Introduction:
Desire

HAYLEY O’KELL AND ALMA PRELEC

University of Leeds
Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

Within its reach, though yet ungrasped
Desire’s perfect Goal —
No nearer — lest the Actual —
Should disentrall thy soul —

— Emily Dickinson¹

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthral me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

— John Donne²

Listening back to the echoes that can be found in volume 15 of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, the volume ended on a note of yearning. The introduction to *Echo* discussed how readers turn to literature to seek a completeness lacking in our own lives, due to the inability to see our own stories from start to finish.³ This yearning for an irretrievable, complete past is inextricably bound up with the concept of the echo. Such longing has similar potency for this special issue on desire. Much in the same way that the echo is always an imperfect mimic of the original, desire functions in a similar mode: the fulfilment of desire often falls short of the overwhelming impulses that underlie the urge. This could, however, shed light on the ineffability of desire; our inability to effectively communicate in words or images how desire completely enthrals us. Could, then, the anti-climactic fulfilment in literature or cultural production more broadly echo an inability to describe desire, its ineffability and how it naturally evades language?

The human drive of desire, whether for sex, food, knowledge, power, material assets or for the continuation of narrative, is a topic that fascinates novelists, poets, cinematographers, and other artists. When musing over desire though, artists rarely describe it in the same way. Desire resists a simple, uniform definition and consequently there is a wealth of literature and cinema that addresses the human drive of desire in various ways. Reflecting on narrative pleasure and its friable nature, Roland Barthes states: ‘[e]veryone can testify that the pleasure of the text is not certain: nothing says that this same text will please us a second time; it is a friable pleasure, split by mood, habit, circumstance, a precarious pleasure’. Here, Barthes suggests that we cannot rely on pleasure, it has a certain friability. The pleasure gained from the text cannot be predicted in any sense, and such an interpretation lends itself to other forms of desire. Desire cannot be determined by ‘mood, habit [nor] circumstance’; rather it evades rules, habits and patterns. The nature of desire intrigued contemporary Spanish cinematographer, Pedro Almodóvar, so much so that he named his production company in its honour, El Deseo S.A [Desire].

The Cartesian formulation ‘I desire, therefore I am’ can be applied to many of his most compelling characters. His films are notable for how they deal with the pervasiveness of lust and desire, and how these infuse human relationships. Desire is so abundant in Almodóvar’s cinematography that Paul Julian Smith’s monograph on his cinema is quite fittingly entitled, *Desire Unlimited: The Cinema of Pedro Almodóvar*. The language that scholars and artists decide to use when referring to desire is worth analysing. Here, for example, Smith defines desire in terms of excess, of desire overflowing or being abundant, by using the adjective ‘unlimited’. By framing desire as ‘unlimited’, Smith highlights the idea that desire is boundless, it has infinite possibilities and those that experience desire have a certain lack of control over their drives. Such language ties into the friability that Barthes attributed to the pleasure of the text. Lacking control over our desires is a theme that is addressed at length in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Humbert Humbert’s transgressive obsession with twelve-year-old Dolores Haze, or Lolita as he calls her, enthrals his body and torments his mind: ‘[w]hile my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea. [...] Taboos strangulated me.’ Humbert’s desire for a young, pre-pubescent girl — a ‘nymphet’ as he calls her — is certainly an illicit desire forbidden in society, and as such, he metaphorically describes such taboos and bodily impulses strangling him. In the aftermath of his illicit, perverse relation with Lolita, he describes himself teetering over the edge of temptation, tentative that he may

---

8 Nabokov, p. 18.
fall prey to his desires once again: ‘two years of monstrous indulgence had left me with certain habits of lust: I feared lest the void I lived in might drive me to plunge into the freedom of sudden insanity when confronted with a chance temptation in some lane between school and supper.’9 The language Nabokov uses here in Humbert’s narrative is interesting. Nabokov describes the act of Humbert giving into his desires as a plunge into pleasure. Namely, if he gives into ‘monstrous indulgence’ again, he will struggle to limit his desire and he might potentially become overwhelmed and in a state of ‘sudden insanity’.10 His desire is also described as being monstrous — namely it’s unnatural, potentially hideous or frightening in nature. Such language shows the unpredictability of desire, and how it can deviate from what is considered safe and natural.

Monstrous and sadistic forms of desire and violence can be found in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*. In Carter’s short story, the heroine is due to marry a Marquis and she reflects on the unpredictability of his desire, directly connecting desire and violence: ‘[a]nd it was as though the imponderable weight of his desire was a force I might not withstand, not by virtue of its violence but because of its very gravity.’11 That the heroine senses a gravity and violence associated with the Marquis’s desire is a notable foreshadowing of her discovery that he has killed his three former wives and enjoys sadistic pornography. *The Bloody Chamber* deals with the dangers of sadomasochistic and violent forms of desire that exceed consensual limits and end in bloodshed. Desire, then, is not always contained within safe and consensual boundaries. For the purposes of this volume, it is worth reflecting on the shapeshifting nature of desire: for some, it is ineffable; for others, excessive; or even imponderably violent. The metamorphic quality of desire imbues this volume of *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities* and the papers that comprise it.

* * * * *

Constructed from a kaleidoscope of cultural impulses ranging from classical mythology to doctrinal discussion, the presence of an affective lexicon in the discourse of desire in Dante’s *Paradiso* is reflected and validated in Botticelli’s choice of infant figures in his illustrations to cantos 21 and 30. — Rebecca Bowen

The volume begins firmly on Italian soil with Dr Rebecca Bowen (University of Oxford) who writes on the languages of desire in Botticelli and Dante (‘Languages of Desire in Botticelli and Dante: *Paradiso* 21’). In her essay, she explores the interpretative possibilities of Sandro Botticelli’s illustrations of the blessed souls in *Paradiso* 21 as a flock of winged infants. Used as the basis for the engravings included in the 1481 Florentine edition of the text, Botticelli’s illustrations validate certain lexical strands in Dante’s poem, particularly

9 Nabokov, pp. 257–58.
10 Nabokov, pp. 257–58.
the strands that carry an affective, eroticized charge. Bowen uses Botticelli’s winged infants as a lens to break down the hermeneutical puzzle that is Dante’s complex and ambiguous engagement with desire. Notably, she explores Botticelli’s image and Dante’s text from the perspective of the ‘potentially secularizing, albeit classicizing, connotations of winged infants in fifteenth-century visual culture’. Analysing the kinetic exuberance of the winged infants, Bowen’s essay demonstrates how Botticelli’s illustration responds to multiple aspects of the complex poetic fabric of Dante’s poem. Ultimately, she posits that Botticelli took advantage of the cultural ambiguity of the winged infants in the late fifteenth century to reflect and respond to the lexical range of Dante’s *Paradiso* and its kaleidoscopic presentation of desire.

* * * * *

Both women, inspired by Rousseau, write on the precipice between the expression of female desire and the sensibility and opinion of the eventual readership. — Katherine Moore

In her contribution to this volume, Katherine Moore (Florida State University) explores the representation of female desire in Madame Roland’s *Mémoires* and Sophie Cottin’s *Claire d’Albe*. Roland and Cottin wrote in the milieu of eighteenth-century France where the rules of *bienséance* largely forbade the discussion of sexuality in literature, with female sexuality being particularly taboo. In her essay entitled ‘Reading Between the Lines: Female Sexual Desire in the Late Eighteenth Century’, Moore analyses the intricacies of expression and euphemism which imbue Roland and Cottin’s texts. Through euphemistic language in her *Mémoires*, Madame Roland distances herself from the sexual sensations of her body, placing herself on a chaste pedestal. As such, Moore argues that Roland’s posthumous writings may have been performative in that they cemented a chaste image of Madame Roland, an image that jarred with the extramarital affair she had in the months leading up to her arrest and execution. Cottin’s epistolary novel, *Claire d’Albe*, is infused with passion, desire and transgression, told through a loose retelling of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. The eponymous protagonist of Cottin’s novel, Claire, is largely concerned with keeping her desire to commit adultery under control. Claire, though, is unable to resist the sensorial pleasure of Frédéric, the object of her sexual desire. Through Cottin’s sophisticated use of euphemistic language, she presents Claire as ecstatic and overwhelmed with the violence of her desire. The inclusion of such female desire was unheard of in eighteenth-century France, and indeed, morally outrageous. Publishing her novel anonymously, Cottin was able to write sexually scandalous prose that placed the sexuality of her female protagonist at the centre of her text, which became the best-selling novel in France between 1816–20.
Women living within patriarchal systems, such as Gabriela, wear symbolic masks to tackle the anxiety produced by a key feature of their femininities: the wish to overtly follow their sex drive without any guilt. — Karol Valderrama-Burgos

In ‘“Life is Real”: Sexual Freedom and Sex for Pleasure in La vida “era” en serio (Mónica Borda, 2011)’, Dr Karol Valderrama-Burgos (Queens University Belfast) brings us to the world of cinema, here exploring the depiction of desire in one of the first Colombian films to be directed by a woman. The protagonist of Borda’s film, Gabriela, lives in constant denial of her desires, as these appear to clash with her dual role as a mother and wife. A world of fantasy and of masks — perhaps suggested by the title, which echoes, albeit in inverted form, Calderón’s Life is a Dream — thus becomes the playground in which Gabriela can break free from these shackles. Initially presented as docile and submissive, Gabriela’s worldview is shaken following an encounter with her polar-opposite, Luisa: a femme fatale who will go on to awaken Gabriela’s repressed sexual desires. Exploring the women’s subsequent encounters in detail, Valderrama-Burgos posits that Joan Rivière’s work on womanliness as masquerade provides the clue to unlocking Gabriela’s increasing erratic behaviour, which at times borders on the criminal. It is argued that masks — physical and imagined — are constantly at play when desire is in question. It is only through adopting the mask of another that Gabriela may voice desires that are initially foreign even to herself.

