

# Reading Miller's "Numinous Cock": Heterosexist Presumption and Queerings of the Censored Text

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**I**N 1988, GORE VIDAL REVIEWED A NEW EDITION of the Durrell-Miller Letters, noting "The dust-jacket ... shows three protagonists sprawled in a shallow wine-dark sea—Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, and Henry Miller's numinous cock. Needless to say, it is the third that not only rivets attention, but commands nostalgia and, well, let us be honest, pity and awe" (11). Whatever we might make of the "numinous" nature of the phallus on the book cover, Miller's sexuality is on display as he and Durrell are photographed bathing in the Ionian Sea, and this display continues in his writing. Yet, the homoerotic nature of this dialogue is overlooked—Miller is not lounging with a woman nor is Durrell's wife Nancy, the photographer, visible. The third musketeer in Vidal's trinity mediates between Durrell and Miller and ostensibly for the book's forty-five-year correspondence. Censorship in critical scholarship of this role interests me, in particular due to the overtly erotic and sexual materials that brought both authors fame. In conjunction with this photograph, perhaps the most obvious invocation of the phallus in their works is the cover art to the three volumes of the Villa Seurat Series published by the Obelisk Press with its phallic logo. Are readers, when cradling the most famous Obelisk publication, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, unwittingly palming Miller's "numinous cock" via the obelisk

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on the spine? This is the first view for the reader when approaching Nin, Durrell, and Miller's books in this series. Whether approaching the spine on a shelf or a faced copy, the promise of the upright obelisk advertises the books' nature: erotic arousal of the reader's interests. The phallic stamp of the press negotiates the interaction between the largely male readership and the pornographic entertainment that allowed the press to fund unknown literary authors. The Obelisk was run by Jack Kahane and was an overtly pornographic business that published literary authors as well, later becoming the Olympia Press famous for publishing Sade, William S. Burroughs, and George Bataille.<sup>1</sup> Yet, its stamp exemplifies some queer problems that continue to plague Miller's works. With these problems left hanging as provocatively as Vidal's third musketeer, it seems reasonable to expect that some portion of the large body of scholarship on this text would have posed such questions by now, seventy years later. The absence of such discussion, a symbolic castration of scholarly enquiry, is the form of censorship with which I am concerned.

Scholarly discomfort with the sexualities presented in Miller's works points to conflict in current theorizations of sexuality: Queer Theory versus Gay and Lesbian Studies here. The past decade has seen an acceleration in definitional excursions in theories of sexuality that generally exposes a tension between increasing inclusivity through the addition of definitions versus the deconstruction of the same stable categorizations, as in Queer Theory and Trans Studies. As Queer Theory challenges stable definitions, it has increasingly conflicted with the political and recuperative aims of Gay and Lesbian Studies, and the two fields increasingly divide from one another as theory alienates practice. Moreover, these definitional divisions are also visible between studies of sexualities based in the Humanities versus the Social Sciences. Hence, my terms here are loosely applied and point to scholarly trends more than to stable categories with agreed characteristics.

In this context, Miller has been repeatedly portrayed as the epitome of stereotypical Western masculine heterosexuality and most forcefully so in queer readings of *Tropic of Cancer*. I contend something different. Despite scholarly failures to notice the overtly queer content of the novel and (even more provocatively) despite queerings of the text that oddly reinforce heterosexist presumption, Miller explicitly endorses and implicates himself in discourses of queerness. This article interrogates the tension

1 For more, see the University of Liverpool's recent volumes on the Obelisk Press and its reincarnation after World War II as the Olympia Press: Pearson's *Obelisk* and Kearney's *The Paris Olympia Press*.

between stable and unstable identities in theories of sexualities, primarily using “queerings” of Miller as a case study. I question what investments general literary criticism holds, as well as Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory, that led to Miller’s relative exclusion from literary studies of sexuality, despite his having been among the most famously banned authors of the past century. I also discuss how heterosexist presumption is instantiated in ostensibly queer readings of Miller, suggesting that this reflects ongoing critical tensions in Queer Theory that would profit from a return to Miller’s late modernist notions of identity.

*Tropic of Cancer*’s role in overturning American and Canadian censorship laws cannot be overestimated. There is no single text with as much importance to censorship in the twentieth century—I write that without hesitation.<sup>2</sup> However, Miller’s famous and still popular novel is now rarely discussed, which suggests it somehow discomforts our interpretive schemas in the academy. For instance, Jacques Lacan, Ihab Hassan, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari all significantly and explicitly engaged with Miller’s works, which makes it increasingly odd that he remains absent from mainstream literary scholarship that actively draws on these theorists and also that he is only obliquely tied to these theorists when he is even mentioned at all. Moreover, the dearth of discussion of homoerotic elements in one of the most famous erotic novels of the last century, possibly eclipsing even Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, suggests that the literary criticism ostensibly seeking such elements has already inscribed a mask of heterosexist presumption on Miller’s texts more firmly than a censor’s stamp or knife. Typically, Miller’s fading reputation is ascribed to sexist language in his works, which implies a readership without irony and unaware of Miller’s anarchism and devotion to Emma Goldman, nor the critique of normative masculinities implicit in his works.

