). Starting when she was eight, her parents gifted her with the historical fictions of G.A. Henty, and she devoured them (*Heart to Artemis* 94). She would write up her own stories about such historical places, but always “A boy must occupy the centre of the story” (*Development* 24). From an early age, Bryher

“thought of herself as in some way 'male',” and her “sense of herself as both boyish and lesbian were intertwined, and crucial to an understanding of her historical fiction” (Hoberman 89-90). When her parents gave her Henty's *The Young Carthaginian* at age nine, she became at once captivated with the history of Carthage and fond of Hannibal. It excited her, because she “was just the same age as Hannibal when he had sworn his famous oath to fight Rome” (Bryher, Coin of Carthage, x). Henty's book prompted a thorough interest and study of Hannibal and Carthage, for they “offered Bryher an alternative to the repressive Victorian environment around her—an alternative, in particular, to repressive gender and sexual roles” (Hoberman 168). Unable to fulfill her dream of a life at sea, Bryher “was suicidal when she met H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and with her encouragement decided to become a writer” (Friedman xxx). H.D. provided Bryher with “a reason to live and a respectable home away from the Ellerman mansion...and then traveled widely with her in the 1920s—the Scilly Isles, Greece, Corfu, the United States, Egypt, Paris, Berlin, and Switzerland” (xxx). She even took her name, Bryher, from her favorite of the wild Scilly Isles. Years later, Bryher met and discussed her desire to be a boy with Havelock Ellis, where he introduced her to the studies of the sexologists (with his work included) and she took to it enormously. She wrote of their discussion:

Then we got onto the question of whether I was a boy sort of escaped into the wrong body and he says it is a disputed subject but quite possible and showed me a book about it...we agreed it was most unfair for it to happen but apparently I am quite justified in pleading I ought to be a boy...I am just a girl by accident. (qtd. in Hanscombe and Smyers 38).

Then, in 1927, Bryher met Hans Sachs and became intensely involved in the world of psychoanalysis. She was heavily invested in the movement, often donating money to psychoanalytic societies and even trained to become an analyst herself (Friedman xxvi). Bryher's “constant gift-giving” to psychoanalysts (including Freud himself) as well as to other artists “originated partially in

her own insecurity as a writer...despite H.D.'s constant encouragement" (xxxiii). In 1933, however, Bryher gave up her dream of becoming an analyst after the death of her father, but she still met with Sachs occasionally to "do a spot of analysis" (Friedman xxxi). Despite never becoming fully trained, psychoanalysis heavily influenced her work, particularly in regard to her notions of gender and sexuality. Characters like the girl-page of Elizabethan literature fascinated her, and became "an important symbol of freedom from gender constraints" (Wallace 20). She began to create male protagonists for just this reason. Bryher engaged in "cross-writing as a man in order to enter into the 'masculine' sphere of history as the Elizabethan girl-page cross-dressed to take an active part in the events of the play" (21). Writing historical fiction from a man's point of view allowed Bryher to question the notion of masculinity. It offered a way to adopt the male voice and explore "the complexities and attractions of power, both political and sexual" (22). Such cross-writing exposes the performative nature of masculinity itself. Judith Butler states that, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (137). For Bryher and other women historical novelists, cross-writing explores masculinity and exposes the fact that gender is not inherent, but rather is a social construction. Cross-writing shows that masculinity "is not a norm against which femininity is judged lacking, but itself a learned performance" (Wallace 23). Bryher not only explores masculinity, but she writes about lesbian sexuality in a variety of subtle ways, using both male and female characters.

Chapter One – Matriarchal Nostalgia and Gate to the Sea

Published in 1958, *Gate to the Sea* is not only the sole novel of Bryher's to take place in Greece, it is the only one with a female heroine. Like many historical fiction authors who were women, they felt constrained by the genre. Typically dominated by male-oriented discourse, the notion of writing history from a female character's point of view was impossible for some, including Bryher's contemporary Marguerite Yourcenar, author of *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Another barrier, of course, was Bryher's lesbianism, which was difficult to express in a way that “normalized” it, at least without social repercussions. Radclyffe Hall's obscenity trial for publishing the openly lesbian *The Well of Loneliness* was not far from many lesbian writers' minds during that period. With the added pressure of knowledge that they were writing in a male-dominated genre, Bryher and other lesbian writers often engaged in cross-writing or other coded ways of portraying homosexuality and questioning traditional gender roles. As I said above, Bryher often lamented being born a girl, especially with her desire for adventure and occupation as a sailor, avenues seemingly barred to women. In all of her other historical fictions, Bryher engages in cross-writing to portray carefully coded, homosexual characters and themes. While such cross-writing exists even in her sole novel about Greece, the protagonist is female. Critical discourse on pre-Olympian Greece was preoccupied with the notion of an ancient matriarchy, which fascinated Bryher. Due to her personal views on a matriarchal Greece, Bryher creates a subversive female protagonist that has active desire for the female body—literal and metaphoric. For Bryher, as for many of her contemporaries, Greece is a maternal, female-oriented space. Several characters create a queer space in a variety of ways within the center of the novel, one that allows for an active female desire and critique of the lack of women's experience in the creation of history.

The notion of pre-Olympian Greece as a matriarchy was not new during Bryher's time, but was still much disputed. The idea first appeared in Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (1861);

artifacts (clay figures and crude artworks) found on Crete were “unsettling to the nineteenth century's image of antiquity” (Hoberman 18) as they implied a cult of goddess worship. Yet anthropology and classicism were previously separate fields of study; the merger of the two proved to be shocking. Using anthropological studies and archaeology as a source of knowledge about antiquity, “forced the hitherto idealized classical world into the same intellectual context as so-called savages” (18). Lewis Farnell, who struggled to convince peers of the merit of such studies in Oxford, laments the “prejudices of Jowett and the early Victorian scholars, whose souls were closed against art-study” (Farnell 267). Over time this theory became more widely accepted, and scholars began to hypothesize a matriarchal stage in development in human society, among them notable figures like Jane Harrison, Havelock Ellis, and Sigmund Freud (Hoberman 18). Opinions were usually split among gender lines, with an anxiety on the side of many male scholars. For women, the idea of a past that held agency, “even domination, associated with specifically female body parts working in alliance with nature was an appealing notion” (19). Many of the male theorists who agreed with this pre-history saw this “movement from matriarchy to patriarchy as an inevitable movement toward civilization” (19). Conversely, female scholars displayed a nostalgia for such ancient cultures, particularly Jane Harrison. In attacking the values of “Classic Greece,” Harrison was a forerunner for those who attacked “a century's worth of European male self-satisfaction” (19). For Freud, the idea of Greek civilization's prehistory was fascinating. It became a “crucial metaphor in his thinking about women's sexual development” (20). With his ideas about lesbianism, it became an easy metaphor. Freud attributed lesbianism to a failure of progression beyond the pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother, (Freud 226-30) and conflated this mother-fixation with pre-Hellenic culture. He writes: “Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls...comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece” (226). During her stay with Freud for analysis in 1933,

H.D. wrote to Bryher that he felt the same way about her own sexuality, saying “mine is absolutely FIRST layer, I got stuck at the earliest pre-OE stage, and 'back to the womb' seems to be my only solution. Hence islands, sea, Greek primitives and so on” (qtd. in Friedman 132). Freud was very vocal with H.D. about her fascination with Greece (like her 1921 novel *Palimpsest*) and its connection to her bisexuality (Friedman 132). With their shared interest in Greece, it's likely that Bryher held the same views regarding the connections between this pre-Oedipal stage and pre-Olympian Greece. She may have even written to Freud about it, but unfortunately all of Bryher's letters to Freud were lost, presumably during his haste to flee Vienna in 1938. The only reference Freud makes in his letters to Bryher regards penis envy, and that:

Everything you wrote about the valuable effects of penis envy is true. Psychoanalysis is too easily suspected of expressing judgments, which it doesn't think of doing. Considering the entanglement of relations in the world, each process necessarily develops both useful and harmful effects, and the explanations of analysis, which usually substitute something simple and elementary for an overly complex abstraction, often create the impression that they intend a devaluation (qtd. in Friedman 262)

Freud's letter echoes with approval for Bryher's remarks about the “valuable effects” of penis envy, while also reiterating that psychoanalysis isn't judgmental about which stage a person in particular is “stuck” in. Instead, its only interest lies with the diagnosis and further understanding of individual and societal development. What Bryher wrote about in particular, however, no one will ever know. Considering her desire to have been born a boy, one can guess she might have written to him about the acceptance of lesbianism within the arena of sexology and psychoanalysis, or about penis envy as a legitimate a personal truth. Freud's theories about homosexuality appear to have been accepted by both Bryher and her longtime partner. If they weren't, Bryher certainly never would have

begun training to be an analyst herself, nor would she have paid for H.D. to be analyzed by Freud himself. Regardless, this interest in a pre-patriarchal past was shared by Bryher and H.D., as well as many other of their contemporaries. With this active discourse amongst intellectuals, women authors were able to recreate “a revised version of ancient Greece, one in explicit opposition to traditional, male-oriented versions” (Hoberman 21) and question the idealized Greece that had previously permeated the European imagination. In this sense, myth and pre-Hellenistic Greece were used by female modernists to “challenge their culture's assumptions about gender” (22). By using Greece during this time period as the setting for *Gate to the Sea*, Bryher reinterprets what that culture is to the woman writer's imagination. Greece became “a conceptual space in which alternatives to heterosexuality could be explored” (23) and prompted further discussion about gender and sexuality without consequence. By using Greece as a setting, Bryher was able to have a distinctly queer protagonist without social backlash.

On the surface, Bryher's only historical novel about Greece is simplistic. Taking place in one day, it chronicles the Greek priestess Harmonia's flight from Poseidonia (now called Paestum) to escape the tyrannical rule of barbaric conquerors. This single day, however, is shown from multiple perspectives, often rapidly or abruptly shifting back and forth throughout the novel. These shifts from viewpoint to viewpoint are characteristic of Bryher's novels, and they emphasize the misconceptions every character is prone to. Highlighting the imprecise nature of human recollection and interpretation of events, often a single scene is detailed from the point of view of multiple characters. These conflicting views that characters are prone to implies that the “factual” evidence that makes up history is inherently flawed. The facts that are “used to define an era's 'difference' are themselves the products of culturally derived conceptualizations and could be construed in different ways” (Hoberman 92). This technique reveals the flaw in converting experience into history, especially when it comes to

women and women's experiences. Luce Irigaray calls it a problem of “masculine” systems of representation, one where women's voices and experiences are negated. For Irigaray, the problems of relating history exist due discourses being “appropriated by the 'masculine',” (Irigaray 74) and women systematically erased. This systematic “appropriation” becomes evident in the passages relating to the Poseidonians' situation. Conquered by a Roman tribe, the Lucanians, most of the citizens who didn't perish were enslaved, and “only the slaves and the aged remained inside the walls” (Bryher 9). The novel opens from the point of view of Lykos, an elderly and disabled slave, who questions his own history in relation to the present. He wonders, “Why had he been the best netmaker in Poseidonia, why had he won the boys' foot race at fifteen, to end without a rag that he could call his own, less valued by his masters than a dog?” (10). Having broken a vase to keep from falling earlier, Lykos contemplates his master's declaration that “the Games give us a chance to rid ourselves of slaves that are no longer sound” as the Lucanians held “their annual Games in honor of the god of war” (9-10). Obviously an event with a masculine god, Lykos's master revels in the opportunity to wager human lives on the outcome, apathetic despite the possibility that Lykos will be separated from his wife Phila. Lykos awakens before dawn, wondering whether “his owner wagered him upon the luck of some Lucanian's arm” (10). Not only is the separation from his wife likely, but Lykos is upset that the day itself was ruined. For the Poseidonians, the day itself “was the solitary festival when the slaves might speak their own language without being beaten, and worship again in temples that had formerly been their pride” (10). A female-oriented festival for Hera, the event becomes the one thing the Poseidonians look to all year. As to why they were still allowed to worship, Harmonia believes it is because the day itself coincided with the Games for the Lucanian god of war, so that “their masters did not care whether the battered, beaten remnant of the Poseidonians had a procession or not” (22-23).

