

Lesbian Aestheticism on the Eighteenth-Century Stage



Several recent critics have treated eighteenth-century lesbian literary representation as a depressing catalogue of rejection and demystification. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, lesbianism in Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse* (begun 1760, published 1796) demonstrates "the violence by which, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, sexuality is constructed."¹ In Daniel Defoe's *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal* (1705), Terry Castle discovers the founding metaphor for lesbian literary history: "The kiss that doesn't happen, the kiss that *can't* happen, because one of the women involved has become a ghost (or else is directly haunted by ghosts), seems to me a crucial metaphor for the history of lesbian literary representation."² Lisa L. Moore makes the most systematic case for lesbian abjection by arguing that eighteenth-century novels disseminate a "story of virtuous bourgeois femininity...in which the dangerous, potentially sapphist female friend provides the heroine with the opportunity to risk and then refuse sexual immorality." The lesbian needs to be "banished, mutilated, or killed off" in order that "the insularity and virtue of the domestic space" may be "firmly asserted."³

This essay argues that eighteenth-century writers were not quite so hostile to lesbianism as these critics suggest. The lesbian subject position was too rich and interesting a resource to eighteenth-century writers for its sole purpose to be channeling violence, insubstantiality, or scapegoating. The consistency with which suspicious women are banished might be seen less as a universally sanctioned judgment than as a routine bow to respectable opinion, an obligatory but potentially empty gesture. By making sure to include it, eighteenth-century authors opened up a broad canvas to examine and experiment with forms of agency available to non-heteronormative women.

The critics that I cited focus on the novel, the vehicle for emergent middle-class mores, rather than on the drama, which had a long legacy of representing nonbourgeois modes of sexuality. The drama, in other words, posed potentially more of a challenge to sex/gender hegemony than the novel did because it was less defined by bourgeois tradition. In this essay, I will look at how three eighteenth-century comedies of manners, Hannah Cowley's *The Town Before You* (1795), Henry Seymour Conway's *False Ap-*

pearances (1789), and Mary Berry's *Fashionable Friends* (1802), were able to create a space for lesbian representation unavailable in the novel.⁴

Eighteenth-century comedies, like eighteenth-century novels, rarely end without a moralizing set of judgments on good and bad characters. With regard to lesbian representation, such judgments superficially seem to function in the way that Moore characterizes eighteenth-century novels, with the condemnation of female characters associated with erotic interest in other women. Yet, what strikes me about these comedies is how easily they let such characters off the hook: "condemnation" is far too strong a word for these characters' fates. The question is why they are not treated more harshly. The answer, I believe, is that what these characters stand for is too important to be flatly dismissed. Specifically, these women represent a passionate attachment to producing or consuming works of art. They are aristocratic aesthetes trapped in a world of sober bourgeois moralism. Through them, these plays glimpse a possible mode of responding to art that cuts against the official didacticism of much eighteenth-century drama.

The career of an actual woman, Anne Seymour Conway Damer, catalyzed the appearance of these female aesthetes.⁵ Of the many aristocratic women accused in late eighteenth-century satirical pamphlets or obscene libels of having sex with other women, she was the best known. For recent historians of lesbianism in the eighteenth-century, Damer has been a pivotal figure, in some cases appearing as virtually the first modern lesbian.⁶ In this essay, I am interested less in Damer's life *per se* than in the way that her activities as a famed sculptor, gifted actor, and notorious gender-crossing woman stimulated eighteenth-century dramatists to imagine unconventional female roles. Damer, as artist and actress, offered an opportunity to reflect not merely on sexual deviance but also on the possible interconnections between sexual deviance, art, and the drama. In the plays by Cowley, Conway, and Berry, the result was the figure that I am calling the lesbian aesthete, the aristocratic woman of the world whose rebellion against bourgeois norms made her an object of fascination for the eighteenth-century stage.

It was typical of the extensive circulation of Damer's image that a character based on her might appear in a popular comedy by a leading playwright, Hannah Cowley. Although Cowley is little known today, she was prominent in late eighteenth-century drama.⁷ Garrick had patronized her early career, and she had built a solid reputation with a string of comedies, several of which continued to be performed into the nineteenth century. Her strength was the comedy of manners, and her twist on the genre was to underscore the importance of women: as Stuart Curran notes, "her major creations are all vehicles for actresses."⁸ She also gained some notoriety as one of the Della Cruscan who influenced the second-generation Romantic poets.

In Cowley's last play, *The Town Before You*, she used as her heroine a female sculptor, Lady Horatia Horton. Since Damer was the only female sculptor in England and had gained a considerable reputation on the

basis of her art, Cowley invited her audience to assume that Horton was based on Damer, and the identification was obvious to contemporary reviewers. The *Monthly Review*, for example, noted that Lady Horatia Horton was “a drawing from *Mrs. Damer*, whose birth, beauty, and talents, have sufficiently rendered her an object of observation.”⁹ More ambivalently, the *Analytical Review* noted that Lady Horton’s character was drawn “not without personal allusion, too strongly marked.”¹⁰

