

From:

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Setting the Record Queer

Rethinking Oscar Wilde's »The Picture of Dorian Gray« and Virginia Woolf's »Mrs. Dalloway«

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»To define is to limit«, Lord Henry states, and Mrs. Dalloway »would not say of anyone [...] that they were this or that«. Why then are the respective novels mostly read – and in recent adaptations rewritten – in denial of their genuinely ambiguous designs?

Bringing the two literary classics together for the first time, their shared concerns regarding textual and sexual identities are revealed. Challenging an established critical record commonly related to Oscar Wilde's and Virginia Woolf's own mythologised biographies, this study underscores the value of constantly rethinking labels by liberating the texts from the limiting grip of categorical readings.

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1. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

A Joint Adventure

Triggered by their conspicuous number of recent rewritings, this study brings together *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, two literary classics which have so far never been aligned with each other in any in-depth discussion. Separately both narratives indeed *have* an abiding history of being scrutinised with regards to their portrayal of same sex desire and their authors both have gained iconic status for contributing to the representation of same sex desire long before “Gay Liberation”. But as will become evident it is precisely the narratives’ classification and categorisation resulting from Oscar Wilde’s and Virginia Woolf’s highly mythologised biographies that have obstructed the view on their communal strategies of undermining heteronormativity.¹ This study, however, endeavours to show that a combined reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* brings to light numerous shared semiological and ideological concerns that, as will be argued, anticipate Roland Barthes’ considerations of textual – as well as Judith Butler’s notion of sexual performativity. Read in the light of these (post-)structuralist ideas, it is surprisingly the “original” novels rather than their current adaptations which articulate a queer

1 | My usage of the terminologies “myth(ologies)”, heteronormativity and the symbolic are borrowed from their signification in Roland Barthes’ and Judith Butler’s writings.

contestation² of textual and sexual identity, an observation that is a key point of departure for the following discussion.

In order to exemplify the subversion of discursive truth-effects which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* generate and which their current reincarnations for the most part take up on rather questionable terms it is important to take into consideration their textual as well as their sexual queering. Indeed, although the differences between Wilde's and Woolf's tale will not be disputed, this study aims at bringing to the fore the fact that, read as a joint adventure, the novels reveal a queer understanding of the inseparability of life as text and text as life, of the concurrent peril and allure of unequivocal signification, and of the heteronormative ordering of the symbolic stabilised through reiterative performativity. It is a shared and important stance of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* that there is no "outside" to the symbolic ordering of human existence, but there exists nevertheless the possibility to embrace the arbitrariness of signifiers instead of arresting their possible meanings through their naturalisation. According to Barthes

[t]he writer's language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it. This should impose on critics the duty of using two rigorously distinct methods: one must deal with the writer's realism either as an ideological substance (Marxist themes in Brecht's work, for instance) or as a semiological value (the props, the actors, the music, the colours ...). The ideal of course would be to combine these two types of criticism; the mistake which is constantly made is to confuse them: ideology has its methods, and so has semiology. (1973 [1957]: 137)

The selected narratives henceforth are discussed in a two step reading, of which the first deals with their semiological value and points up *how* both *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and their contemporary adaptations queer or alternatively confirm the possibility of authentic textual representation and therewith produce or foreclose a reconfiguration of naturalised ideas. The subsequent discussion of the narratives' ideological substance focuses on their challenging or rather

2 | What queer designates precisely is obviously debatable and is in fact one of this investigation's guiding questions. In drawing predominantly on Barthes' and Butler's ideas, this study, however, takes on a strictly discursive approach.

underpinning of the dichotomous ordering of gender and sexual identity. Because the frequently consulted biographical data of Wilde and Woolf often seem to overwrite the wilful ambiguity of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* they will not be taken into consideration as frames of references for the analysis. Nevertheless the authors' contribution to discourses that have shaped poststructuralist thinking will be considered alongside the more recent theoretical contributions of Barthes and Butler. For example the assumption that language constructs our sense of reality while not being fit to express or represent experience truthfully is a recurring motif in the writings of both Wilde and Woolf. The body of work of both authors indicates their awareness of an arbitrary but fatal symbolic ordering of human existence and the difficult or rather paradoxical situation which any discursive faces effort that objects to mythological naturalisation of normative identities.