With the exception of this holiday, however, the Poseidonians are forbidden even to speak their

native language, instead adopting their conquerors'. Lykos decidedly states that "they could not have found a finer weapon to destroy the city" (15). By punishing the remaining Poseidonians who speak their own language outside of the festival day, the Lucanians "rob the Poseidonians of their ability to make sense of their past" (Hoberman 93). Lykos knows the power that language has, for "The very sounds that were a man's earliest memories had been taken away from him, nor might a mother hum a Greek cradle song to her child. They could neither resist nor communicate with one another" (Bryher 15). Cutting off communication, particularly by forbidding children to be raised in the language, creates painful signifiers of slavery and even genocide. Even worse, "Action without such a sense of a coherent past is impossible" (Hoberman 93). By forcing them to cease communications in Greek, the enslaved children of Poseidonia grow up without a sense of their cultural background, being replaced instead with an identity that doesn't extend beyond slavery. Lykos remembers "the right to call the common things of life by their true names, bread, oil, rope, fire" but that knowledge will die out within a generation or two (Bryher 15-16). By losing this sense of past, Lykos knows that this loss, "rather than the branding, made them slaves" (16). During their ceremony, Harmonia despairs when she realizes the Greeks have trouble pronouncing the words necessary to honor Hera. To the conquered people, "Greek had become a foreign language, and in a few years nobody would remember it" (50).

Luce Irigaray conflates the discovery of women's sexuality with another language entirely, with the idea that "Women's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks" (Irigaray 25). This language that has dominated women's sexuality she calls a perpetuation of "the authoritarian discourse of fathers" (27) which implies that women possessed a sexuality, a language, that was lost by time. Like the words necessary to honor their female deity, this feminine language slowly becomes lost to the Poseidonians. Bryher dramatizes this loss of female-oriented

language in the Poseidonians, aware of the experiences negated in the formulation of history. No longer able to communicate, they cannot possibly overthrow their Lucanian masters, particularly when they are “muttering not about liberty but bread” (Bryher 66). When a cry for liberty goes out during the festival, Phanion, a Greek traitor and loyal to his masters, reproaches Harmonia for the act because she “encourage[s] the slaves to remember” (61). When she protests that her job is much humbler, he spouts the same rhetoric as his conquerors and informs her that they are better off now than before. The citizens “huddled around their braziers spinning words” when now “they are fed and clothed and all they have to do is obey” (61). Phanion's voice is harsh, as he informs her “what you call your slavery is an episode” (61-62). Phanion insists that this experience Harmonia and the enslaved citizens share is meaningless. Their experience is “irrelevant to the dominant culture,” and thus becomes insignificant (Hoberman 94).

When Harmonia reflects on the sacking of Poseidonia, she remembers that the invading Lucanians “had seized the Temple's gold, the jars of honey, and the sculptured vases but had overlooked the treasure that formerly ten talents could not have bought, a figure of Hera carved from a wild pear tree at Argos and brought by the original settlers” (20). Harmonia's fixation on the statue of Hera is an attempt to cling to the past through objects, an action repeated throughout the novel, particularly by Archias. Harmonia's brother returns to the city in search of a carved silver disk, a task given to him by the oracle at Cumae in order to start a new city. Archias, who has by the gods been “stricken” with “occasional fits of madness,” (13) believes it will cure him from his illness that was god-given for intruding upon a sanctuary. The sanctuary was one devoted to Hera, and Archias's trespassing is seen as a punishment, for being male and intruding on a space for women only. Taking refuge during a storm in a cave that turned out to be a sanctuary, he believes this is the cause for his madness and the city's fall. He describes his personal downfall as a moment when “He had seen a cave

in front of him with no sign of life outside it or within, a flash of lightning had split the tree a few paces from his head, he had sprung as he supposed to shelter and a voice had shouted at him, 'Ai! Fool! You have broken the sanctuary of the goddess!'" (47). His sickness, the oracle tells him, is pride, for he believes that "an act of youthful disobedience could influence the fall of a State" (48). Archias will always be mad, though he believes that the sea "had given him peace" and his "unhappiness came from the mountains" (46) which suggests he has "attacks" when on land, particularly near mountains—and the cave of Hera. Instead of taking into account all of the factors involved in the conquering of a city, Archias believes he is solely responsible for encroaching upon Hera's territory. Becoming an "emblem of suppressed female power," the cave becomes a point of uncertainty where, "Unassimilable into history, it remains a hint of all that history leaves out" (Hoberman 97). Maria Jacobus calls this emblem the "monster in the text," one that wreaks havoc "on hierarchy, and on unitary schemes designed to repress the otherness of femininity" (Jacobus 5). For Archias, once an innocent boy, entry into such a cave altered him. His "madness" is a disability that excludes him from being grouped with other men. Pitied by men and women alike, they react with surprise when he is capable of escaping during the siege of the city. Harmonia believes "generations of stifled rebellions had flared up in her brother, and it was this, expressed in a form of restless wandering...that had chased away his wits" (Bryher 19). This description of Archias' madness, as well as the reality of it, excludes him from the typical masculine category. Especially during his return, Archias doesn't fit within that space, either within the population of slaves and remaining citizens. Archias' experience is a possible sexual awakening, albeit one atypical for a male. By engaging with the spiritual force of Hera and the physical location of the cave, Archias believes himself cursed and a perpetual outsider.

To further emphasize this ambiguity, Archias returns with the aid of young Myro. Sexually ambiguous herself, when Harmonia first meets her Myro defies categorization. "He...it...Myro is really

a daughter,” (43) Archias attempts to explain to his sister. “My name is Myron, not Myro,” she tells the priestess, “stressing the masculine form of the name” (44). Myro declares that “I am a boy and I am going to be a sailor and go with Archias on his voyages” (44) and further declares that she worships Artemis (70). Wearing a masculine hairstyle and garments, Myro comes with Archias because she identifies with the downtrodden Poseidonians, exiled from their own culture. She believes that: “To be an exile was to be like herself. Fortune had flung her into the women's apartments when all that she wanted was to fight Lucanians and sail...when she said that she could not go against her nature, either they beat her or were hostile” (52). Revealing that no one else would volunteer to journey with Archias, Myro insists that she “belongs to the sea,” and that she “shall die if they shut [her] up in the women's quarters again” (71). With her desire to be masculine and a sailor, Myro mimics Bryher herself. Her desire for a masculine name, clothing, and occupation is only eclipsed by her desire for Harmonia herself. With the declaration that she worships Artemis, a goddess renowned for virginity, spending time exclusively with women and disdaining men, Myro's lesbianism is all but directly stated. Myro looks at Harmonia with a desire that is, according to Bryher's contemporaries, masculine. She “had never seen a woman as lovely as Harmonia,” and her only wish before the journey was “to see Harmonia, whose courage had made her a legend to the exiles” (48-49). While gazing at Harmonia, she elevates her to that of a beautiful object, “as if she were made from an ivory the color of light” (50). Harmonia's position as priestess may not impress the Lucanian population, but it certainly impresses Myro. Believing the older woman capable of doing anything and an object of desire, she knows that “had the walls opened at a sign from her uplifted hand, Myro would have followed her without surprise” (50). The desire for Harmonia is not explicitly stated as sexual, but the desire Myro possesses is supposed to exist only in men, directed at women. During the ceremony for Hera, Myro watches as Harmonia takes the statue of the goddess and “as she carried it up the stone blocks the pleats of the

chiton fell into the straight line of a charioteer's tunic when he braced himself for the final, dangerous turn. It was the most beautiful figure that she had ever seen in her life” (53). The language here is ambiguous, and arguably deliberate. While Myro could be referring to the magnificence of Hera's statue, the attention paid to the chiton suggests she is actually referring to the priestess. By entwining the image of Harmonia in the chiton with a male charioteer in action, Myro's look makes multiple visual connections. This gaze that Myro possesses places emphasis on the visual which, Irigaray states, “is particularly foreign to female eroticism” (Irigaray 26). By being gazed upon, Harmonia seemingly is categorized as passive, the receiver of such attention, but the associated image of the male charioteer confounds such an attempt at categorization. For Myro, Harmonia becomes “the beautiful object of contemplation” (26) but the image of the charioteer retains the agency of a male—at once “subject” and object. Both of these images are powerful to Myro, and at once Harmonia is both male and female beauty, and seemingly engaged in a “dangerous” act. While she's doing nothing more than carrying a statue, Harmonia's act is “dangerous” because it perpetuates Hera's legacy and worship in a hostile land—becoming threatening.

Witnessing this excites Myro tremendously, for the object of her gaze is as sexually ambiguous as she is, albeit momentarily. Of course, Irigaray states that those who have such a gaze are male. But what happens when a female character possesses it? There is, of course, Freud's theory of penis envy, which Bryher seems to have subscribed to. Myro desires the agency that accompanies a penis, like the ability to become a sailor without protest, just as she desires the beautiful Harmonia. Freud insists that the “masculine” is the standard sexual model, but by contemporary standards it has been dismissed, and Irigaray points out that “psychoanalysis cannot solve the problem of the articulation of the female sex in discourse” (Irigaray 76). This is true particularly when masculine tradition relies upon anatomy as “an irrefutable criterion of truth” (71). In response to such an oppressive tradition, she proposes that

women engage in mimicry to adopt the masculine and rescue their sexuality (76). Myro adopts male forms of dress and tries to manipulate language to her benefit, seen when she insists on being called “Myron” yet no one listens. She is still “Myro” to even Archias, who needs her for stability during his fits of madness and confusion. Harmonia, too, displays this adoption of the male gaze, as well as other signifiers of lesbianism.

Even though she declares that “a priestess held no power” (Bryher 18), Harmonia is in fact telling a lie or else unaware of the truth—a priestess seemingly holds no power in relation to the Lucanians—but to the Poseidonians she is the figurehead for their central deity. She is a “legend” amongst the exiles, according to Myro, and is still respected enormously by all of the enslaved citizens. She believes the Lucanians see her as harmless, yet her assistant Demo is a “tiresome girl whom Phanion had insisted must be trained as her first attendant” (16) and reports her every move. If Phanion and their Lucanian masters were truly unconcerned with the priestess of Hera, they would not have bothered to pay an informer to watch Harmonia's activities. Her power lies with the hemlock she possesses, and debates giving to Phila, who will use it to be sure she and Lykos die together, rather than face the horror of separation. Hemlock, a poisonous plant, can fulfill the wishes of Phila and Lykos, but “to help a slave against his master was a savagely punished crime” (20) and the act of giving it is just as dangerous as its consumption. Harmonia comes to realize that she will eventually be disposed of by the Lucanians, questioning: “Would they poison her, throw her into the sea, or, worse perhaps than either, send her as slave to some hovel in the hills?” (19). With the knowledge that her fate is inevitable if she stays in Poseidonia, she decides to give Phila the hemlock.

Another display of her power would be Harmonia's relationship to Hera herself. In the temple, Harmonia has a vision that “the eyes looked at her, the lips smiled...Hera had remembered her, not with anger, but with compassion” (20-21). The spirit of Hera supposedly “went from the Temple in spring

to roam the meadows like some grave and solitary girl” (21). No other characters experience such a vision, particularly of the central female deity of the Poseidonians. Harmonia's relationship to Hera as devoted priestess means that she handles the rituals and maintains the Temple, which houses Hera's artifacts. At this moment, Harmonia's vision is twofold: she sees the statue of Hera become animated, and she gazes upon an object of the feminine with desire. In much the same way as Myro's adoption of the male gaze, Harmonia uses it to glimpse Hera-as-object, and Hera-as-female. This glimpse merges both versions of Hera, and Harmonia's desire for the goddess is mixed with her elation at not being forgotten. Harmonia is overjoyed for proof of her faith, for a sign that Hera has not deserted her. By subtly couching this desire in a religious sign, Harmonia's gaze is at once erotic and literally objectifying. Hera is a goddess, but acts outside of religious relics such as the statue or the cave, having a direct interaction with and impact with mortals. At the same time, Hera is not an actual character that interacts with others, aside from Harmonia and the vision. Hera has a physical, object of a body, while also being an ethereal presence throughout the novel. She can be seen as an example of Teresa de Lauretis's “perverse desire,” one that is “sustained on fantasy scenarios that restage the lost and recovery of a fantasmatic female body” (de Lauretis 265). Harmonia recreates this “perverse desire” by performing her very duties, thus creating a subtle encoding of lesbianism implicit in her role as a priestess. While not as textually explicit as Myro's admiring gaze, Harmonia adopts a “perverse” desire for Hera, as well as others.