If Cowley knew Damer personally, no record of their acquaintance survives. In her “Preface” to the published version of *The Town Before You*, Cowley does not acknowledge that Horton is based on Damer or even hint that her character has a real-life original. Instead, she stresses that her plays are meant to instruct, and that she is disappointed that the contemporary theatre discourages her didactic goals. Given the current conditions, Cowley observed, no mother would take her daughter to the “great National School, THE THEATRE, in the confidence of their receiving either polish or improvement.... Should the luckless Bard stumble on a reflection, or a sentiment, the audience yawn, and wait for the next tumble from a chair, or a tripping up of the heels, to put them into attention” (p. xi). Cowley writes defensively, as if hyper-aware of the need to justify her plays by asserting their instructiveness.¹¹ As several reviews indicate, *The Town Before You* had an obvious moral, “to controvert the notion, that baseness and vice find their peculiar soil in riches; and that poverty, while it starves the body, must also necessarily starve the principles of ill” (*Monthly Magazine*, p. 330). In the play, the good characters are wealthy, and the villains scrounge for money.

This moral looks unexceptionably conservative, a rebuke to the Jacobin sentiment of such female writers of the 1790s as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Yet, Cowley’s conservative moral allows her to stage a defense of the female artist. Lady Horton, the character based on Damer, fits into Cowley’s plan because, as a wealthy female aristocrat, she belongs to the class that the play categorizes as virtuous. Cowley undercuts the eighteenth-century condemnation of the female artist and aristocrat by showing a woman who, even though she is both, is thoroughly sympathetic.

What characterizes Horton’s aristocratic social status in the play is her role as leader of a homosocial circle. Buckram, the staymaker, says that he is “recommended by lady Horatia Horton” and works “for all the ladies of fine taste in town” (p. 7). It soon becomes clear that Lady Horton is the leading lady of fine taste, the head of an elite sphere that seems to have little to do with men or ordinary domestic concerns. So attractive is this sphere that other women flock to her. Her studio is characterized as a “school” (p. 28), as if to make explicit Horton’s power to inculcate a set of values quite different from that of conventional female schooling. The link between Horton and schooling is especially pointed in light of Cowley’s regrets in her preface about the failure of the British theatre as a school. In the play, Horton’s studio has become a different, more attractive pedagogic option for women.

What women learn in this school is the powerful attraction of the link

between femininity and the production of art. For the play's ingenue, Georgina, learning from Lady Horton has led to infatuation: "I am going to Lady Horatia Horton's. I do love to go there . . . Lady Horatia does look so charmingly whilst at her labours; her sweet white hands appear like the very marble she is at work upon" (p. 11). Georgina hopes to become Horton's pupil: "I wish she wou'd teach me her art; I could spend my life amidst fine statues" (p. 11). Horton's sculpture has made her admired for her mastery and even more, as Georgina suggests, for the erotic attractiveness of the body as she molds her materials.

When Georgina describes her acquaintances at Horton's, it seems that attraction between women is common among them:

When I was last at lady Horatia Horton's, a Countess from the Opera came in, thus (*striding across, and sitting down abruptly*)—Bless me, Lady Horatia, how cou'd you be at home to-night? I galopp'd sixty miles to-day, have kill'd one coach-horse, and spoiled another, merely to the hear the Banti—
O! the Banti! (p. 12)

As Georgina continues, the erotic nuances in the countess' rhapsody about the opera singer become even more explicit: "O! her upper tones!—and, O! her under tones!" (p. 13). The countess' gruff manner and her violent transports establish her as a masculinized woman who has developed an erotic obsession with the Banti and her singing. Sir Simon, Georgina's father, misunderstanding the singer's name, asks, "The bantling! why, whose bantling was it?" (p. 12). Ignoring the special artistic concerns of Horton's circle, he assumes that these women are talking about domestic concerns instead of aesthetic ones (babies instead of opera) and are using colloquial English words ("bantling") instead of exotic foreign names ("Banti"). By including Sir Simon's uncomprehending comment, Cowley foregrounds the actual antidomestic nature of these women's relationships.

As for Horton herself, her interests in sculpting and teaching other women lead men to wonder about her erotic desires. Asgill, the hero who loves Horton, describes her as sculpting only female figures: "With an enchanting modesty she seeks for models only in the graces of her own sex, the daughters of Britain, and the matrons of Greece." Although Asgill sees only "enchanting modesty" in Horton's choice, his best friend, Conway, worries about a possible problem: "Very well: but you are a *Son* of Britain—does Lady Horatia—," to which Asgill "eagerly" replies: "Yes—no—I can not tell" (p. 17). Conway's unfinished question to Asgill could be completed in two possible ways: "Does Lady Horatia care for you?" or "Does Lady Horatia care for men?" The dashes in his speech and the uncertainties of Asgill's response again hint at the lesbian subject position that Cowley associates with Horton and her art.