The challenge of queering established discourses consists in making use of a comprehensible language without falling back on essentialised meanings and their binary structure. Wilde's and Woolf's preoccupations concerning "realism" in literature anticipate, or precede, Barthes' famous essay "The Death of the Author" where he states that "writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observation, of representation [...] but instead [...] a performative." (1986 [1967]: 52)³ As will be argued the foremost point of departure presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* is precisely the naturalised setup of a symbolically ordered human sociality which is deemed to be truthful through its self-affirming essentialism. In their wilfully conflicting and ambiguous semiologies and their withdrawal from binary conceptions of identity the "original" novels unravel rather than define possible significations in contrast to the majority of their contemporary critical and literary encounters

3 | Wilde's anticipation of Barthes has been acknowledged by some scholars. In his study *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* Michael Patrick Gillespie for example states: "In its own fashion, *The Critic as Artist* anticipates the arguments of authorial presence that Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault will make nearly a century later. In this essay Wilde the critic is demanding that Wilde the artist acknowledge the concept that the determination of meaning rests at least in part with each reader who encounters the work" 45.

which aim to determine what is wilfully left open. Rather than finding and telling certainties Wilde and Woolf appear to be more concerned with discursive means to undermine a narrowing conception of truth:

The first duty of life is to be as *artificial* as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered. In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential. *In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.* If one tells *the truth*, one is sure, sooner or later, to be *found out*. (Wilde, 2003 [1894]: 1244)

Whether we call it life or spirit, *truth or reality*, this, the *essential* thing, has *moved off, or on*, and *refuses to be contained* any longer in such *ill – fitting vestments* as we provide (Woolf, 1984 [1925]: 287; emphasis added)

Both remarks challenge the taken-for-grantedness of universal notions of “truth” and “the essential” as well as of the Realist writing in which these concepts are evoked. While different in tone, the statements counter the traditional idea of being able to express or represent “truth” or “reality” through language. Instead they point to the fatal symbolic entrapment of individual potentiality as a result from a faith in the truth-effect of language and thus from letting oneself be defined by its performatives. Both authors consider common truths or essentials to be reiterated myths, alienating forces rather than authentic representations. Rather than aiming to reach for an imaginary essential meaning through a likewise imaginary “natural” sign system, both writers instead hint at the possibility of semiological play as a means of queer resistance. Since there is no outside to the symbolic, the possibility of loosening its confining grip depends on its reconfiguration through style, an embrace of the unnaturalness of language as the only available means to counter the truth-effects disseminated through heteronormative performativity.

In *Mythologies* Barthes similarly upholds that “[i]f there is a health of language, it is the arbitrariness of the sign which is its foundation. What is sickening in myth is the resort to a false Nature.” (1972 [1957]: 128) It is against such “sickening” naturalised assumptions which perform *as* authentic and conceal the discursive construction of textual and sexual identities that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* respectively are written against. In both cases the resort to a false nature becomes undermined by means of their semiological queering of reiterated mythologies and an ideological

queering of the heteronormative ordering of gendered and sexual positionings.

The queer outlook on performativity which unites *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* is discernible in their self-subversive reconfiguration of textual and sexual identity. Through their continuous disordering of established sign units they contribute to a politics of denaturalisation Butler advocates in her study *Bodies That Matter*, in which she states that

a political signifier gains its political efficacy, its power to define the political field, through creating and sustaining its constituency. The power of the terms “women” or “democracy” is not derived from their ability to describe adequately or comprehensively a political reality that *already* exists; on the contrary, the political signifier becomes politically efficacious by instituting and sustaining a set of connections *as* a political reality. (1997: 210)

Breaking up the discursively established sets of connections by which identity traditionally is conceived the novels by Wilde and Woolf critically engage with the premises and effectiveness of naturalised ideas instead of building their narratives on the presumption of their validity. Both tales are interspersed with contradictory currents that question unified meanings and rather present the ongoing tension between potential ambiguity and the social exigency of apprehending and presenting identity as a coherent and meaningful whole. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* present the discursive incentive and temptation to read *for* essential meanings. But through their continuous disordering of established myths bring to the fore the ways in which different signifying possibilities can be embraced, producing pleasure rather than being feared and overwritten. While the novels draw on the traditional grand themes of life, specifically love and death, they challenge the reiterated terms by which they have become “essentially” rather than individually meaningful.

