PREFACE TO THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Browsing around online in 2017, I found an announcement that astonished me: a BBC ONE series was announced starring Suranne Jones. Titled "Gentleman Jack," the series was based upon the life and times of Anne Lister. Lister, a historical figure whom I discuss in my book as an example of premodern female masculinity, described a life of leisure, love, and promiscuity in her diaries. Lister was recognized by her peers as masculine, but given the era, no connections were made automatically between her masculinity and any particular sexual preferences or practices. How would a new TV series portray such a figure, I wondered, and, perhaps more pertinently, why would they choose to do so now?

Ann Lister presents contemporary scholars and readers with a genuine historical enigma—she was an aristocratic woman who wrote extensive diaries about her life and left detailed accounts of her relations with women. But the way she thought about her life, her class status, her relation to marriage, and her female lovers remain utterly distinct from the understandings we are tempted to project onto them from the vantage point of the present day. An added layer of mystery attends this case because Lister, fearing prying eyes, wrote her diaries in code. This lexical code can stand in

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

now for the inscrutability of the past. Even once these diaries are decoded, in other words, the meanings of Lister's stories may remain opaque, veiled from the contemporary reader by the assumptions we bring to any such accounts about identity, coherent forms of desire, and the fixity of social roles.

In *Female Masculinity,* I grappled with the enigma of Ann Lister and others in order to offer a clear set of case histories through which to confront the shifting norms around gender variance and sexual desire over the past four hundred years for people born female. While queer studies in the 1990s was replete with such accounts for male gender variance and desire, there were no such studies of women. Male scholars had documented and explained the meaning of male femininities from the Greeks (studies of the *kinaidos*) through early Christianity (sodomites) to early modern forms of homoerotic contact (mollies and molly houses) to the late nineteenth century legal persecution of homosexual men and dandies (the trials of Oscar Wilde for example). When I decided to offer a history of female masculinity, queer studies had not produced comparable prehistories for lesbianism. In the ancient world, women who had sex with women were often labeled as "tribades" and they were thought to have large clitorises that functioned as phallic organs. Early modern references to lesbianism might have involved accusations of witchcraft, and by the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries cases of cross-dressing or passing women were assigned the label "female husband." The term "female masculinity," precisely because it describes multiple modes of identification and gender assignation, is capacious enough to contain many of these historical variations without stabilizing and foreclosing on their meanings.

Female masculinity has a long history, a history that has been rooted in racial and class-based distinctions between women and that casts femininity as in some ways white and female and masculinity as both working class and black. Such historical assumptions, just to give one example, formed the foundation of a book of photographs simply titled *Women,* published by Annie Leibovitz in 2000 on the cusp of a new century. Annie Leibovitz presented her viewers with a wide range of images designed to complicate, disorganize, and denaturalize once and for all the ways that femaleness, femininity, and womanhood do or do not cohere as a social identity. In quick succession, the book featured boyish farming women, tough female coal miners, Lolita-like cheerleaders, tattooed rock heroines, gorgeously wrinkled octogenarians, politicians, athletes (often black), and superstars. A stunning shot of Martina Navratilova pulling on a huge mechanical cog

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

wheel, emphasizes precisely what women's sports photography tends to de-emphasize—namely the magnificent strength and musculature of female athleticism. This shot, an obvious quotation of a Lewis Hine photograph, placed a female athlete in the place of a male manual laborer as if to insist upon a new order of masculinity even as it tethers female masculinity and muscularity to the laboring body. Another shot, an artfully posed portrait of performance artist Jennifer Miller, contrasted her naked female body with her shamelessly cultivated facial hair—a full beard and moustache—and forced the viewer to consider body hair and female form in close proximity. A shot of Venus Williams and Serena Williams and another of Jackie Joyner Kersee linked black womanhood to athleticism and allowed us to see the ways in which whiteness has determined what we see as so-called normal womanhood. The book was capacious in its definitions of the female body however and instructive in the way it marked and emphasized implicit connections between race, class, and female embodiment.

One photograph in *Women* brought the viewer face to face with a close up candid shot of New Jersey cop and male-to-female transsexual, Janet Aiello; nestled as this shot was among numerous pictures of female body builders and athletes, the startlingly brawny arms of the transsexual police officer provoke little to no surprise. These women appeared alongside more conventional representatives of womanhood like Hillary Clinton and Oprah Winfrey, and yet the volume as a whole suggests that by the end of the twentieth century the category "woman" covered a vast array of behaviors, embodiments, looks, professions, and activities. While certain women have always been considered hairy, scary, and ugly by Western cultures, at the end of the twentieth century, it would seem, those same women rounded out the category of woman rather than expressing its limits.