Horton herself does not quite live up to these hints because the plot quickly establishes her love for Asgill. The point of the hints of a lesbian subject position is less to make the audience question Horton's erotic af-

finities than to signal her larger independence from masculine judgment. As an aristocrat, she is not obliged to fit herself in a respectable mode of female behavior by conforming to male expectations. These qualities make her able to defend herself as a female artist with little regard for men's evaluations. She mounts her self-defense most vigorously to Sir Simon, who, though an aristocrat, has a stereotypically philistine reaction to her sculpture. When he sneers at her bust of Medusa for representing "our women's faces, with young serpents hanging in drop curls, by way of a new fashion'd tete," she responds, "Sir, this more than gothic ignorance, is a disgrace to the age in which we live, and to your own situation. The head of the beautiful MEDUSA is amongst the *wonders* of the art. O! the more than martial skill, which could make BEAUTY horrible!" (p. 79). She continues by listing the works that she especially admires: "The touching NIOBE, mourning over her children;—the light ATALANTA flying from her lover—the graceful GANYMEDE caught up to Olympus for his beauty, did not of those strike ye? none of those awaken your adoration for the sublime art,—for SCULPTURE!" (p. 80).

Of these figures, only the mourning Niobe would fit a late eighteenth-century model of sex/gender respectability. The rest are a gallery of perversity: the phallic Medusa; the athletic, man-hating Atalanta; and Ganymede, a figure long associated with pederastic desire. Horton's artistic enthusiasms counter the role models of the bourgeois family. When Sir Simon, who is a business magnate, dismisses her rhapsody as insane raving, she sneers, "I suppose you have been employing *your* talents to the more exalted purposes of importing verdigrease, and blubber, and in making monopolies" (p. 80). Her aristocratic, classical, and antiheteronormative tastes make his bourgeois-identified ones look trivial.

Admittedly, Cowley seems to poke a bit of fun at Horton in the rhapsodic tone of these speeches. She follows the Augustan convention of lending a shade of ridiculousness to a character who is basically meant to be taken seriously so that she can avoid seeming to preach too crudely to her audience. But if she had wanted Horton to seem silly, she could have had other characters target her. Instead, aside from Sir Simon, the men in the play approve of her art, albeit in terms that ignore its association with a lesbian subject position. Conway, for example, believes that "it must be charming to see a fine woman sit with a chissel, and bring out of a block of marble, a form as graceful as her own" (p. 15). He heteroeroticizes and maternalizes Horton by turning sculpture into a weird form of giving birth. For one eighteenth-century reader, the reviewer in the *Monthly Review*, Conway's comments looked like a worthy attempt to defend Damer and her artistry. The reviewer noted that Damer's "passion for sculpture has not always escaped ridicule: but through the organ of *Conway*, a sensible young man of fashion...Mrs. Cowley had made no feeble defense of it" (p. 330). In the play, a more lukewarm endorsement of Horton comes from the servant Perkins, who comments that "a lady who employs her thoughts and her chissel on works of art, is, at least, *not idle*; and therefore, as Doctor Johnson says, not in the way of being wicked" (p. 83). For

Perkins, female artistry keeps women from their presumably natural inclination to licentiousness.

Through such comments, Cowley models for her male audience an unthreatening way of accepting the figure of the female artist, which they might otherwise reject out of hand. Condescending as such comments are, they participate in Cowley's project of using Damer's precedent to create a positive atmosphere around the figure of the female artist. Rather than allowing one character to give what would be perceived as a definitive defense of Horton, Cowley has a variety of characters praise Horton in different ways. These reactions make Horton a touchstone of judgment: sensible characters admire her; stupid ones like Sir Simon do not. Without bullying her audience, Cowley diffuses positive statements about Horton to create the effect of widespread, if sometimes grudging, social admiration.

It would be easy to criticize Cowley for not being more forceful in her defense of Damer/Horton. At the end of the play, Sir Simon even tells Horton to give up sculpture, because the art of "making a good wife" is "the noblest pride of an Englishwoman" (p. 102). While such comments are virtually inevitable in the heterosexualizing closure of the eighteenth-century comedy of manners, nothing in the script indicates that Horton obeys Sir Simon or agrees that her marriage will stop her art. Far more interesting is the play's overt use of a person as scandalous as Damer to defend the figure of the female artist. Cowley might have chosen far less controversial female figures, such as a respectable novelist like Frances Burney, as a model. Yet, to do so would be to lose part of the point, which is to find a new, exemplary role for aristocratic women. Since the bourgeois woman had taken over the domestic sphere, care of the body, and the nurture of children, Cowley instead gives to the aristocratic woman the realm of art.

The benefit of this choice is that Horton can defend art on its own terms, rather than having to argue for its instructiveness, as Cowley herself must do in her preface. The bourgeois female writer must make her work respectable by insisting that it has a commendable and obvious moral purpose.¹² The aristocratic female artist, Horton, does not have to trouble herself with morality, and can wax enthusiastic over the beauty of art for art's sake. She can even praise art whose sole purpose is its virtuosic display, as with the statue of Medusa that makes beauty horrible. Cowley uses the notoriety of Damer's sexuality to create Horton as a figure who does not have to be bound by respectable pieties. In her play, the woman associated with the lesbian subject position becomes the spokeswoman of art for art's sake. The play links female homoaffective relations with aestheticism and sets them against heteroerotic relations and didacticism. While its official sympathies are with its more conventional gestures, a countercurrent of sympathy with Horton unsettles its neat conclusion.

To turn from Cowley to the other playwrights, Henry Conway and Mary Berry, is to turn to a different kind of drama. Whereas Cowley wrote for the rough-and-tumble world of the public theatres, Conway and Berry

wrote for private theatricals. They were amateur authors, unlike Cowley, and the performances of their plays were far more under their control, since they knew all the actors and most of the audience. In terms of their relationship to Damer, they wrote for her, not about her. Damer was Conway's daughter and Berry's closest friend.