Jaime Gil de Biedma’s diaries present a chameleonic, multifaceted approach to the tension ridden performance of masculine gender and queer desire in the Spanish intellectual bourgeoisie of the late 1950s. — Álvaro González Montero

Of all genres, it is perhaps the diary form that provides the most natural home for desire to be explored. The personal diary is by its nature confessional: at least in genesis, it is the opposite of the bestseller — its intended readership remaining stubbornly at one. It should come as no surprise, then, that these texts are so often published posthumously. Such is the case in ‘The Camp and the Dandy: Class, Sexuality, and Desire in Gil de Biedma’s Diaries’ by contributor Álvaro González Montero (University of Leeds). Focusing on the diaries of Gil de Biedma — acclaimed twentieth-century Catalan poet, member of the Generación de 50 and perpetual provocateur — González Montero explores distinct epochs of Gil de Biedma’s sexual experimentation. Mapping through the diaries across decades, Montero identifies distinct stages in the poet’s evolution in sexual expressivity, ranging from a keen interest in the marginal (exemplified by a maldista attitude) to an altogether more detached, Wildean campism in his later years.
In Ewald’s tragedy, set in the Garden of Eden, Ewa is the first human being to appear, and her very first words reveal that she suddenly feels a still-undefined desire:12 ‘Mig længes inderlig — men veed jeg selv hvorefter? — / Gud! — ’ [I long fervently — but do I know for what? — / God!].13 — Sarah Fengler

The implications of acting upon (forbidden) desire form the basis of Genesis 1–3 and Christian doctrine thereafter. Taking the origins of man’s fall as a starting point, the final essay of this volume explores what is perhaps the most archetypal story of the dangers of desire, that of Adam and Eve. In ‘Longing for Life and Death: Eve’s Desires in Klopstock’s Der Tod Adams and Ewald’s Adam og Ewa’, Sarah Fengler (University of Oxford) explores how Eve is reimagined in two eighteenth-century tragedies. Through close textual analysis, Fengler posits that the German Der Tod Adams (1757) and Danish Adam og Ewa (1769) present radically different interpretations of Eve’s desires, despite both drawing from the Old Testament. In Klopstock’s text, ‘Eva’ longs for death not only because it presents the possibility of salvation, but also because she feels she belongs to Adam, and thus must follow his actions. Ewald’s ‘Ewa’, by contrast, seeks meaning beyond Adam, and her desires — and actions — reflect an emancipatory potential. She, too, desires salvation, but this is expressed independently of Adam’s wishes. Ultimately, it is suggested that both texts shed light on eighteenth-century interpretations of religious scripture — and the yearnings that underpin it.

Agony is ecstasy, death is life: the Spanish mystics were well-aware of the ineffability of spiritual desire, attempting to capture this quality through the use of paradox. Like Donne, quoted in the opening pages of this volume, San Juan de la Cruz (1542–1591) and Santa Teresa de Ávila (1515–1582) portrayed the yearning for a union with God in highly eroticized terms, shocking contemporary readers and provoking theological debate to this day. The century following their deaths, Gian Lorenzo Bernini would go on to immortalize Teresa in marble form. The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa (1652) depicts the Saint in the throes of longing as an angel approaches, a scene evocative of her own infamous fits of rapture. Reclined, eyes closed, mouth ajar: the visual implies both the height of salvation and perhaps another sort of death, the petite mort.

This link between the divine and the erotic is explored by Rebecca Bowen in

the first essay of this volume. Reading Dante’s *Commedia* in light of Botticelli’s accompanying illustrations, completed almost two centuries following the text’s genesis, Bowen observes potentially secularizing tendencies on the part of the illustrator, which themselves echo the evolving role of the winged infant in the late fifteenth century. At the time of Botticelli’s creation, angels were ordinarily depicted as adults — as opposed to the cherubic *putti* that arrived only later, in the sixteenth century — thereby complicating a reading of the souls. Furthermore, Botticelli’s images serve to reinforce the inherently ambiguous relationship with desire already present in the text: ‘[t]he hairsbreadth of distance between Dante’s raised right hand and the foot of the infant above him, for example, presents a tantalizing proximity that increases the suggestive symbolism of the winged figures’. Bowen’s analysis thus takes on a dialogic approach: Botticelli’s unusual decision to depict the blessed souls as infants — the first such example in the *Paradiso* — may reveal not only the cultural attitudes and circumstances surrounding his illustrations, but also previously obscured aspects of Dante’s text, most notably in relation to its representation of spiritual desire as erotically charged.

Dante’s Beatrice can be viewed as the logical inverse of the Biblical Eve; the former leads the poet to salvation while the latter provokes man’s downfall, thereby establishing a world of sin. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that desire takes a dark turn in Sarah Fengler’s comparative analysis of two eighteenth-century renderings of Eve. The German *Éva* and Danish *Ewa* both testify to longing for death, here read as an all-consuming desire, but Eva does so out of sense of belonging to Adam, rather than for her own spiritual emancipation. The forbidden fruit itself takes on multiple meanings: ‘it entails not only the risk of death, but also the possibility of happiness, which is decisive for Ewa’. Despite these theological overtones, Fengler’s essay thus shares elements with Katherine Moore’s secularly orientated (if contemporaneous) texts. In both essays, one can discern a decidedly gendered attitude in the manner in which female desire is expressed. Notably, Moore’s exploration of Sophie Cottin’s *Claire d’Albe* (1799) exposes how unbridled female desire reverberates with the taboos associated with that first, legendary bite. The married eponymous character both desires another man and wishes to be faithful; this dual longing culminates in a torturous sexual experience that has violently religious undertones: ‘the mélange of the sexual and religious delight calls into question Claire’s understanding that this love and desire is against God and therefore forbidden’. The forbidden aspect of desire is similarly portrayed, albeit in more muted tones, in Madame Roland’s *Mémoires*, Moore’s textual counterpart to *Claire d’Albe*.

The *Mémoires* bring us to the realm of confessional writing, here also explored by Álvaro González Montero in relation to Gil de Biedma’s diaries. Both the *Mémoires* and the *Diarios* were published posthumously. Crucially, however, Roland wrote while imprisoned, with the explicit intention of the
text finding an eventual readership. Allowing for this, Moore proposes that Roland’s continual references to the virtues of chastity — alongside an apparent revulsion towards the sexual — can be read as a sort of literary performance. By contrast, one would be hard-pressed to discern any self-censorship in Gil de Biedma’s diaries, despite the fact that this collection, too, was intended for publication. González Montero maintains that these diaries reveal the extent to which social class could permit (or inhibit) sexually ‘deviant’ expression. In the case of Gil de Biedma, the author’s social status allowed him to move through both homosexual and heterosexual spaces with relative ease, adopting different masks for each. Rather unlike any of the other authors approached in this volume, Gil de Biedma describes his desires as though they exist beyond the boundaries of the moral and immoral — this binary is eschewed for a more nuanced take on what is portrayed as desire’s inherently kinetic nature: overwhelming in one moment, forgotten the next.