In her introduction to Leibovitz's book of photographs, Susan Sontag remarks upon the variety captured by the photographic survey and she notes: "So this is what women are now—as different, as varied, as heroic, as forlorn, as conventional, as unconventional as this" (20). An image of Sontag herself appears at the end of the volume and with her cropped hair, she projects a severe look that emphasizes her own unconventional appearance. Sontag tries to say something specific in this introduction about the content of nonnormative womanhood and she links some of these representations of womanhood to the category of female ugliness.

Literature and folklore are replete with tales of ugly women, the masculine women who could not, cannot, and will not hide their butch de-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

meanors behind a feminine facade; only rarely however is the category of female ugliness explicitly connected to female masculinity. Lesbianism has long been associated with female masculinity and female masculinity in turn has been figured as undesirable by linking it in essential and unquestionable ways to female ugliness. The dilemma of the masculine and therefore ugly woman functions as the specter that haunts feminine identification in order to ensure that few women cathect onto female masculinity through either identification or desire. One obvious signifier of the equation between ugliness and female masculinity can be traced through the association of female hirsute bodies with essential ugliness. Hirsute women, in literature and in life have all too often, as Rosemarie Garland Thompson's work on "freakery" has shown, been dubbed "witch" or "freak" and displayed in circuses and fairs; many such women have been expelled from their communities while others have been adopted as divine figures.[1]

The association of female ugliness with female masculinity, obviously, works to protect and naturalize the relationship between femaleness and femininity; indeed, so well defended is this relationship that, late in the twentieth century and long after second-wave feminists conclusively argued that femininity is a social construct rather than a naturalized expression of the female body, female masculinity for the most part was still perceived as an abject failure of embodiment, desire, and socialization. But, as Judith Butler asks in *Bodies That Matter:* "What happens if the law that deploys the spectral figure of abject homosexuality as a threat becomes itself an inadvertent site of eroticization?" (97). By which she means, what if the category that represents the failure of femininity actually comes to represent a powerful site of eroticization and identification; what if female masculinity is desirable as both a subject position and as an object of desire? By including many pictures of masculine women under the banner of *Women,* capital W, Annie Leibovitz answers Butler's question by suggesting that compulsory femininity has met its proper end. And Sontag answers the question in her own way; she says: "So *this* is what women are now."

According to Sontag and Leibovitz, then, women are not precisely what they could not be earlier in the century. The function of the masculine/ugly woman indeed was complicated within modernism. At certain moments, the masculine woman in modernism comes to signify the ills of modern life itself: the coarsening of female beauty, the breakdown of separate spheres, and the devolution and degeneration of the species. She also represents a catastrophe in nature itself, the untoward consequences of the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

Great War and the alienation of self that is so much a hallmark of modern literature. In eccentric accounts of gender like those produced, for example, by turn-of-the century philosopher, Otto Weininger, the masculine woman, paradoxically, also figured as a powerful female character type who has renounced her own flawed and damaged femininity. The enigmatic nature of the masculine woman in the first part of the last century then made her into a perfect icon of modernity—she combined in one body the force of power and abjection, she was both phallic and obviously castrated—she was a riddle that neither psychoanalysis nor sexology could adequately solve. Sterile but virile, damned but noble, the manly woman was a creature born of the wasteland.

During World War I, the insights of sexology had profound implications as hundreds of male soldiers returned from the Front suffering from various forms of a debilitating hysteria and, at the same time, hundreds of women either took over masculine jobs at home or petitioned to drive ambulances at the Front. Since male femininity had been tied so definitively to homosexuality, male hysteria was a particularly troubling neurosis; and since female masculinity had been tied so definitively to female homosexuality, the participation of women in masculine occupations gave cause for concern about the impact of these new occupations on "female character" and on the "woman question" in general. Otto Weininger, a controversial Jewish thinker, for example, considered the demand for female emancipation to be a direct result of female masculinity, whether acquired or innate. He proclaimed: "A woman's demand for emancipation and her qualification for it are in direct proportion to the amount of maleness in her."[2] By emancipation, however, Weininger did not mean economic autonomy, political enfranchisement, or gender equality, he meant rather the "deep seated craving to acquire man's character, to attain his mental and moral freedom, to reach his real interests and creative power" (65). In other words, women with any kind of social, aesthetic, or political aspirations must in some sense not be women at all and, furthermore, he claimed, the heroic women held up by feminists as examples of female genius and aptitude—Sappho, George Sand, Catherine the Great—were not simply "great" women rather they were virtual men, and their masculinity "presupposes a higher degree of development" (66). Obviously a theory of sex and character like Weininger's is deeply misogynist in that it attributes all female ambition to a male disposition; femininity itself then corresponds to a low and even regressive form of human development and it cannot be the root of either genius or