Conway wrote *False Appearances* for Britain's most famous private theatre, the Duke of Richmond's, which ran in the spring of 1787 and 1788.¹³ The duke had married Conway's stepdaughter, and the families were close; Damer mentions the duke and duchess frequently in her letters.¹⁴ The duke was not a remarkable man, but had long been interested in the arts and allowed a room of Richmond House to be adapted as a theatre. To lend luster to the performances, the famous comic actor Elizabeth Farren aided the aristocrats in rehearsals. The plays that they performed included Arthur Murphy's *The Way to Keep Him* and *Jealous Wife*, Susanna Centlivre's *The Wonder*, Nathaniel Lee's *Theodosius*, and Conway's *False Appearances*, adapted from Boissy's *Les Dehors Trompeurs*. Damer acted in all of these, with mixed results; some found her acting "detestable"; others, "finished and intelligent."¹⁵

As social events, the Richmond House plays could not have been more prestigious. So valued was an invitation to them that a motion in the House of Commons was actually postponed to allow members to attend opening night. William Pitt and Charles James Fox, inveterate political enemies, created a sensation by entering together. Political differences disappeared as an aristocratic class celebrated its exclusivity. On the last night of the 1787 performances, no less than King George III and Queen Charlotte, along with the Princesses Elizabeth, Augusta, and Mary, came to see the show. Although journalists did not witness the performance, they gathered all the information that they could from those in the audience and relayed what they discovered.

In such a setting, the scandals about Damer's past would have faded before her obvious inclusion in the most elite society. Merely to appear in these theatricals meant that her own class had not cast her out. According to the newspapers, her costumes were the most extraordinary aspect of her performances. In *The Way to Keep Him*, for example, she wore "an embroidered gauze on a white ground, a diamond necklace of prodigious value, wheatsheaf ornaments of diamonds in her hair, a girdle of diamonds and stars of the same in festoons for the dress" (quoted in Rosenfeld, p. 39). A dress of such value would never have been seen in a public theatre. Wearing it reminded Damer's audience that, at a private theatrical, they had the privilege of watching an aristocrat play an aristocrat. At the public theatres, they had to endure men and women from stations in life far below theirs imitating whatever they took aristocratic manners to be. But at Richmond House, they could see the real thing, and Damer had the diamonds to prove it.

Conway's *False Appearances* took the consolidation of class one step further. Whereas in the other Richmond House plays, aristocrats played aristocrats in dramas by nonaristocrats, in Conway's play, actors, charac-

ters, and author all belonged to the same class. Outside of this setting, the play lost its charm, as was proved when Conway later revised it for Drury Lane. It failed miserably; the *Critical Review* noted of it, "The play, like other *very* genteel comedies, is insipid...it is an exotic which bears not in our climate, and will scarcely flourish in our short northern summer."¹⁶ Similarly, another complained, "This comedy was performed originally at Richmond House Theatre and has been held in high estimation by the fashionable world, where it is to be wished it had ever remained, not being drawn with that genuine humour, variety, and strength of character which are necessary to the formation of a good English drama." The critic objected especially to the drama's un-Englishness, a sign of its link to an aristocratic class that imagined itself as international: "The General has taken his subject as well as his characters from a French piece; in doing this he has acted erroneously, as an English comedy should display English manners."¹⁷ For these reviewers, a play that smacked of "genteel" privilege had no place in the popular world of London public theatre. Their reactions are an invitation to pay close attention to elements in the play that run counter to conventional bourgeois didacticism, such as its treatment of relations between women.

Conway's play quickly establishes the countess, the role played by Damer, as a stereotypical woman of the world by having other characters condemn her for her love of fashion. She and her companion the baron "seek each other, because they think each other fashionable; they are complaisant without fondness, and intimate without being acquainted" (p. 3). Part of the countess's dedication to fashion is her enmity toward marriage. She encourages the Baron to avoid it at any cost: "No, Baron, no; I know you well, and believe me, Marriage is not made for you, nor you for it" (p. 7). No husband ever appears to accompany her, so her words to the baron seem to apply to herself as well. In her view, marriage destroys the easy sociability needed for success: "The true man of the world holds to nothing, or by the slightest bands, which one moment forms, and the next destroys" (p. 7).

Insofar as the countess does seem eager to form such bands, they are with other women. When the virtuous young Celia insists on her preference for obscurity, the countess responds, "No, no; I must have the forming you...Handsome as you are, and made to please, don't you pant to be admired?" (p. 4). The Countess's eagerness for forming Celia suggests that she is one of those pleased by Celia's handsomeness. As a woman with a supposedly superior knowledge of fashion, she offers herself as a teacher/admirer to younger women. To be eager to "form" another woman suggests a social version of Lady Horton's artistic activities. Like Horton, the countess imagines herself as an artist with a special relation to women, the ability to create their character. The countess's interest in young women returns later when she flirts with the heroine, Lucille. When, after hearing the countess condemn love, Lucille comments, "That picture of love is not very flattering!" (p. 65), the countess responds flirtatiously, "No, my little angel: it's painted much more charming in your eyes" (p. 65).