The “other” recipient of Harmonia's gaze is a young Poseidonian woman named Philinna. The daughter of a Poseidonian and a farmer who allied with the Lucanians, Philinna has avoided slavery of a sort. Engaged to marry Fabricius, a Lucanian whose name connotes a fabrication or construction of something, the soldier reflects upon the necessity of confining Philinna and not allowing any association with other Poseidonians. He thinks “now that the girl was his wife he had had to forbid her

to attend ceremonies where the rest of the worshippers were servants” (Bryher 30). As guard to the main gate, Fabricius is charged with keeping the enslaved Poseidonians within the walls of their own city. The only time the natives are allowed outside the walls are for Hera's festival, and “had it been some ragged slave trying to slip away during a steward's absence he would have knocked him down with the butt end of his weapon or stabbed him without mercy” (29). Fabricius not only implements the dominating Lucanian laws, but he also constructs a cage for his wife who still retains her element of difference, because he “knew that Philinna missed the Temple” (31). Despite his disdain for Poseidonian religion, Fabricius feels “confused in front of Harmonia's dignity as he had felt when the commander of the army had spoken to him during a night watch” and eventually gives her a salute and tells her to “Pass in peace” (31). Even a Lucanian like Fabricius, acting out the role of the typical, patriarchal male, is confused by Harmonia's presence. She intimidates him like a superior officer, enough to befuddle him into saluting someone technically beneath him. As a Poseidonian, she is a conquered person as well as a woman, and yet her demeanor imitates that of a high-ranking army official. For the Lucanians, who put seemingly great pride in their military and devotion to a god of war, this is a position that could never be held by a woman. Despite this, Harmonia's behavior elicits a submissive response from Fabricius. Harmonia's brief act of *mimesis* is an attempt “to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (Irigaray 76). But to be an adept mimic, Harmonia cannot be “resorbed in this function. They must remain elsewhere” (76). In this *mimesis*, Irigaray suggests the possibility for a reversal within the phallic order of society and discourse (77). Such a reversal of roles is achieved, but without Harmonia becoming a parody of herself. Fabricius is intimidated Harmonia's actions and discourse, not mocking her or deriding her as pathetic. Harmonia occupies a space that is “elsewhere” from the passive femininity of the Poseidonians, nor can she ever assimilate into Lucanian society. Not just limited to the encounter

with Fabricius, Philinna's character emphasizes instances of Harmonia's sexual difference.

Before her wedding, Philinna approached Harmonia to ask for a blessing from Hera. She begs the priestess “that she might dedicate her childhood robe...at Hera's altar before her marriage” (Bryher 28). Despite being allied with the Lucanians, and about to marry one, Philinna argues that “My mother was Greek, and we desire the blessing she was given, and my grandmother before her” (28). About to tell the young woman that “There are temples for those who have made peace with the enemy,” (28) Harmonia takes a moment to look at the converted Poseidonian. Dressed “without a cloak and in the shorter chiton favored by the Lucanians,” Harmonia detects no “heavy arrogance” (28) that accompanies free citizens like Demo. Harmonia's thoughts are focused on Philinna's appearance, how she wears the Lucanian style but has none of their mannerisms. The mention of the short chiton implies at least a portion of her legs are showing, and the priestess admits to watching Philinna throughout the years, as she grew “into a girl so lovely that she might have been one of those nymphs with an apple basket on her head that the shepherd boys sometimes fancied they saw up in the mountains” (27). Equated with captivating creatures of myth, Philinna's beauty obviously has an effect on Harmonia. A request that could easily be denied, the priestess eventually grants permission and hopes that “she had neither been influenced by the dark gold honey in its earthenware jar nor by the girl's mountain beauty” (29). However Harmonia is uncertain as to whether the decision was entirely impersonal; she knows that their tradition “had to be kept without compromise in these alien surroundings or it would die, and such a dedication could bear no fruit...the husband would see that his children followed his belief” (29). Despite the mental reminder to be steadfast in rejection, a glimpse of Philinna unravels her argument. The “dark gold honey” serves as an offering, a product and creation of bees—a matriarchal species, and one led by a larger queen. A parallel to Hera worship, this offering of the honey, along with her robe from childhood, demonstrates that Philinna is loyal to her childhood

religion. This assertion of femininity and dedication to Hera is almost as captivating as Philinna's beauty, and Harmonia has no choice but to accept. Despite the offer of the childhood robe, Harmonia believes that she never dedicated it, and instead gave up "her own youth, her longing to seek and see, those great passions that were twins of one another" (74). Instead of using the robe for its intended purpose, Philinna's robe "hung before her now, the blue of a dissolving wave" (74). Philinna's robe is kept in close proximity to the Temple, and is the color of the sea. Such nature imagery furthers not only Philinna's connection to Hera and her loyalty to female-oriented worship, but also to Harmonia herself. Despite Philinna's marriage, Harmonia preserves this object from the younger woman. Instead she realizes the years of her life dedicated to the Temple would be an adequate substitute. The two women are linked through this article of clothing, much like Harmonia is connected to the original settlers through the statue of Hera.

When she decides to flee Poseidonia with Archias and Myro, Harmonia must decide which objects to take. Archias, obsessed with his order from the oracle, forces them to retrieve the silver disk—the emblem of the city—in order to start a new city elsewhere. Despite his obsessive need to find the disk, Archias tells Harmonia that "Loyalty is to Hera, not to a place" (41). He means for her to continue to serve Hera, but that her residence in Poseidonia isn't necessary to fulfill the task. The spirit of Hera should be honored, he tells her, not the literal location. Ironically, despite Archias's insistence that Harmonia doesn't need to stay in the Temple to worship Hera, he is tasked with the necessity of bringing back the emblem of the city in order to start anew. This simultaneous privileging and devaluing of objects and places becomes paradoxical, but it is also information from Archias, who is in fact mad. Absolutely sure his trespassing at the sanctuary caused Poseidonia's downfall, he sees this chance to restore balance—and be cured from madness once and for all. Will the retrieval of a disk solve all of Archias's problems? No, but he believes they will. With the importance he places on the

object, Archias hopes to rid himself of a debilitating illness that causes others to judge him, effectively rejoining a dominant social discourse. Like Lykos' lame leg, however, such an illness is not so easily remedied. Archias places as much importance on physical relics of his cultural past as Harmonia does. However, his confusion as to where he buried the disk (for safe-keeping) in the courtyard buys enough time for the Lucanian masters to return home, nearly getting them all caught in the process. Such a narrow escape—and one that leads to awareness and being hunted—suggests that the location of the disk was not important. In addition to nearly causing their arrest, Archias' (incorrect) insistence on the location of the disk reinforces the idea that memory is fickle. Harmonia realizes this earlier in the novel, because “memories passed...the present had obliterated the past” (26). These objects, imbued with the meaning that Harmonia and the Poseidonians have given them, raise the debate about what should be left behind. In a decisive moment, Harmonia takes the statue of Hera with her, but must cut off the ritual garlands keeping it in place. Such an act compromises “her attachment to the literal fulfillment of her religious duties” (Hoberman 95) and makes her decision to flee much easier. Along with the statue of Hera and the emblem, Harmonia takes her mother's legacy: a necklace and a mirror. For Harmonia, these objects affirm “her connection to a female past, her resistance to absorption into a future where her identity will be *all* (author's emphasis) idea” (95). This means that by taking along the items, she is resisting the incorporation of her identity into history—one that privileges male discourse. In this discourse, the “everyday objects” like the necklace and mirror, which serve to “affirm an independent female identity” has no place in history (95). The mirror is shown to be “Like the necklace, it had belonged to her mother, but it was an everyday possession, and the limbs of the nymph that formed the handle were dented and rubbed. It was all that was left to her of her home, she could not leave it behind.” (Bryher 101-2).

With these ordinary objects in tow, Harmonia is free to leave Poseidonia and found a new city

in Salente. Seen as “an echo, the memory some girl kept of her home after she had followed her husband to another land” (100) these physical objects serve to maintain a connection with Poseidonia, with their past. Through this, Harmonia and the other refugees that flee can try and maintain their hold on “a lost female past” (Hoberman 95). As they flee with the Lucanians on their heels, there “was not time for Harmonia to remember she was leaving Poseidonia forever” (Bryher 113). Too caught up in the present moment—and the present danger—Harmonia forgets to acknowledge the past that she's leaving behind. Her objects, “through the sheer force of her carrying them, will represent the past” (Hoberman 96) or they at least attempt to represent it. The refugees, while fleeing, are acutely aware of their loss. Phila, Lykos' wife, focuses on the familiar coastline as she tries “to fix every outline in her mind, the dip, the serpentine furrow, the twin peaks that rose like lily stems” (Bryher 115). The description of the landscape, obviously feminine, are images that will soon be forgotten. Harmonia's last look is of “the towers and the white gateway through which they had passed to freedom” (119). This final glimpse of a “receding female landscape” (Hoberman 96) exaggerates this horrific loss on behalf of the Poseidonians. What has been lost is in fact “an unmediated relationship to the feminine, to language, and to the past” (Hoberman 96). This loss of a matriarchal, feminine Greece resonates with the characters themselves. In her act of rescuing the statue and her mother's mirror, Harmonia tries to “recall her mother's lost self,” which is “endlessly reproducible but inaccessible” (Hoberman 100). Even as they sail across the sea, another maternal image, Harmonia wishes “that instead of going to Salente she could float forever across these calm, indifferent waves” (Bryher 116). This desire is also equally unobtainable for Harmonia, tasked with keeping Hera's worship alive, temple or no. Lykos succinctly realizes their problem as his wife daydreams about healing his leg in Salente. He tells her, “I shall never bring you another olive crown...the muscles were withered, and though they might ease the stiffness, nothing could cure the limb” (116). Just like their recreation of a maternal past, the

damaged and atrophied muscles will never heal fully and be restored. Lykos continues by saying to his wife: “never believe the philosophers who say that we learn through suffering. I have never accepted either my lameness or our slavery. I have endured but resented them, every waking hour” (116). With this Lykos voices disdain for those who try to rationalize suffering, particularly the suffering of those not quite within the cultural norm—the queer. While there is an effort to retain their past, only this suffering remains along with the objects retrieved. This attempt to recall a loss of the feminine through relics mimics the nostalgia Bryher's contemporaries developed for an ancient, pre-Hellenic culture. More than that, however, is the active desire for a woman-identified experience behind these connections to a fantasmatic female body. While they do try, the loss of homeland and temple ensures that the relationship they once had with the matriarchal is forever out of reach, just as the past is unable to be revisited. Despite such a loss, these connections to the metaphoric female body will continue to be reproduced but inaccessible, much like the relation to history and historical fiction.

Homosocial Relationships and Lesbian Possibility in *Roman Wall*

The question of “when is a lesbian narrative a lesbian narrative” is brought to the forefront in Bryher's historical fiction, particularly in her 1954 novel, *Roman Wall*. Taking place in a small Roman outpost in what is now Switzerland, Orba is a pastoral setting and site of great tension in 265 AD, as Roman citizens and other peoples fear of invasion by the Germanic Alemanni tribes. Most of the primary characters in the novel are men—so what makes it a “lesbian” narrative? One won't find any literal lesbian characters in this novel. While written in the later part of what constitutes the “modernist” literary period, Bryher and her notion of lesbianism stems from the work of the sexologists—Kraft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis, as well as the work of Sigmund Freud himself, even going so far as to correspond with Freud and begin training to be an analyst herself. Bryher's understanding of lesbianism came from the discourse of Freud, as well as the sexologists' theory of the “invert,” or a person whose spirit is of the opposite sex: the mannish woman or the effeminate man. With this discourse in mind, as well as the awareness of the limits imposed upon her by her gender, Bryher's protagonists are nearly always male, with the exception of Harmonia in *Gate to the Sea*. In *Roman Wall*, as with *Gate to the Sea*, many of the chapters are devoted to single events seen and presented from multiple perspectives and characters' viewpoints. The two main protagonists are Valerius, a disgraced soldier long forgotten at his post in Orba, and Demetrius, a traveling Greek merchant. Through their narration—as well as that of many others—the reader is privy to an event long-forgotten by time: the sacking of Orba and nearby towns, including the capital Aventicum by barbarian tribes. These shifts in narration allow for an awareness of the problems with individual perception, and from such fragmented and flawed viewpoints, characteristic of modernist writings, the reader is able to view the recreated historical events and queer spaces constructed in the novel. While

not featuring literal lesbian characters, the homosocial relations between many of the male characters and effective cross-gendering constitute a distinctly lesbian text.