When Wilde states that the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible he is precisely alluding to the danger and allure of following naturalised ideas instead of seeing the impossibility of naturalness, which is why the second duty has not yet been discovered by anybody. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* disbelief and doubt become the basis for survival. The only other available alternative to the straight-jacket of performativity, a possibility of discovering truth

is death because “the truth is what, being taken away, leaves nothing to be seen but death (as we say: life is no longer worth living).” (Barthes, 1978 [1977]: 230) This deployment of death as the ultimate act of defiance also evidently links the novels’ conceptual set-up.

Despite the absence of comparative readings thus far it becomes apparent that a parallel reading of the novels by Wilde and Woolf evinces a similar unease in both texts with and undermining of the ill-fitting because performatively reiterated and naturalised parameters of identity. The remarkable similarity between the two tales may have gone unnoticed if there had not been several literary remakes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* recently that point to the inspirational value of both narratives. While both novels separately have become canonical works of British literature *The Hours* (1999) by Michael Cunningham and Will Self’s *Dorian. An Imitation* (2002) have certainly helped to bring Woolf’s and Wilde’s tales back again into the literary spotlight at the turn of the 20th century. The discovery of the existence of even two more albeit lesser noted retellings from the late 1990s, namely Robin Lippincott’s *Mr. Dalloway* (1999) and Jeremy Reed’s *Dorian. A Sequel* (1998) seems to confirm the compatibility of the concerns presented in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* as corresponding to a current zeitgeist. In “Rewriting Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester,” an essay that engages with the adaptations of Woolf’s narrative James Schiff similarly argues that, at least

the single-day story of Clarissa Dalloway is not a recognizable cultural myth nor is its protagonist generally familiar to most readers. These three⁴ recent

4 | This study refrains from including *Mr. Philips* (2000) by John Lanchester in the selected adaptations, because “[w]hereas Cunningham and Lippincott appropriate the structure, events, characters, themes, and style (use of semicolons, exclamation points, and so forth) found in Woolf’s novel, Lanchester largely limits his dependence on Woolf to structure and place.” (Schiff, 2004: 376) My investigation, however, juxtaposes for the sake of comparison how the indeterminacy of the characters and the playful engagement with performativity of the “originals” has for the most part been given up in favour of revelation and conclusion, despite the adaptations’ self-professed claim to sequel or to imitate them.

retellings suggest, however, that Woolf's novel already one of the esteemed fictions of the twentieth century, is gaining cultural currency, becoming increasingly useful to contemporary readers and writers. Although the genius of Woolf's and aesthetics may account for this, one should not forget that her handling of gender and sexual identity and her depiction of the fluidity of character remain highly relevant to common readers. (365)

With regards to the anti-mythical design of either Woolf's and Wilde's narrative which this study suggests it is noteworthy that Schiff invokes *Mrs. Dalloway's* un-mythical status, which is now allegedly becoming increasingly useful for contemporary readers and writers. Wilde's novel, rather contrarily and involuntarily, has indeed become one of the most frequently passed on cultural myths and this status can be seen as another reason for the oppositional rather than connected situatedness of the novels up to now.⁵ As Nunokawa in his essay "Homosexual Desire and the Effacement of the Self in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*" (1992) also pronounces its mythical standing is not so much owing to the text itself: "Wilde's text declines to cooperate wholeheartedly with its *après coup* canonization as an old testament version of the exodus from the closet, a shadowy precursor whose difference from the contemporary coming-out narrative is only a matter of time." (313) As will be argued, this binary and reiterated reception and appropriation is again based on the continuously mythologised presence of their authors. As becomes evident all rewritings tend to centre on the sexual

5 | Ruth Vanita's "The Wilde-ness of Woolf: Evading and Embracing Death in *Orlando* and *The Waves*" (1996) presents a remarkable exception to this overall tendency at least through the investigation's foregrounding of a literary affinity of the two authors in question. But, while it points up similarities between *Orlando* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in their thematisation of beauty and death, it elides the similarities of the selected novels in this study. Furthermore Vanita's study *Sappho and the Virgin Mary*, in which the essay can be found endeavours to trace the literary tradition by which Woolf as a "Sapphic writer" emerges and attempts to "right the bias of most critical discourses on sexuality, including dominant queer theory discourses, that invisibilize the clitoris in favour of phallicism and/or anality." (2) My investigations in this study, however, attempt to draw attention precisely to Wilde's and Woolf's challenge of the dichotomous ordering of desire, which a conceptual recourse to genital sexuality runs danger of (re)establishing again.