Masks also form the basis of the remaining essay in this volume, though approached from a markedly different angle. Here, one observes the consequences of involuntary masks: those that are superimposed by society to hide or stifle desire, as opposed to those deliberately adopted by the subject in question. Returning to the representation of female sexuality, Karol Valderrama-Burgos explores the 2011 Colombian film, *La vida ‘era’ en serio* through the lens of Joan Rivière’s notion of womanliness as masquerade. Through a focus on the protagonist’s overwhelming envy of a sexually liberated co-worker, Valderrama-Burgos reveals the extent to which repressed desire can have dire consequences. Complicating the reading, however — and here we see echoes of Moore’s thesis on *Claire d’Albe* — is the fact that while Gabriela yearns for sexual liberation, she does not wish to entirely disavow her established role as a wife and mother. Her fantasies, thus, appear to remain just that. Still, Valderrama-Burgos posits that Gabriela’s comments at the film’s close suggest an internal transformation: ‘although Pablo asserts that life was real before her crisis, Gabriela contributes to the film’s decisive ending by affirming that life has only just started for her’. If Gabriela may appear superficially the same, it is left up to the viewer to interpret how she might go on to express — or indeed act upon — her desires moving forward.

Despite covering a range of almost 700 years, the texts in this volume all grapple with what appears to be an inherent duality of amorous pursuit, whether in the realm of the theological or secular. Desire, despite orientating towards the object of longing, inevitably also represents the possibility of pain. Perhaps it had to be so: Cupid (Eros) was traditionally depicted with a double arrow — one of gold to inspire love, the other lead or steel to create aversion. Millenia later, the mystics self-flagellated, a form of repent that could lead one closer to God: the ultimate desire. This sadomasochistic quality is explored in Miss Havisham’s explosive monologue in *Great Expectations*, as narrated by Pip:
“I’ll tell you,” said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, “what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter — as I did!”14

While Miss Havisham’s definition of love is perhaps questionable, this same description, if applied to desire, appears apt. Messy, unbridled, self-contradictory: desire underpins human relations, acting as a consistently destabilizing force. It has been the cause of the worst of human atrocities (one might wish to begin with Troy), and also the greatest of unions — spiritual or otherwise. As the contributors to this volume have consistently suggested, it resists strict definition. If at its height desire evades the limits of language, the intention to provide a (written) volume on the subject thus seems a fraught exercise, doomed from outset. But while desire itself may be ineffable, a study of its manifestations across artistic genres need not conform to this rule. In the act of analysis, the role of the critic is not to reproduce desire, but to chart its transformations. The volatility, then, of desire is both the hermeneutic puzzle and its own solution. Or, to return to Barthes, with whom we opened this volume: ‘It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool’.15

Languages of Desire in Botticelli and Dante: *Paradiso* 21

Rebecca Bowen

University of Oxford

Abstract. This essay explores the multifaceted language of desire in Dante’s *Paradiso* through a specific lens: Sandro Botticelli’s visualization of the contemplative souls in canto 21 as a crowd of winged infants. Exploring the connotations of the visual language evoked by these figures and the figural histories with which they interact, this essay considers the ways in which Botticelli’s artistic choice validates certain lexical strands in Dante’s poem, particularly those which convey an affective and eroticized charge. Interweaving secular resonance and Christian symbolism, Botticelli’s use of winged infants is ultimately seen to present a flexible visual language that reflects the semantic range of Dante’s text, offering a metaphor for its enduringly complex, and often ambiguous, engagement with desire.

The role of desire in Dante’s *Commedia* is vast, running the gamut from infernally punished sin to heavenly sanctioned reward.¹ Identifying the semantic implications of the terms in which Dante evokes and describes desire, let alone its ethical ramifications, is often a hermeneutical puzzle. This exercise is rendered all the more complex by the fact that the same terms are frequently employed for infernal lust (‘Amor ch’a nullo amato amar perdona,’ *Inf*. 5.103) and divine love (‘l’amor che move il sole e le altre stelle,’ *Par*. 33.145).² This semantic range poses a particular challenge to visual mediation, as it invites the artist to settle on a reading of the text that may or may not reflect the nuances of the original. This process is further complicated by the fact that visual representations of desire also lean towards semiotic multiplicity, often requiring the viewer to establish their own interpretation of the figural systems at play in order to settle on a meaning.³ This is particularly the case for the figure of love

¹ The literature is equally vast, for a start see the essays in *Desire in Dante and the Middle Ages*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Tristan Kay, Elena Lombardi and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Legenda, 2012).

*Working Papers in the Humanities* vol. 16 (2021), 10–18
© Modern Humanities Research Association 2021
personified, whose modern ubiquity in the shape of the classical Cupid belies a historical ambiguity — in the European Middle Ages, Cupid could represent a spectrum of desires from demonic lust to Christ-like love.

This essay explores the interpretative possibilities of one such potentially ambiguous visual mediation of desire: Sandro Botticelli’s choice to illustrate the blessed souls in Paradiso 21 as a flock of winged infants. This image raises a series of questions about Botticelli’s interpretation of Dante’s text and the flexibility of such infant figures at the time of Botticelli’s drawing. To a modern viewer, winged infants immediately recall the familiar putti: angels whose fleshy forms sprout from altarpieces and church ceilings across the world. As this essay will show, this commonplace understanding does not hold true in a historical context. Indeed, until the sixteenth century, angels were most commonly depicted as fully-grown adults, as we see them in Botticelli’s illustrations of Paradiso 28 and 29. Examining the connotations of winged infants at the time of Botticelli’s composition (and the figural histories with which they interacted), this essay explores the ways in which Botticelli’s illustration validates an affective, even eroticized, charge in Dante’s text, offering an enduring meditation on the complex, often ambiguous, role of desire in the Paradiso more generally.

Executed almost two centuries after the Commedia was written, Sandro Botticelli’s pen and ink illustrations were designed to accompany each canto of the poem on the same sheets of velum that displayed the text. Although the poem was never transcribed onto the original drawings, several of Botticelli’s illustrations were used as the basis for the engravings included in the 1481 Florentine edition of the text. The remaining designs for the Commedia survive

---


6 In Botticelli’s illustrations to other canti, the blessed souls are represented as adults (Paradiso 3, 4) or flames (Paradiso 6–8, 23–26). The only other illustration with winged infants is Paradiso 30, discussed below.

7 The dating of Botticelli’s illustrations is still imprecise, but their emergence in the 1480s is strongly suggested by their use as designs for the woodcuts in Nicolò di Lorenzo’s 1481 printed edition of the Commedia. See Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcappenberg, “Per essere persona sofistica”: Botticelli’s Drawings for the Divine Comedy’, in Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante’s Divine Comedy, ed. by Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcappenberg (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000), pp. 13–35.

8 This much lauded publication included the commentary of the celebrated humanist Cristoforo Landino, a scholar whose deep engagement with the Medici household links him to Botticelli. For speculation on Botticelli’s knowledge of Landino’s commentary, see Angela Dressen, ‘From Dante to Landino: Botticelli’s Calummy of Apelles and its Sources’, Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 59 (2017) 324–39.
in their original manifestations as pen and ink drawings with silverpoint detail, now divided between the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and the Biblioteca Vaticana in Rome.

The intricate interaction between the canti and the illustrations betrays a detailed study of the text on the part of the artist, a focus echoed in Vasari’s allusive comment that Botticelli ‘comentò una parte di Dante’. In the case of the illustration to Paradiso 21, the complexity of the narrative and figural detail offers rich insight into Botticelli’s reading of the text and the fifteenth-century context in which that reading took place. Unlike in any of his earlier illustrations to Paradiso, in canto 21 Botticelli presents the blessed souls as a flock of winged infants (fig. 1). This detail is striking because it appears to have little to do with the text.

In canto 21, as in many other points in Paradiso, Dante describes the blessed as ‘tanti splendor’ (‘so many sparkling lights’, Par. 21.32), a visual prompt that Botticelli took up in seven other illustrations (in Paradiso 6–8 and 23–26) where — in line with Dante’s own use of the terms splendor, faville and lumi — the souls are depicted as symmetrical flames. Diversifying his use of the language of light, Dante compares the souls in Paradiso 21 to a flock of jackdaws, or crows, an avian simile that presents a potential launch pad for Botticelli’s flighty infants:

9 ‘Commented part of Dante’, Giorgio Vasari, Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti, 3 vols. (Florence, 1568), iii, p. 517.
Beginning with the top left-hand section of Botticelli’s image, the viewer is treated to a visual experience that mirrors the description in the text relatively closely: a ladder, extending up out of the frame and beyond our sight, is flocked with bird-like figures wheeling around it. The flight of Botticelli’s winged infants clearly draws on Dante’s avian imagery, although his anthropomorphized interpretation of the pole (common, crow-like birds) does not respect the text to the letter. By turning Dante’s pole into fleshy boys, Botticelli disrupts the correspondence between his image and the most evident allegorical intent of Dante’s simile since, as centuries of commentators have pointed out, Dante’s specific selection of birds (pole) can be related to the identification of the souls in this canto as Christian contemplatives. Such plain birds were thought to invoke humility, or the solitary nature of a life dedicated to religious thought. This point of reference is relatively far removed from Botticelli’s kinetic infants, whose figural interactions suggest a level of spontaneity and play that does not precisely reflect the circling movements of the birds described in Dante’s text, identified by critics as the specific stages of contemplation discussed by various religious authorities. Why Botticelli should have chosen winged infants to capture a tone of beatitude and play, rather than following the specific depictions of contemplation embedded in Dante’s text, is not immediately clear.