For example, like Dittman’s sense of the “heterosexism of Henry Miller” (91), Elisabeth Ladenson describes *Tropic of Cancer* as a “work that surely offer[s] the most impeccable straight [heterosexual] male credentials” (418)

2 See Hutchison’s *Tropic of Cancer on Trial* or Gertz’s foreword to the book. Retracing the legal history of *Tropic of Cancer* and its sixty American trials is beyond the scope of this paper, but the importance and extensive citation of *Grove Press, Inc. v. Gerstein* in the U.S. Supreme Court is worth noting, especially since it led to Grove Press editions of the Marquis de Sade and other previously banned works (Kendrick 209–11). Another instance of the literary oversight of the novel’s importance is that the British trial of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and *Fanny Hill* is widely known only as “the Chatterley trial.” As a living author, Miller’s trial involved him personally.

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in her attempt to consider the “universally acknowledged [truth] that a heterosexual man in search of entertainment will want to watch women have sex” (417). Her rebuttal to Jane Austen cunningly places Mr Darcy adjacent to women in pornography, which disrupts the power dynamic between Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. However, we cannot overlook the narrator’s irony in Austen’s most famous sentence: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 1). As the opening of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, this sentence famously displays Mrs Bennet’s desires, beliefs, and misunderstandings of the world around her, hence demonstrating the narrative voice’s comic irony. Likewise, we should not hasten to fit Miller into heterosexist expectations nor elide narrator and author. Apparently nothing is more “straight” than a man watching women have sex with each other, which privileges the power dynamic of the male gaze while oddly disposing of the male body, but by this definition Miller would seem to fail: first as the reader cradles the phallus on the book’s spine and again once the reader penetrates the text. Ladenson’s reading is adroit and her allusion to Austen nicely destabilizes the heteronormative ideal of which Mr Darcy is a prime example, but the explicit content of Miller’s novel refutes Ladenson’s contention that *Tropic of Cancer* is the most “impeccabl[y]” (417) heterosexual text available. Ladenson’s two statements are no more true than Austen’s, though the irony in *Pride and Prejudice* stands out more convincingly. Ladenson is humorous but sincere. Stated plainly, Miller playfully challenges the rigidity of such identities as “straight,” “gay,” or “lesbian” before Ladenson begins her strong reading, but he does so in moments ripe for the reader’s projection of his or her own expectations. This makes it surprisingly difficult for readers to perceive what they claim they are looking for: queer moments in the text.

The ambiguity that surrounds Miller’s descriptions of his relationships with other expatriates in Paris subverts readerly anticipation of a particular sexual identity, and this anticipation is heterosexist presumption. At the moments of greatest heterosexual anticipation—particularly with regard to the erotic nature of the text and its initial publication with the phallic stamp of the Obelisk Press on its opening page—Miller subverts the scene with ambiguities that suggest an identity beyond that anticipated by readers like Ladenson. When the narrating Miller and Van Norden (another homosocial relationship in the novel) hire a Parisian prostitute, the masturbatory or pornographic reader expects the coupling commonly found in such novels, with the American penetrating old Europe and so forth. Miller even notes this type of reader in his opening to *The World of Sex*:

The readers of my books fall usually into two distinct classes—those who are disgusted by the strong element of sexuality and those who rejoice in discovering that this element forms such a large ingredient.... In the latter group are some who have no patience at all with what they choose to call my “classic” side [read: “literary”]. (5)

When I refer to the “pornographic reader,” I mean this kind of reader: one primarily attracted to Miller’s works for sexual excitement and repulsed by his literary “side.” Such an exact binary is obviously rare, and the impossibility of a definite distinction reflects the blurring of other binaries in Miller’s works. To this point, instead of smoothly satisfying a largely “pornographic” reader by offering an uncomplicated series of sexual descriptions, descriptions aimed primarily at titillation rather than disturbing the reader’s easy consumption of the text, Miller offers up a cruel representation of the prostitute’s trade. It is a representation based on the mechanistic function of capitalist exchange: “We haven’t any passion either of us.... But there’s the fifteen francs and something has to be done about it” (*Tropic* 140). In fact, the “fifteen francs” even come to replace human lust and sexual desire; “[T]he fifteen francs is [sic] like the primal cause” (140). Even the sex act becomes “a machine whose cogs have slipped..., inhuman” (141) rather than something with “a spark of passion” (140). Oddly, even this clear distinction between the mechanized sex and the humanity of passions is troubled by Miller’s use of “whose” to describe a specifically “inhuman” machine, which would properly be a “that.”

A further element of this “pornographic” moment in the text is the ambiguity Miller adds to what should be relatively direct description. If the pornographic can be loosely defined against the erotic based on their degree of engagement with literary ambiguity, multivalence, complex use of metaphor and simile, or other such devices (the erotic being more literary and the pornographic less), then Miller confuses his pornography by allowing for a great deal of ambiguity and plurisignation at the moments when the pornographic reader would anticipate such elements being absent.<sup>3</sup> This complexity in Miller’s most directly anatomical, pornographic description hence suggests irony in the narrator’s domination via “knowing” that the pornographic enacts. Apart from the sexual context, this moment has been discussed by Deleuze in the context of the inhuman,

<sup>3</sup> This implies I include Ladenson in this group, but not out of any animosity to her excellent body of work. Ladenson, and later Hardin, simply offer convenient and striking examples of the tension in critical scholarship with which I am concerned: queer readings that reinscribe heteronormative identities.

and it also parallels Miller's anarchist debate with Herbert Read when Read was a supporter of the communist ethos of the surrealists (Gifford 36–64). If Miller's style and content are taken as a form of social work, then the elisions of the sex trade with inhuman machinery and of cash with authority also reflect Miller's longstanding anarchism.