Her comment is another example of her penchant for “forming” women. Her flirtatious, condescending tone is that of a woman too sophisticated to love, but who can acknowledge the passing seductions of a young girl.

Whereas in Cowley’s play a lesbian role hovered around Horton as a producer of art, in Conway’s play, it hovers around the countess as an enthusiast for art. Since she does not have to worry about caring for a husband, she is free to lavish her attention elsewhere, on other women and on artists. In her company, the baron must hear “Signor Vacarmini...the greatest fiddle in all Italy—the most divine creature” (p. 5). The countess asserts her enthusiasms against what are conventionally considered weightier matters. When a character named De Forlis wishes to speak with the baron about intervening with the government, the countess brushes aside male politics to assert the urgency of art. Told that De Forlis has “come to solicit” a government, she answers, “O, nothing is less pressing; and, if you don’t get this, you’ll get another.—But, for the divine mortal, who is leaving Paris, the happiness of hearing him is confin’d to this very night. The fortunate moment must absolutely be seiz’d, or may be lost for ever” (p. 40). In the event, Vacarmini does not appear for his concert and the assembled company turns to playing cards instead. But, in a sense, the fact that he does not play paradoxically makes the countess’ aesthetic enthusiasm seem all the stronger because she attends even his non-concerts.

In the end, the baron fails to win the virtuous heroine Lucille and, as a result, becomes the countess’s full-time property. With her, he can “hear concertos, sonatas, and Vacarminis” (p. 71) whenever he wishes; and she exclaims in the play’s last speech, “His marriage is absolutely off then!—I can’t contain myself for joy” (p. 71). Her point is not that she will marry him but that he, like her, has evaded the enemy, a marriage that interferes with a life dedicated to artistic enjoyment.

In terms of the play’s script, the baron’s failure to win Lucille is presented as a moral failure: Lucille ends up instead with a better man. Yet, given the setting in which *False Appearances* first appeared, the play’s avowed distaste for the fashionable world and eagerness to celebrate a pure, heterosexual love cannot quite be taken at face value. The members of the audience were far closer to the wicked countess than to the virtuous Lucille. If parliamentary debate had to be suspended in anticipation of the theatricals, then the countess’ fanatical devotion to entertainment was one shared by the play’s audience. *False Appearances* uses the countess to criticize fashion in front of the eighteenth century’s most fashionable audience. Not surprisingly, its criticism is gentle. At the play’s end the countess has gotten everything that she wanted (specifically, the baron has not married), and there is no sign that she or anything about her has been lessened at all. She never undergoes the downfall that women of the world usually suffer in the hands of bourgeois playwrights, such as ruin or social embarrassment. Even more, Conway gives to her the last speech of the play, in which she reaffirms her admiration of the baron’s bachelorhood: “You’re charming as you are, we must agree, / And to be happy too—be

always free" (p. 71). The baron's failure to win the virtuous heroine is no great loss.

While for an audience like Cowley's that expected bourgeois pieties, Damer was a problematic figure, for an aristocratic audience that did not have to conform to such pieties, a character like the countess did not need defending and received only the most perfunctory criticism. The lesbian role hinted at in the countess' lines works not as a negative element of characterization but as a little *frisson*, a small hint of the erotically risqué. For Damer, getting to say such lines was, in this setting, the equivalent of wearing a particularly stunning diamond necklace: the lines allowed her to hint at behavior that only aristocratic women could afford.

The countess' artistic enthusiasm belongs to the same class of behavior. A merely bourgeois woman was supposed to focus her energies on her husband and children. An aristocrat, in contrast, was free to follow her aesthetic obsessions and to become a fan of virtuoso violinists like Vacarmini. Even though there is no logical connection between being attracted to the arts and to other women, the play joins these enthusiasms in the countess as signs of her indifference to the emotions that were supposed to characterize respectable women.

The countess' chief interest is in the baron, and her lesbian role surfaces only occasionally. But the casualness of Conway's treatment is itself part of aristocratic display because he allows potentially shocking behavior to be tossed off with urbane lightness. Where a bourgeois playwright like Cowley had to surround a character like Horton with layers of protective comments to make her acceptable to a masculine audience, Conway could simply insert a few highly suggestive lines into his script and let his daughter and his audience make of them what they would. Such an urbane display would have been particularly dear to the aristocratic audience because, as Linda Colley has argued, they were experiencing pressure to refashion themselves as national patriots, as Damer had done with her sculpture.¹⁸ In the private theatricals, however, they could relish the privileged exclusivity that they elsewhere were gradually having to give up. Indeed, aesthetic enthusiasm could appear as a new mode of defining aristocratic female behavior at a time when older signs of aristocratic distinctiveness were fast fading. There was no better image of that exclusivity than the woman of the world who could worship violinists and could casually occupy a lesbian role. In both cases, she could indulge possibilities that merely respectable women could not.

Mary Berry's *Fashionable Friends* shared much with Conway's play. Like *False Appearances*, it starred Anne Damer and was written for a highly exclusive audience; also, like Conway's play, it failed miserably when later produced in a public theatre.¹⁹ Its connection to Damer was even closer than that of *Fashionable Friends* because it debuted in Damer's own house at Strawberry Hill. Furthermore, Berry was no mere acquaintance, but Damer's best friend. Damer's letters to Berry stress repeatedly the strength of their relationship: "I am uncomfortable when more than a day or two without writing to you"; "Farewell, and rest assured that the greatest com-

fort I can receive on earth is from the idea of ever being a consolation to you”; “If I loved you but half as well, or thought of you but half as much as I do, I should fly to you” (*Berry Papers*, pp. 111, 123, 149).

