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What To Do If Your Inner Tomboy Is a Homo: Straight Women, Bisexuality, and Pleasure in M/M Gay Romance Fictions

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This essay tackles the controversy of heterosexual-identified women who derive erotic and psychic pleasure from writing and/or reading popular literature in which the central romantic couple is two men. Such narratives are known as M/M fiction and comprise a subgenre within the larger romance market. Criticism directed at this cultural practice often argues that such narratives merely substitute two male bodies for a male/female pair without substantively altering the emotional and sexual dynamics of the relationship. Hence, the male lovers in such narratives are simply acting out a heterosexual fantasy of gay male intimacy. To challenge this view, this essay turns to revisions to Freudian understandings of bisexuality. In so doing, it attempts to relocate this pleasure in the repudiated male identities and homosexual object cathexes that all women are urged to give up in the pre-Oedipal phase as a condition of assuming (hetero)normative gender and sexual subjectivities.

KEYWORDS *fiction, bisexuality, slash, romance, psychoanalysis, tomboys*

[T]he melancholic formation of gender sheds light on the predicament of living within a culture which can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty. (Butler, 1997, p. 133)

On his blog, “Violated,” gay male author Jamie Fessenden (2014) added his voice to the burgeoning controversy surrounding the dominance of female-bodied writers within the male/male (M/M) romance genre. The latter are popular literary narratives that, though they depict M/M sexual intimacy,

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the most popular and best-selling titles are written predominantly, though not exclusively, by women for women readers, many of whom are in fact heterosexual (Brooks, Buben, & Lauture, 2015; Pagliassotti, 2012). In his post, Fessenden (2014), who is also the author of several M/M romances himself, tries to come to terms with this seeming discrepancy between the central narrative focus of these works and the gender and sexual identities of their primary authors and consumers, writing: “The fact of the matter is, MM romance may be *about* gay men, but it isn’t really *ours*.” What Fessenden means by this statement is that often such books don’t seem to him to be authentic depictions of the real lives—that is, the romantic and sexual lives—of actual gay men. According to Fessenden (2014):

The genre is full of tropes that often baffle and frustrate us—all couples must be monogamous, despite a very large percentage of gay couples having open relationships; the only *real* sex is penetrative anal sex, despite the fact that many gay men don’t like it—and many gay men have difficulty writing them. Not only that, but many gay men have difficulty *reading* them. Hence the reason this argument of women writing MM Romance keeps surfacing.

Like other critics who have taken up this debate, Fessenden (2014) traces the origins of M/M romance not to gay romantic fiction, despite the homosexual identities of many of these works’ protagonists, but to what is often called “slashfic.” Slash fiction represents a genre of writing that first emerged in the 1970s when some female fans took two well-known male characters from popular media and rescripted them imaginatively in homoerotic scenarios. An important distinction to keep in mind regarding gay romantic fiction and slashfic is that in slash (what some call ‘true’ slash) not only is the couple expropriated from the media, that is, the “source text,” as in Captain Kirk and Spock, from the popular *Star Trek* television series—hence the term ‘K/S,’ the slash, or virgule, representing the punctuation between the two men’s names—but the lovers identify and are furthermore identified by their largely female readers as heterosexual, and not homosexual. So though it is technically accurate to say that all M/M fiction is “slash” fiction—in this case the same punctuation mark separates the two letters ‘M’ as in slash literature—it is not accurate to say that all ‘slash’ fiction is M/M fiction, because the male lovers in the latter are not from a preexisting source text, nor do they generally identify as straight but as gay. (Note that Fessenden removes the slash in his own references to M/M fiction, doing so perhaps to further distance the male same-sex narratives he writes from what is conventionally known as slash fiction. The present essay holds on to the M/M rendering, in part as a way to foreground the close, if sometimes strained, relationship between the two genres.) To strengthen this distinction between M/M and slash, some critics often refer to M/M fiction as “original

fiction” (Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Lanyon, 2008; Salmon & Symons, 2004). As Fessenden explains it, M/M fiction

evolved away from [these] origins. MM romance is original fiction and much of it is well-written and professional. But it *descended* from slashfic, and the gender demographics haven’t changed a lot. The majority of writers are still female, and the majority of readers are female.

Although Fessenden (2014) does not focus specifically on the heterosexual identities of many of the female-bodied writers and readers of much M/M fiction, other critics, many of them gay men and lesbians, have not shied away from highlighting just this dimension. Indeed, in her own article on the subject, the award-winning journalist Victoria Brownworth (2010), who is a lesbian, made this dimension explicit, writing, “If you aren’t familiar with M/M fiction here’s what it is: Straight women fetishizing the lives of gay men.” Faced with such criticism, one straight female author (Martha W., 2010) sought to defend herself with the claim that, because she was writing fiction—which, in her words, “has an element of the author’s imagination/opinion and therefore is not accurate to real life”—Brownworth’s charges were not relevant to her. A gay male respondent, Paul G. Bens, Jr. (2010), quickly fired back, “Yes, fiction. But you leave out the important part of the equation. Fiction which—intentional or not—represents a marginalized group which has faced decades of hate, fear-mongering, violence and offensive stereotypes and, yes, death.” It should be noted that Brownworth, like many others who have entered into this debate, does not anchor her claims in any empirical research. Rather, she often generalizes about the plots, authorial identities, and character dimensions of M/M romances from her own selective reading of titles in a booming genre that is itself multifaceted and always evolving rather than uniform. It is precisely this tendency toward a “universalizing interpretation,” to borrow a phrase from the editors of *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (2006, p. 19), that often undermines some of Brownworth’s more credible insights; too, her use of overheated and dismissive rhetoric—attributing a kind of unique, sexual pathology to the writers of the subgenre (labeling them ‘fetishists,’ for instance)—is also what has chiefly infuriated her most vocal critics. But similar to Fessenden and Bens, another gay male critic, Dick Smart (2010), characterized many M/M narratives as barely disguised gay fiction for straight women: “Hot bare-chested studs have replaced the bodice-ripped heroines of traditional women’s romance, but the plot lines remain much the same; as do, surprisingly, the audience and the writers – straight women.”