More to my point, the voyeuristic element of the scene involving Miller, Van Norden, and the prostitute mirrors the “pornographic” reader's superficial titillation in reading the erotic prose of Miller's novel (a titillation bought at the cost of the overt content of the novel or, in other words, ignoring the book in order to construct a text that fulfills one's expectations). Specifically, Miller watches Van Norden “tackle her” (141) in the mechanistic approach to a pornographic scene (carefully enumerated, defined by class and type, and reduced to physical properties), and his watching is akin to the reader “watching” a mechanically described sex act in a pornographic novel. Suggestively, Miller notes the lack of passion in this machine, and “As long as that spark of passion is missing there is no human significance in the performance” (142). This implies that the same human significance is absent from a reader who is without passion in his or her reading. In the context of Miller's anarchism, the broader implication is that his work ironically critiques power relations in the “performance” of such forms of sex, pornography, and reading. Naturally, he concludes that “It needs the touch of a human hand to set it right” (142), and this “human hand” disturbs the reader's anticipation (and pornographic reading) of the heterosexual emphasis of the scene. The language that describes Miller's interaction with Van Norden is more complex and suggestive than during the entire “seduction” (or more accurately the purchasing) of the prostitute and her mechanized copulation with Van Norden. While she and Van Norden are described mechanistically and without literary playfulness, Miller revives the erotic tension of language's overt and covert meanings in his descriptions of his relationship to his male friend.

The narrating Miller “interferes” with Van Norden's “quintessentially” heterosexual activity of engaging a prostitute, and the language becomes “thick”: “The girl is lying on the edge of the bed and Van Norden is bent over her like a satyr with his two feet solidly planted on the floor” (141). Then, separated by a paragraph that troubles the reader's visualization, Miller is “down on [his] knees behind Van Norden” (142) and is “tickling him in the rump” (142). In response, Van Norden “grunts,” “Leave me alone.... I almost got it in that time” (142). This disturbs the previous physical descriptions suggesting that heterosexual intercourse has not occurred, leaving only Miller's digital “interference” with Van Norden (I will return

to this image shortly). Heterosexual intercourse is the reader's assumption but does not occur in the text. Moreover, that this scene (among several others) has been both overlooked and denied by every critic who has discussed homosexuality in Miller's works can only be explained by the critical myopia created by heterosexist presumption: the very thing against which such critics claim to work. In a novel with the "most impeccable straight male credentials," this grunt from Van Norden, bent like a satyr in front of the kneeling Miller, seems to mumble the name of another kind of love. This grunt also "suddenly brings to [Miller's] mind, for the second time, the remembrance of [his] dream" of Van Norden's penis (142). Language relating to the prostitute is relatively dry, which perhaps relates to her impenetrability in the narrative, but Van Norden returns Miller to his slippery prose, rich with ambiguities and oddities of word choice that undermine the reader's anticipations. During the heterosexual domination of a woman by economic power, realized in the form of sexual possession, the anarchist Miller is "on [his] knees *behind* Van Norden..., tickling him *in* the rump" while dreaming of his penis (142; emphasis added).

On a more literal level, this return to the literary suggests that the prostitute and heterosexual domination are sterile, and it is possible to argue she works only as a conduit for Miller's penetration of his friend. Yet, Van Norden's "rump" does not displace the prostitute's vagina or act as a substitute; it seems rather the reverse such that she can only stand in for the other aim. The "suggestion" of sodomy in the physical posture and sexual arousal of another man by tickling him "in" his body subverts the heteronormative pornographic narrative with a "subtext" of homosexuality, homoeroticism, double meanings, and language games of eroticism. In other words, the living form of the novel is caught in its homoerotics. Stylistic sterility emerges in its scenes of heterosexual domination, suggesting that the formal elements resist such authority, while literary play emerges in the meeting and hence penetrability of equals. My conflict with previous scholarship lies in this queer "subtext," which past work can only find through innuendo and close reading, despite the highly overt nature of the material. In other words, these are not "subtexts" in need of a critic's "queering." Stated bluntly, the only sexual penetration in the scene is Miller poking his finger in his friend's bum while dreaming of his friend's penis, which needs little critical intervention to reveal subversive, queer readings. It is then doubly odd that a critical intervention is needed to correct these critical trends, since a queering of the text is only possible after imposing "the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption ... that erects new closets" (Sedgwick 68). Sedgwick contends the socionormative presumption of

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heterosexuality continually re-closets homosexuals. Using her universalizing view, this presumption of heterosexuality serves as a social censor of all transgressive sexualities, even though in total they would be by far the most common. This is to say, Ladenson can only queer the text once she puts it in the closet it formally and explicitly resists. Moreover, that queer readings impose this closet suggests an internal conflict in the theory, one in which queer theorists censor this clear voice in the novel only to reintroduce it through an artificially subversive critical intervention.