In between the debuts of *False Appearances* and *Fashionable Friends*, Damer had been subjected to a renewed onslaught of gossip about her personal life.²⁰ Damer and Berry were quite conscious of the risks that their friendship entailed. In the summer of 1794, Berry wrote to Damer in panic after what seems to have been the accusation that she and Damer were lovers:

Do not think f[ro]m what I have wrote that we are to be separated, God almighty forbid—but a change of manner, a less frequency of meeting, a something must be done.... You see the necessity of all & *double all* the caution I enjoyed, & of which, would to heaven! you had not recieved [sic] so severe a conviction—²¹

Eventually, Berry decided to ignore the rumors and trust to her confidence in her own virtue. Yet her anxiety in this letter suggests how difficult a friendship with Damer might be.

Given this notoriety, even the title of Berry’s play, *Fashionable Friends*, would have clued the audience that the play was a comment on Berry and Damer themselves. They performed the “fashionable friends” in the play: Berry took the role of the heroine, Mrs. Lovell, and Damer took that of the woman of the world, Lady Selina Vapour. The relationship between Mrs. Lovell and Lady Selina looks like a self-protective parody of the relation that Damer and Berry were supposed to have. In the play, friendship between women is a fad, sustained by empty sentimental rhetoric, to disguise heterosexual intrigue. Women, as Berry presents them, are incapable of friendship not because they turn to lesbianism but because they are interested only in men. The play’s condemnation of female friendship and celebration of heterosexual union fit impeccably with heteronormative bourgeois values.

Lady Selina, the character played by Damer, is a prototypical woman of the world: one character says of her, “Nobody is so much the fashion, so much abused, and liked, and talked of, as she is” (p. 48). Her chief trait is her supposed devotion to female friendship. Although she tells Mrs. Lovell that one man, Sir Dudley Dorimant (her former lover), has sentiments that “are more refined than those of most of his sex,” she adds typically that no man has “any idea of the delicacy, the disinterestedness of female friendship; and to friendship I have resolved to dedicate my future life” (p. 20). The play works hard to make her sentiments look ridiculous. When Lady Selina is alone with her supposedly dear friend Mrs. Lovell, she is bored:

Mrs. Lov. How charming, if the world, and all its tedious forms, allowed one to pass more evenings like this, in the calm enjoyments of friendship.

Lady S. You know how peculiarly suited they are to my pensive turn of mind.—(*Yawns.*)—Thus agreeably situated, I could positively forget all time—I have no idea how long we have been together—(*Yawns.*)—Pray, my dear, what o'clock is it?

Mrs. Lov. I dread looking, for fear it should be near the hour that we must exchange this charming quiet, for all the noise and confusion of the masquerade.

Lady S. (*Aside, and looking towards the door.*) I expect Lovell every instant: how shall I ever get her away? (p. 71)

Although Lady Selina has mastered the fluent language of sentimentality, her body, in the form of her yawns, rebels against her pose. As it turns out, she spends time with Mrs. Lovell only so that she may pursue Mr. Lovell. Her female friendship is a ruse enabling a potential adulterous relationship. As with many works written during the 1790s, Berry's play treats sentiment not as an empowering mode for women but as a fad that masks hypocritical scheming.²²

Of the three plays that I treat, *Fashionable Friends* puts the least emphasis on the woman of the world's devotion to art. It may be that the attacks on Damer as a sculptor during the 1790s made Berry particularly hesitant to represent Damer as a lesbian aesthete. Lady Selina is instead closer to Sheridan's characters in her hypocritical mouthings of fashionable platitudes from literature about sentimental behavior. She justifies her delicate nerves by calling on Rousseau: "Heavens! What a misfortune to be constituted so perfectly unlike the rest of the world! Poor Rousseau! He perfectly understood my feelings.... He was the physician of the soul! the Esculapius of all feeling minds" (p. 25). Later, for a scene in Lady Selina's apartment, Berry's stage directions indicate that one side of the stage is dominated by "*a Table covered with Letters, Papers, and Books*" (p. 43). While the table's only purpose in the plot is to let Lady Selina write two short notes, the clutter of papers and books on it, like her invocation of Rousseau, associates her affected sentiments with literary faddishness. Such images echo what the other plays represent more boldly, the link between excessive expressions of interest in one's own sex and excessive interest in art, as if artistic enthusiasms and a lesbian identity went hand in hand. Lady Selina's feelings all come from books, rather than from what the play wants to present as the more natural sentiments of heterosexual marriage.

The play's moralistic ending eventually condemns Lady Selina's behavior as "the affected feelings of a sentimental coquette" and "the exaggerated sentiments of a false friend" (p. 78). Mr. Lovell predicts that once Lady Selina discovers that he is no longer available, "her attentions will soon be diverted to others less aware of the futility of her professions, the affectation of her sentiment, and the profligacy of her mind" (p. 81). Such comments place the play in a familiar plot that devalues same-sex friendship for supposedly more satisfactory heterosexual pairings.