potential of Wilde's and Woolf's tales set against the background of "the ineradicable love for life that continues even in the face of a longing for death." (Allen, 1999: 82) Thus my first suspicion was that the new generation must obviously be inspired by a combination of respect for Wilde's and Woolf's ambiguous presentation of their protagonists' sexuality and enticed through a recent popularisation and mobilisation of queer sensibilities.⁶ But it quickly became evident that, with the exception of *The Hours*, they allege a hidden secret inviting to be exposed. As I will suggest in the following the queer potentiality of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* in many readings and new writings of the two novels appears to be understood and employed as synonymous to a representation of homosexual desire, thereby defining what the tales wilfully present as indefinable. Instead of taking into account queer theory's poststructuralist theoretical framework which seeks to undermine the sex-, gender- and sexual dichotomies to which the notion of a homosexual identity contributes, it is my contention that most of the readings and rewritings consulted for this investigation opt for an overwriting of the tales' affirmative ambiguities. Seen as yet another discursive shift in favour of heteronormative assumptions and mythologisations it is this problematic usurpation of "queer" as a decidable and separate category that will become the main theoretical point of departure for the following analysis. This study then posits that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* genuinely avoid decidability and invite the reader to question the truth of and the price for identity. Through a comparison of their derisive portrayal of performativity which "suggests that what the person 'is,' and, indeed, what gender 'is,' is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined" (Butler, 1990: 10) with their four

6 | Cf. Milde, Nadine. "Pop Goes the Queerness, or, (Homo)Sexuality and Its Metaphors: On the Importance of Gay Sensibilities in Postmodern Culture and Theory." This article highlights the growing and questionable medialisation of queer aesthetics. It also points to the problematically antagonised differentiation between queer and gay. While I follow its critical observations for the most part and also see a problem in insisting on terminological oppositions, I'm also sceptical of their exchangeability when one wants to avoid the dichotomous structuring of identity. Indeed this study sees the problem in falling back on binary conceptions, which gay and lesbian implies, while *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* denounce either-or-conceptions.

contemporary reincarnations this study will consider the reasons for the apparent urgency to set the record straight, when Wilde's and Woolf's tales fervently endeavour to set it queer.

This study aims at disburdening Wilde's and Woolf's novels from the tight grip of biographical and unequivocal readings again, claiming their denaturalisation of established representations not only as one of their most interesting textual qualities, but also to be rather profound contributions to queer politics. The texts in question will therefore be analysed from a thoroughly poststructuralist point of view. My analyses of their portrayal of desire will especially draw on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity as the incorporated reiteration of sex/gender/sexuality attributions enforced by hegemonic heteronormativity. I propose that Butler's political concept of the performativity of sex⁷ can be said to find its poetologic equation in Barthes' notion of the performativity of text⁸ which is why I read the texts in parallel in this study in order to consider the textual and sexual queerness of the writings in question. The explicit references the authors of the four adaptations make to their predecessors⁹ apparently self consciously

7 | Since Butler denies a categorical differentiation between sex and gender, an issue which will be outlined at a later point, and this study aligns itself with this point of view, I use these terms as interchangeable.

8 | In her introduction to *Gender Trouble* Butler problematises the invocation of identity categories within feminist and gay/lesbian politics and links this problem to representation. She asserts: [P]olitics and representation are controversial terms. On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women [...] The domains of political and linguistic "representation" set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. (2-3)