I must emphasize this point. Ladenson un-ironically contends that this “work ... surely offer[s] the most impeccable straight male credentials” (418). With the text now closeted, she is able to subvert its ostensible heteronormative stability. Since Ladenson is a rigorous scholar, this problem suggests a paradox in the critical method, and the palpability of the problem increases when we turn to the only text that finds homoerotic content in Miller.<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardin (who labels Miller homophobic) proposes that unconsciously suggestive language points to the homoerotics of any sexual relationship, and in this he is in line with Sedgwick. However, for Hardin’s argument to stand, the homoerotic elements of *Tropic of Cancer* must be indirect, indicating the “subconscious ... as a space for locating desire,” a self-censored or unconscious desire (Hardin 130). Although Hardin does not mention it, this places him in the tradition of Sedgwick’s “universalizing view” (85). Sedgwick’s term has been taken in two directions by critics: the first a definitional approach to homo/heterosexuality as relating to all sexualities along a spectrum in which none exist in isolation or independence, and the second emphasizes the similar social performance of sexualities. Both approaches eliminate a binary sense of sexuality and replace it with a spectrum or flexible series of varying social practices. Excluding Hardin’s elision of the subconscious with the unconscious, I propose Miller’s homoeroticism is not simply “sublimated” in the text, indicating repression, nor is Van Norden’s “rump” a substitutive gratification in psychoanalytic terms. Instead, these moments of “repression” occur in Hardin’s own thesis, which relies on the epistemological closet of heterosexist presumption. Hardin and Ladenson’s expectation of the “impeccabl[y]” heterosexual novelist censors<sup>5</sup> the direct homoerotic ele-

4 Provocatively, John Hepworth favourably draws on Miller in his “Hitchcock’s Homophobia” and even casts an “Amen” (194) to Miller’s anarchist pronouncements in “An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere.” Yet, the sexual content of Miller’s works remains entirely absent from Hepworth’s chapter.

5 I now use this term to refer to the psychological process and not the state’s intrusion into production and distribution, although the two obviously overlap in significant ways beyond a shared terminology.

ments of the novel in their readings and leads them to find homoerotic materials only through their own interventions. This is a tactic that Gay and Lesbian studies generally attempts to undermine rather than reinscribe. The “unconscious” and “sublimated” homoeroticism can only be seen as such if we, the readers, repress the overt homosexual content—that act of repression runs contrary to the overt aims of this reading paradigm and leads me in the remaining pages to ask what tensions in this theoretical model might precipitate this problem.

With imaginative flair, Hardin stretches his argument to take in Miller’s three comments on semicolons while working as a proofreader. Hardin discusses Miller’s minor comments on proofreading, a scene otherwise largely ignored apart from biographical interest in his jobs with Alfred Perlès. Miller thrice mentions semicolons while complaining of his work for the *Chicago Tribune* in Paris, and from this scene Hardin generates his first major vision of a queered *Tropic of Cancer*:

[T]he colon as well as the anus represent a Rabelaisian focus on the alimentary canal; although the colon is not the same as the anus, its proximity and the breadth of meaning inherent in Rabelasian images allow for readings which can be related to food, excrement and sex. (144)

Contrary to the beliefs of my students, the colon is also not the same as the semicolon. And very oddly, Hardin’s discussion of anal pleasure avoids the only commentary in the novel on the “rump” in a sexual passage. Much like this transformation of punctuation and grammar into anal sex (which is not exclusively homosexual or homoerotic), Hardin reads Miller’s description of Moldorf’s continually talking or eating mouth and notes “The mouth is sensual and Miller’s fixation on it suggests a subtextual reading which permits the bringing together of speech and oral sensuality and pleasure (eating, kissing, fellatio). Sex and speech are so closely allied in this novel that one cannot ignore making the connection” (142). Hardin’s reading is imaginative and playful, but it requires a greater stretch from the reader than Miller’s already overt homoerotic materials or, for that matter, an eponymous study of Hardin. We can safely set aside the homoerotics of copy-editing in favour of Miller’s digital punctuation and phallic fantasies if we wish to find such matter.

A reader might also argue that indeterminate sexuality implies an unnamed option: bisexuality. However, the implicitness of bisexuality is also a projection of our own schemas. While a third title that unifies this

binary may be coined, Miller specifically does not invoke it—the absence of this word where it might be appropriate characterizes his oeuvre.

Moreover, I do not wish to imply that I am relying on biographical essentialism in making this argument about Miller's novel, even though the authorial Miller parallels the narrating Miller in refuting stable sexual categorizations. Mary Dearborn, one of Miller's biographers, argues that Miller experimented with homosexuality in his early youth (31, 34), based on his description of "buggering" and being "buggered" by his childhood friend Joey (*Henry Miller's Book* 43):

We all three slept in one big bed. Joey and I had acquired the habit of buggering one another. We thought nothing of it, but to "Turk," as we had nicknamed Tony, we were committing a grievous sin. Sometimes we tried to bugger him, but it was useless—he was incorruptible. (43)

While Dearborn does adroitly point out that Miller "name[d] his son Tony and rename[d] all his best friends Joey" (31), and Miller, Durrell, and Perlès all used these nicknames for each other in their correspondences, I do not believe that the veracity of any such events or the potential charge of latent homosexuality (as some have informally argued) necessarily has a bearing on the homoeroticism that expressly pervades the language and contents of Miller's texts. Quite apart from the question of biographical essentialism, such scenes reveal Miller's continuing trope of overt homosexual activity for the narrators in his writings. As Laura Kipnis argues, "fantasy, identification, and pleasure don't necessarily immediately follow assigned gender: for instance, straight women may get turned on by gay male porn or may identify with the male in a heterosexual coupling" (103). In an alike conceptualization of fluidity, which is implicit in Kipnis, the homoerotics of *Tropic of Cancer* are based in this discontinuity between presumed socio-normative sexual identity (which is part of Kipnis's intent in referring to "assigned gender") and the fantastic, identificatory, and pleasing elements of verbal play. Apart from gender identities, which carry their own set of essentialisms (biographical or biological), the same argument follows for binary sexual identities that do not allow for continual revisions, vacillations, and provisionalities. Stable and named notions of sexual preference, heterosexuality, or homosexuality (and other variations thereof) do not necessarily represent sexual actions, thoughts, desires, or textual allusions thereto. If sexual identity is divorced from definitional desire and acts (as pornographic textual depictions may be separated by a reader from the playfulness of puns, allusions, and so forth), then on what basis can the

imposed titles and definitions of a sexual identity realistically describe actual states? More plainly, any easy essentialist equation of “doing” and “being” a particular identity is problematic. It seems more plausible that this paradoxicality of sexual identities points to the constructed nature of the classifications themselves, rather than to any “intrinsic” or “real” conflict. One might use a verb to denote an immediate ontological state, but equating the same verb with an eternal state of being or an identity is highly unstable. Miller seems to exemplify this instability in his works, both in form and content.