When I first read Berry's *Fashionable Friends*, it seemed, far more than Conway's play, to be a strategic deflection of the rumors about Damer and Berry. According to this reading, Berry condemned friendship between women so that she could present herself and Damer to aristocratic society as women who really were interested in men and who recognized the pitfalls of female intimacy. If Berry and Damer could appear in a play that seemed to satirize their relationship and affirmed the value of marriage, then they had paid their debt to respectability, after which they might be allowed to continue as before. In seeing it, the audience was invited to become complicit in their masquerade, to participate in a delicate game of knowing and not knowing.

Yet the more I considered the setting, Damer's own home at Strawberry Hill, the less likely this reading seemed because it assumed that Berry was writing for a hostile audience. The attraction of a private theatrical was that one could invite one's friends and exclude one's enemies: Damer and Berry were performing for the hand-picked few, not for a public audience like Cowley's. For such an audience, Berry would not have needed to defend herself or Damer; she could assume knowledge and sympathy from the audience in a way that Cowley never could. Although at the play's end Mr. and Mrs. Lovell are happily reunited, the audience knew that Berry and Damer had no husbands and that, when the evening was over, the actors playing Mrs. Lovell and Lady Selina had only each other.

In this light, Berry's piece in its original setting seems less like a deflection of suspicion about herself and Damer than a display of the gap between bourgeois and aristocratic systems of value. The play presents one set of values: those performing it lived according to a different one. In most cases, the point of such a gap would be to convince those in the audience that they ought to lead their lives in accordance with the values presented by the play. In the case of *Fashionable Friends*, however, no such didactic intention appears. Among those of Damer's class, Damer's friendship for Berry never led to any negative comments, although condemnation did come from those of a lower social rank.

Fashionable friendship was a problem only for women whose lives had to be dominated by men. In accordance with eighteenth-century convention, the play uses the aristocratic woman as a figure for the fears of a bourgeois audience. But since the original audience and actors were far from bourgeois, it projects a shadow image of a different kind of female friendship, one never represented on stage but known to audience and actors to be available to women of the upper classes. Berry's play imports a bourgeois ideology into an aristocratic setting to heighten the piquant contrast between what mainstream culture was making of friendship between women and what was happening in the elite world of Strawberry Hill.

This contrast might explain why *Fashionable Friends* was so harshly condemned when it was produced at Drury-Lane. It was produced without Berry's knowledge or consent and ran for only two performances. In her

“Advertisement” to the play, Berry hid her authorship by claiming that it had been “found among the papers of the Late Earl of Orford [Horace Walpole]” and then noted, “after the extraordinary abuse that has been lavished upon it, the Executors considered it as a duty to the unknown Author to publish it” (p. 3). According to the reviews of the printed version of the play, this “extraordinary abuse” arose from charges of immorality. The *Poetical Register* noted such charges: “Much has been said of the immorality of this comedy by some diurnal writers, of whom it is not uncharitable to say that their moral perceptions are not very acute. That it contains immoral characters is true, but its tendency is not hostile to morality.”²³ Given the lengths to which Berry goes to conform to bourgeois norms of respectability, it initially seems difficult, as the reviewer suggests, to understand why *Fashionable Friends* ever invited charges of immorality. Another reviewer commented that the play, “on account of the morality it exhibits, as well as the general merit to which it is fairly entitled, deserves a better fate than it met with.”²⁴ For these writers, the play alone did not justify its supposed immorality.

No review that condemned *Fashionable Friends* for immorality survives. But, given the precedent of *False Appearances*’ similar failure, it seems likely that the perception of *Fashionable Friends*’ supposed “immorality” also arose from the transfer of an aristocratic play to a bourgeois theatre. For aristocrats, friendships between women were not the stuff of scandal; but for the public theatres, a play that had been associated with such friendships, even if it went out of its way to condemn them, could seem a vehicle for a supposedly immoral message. Within the confines of Damer’s home, Berry could make assumptions about audience and reception that did not hold true in the public world of the theatre. Damer was still too controversial a figure for anything associated with her to be easily entrusted to a public audience’s good will, especially without the layers of defensiveness that Cowley had included in *The Town Before You*. Berry’s treatment of female friendship revealed a fault line in British attitude towards the independence of aristocratic women. Whereas *Fashionable Friends* was perhaps surprisingly bourgeois for the aristocrats, it was too aristocratic for the bourgeoisie.

While the three dramas I have discussed were hardly havens for the free expression of homoeroticism, they in all cases complicate the supposed dominance of bourgeois norms in eighteenth-century literature. One reason that heteronormativity has seemed so grimly persistent in recent queer studies’ accounts of eighteenth-century literature has been that critics have looked almost exclusively at novels. Novels, being the prototypical bourgeois form in the century, not surprisingly conform most steadily to bourgeois expectations, so that looking only at them paints a uniform image of relentless homophobia. Yet to allow the novel to dominate our sense of the period is to grant it a hegemony that it did not yet have. Other genres, such as drama, were not quite so thoroughly associated with the ideology of a particular social group. The existence of the private aristocratic theatricals, for example, meant that plays presented

there might not fit commonplace English tastes, as in the case of *False Appearances*, or might clash vividly with the lives of those performing it, as with *Fashionable Friends*. Even the public theatres, as Cowley's drama proves, could find room within a quite conservative framework for defending the female aristocrat. In such theatres, the woman of the world's lesbian identity might surface more freely and openly than it would in novels, although the plays ultimately follow conventions of heterosexual closure.