While there is no such thing as an open, literal lesbian character in *Roman Wall*, Bryher was limited by the sentiments of her era. She could not portray lesbianism the way contemporary readers might expect. Literature being an important source for representations of lesbianism, at first it appears that “lesbian literary narratives appear to offer no major definitional problems” (Farwell 3). However, the lesbian subject “appears in a number of coded, indirect, and subversive as well as literal ways” (3). The result creates an abundance of definitional problems. Julie Abraham posits that “anxieties about the parameters of ‘lesbian writing’ have not been resolved” (Abraham xxii) meaning that there is much debate about what constitutes a lesbian text, and many assumptions exist about what subjects can be explored in “lesbian” texts. These assumptions “still limit our interpretations of what it might mean to consider any given writer as a lesbian writer, and consequently our identification of writers as lesbian writers” (xxiii). Farwell admits that the identification of lesbian texts has become “a complex theoretical problem dividing current literary critics and theorists...the word “lesbian” remains an elusive term” (Farwell 4). Bonnie Zimmerman noted in the early 1980’s that the term lesbian is “plagued with the problem of definition” (Zimmerman 456), yet theorists are still divided on a definitional level to this day. Traditional lesbian theory has treated the lesbian narrative as a “text determined by the shared experience among identifiable lesbian authors, readers, and characters,” which treats narrative itself as a “neutral tool into which lesbians can be written” (Farwell 4). Postmodernism treats lesbian “as a fluid and unstable term,” and makes narrative a “powerful if not closed ideological system into which lesbians enter only to be entangled in a heterosexual, male story” (Farwell 5). Farwell also suggests that theory has kept lesbian narrative “as a marginal form” because earlier critical interest “steered away from lesbian fiction because, in the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian

fiction was equated with popular novels, a form that seemed to lack literary depth” (5). She argues that the definition of a lesbian narrative has always been in crisis, because “lesbian texts reflect the ability and need of some writers and readers to disguise their sexual identity in order to pass as heterosexual” (Farwell 6). Sarah Lucia Hoagland outright refuses to define lesbian in *Lesbian Ethics*, because any constraint, she argues, will be absorbed by “the context of heterosexualism” (Hoagland 8). Often when the term “lesbian” is up for debate, so too is the “narrative” aspect of a lesbian narrative. Many postmodernists believe narrative functions as a construct rather than a reflection of experience, and that “it is already constituted as male and heterosexual” (Farwell 12). Farwell, like many other theorists, suggest that direct representation of lesbianism or lesbian characters can be “self-defeating” because it appropriates the “heterosexual nature of the narrative” (13). She presents a working definition of narrative in the scheme of lesbian theory as “an ideological system against which the lesbian subject...must be and has been written” (15).

Narrative is governed by “paradigms and codes,” the balance between the masculine and feminine, and “privileges male individuation and defines closure—either in marriage or individual triumph—as the resolution or transcendence of the tension of gender separation” (15). The traditional narrative structure privileges the heterosexual and the male, constructing this as the norm, which creates obvious problems for lesbian authors and the construction of lesbian texts. Lesbian novels, then, according to Julie Abraham, are “inevitably based on the heterosexual plot” (Abraham 3). By positing an “oppositional and hierarchical relationship of male and female” of heterosexual plots, narrative “disrupts or prevents female bonding” (15). Farwell laments that the inherent structure of narrative is “everything but lesbian” (15). The lesbian becomes a “narrative impossibility” (Farwell 16). Abraham argues that, with the privileging of heterosexuality, lesbian novels “cannot ‘normalize’ lesbianism” due to the confines of the structure (Abraham 3). If lesbianism is represented in the novel

“through narrative, as a matter of emotional, sexual, and social relations,” then it has to be represented through the heterosexual plot” (3). This dependence on the heterosexual plot is an issue that creates effects “ideological as well as formal” (Abraham 11). If lesbian novels like Bryher’s replicate the heterosexual plot’s “sexual prescriptions,” then “masculine desires feminine” (4). This creation and repetition of masculine and feminine pairings is “only one possibility of the range of effects of the lesbian novel’s dependence on the heterosexual plot” (11). There are also readily apparent “external pressures shaping lesbian writers’ relations to the lesbian novel: the threat of censorship; and the stigma surrounding lesbianism, which might be drawn to a writer by her production of a lesbian novel” (Abraham 25). Abraham posits that lesbian writers had several options when it came to create lesbian texts. They could “represent women through the heterosexual plot...give up on writing about women, at least as protagonists...give up on plot/narrative,” or they could “reconstruct narrative” (29). Writers like Bryher “turned from an understanding of the personal that both distorted and failed to contain their experience, to the discourse of ‘history’” (29). This allowed them to merge “the personal and the public as a way of constructing narratives beyond the heterosexual limits of literary ‘reality’” (29).

If lesbian novels are “formula fictions based on the heterosexual plot,” then there were various means of resisting these limitations (Abraham xix). One of these forms of resistance, Abraham suggests, when “faced with the limitations of the heterosexual plot, turned to history as an alternative source of narrative convention” (xix). While Abraham primarily focuses on the historical fictions of Willa Cather and Mary Renault, she acknowledges Bryher, Marguerite Yourcenar, and other lesbian authors of the early 20th century as “major contributors to the genre of historical fiction in the twentieth century” (xx). History, for Bryher and these other authors, offered “possibilities for narrative and for the representation of same-sex relationships” (Abraham xx). History became a “medium of representation” and at once “enables and limits possibilities both for the representation of

homosexuality and for the lesbian as a writer” (xx-xxi). While history wasn’t “the only alternative source of narrative structure,” (xxi) it was the primary medium in which Bryher chose to work. Bryher and other lesbian writers of this period were “acutely aware of the freedom from social accountability historical settings offer[ed]” (Abraham 29). Lesbian writers during this time chose to turn to history as “a source of narrative alternative to the heterosexual plot” (30). This was only possible, according to Abraham, because history is narrative, and it enabled access to “an already established narrative” (30). History, for lesbian writers during this time, became a “structural refuge from the heterosexual imperative” (30). More importantly, history has been used as a “source for defenses of homosexuality since at least the Renaissance” (30). Using classical figures like Plato, all the way to Christopher Marlowe, authors were able to present homosexuality in a way that was deemed socially acceptable. Another advantage of using history is that “the heterosexual plot is at best marginal within its narratives” (31). This is, unfortunately, due to the fact that “women are secondary subjects within history” (31). Due to this problem, lesbian authors were also faced with the impossibility of female characters as central figures within the narrative. Reflecting on her novel, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar stated that she had to make the central figure of her historical fiction Hadrian, not Plotina. Because of history, she says, “women’s lives are much too limited, or else too secret” (Yourcenar 327-328). If lesbian writers were to use history and “wanted to regain access to female subjects, they had to reconfigure “history” as well as narrative” (Abraham 32). Using male characters meant that “lesbian writers focused consistently in their histories on male homosocial and homosexual relationships” (32). Theorists are split on the interest of lesbian authors’ representations of male homosexuality. Terry Castle complains that lesbians “who enjoy writing about male-male eros” focus on that “more than its female equivalent” (Castle 244) while Eve Sedgwick has written on Willa Cather’s use of this trope and “the rich tradition of cross-gender inventions of homosexuality of the

past century” (Sedgwick 66).

Writing about Rome and the Romans, for Bryher, constitutes an act of transgressive sexuality. There are multiple characters that do not adhere to the heteronormative, patriarchal culture that they live in. With the patriarchal in this novel being Roman society, these characters either consistently or occasionally operate outside of traditional Roman values or come into conflict with them. *The Roman Wall* depicts the end of a strict empire as barbarians threaten to overtake the colony outposts in Helvetia. By deploying multiple points of view, Bryher tracks the tangled web of events and figures involved in the sacking of Roman outposts and loss of the Helvetian frontier, focusing on many central, interconnected characters. Her novel focuses not on exact, “historical” events, but rather on the homosocial relations between men. Situated in a space of geographical and temporal queerness, *The Roman Wall* uses the crumbling of an empire to explore masculinity and the problems of rigid sexual dichotomies.

Much of this experimentation on Bryher’s part has to do with geographical location. Because the story takes place at an outpost and not Rome itself, there is frequent mention of the wildness of the Helvetian countryside which impacts the characters living there. By being not in the middle of the empire, many of the characters have adapted to living in such a wild territory, constantly under threat of invaders. The invaders themselves are simply called the Alemanni, and are faceless. The only description given of them as a whole is that they are “the usual barbarians. Strong, healthy, stupid” (Bryher 42). In a civilization with a prominent slave trade, they are also “too dangerous to make good slaves” (42) which enhances their negative qualities. The Alemanni are a brutish masculine enemy, one that present the threat of destruction to outpost villages like Orba. Valerius, a disgraced Roman soldier, is in command of the small town of Orba, and the novel begins with his return from a visit to

Aventicum. He is an atypical Roman due to his past sexual relationship with his commander's wife. After such disgrace, his family drains their savings in order to transfer him to Orba, a satellite village near Aventicum. The largest city on the Swiss/Helvetian frontier, Bryher notes that Aventicum was the “main cultural and political centre of the Romans in Helvetia” (7) and likely where outpost commanders would report. The bureaucratic laws of Rome are shown to be flawed from the beginning and heavy taxation and tolls result in fewer travelers and a decline in population. There is less of a military presence as well, and the Alemanni's successful raids and increasing presence are due to what Ruth Hoberman calls “Roman complacency, corruption, and rigidity” (Hoberman 171). The taxation and tolls have caused less travel between the towns, and fewer troops being sent out to relieve others of active duty or guard the borders. When he returns from Aventicum, Valerius reports to his sister Julia but intentionally leaves out the fact that invasion seems imminent, trying to protect her. Yet Julia detects that something is wrong immediately, confirming her fears “that the situation was worse than he would admit” (Bryher 20). Attempting to deflect any concern, Valerius recounts his visit with the local authority in Aventicum, the governor Vinodius. He tells Julia that “the man's a fool” even though Julia notes that it “was hardly wise to speak thus of the governor of a province” (15). Already there is a disassociation on Valerius's part from the local authority: Vinodius the governor. His reasoning is because Vinodius has “begged [him] to remain in charge...till the autumn” despite being “due to retire a year ago” (15). The reason for Vinodius's request is that “they are so short of men” and that regardless of any danger “[they] are safe for another year” (15). This, of course, is the identified complacency of the Romans. When shown an Alemanni arrowhead found nearby, Valerius comes to recognize the threat, and that Vinodius has lied or underestimated the barbarians. Without consistent patrols, the Alemanni have been allowed to creep closer and into Helvetian territory while citizens like the governor are ignorant. The Alemanni are “in the hills in force” yet Vinodius “assured him that the

frontier was peaceful” (28). Valerius, at first, believes it “absurd to let the chance discovery of an arrowhead destroy his inner tranquility” (28) and thought it might've been bartered for in the market, or perhaps lost by a local. For an aging Roman soldier, Valerius finds it difficult to believe his superior—and main link to Roman society and law—could be so wrong. It takes the appearance of Demetrius, the Greek trader, for Valerius to change his mind.

While traveling through the mountain pass, Demetrius and his party were attacked by Alemanni close to Orba. Valerius's soldiers chance upon the fight and force the Alemanni to retreat, rescuing the wounded trader and his men and bringing them to town. Immediately there is a sense of dislike on behalf of Valerius and the Roman soldiers for the Greek and his men. When one of the soldiers, Quintus, arrives at Valerius's villa to relate the incident, he uses a mocking greeting and is amused. Quintus announces himself by saying “we come in peace,” mimicking “the traders' greeting, and although it was too dark to see his face, it was evident by the tone of his voice that he was very much amused” (Bryher 30-31) despite the fact that several members of the party were injured. Demetrius frequently cries out “Aie!” and bemoans his situation and injuries, but Valerius reprimands him. He accuses Demetrius of “creeping round the backway, to avoid paying tolls” (32). Wounded and caught trying to cheat the tolls, Demetrius is the object of Roman scorn. The Greeks' ability to travel over an expansive and diverse landscape is an asset, but not to Romans like Quintus and Valerius. Ruth Hoberman suggests that Bryher's depiction of the Romans is typical of the modernists, and assumes “the standard Roman is strait-laced, disciplined—a human version of the 'Roman wall' so often cited as representing Roman achievement” (Hoberman 166). While considered the Roman ideal, this rigid behavior and discipline has led to complacency and a lack of security for the colonies in Helvetia. The Greek traders are “at the opposite extreme” from the Romans, and they are “at once outsider and everywhere—a blurrer of boundaries, a crosser of seas” (166). The Greeks are “ethnic outsiders” (168)