9 | Not only do Wilde and Woolf appear as characters in three of the four adaptations, a technique which could be seen as a trademark of postmodern metafiction and intertextuality, but their titles already give the recent narratives a deliberate case history, a genealogy. Thus instead of denying their unoriginality they assert their imitations as conscious and intentional performances. While this could well be an indication of the writings' queer approach to

subscribe to Barthes' general surmise that "the writer can only imitate an anterior, never original gesture [...] a ready-made lexicon, whose words can be explained only through other words, and this ad infinitum." (Barthes, 1986 [1967]: 53) In this context Robin Lippincott cites Harold Bloom in the epithet to *Mr. Dalloway*: "Literary character is always an invention, and inventions generally are indebted to prior inventions." This seeming acceptance of imitation could in effect be "demonstrating how recent trends in retelling, following the postmodern tendency toward self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, have made the act of borrowing less veiled, more explicit." (Schiff, 2004: 364) But instead it may precisely be the rewritings' evident invocation of the authors' own mythologies and their intentionality to imitate or sequel Wilde's and Woolf's "master narratives" as they have been already become essentialised that works *against* the originals' queer quality because "[t]o assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing." (Barthes, 1986 [1967]: 53)

Rather than contributing to or simply updating *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s and *Mrs. Dalloway*'s ambiguity in accordance with queer theory's aim of unsettling identity, the four adaptations surprisingly rather help to determine a textual telos as well as their main characters' sexuality.¹⁰ Thus they work against and not in accordance with their predecessors' queer understanding of "representation" in which "writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it [...] by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world-as-text) a 'secret,' i.e., an ultimate meaning. (Barthes, 1986 [1967]: 54) Although the contemporary authors then profess to be inspired by their role models' literary "style", as Wilde-, and "vestment", as Woolf puts it, they nevertheless seem to insinuate the existence of essential secrets in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* which through their adaptations can now finally be revealed, or at least be named. While, to paraphrase Barthes, the contemporary texts obviously also can be

performativity by foregrounding the generally reiterated composition of identity, the analysis will show how, apart from *The Hours*, they rather foreclose rather than update the transgressive "identity politics" of the "originals".

10 | *The Hours*, of all the four novels, can be regarded as retaining most of the ambiguous quality of its predecessor, although its ending also insinuates a genealogy rather than generality of ambiguous desire.

seen simply as additions to the ready made lexicon, the writing *ad infinitum*, bringing about new semiologic patterns to be traversed, their attempts to provide paradigmatic models of identity are remarkable and dubious. It is precisely against such tendencies to resolve the irresolvable, to impose one meaning instead of embracing the fluidity and potentiality of significance that, as will be argued, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* maintain their timeless and dual force.

While taking into account the discursive formation of the selected texts, I will follow Barthes' argument that "the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination, but this destination can no longer be personal"¹¹ (1986 [1967]: 54). Although Wilde's and Woolf's artistic and critical concerns are allowed for and joined with recent queer theories, this study does not partake in a biographical or canonical reading of the novels in question. It rather opts for refraining from lengthy speculations on the personal motivations of the novels' authors. Indeed one of the reasons for the continued partitionment of both *authors* in question may result from Woolf's suspicious silence on Wilde, as Margaret Diane Stetz points out:

If feminist criticism only came around to embracing Oscar Wilde late, very late in the twentieth century, we can lay at least some of the blame at the feet of Virginia Woolf. From the turn-of-the-century through the late 1930s, she spoke both to and from the heart of modernist circles. Her opinion of books and authors were delivered authoritatively and took on the weight of authority. [...] And of Wilde she consistently said little, neither engaging with his work nor addressing the significance of his life. It was clear from such silence that she did not consider him a subject of importance. [...] Consciously unimpressed, Woolf nonetheless showed the impress of Wilde's writing on her own style." (Stetz, 2004: 224)¹²

11 | For an in depth discussion on this subject see Gillespie's study which precisely reads Wilde's canon in relation to Victorian values and discourses. However, since my aim here is not so much to read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the light of its author's body of work, but in the light of its return at the beginning of the new millennium, I will refrain from assumptions about possible concessions Wilde made out of pragmatic reasons.