Even Michael Hardin makes the very deliberate argument that “none of [his project in performing a queer reading of *Tropic of Cancer*] is to argue that Miller is not homophobic and sexist—Miller very clearly was” (*Fighting* 129). Hardin’s note halts the productive discussion by ascribing titles to the author that dismiss the need for closer attention and complex interpretive activity by the reader. I note later with regard to Kate Millet that Miller’s sexist language poses problems for current criticism, although unlike his modernist contemporaries, Miller’s anarchism and devotion to Goldman suggest highly ironic readings of his representations of gender roles and women’s rights. The formal and thematic instabilities in Miller’s oeuvre also reflect his anarchism, deriving from his 1912 meeting with Goldman in California and his later friendship with Frank Harris from 1914 through the 1930s (Orend 53–57). Yet, while egoism influences Miller’s notions of authority and liberty, the stability of the ego is refuted as a mark of Miller’s break from his modernist forbears, as is detailed later with regard to Lawrence. The fluctuating subject position of Miller’s narrator, unreliable perspectives, and lack of formal coherence reflect this conceptual refusal to submit the work and the artist to an external authority or imposition of stability that forecloses the range of potential interpretive activities. The narrating subject is likewise exempted from imposed stability and is free to fluctuate according to libidinal impulses outside of social sanction.

As the most immediately apprehensible instance of this instability, and in contrast to the accusations of homophobia that are traditionally aimed at Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, the first paragraphs of the novel ironically find the narrator (named Henry Miller) shaving his friend Boris’s armpits, even after which his “itching did not stop” (23). Miller then comments: “We might never have known each other so intimately, Boris and I, had it not been for the lice” (23). These lice echo John Donne’s flea, providing the vehicle for exchange between the two, although this places Boris as the lover. However, whatever the nature of Boris’s “itch” may be,

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“known” and “intimately” are sexually connotative choices for the opening page of Miller’s novel, especially when applied to a male character in a homosocial relationship with the narrator. Donne’s erotic poem “The Flea” describes the mingling of two lovers’ blood in a flea as anticipating their coitus and loss of virginity (58). That Miller opens the book with this allusion and places it between two men points to his active subversion of socionormative values in general and sexually normative values specifically. The gesture also subverts the heterosexist reader while preparing for the extended subversions of accepted sexual practices that follow. For a novel often viewed as heterosexual pornography (as evidenced forcefully in its famous censorship), this opening disturbs the reader’s imposition of discrete and anticipated definitions of sexuality.

Furthermore, after half of the novel’s erotic (and apparently heterosexual) adventures, Boris reappears through a letter in which he writes:

“What happened between us—at any rate, as far as I go—is that you touched me, touched my life, that is, at the one point where I am still alive: my death. By the emotional flow I went through another immersion. I lived again, alive. No longer by reminiscence, as I do with others, but alive.” (161)

The language of these two scenes surrounding Boris is richly suggestive, even more so than the intimacy of the bond between the two men. “Something happened between [them]” that involves Boris being “touched” by the narrator “at the one point where [he is] still alive” (161). The event would seemingly refer to the armpit shaving during delousing, which would normally involve the removal of infested clothing, after which Boris still “itched” and Miller “scratched,” leading them to become “intimate.”

Given Miller’s frequent contention that sex is the point at which he is still alive, while he is otherwise “dead,” his touching Boris at the point where *he* is still alive also suggests a homoerotic tension that disturbs the superficially ardent heterosexuality of the text: the ardent heterosexuality with which Miller is customarily aligned by critics. Moreover, Boris not only describes being touched but also being “immersed” because of “the emotional flow” associated with what “happened between” him and the narrating Miller (161). An immersion does not imply being penetrated but, rather, penetrating something else, whether it is the baptismal water of the river or another rebirth into a new notion or construction of selfhood, such as those based on categorizations of sexuality.

I read these disruptions as prompting the reader to recognize that his or her own “exploration of the unknown yields only the known” (Miller,

*Hamlet* 356). When Miller offers what the reader set out to find, such as in the case of heterosexual imagery, it is unsatisfying and drives the reader to recognize his or her own presumptions. In finding Van Norden penetrating a prostitute, the book (if not the reader's text) reminds us that Van Norden cannot "get it in" and that Miller is "tickling him *in* his rump," which converts the tendered homosexual exchange into a hollow tribute to the reader's heterosexist anticipations compounded with a contradiction of "what [the reader] set out to find" (89). That so many expert readers could and have accepted finding "what [they] set out to find" in an unquestioning manner simply reinforces the extent of the heterosexist presumption that surrounds Miller's works, veiling its overt statements and hiding how the text subverts such imposed readings.