10 ‘I saw a ladder, standing so / high my sight could not surmount it. / I saw, too, by the rungs descending down, / so many sparkling lights, that I thought every spark / appearing in the sky must be shining there. / And just, as is their nature, / jack-daws together, at the break of day, / move their frigid wings to warm them; / some fly off without returning, / others fly back to where they began, / and others wheeling round, remain at home; / this very movement appeared to me / in that sparkling throng which moved together, / as they jumped off from certain rungs.’


A potentially angelic status can be claimed for Botticelli’s winged infants when they are considered in light of the image’s central motif: the ladder that represents the contemplative life. This ladder is still present in both the text and the image of the next canto, Paradiso 22, where Dante encounters the contemplative Saint Benedict, who cites the ladder’s biblical origins when he notes that it ‘apparve d’angeli si carca’ (‘appeared laden with angels,’ Par. 22.72). As Heather Webb has shown, Botticelli often leans on details from adjacent canti to construct figural meaning in his illustrations to Paradiso, making the identification of the infants in Paradiso 21 with the term ‘angeli’, from Paradiso 22, a distinct possibility.

Nonetheless, the physical discrepancy between the infant-figures of Paradiso 21 and the depictions of angels as adults (armed with the attributes of the church militant) in Paradiso 28 and 29 suggests that Botticelli did not intend these infants to be understood simply as angeli, a categorization which Dante himself does not assign to the souls in this canto and which is, moreover, presented as a doctrinal matter governed by religious texts in Dante’s discussion of the hierarchy of angelic forms in canti 28 and 29. The translation of this nomenclature into a note from the artist’s hand in the margin of Botticelli’s illustration to Paradiso 28 suggests that the artist took this structure seriously, perhaps responding to Dante’s claim that the order was the result of a divine revelation (Par. 28.136–39).

Botticelli’s employment of winged infants thus displays a figural flexibility that is mapped onto the biblical model of Jacob’s ladder (‘di angeli si carca,’ Par. 22.72), but remains distinct from it, by not entering into a discussion of angelic types. In this way, Botticelli’s figures are free to respond to multiple elements in the text. In fact, the composition of Botticelli’s illustrations in the 1490s places his infant-angels at a very interesting, if indeterminate, period of their figural history. The depiction of infants was on the rise in fifteenth-century religious art, however the apotheosis of the infant-putti ascends to the status of ubiquity in altarpieces such as Titian’s Assumption of the Virgin (1515–16), in the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. Before the turn of the century, such figures remained largely classicizing, as we find them in the work of Donatello where they are employed as visual citations in the decorative borders of larger artworks, a practice which then became commonplace.

Winged infants also appear as eroticizing features in late fifteenth-century

---

13 This is a vernacularization of the biblical passage: ‘angelos quoque Dei ascendentess et descendentes per eam’ (‘with angels ascending and descending by it’), Genesis 28:12.
humanist compositions, such as Mantegna’s paintings for the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este and his earlier, equally secular, frescoes in the Camera Degli Sposi of the Ducal Palace in Mantua.  

These potentially secularizing, if not actively classicizing, connotations of winged infants in fifteenth-century visual culture invite us to explore the relationship between Botticelli’s image and Dante’s text from a different angle. At the start of the canto, for example, Beatrice draws on the classical myth of Semele to warn Dante about the potency of her smile, cautioning him that if he were to behold it at this point in his spiritual journey he would be utterly destroyed. This secular reference to an erotic tale places Dante in the role of Jove’s mortal, female lover. It also casts the Christological power of Beatrice in decisively pagan garb, while simultaneously conveying the Christianized message of the canto: that attempting to overreach the bounds of mortal contemplation is an impossible and potentially sinful act.

The tension between the upward trajectory of the narrative and the limitations of Dante’s capacity at this point in the text is manifested in Botticelli’s image through the intricate interactions of the central figures. Beatrice’s raised left arm guides the gaze up to the top of the plane, where Dante’s eyes seem to follow, even as her right hand forms a countermovement with his raised arm, directing away from the ladder. These movements are inscribed in Beatrice’s pose, as she turns half towards the ladder and half back to Dante, the swirling hem of her garment contrasting with the stillness of Dante’s robe. A ‘hypothetical’ Beatrice, in the shadowy lines of silverpoint, ascends the ladder above them, gazing back at the figures below: a premonition of the journey they will take, perhaps, or a manifestation of her warning that Dante is not ready to fully behold her beauty on a higher plane.

This interplay between movement and stasis is also visible in Botticelli’s winged infants, many of whom are depicted in half-finished graphite, experimenting with poses that seem to be brought to fruition in the twisting limbs of their inked brothers. The playfulness of these compositions reflects the symbolic syncretism of the scene, embodying the classicizing tone of the


20 Webb, ‘Botticelli’s Illustrations’, refers to this dynamic elsewhere in the *Paradiso* illustrations as the: ‘asymmetries between Dante’s limited capacity to see and to understand and Beatrice’s divinely participatory capacity,’ 203.

21 ‘Ché la bellezza mia, che per le scale / de l’eterno palazzo più s’accende, / com’ hai veduto’ (‘since my beauty burns brighter with each step to the eternal palace, as you have seen’), *Par*. 21.7–8.
opening reference to the myth of Semele, while also enacting a sense of joy in the depiction of beatitude that validates the spiritual tone of the text, even as it draws on an ambiguously secular visual lexicon. Several terms present throughout the text of the canto feed into this atmosphere, suggesting that Botticelli’s imagery can be related to the discourse of desire unfolding in the poem. First, and most notably, is the use of the keyword amor/amoore.

Identifying Peter Damian’s presence before he speaks, Dante notes: “Io veggio ben l’amor che tu m’accenne” (‘I see clearly the love that you show me,’ Par. 21.45). This lexicon is echoed and intensified by Peter Damian who explains to Dante that the love perceived in him is indicative of the divine love suffused throughout paradise, employing a notion of burning that is frequently related to the experience of beatitude, but that is also an indelible attribute of earthly lust: “nè più amor mi fece esser più presta; / chè più e tanto amor quinci su ferve, / si come il fiammeggiar ti manifesta” (‘nor did more love make me faster; because more and just as much love burns above, as the flaming here displays to you.’ Par. 21.67–69). In his response to Peter Damian, Dante acknowledges ‘libero amore’ (‘free love,’ Par. 21.74) as the root of the blessed souls’ ability to act in accordance with divine will, and culminates the use of that lexicon in this canto by directly referring to Peter Damian’s soul as love, framing his speech as that of amor: ‘poi rispouse l’amor che v’era dentro’ (‘the love that was within responded to me,’ Par. 21.82).

The presence of the Christian signifier caritas (‘l’alta carità [...] sorteggia qui si come tu osserve,’ Par. 21.70; 72) roots these exchanges in the Christian context of the canto, however the semantic range of amor does not altogether lose its earthly referents, as the presence of more overtly erotic language reminds us. For example, before his conversation with Peter Damian, Dante’s desire to question the Saint is encouraged by Beatrice who tells the pilgrim to ‘resolve’ his ‘hot desire’: ‘solvi il tuo caldo disio’ (Par. 21.51). The eroticism of this statement is channelled into the religious context of the setting but not cancelled out by it. Returning to Botticelli’s image with an awareness of this amorous, if not at times vaguely erotic, undertone, the infant figures take on a different cast, turning from specific manifestations of blessed souls into more flexible visual ciphers, capable of occupying the classical name of amores (loves, or even Cupids) and playing out multiple referents. The hairsbreadth of distance between Dante’s raised right hand and the foot of the infant above him, for example, presents a tantalizing proximity that increases the suggestive symbolism of the winged figures who, in this context, could represent Dante’s own caldo disio — as hot as Semele’s scorching by her divine lover — as well as general joy of beatitude and contemplation.