Brownworth’s article initially appeared in August 2010 on the Lambda Literary Foundation (LLF) website, the organization that oversees the recognition of published literature that focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered experiences. Shortly afterwards, the article ignited a small

firestorm on the organization's website, as well as on a number of other blogging sites devoted to fans of M/M fiction (Brooks et al., 2015; Frantz, 2010). However, I'd like to suggest that the larger context for this debate can be traced back a year earlier to when the LLF revised its eligibility requirements to no longer allow non-LGBT writers to vie for literary awards. Similar to the furor created by Brownworth's article in 2010, this announcement in 2009 resulted in sweeping charges flying back and forth over the Internet between those who supported Lambda's decision to limit the awards, for politicized reasons, to writers who identified openly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), to those who blasted that decision as a form of antiheterosexual bigotry (Crisp, 2011; Nelson, 2011).

Controversy has continued to rage around the question of whether it is actually accurate to say that straight women are the dominant writers and readers of this subgenre of romance writing. Indeed, a number of other interested commentators vociferously dispute this claim altogether, characterizing the largely female-bodied writers and readers of M/M, as well as the fan community more generally, as much more diverse and indeterminate in their sexual identifications than its chief critics state (Brooks et al., 2015; Frantz, 2010). In their article, "Cunning Linguists: The Bisexual Logics of Words/Silence/Flesh" (2006), for example, Lackner, Lucas, and Reid argue for the need to "blur" the use of a straight/gay binary in efforts to interpret the gender and sexual identities of female readers and writers of slash fiction. "Arguably," the authors write:

all women—asexual, heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgendered—are born into and raised in the dominant patriarchal culture. The extent to which they are forced to read from that perspective is a complex one, allowing for a range of readings from accepting to resisting, complicated by the extent to which 'masculinity' may be claimed and constructed by both men and women. (p. 195)

I would like to suggest that what this controversy chiefly highlights is the extent to which M/M and slash fiction remain evolving subgenres within the larger, overarching romance market, so that what may have once been true of earlier narratives (distorted and even inaccurate depictions of male same-sex intimacy, for instance) no longer appears to hold.

Despite the unsettled nature of this debate, the present inquiry opts to take this specific perception among some fans and critics of M/M fiction—mostly lesbians and gay men—that the subgenre is in fact dominated by heterosexual women as a provocative starting point for its own largely theoretical speculations.¹ Indeed, rather than straightforwardly ask why some heterosexual women enjoy reading popular genre literature about M/M sexual intimacy—a question that others have posed and offered rich, preliminary responses to—this paper situates its inquiries within the context

of heterocentrism and the societal homophobia that often results, to pose a series of somewhat different questions altogether: What happens when human agents develop self-conscious strategies, such as a specific practice of reading and/or writing, by which they are able to sidestep the societal injunction against homosexual attachments in their persons by reimagining those attachments in another form? Consider the popular sentiment, one grounded in religious beliefs around gender and sexual norms: “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”—or what some have called its lesbian counterpart: “God made Adam and Eve, not Madame and Eve.” That is, if the cultural injunction against homosexuality that Judith Butler (1997) examines in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, and from which I’ve taken my epigraph, is dependent on anatomy (so that sexual intimacies between two persons with female anatomy as well as those between two persons with male anatomy are culturally proscribed), is it possible to relay those attachments through the psyche in a way that not only does not violate societal norms against homosexual attachment in a conventional sense, that is, in one’s person, but which also challenge those norms altogether, if covertly and therefore (dare I say it) safely? And if a particular strategy for doing so is imagined to be ‘safe’ for one group of individuals (i.e., some straight, female-bodied women for whom public knowledge of such tabooed attachments might compromise their gender and sexual privileges), might we infer that it might be imagined as ‘unsafe’ for another group (i.e., male-bodied gay men for whom societal opprobrium has left them facing, as Paul G. Bens, Jr., (2010), above puts it, “decades of hate, fear-mongering, violence and offensive stereotypes and, yes, death,” for daring to cultivate and live out those very same tabooed attachments)?

To take up such an inquiry, this essay focuses narrowly on those female-bodied readers and writers who presently or may have at some point in their lives identified as heterosexual to foreground as acutely as I can the specific interpretative problems that such cross-identification (or cross-fantasizing) creates. It is in highlighting this narrow set of authors and consumers, I argue, that we might be able to decipher patterns that may well apply to many other authors and readers of M/M romance fiction. Rather than closely analyzing any specific M/M romance, the foregoing essay focuses on the political dynamics surrounding Lambda’s controversial decision, on the one hand, and Brownworth’s (2010) inflammatory article, on the other—that is, on these dual attempts to regulate who should count as a legitimate author of such fiction, or to counter any such regulation with a broader definition. In so doing, I will be interpreting the cultural work that this controversy exposes, the critical difficulty of which it is the symptom, that is, who counts as an appropriate reader, interpreter, author, consumer of such fantasies, and why. My stakes in this analysis are thus not to impose a particularly static reading on any individual person, or to explain a woman’s desires to her (what one of my interlocutors has called “mansplaining”), but rather to tease out the

broader cultural dynamics that the controversies surrounding women writers of M/M fiction make visible. In short, as a literary scholar, I hope to decipher a contemporary situation that implicates many, many people and that suggests that the culture overall is now working through a new understanding of gender/sexual identities. Indeed, rather than reifying dominant categories of gender and sexuality (i.e., assuming people are rigidly straight or rigidly gay, for instance), the following exploration hopefully unsettles—or ‘blurs’—any of our presumed categories of understanding, including potentially our own.