I am also drawn to the relation between the penetrations and language of mechanization in these scenes from *Tropic of Cancer* and a frequently quoted passage from *Sexus*:

Everything external is but a reflection projected by the mind machine ... the woman I fell upon, clawed, bit, suffocated with unknown kisses, the woman who had been Mara and was now Mona, who had been and would be other names, other persons, other assemblages of appendages, was no more accessible, penetrable, than a cool statue in a forgotten garden of a lost continent. (209, 210)

While neither Van Norden nor Boris are described as "penetrable," penetration is their ticklish or itching subject, and in this above passage, Miller only penetrates his own projections, his own censored expressions of himself, while Mona/Mara remains distinct. Moreover, while the language of penetration is embedded in the descriptions of the two male characters—Boris is immersed in the narrating Miller (penetrating) and Van Norden is tickled *in* the rump (penetrated)—it is absent from Miller's descriptions of the prostitute, even when Van Norden is "bent over her like a satyr" (*Tropic* 142) with Miller "watching their movements" (142). Much like the description of Mona/Mara, his wife, Van Norden, even in the act of copulation, is not able to penetrate the Parisian prostitute, and in contradiction to the actions in which he is described as being engaged, he snaps at the narrating Miller, "I almost got it in that time." (142), as if the physical penetration is meaningless and he does not "get it in" her.

This confusion is productive and supports the entire scene with Van Norden. In all cases here, acts and identities are distinct from each other, and penetration loses much of its definitional impetus. The mechanized sex that Miller compares to "one of those crazy machines which throws the

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interpenetrate.

newspaper out, millions and billions and trillions of them” (142) acts as a phallus ejaculating white newsprint. This is also in contrast to the broken machinery mentioned earlier; this machine is a “which” and not a “who.” The same ejaculatory phallic imagery comes in the same scene through the “volcano erupting” (142), the soldier with a “knife or gun” (141), and even the “fifteen francs” (140) that displace the “primal cause of things” (140) during Miller’s and Van Norden’s interaction with the prostitute and each other. Because Van Norden is so intent not to “let her work on [his] sympathies” (140), she is impenetrable, with penetration standing in for a form of human contact (anathema to the pornographic reader’s pleasure). He does not allow her *in* him, and hence she is impenetrable as well. Van Norden also remains unknown to himself and impenetrable, not recognizing his projections, though Miller’s digital intervention points to the form of desire Van Norden is unable to recognize. The discrete persons in the heterosexual exchange remain unknowns to each other and themselves, separated by their phenomenal worlds, which cannot interpenetrate.

In this manner, the prostitute is like the later Mona/Mara “who had been and would be other names, other persons, other assemblages of appendages, [and] was no more accessible, penetrable, than a cool statue in a forgotten garden of a lost continent” (Miller, *Sexus* 210). Identity, then, is aligned with penetrability and accessibility, such that Van Norden can be penetrated while these two women (though not others) remain apart—only in this metaphorical sense would I associate sexual activity with identity, but even this still falls into Nietzsche’s troubling of the *site* of identity.

This instability of identity seems to be Miller’s organizing principle here. If articulated in the same manner as Nietzsche’s notions of selfhood, it places any such identity outside of the ambiguity and more firmly in the space of the unknowable. When mocking “logicians,” Nietzsche argues strongly

a thought comes when “it” wishes and not when “I” wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject “I” is the condition of the predicate “think.” *It* thinks, but that this “it” is precisely the old famous “ego” [Ich or “I”] is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an “immediate certainty.” (24)

This is the “trick of Socrates which Nietzsche so bitterly lampooned” (Miller, *Hamlet* 312). While Nietzsche rejects what Miller has later re-titled “the modest, defeated, plodding, workaday self which has a name and which can be identified in public registers” (*Sexus* 29), Nietzsche does point to

some more essential identity, or at least he is specific enough to not deny such a thing. Similarly, Miller overtly affirms such an identity while arguing against its location in the places typically associated with it.

Likewise, to avoid a paradoxical situation in which Mona/Mara is both penetrated (by direct description) and impenetrable (by direct statement), the reader is prompted to an ambiguous understanding of “penetration” as both a physical conjoining and a mental connection in sympathy. The Self of Mona (without addressing what such a thing might be, might specifically mean, or where it might be located) is clearly fluid and hence inaccessible (which does not mean that it must exist in some clearly defined way either), just as the prostitute’s identity is unfixed depending on the exigencies of any particular situation, and Van Norden is not open to her.

This is why I disagree with earlier critics of Miller’s depictions of sexuality, and especially with Kate Millett’s reading, a reading Miller encouraged (“Letter” 157–58) but that overlooks these complexities. Impenetrability is not only apparent in these two scenes. There are others. In the opening of *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller encounters the same contradictory impenetrability during penetration in the “cabinet” (37) of a nightclub, and Millett has read this scene closely:

He finds he can’t “get it into her.” With his never-failing ingenuity, he next tries sitting on the toilet seat. This won’t do either, so, in a burst of hostility posing as passion, he reports: “I come all over her beautiful gown and she’s sore as hell about it.” In the *Tropic of Capricorn* he repeats the stunt; in *Sexus* too. It is a performance that nicely combines defecation with orgasm....What he really wants to do is shit on her. (309)

In contrast to Millett, I return attention to Miller’s comment that “I try to *get it into* her but it won’t *work*” (*Tropic* 37), which is an anticipation of Van Norden’s mechanized scene where he “almost *got it in* that time” (142), but the “machinery” likewise did not work. Millett notes the repetition but fails to attend to the complexity and function such repetition implies. In all cases, physical penetration is less the issue and simply reflects the anonymity of the sex, with its overt associations with excrement, impotence, and hired labour. Millett is right to point out how it “nicely combines defecation with orgasm” (309). However, she does not follow this up with Miller’s more pointed description of shit in the same book.