who are depicted as “flexible, nurturing” and capable of going anywhere (165). Demetrius has no qualms with selling his wares to the Alemanni and Romans alike, for which Valerius judges him. Valerius knows that “the sale of weapons was forbidden...but there was nothing to prevent that hunter from slipping across the border and selling his knife on the next dark night” (Bryher 44). Demetrius’s behavior and attempt to sell his wares bothers the Roman captain, as “the impudence of it kept [him] in a rage during the whole of his walk down the hill” (44). The Greeks continuously clash with Roman sensibilities. They seem to “escape definition by their location, allegiance, or even gender, thus challenging the story of Roman imperial triumphs that would otherwise appear to be all history has to tell us” (169). The traders are able to escape definition due to the loss of their homeland, and the “allegiances that determine their actions are shaped by personal, not national loyalty” (169). Unlike the Romans who obey the strict laws of Empire, the Greeks have no such limitations and have been “crossing from side to side since they were born” (169). There is a seamless continuity of these male-oriented relationships formed by the Greeks, a seamlessness that Eve Sedgwick points out is uncharacteristic of modern men as there is a sharp distinction between patriarchal male bonding and homosexuality (Sedgwick 4). Bryher doesn’t make this distinction amongst the traders, due to the time period or possibly because she is encoding a sense of female community. This sense of female community is defined by Sedgwick as: “an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations links lesbianism with the other forms of women’s attention to women” (2). Bryher’s Greeks care for others in ways that “shade imperceptibly from social to sexual, evoking a continuum more characteristic...of women’s than men’s behavior” (Hoberman 169). Demetrius and his party, which also includes Felix, the overseer who is a Christian and former slave, are ethnically diverse. As a religious minority, Demetrius recognizes Felix’s worth and describes him as “an invaluable fellow though he is a Christian” (Bryher 43). While Christians are looked upon with suspicion or revulsion

during this time period, Demetrius clearly places value not on birth or religion but on efficiency. Valerius describes Felix as “a surly fellow” (46) and views him as weak for nearly dying of a fever, not wounds sustained in battle. For Valerius, as for the rest of Roman society, there is a clear social hierarchy, and ethnic or religious minorities like Demetrius and Felix are not his equals. He scornfully calls Demetrius “that wretched object on the bench” (37) lowering him to the position of an inanimate object, “wretched” in his suffering, yet worth no more than the bench he rests upon. The Greeks, however, are able to mingle with all groups of people and travel across many varied geographical locations. Demetrius stoutly argues that “everything moves” (158). This ability to travel proves to be an asset, one that confirms Valerius's suspicions about an impending attack and eventually ends up saving them all.

Location has much to do with gender roles in Bryher's novel. The character Veria, a ward of Domina Julia, is “the daughter of a freedwoman and an Helvetian soldier” (21) and technically a Roman citizen. Yet she seemingly has no gender, and is “neither boy nor girl but a bit of moving landscape, with a tunic looped up above dirty knees and burs clinging to its uncombed hair” (26). With no gender-neutral pronoun available in English, Bryher resorts to calling her “it” to further emphasize her difference, especially in comparison to the other Romans in Helvetia. Veria confounds gender categories with her tomboyish appearance. Because Veria has “grown up in the woods,” Valerius knows there is no use “of applying the rules of an imperial court to this child” (51). Veria is preoccupied with goat herding, and has been this way “almost since she could walk,” which is further underscored by the point that she is “used to the howling of wolves in winter” (51). Julia, who raised Veria as her own, also observes that “there was no trace in her the manner of Roman restraint” (Bryher 63). Despite being born a natural citizen, the wild frontier of Helvetia has seemingly 'robbed' Veria of the rigidity that characterizes the Romans. Born into a society that has strict notions of gender and sex,

Veria adopts a “fetishized masculinity” within the novel, and “evokes homo- as much as heterosexual desire” (Hoberman 173). This lack of gender roles and “Roman restraint” concerns Julia, and often she's seen throughout the novel scolding young Veria. Valerius even suspects that the reason Julia doesn't remarry is because she is too occupied with the younger woman, implying that her interest in the young woman is excessive. Veria is not related to either Valerius or Julia, but having been raised in their household, there is an undeniable hint of incestuous desire regarding their ward.

Concerned that the wild Helvetian is in love with her friend and fellow goatherd Nennius, Julia sends the young boy Nennius to Aventicum in order to disrupt a possible heterosexual pairing. She is “so anxious about Veria,” and while discussing the decision to send off Nennius, Julia constantly twists a towel “into a knot around her fingers” (Bryher 46). The physical manipulation of the towel underscores Julia's effort to manipulate Veria to keep her from falling in love with Nennius. When Valerius asks her why it matters, Julia “flung the towels over the wall instead of taking them to the orchard, as if she were numbed by some fatigue of the soul” (47). This “numbness” only comes about from Valerius's pestering, and Julia's consistent defense of her actions. Within the confines of their patriarchal and heterosexual culture, Valerius sees no reason to deny Veria a potential heterosexual coupling, and is puzzled as to why Julia is so resistant to the notion. In the end, it is Valerius who agrees to marry Veria. When she discovers her brother's plans for her ward, Julia confronts the two of them with “cold resignation” (63) and rebukes them, saying “I was mistaken, Valerius. I should not have sent the boy to Aventicum; you ought to have gone there yourself” (63). Julia scolds her brother, even though Veria has no money to her name and no status within their society. Marrying a Roman officer would be advantageous for someone of her low birth, even if Valerius is due to retire.

Julia's preoccupation with Veria occurs consistently throughout the novel. Despite being a proud, traditional Roman, her time spent living in Orba has changed her. Resistant to the idea of

remarrying, Julia knows it is because of Veria, “for whom she had been willing to renounce so much” (62). Sections from Julia's perspective reveal she regretted the idea of marrying in the first place, saying: “had she not spoiled her life by acceptance of that first marriage by her father's command?” (63). She is resentful of her position as a widow and head of household, regretting that she was never able to become a priestess to Apollo. Yet she quickly reminds herself that she had to obey her father, that she “owed her parents obedience,” but wonders “why had no vision come to convince them that her destiny lay in the temple, rather than the home?” (63). Julia aligns herself with the god Apollo, a male deity, and laments a loss that came about by being obedient. Apollo is the lawgiver, the deity that stands for justice, and Julia prefers him to the “wailing and the incense of the East” (61). Presumably the reference to Eastern religion is an allusion to Isis-worship, a feminine deity (Hoberman 171).

Marcus, the quintessential Roman and Julia's suitor, informs her that “if we keep the laws, they are a wall around us that no enemy can pierce” (Bryher 59). It is the obedience to the law that can protect them, or so Marcus claims. Despite her outward obedience, however, Julia bitterly regrets having to uphold tradition. The obedience to her parents in the past caused her to abandon the dream of becoming a priestess, the only position of power a woman could actually hold in the Empire. Confined by her situation, Julia engages in resistance by harassing her brother Valerius and forming a bond with Demetrius and Felix. This, like many other “relationships based on friendship and nurturing,” serves to “prevail over political allegiances, and boundary-crossers succeed where partisans fail” (Hoberman 171). This friendship she forms with the traders turns out to save their lives; the Greeks return to warn them and help them escape. In order to do this, however, Demetrius is forced to forge official documents that order Valerius to fall back to the nearest stronghold. The Roman citizens uphold their laws until the very end, participating in their destruction. The laws of Rome are “for Bryher...inseparable from blindness and inflexibility” (171). The qualities desirable of being a Roman

citizen are what leads to Orba and Aventicum's downfall, and characters like Vinodius the governor perish.

Vinodius is the highest form of authority for Roman civilians in Helvetia, yet other characters like Valerius and Demetrius quickly realize how blind he is to the impending threat. The root words of his name, both *vino* and *dios* come together to mean “radiant, or divine, wine” (OED). A fairly obvious name, Vinodius is a drunken fool, confirming what Valerius said earlier in the novel. Despite the eminent position, Vinodius is cruel, vain, and bored. What glimpses the reader has into his mindset are bogged down by it. He revels in the power he has over other people, particularly his enemies, and is more occupied with physical pleasure and meting out punishment than anything else. Vinodius declares that he “was not afraid of the barbarians. Raurica and Vindonissa were there to repulse them if they crossed the river in large numbers, but it was impossible to prevent a village or two from being burned” (Bryher 100-101). With no thought to the potential casualties by his negligence, Vinodius instead holds large gladiatorial games, when the money could instead be spent on more troops or equipment. Instead of caution, Vinodius is blinded by complacency, thinking “the Empire and I are one” (101) and as the representative of the Emperor Gallien, he will always be well taken care of. Already he predicts the outcome of the barbarian threat, saying “in two years, or perhaps three, Gallien would come with his legions, cross the Rhine, fight one battle, and the land would be secure again” (101). His simplistic way of thinking at once underestimates the Alemanni forces and places too much confidence in the Empire's strength—believing it to be synonymous with his own. Despite his stupidity and blindness, Vinodius's confidence in Gallien and the Empire is entirely personal, as he fought beside the emperor when they were in Gaul. While falling asleep at the very games he paid for, Vinodius dreams of Gallien, not his wife Tullia. As an avid follower of Freud, and a one time psychoanalyst in training, Bryher does not include the dream of Gallien to be a mere diversion from the

bloody gladiators. Gallien appears, reminiscing with him about their younger days. He asks: “do you remember how my father sent us over the river together, with a single cloak, and only pulse for supper, as if cold and hunger were the only ways to leadership?” (111). That this vision of Gallien invokes his father, the former Emperor, suggests a reiteration of the patriarchal culture they live in. Yet the single cloak given to them, passed down from the father, is given for both of them to share. The climate of Gaul is colder than that of Rome, which implies that Vinodius and Gallien had to huddle beneath it to stay warm. Such closeness in order to survive the wilder landscape during their conquest implies a connotation of homosexual unity. Despite being an event long past, this memory is important to Vinodius and comes to him in the midst of what is supposed to be the event of a season. Gallien tells him: “I would not have left you in Aventicum so long, but the place was more important than it seemed. I can give you Narbonensis, or will you remain with me at my camp? It is lonely here, I need a friend” (111). But then Vinodius blinks, and it all disappears. He realizes that he had been sleeping, and “there was no Emperor” (111). This lost past, lost camaraderie, is important to Vinodius. Despite his high position, he longs for the male friendship of the Emperor himself, while a gladiator has finished and “look[ed] up at him with uplifted sword” (111). The fact that his dreams are centered around this charged and suggestive male friendship is reinforced by the actions around him. The gladiator looks to Vinodius for validation (by giving him the thumbs up) with an uplifted sword. The phallic imagery is twofold: first the sword of the gladiator, and the thumbs up given to the victor. Clearly Vinodius longs to be in central Rome, to have that relationship with Gallien once more, but it is Gallien who sends him away and forgets him. The laws that he holds dear, which forbid him from questioning orders or abandoning his post, end up being his downfall. With the inability to adapt to his present climate and surroundings, Demetrius remarks to his friend Thallus, Vinodius's steward, that “the barbarians move, and you and your fellows in the Treasury watch our misery with a marble indifference” (195). The

connection Demetrius makes between the Treasury and the Romans is an apt one, for the “marble indifference” that they hold is the key to their demise, much like the building itself. As the Alemanni attack Aventicum, citizens watch as “there was a roar, the ground shook as if an earthquake had shattered it, and the great wall of the Treasury cracked and fell forward upon the thin line of the advancing Romans” (205). The Roman wall, the symbol of their laws and order, crushes Vinodius and the rest of the Roman defense. A survivor notes that “somewhere in that desolation, Vinodius and his legionaries were buried under the wall...the law scrolls and the hunting gear were indistinguishable ash on a burning courtyard” (206). Their laws not only proved useless in a time of crisis, but they are indistinguishable from habits of pleasure once the attack starts. All becomes ash on a courtyard, lost to history. Vinodius and the Romans are ultimately crushed beneath the weight of their own ignorance, their false sense of security. Demetrius's observations are keen, and the Romans are destroyed by their own inflexibility, breaking before they bend. He is present when Vinodius is warned of impending invasion, though the governor forbids him from spreading the word and possibly saving hundreds of lives. Vinodius informs the Greek that “one syllable about what you have heard and it will be hanging, not flogging, remember” (152-153) yet Demetrius goes to the messenger almost immediately afterward. He “often wondered afterwards at his impudence, but perhaps it was his almost insolent questioning of the officer that had saved them” (153). Despite the threat of death, Demetrius goes ahead and questions the officer, before fleeing the city with his company and friends.