THE ABSENT (FEMALE) SUBJECT AND MAN-ON-MAN ACTION

As I noted earlier, a central tension that emerges in these controversies is the perhaps too close overlap between the subgenre of M/M romantic fiction and its gay male counterpart, a genre with which it is also starkly contrasted. As Josh Lanyon (2008) puts it in *Man, Oh Man! Writing M/M Fiction for Kinks & Cash*:

The essential difference between M/M fiction and all other gay genre fiction is that regardless of genre—mystery, military, paranormal, historical—the romantic relationship between the two male protagonists is going to be of paramount importance. *All* M/M fiction is romantic fiction . . . The story you tell is the story of that relationship, regardless of the context in which you choose to place it . . . The stand-out thing about M/M versus gay romantic fiction is that there’s a distinct sensibility to M/M fiction. In effect, it’s gay men in love and making love versus gay men fucking. It’s about sensual and evocative details. It’s about the choice of language. It’s about emotions rather than mechanics. (pp. 6, 8)

Lanyon’s explanation begs the question as to what is the difference between gay romantic fiction in which gay men “fuck” and M/M romantic fiction in which the gay male characters “make love.” One of the things I think he means is that the literary plots, themes, and characters of each genre are designed in part to appeal primarily to its preferred reader, and as such the plots, themes, and characters of each genre should not be misconstrued as equivalent or interchangeable with one another. In other words, the ‘gay men’ who make up the plots of gay romantic fiction—because they are intended for a specific group of readers, that is, primarily gay male readers—are not to be confused with the ‘gay men’ who make up the plots of M/M fiction, which are themselves intended for a completely different set of readers, that is, primarily straight female readers. The same would hold true whether there is the occasional overlap between these two groups of readers, which as Raven Davies (2005) argues is often the case in slash fiction: “Though some Slash writers (referred to as ‘Slashers’) are gay,” she writes,

“the majority today are liberal straight women” (p. 198). For even though we may recognize something of a ‘resemblance’ between the two kinds of characters across the genres of gay and M/M romantic fiction (unlike, say, slash and fan fiction, where the male lovers are expropriated from source texts in which they are clearly marked as heterosexual, or perhaps bisexual), it is nonetheless imperative to remember that such characters may often be at cross purposes, even if they do not initially seem to be.

In their article “Slash Fiction and Human Mating Psychology,” Catherine Salmon and Don Symons (2004) seem to be trying to capture something of the intentionality of narrative that I am describing and the contrasting ways in which narratives are received by readers when they argue that “genre romances [like slash and fan fiction] are analogous to male-oriented porn in the sense that they are wish-fulfilling fantasies, well designed to pick the locks of the pleasure circuits of female brains” (p. 96). However, these authors, evolutionary theorists by training, also contend that the metaphorical “locks” guarding the pleasure centers of male and female consumers of porn and romance narratives, respectively, are fundamentally different from one another. Although visual and written narratives ‘falsify reality’ to the extent that they try to satisfy wish-fulfillment fantasies, they each clearly do so in keeping with the specific needs of their intended spectators and readers, respectively. Although the main purpose of male-directed porn narratives is “to facilitate action, in the form of masturbation,” the main purpose of female-directed erotic narratives is decidedly less sexy. According to Salmon and Symons (2004), these narratives have the following features:

1. the goal of the heroine is never sex for its own sake, much less with strangers;
2. the core of a romance novel’s plot is a love story in which the heroine overcomes obstacles to identify, win the heart of, and marry the one man in the world who is right for her;
3. in a romance novel, sex serves the plot rather than the other way around, as in porn;
4. the emotional focus of a romance is not on sex but, rather, on love, domesticity, and mutual nurturing (pp. 96–97).

Although Salmon and Symons (2004) derive these features from conventional romance narratives centering female protagonists with their male paramours, they in fact view slash fiction as merely a ‘subgenre’ of the conventional romance market, not as a radical departure. Hence:

a slash story is in essence a love story in which two long-term male partners, usually depicted as heterosexual (however unlikely this may seem), suddenly realize that they have come to love one another. Slash stories

typically have a happily-ever-after ending, namely the establishment of a permanent, monogamous romance and sexual union. (p. 97)

As the authors put it:

in both [slash and conventional romances] the emphasis is always on the emotional rather than the purely physical aspects of sex. In slash and mainstream romances alike, sex occurs within a committed relationship as part of an emotionally meaningful exchange, and it serves rather than dominates the plot. (p. 97)

Salmon and Symons (2004) reach the conclusion that “it has been argued that slash is not really about male homosexuality at all; rather, it is about a female fantasy of heterosexual sex acted out via ostensibly male bodies.” In these authors’ view, “Romances—mainstream novels and slash stories alike—are in essence female fantasies about overcoming obstacles to achieve the perfect mateship” (p. 97).²

If it is true, as Fessenden (2014) and Lanyon (2008) have pointed out, that M/M fiction is “descended” from slash and fan fiction, without being identical to these works, then such insights might be generally applicable to an analysis of the plot dimensions of M/M romances as well, especially in noting how such narratives (especially in their use of sexual tropes) differ from gay romantic fiction. Just how important is it that most of the men who are sexually involved with one another in M/M romances are gay whereas most of the men who are sexually involved with one another in slash and fan fiction are generally heterosexual? It turns out that for some women it may matter a great deal. After all, this feature distinguishes the two genres in offering up to its privileged female readers male protagonists who, on the one hand, do not have to overcome their resistance to homosexuality to fall in love with one another (which is the case in M/M fiction), and on the other hand male protagonists who do have to overcome such resistance (which is the case in slash and fan fiction). In short, the men in the former are gay because their primary readers, and the narrative itself, want them to be, whereas the men in the latter are straight for the same reason. It becomes clear at this point that what Salmon and Symons (2004) write about slash and fan fiction—that slash and other female-intended narratives about male same-sex intimacy are primarily about perfecting male/female interpersonal relations for heterosexual female readers—cannot be neatly expropriated for a careful analysis of M/M fictions, despite the tendency in their earlier work to uncritically conflate the two.³ After all, the central reason why the male lovers in much slash fiction are heterosexual is because male heterosexuality—a primary sexual attraction to women and not to other men—represents a significant conflict for the lovers to surmount if they are to have a lasting relationship. The conflict in most mainstream romances, however, in which

a heterosexual man and woman strive for a lasting union, generally presents a conflict that is “so simple that if either of the protagonists had bothered to say, ‘What?!’ there would have been no conflict” (p. 93). Slash fiction solves this problem, however, because the

conflict is inherent and compelling: two heterosexual men must overcome psychological and social barriers to recognize, accept and consummate their love . . . The happy ending of a slash story may thus be especially credible [to such readers], since a love this strong can more plausibly be expected to last forever. (Salmon & Symons, 2001, p. 93)

Unfortunately, the authors’ reading of M/M romances in which the protagonists’ heterosexual identities are privileged minimizes the psychic mobility that often underwrites readerly pleasure in a broader range of these types of narratives, especially in those in which the protagonists are explicitly homosexual rather than heterosexual.