The other function of the “rump,” Miller’s view of the excremental world, is expressed when he takes “one of Gandhi’s men” (*Tropic* 97) to a brothel. In the ensuing scene, “The five of [them] are standing there

looking at the *bidet*. There are two enormous turds floating in the water” (99), and the Madame is berating “Gandhi’s m[a]n” (97) ferociously. As the problem is resolved, Miller muses:

I think what a miracle it would be if this miracle which man attends eternally should turn out to be nothing more than two enormous turds which the faithful disciple dropped in the *bidet*. What if at the last moment, when the banquet table is set and the cymbals clash, there should appear suddenly, and wholly without warning, a silver platter on which even the blind could see that there is nothing more, and nothing less, than two enormous lumps of shit. That, I believe would be more miraculous than anything which man has looked forward to. (103)

Despite the remove of pages, it is clear that “the faithful disciple” (103) at least nominally refers to “Gandhi’s m[a]n” (97) and that the “two enormous” (99, 103) lumps of shit are the same in both descriptions. However, the paragraph immediately preceding the “miracle of shit” does not refer to Gandhi but rather to “Gautama and Jesus” (103), linking the creation of the disciple to disillusionment with two dominant worldviews and belief systems that double as means to identification.

As with Millett’s linking of sex and defecation, this scene takes place in a brothel and anticipates copulation, but the orgasm-defecation elision is not so narrow. Penetration and excretion are dominant tropes in both scenes, as are money and authority as well as coercion. Miller has expanded defecation to encompass a worldview that balances how individuals interact with each other. As with the woman whose gown Miller soils with sperm (37), the defecation of the young Indian is closely tied to the relations between people and sex, and if the reader accepts the expansion of defecation in a brothel’s bidet to a discussion of broad authoritarian social structures, then the excretions from the encounter in a nightclub’s closet equally indicate the faults in such social systems that reduces people and intimacy to fifteen francs. I read against Millett’s argument that “What [Miller] really wants to do is shit on her” (Millett 309) and instead suggest that the shit of their meeting indicates the same rotting social flaw that Miller finds in any authoritarian structures such as religion, capitalist exchange, and heteronormativity. That is, there is no humanity in the exchange. If the “miracle of shit” applies to the “miracle which man attends eternally” (103), then the reader notices the false pedestal of projected desire that masks aggression and failures to interpenetrate phenomenal worlds. The patriarchal image of the subservient

woman and strict heterosexual relations are undermined. This is a meeting point where Millett may actually have found common ground with Miller. Despite discourses of domination and authority, the Self remains inaccessible, and attempts at authoritarian penetration reveal only “shit.” The American woman Miller ejaculates on in the toilet (36–37) is as impenetrable as Mona/Mara and the Parisian prostitute with whom Van Norden is described. However, while neither Van Norden nor Miller can “get it in” their respective female mates, the excretory theme reappears in Miller’s anal play with Van Norden, “tickling him *in* the rump.” These turns to the excretory and to the homoerotic (if not homosexual) appear as Miller’s interventions in the discourses of enforced heterosexuality and authoritarian socio-normativity, including gender roles. This aligns Miller with Millett more than she may be comfortable admitting, and, more to my point, all of these problems of textual play and stable identifications point the reader again to an unresolvable provisionality that characterizes Miller’s works and his ironic heteronormative egotism.

These factual problems with the texts and critical responses all point to the other critical dilemma with which I am concerned. How is it possible, given the overt nature of Miller’s play with stable notions of sexuality, that *all* scholars who endorse a Gay and Lesbian Studies or Queer Theory approach to these texts have also continuously re-inscribed heterosexist presumption on texts that overtly destabilize the notion itself? Why do those who aver homophobia unknowingly impose the epistemological closet of heterosexist presumption? A simple response is that Miller *still* disturbs our anticipations and social norms over seventy years later. Given his continued good sales, popular readership, and previous iconic status among critics, as well as the fact that Miller is nearly universally excluded from academic discussions that his works in large part helped to initiate, I believe there is some merit in my simple thought that he still disturbs our value systems, as well as the value systems of our academic modes of reading.

Miller’s sexist language and Millett’s approach to it are also commonly cited factors in his critical decline, but the texts also overtly challenge the same conventions, at least more than is typically acknowledged in his contemporaries. A sociocritical reading would quickly note that Miller’s language “does” a form of sexual identity and gender relations that is at odds with its social context and normative expectations. Form and content align in Miller, with his anti-art and anarchist anti-authoritarian views blending with his formal play. The critical responses from queer theorists to Miller offers us a way to examine the tensions between early modernist

notions of identity, such as D. H. Lawrence's allotropic self, late modernist rejections of the stable ego, and our current identity politics, which walk through a similar tension.

My reference to Lawrence's allotropic self goes to the crux of this issue since it is one of Miller's bases for comparison and difference. In 1932, Miller wrote his lengthy study *The World of Lawrence*, although it was only published posthumously in 1982. As a chemical term, allotropic means "having different physical properties, though unchanged in substance" (*OED*), such as diamonds and coal both being allotropes of carbon. In other words, wildly diverse things are still connected at the level of Lawrence's blood consciousness and relationships are based on neither "coal" nor "diamonds" but on "carbon." More specifically, in his 15 June 1914 letter to Edward Garnett, Lawrence claimed:

*You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically-unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond—but I say "diamond, what! This is carbon." And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.)* (*Letters* 183; emphasis added)

This famous passage is not lost on Miller, especially given their shared interest in the censored "soot." This passage's *topic* shows where Miller's extension and development from his predecessors is most apparent: "the old stable ego." As with Lawrence, the stable ego is banished by Miller, and while we may allow for a constant libidinal current, its expression is an allotrope, and hence the allotropic self is subject to radical reorientation.