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

power. In other parts of the book, Weininger links his odious ideas on gender to equally sinister notions of race: Jews, he claimed, were a feminized and therefore a doomed race.

While Weininger's ideas reflected both the anti-Semitism and the masculinism of the first decade of twentieth-century Europe, they do provide insight into the ways in which female masculinity might have been understood simultaneously as a gender or sexual perversion, and as a superior form of female evolution. Weininger believed in fact that the two went together and that even where a successful woman was not known to be homosexual, her homosexuality would be legible on her body. In one passage, Weininger describes the physical appearances of successful masculine women as follows: "George Eliot had a broad massive forehead . . . the face of Lavinia Fontana was intellectual and decided, very rarely charming; whilst that of Rachel Ruysch was almost wholly masculine. The biography of that original poetess Annette von Droste-Hulshoff speaks of her wiry, unwomanly frame, and of her face as being masculine." Here Weininger explicitly connects the ugly, masculine woman to homosexuality and he even formulates a woman's homosexuality as an outcome of her masculinity. Weininger's idiosyncratic and controversial response to feminism then concludes with a modest proposal: "Let there be the freest scope given to and few hindrances put in the way of all women with masculine dispositions who feel a psychical necessity to devote themselves to masculine occupations and are physically fit to undertake them" (71). But freedom for the masculine woman predictably comes at a price for the feminine woman: "Away with the whole women's movement" states Weininger ominously, "with its unnaturalness and artificiality and fundamental errors." This split between emancipation for the invert and confinement for the feminine woman set female masculinity at odds with feminism, indeed set female masculinity at odds with womanhood, and created a double bind for the masculine woman and for masculine female modernists. Does the masculine woman cleave to a masculinist politics that sets her at the top of a hierarchy of women or does she recognize her solidarity with feminine women and set her sights on feminist goals? Gertrude Stein, for one, was extremely attracted to Weininger's ideas precisely because he associated female masculinity with female genius, but other writers like Djuna Barnes had to work out how to rescue female masculinity for a feminist aesthetic.

While Weininger and certain sexologists like Havelock Ellis associated female masculinity with a fundamental and bodily inversion of sex and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

gender, other early twentieth century writers like D. H. Lawrence understood female masculinity as more of a temporary and contingent camouflage adopted by some women in the face of a shortage of men following World War I. Lawrence clearly expressed his sense of the damage done to gender stability by the death of so many young men in England during the war years in his short story from the early 1920's *The Fox, the Captain's Doll, the Ladybird*. *The Fox* tells a crudely allegorical tale of the consequences of disrupting nature's plan for men and women. In this strange story of domestic disorder, two young women are living together on a farm, milking cows and raising chickens. Banford and March are described as follows: "Banford was a small, thin, delicate thing with spectacles. . . . March was more robust. She had learned carpentry and joinering at the evening classes in Islington. She would be the man about the place."[3] Lawrence links the two women to a doomed endeavor, running a farm without a man around the place, and describes each one as flawed in a different way. Banford has internalized the ills of modernity and civilization; she has the nerves associated with hysterics and Lawrence desexualizes her by describing her throughout as frail and anxious, old before her time, and at odds with nature itself. March, on the other hand, is "robust" and hearty; her flirtation with masculinity has not damaged her body or mind but it has resulted in a repression of a natural or heterosexual instinct. When a young soldier, Henry, arrives at the farm, it is the masculine March and not the nervous but feminine Banford who becomes the object of his desires.