The question is, then, why would straight women be psychically driven to read and to write literary narratives in which intimate relations between self-identified gay men are at the center of the romance plot rather than narratives with intimate relations between two self-identified heterosexual men? What is it, we might ask, that turns these women on with these narratives in particular? Are these narratives primarily about imagining more fulfilling heterosexual intimate relations, or for these writers and consumers is there something more personal and private that is at stake?

In her essay, “Forms of Pleasure in the Reading of Popular Romance: Psychic and Cultural Dimensions,” Eva Chen (2007) offers one way to respond to this question. She argues that conventional views of the female subject’s relationship to the romance text are inadequate because they rely in part on an outmoded, if heteropatriarchal, structure of identification and desire that requires a fixed and stable gendered (as well as sexual orientation) relationship to obtain between reader, protagonist, and love object. This is the view propounded by Janice Radway (1984), a model which for some critics remains popular, even today. For Chen, referencing the Freudian psychoanalytic backdrop to such theories, this view “seems based on a somewhat linear identification between the female reading subject and the female protagonist or the female child in the pre-oedipal process of identity formation” (p. 37). However, Chen poses a series of questions principally designed to depathologize alternatives to this psychoanalytic master narrative. For instance, she asks:

But does identification also include other possibilities? Is there just one form of identification (the pre-oedipal stage) and one sort of regressive desire and pleasure? May the reader also identify with the position of the mother in the pre-oedipal, mother-child relationship or with a position

of vacillation between the mother and the female child? Or even with a reading position not bound by the reader's own biological gender? (p. 37)

Because of Chen's readiness to consider the lack of bodily fixity that structures the relation between reader and text, and is not as focused on male/female interpersonal "mateship," as is the case with Salmon and Symons (2001, 2004), I find this last option to be the most fruitful for my purposes. Taking up the concept of 'desubjectivation' from Laplanche and Pontalis' essay, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" (1964), in which the subject "cannot be assigned any fixed place" in the text, that is, any fixed body, but rather participates in the narrative action through the "very *syntax* of the sequence in question" (p. 26), Chen sets out to challenge certain assumptions that once governed the way some scholars tended to interpret the relation between specular female image and female spectator as one constructed in terms of the fixed linearity of identification and desire. This view was once typical of Freudian psychoanalysis in general, and of 1970s feminist film theory in particular. As do Laplanche and Pontalis (1986), Chen privileges fantasy in her reading of this relation between reader and textual image, rather than reality, seeing the text as a site of psychic mobility and thus liberation for romance readers as they engage with the characters and plots they encounter in these narratives. As Chen puts it:

In offering and guiding the reader's fantasy pleasure, the romance reader may take on a variety of positions in multiple identifications with the heroine, the hero, or the process of loving, and therefore experience pleasure through each position. (p. 38)

Hence, "Pleasure is produced when the old fixed boundaries are eroded and new possibilities are tried on" (p. 38).

Indeed, M/M romance author K. A. Mitchell (2009) confirms Chen's (2007) conclusions when she suggests on an online discussion forum devoted specifically to the subject of these narratives that for some women the conventional gendered dynamics of mainstream heterosexual romances offer limited identificatory pleasures for its more daring female readers. This is not the case with M/M romances, which generally offer its female readers two protagonists, not one, and therefore afford these readers greater mobility as well. Says K. A. Mitchell (2009):

readers [of M/M fiction] don't feel like they are supposed to identify exclusively with either hero and both heroes have the kinds of freedom that traditional romance heroes have, [for instance] the freedom to be an idiot and be redeemed by love. Also, for readers who feel that they are tired of the familiar story, M/M has all new kinds of conflicts and issues to explore. It's very different, and . . . for most heterosexual women, the

experience of a man in a relationship with another man is far enough removed from what she experiences to make it intriguing.

For Salmon and Symons (2001), this type of psychic mobility also characterizes female fans of slash fiction more broadly. Based on their own empirical data, the authors suggest that “most romance readers, not just slash fans, can identify with one or both of the protagonists in a male/male love story and can enjoy reading such a story” (p. 90). Although the authors insist there is nothing pathological about such identificatory possibilities for these women, the type of mobility they describe is nonetheless closely anchored to heteronormative assumptions of partner relationality, and it therefore presents far more limiting options than those described by Chen. As Salmon and Symons (2004) put it:

Some women may prefer the fantasy of being a co-warrior to that of being a Mrs. Warrior and the fantasy of being a hero who triumphs over the forces of evil to that of being a heroine who triumphs over an alpha male. (p. 90)

This singular freedom to range over multiple objects of desire, without necessarily privileging the couple relationship as one’s motivation, is also a defining characteristic of bisexuality, popularly understood as an ‘unpredictable fluidity’ between male and female object-choices, one that disrupts “the binarism of hetero/homosexuality,” and which, troubling for many, can be mobilized as a suspect identity category and a problematic mode of desire (Angelides, 2001, pp. 3, 4). However, I want to suggest in what follows that the identity category “bisexual,” as well as this mode of desire, can also be mobilized, in a nonbiphobic sense, to illuminate textual scenarios in which the primary figure includes one man who is sexually involved with another man, as is the case with the characters in an M/M romance novel, as well as the ostensibly heterosexual woman who calls this bisexual man into being through her idiosyncratic practice of reading and/or writing *as if* she were man.