The kinetic exuberance of the winged infants can clearly be related to the emotional charge Dante invests in the blessed in this canto, as he refers to Peter Damian as ‘nascosta / dentro alla tua letizia’ (‘hidden within your happiness,’ Par. 21.55–56), a quality echoed in Damian’s self-characterization of ‘l’allegrezza ond’io fiammeggiio’ (‘the joy with which I flame,’ Par. 21.88) and dramatized in
the image of the spirit spinning like a millstone (81). An impetus for the youth of the figures might also be located in the text as Dante frequently draws on notions of infancy to imbue his depictions of paradise with an affective charge.²² Such language is present at the start of canto 22 when Dante, describing his fright at a cry set up by the spirits at the end of Peter Damian’s speech, depicts himself as a child turning to a maternal Beatrice: ‘come parvol che ricorre / sempre colà dove più si confida’ (Par. 22.2–3).²³ Notably, such language is also a prominent feature in the only other canto that Botticelli illustrated with winged infants: Dante’s entrance into the final heaven, the Empyrean, in Paradiso 30.

Describing the heaven as a river of light, Dante depicts the souls enlivening it as boisterous and inebriated, diving in and out of the waves: ‘Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive, / e d’ogni parte si mettien ne’ fiori, / [...] Poi, come inebriate dalli odori, / riprofondavan sè nel miro gurge; / e s’una intrava, un’altra n’uscìa fori’ (Par. 30.64–65; 66–69).²⁴ Botticelli returns to the visual language of the winged infant to render these ‘faville vive’, updating the figures from Paradiso 21 with flame-like sparks and depicting them as playfully immersed in flowering vegetation, baby bottoms emerging from open-petaled stems. While these figures represent the souls described in Dante’s text, they also display an element of the symbolic flexibility seen in the illustration to Paradiso 21, reflecting a broader notion of paradisiacal desire and the joy of beatitude. Importantly, Dante depicts his own desire to immerse himself in this river light through the language of infancy, once more rendering himself a child: ‘non è fantin che sì subito rua / col volto verso il latte, se si svegli / molto tardato dall’usanza sua / come fec’io’ (Par. 30.82–85).²⁵ Whether or not Botticelli’s infant figures respond directly to the affective drive of Dante’s language of infancy, such visual mediation brings that linguistic field to the surface of the text, embodying its emotional undertone in the literal infancy of the winged figures.

The infant figures of Botticelli’s illustration can thus be seen to respond to multiple aspects of the complex poetic fabric of Dante’s poem. Constructed from a kaleidoscope of cultural impulses ranging from classical mythology to doctrinal discussion, the presence of an affective lexicon in the discourse of desire in Dante’s Paradiso is reflected and validated in Botticelli’s choice of infant figures in his illustrations to cantos 21 and 30.²⁶

²² On the potency of infant imagery in the Commedia, see Gary Cestaro, Dante and the Grammar of the Nursing Body (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), pp. 135–66.
²³ ‘Like a child who runs back, always, to the one he trusts the most’.
²⁴ ‘From this river issued forth living flames who dove on every side into the flowers [...] then, as if drunk from the scent, they dove back into the stream, and if one of them dove in another sprang out’.
²⁵ ‘No baby sooner rushes with their mouth turned towards the milk, if they wake up much later than they’re used to, than did I’.
²⁶ On the role of this affective charge within the eschatological system of the Commedia, see Manuele Grangolati and Francesca Southerden, ‘From Paradox to Exclusivity: Dante and Petrarch’s Lyrical Eschatologies’, in Petrarch and Boccaccio: The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World, ed. by Igor Candido (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 129–52.
of the winged infant in the late fifteenth century, not quite an angel but also more than a classicizing citation, presents the artist with a unique figural language through which to reflect and respond to the lexical range of Dante's text and its enduringly complex engagement with desire.
Reading Between the Lines: Female Sexual Desire in the Late Eighteenth Century

Katherine Moore
Florida State University

Abstract. In eighteenth-century France, the rules of bienséance dictated that discussions of female sexuality were considered off-limits for polite society and fiction. While some male authors flouted these sensibilities openly with their libertine novels, female writers were much more cautious with how they pushed back against these rules. Authors such as Sophie Cottin and Marie-Jeanne Roland de la Platière (Madame Roland) wrote about female desire in the last decade of the eighteenth century and both were either censured or reprimanded, despite their careful attempts to discuss female sexuality in relation with virtue. In this paper, I examine the difficulty of reading female sexual desire in historical contexts where open discussion of female sexuality was discouraged. By examining Cottin’s Claire d’Albe and Madame Roland’s Mémoires, I argue that to obey the rules of bienséance, these female writers discuss female desire and the tension between desire and virtue in varying degrees of dissimulation. Both authors, in different ways, present the simultaneous existence of female virtue and female sexual desire. Through examination of the reception of these texts, I argue that we can see how French publishers and the French reading public accepted fictional female desire more willingly than the autobiographical desire presented by Roland.

In France, the rules of bienséance in the eighteenth century largely forbade discussion of sexuality in literature, but female sexuality was particularly taboo. While some male authors flouted these sensibilities openly with their libertine novels, female writers dissimulated their pushback against these rules. Marie-Jeanne Roland de la Platière (Madame Roland) and Sophie Cottin wrote cautiously about female desire in the last decade of the eighteenth century and caused scandal or had their works censured. Both women, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in different ways, wrote both in imitation and in defiance of his works and ideals.

1 Bienséance here refers to the moral norms of a particular society.

Working Papers in the Humanities vol. 16 (2021), 19–27
© Modern Humanities Research Association 2021
Reading female sexual desire in the context of the late eighteenth century, where open discussion of female sexuality was discouraged, necessitates close and careful reading of motivation, euphemism, and meaning shifts in language. By examining the patterns of expression in Roland’s Mémoires and Cottin’s Claire d’Albe and the difference in publication and reception of these works, we can see how these authors navigated the underlying tension surrounding female desire and its expression. By juxtaposing desire with virtue, each woman attempted to walk a fine line between the acceptable and unacceptable.

Chastity and Image

In her Mémoires, Madame Roland puts virtue directly in contrast with sexuality, rejecting the latter utterly in the name of chastity. Therefore, a central element of Roland’s writing about sexual desire is her refusal to engage with her own. To fully understand Roland’s description and discussion of sex and desire, it is important to know how she framed these experiences. Introducing the reader to the section where she will recount her experiences of sex, Roland claims, ‘Je suis un peu embarrassée de ce que j’ai à raconter ici, car je veux que mon écrit soit chaste, puisque ma personne n’a pas cessé de l’être, et pourtant, ce que je dois dire ne l’est pas trop.’3 The author’s insistence on the chastity of ‘ma personne’ — herself and/or her body — and also her writing is an essential framing of her discussion of her desire. It is also important to note that her Mémoires were written specifically as a means of posthumous redemption. Roland wrote while she was imprisoned, awaiting her trial and execution, and trusted friends smuggled her writings out of prison so that they could be published after her death.4 Whilst reading Roland’s discussion of sexual desire, it is essential to understand that she was explicitly writing to promote herself as chaste.

In her writings, Roland only confesses curiosity and revulsion as her main conscious feelings toward sexuality — a product of her strict religious faith and of her chastity. In the first part of Mémoires particuliers,5 she recounts the story of a teenage apprentice from her father’s workshop who forced her to touch and look at his penis when she was alone in the workshop with him one day.6 When she reacts with horror and fright, he tells her, ‘“je ne vous aurai appris que


4 Reynolds, pp. 278–79.

5 The Mémoires are split into two parts: the first dealing primarily with questions of politics where she recounts events of the Revolution and the second, titled Mémoires particuliers, which is more autobiographical in nature and deals with events of her childhood up to the Revolution. These Mémoires particuliers are split into multiple parts.

6 Reynolds, p. 18.
ce qu'elle [Roland’s mother] connaît bien.”7 Whether intentional or not, this appeal to learning was difficult for an avid learner like Roland to resist. Roland muses, ‘J’aurais bien voulu savoir ce que l’autre voulait m’apprendre; j’aurais désiré de l’entendre sans que ce fût à moi qu’il le dit, et le monde commençait à me paraître bien étrange.’8 Roland’s reaction here centres her curiosity and her desire to learn about the world. Her focus on learning rather than on sexual desire is unsurprising given that she was about ten years old.9 Nevertheless, it is easy to see how she separates herself from this desire and instead wants to listen and learn without having to be the person who is being taught about such things. After a second incident of sexual assault with this same boy, Roland told her mother and was lectured about ‘religion, vertu, honneur [et] réputation’.10 Understandably, the two incidents of assault and the conversation with her mother left a grave impression on the young Roland, who denounced any feeling of sexual desire or sexual pleasure after this point in the narrative.