12 | Stetz goes so far as to argue for "a major disjunction between the fact of Wilde's non-appearance as a topic in her criticism and the presence of this

The observations by Stetz discern an overhasty and dangerous trust in authority, which is dramatised and criticised in both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* and often appears to be one reason for obstructing rather than proliferating their potential significations. It is remarkable that Woolf does not seem to admit mutual or even borrowed ethical and aesthetic concerns with or respectively from Wilde, but, similarly to Stetz I am also sceptical of the “truth” value of this omission. It may have had more to do with precisely the overshadowing significance of his *life*, his confining biographical mythology that Woolf rather shied away from. In any case her *work* throughout displays such a profound uneasiness with authorial reliability and a contempt for unquestioning readings that her articulated opinions or suspicious silences should neither be taken as defining proofs for her own writing nor as directions to one’s own conceptions.¹³ More recently than Woolf Elaine Showalter voices contempt for Wilde’s alignment to feminist concerns, drawing specifically on the misogyny apparently discernible in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

The contradictions between the decadent and the feminist position can be seen very clearly in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In his personal life, Wilde might have been said to support the cause of the New Woman. As editor of the magazine *The Woman’s World*, he had commissioned articles on feminism and women’s suffrage. But Wilde was also one of the leading theorists of decadence, and his novel was the English Bible of decadence, as well as a kind of bible for male homosexuals [...]. This rational-

apparitional Wilde, who haunts Woolf’s writing with the persistence of the Canterville Ghost.” (2004: 227)

13 | In “How One Should Read a Book” Woolf for example asserts: “To admit authorities, however heavily furred and gowned, into our libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom which is the breath of those sanctuaries.” (1980 [1926])

In “The Critic as Artist” (2003 [1890]) Wilde makes a similar argument, when he states that: “Who cares whether Ruskin’s views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? [...] [C]riticism of the highest kind [...] treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself [...] to discovering the real intentions of the artist and accepting that as final.” (1126-1127)

ization of homosexual desire as aesthetic experience has as its subtext an escalating contempt for women, whose bodies seem to stand in the way of philosophical beauty. The aristocratic dandy Lord Henry Wotton speaks the most misogynistic lines in the novel. (1991: 175-176)

Showalter's observations erect a profound opposition between feminist and decadent positions despite Wilde's admitted support of feminist politics in his function as editor. Her denial of Wilde's genuine addressing of "women's concerns" does not only leave aside his more obvious literary advocacy of the New Woman in his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) for example. She furthermore makes the author responsible for having written "a kind of bible for male homosexuals", a reception that seems to exclude the possibility of heterosexual and women-identified readings. This does not only leave aside *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* general ridicule of gender performativity which points to a symbolic and unnatural dichotomy of the sexes. In accordance with a general tendency she additionally omits the character Gladys, for whom Lord Henry not only professes profound respect but with whom he engages in battles of equal wit that deride gender stereotypes from "both" positions. As a queer analysis of the novel brings to the fore, women and men only ever are debated and valued by their stereotyped habits and not in their potential being. The disdain articulated for conventional masculine or feminine positions thus rather aims at ridiculing the symbolic ordering of the sexes and not sex(uality) itself. Indeed, the portrait of Dorian Gray which arrests his potentiality and turns his ambiguous self into a stable and oppressing identity, namely performs as an object of desire for "both" sexes. His confining role as desired object rather than desiring subject, traditionally attributed to women thus may be seen as a general, critical comment on the personal cost with which such a role becomes embodied.

Whilst different in their valuation of Wilde's contribution to feminist concerns the reflections by Stetz and Showalter both imply another reason for Wilde's and Woolf's critical severance which resides in a rather traditional and reiterative concept concerning their different gender- and accompanying sexual markings. Whereas through his self staged dandyism, his purportedly flaunted "effeminacy" and his sensational trial for "gross indecency" Oscar Wilde has come to be seen as the prototypical embodiment of decadent male

homosexuality per se,¹⁴ Virginia Woolf's public reception as a "serious" and "feminist" intellectual rather has led to a different encountering of her work.¹⁵ It is remarkable how this discursively reinforced sexual difference of the authors and the subsequent categorisations of their personae do not only lead to distinct readings of their personal biographies but also fix their fictional oeuvre to very different perceptual outcomes. Accordingly then, and suspiciously leaving both Wilde's and Woolf's critical interrogation of stereotypes in general aside, Oscar's and Virginia's works are generally regarded as *obviously antithetically* informed by their opposing "identities". Instead of comprehending their works as instances of queer destabilisation, their novels' achievements are therewith often limited to biographical testimonies.