WITH YOU I’M BORN AGAIN: RESUSCITATING THE FIGURE OF THE TOMBOY

In her essay, “Straight Pen for Gay Men,” M/M romance author Karen Thomas (2011), a heterosexual woman who publishes under the pseudonym “Dale Chase,” writes that she regularly gets a range of responses from other heterosexuals when they learn what she does for her side job. These responses run the gamut and include everything from curiosity, expressions of disbelief, to incomprehension, and even homophobia. Admitting that it was never her

intention to ruffle other people's feathers, Thomas describes once seeing an ad in a trade magazine asking writers to submit creative work for an upcoming publication on erotic gay fiction. Given Thomas' self-described penchant for finding male characters somewhat easier to write than female characters, she decided to set herself a challenge. This is how Thomas (2011) describes what came next:

An idea quickly came to mind involving a guy who has sex with the pizza delivery man, and so I sat down to write. What happened then was beyond anything I had anticipated. As the story spilled out of me in a single, highly liberating two-hour session, I found myself caught in an incredible rush. A lifelong tomboy, I had apparently tapped into *another side of myself*, one in which male intimacy was my core mode of self-expression. When the story was completed, I decided on Dale Chase as my pseudonym, because I had known since childhood that, *had I been a boy*, I would have been named Dale. (I added the "Chase" because it sounded cool.) (emphasis added)

Several things come to mind after a close reading of this passage. Certainly, one of these things is how uncanny Thomas' description of writing this story, her first involving two men who are sexually involved with one another, comes to the experience of describing male ejaculation—"the story *spilled* out of me," she writes, "in a single, highly liberating two-hour session." Because Thomas (2011) is a writer of gay male romance, her expressive use of a double entendre to essentially characterize writing in terms of masturbatory pleasure should not come as a surprise. What I do find surprising, though, is the way Thomas links this specifically masculine sexual metaphor of writing as jacking off not only to her statement that "male intimacy was the core of my self-expression," but also how she links this creative literary practice to the female-centered experience of giving birth, not birth to a child, but rather birth to herself. For it is at the end of this 2-hour, intoxicating writing jag that the female author emerges into a new 'male' self—in other words, 'Karen Thomas' is reborn as 'Dale Chase.' In fact, several paragraphs later Thomas is even more explicit about this cross-gender identification (what I want to provisionally call her "bi-sexedness"), writing in response to questions from others as to where, because she is a straight woman, such stories about gay male sexuality could possibly derive: "The explanation is really quite simple," she answers. "I am a woman with a strong male side who is attracted to men."

I would like to link these two provocative utterances that Thomas (2011) makes above to a third statement she also offers, and this is the one where Thomas refers to herself as a "lifelong tomboy." Thomas' admission inspires a series of fanciful speculations I'd like to examine further, all of which turn on what Ann Pellegrini (1997) has identified as two competing views

of bisexuality that are central to a psychoanalytic understandings of human sexuality: “bisexuality as the universal coexistence of the masculine and feminine in one desiring subject . . . and bisexuality as the direction of desire at objects both male and female” (p. 47, n. 6). With respect to Thomas’ series of statements, these speculations can be phrased in the following provocative terms: Who is the supposed straight woman who reads and/or writes M/M gay male romances? Is she really straight or is she really gay? Is she really a woman or is she really a man? What does it mean to be really straight, or to be really a woman in a society that values men over women, straights over gays and lesbians? Does it mean that a straight woman can never ever desire in ways that are not straight, and that do not correspond to the gendered morphology of her actual body, or her genitalia? Can a so-called woman be straight in her conscious life but be a gay man in her fantasy life? If this is so, then can such a woman manage to be a ‘woman’ and ‘straight’ to everyone else, but be a ‘man’ and ‘gay’ in her deepest, most private sense of self, as Karen Thomas, aka ‘Dale Chase,’ appears to be, and not be suspected of being everything from a lesbian to a fag hag, as Thomas admits some of her heterosexual acquaintances appear to believe? In other words, do any of us always have to be what other people take us to be, or can we sometimes be someone completely different as well?

Although some might argue that such questions only reify and render more stable conventional gender and sexual categories, my playful invocation of these questions here in fact is intended to destabilize as well as make a general mockery of any underlying assumptions as to the commonsense and self-evident relation between the two categories, gender and sex. Hence, provisional answers to such outlandish questions might seem to lie in confronting the cultural problem all of us have as we mature from being considered children (and considering ourselves to be children) to being considered (and considering ourselves) to be adults, and all that being an adult signifies. After all, as children we are often allowed greater latitude in expressing ourselves as gendered and, to a lesser extent, sexual beings, whereas as we grow older that latitude seems to be slowly reigned in, until, by the time we are in our late teenage years, there seems to be virtually no latitude remaining at all—no room, that is, for ‘play.’ This is why I suggested that Karen Thomas’ description of herself as a “lifelong tomboy” was so surprising, her statement inferring that she still considered her life as one marked out by “play,” though she is clearly an adult—the evidence for this dual attitude made visible in the “bi-sexed” nature of her self-chosen male moniker as positioned alongside her given female one. Keeping this close textual analysis in mind, consider the following entry for the term ‘tomboy,’ taken from the volume *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia* (Hogan & Hudson, 1998), and which reads:

[A] young girl who assumes the dress, activities and manner of a boy. The term can be positive, negative or neutral, but typically signals gender variance. Tomboys commonly have athletic ability and favor rough, outdoor *play* with boys who . . . possess a freedom and independence difficult to find with girl peers. Once called a “temporary visa to male territory,” tomboyism is considered acceptable in the US until age 12 or 13. Tomboy identity can be experienced by girls who develop into either lesbian or heterosexual adults . . . Tomboys cross racial, ethnic, class and regional lines with only slight variation. (p. 556)

As this definition strongly hints at, there after all may be very sound reasons why many young girls choose to adopt the identity of tomboy in a culture that unthinkingly associates ‘freedom and independence’ with boys, and, by implication, associates ‘nurturance’ and ‘dependence’ with girls (Flax, 1978, p. 179). For one thing, boys are eventually slated to become ‘men,’ and hence get to develop an autonomous self in a society that views autonomy as a male prerogative, whereas the opposite is the fate that awaits girls, who are slated to become ‘women,’ and therefore must learn to accept the inferior positioning assigned to their sex in that same society.