Due to the revulsion that she felt at the apprentice’s actions and the intense religiosity stirred up in her by her mother’s lecture, Roland describes the sexual feelings and desire that her body feels, whilst also rejecting those same sensations. In the second part of her Mémoires particuliers, Roland describes her experience of a [female] nocturnal emission:

Avant ce temps, j’avais été quelquefois tirée du plus profond sommeil d’une manière surprenante. [...] Mais un bouillonnement extraordinaire soulevait mes sens dans la chaleur du repos, et, par la force d’une constitution excellente, opérait de soi-même un épurement qui m’était aussi inconnu que sa cause. Le premier sentiment qui en résulta fut, je ne sais pourquoi, une sorte de crainte. J’avais remarqué dans ma Philotée qu’il ne nous est pas permis de tirer de nos corps aucune espèce de plaisir, excepté en légitime mariage. Ce précepte me revint à l’esprit: ce que j’avais éprouvé pouvait s’appeler un plaisir, j’étais donc coupable, et dans le genre qui pouvait me causer le plus de honte et de douleur, puisque c’était celui qui déplaisait le plus à l’Agneau sans tache.11

7 Roland, Mémoires, p. 217. “‘I won’t have taught you anything she doesn’t know well enough’” (Roland, The Memoirs of Madame Roland, p. 138).
8 Roland, Mémoires, p. 216. ‘I would like to have known what it was that the young man wanted to teach me; I would have liked to hear about it without being myself the person to whom he said it. In short, the world began to seem a strange place’ (Roland, The Memoirs of Madame Roland, pp. 139–40).
9 Reynolds, p. 18.
11 Roland, Mémoires, pp. 251–52. ‘Before that time, I had once or twice been woken in a rather surprising manner from a deep sleep. [...] But in the warmth of sleep I experienced an extraordinary surge of physical sensations, which, through the agency of a healthy constitution and without any conscious participation by me, was like a sort of purification all on its own. My first reaction was a kind of fear. I had read in my Philotée that we are not permitted to derive any sort of pleasure from our bodies except in legitimate marriage. Recalling this precept, I felt that I must be gravely at fault since the sensations that I had experienced must certainly be described as pleasurable. Furthermore, the pleasure in question was undoubtedly one which would be most displeasing to the Spotless Lamb.’ (Roland, The Memoirs of Madame Roland, p. 168).
There are two elements that stand out as important in this passage: first, that the language surrounding the physical sensation of pleasure is vague and euphemistic, and second, that she spends more time discussing the morality of such sensations and her reaction to having unwillingly felt them, than to the sensations themselves. Her use of euphemistic language when discussing sexuality is consistent throughout her Mémoires and allows Roland to separate herself from the events and feelings that occurred: it is not her body that experiences or creates the pleasure but rather ‘un bouillonnement extraordinaire’ that performs the pleasurable feeling on her. The passivity of the language here parallels her description of the apprentice’s actions wherein sexual acts, desires, and pleasures are placed onto her body by external forces. The distance that is created between her body and her pleasure supports her claim of ignorance, ‘un épurement qui m’était aussi inconnu que sa cause’ and her desired public image of chastity. Once Roland has sufficiently separated herself from these sexual feelings, she begins to talk about their morality in order to augment her perceived chastity. Her first instinct is fear, closely followed by her religious learnings through which she discusses the (in)appropriateness of these feelings. The rest of the passage focuses on the sinful nature of these sensations and the measures she takes to avoid them or punish herself. She notes that the punishments ‘ne me faisaient pas plus de mal que les accidents nocturnes, pour la réparation desquels je me mettais à cet extravagant régime’. Contrasting the physical punishment of putting ashes in her food with the moral and spiritual damage of her subconscious sexual desires, Roland once again seeks to put distance between her body and its sexuality, further insisting on her chastity. For Roland, although she experiences sexual desire, the fact that she can control it renders her chastity more powerful.

To conclude this discussion, it is necessary to think about how the author discusses and portrays her desire, considering both the circumstances of her writing and her stated goals. If we accept her assertion that her writing is truthful to her experiences, then her writings about these sexual experiences and feelings simply highlight her chaste nature. It makes it clear that she has never had more than perhaps a passive academic interest in sexual activities and fought against her own body’s instincts towards experiencing pleasure during sleep.

However, as an alternative interpretation, I suggest that Roland may have been exaggerating her dismissal of desire in a performative way intended to cement her image as a chaste woman whose only interests were political.

---

13 ‘without any conscious participation by me, was like a sort of purification all on its own’ (Roland, *The Memoirs of Madame Roland*, p. 168).
14 Roland, Mémoires, p. 67.
15 Roland, *Mémoires*, p. 252. ‘This did me no more harm than the nocturnal accidents for which it was intended to atone’ (Roland, *The Memoirs of Madame Roland*, p. 169).
the months leading up to her arrest and execution, Roland was participating in a romantic extramarital affair. According to later accounts, her affair was not sexual, although Monsieur Roland seemed to have had suspicions about the nature of the relationship. Furthermore, during her imprisonment, her political enemies attempted to paint her as an over-sexualized character in the press. Therefore her rejection of physical desire acts as a counter to these rumours and caricatures that were circulating. Although writing at a time when open discussion of female sexual desire and pleasure was not considered acceptable, Roland wrote specifically for an eventual public audience. She used these discussions to underline her chaste nature, which she explicitly states as a goal of her Mémoires. Of course, if she wanted to appear chaste, the most apparent course of action would be not mentioning sexual activity or desire at all. However, it is likely that she was inspired by Rousseau's Confessions in which he recounts both embarrassing and explicit stories. She may have included these anecdotes, then, in a desire to emulate Rousseau. Furthermore, these stories also allowed Roland to explicitly insist that she was able to control her sexual desires, which bolsters her argument that she was a chaste woman. Thus, I posit that her inclusion of these stories, her revulsion toward and rejection of desire, and her explicit goal of being seen as chaste, are to quell any rumours surrounding her affair and preserve her image for posterity.

Virtue and Volupté

Later in the 1790s, Sophie Cottin published her first novel, Claire d’Albe, a text in which she explores the concepts of passion, desire, and transgression through a loose retelling of Rousseau’s Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse (1761). In her epistolary work, Cottin uses both euphemistic and more straightforward language to talk about desire and sexual pleasure. While Roland’s primary concern is her virtue and chastity, Claire, the eponymous character of Cottin’s novel, is primarily concerned with remaining faithful to her husband and with not giving into her adulterous desires. Her descriptions are largely marked by the tension between her romantic/sexual desire for Frédéric and her desire to avoid committing adultery. Once Claire accepts her feelings for Frédéric, her behaviour around him changes. She reveals this to her friend, Elise, and recounts a moment where she finds herself alone with the object of her desire:

Le bras de Frédéric était passé autour de mon corps; je sentais sa main sur mon cœur, tout mon sang était porté; il le sentait battre avec violence. [...] Elise, je respirais son souffle, j’en étais embrasée, je sentais ma tête s’égayer... Dans mon effroi, j’ai repoussé sa main; je me suis relevée.

17 Reynolds, pp. 261–62.
18 Reynolds, p. 277.
19 Reynolds, p. 279.
In this passage, Cottin focuses closely on physical sensations to convey Claire’s desire to her readers. There is a clear preference for the heart and the head both here and in later passages. She feels his hand on her heart and feels connected to Frédéric through their breathing. It must be noted that these two processes — breathing and the beating heart — are both vital processes linked to life. With life comes violence: her heart and her blood pumps violently, and she is inflamed with his breath. So we come to a primary tension in Claire’s feelings of desire: the tension between lifegiving passion and violent transgression. Quickly following this, Claire refuses both her own desire and Frédéric’s, pushing his hand away and getting up.

After Claire has hid herself away for several days, she decides to re-join her family for dinner and a scene similar to the one above follows. This time, Claire is more overwhelmed by her desire and the language becomes more euphemistic than in the first scene, which primarily used non-figurative language. Once again, Claire describes the scene to Elise:

Frédéric me reçois dans ses bras; je veux appeler, les sanglots éteignent ma voix; il me presse fortement sur son sein... A ce moment tout a disparu, devoirs, époux, honneur; Frédéric était l’univers, et l’amour, le délicieux amour, mon unique pensée. [...] Alors je suis retombée sur mon fauteuil; il s’est précipité à mes pieds, je sentais ses bras autour de mon corps; la tête appuyée sur son front, respirant son haleine, je ne résistais plus. [...] A cet instant les lèvres de Frédéric ont touché les miennes; j’étais perdue, si la vertu, par un dernier effort, n’eût déchiré le voile de volupté dont j’étais enveloppée: m’arrachant d’entre les bras de Frédéric, je suis tombée à ses pieds.21

In this passage, there are very similar actions to the first: Claire is in Frédéric’s arms, their breath is mingled, and she manages to resist at the very last moment. However, in-between these straightforward descriptions, Cottin inserts the emotions and thoughts of Claire; finally, she describes how virtue destroys the ‘voile de volupté dont j’étais enveloppée’.22 When virtue vanquishes the ‘veil of pleasure’, Claire is able to free herself from Frédéric’s embrace.23 We have already examined the language of heart and breast in the previous passage, though it is worth noting that violence is only introduced at the very end of

arm was around my body; I felt his hand on my heart, all my blood rushed toward it; and he felt it beat with violence. [...] Elise, I inhaled his breath, it set me on fire, I felt myself losing my head... In my fright, I pushed away his hand, I stood up’ (Sophie Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, trans. by Margaret Cohen (New York, NY: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002), p. 80–81).