Demetrius's ability to adapt is not only important as a trader, but as a survivor of the raids on the provinces. “Everything moves” (158) he tells his friends, quoting Heraclitus and reminding them that if the barbarians can traverse this wild frontier, so too can they. The barbarians moved “in a brutal, continuous wave” (158) and they must follow the example or else be trampled in the path of the Alemanni horde. His friend Thallus, another Greek, bemoans the loss of material goods by leaving in

haste, but Demetrius rebukes him by saying: “life is fluidity and change” (195). It is with this change that the Greeks adapt and survive; Demetrius and Thallus are able to flee Aventicum and warn the citizens of Orba in time. Even though Demetrius and company are “often outside the law, [they are] also more humane and better able to survive than their more law-abiding but narrow-minded contemporaries” (Hoberman 172). The Greeks are nurturing and embrace the homosocial relationships that form, instead of rejecting them or looking down on them like their Roman counterparts. Looked down upon because they often operate outside the laws, it is this quality that saves them—and Valerius in turn. Hoberman remarks that it’s “precisely this sense of order, however, that nearly kills Julia and her brother Valerius” because even when “they realize their outpost is surrounded by the Alemanni, Julia and her brother Valerius will not leave until a command comes from the Roman commander, who, they are perfectly aware, has forgotten they exist” (Hoberman 171). Aware of their stubbornness, Demetrius takes it upon himself to help save Valerius and the citizens of Orba. Thallus, the Greek steward, has access to his master's chambers and official seal. Demetrius knows that it is a tremendous risk, but he “remembered Valerius, and the feeling of security that they had had, inside Orba” (155) and commands Thallus to forge an official document from Vinodius. If they accomplish that, it serves a dual purpose, because if they “can send word to Valerius to withdraw from Orba, his men will guard [them] as far as Pennilocus” (155). Demetrius takes extra care to help Thallus escape with him, even though the Greek steward is burdened with ill health and a young boy slave, Aristo. Some see it to be a burden, even Felix, who comments “oh, those Greeks! Risk or no risk, how they clung to each other” (Bryher 171). The Greeks feel compelled to not only help one another, but to aid those they've befriended, like Julia and Valerius. Despite his initial scorn for Demetrius, Valerius comes to trust the trader, and even unknowingly owes him his life. Valerius and Demetrius share another common bond, however, in the form of Valerius's past lover, Fabula.

While never making an appearance in the novel, Fabula proves to be a mythical figure that connects the protagonists. Her name alone means a fable or story (OED), and she is larger than life. Both Demetrius and Valerius mistake her for a goddess, separately. Demetrius describes her as having the body “of a youth, the skin hardly bronzed, and not lined, yet I knew I was in the presence of something ancient and timeless, a flower, if you will, from the youth of the world” (Bryher 197). Valerius recounts his past love to Veria, saying “there was a goddess coming down the path...she was something beyond us mortals” (Bryher 53). He dives into the river, crossing it to meet her. Fabula stands alone with “the outline of her body under her transparent tunic” before Valerius, who can only stand “dripping wet, in front of her, in a hollow between two banks of willow” (53). With the willow surrounding them, a tree characterized for being pliable, it can also be seen as a symbol of grief for unrequited love or the loss of a mate (OED). For Valerius to meet this ethereal woman snugly between two banks of willow, it is another emphasis on their doomed pairing. Soon they are caught, and “there was a divorce...and then she disappeared” (Bryher 54). Her other features are just as unfixable as her location to the current day Valerius. Her eyes are described as “oceanic” and “wave-blue” (184). When asked if she was his only lover, Valerius is quick to assure Veria that she was not, but that Fabula “had an intelligence of the body as well as the mind; that made her different from the others” (54). With that single movement across the river, Valerius meets Fabula and is forever changed by her. He tells Veria that they “used to talk of immortality, but not in the sense that Julia knew the word; it had nothing to do with duty” (55). For Fabula, immortality is not linked to the Roman laws and, by seducing Valerius, she operates outside of them. Immortality for Fabula, Valerius says, is “a state...of seeing” (55). Revealed that Fabula “wanted to go to Delphi,” Valerius believes that “the doctrine is austere for a woman” (55) yet the reader knows that Fabula has accomplished her goal—Demetrius meets her when she has become a priestess. The reference to immortality as seeing is linked to Delphi,

where the oracle would have visions from Apollo. Fabula's desire is uninhibited by Roman laws, for even after a divorce she succeeds in becoming a priestess. For Valerius, Fabula is not just an occasional lover, nor is she a femme fatale. Fabula is a “hint of an alternative past, a palimpsestic reminder of lost intimacy” (Hoberman 172). She refuses to go away, and for a moment while discussing her, Valerius “seemed to feel her breasts under his hands again, and the cool skin that had sharpened his own fever” (Bryher 55). She “is a moment in the past that refuses to stay there, an erasure that refuses to stay erased” (Hoberman 173). Even though she has been physically left behind, Fabula is never far from Valerius's thoughts. Her memory serves to determine his past and guide his present through his constant recollection of her. This encounter with the otherworldly Fabula reveals his vulnerability, for “Roman walls are vulnerable not only because of their rigidity; the very history that records their defeat can be subverted, when movement and memory provide alternative stories” (173). This loss is the loss of the female body, one that Valerius seeks to find again in his present. His search is for the “fantasmatic female body” (Hoberman 170) and is one characterized by excess. This “disruptive excess” (Irigaray 78) is disruptive only because Fabula refuses to be contained within Roman laws, and defies being categorized by what Irigaray calls an “economy of the Same” (74). For Irigaray, this characteristic of excess within female sexuality “resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept” (79). Her excess causes her to overflow the normal boundaries for women in Roman society, and subsequently becomes a myth or fable in the minds of men. Not only is her life undamaged by the scandal of the affair and divorce, but she continues on to become the priestess she always desired, and captivates everyone who visits her temple. This active yearning for Fabula on Valerius's (and Demetrius's) part is characteristic of what Teresa de Lauretis calls lesbian fetishism. This fetishism that de Lauretis describes is not negative, but rather restages “the subject's own loss and recovery of the female body” (de Lauretis 265). Because Bryher is a “masquer

of masculinity” (Hoberman 165) she codes this desire for the female body in that of a male character. She enacts a “narrative cross-dressing” that can be interpreted as an attempt to “through a fetishized masculinity, to simultaneously control the loss and adopt the masculine role that most effectively signifies desire for the female body” (173). Through her cross-writing, Bryher is able to express love for a symbolic female body, one that captivates Valerius. The symbolic “recovery” of this female body, for Valerius, is in his promise to marry Veria, when he tells her “we shall reach Ceresio and end our lives there together” (Bryher 219). He muses that “perhaps the world is a fable” (219) and he cannot get back his lost time with Fabula, but at least he has Veria, a somewhat recovery of that lost female body. While not the larger than life goddess, Veria “would let him dream in peace” (218) and Valerius is happy during this movement from one life to his new one in Ceresio.

This final movement towards Ceresio characterizes the transgressive quality that Bryher associates with travel. The themes of loss and recovery permeate the novel, with the only way of surviving being able to follow through with periods of movement. The flexibility required to traverse not just geographical landscapes, but mental ones, is a quality Bryher esteems throughout the novel. Those who are incapable are ultimately destroyed. Characters like Demetrius and the Greeks are consistently transgressive, moving outside the boundaries of rigid, heteronormative Rome and its colonial frontier. Even Julia and Valerius, Romans themselves, exhibit tendencies to resist or act against those laws, allowing for brief vacillations between spaces.

Chapter Three – Ruan and Post-Arthurian Britain

Like many historical fiction novels that feature boy heroes and adventures, Bryher's 1960 novel *Ruan* features a young man who desires adventure. The only of her historical novels set in a Celtic Britain, *Ruan* explores the life of a boy training to enter the priesthood. Unhappy in the druidic tradition, Ruan longs to run away and become a sailor, much like Bryher's own childhood dream. Without her characteristic shift between perspectives, the 1960 novel focuses solely on Ruan's viewpoint as he longs to escape the confinement of his surroundings. As in *Roman Wall*, Bryher engages in cross-writing a male protagonist who has many homosocial relationships throughout the novel. In addition, Ruan also engages with several nameless women in “heterosexual” relationships. The most transparent of Bryher's protagonists, Ruan's desires parallel those voiced in her autobiographical novels and memoirs. As lesbian stand-in engaging in a play of masculinity, Ruan explores the spectrum of lesbian desire in Cornwall, Ireland, and the Scilly Isles. With a host of relationships, both homosocial and “heterosexual,” Ruan navigates sexuality as if it were the sea—turbulent, exciting, and dangerous. Using legends and Ruan's own experience, the novel creates a space for transgressive gender boundaries as well as a discussion on the past and how history is formed. Bryher explores the ways in which traditions come to an end and others arise, and how history and experience changes depending on the dominant cultural discourse in place.

In her introduction, Bryher explains her reasoning for the novel's setting, describing a fascination with early Britain that she gained through influential texts and archeological discovery. “The world of research opened to me,” she states, when she “discovered *The Legend of Sir Gawain* by Jessie L. Weston at the age of sixteen” (Bryher 10). Weston, a female scholar, compiles fragments as well as French and German writings on the figure of Sir Gawain, connecting him to early Celtic

religious beliefs. Using a female scholar's work in particular can also serve to “undermine the authority of traditional scholarship” (Hoberman 4). Citing Weston as one of her key influences, Bryher concludes that Gawain was later on generally “displaced by other figures. I was interested as a matter of history” (Bryher 10). Her interest in Gawain's displacement from prominence in Arthurian legend sets the tone for *Ruan*, with cultural changes like the rise of Christianity affecting how Gawain's story was told. Bryher suggests that “the Church may have disliked him because he seems to have taken over certain magical attributes from the early British gods” (10). With the apparent enmity of the Church, she focuses on how Gawain's story could have been told during the sixth century, and how that story changes or is lost through time. The story of Gawain becomes a parallel to Ruan's own journey, which is dictated by changes in a post-war Britain. Estimating that the civil war in sixth-century Britain ended with the death of Arthur and his opponent Medraut in 538, Bryher intentionally sets the novel “about a generation after this period” when “Saxons were still quiet but Irish raiders were plundering the coast of Wales” (8). The declaration that “Wars foster change,” (9) as well as the fact that she had survived two world wars, Bryher's concern is with the death of tradition and the new freedoms that are a result.

Ruan, the second son of a soldier and brought up in the druidic tradition, is both a willing participant in and spectator to change throughout the novel. Though he is in training for the priesthood, Ruan is explicit in his dislike for such a career. He protested when his uncle, Honorius, came for him, despite the fact that “there is no one else” (14). According to their tradition, the head priest “who was unmarried was always succeeded by a nephew” (14), but Ruan's cousin dies, and his older brother is already married with children. Honorius, a man with a transparent name, given his preoccupation with honor and tradition, is both proud and arrogant. He calls Ruan “spoilt” and reminds him of the prestige of such a position, saying: “Remember . . . we sit next in rank to the King and guide him in council”

(14). Almost equal to a king in social status, as well as being the primary resource for guidance in matters of state, the priesthood is a powerful and respectable profession. His uncle is “famous as far away as Wales, where they usually considered a teacher to be ignorant unless he had received his white robes from one of their schools” (14). Ruan desires none of the power or fame, remarking bitterly that “You cannot take a hunting dog from the woods and expect it to bark with joy in a kennel” (14). He sees the priesthood not as a gateway to knowledge and power, but rather as a confinement with no avenue for escape. Although she is mentioned infrequently, Ruan's mother delivers a prophecy at the beginning of the novel, telling her brother that “You will never make a priest of him . . . he is too like his father” (14). Ruan's father was a soldier who was “killed at the beginning of the civil war” (14) and he was caught in an ambush by neighbors when “sometimes it is village against village” (25). In such a turbulent time, there may be no bodies to bury. Instead, one of his men “found his sword sticking in a clump of reeds and had brought it back” (25). The only link to his father, then, is the sword. Unfortunately for Ruan, in the priesthood “we were not allowed to possess or handle weapons” (25), effectively deterring him from taking up his father's sword.

Chafed by this metaphorical castration, Ruan is restless most of the time—the very beginning of the novel involves a scene where he abandons his studies to attend the local fair, an act that almost certainly means punishment, yet Ruan doesn't care about the consequences. He wishes to “explore the world with both senses and mind” yet every teaching is “not to train us as sailors but to subdue the flesh” (15). In this mention of his desire to become a sailor, Ruan equates the priesthood with confinement, particularly bodily confinement. Despite a professed desire to explore and grow, he sees no possibility for either in his studies, which are described as nothing more than repeating verses, the students “held mock courts where [they] spoke about law to each other in an archaic language everybody else had forgotten, [they] prayed interminably for the safety of the King and his land” (17).

Ruan's irritation comes from the belief that the rituals and language are archaic and useless. They “chanted at school about otherwise forgotten wars” (16), and supposedly the years of training were necessary because “it was supposed to bring bad fortune to the land if [their] tongues stumbled over a word” (16). Ruan's tone suggests he doesn't believe in misfortune occurring because of a mispronunciation, nor does he care “if King Eudav's father were Caradoc or Bran” (15). Tasked with keeping records and genealogies, Ruan finds it insufferable. His studies involve history and its maintenance, as well as the rituals required by tradition. Interestingly enough, Ruan shows no desire for history or the past. The only “endurable hours” during his training are when they “help water the cattle and till the fields on the farm,” a task that his “companions hated” (17). Ruan's difference from the other students is readily apparent. While they come from miles away to learn from Honorius, Ruan only finds enjoyment in watering cattle and tilling the fields. His difference is revisited repeatedly, alienating him from his peers.