If the traditional aristocratic woman was no longer valued after the triumph of bourgeois respectability, she had to be reinvented. The plays based on Damer foreshadow the birth of the lesbian-inflected aesthete from the death of the aristocratic woman. In all cases, the plays link the woman of the world's independence from bourgeois domesticity with a love for the arts. Although the image of the aesthete most familiar to the twentieth century is that of the gay male descendant of Dorian Gray, these plays remind us that aestheticism was originally associated with women, and with women who did not need husbands. Aestheticism rescued a positive quality for the aristocratic woman, whose image otherwise suffered so much at the hands of eighteenth-century writers. In previous representations, if the bourgeois woman was natural, the aristocratic one was unnatural—animal-like in her devouring sexuality, lack of self-control, and irrationality. The plays revalorize unnaturalness by substituting the art-loving female aristocrat for the bestial one. This figure, rather than simply being rejected, could be included in the social world of the plays because she claimed to have access to a higher, more exalted mode of experience than that of other women. Even when the plays questioned the genuineness of this alternative mode, the presence of the lesbian-inflected aesthete became a reminder of female possibilities that respectability strove to erase.

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NOTES

1. *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke Univ., 1993), p. 48.
2. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (N.Y.: Columbia Univ., 1993), p. 30.
3. *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (Durham: Duke Univ., 1997), p. 12.
4. The texts cited are: Cowley's *The Town Before You* (London: Longman, 1795), Conway's *False Appearances...Altered from the French* (London: J. Debrett, 1789), and Berry's *The Fashionable Friends* (London: J. Ridgeway, 1802).
5. I have treated Damer's life and career extensively in chap. 4 of my *Romantic Genius*:

The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role (N.Y.: Columbia Univ., 1999), pp. 91–124; I refer the reader to this chapter for details about Damer’s life. In this article, however, I am focusing on material different from that discussed in my book: there I examine Damer herself, while this essay uses Damer to focus on aristocratic ideologies and 18th-century dramas.

6. See Randolph Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein & Kristina Straub (N.Y.: Routledge, 1991), pp. 112–41.

7. For information on Cowley, see David W. Meredith, “Hannah Cowley,” in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers*, ed. Janet Todd (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), p. 94; Joyce E. East, “Mrs. Hannah Cowley, Playwright,” in *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts*, ed. Frederick M. Keener & Susan E. Lorsch (N.Y.: Greenwood, 1988), pp. 67–75; and Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act: Women Playwrights in London, 1776-1829* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 57–76.

8. “Women Readers, Woman Writers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 1993), p. 183.

9. Anon. review of *The Town Before You* in *Monthly Magazine*, n.s., 16 (1795): 329–32 & 330.

10. Anon. review of *The Town Before You* in *Analytical Review* 21 (1795): 399–402 & 399.

11. On the challenges facing female dramatists generally during the period and their responses to them, see Donkin; Barbara Darby, *Frances Burney, Dramatist: Gender, Performance, and the Late-Eighteenth-Century Stage* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky, 1997); Catherine R. Burroughs, *Closest Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1997); on the stage, see Joseph Donohue, “The London Theatre at the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in *The London Theatre World, 1660-1800*, ed. Robert D. Hume (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ., 1980), pp. 337–70.

12. For the classic argument about this moral pressure, see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1984), pp. 3–47.

13. For biographical information on Conway, see Brian Fothergill, *The Strawberry Hill Set: Horace Walpole and His Circle* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), pp. 177–207.

14. See, e.g., *The Berry Papers: Being the Correspondence Hitherto Unpublished of Mary and Agnes Berry (1763-1852)*, ed. Lewis Melville (pseud. Lewis Saul Benjamin) (London: John Lane, 1914), pp. 112, 164, & 196.

15. Sybil Rosenfeld, *Temples of Thespis: Some Private Theatres and Theatricals in England and Wales, 1700-1820* (London: Soc. for Theatre Research, 1978), pp. 46 & 51. I am indebted to Rosenfeld’s account of the Richmond House theatre (pp. 34–52) throughout my discussion of Conway’s play.

16. Anon. review of *False Appearances* in *Critical Review* 68 (1789): 157.

17. Anon. review of *False Appearances* in *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine*, part 1 (1789): 226.

18. See Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1992), pp. 164–76.

19. For discussion of Berry’s domestic life as a kind of theatre, see Burroughs, *Closest Stages*, pp. 67–73.

20. For details, see Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, pp. 111–22.

21. Berry’s letter is quoted from extracts made by Anne Damer in four notebooks now in the Lewis-Walpole Library in Farmington, Conn. The quotation appears on pp. 46 and 47 of vol. 3.

22. For a discussion of women writers and sentiment in the 1790s, see Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1995).

23. Anon. review of *The Fashionable Friends* in *Poetical Register* 2 (1802): 453

24. Anon. review of *The Fashionable Friends* in *New Annual Register* 23 (1802): (320).