In place of aiming to (dis)solve the textual/sexual ambiguity of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* and reveal an alleged secret (of the text *and* its author), my investigations will take precau-

14 | Wilde's homosexuality is hardly ever left unmentioned in any discussion of his works although with different valuations. Ruth Robbins [2003] for example notes that: "[O]ne can imagine why the particular performance of possible gay identity that Wilde chose, which came retrospectively to stand for gay identity *per se*, might not be particularly comfortable or attractive for many gay men." In accordance with this study Robbins refrains from the "either/or reading of Wilde's life and work" and her discussion of the "deliberate ambiguity" inherent in *The Importance of Being Earnest* follows a similar line of argument as this study.

15 | Although Ellen Carol Jones, in her introduction to a special edition of *Modern Fiction Studies* on Woolf, alludes to "the status of Virginia Woolf as camp cultural icon," (1992: 2) Woolf's lesbian affairs publicly do not seem to be understood as encompassing her whole persona and work. While this beneficially has allowed for more disparate views of her most pressing literary concerns, this arguably has to do with the commonly rather silenced, trivialised, and desexualised status of female homosexuality, as Jones also discerns: "Read from a heterosexual perspective, Woolf is found wanting in the sexual department" (ibid. 2) and Virginia's rather "intellectual" than "sensual" public image in particular. This different treatment also testifies to the discursive requirement of homosexuality's outing in order to be comprehensible as different from heterosexuality. Wilde's trial "outed" his sexuality and with it imprisoned his writings.

tions to keep the indeterminate set-ups of the novels intact, or rather accentuate their queer potentiality again.¹⁶ The readings in this study endeavour to abstain from a tendency within literary criticism which Wilde in “The Critic as Artist” already mocks, namely that “the critic [...] will prefer to look into the silver mirror or through the woven veil, and will turn his eyes away from the chaos and clamour of actual existence, though the mirror may be tarnished and the veil be torn.” (2003 [1890]): 1125) As I will argue the apparent disordering of established semiological and ideological truth-effects presented in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway* articulates a genuine and vital objection to an orthodox disregard of the chaos and clamour of “actual existence.” As becomes apparent through their self-professed fictional reincarnations it is not only a major part of literary criticism that is quick in overwriting the self subversive and anti-mythological strategies of Wilde’s and Woolf’s tales. That the recent adaptations under scrutiny can, for the most part, be seen as written contradictory to these queer qualities of their forbearers, in the sense that Jeremy Reed’s *Dorian. A Sequel*, Will Self’s *Dorian. An Imitation*, Robin Lippincott’s *Mr. Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, at least on the plotting front aim to “untangle” the old “textures”, to reveal behind allegedly hidden layers a likewise alleged essence so carefully cautioned against by their predecessors, will be a point of discussion.

After all why do these adaptations take up a story already told only to bring it to an end, which, so might be argued, it either already had or never invited to have? Why do these *Wildean* and *Woolfean* imitators for the most part want to set the record straight, when Wilde and Woolf so carefully aimed to set it queer? Following Barthes’ stance

16 | In her publication *Virginia Woolf & Postmodernism* (1991), a study which due to its poststructuralist theoretical framework shares the aesthetic and ethic concerns of this inquiry, Pamela L Caughie sees this tendency to define and decide as likewise problematic. As she states: “I felt dissatisfied with readings of Woolf that claimed to be new, even subversive, yet ultimately relied on assumptions about fiction they had hoped to dispel. [...] By structuring their arguments in terms of oppositions [...] they run into trouble, because they end up ignoring much of what does not fit such neat dichotomies, or because they posit some tenuous synthesis of opposition, or because they leave themselves no language with which to define what Woolf has discovered. (xi and 6)

that “there is no time other than that of the speech act, and every text is written eternally here and now” (1986 [1967]: 52) a synchronised queer reading of Wilde’s and Woolf’s novels along with their antecedents sheds new light on the literary, philosophical, psychological, and gender/sexuality conceptions informing the selected fictional texts as well as the critical readings of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. This study will consider then, in how far the ever increasing, contradictory, and intensifying discourses informing literary criticism, namely historiography, psychoanalysis, philosophy and feminist/gender studies have inspired the latest remakes and how, ironically although maybe explicably, the predecessors weave their text(ure)s more queerly than those written in the time of queer theory’s invention and popularisation.