Lawrence's formulation of female masculinity, like Weininger's, assumes that masculinity wherever it may be found signifies health, nature, and biological superiority. But unlike Weininger, Lawrence assumes the naturalness of and the inevitability of the heterosexual instinct. Accordingly, Lawrence formulates female masculinity in a way that permits the masculine woman to participate in a heterosexual relationship. While the lesbian relationship between March and Banford is described as suffocating and sterile, the relationship between March and Henry operates on the principle of a natural autopilot—the sex instinct in other words automatically wins out over the cultural imposition of masculinity upon the woman. When confronted with the sensual attractions of the young fox-like soldier, March's assumed form of masculinity gives way to the power of a presumably authentic form. While the soldier's manhood is supposed to represent a natural cure for the evils of modern gender, in fact it proves fatal to both women. Banford dies a violent death when Henry deliberately misjudges

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

a tree he is felling; the phallic trunk comes down on the frail Banford and crushes her. March's fate is less violent but equally terminal: she receives the homeopathic rather than the allopathic version of the cure, his masculinity undoes hers, and she dies a natural death in an untimely marriage.

While Weininger and Lawrence both see female masculinity as a healthful alternative to the noxious and debilitating spirit of a feminized modernity, Weininger's theory of female masculinity is predicated upon the inherent weakness and fragility of embodied femininity. Lawrence, by comparison, reinvests in the notion of a natural and bodily masculinity that cannot be threatened, challenged, or replaced by virility in women. For both writers, however, femininity is a symptom of modern degeneration and the only solution is to recreate a virile culture. For obvious reasons then, many feminists studying the rise of models of inversion within modernism have associated female masculinity with an anti-feminist and anti-feminine understanding of modern gender.

The standoff between feminism and female masculinity continued well into the twentieth century until it eventually produced a fatal sense of betrayal. The current conflicts between some white feminists and transgender men and women, for example, constitute at least one manifestation of this original mutual mistrust. The masculine woman continues to represent some kind of betrayal of womanhood as the film *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) confirmed. In this phobic film, an older, masculine, female teacher, Barbara (Judi Dench) preys upon a younger woman, Sheba (Cate Blanchett) and engineers her downfall after Sheba gets involved with a male student. Barbara is a classic spinster, she is lonely, spiteful, and manipulative. Rather than being represented as the victim of heteronormativity, the film depicts her as a threat to natural, heterosexual love. But more often than not by the end of the twentieth century, butch lesbians seemed to have faded from view, eclipsed by transgender forms of manhood.

However, in the past five years, the masculine woman has made something of a comeback. From the Broadway musical based on Alison Bechdel's memoir of growing up butch with a closeted gay father, *Fun Home,* to Lea Delaria and the many butches in *Orange Is the New Black,* from Charlize Theron's turn as Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max,* to the hockey-playing tomboy in the Pixar animated film *Inside Out,* we would seem to have a plethora of butches in popular culture right at the very moment that the category has supposedly gone out of style. Are the new representations of butches ghostly after-images of a recent past that has come and gone and taken its

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

place within a pantheon of gay and lesbian histories relegated to the past by the recent triumphalism of the gay marriage era? Or, conversely, are they harbingers of a new future of gender variability that has expanded beyond man and woman into a wide-ranging set of expressions of the gendered body? Has female masculinity been around long enough to become trendy? Or, in an era of unprecedented visibility for transgender embodiment, does butch represent an obstinate fragment of an older paradigm, still capable of generating both fascination and fear?

In an interview in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2016, Alison Bechdel, who appeared in the photograph accompanying the piece dressed in a very smart tailored suit, was asked: "In *Fun Home,* you wrote about becoming a connoisseur of masculinity at a young age. Today a young person like you would be more likely to identify as transgender than gay. Is the butch lesbian endangered?" "Well, first of all, great question!! Second, wow, in the *New York Times?* Really? Third, well, is the butch endangered?" Bechdel answers adroitly: "I think the way I first understood my lesbianism, before I had more of a political awareness of it, was like: Oh, I'm a man trapped in a female body. I would've just gone down that road if it had been there. But I'm so glad it wasn't, because I really like being this kind of unusual woman. I like making this new space in the world."

So, is butch the designation of a new space or an old space? The article is ambivalent and implies both that butch is an old-fashioned form of identification that is in danger of being eclipsed by transgenderism and that it is a "new space in the world." And maybe that captures perfectly what shall hereafter be known as "the temporal paradox of the butch"—s/he is out of time and ahead of his/her time and behind the times all at once. Butch is simultaneously a marker of what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal drag" or "the visceral pull of the past on the supposedly revolutionary present" and of certain forms of what Juana Maria Rodriguez terms "sexual futures." The uncanny, uncertain, dislocated, and indefinable terrain of the butch competes with our sense of the stubborn, recalcitrant, unmoving, and unmoved essence of the butch. Butch was supposed to fade away as a category precisely because it encapsulated the ugly, the dowdy, the backward, and the tragic, but its calcified intransigence may actually have equipped the category for survival!