Despite this, Ruan has no desire to conform to what is expected of him, stating “It was not an old man with a tottering crown who mattered to me but a girl walking up from the mill with a basket on her head or a falcon swooping downwards as fast as any wave upon the wild dove” (15-16). Unlike his uncle, Ruan has no interest in being an adviser to the king and in maintaining this tradition. Instead, he professes only to be concerned with a girl, or in this case the ability to look at or admire women, as well as the actions of a falcon or hunting. This image, of a falcon diving to snatch a dove, suggests an image fraught with violence and power. The falcon is a powerful bird of prey and used in hunting, while doves are quite harmless. In identifying with the falcon, and by tying its movement with that of the sea—something he is drawn to—Ruan places himself in the position of an animal of prey. This is reiterated when he remembers that “the gods make us according to their will” yet wonders why they would have given him “the heart of a kestrel” if they intended for him “to live like a sparrow” (17).

Ruan consistently uses animals and natural imagery to describe his condition and confinement. Whether he be a hunting dog confined to a kennel or a kestrel devalued to the life of a common sparrow, he points out that it is against his very nature to act this way, to participate in this constricting profession of priesthood. “There were no girls, no hunting,” he laments, only the “incessant threat hung over us that if we did not watch things we risked bringing famine on the land” (17). This threat of misfortune falling upon the land for mistakes seems common. Not only does it add pressure on Ruan to conform and focus on his duties, but it forbids what he sees to be normal interests: women and hunting.

Although forbidden from visiting the town during the holiday, Ruan sneaks away to visit the fair despite the fact that “The King has a fever” and Honorius declares that he “will not have [them] wandering about a market place when [they] should be praying for his recovery” (17-18). Their positions as priests are tied to the king, and Honorius reminds them that such a position is more important than going to the market. Disregarding the command, Ruan instead spends several hours at the market, bartering, flirting with young women, and listening to a harper's tale. Always aware of the presence of women, Ruan flirts with a girl in a stall that sells cakes. Nameless, she's described as “ladling honey sauce the color of her skin onto the hot, crescent-shaped cakes” (28) which links her appearance and physical body to the dessert. While her father is busy, Ruan “leaned over, kissed her, snatched a cake from the dish and ran off into the middle of the crowd again, licking the honey from [his] almost scalded fingers” (28). While this seems like a trivial scene, it emphasizes Ruan's sexual desire and how unfit he is for the celibacy of priesthood. His behavior is also very imposing, his desire straightforward. Despite her earlier flirting, Ruan initiates the action and steals one of her “cakes.” With the honeyed cake acting as a stand-in for the girl's sexuality, Ruan doesn't think about potential consequences like potentially scalding his fingers. As a cross-written male character, Ruan's actions

with the girl become a site of lesbian sexuality, with the honey as sexual fluid and the fingers as a substitute sexual organ. Considering Bryher's interest in Freud's theories of sexuality, particularly lesbian sexuality, an example of penis envy was bound to arise. Distancing herself from classical psychoanalytic views regarding penis envy, that women “desire to possess a male organ in (the) place of the clitoris” (56), Irigaray points out that “The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex” (69). Freud's problem, she continues, is due to his “tendency to fall back upon anatomy as an irrefutable criterion of truth” (70-71). Bryher's use of hands as a substitute phallus may fall in line with Freud's theory of penis envy, or it could also represent the fact that the hand is the penetrator for lesbian sexual encounters. In addition to his kiss with the girl, Ruan also stays to listen to a harper sing a ballad of Sir Gawain, and one that is teeming with lesbian possibility.

With creative invention, Bryher reconfigures Weston's research of Sir Gawain myth into a “sad omen” (Bryher 30) and a narrative within the narrative that leads to an embrace of the feminine Other. Weston suggests that, “though the development of Gawain as a model of chivalrous knighthood is due largely to the Northern French poets, the character is, in its origin, Celtic” (Weston 11). Her reasoning is that, in addition to fragments collected, Gawain's power is seen to wax and wane with the sun, proof that “this Celtic hero was at one time a solar divinity” (13). With the link between Gawain and Celtic lore, Bryher can incorporate him into the setting as a “legitimate” tale told to Ruan and his people, and she can also re-vision him as he was revised throughout the ages. Beginning with a dream, Gawain sees himself “lying half in and half out of a ford, with the King's banner, ripped in two, floating in the water beside him” (Bryher 30). The harper goes on to detail Gawain's refusal to take part in hunting or feasting, due to his dream and the fear it inspires. The refusal to take part in a typically masculine activity like hunting, along with the gluttonous feasting that accompanies it afterward, implies a subtle

rejection of masculinity on Gawain's part. When he withdraws, his “companions left him alone, supposing that he had a fever,” (31) which encourages the idea that Gawain's refusal pushes him not only away from his friends, but away from gender norms—his friends believe something must be wrong with him. Another vision, this time in the fireplace at the feast, shows Gawain that “friend would take sword up against friend in the war to be and sons would betray their parents” (32). There is no clearer indication that the country will be engulfed in civil war, and by now Gawain knows this is inevitable.

Gawain's visions are at once prophetic and an example of how history informs the present and how it's told. Gawain soon escapes the war, just as Ruan escapes the nightmare of priesthood. Sir Gawain's flight occurs after he is given an important relic: his mother's brooch. He recalls that she once told him “You will have a harder task, Gawain, than most of your fellows but when it is over you will join me again” (34-35). With the knowledge that a ship is waiting for him, Gawain decides to leave his friends behind to their battles and war, while he goes to join his mother. Weston's research shows that in the Gawain story there are “references to an adventure, either on an island, or at a castle which can only be reached by crossing the water” with a connection to a “lady, who is either herself a fairy or the near relation of a magician” (Weston 28). Bryher imposes the mother-son relationship on the story, making it a possible site for the Oedipus complex. The item his mother sends to remind him to come home is a brooch, which has several red gems in it and one place where he “marked the gold in the corner with [his] teeth” (Bryher 35) which furthers the implications of incest and a desire aimed at the mother. A potential nipple or womb image, Gawain marked it with his teeth as a baby, and the brooch becomes a representation of his mother in her physical absence. Her voice comes to him, beckoning, and Gawain decides to go. The harper reminds the audience that “some have said that Gawain's mother was immortal and others that she was weary of the world and returned to the island

where she was born, far to the west, across the sea” (35). Gawain, by returning to his mother's island, embarks on a journey seemingly back to the womb. It can only be “approached, or quitted, by water, and Chrétien [de Troyes] in particular emphasizes the fact that the water is so wide that no engine of war could throw a missile across it” (Weston 33). Water, a natural and usually feminine image, is almost guarding the island from any missiles that an engine of war could throw. With missiles being an incredibly phallic image, combined with the fact that the engine of war is a male-operated machine, that they cannot penetrate the surrounding water or persevere to the island is significant. Weston states that in several versions the castle is “on an island, inhabited by women, keeping themselves apart from men, and owning as a mistress a lady of surpassing beauty” (34). Not only are Gawain's friends unable to reach the island, no seemingly masculine force can penetrate it. Gawain's earlier queer behavior and renunciation of masculine enjoyments becomes an asset—one that allows him to reach his mother's island. Not only is his mother the head of the island, but Weston suggests it was only populated by women. To win this castle, she says, involves “permanent residence there” (34). Hints that Gawain's mother is a fairy or somehow magical, in addition to the female-only population, reinforces Gawain's characterization as Other. When Gawain reaches the beach and looks at his mother's token, he is given another vision of “a madman striding . . . the length of the King's hall to seize the ancient glass cup that they had borne to the King after every Saxon defeat. It was the emblem of the land but the figure grasped it and smashed it against a stone” (Bryher 37). Gawain sees the future one last time, with the grail—the symbol of Arthur's reign and power—being crushed into nothingness. Yet despite his sadness for his companions and their fate, Gawain's fate is different. As he boards the ship to take him to his *mother-land*, his “heart began to beat strongly again, as if the years had dissolved with the dreams and he were a young man going to meet his first love” (38). In Weston's accounts, the “lady of his love was really that queen of the other-world, and he was, naturally enough, regarded as the

champion of all the dwellers in it” (Weston 45). Bryher conflates the roles of both mother and lover into one bodiless woman, one who is a concrete example of the Other by being fairy or immortal. She summons Gawain to the island, a recreated and natural womb, one that he never leaves, one that is populated with women. Sir Gawain is simultaneously transported back to the womb, safe with his mother and forever young, as well as on a veritable Isle of Lesbos.

Thus, instead of a story told about Sir Gawain's valor or chivalry, the harper regales the town with a rejection of traditional masculinity and a drive toward a distinctly lesbian space. Due to her reliance on Freud's model of female sexuality, Bryher portrays Gawain as a male because female homosexuals were thought “to act as a man in desiring a woman who is equivalent to the phallic mother” (Irigaray 65). This fairy ruler is at once phallic mother and object of Gawain's desire. When the story ends, the harper promises to continue with the tale of “how Gawain found his youth again in the islands of happiness” (Bryher 39). This implies that Gawain not only experienced a physical transformation—a rejuvenation and possible orgasm—but that he found only happiness in such a space. Instead of revulsion or disinterest, Ruan becomes captivated with Gawain's tale, where “something of the mystery still roared in my ears like the sound of the sea in a shell” (39). The sea becomes a site of desire for Ruan. The sea is soon replaced by a literal female character, who grabs his hand to dance and Ruan readily joins in as “an untied ribbon and a lock of black hair caught my cheek as we drew nearer to each other” (40). About to enter a ring full of women, mimicking Sir Gawain's choice, Ruan is pulled away abruptly. He is found by the bodyguard, and informed that he was “dancing with the girls while [his] master was lying dead in the palace” (41). The death of the old king forces the festival to a halt, and Ruan must go back to his uncle.

The shift of power and interests that come with a new king is troublesome to Honorius. He informs a stubborn Ruan that “The Christians have the ear of the young King,” (41) meaning he has

moved away from the religious tradition of his father and ancestors. Even more troublesome, Honorius laments that “They came as beggars and now they are as powerful as we are” (42). In her introduction, Bryher remarks that “although a change of faith probably meant little to the majority it must have been hard for the Celtic priests” (9). The loss of the old king means the loss of Honorius' power, and he becomes fearful of the change. Like change, this new king is unpredictable and can be seen praying for days or else feasting until completely drunk. As a resident of the castle, Ruan is privy to the young king's moods, where he apparently “would pick out a man for no apparent reason and treat him as a brother and after a few months, just as unpredictably, send him away” (42). While Ruan had no interest in the old king, he has seemingly paid closer attention to the young one, and had “often seen [him] galloping across the meadows on a black horse” (42). Even though he questions the other man's ability to rule, Ruan has paid attention to the young king, despite his apathy for everything else in the castle. The king's habits that shift between fierce religious devotion and self-destructive drunkenness, coupled with his treatment of random men “as a brother” carries implications of instability as well as homosexual impulses. Before he can “watch every act” (42) of the king, however, Ruan is caught up in the visit to the Scilly Isles for the king's burial.

Despite the excitement at a brief excursion to the island where kings are buried, Ruan's visit to the Scilly Isles is marred by the burial of the king. He asks: “What were the amulets of our great grandfathers but fetters to our younger selves?” (52). Doubtful that the King “was the embodiment of his race,” Ruan is contemptuous of “the pomp surrounding his burial” (53). To be buried on the main island, the king's body is draped in a purple cloth, a color that “took a thousand shells, found only in a single bay in Ireland, to dye one yard” (53). Despite the fact that preparations for the burial have been extensive, Ruan sees no point in the pomp surrounding it, particularly as the king is already dead. Like the amulets of their ancestors, he sees this tradition as nothing more than a burden. Because the young

king Constantine “intended to be baptized,” the old king is decidedly “the last King to be buried [there]” (55), and this burial heralds the death of tradition. This is not particularly worrisome to Ruan, who compares himself to Gawain, wondering if he had “also been a rebel” on a search to bring happiness while “the yoke of priest and ruler hung heavily on [their] shoulders” (57). Yearning for an adventure similar to Gawain's, Ruan seeks to escape this “yoke” of tradition and follow in his hero's footsteps. Marveling at Gawain's voyage across a sea that “ended in mystery,” he wonders whether “Gawain had sailed across it to his mother, perhaps its end was the dwelling place of the gods,” (58) while he is supposed to be paying attention to the burial and his uncle performing the rites. His disinterest in their cultural heritage and religious rites becomes not only a signifier of the kingdom moving away from their past, but also a grim reminder that many of the Celtic rites and tradition was lost over time. What remnants of Celtic doctrine remain come “from early Welsh poetry and Breton folklore” (Bryher 8). Further indication of the death of tradition is shown when Honorius becomes gravely ill.