However, Miller's close friend Durrell identified plural "warring selves" when he placed Miller beside Lawrence in his "Studies in Genius" (49; emphasis added). Moreover, Lawrence's use of the term "allotropic" derives from two footnotes in F. W. H. Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (Gibbons 338–41). It is Gibbons's "subliminal self" which represents "our *central* and *abiding* being" for Lawrence (339; emphasis added). Hence, Lawrence promoted another frame for the immortal soul, from which Miller retreated, even if he did not fully succeed in ridding his work of "the old stable ego." The continuity of at least the drive, if not an actual self *per se*, is where Miller broke from his modernist forebears—if

a drive remains for Miller, it is divorced from a central and abiding being or socially regulated subject.

In Lawrence, we find an early predecessor to the kinds of rejections of identity that we later find in Queer Theory, as opposed to Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Miller is very much in this vein. With Miller's unstable text, structural innovation, and language games of innuendo and distraction, he expresses the allotropic forms of sexual desire. These expressions then resist easy classification into stable categories, such as identities. The questions this prompts are politically impolite yet theoretically necessary. For instance, how, if I reject stable identities via Queer Theory, can I justify political actions that concomitantly reject conservative agendas made visible in derogatory language such as "lifestyle," "preference," or "choice"? More simply, if identity is protean, how can one secure civil rights and resist social pressures to conform? Why prefer one state over another when faced with social pressure? Dana Shugar is persuasive in making this distinction between Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory when she asks:

[Q]ueer theory's insistence on identity as a free-floating, interchangeable set of social roles, without regard to the different values society itself places on those roles, leaves us no way *as a community* to conceptualize resistance against larger social forces which continue to devalue women, men of color, working class people, and so on.... Why should we settle for a theoretical construct that cuts us off from one of our most powerful strategies? (18)

Bert Archer struggled with this problem in his popular treatment *The End of Gay*, as have several authors in Mark Simpson's *Anti-Gay*, or more recently David Alderson (325–27), all without fully satisfactory answers.

The question is troubling. We tend to discuss sexuality less as an action and more as an expression of a stable identity, despite our theoretical models' implicit rejection of such a notion. The sterile signing of a cheque is both an act and an expression of a stable social self while the more lively consumption of a good meal is not, though the latter likely has a great deal more to do with our ontological and sensual engagement with the world. To return to Nietzsche's old problem, *where* do we find the self, and if we cannot find it, does that mean it does not exist? I have seen no queer critic willing to directly argue that actions define a stable identity, and with regard to sexuality this is an already well-accepted distinction in Queer Theory. Yet, our otherwise outdated stable notions of identity continue to trouble the nexus of identity, sexuality, and actions whenever

Gay and Lesbian Studies meets Queer Theory. Similarly, this focus on the homoerotics of *Tropic of Cancer* is based in the discontinuity between assumed heteronormativity (which is parallel to Kipnis's notion of false stability in referring to "assigned gender") and the fantastic, identificatory, and pleasing elements of verbal play that are demonstrably present in the text. Apart from gender identities, which carry their own essentialist presumptions, the same argument follows for sexual identities that do not allow for continual revisions, vacillations, and provisionality as Miller renders them. In other words, our theory refutes the predicates of the political actions our theory was developed to support. If I can queer the "straight" text, I can equally straighten the "queer" text (as Ladenson and Hardin unintentionally demonstrate), meaning these are not meaningful critical distinctions, even though they are frequently very useful for laudatory social ends.

And yet, before this body of theory arose, Miller and the other writers of the Villa Seurat were already muddying the water while publishing through the Obelisk Press. They continually disturb identity politics and resist (though sometimes unsuccessfully) the reader's tendency to impose stability or closure. But, in modernist fashion, Miller embraces ambiguity in William Empson's seventh type: "[T]he two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context ... in such a pair you are only stating, for instance, a scale, which might be extended between any two points, though no two points are in themselves opposites" (Empson 192). The reader's anticipation of a particular sexual identity in the narrator (that is, heterosexist presumption) is subverted by ambiguous sexual acts, confusions between narrator and author, and the characters' abilities to revise identity-defining acts between what begin as binary poles but become merely two points among many others. Sexuality remains kinetic insofar as it acts but loses its association with identity. It dares, but it does not name. This places the reader in the awkward position of creating meaning from an unresolved ambiguity, and it places the critic in the even more uncomfortable position of dealing with gaps "into whose vast and shadowy spaces the machinery of heterosexist presumption and homophobic projection will already, undetected, have had ample time to creep" (Sedgwick 247). Hence, any resolution made by the reader reflects what he or she set out to find: projection. Just as there is no "penetration" in the sexual exchanges, the reader does not penetrate the text and does not recognize herself in the projected contents that obscure the text. This is to say, at the moments of greatest heterosexist presumption, the text does not fulfill the expectation, and the reader's reaction offers a potential

moment of self-recognition. The verb “love” may be conjugated, but its subject remains even more elusive than its object. The more the verb limits the scope of available subjects, the more we are pushed into the passive constructions of an ever-vanishing identity.

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