Hence, we might find it useful to consider that the figure of the tomboy emerges, at least for some women—whether heterosexual or homosexual, as the above notes—as a response to these societal restrictions on their pursuit of an autonomous life, and the reigning in of what I called their latitude. Along with the originary bisexuality that Freud posits as a universal human phenomenon, the roots of such a response lay deep within the psyche. In her essay “Tomboys and Cowgirls: The Girl’s Disidentification from the Mother,” Dianne Elise (1999) turns to Freudian psychoanalysis to pose a series of questions related to the tomboy phenomenon, such as:

What does it mean when a girl is *not* a tomboy? Why is it that adolescence usually ends tomboy life; what significance does this ending have for female development? What is the need for a label—“tomboy”—that is redundantly masculine? (p. 140).

For Elise, the time-sensitive gender identity of the tomboy derives from the deeply problematic psychoanalytic concepts ‘penis envy’ and the ‘masculinity complex’ as specific psychosexual stages in female sexual development. Classical psychoanalysis has made it clear that both of these conditions must be surmounted if a ‘normal’ outcome, that is, femininity and heterosexuality, is to be the girl’s future. For it is only in the girl’s successful resolution of her Oedipal crisis, in which a clitoral focus gives way to a vaginal-focused sexuality, and a mother-fixated libidinal attachment successfully shifts to a father-fixated one, that “passivity is seen to gain the upper hand, clearing phallic activity out of the way and smoothing the ground for femininity” (p. 141). For Elise, the “tomboy” phenomenon emerges at the realization of

a failure of either or both of these outcomes to materialize. One of the two pathways by which the ‘tomboy’ might emerge, Freud (1933/1965) argues (the first is sexual inhibition or neurosis), involves the little girl’s dawning awareness that she is castrated, that is, does not have a penis, and leads to what Freud called the “masculinity complex” (pp. 156–157). “By this’,” Elise writes, quoting Freud, “we mean that the girl refuses, as it were, to recognize the unwelcome fact and, defiantly rebellious, even exaggerates her *previous* masculinity, [and] clings to her clitoral activity” (p. 141). Freud’s (1933/1965) reference, here, to the girl’s “previous” masculinity is his none too subtle nod to the concept of primary bisexuality, a concept that is central to what he describes in this same essay as “the prehistory of women” (p. 162). Laying sepulchered in this ‘prehistory’ we find the psychic remains of the repudiated figure of the tomboy, a figure who, apparently for some women, still has a wisp of breath remaining.

HOW TO DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE AND DOUBLE YOUR FUN

Up to now, not a single scholar has focused on the tomboy as this figure relates specifically to the writers and readers of M/M romance fiction. And yet, as we have seen, ‘tomboyism’—a history of having been a tomboy, or at least of having imagined oneself as one, or perhaps being one still—is central to the gender identifications of a handful of female-bodied writers and readers who are drawn to this particular subgenre. This connection has been made, however, in terms of slash fiction. Indeed, Salmon and Symons (2004) tentatively establish this connection between tomboyism and slash aficionados when they speculate on the identities of such fans and why they may be drawn to the genre:

Our research suggests at least one hypothesis: They [the female writers and readers of slash fiction] *might be*, disproportionately, former tomboys. Research on tomboys suggests that most do not reject traditionally female activities but rather embrace traditionally male ones (e.g., they may play with both dolls and trucks). As adults, they typically score high on tests of assertiveness, competitiveness, and willingness to take risks. Slash may have a special appeal to such women because it uniquely fuses traditionally female romance with traditionally male camaraderie, adventure, and risk taking. (p. 99; emphasis added)

In addition to Karen Thomas (2011), who currently, as I noted, identifies as a tomboy, we find this very prehistory of the tomboy in the personal narratives of other female authors of M/M romance fiction. For example, a tomboy identification has been claimed by two white British female authors of M/M fiction—Alex Beecroft and a second woman who writes under the

pen name Erastes. In a 2010 profile in *Out Magazine*, Erastes admits: “I’m a complete tomboy. I went to bed with men, and sometimes with two men—I just didn’t see what it was I was *aiming* at. Do you see what I mean? I had never thought: *Buy a gay sex book*. Then suddenly the light came on, and I thought, *This makes perfect sense!*” (as cited by Wilson, 2010). The response from Beecroft, who is heterosexually married and the mother of two, recalls the two competing views of the Freudian notion of bisexuality that coincide in Thomas’ self-(re)invention of herself as male and female, straight and gay: “In my sexual imagination, I’m a gay man. I write to satisfy a sexual desire that I can’t physically satisfy in this body.” She elaborates:

For a long time, I thought I was transgender. I thought I literally was a gay man trapped in a woman’s body. Now I’m just confused. I don’t really identify with either gender. But it’s taken me 40 years to get to this point. (Wilson, 2010)