21 Cottin, Claire d’Albe, p. 67. ‘Frédéric catches me in his arms. I attempt to call out, sobs quench my voice, he clasps me forcefully to his breast... At this moment all vanished, duty, husband, honor; Frédéric was the universe, and love, delightful love, my only thought. [...] Then I sank back into my chair; he threw himself at my feet; I felt his arms around my body, my face leaning on his forehead; inhaling his breath, I was no longer resisting. [...] At this moment Frédéric’s lips touched mine; I was lost, if virtue by a last effort had not rent the veil of pleasure wrapped around me: tearing myself from Frédéric’s arms, I threw myself at his feet.’ (Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, pp. 88–89.)

22 ‘the veil of pleasure wrapped around me’ (Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, p. 89).

23 Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, p. 89.
the passage, when virtue destroys volupté. There is also an important contrast between vertu and volupté. Like Roland, Claire desires to be virtuous — to be faithful to her husband.24 Cottin contrasts this with the expression voile du volupté which is the most euphemistic language we have seen thus far in these passages. In English, it is translated as a ‘veil of pleasure’ which does not quite capture the full meaning in French.25 According to the Trésor de la langue française, the word volupté refers to pleasures of the senses and has, since the sixteenth century, been used specifically to refer to sexual pleasure, and in the late nineteenth century, could refer to the act of orgasm specifically. It is unclear whether or not volupté would have yet been recognized as referring directly to an orgasm in 1799 when Claire d’Albe was published, or if that sense of the word developed later in the nineteenth century. However, it would have been clear to contemporary readers that the pleasure and desire that Claire was experiencing was distinctly sexual and sensorial.

At the end of the novel, Elise writes the story of Claire’s submission to Frédéric. This passage ties together the tensions present in the previous two passages: virtue juxtaposed with volupté, which mirrors the struggle between life and death. In her writings intended for Claire’s daughter, Elise writes:

> et saisissant Claire, il la serre dans ses bras, il la couvre de baisers, il lui prodigue ses brûlantes caresses. L’infortunée, abattue par tant de sensations, palpita, oppressée, à demi-vaincue par son cœur et par sa faiblesse, résiste encore, le repousse [...] L’amour a doublé les forces de Frédéric, l’amour et la maladie ont épuisé celles de Claire... Elle n’est plus à elle, elle n’est plus à la vertu, Frédéric est tout, Frédéric l’emporte... Elle l’a goûté dans toute sa plénitude, cet éclair de délice qu’il n’appartient qu’à l’amour de sentir: elle l’a connue cette jouissance délicieuse et unique, rare et divine comme le sentiment qui l’a créé; son âme, confondue dans celle de son amant, nage dans un torrent de volupté; il fallait mourir alors; mais Claire était coupable, et la punition l’attendait au réveil.26

Once again, the scene starts in a similar way to the others, with Claire in Frédéric’s arms. However, the language now returns to emphasizing the violence of the emotions that Claire is experiencing, as well as positioning her as an object

---

24 According to the Trésor de la langue française, vertu refers to courage (physical or moral) or strength of soul. It is often translated into English as ‘virtue’. See ‘Vertu’, TLFi: Trésor de la langue Française informatisé <http://stella.atilf.fr> [accessed 5 February 2022].

25 Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, p. 89.

26 Cottin, Claire d’Albe, pp. 106–07. ‘and, seizing Claire, [he] holds her tightly in his arms, he covers her with kisses and lavishes on her his burning caresses. The wretched woman, overwhelmed by so many sensations, shaking, oppressed, half conquered by her heart and by her weakness, still resists, pushing him away [...] Love has redoubled Frédéric’s strength, love and illness have exhausted Claire’s... She no longer belongs to herself, she no longer belongs to virtue; Frédéric is all, Frédéric sweeps her away... She tastes in all its fullness that flash of delight that love alone can feel; she knows the delightful and unique rapture, rare and divine like the feeling that created it; her soul, merged with her lover’s, swims in the senses’ flood of pleasure. She should have died then, but Claire was guilty and punishment was waiting when she awakened.’ (Cottin, Claire d’Albe: An English Translation, p. 145.)
that is seized, squeezed, and destroyed. Despite this, she still attempts to fight against her desire before finally being overcome by Frédéric’s strength which is a by-product of his love. Once she is overcome, the narrative swiftly turns from a literal description of the scene to euphemistic phrases which express the depth of her desire and pleasure. Notably, volupté appears again, though instead of being enveloped in a veil — evoking a sense of sheerness, softness and delicacy that is easily destroyed — Claire and her soul swim with Frédéric’s in a torrent of volupté. This is combined with other phrases like plénitude, délice, and jouissance. All of these words have sexual connotations that serve to reinforce the vision of Claire as ecstatic and overwhelmed with her desire. Though this language might not seem like much to a modern audience, Hinde Stewart notes that ‘rarely does a heroine of this period (except in pornography) enjoy sex so keenly.’ In addition, these words all also have religious uses, confounding the straightforward reading of the passage — the mélange of the sexual and religious delight calls into question Claire’s understanding that this love and desire is against God and therefore forbidden. Though the text states that she no longer belongs to virtue, these phrases also suggest that virtue and volupté are closely linked. Once Claire reaches her climax, the language and tone immediately shift to remind us that while virtue and volupté go hand-in-hand, so do life and death. Now guilty, having experienced the fullness of her desire, Claire is condemned to death.

Cottin, like Roland, wrote under constraints about what was considered proper discourse to include in a novel, and was also inspired by Rousseau. To avoid these constraints, Cottin published Claire d’Albe anonymously. However, by the time she published her second novel two years later, her anonymity had been shattered and it was known that she was the author of Claire d’Albe. Reception of Claire d’Albe was mixed, both inciting moral outrage and becoming a bestseller in France: ‘[i]n the period 1816–20, Claire d’Albe was in fact the best-selling novel in France’. Despite the popularity of her first novel, by the time Cottin was writing clearly under her own name, she no longer included such scandalous prose in her novels. It was perhaps her expected anonymity that allowed her to write about female sexuality so freely, letting her heroine experience the pleasure and violence of volupté while still being described as virtuous by other characters in the novel.

27 Fullness, delight, and rapture.
Desire and Virtue

Both women, inspired by Rousseau, write on the precipice between the expression of female desire and the sensibility and opinion of the eventual readership. They also both wrestle with dichotomies. The Mémoires pit sexual desire against virtue and chastity. Leaving no room for misinterpretation, Roland clearly rejects her sexual desires in favour of emphasizing her virtue and chastity for posterity. Cottin also juxtaposes desire with virtue, but refuses to definitively separate the two, allowing them to exist together in her heroine. For Claire, desire is both life and death, transgression and virtue.

Ultimately, while Claire d’Albe may have scandalized some of her contemporaries, it was nevertheless a well-read novel and never underwent censorship by publishers in France. Roland’s Mémoires, however, had passages removed before it was published for the first time and did not appear in full until 1905, more than a century after her death.30 Though there may be many reasons for this censorship, I would argue that this points to a higher tolerance for fictional female sexuality at the end of the eighteenth century from publishers and the reading public. While Cottin’s work may well have sparked moral outrage among some, she successfully navigated the tension between desire and virtue in her depiction of the eponymous heroine.

30 Reynolds, pp. 278–79.
‘Life is Real’:
Sexual Freedom and Sex for Pleasure in
La vida ‘era’ en serio (Mónica Borda, 2011)

Karol Valderrama-Burgos
Queen’s University Belfast

Abstract. This working paper addresses Mónica Borda’s 2011 La vida ‘era’ en serio [Life ‘Was’ Real], one of the first contemporary Colombian films directed by a woman. The film brings to the fore how sexual freedom and sexual experiences can destroy a traditional feminine mask: that of the ideal, maternal, and sexually passive woman in patriarchy. Usually, this mask not only serves to hide the female sex drive, but also alludes to representations of heterosexual women who have sex exclusively within the sanctity of marriage. To investigate female sexuality and desire, Joan Rivière’s work on understanding womanliness as a masquerade will serve as a lens to analyse the selected film. The evaluation of heteronormative female behaviours within a (patriarchal) context reveals alternative ways in which women’s femininities are constituted, thereby challenging patriarchal expectations of womanhood. Accordingly, this working paper analyses how transgressive female desires trigger the redefinition of female subjectivity within patriarchy and the free expressions of sexual life through the representation of the film’s main female character. Ultimately, this work suggests how all this contributes to a nascent discourse of female visibility and ownership through early twenty-first century Colombian cinema.