The Broadway musical version of *Fun Home,* brought an emotional and complex portrait of female masculinity to popular audiences. The showstopping number sung by the young Alison (Sydney Lucas) is a remarkable

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

scene of cross-generational butch recognition. “Ring of Keys,” written by Lisa Kron, tells the story of an encounter between the young Alison and an adult butch who walked into the diner where Alison and her closeted father were eating. Sydney sings:

> Someone just walked in the door, like no one I ever saw before, I feel . . . I feel . . . I don’t know where you came from, I wish I did, I feel so dumb . . . I feel . . . I feel. Your swagger and your bearing and the just right clothes you’re wearing.
>
> Your short hair and your dungarees, and your lace up boots and your keys, ohhh your ring of keys!

“I know you,” she sings, “you’re beautiful . . . no, you’re handsome”! This song, punctuated by ellipses, conveys the unspeakability of affectionate regard for the butch woman. There are no words for such affect, no precedents for generations of butches past who may also have seen strong, gender-queer, female-bodied women and who may have wanted to claim them. As novelistic descriptions by Leslie Feinberg and others of just such ghostly encounters between adult, abject butches and the young proto-butches who want to find their likenesses in the world demonstrate, in the past, the butch adult would have been more likely to spark terror and fear in the young queer’s heart than adoration, acceptance, and identification.

What the young Alison feels for the anonymous butch who crosses her path has no words, cannot be culled from any archives of feelings, gay or straight, and so is captured in that open-mouthed, soundless wonder that punctuates the song. The mouth, open and silent, mimics the ring of keys that say everything without speaking, that jangle a noisy song of their own without words, that say butch in a way that ordinary language could not.

The butch is neither cis-gender nor simply transgender, the butch is a bodily catachresis. The Greek word, *catachresis,* means the rhetorical practice of misnaming something for which there would otherwise be no words. Butch is always a misnomer—not male, not female, masculine but not male, female but not feminine, the term serves as a placeholder for the unassimilable, for that which remains indefinable or unspeakable within the many identifications that we make and that we claim. For Derrida, catachresis captures the inherent linguistic instability in all signifying practices and for Spivak it names the inherent colonial violence lurking in the practice of naming and identifying, systematizing and translating. And so, in

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023

this era of LGBT rights and recognition, let the butch stand as all that cannot be absorbed into systems of signification, legitimation, legibility, recognition, and legality.

The butch, in other words, has neither faded from view, disappeared into the category of transgenderism, nor become the centerpiece of LGBT respectability. She is and she remains a “bad” sexual subject, stranded in illegibility but stubborn in her refusal to simply slip into anachronism. In the twenty years since I charted the evolution of the masculine woman, in other words, she has thrived, flourished, died many deaths, receded into a dowdy decline, and then suddenly reappeared as the toast of Broadway. Like the children’s toy whose byline was “weebles wobble but they don’t fall down,” the butch, against all odds, continues to thrive.

It is because of the resilience of the butch that I believe my book continues to have relevance. Female masculinity is a term that describes simultaneously an evolving role; the shifting surface of girlhood and womanhood; a porous limit of gender variance; an alternative edge to manhood, and a historical trajectory that extends back beyond modern sexual and gender definitions. In our current era, a time riddled with public accusations of male sexual misbehavior and a period plagued by lone male mass shooters, we surely need to rethink the toxic masculinities that currently limn normative manhood. Female masculinity continues to apply pressure to hegemonic forms and even as it represents a seemingly old-fashioned form of queer identification, it may also hold the seeds of future genders.

Notes

1 For more on the essential freakishness of the hairy female body, see Rosemarie Garland Thompson’s informative work *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

2 Otto Weininger, “Emancipated Women,” in *Sex and Character* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 64.

3 D. H. Lawrence, “The Fox” (1921), in *The Fox, the Captain’s Doll, the Ladybird* (London: Penguin, 1994), 7.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/674298/9781478002703-xv.pdf by guest on 09 June 2023