This confusion should not be understood as Beecroft’s alone. It was also Freud’s. Recall that it is in *Gender Trouble* that Judith Butler (1990) reminds us of the confused role that primary bisexuality assumes in Freud’s theorizations of the subject. That is, though Freud in his 1923 paper *The Ego and the Id* implies that the male child forms his attachment to his father without first having had an eroticized longing for him, the same as he had for his mother, he later contradicts himself when he considers the concept of primary bisexuality. As Butler (1990) puts it, “With the postulation of a bisexual set of libidinal dispositions, there is no reason to deny an original sexual love of the son for the father, and yet Freud implicitly does” (p. 59). But if bisexuality, for Freud, is meant to refer to mental and somatic characteristics, which it is, then it is important to remember that a person who is bisexual is in mind and body “not a man or a woman but always both” (Freud, 1933/1965, p. 141). This means that a ‘son,’ viewed through Freud’s interpretive lens, is always also a ‘daughter,’ and that a ‘boy’ is always also a ‘girl.’ The confusion of course is a feature of Freud’s language. He refers to bisexuality as mental qualities to which he assigns the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’ He employs these terms so as to critique the use of the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ as effective ways to refer to aims. As Steven Angelides (2001) reminds us, it is in *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923) that for Freud the boy “also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate attitude towards his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother” (p. 56). Because of Freud’s stubborn commitment to the heterosexist underpinnings of the Oedipal Complex, even though the concept of primary bisexuality militates against this view, he understands the love the ‘boy’ has for his ‘father’ as issuing from a ‘feminine’ disposition; viewed from this angle, such love can only be heterosexual, even if it isn’t. To postulate otherwise would of course undermine Freud’s investment in oedipalization.

But where Freud gets it precisely wrong is in his insistence on substitution. Not only doesn't the boy love his father "as a woman," he doesn't even "love his father as his mother loves his father"; rather, the boy loves his father as he himself, as a boy and as a girl, or to be more precise, as a male and as a female, loves his or her father. That is, the boy loves his father homosexually and, as a girl, heterosexually. No different from the girl, then, the prehistory of the boy is also bisexuality. Here it should be noted that I am not attempting to fix the figure of the tomboy with a (homo)sexual disposition; as scholars have acknowledged, there is no necessary relationship between tomboyism in girls and lesbian identity. My express purpose in associating this figure with a bisexual disposition is to call attention to the doubled nature of gendered attributes that characterize tomboyism more generally, attributes that sometime get (mis)taken for sexual drives. This is of course a by-product of the complicated legacy of binary categories (inherited from Freudian thinking) that often tend to conflate gender expression and sexuality.

Of course it is Butler (1990) who once again reminds us that primary bisexuality constitutes merely a stage of development in Freud's theorizations. Because of the prohibition on homosexuality in Western cultures, Freud (1923) argues that all homosexual attachments and modes of desire must be relinquished in favor of heterosexual object-choices and sexual modalities if the subject is to take his or her proper place within civilization. The injunction to 'give up' these attachments—what Butler (1990) calls "lost loves"—have different consequences for the subject whether these tabooed attachments are the same anatomical sex as the child or the opposite anatomical sex as the child. As Butler (1990) explains it:

This process of internalizing lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation when we realize that the incest taboo, among other functions, initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego and that this ego recuperates from this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire. In the case of a prohibited union, it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is deflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation, and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. (pp. 58–59)

It is through "internalizing" these abandoned object choices and prohibited modalities of desire that the child finally arrives at a fixed gender identity and sexual orientation, where previously there had been neither.

I would like to begin working my way toward a conclusion by revisiting the opening set of questions I posed at the start of this essay, but rephrasing these questions with a slightly different emphasis: What, for instance, might it

eventually mean if we could restore these repressed, dual identifications, and therefore make them available to adult men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike as gendered and sexual options? “If,” as Adam Phillips, after Butler, asks:

“masculinity” and “femininity” are formed and consolidated in part of disavowed grief, what might it be like to live in a world that acknowledged and sanctioned such grief, that allowed us, as it were, the full course of our bereavement of disowned or renounced gender identities? (as cited in Butler, 1997, p. 154)

After all, as Phillips is quick to note, “Very few people are actively bisexual, yet everyone is psychically bisexual” (as cited in Butler, 1997, p. 152). But what if this prohibition was removed, and everyone *was* actively bisexual and not just psychically so? What then?

In a recent, self-referentializing essay in which she explores the inadequacy of the Oedipal sexual positions to account for forms of sexual desire that exceed fixed genders and sexualities for an adult analyst (the author, who is an avowed lesbian), and her analysand (a man who is an avowed heterosexual), and to whom she finds herself to be sexually attracted, clinical psychoanalyst Debra Roth (2009) suggests that Freud’s relegation of bisexuality to pre-Oedipal sexual development is woefully limiting. She points to a number of contemporary revisionist psychoanalysts who argue for “a substantially longer life span for the ‘primary bisexuality’ that Freud first posited.” Explains Roth:

In this reformulation, not only are we all bisexual from the start but also we remain so psychically, irrespective of our object choices. Implicit in this revisionist thinking is the notion that the analytic dyad can more fully reconcile both gender sameness and genital incompatibility through access to early, usually repressed, bisexual desire. It is further postulated that through this act of sexual imagining a form of gender fluidity can be unfettered that permits fantasied erotic connection between people who would not ordinarily choose one another as sexual objects. (pp. 174–175)

CONCLUSION: I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, BUT WHAT AM I?—OR, WHAT FREUD MISSED

Thus far, this essay has been preoccupied with examining what, to some, may seem a fanciful line of inquiry, and that wonders aloud if insights like Roth’s (2009) as to the erotic connection between people of different sexualities can be extended to one that considers the erotic connection between readers, writers, and literary characters who also may have different sexualities. In other words, what if heterosexual female readers and writers of ‘true’ slash

or even M/M fictions found common cause with male literary characters who have sex with one another, regardless of whether these male characters identified as gay, straight, or bi, in a way that not only forged a link between them across sexual modalities, heterosexual versus homosexual, but that also served to revivify these women's lost object choices that have perhaps never actually been relinquished, that is to say, grieved? What might the political and social implications be for this resurrection of bisexual potential for those outwardly heterosexual female subjects who had long tried to conceal their sexual complexity, either by adopting pseudonyms or by hiding the fact that they are writers of M/M fictions from the judgmental eyes of their neighbors?

In closing, let me return briefly to a moment in Freud's thinking where he might have left us with a different way of thinking about the legacy of our bisexual past than he did.