When Honorius summons Ruan to his chamber, instead of issuing commands, he advises Ruan to follow his dream. It seems he finally realizes that the Christian king will dismiss him, and he implies that after it happens, it “will be time enough then, Ruan, to decide about [his] future” (83). Honorius confesses that he went abroad to study in Gaul, making a close friend named Melus and with whom he lived together for several years. Ruan notes that Honorius' “eyes shone as I had never seen them shine during his prayers” while the older man discusses his brief life with Melus, and how “Our harbor was a sheltered place” (81). Clearly his relationship with the Gallois Melus was important, yet he came when his master beckoned him back. He admits that, “I knew when I said goodbye to Melus afterwards that I should never see him again, never have another friend” (83). Honorius' acceptance of his responsibility in the priesthood meant the death of his only friendship, and one with distinct

homosexual undertones. While lying sick with fever, Honorius tells Ruan that he felt Melus was “sitting here beside me with raindrops glistening in his old cap, [like] the first night that I was ill” (83). He can still hear his friend's comforting words, real to him in the haze of his illness. Ruan is shocked by their similarities, but becomes all the more vehement in his desire to escape the burdens of his position. His desperation comes from the realization that, if he does not act soon, he could very well end up like his uncle—unhappy and with an unfulfilling career as a keeper of doctrine that no one wants, with no meaningful relationships. These relationships, between Honorius and Melus and Ruan with several men, is an encoding for Bryher “of female community” where her male characters “care for one another in ways that shade imperceptibly from social to sexual” (Hoberman 169). In order to preserve that potential for homosocial-sexual relationships, Ruan knows he must leave. If not, he risks isolation and an emotional as well as spiritual death. Like Gawain, Ruan must abandon the familiar, traditional culture he has been raised in in order to find spiritual—and sexual—freedom.

Before the trip home from the Scilly Isles robs him of motivation or opportunity, Ruan sneaks aboard a sailing vessel and earns a job working on the deck. Five years aboard a sailing vessel are portrayed in an aesthetic use of white space and the conclusion of a chapter. The several pages given between chapters reinforce the length of time Ruan is away at sea and unavailable to all, including the reader. When the next chapter opens, Ruan accompanies the crew to Ireland during the winter season. While there, he learns of his uncle's death, and that he had been dismissed from court immediately upon his return from the islands. A somewhat relation, his uncle's former ward Lydd reassures Ruan that “by leaving our uncle you saved his life” because “the King and all his followers were baptized” (Bryher 98). While Ruan believes he betrayed his uncle, Lydd informs him that it was better this way. After his disappearance, the king “could afford to be merciful to an old and dying man whom the people loved” but if he had stayed, it might have meant “a savage death” because of his ability to rally

the people “and fight for his inheritance” (99). While accepting this reasoning as logical, Ruan can only wish for a different parting from his family. Feeling guilt over abandoning his dying uncle, Ruan also longs for the ability to sit “beside [his] mother again, while she dipped a wooden spoon into the pot hanging over the hearth, to pick out the bit of meat that I most liked” (105). This desire to be back with his mother, even though she has been dead for years, mimics Gawain's desire to return to his own mother. Logically he knows that, had he stayed, nothing would have ended well and like Honorius, he would have “excluded happiness” (105). Despite being an impossibility, Ruan misses the bond with his mother and family, and seeks to recreate it with other characters throughout the remainder of the novel.

Unfortunately Ruan's attempts at a relationship with an unnamed girl do not go as planned. Met while wandering through a wooded sanctuary, the girl doesn't give her name but tells Ruan she is a maidservant to the Irish king Moram's daughter. Described as easily hidden in the forest and catching him by surprise, she wears a dress “the exact color of the growing leaves mixed with enough rust and brown to tone in with the branches” (140). Ruan “for an instant thought that [she] was a wild cat, sprang from the bough of a tree” (140). She intentionally blocks his path, before drawing him to “the edge of the pool with her bare legs dangling in the water” (141). Hyper-aware of her female body, Ruan excuses her “apparent boldness” and mistakes it for innocence (142). As she moves closer to Ruan, he remarks that “it was natural to find that my arm was round her waist” but laments that he “has no silver” and thus “cannot marry anybody” (144). Despite his declaration of having no money to offer a father, the girl insists that it's not a problem. She tells him that perhaps he had never met the right girl, teasing as “she threaded a white flower into the thong of [his] coat,” suggesting that “not all of us want rings” (144). The white flower connotes innocence or purity, yet the girl is the one pushing the stem into an opening in Ruan's coat. This is a distinctive sexual reference, that of the phallus entering a

vaginal opening, and the girl is the one initiating it. Ruan realizes later that he was a fool “to take the girl for a child . . . I had not been her first lover nor would I be her last” (146) and despite the fact that he “meant no more than to tease her with a kiss or two,” they soon find themselves “lying happily together in each other's arms” (145). The fact that the unnamed girl is not only sexually experienced, but actively seduces Ruan, is a reversal of traditional gender roles. She initiates contact by placing the flower in his coat, and remarks that “If I were a sailor like you, I should leave with the fleet and never come back” (145). The girl expresses the same desire that Ruan once had: to leave her home village and explore the world. For her, exploration also includes the sexual, so she sleeps with Ruan and, presumably, other travelers who don't stay long. With her direct statements in regard to sexual desire and active seduction of Ruan, the girl attempts to reclaim some sort of agency that is otherwise lost to her due to biological sex. Her active sexual appetite is even more surprising when Ruan discovers that she's the Irish king's daughter, when common belief is that “wantonness in a king's family is an evil omen” (151). Considering their location within a sacred wood, it's also suggested that it would “bring ruin to the harvest” (150). With such stigma attached to female sexuality, particularly attached to a king's daughter, her attempts to control her life are remarkable. Set during a time when women are married off when their fathers receive an adequate amount of money in exchange, the Irish king's daughter attempts to negate her “use-value for man” where she becomes “an exchange among men; in other words, a commodity” (Irigaray 31). She is determined not to be a “locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men” (31-2). Irigaray suggests that women are usually only a prop for a man to act out his fantasies upon (25). This is not the case with the king's daughter, who confronts and seduces a sailor, when usually the positions are reversed. Ruan's passive role in the seduction allows her to take control, using her surroundings to her advantage. As Ruan first notes, she almost completely blended into the wood with her dress, and it is almost as if she were inextricably

linked to the forest itself. Never seen outside of the forest, the only clue Ruan has to her identity comes by eavesdropping Lydd plot to expose him. That she is only ever referred to as “King Moram's daughter” suggests the typical position women occupy in this culture, as property of their fathers until they are passed on to become property of their husbands. It could also relate to the symbolic, rather than literal, importance of their encounter. Nameless and almost at one with the sacred forest, the king's daughter can be at once physical sex partner and metaphorical female body. She is literally a representation of the earth itself. For Ruan, she becomes a “fantasmatic female body” (de Lauretis 265). This body exceeds physical boundaries and becomes an indicator of lesbian “perverse desire” (265).

Knowing it will mean his death if caught for sleeping with the king's daughter, Ruan bribes a slave, Melvas, to help him escape through the forest to a friend's ship. Hurrying at night to escape the king's wrath, Ruan and Melvas believe themselves trapped, until Ruan notices “a shaft of moonlight fell on a doe that had come to drink at the pool, she heard the hounds, her ears quivered and she sprang into the undergrowth” (Bryher 167). The doe serves as a guide, for Ruan soon knows “as if it were a path that I had often travelled . . . we jumped across a stump onto a narrow, twisting track” (167). Melvas saw “nothing but thorns” (169) and Ruan knew the way despite never having been in that part of the forest. The doe draws their attention and they are able to escape. Despite suggesting it was pure chance, Ruan ponders that it might be fate. The doe and the moon are both feminine symbols, traditionally belonging to Artemis, and they suggest a link between the forest and Ruan's encounter with a woman who appears to be as much a part of the woods as the animals themselves. After his escape with Melvas, Ruan never considers the girl again, and she fades into memory as the forest fades behind him. Despite her brief appearance, the king's daughter propels the story forward, another act that requires agency. She pushes Ruan to create intimate friendships with men, allowing him to form

deep homosocial bonds and continue on a journey looking for a fabled island.

The runaway slave Melvas has a relatively short part toward the end of the novel, but his actions reflect the level of caring between himself and Ruan. Grateful for being freed, Melvas offers Ruan: “Here or in Wales, half of what I have is yours,” and he “stammered and he meant it” (170). Instead of having to buy his freedom, Melvas' parents “had to pay no ransom” and will treat Ruan like a son, should he decide to live with them (185). Despite the offer to share everything he has, in a marriage of sorts, Ruan refuses, knowing that they will inevitably part. He knows that Melvas will always be a farmer and he was destined for the sea. Despite this, he cannot help but feel sadness, for the “deep companionship of the last day and night would vanish before [they] made port” (170), similar to the other friends he'd made along the way. Ruan sagely believes that treasures cannot be kept, “be they love, moments or memories, they fade, they dissolve as into the ruins of a sunset until, if the gods wish to bless us, they take us with them” (170). With the unpredictable life of a sailor, Ruan knows that many of the bonds he creates with others—men or women—are temporary and will inevitably become a part of the past. His only desire then is to move forward, and find a mythical island like Gawain did.

Friedowald the Finn, who “came from the North, a full week's sail beyond the Frisians” (109) tempts Ruan with a strange map and the promise of a land untouched by anyone else. The journey promises to be perilous, and “It was one thing to talk about it over ale and a feast and another to set across an unknown ocean with so inadequate a chart” (177). Paralleling Gawain's journey, Ruan makes a decision that ends with a journey out across the unknown ocean, hoping to reach an ideal, fertile island. Echoing the land Gawain sailed to, Ruan seeks this foreign island as if he too would meet an other, fairy world across the waves. Knowing he can never go home, Ruan can only seek out this distant island as “no other course was open” (187). Unlike his former life studying to be a priest, Ruan

is excited for the journey, as it “might bring happiness, it might bring death, it would be quite new” (184). Seeking a “union” with this new land, as the alternative means death and destruction, Ruan anticipates “a path in sunlight to a place where there were neither enemies nor fear” (191). As he crosses the sea, Ruan expects a union with the land and nature that is undoubtedly feminine, and one that will protect him as Gawain's did.

This desire that Ruan has to connect with a metaphoric (or literal) female body is consistent throughout the novel, showing several representations of transgressive lesbian sexuality through cross-writing. The use of homosocial relationships between men also become an indicator of lesbianism, one that broadens the sphere of queer possibility. With both present, Bryher uses a post-war historical setting to expand upon the possibilities for change, with emphasis on the notion that traditions can and will die. By becoming part of the past, these traditions are eventually forgotten. Other traditions will emerge, and with them comes a subversive possibility for queer spaces.

Conclusion

With the stigma surrounding the historical novel, particularly women's historical novels, it is unsurprising that Bryher's works have not been written about extensively. When mentioned at all in critical scholarship, it is mostly in connection to her longtime partner, H.D. That Bryher's works have all but been lost to the past, however, is a tragedy. While she places a lot of emphasis on Freud's works, Bryher was simply using the only discourse available on female sexuality, particularly lesbian sexuality. Other lesbian modernists were in a similar position, but Bryher uses this discourse and the medium of historical fiction to open a critical discussion of lesbian sexuality. While scholars today still argue about what constitutes "a lesbian" and come to dissenting conclusions, Bryher's primary subject remains the reality of deep emotional bonds that can exist between women. Her expressions of lesbian sexuality are portrayed in a spectrum of sexual possibility. From physical representations of women to only the metaphorical idea or possibility of them, Bryher encodes the lesbian figure in multiple ways and characters. She uses historical fiction primarily as a vehicle to portray lesbian sexuality. Using historical fiction, Bryher encodes lesbianism and lesbian possibility, primarily because historical settings allow for portrayals of sexual difference without social repercussions. These settings allowed queerness and subversive sexuality, as writing in history allows portrayals to be more socially acceptable. Bryher is able to avoid social repercussions for open discussions of lesbianism by her use of coding and metaphor. With her subtle and occasionally not-so-subtle language, Bryher opens a discourse on the socially constructed nature of gender, particularly masculinity, and records an experience of lesbianism and lesbian possibility.

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