Early in his career, in a 1899 letter to his former close friend and interlocutor Wilhelm Fleiss, Freud (1954) now famously exclaimed, referring to bisexuality, "I am sure you are right about it. And I am accustoming myself to the idea of regarding every sexual act [between two individuals] as a process in which four persons are involved" (p. 289). The key point to keep in mind here is that two of those "persons" Freud invokes have been internalized by the other two, and they are hence generally not acknowledged by any one of us as either existing or, worse still, having *ever* existed. This collective amnesia explains, in part, Juliet Mitchell's 1974 criticism of what she calls "post-Freudian analysts" who take up the concept of primary bisexuality only to argue that anatomy was destiny, and that men and women are by definition the antithesis of one another. To J. Mitchell (1974), such a claim could not be less Freudian. Indeed, "what Freud meant [by the concept of original bisexuality]," J. Mitchell contends:

was that *both* sexes in their mental life reflected this great antithesis; that in the unconscious and preconscious of men and women alike was echoed the great problem of this original duality. Without distinction, both sexes are preoccupied with the great distinction: in different ways they both *flee* from its implications. Both men and women live out in their mental life the great difficulty that there are men and women. (p. 50; 2nd emphasis added)

The problem, as J. Mitchell sees it, is that anatomical men are also psychically women, and that anatomical women are also psychically men; the two are not nearly as mutually exclusive as we have been accustomed to believing. Although "we are [all] psychically bisexual," none of us are psychically and actively bisexual at the same time (p. 51). Steven Angelides (2001) attributes this contemporary conflict with bisexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality to Freud's own inability to conceive of the simultaneity of bisexuality within the same temporal and spatial location. "Freud con-

structed bisexuality as only ever a precultural or acultural form of human potentiality,” writes Angelides (p. 69). “Situated within a regressive space outside civilization and sexed subjectivity, bisexuality was contained within a space inaccessible in the present tense”—or, in Angelides’ apt statement: “No one is bisexual at any given moment” (p. 69).

I want to suggest that though it may have long been understood that, “while allowing for some degree of change or fluidity, no one is bisexual in the present tense,” this may no longer be exactly true for some contemporary sexual subjects as we find ourselves a decade and a half into the new millennium (Angelides, 2001, pp. 69–70). Female-bodied writers of M/M fiction, as well as some of their readers, may be engaged in trying to model for all of us a form of psychic identification that bridges the chasm between identity and desire, thereby making possible forms of sexual crossing that Freud may not have imagined. As Butler says in a 1992 interview, perhaps anticipating our present impasse on this subject, “cross-identification is there as a presupposition of *all* sexed identity, not only in its ostensibly aberrant instances” (as cited in Kotz, 1992, p. 88; emphasis added). If, as Angelides writes, “For to identify is to repress bisexual desire, and to desire is to repress bisexual identity; yet to identify and to desire is to be predisposed to bisexually,” how can we explain the pleasure derived from the readers and writers of these narratives? (p. 63). Indeed, how can we decide, in advance, to return to a question I posed earlier, whether the particular strategic cultural practices in which these women engage—that is, reading and writing romantic fiction that centers gay male subjectivity and desire—is ‘safe’ for them, while simultaneously being ‘unsafe’ for others, namely, actual gay men? Is it possible that such an activity isn’t safe for anyone in a society that makes a virtue of repudiating its own complex human self? In the end, the seeming universal nature of this condition vouchsafes the aptness of Butler’s (1997) dreary insight that “this more general and inevitable separation and loss” that results from the societal “repudiation of homosexual love,” along with its corresponding identifications, “makes gender melancholics of us all” (p. 164).

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NOTES

1. Indeed, in her own response to Brownworth’s inflammatory article, Sarah G. Frantz (2010) wrote: “No, most m/m authors are not straight women. Or at least, in my experience, most of the best m/m authors are in some way either gender queer or have some sort of alternate sexuality.”

2. Given the large female audience that flocked to the 2005 Academy Award-winning film *Brokeback Mountain*, the case could be made that it represents the filmic version of an M/M literary narrative. Indeed, film scholar Gary Needham, working from a dominant assumption linking gay men and women as “feminine passives,” argues that the film employs melodrama of the 1940s woman’s film to lure female spectators. Needham wrote: “A good deal of the pleasure of *Brokeback Mountain* is about ‘letting go’ and allowing oneself to be emotionally overcome by the devastation caused by closetedness and repressed desire as we wait for Jack and Ennis [the male lovers in the story] to get together, which of course never happens. *Brokeback Mountain*, like the woman’s film of the 1940s ... emphasizes a constant waiting; waiting to see how they will respond in particular narrative occasions; waiting to see what will happen next with the hope that it is joyful rather than tragic. This foregrounds ‘waiting’ as a particular manifestation of passive desires ... This is because it is commonly assumed that women are naturally constituted to take pleasure from a passive surrender to their feelings, of which delay and tears are two such consequences, a theme perhaps crystallized by Jack’s tearful moments in the truck” (p. 91).

3. For example, in this earlier work, Salmon & Symons (2001) refer to research they conducted with a group of romance readers to determine if these women could enjoy reading popular “male/male romance” the same as they did titles with heterosexual lovers at the center. The authors assigned the group a romance novel titled, *The Catch Trap* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. This is a novel, they wrote, “in which the protagonists are *original creations rather than a media pairing*. A slash novel would have been completely inappropriate for our purposes, because slash is, first and foremost, fan fiction. The slash writer can and does assume that her readers are intimately familiar with the fictional setting and characters in her story, hence she does not need to supply these dramatic elements. To really appreciate a work of slash fiction one must be familiar with the show from which it is derived, one must like the show and one must find at least one of the male leads attractive. *It is extremely unlikely that an example of slash would have met these criteria for a majority of our subjects*” (p. 78; my emphasis). As this quote demonstrates, the authors conflate slash and m/m fiction. In fact, at least one of the characters in Bradley’s novel identifies as gay.

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