The sanction of the 814 Cinema Law in 2003 has facilitated the funding of Colombian national cinema through tax collection and shaped the notable increase of film production since the beginning of the new millennium. This has firmly contributed to establishing a more progressive national film industry within different fields, as has been widely discussed in Colombian cinema scholarship. Post-2003 films have slowly posited varied images of women’s independence or empowerment, specifically through the representation of their sexualities. From different perspectives, productions like Sofía y el terco (Andrés Burgos, 2012), Señoritas (Lina Rodríguez, 2013) or Alias María (José Luis Rugeles, 2015), suggest a trend on repositioning the female subject in cinema, echoing Nayibe Bermúdez-Barrios’s view when examining the Colombian film Ilona llega con la lluvia (Sergio Cabrera, 1996).¹ This paper considers


Working Papers in the Humanities vol. 16 (2021), 28–36
© Modern Humanities Research Association 2021
the heteropatriarchal idealization of womanhood by analysing how female desire is redefined through *La vida ‘era’ en serio* (Mónica Borda, 2011), and by critically addressing the representation of what life means for a contemporary woman. *La vida* is a pioneering film amongst many Colombian twenty-first century productions, ground-breaking in its focus on visible representations of transgressive female sexuality and desire, and more significantly, it is presented through a female lens.

*La vida* is Borda’s debut feature film, one of the first — and few — films with a narrative focus on diverse female and feminist matters made during the first decade following the 2003 Cinema Law. This black comedy portrays the life of Gabriela (Cristina Umaña) through a postfeminist representation of an empowered working woman facing a major life crisis. Following Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s introduction on cross-examining postfeminism and the politics of popular culture, it could be argued that Gabriela’s postfeminist archetype is cinematically constructed by her role as the administrative and financial manager of ERA, her economic income and corporate expectations, and her seemingly joyful sex life with her husband Pablo (Juan Pablo Gamboa). However, notions of the masquerade and gender performativity support hypotheses regarding the representation of a patriarchal mask of femininity through Gabriela, and the way this mask is adopted, challenged and eventually abolished. This approach also illuminates discussions on female sexual freedom, which subverts the traditional cinematic discourse of the (mis)representation of the female body and desire.

Joan Rivière’s notion of womanliness as masquerade can be considered as a starting point here. Although her case study focused on the analysis of homosexual traits, Rivière’s work validates the purpose of this text. Namely, this paper addresses female sexuality and desire, whilst identifying and rejecting masks of patriarchal femininity that disguise, misinterpret, or ignore female drives. Rivière states that:

> Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it [...] used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment.  

Wearing a mask hides a woman’s desire for change, preventing her from feeling

---

2 Hereafter referred to as *La vida*.

3 Alongside Borda, Paola Mendoza, Gloria La Morte (*Entre nos*, 2008) and Celmira Zuluaga (*La ministra inmoral*, co-directed with Julio Luzardo, 2007) were the first women to represent female issues or women as driving narrative subjects during this decade.

4 The company name where she works and one of the forms of the verb *to be* in Spanish (i.e., was), relevant to the title of the film and this paper, which will be discussed later.


judged by patriarchal assumptions or by the repercussions that would occur if these desires were revealed. Although Rivière mainly addresses femininity, her view of the gender mask is useful, as it explains how ideals of patriarchal femininity and masculinity are constituted by features that are further shaped by sexual experiences. These features are reflected through clothes, mannerisms, or the (in)capability of having particular (sexual) experiences within patriarchal relations.

Rivière’s study supports a particular period and context, namely, a type of intellectual/working woman derived from the early twentieth-century European suffrage movement, who overtly expresses a desire to acquire male privileges through non-conventional means. However, it also underlines two key features that can be explored through an analysis of Gabriela. First, it acts as a starting point to consider women’s fulfilment beyond motherhood, domesticity and marriage, and it aids in acknowledging women’s right to work or to be a property owner. Second, it highlights the prevailing need to explore women’s desire for further sexual experiences and gratification, confronting unresolved taboos within patriarchal contexts.

Women living within patriarchal systems, such as Gabriela, wear symbolic masks to tackle the anxiety produced by a key feature of their femininities: the wish to overtly follow their sex drive without any guilt. This does not mean that women exclusively wish for patriarchal masculinity or male sexuality. Instead, it signifies that women within patriarchy can also employ unrestrained and diverse methods to rediscover their sexualities and, therefore, create femininities that undermine heteronormativity. Thus, this paper explores how a masquerade can be cinematically assembled under codes of traditional feminine identity and postfeminist beliefs, and then deconstructed — from the multiple and curious types of masks that can emerge in real life. The wearing of a mask reveals crises, but at the same time, it provides the mechanisms to structure female subjectivity. This is not reduced to a simple compliance with patriarchal desires, but it manifests itself by creating alternative modes where Gabriela can genuinely acknowledge her subjectivity even if it only happens at the end of the film.

Through the sexuality of the main character, La vida brings to the fore how sexual freedom and the quest for further sexual pleasure abolishes the traditional feminine mask in patriarchy: that of the chaste, ‘virginal’, and sexually passive woman. This mask hides the female sex drive and alludes to representations of women who have sex exclusively within the sanctity of marriage. Gabriela is first introduced as a woman whose sexuality and sexual experiences are defined by patriarchal marriage, so she wears the mask of the archetypal mother and monogamous woman. However, these gendered codes are soon subverted. Gabriela reveals her dissatisfaction to her colleague and friend Luisa (Patricia Castañeda): her concurrent social roles of wife, mother,  

7 Ibid., p. 177.
and businesswoman are overwhelming, she has not achieved her clearly outlined life goals, and she seeks sexual pleasure. Paraphrasing Rivière’s words on the masquerade, certain reactions in a woman’s life show that stability is not as perfect as it appears.\(^8\) The dichotomy between reality and dreams unleashes Gabriela’s desire to perform acute changes to her identity and sexual experiences by impersonating Luisa. Gabriela believes she will resolve these issues by pretending to be as open-minded, single, and sexually liberated as Luisa is, when in fact this augments her sense of crisis and vulnerability. Consequently, a clash of interests and personalities arises between Gabriela and Luisa, and this leads the former towards extramarital experiences which forces her to face her fears, impulses, consequences, and ultimately, her real self. As will be explored below, female sexuality and desire threaten patriarchy through the construction of female subjectivity, prioritizing choice beyond moral norms, acknowledging the female libido’s free expression and existence, and that sex is not restricted by marital bonds.

Amongst the plentiful examples that Magnolia Aristizábal outlines when examining generalized preconceptions about the ideal education of women in Colombia, it is implied that a domestic-centred life would fulfil women, in conjunction with conjugal, filial, and maternal care.\(^9\) However, according to Gert Hekma and Alain Giami, it is during the long-term development that started at the end of the nineteenth century, and that broke out in the late 1960s, that women concluded female fulfilment could be understood and felt differently.\(^10\) Sexuality politicized private and everyday life, challenged subjectivities, and led to a search for ‘greater freedom and extended agency for individuals.’\(^11\) Overall, \textit{La vida} shows Gabriela in family situations where she seems to embody patriarchal archetypes, yet she contradicts these by expressing indifference as a mother or wife. Gabriela’s life is masked and unfulfilled. She rejects ‘the ideal woman’ through silence and gestures that suggest her sense of disturbance or disengagement with the domestic sphere. The opening sequence, which portrays Gabriela’s day-to-day activities in contact with her children and husband, suggests a first subversion to the protagonist’s mask. The techniques employed by Borda — trivial dialogue, fast-paced scene-cuts, the incessant sound of a ticking-clock, and satirical extradiegetic music in the background — suggest that Gabriela’s behaviour does not reflect traditional expectations. In particular, the frontal medium shot framing Gabriela’s face from inside an empty fridge accentuates the chaotic and empty life she is trapped in. Her

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 174.
\(^11\) Ibid., pp. 1–3.
actions are represented as shallow responses to each family member, reflecting her lack of control of domestic matters, and they explain (only with the progress of the film) that she wishes to focus her attention on something else: her sexual desire. When the sequence ends and when everyone has gone, Gabriela is framed at the door — doomed to live in a patriarchal cage.

Gabriela’s dissatisfaction is also displayed at work. Arriving late, she comes across Luisa inside the lift where both her frustration and desire manifest simultaneously. In line with Simone de Beauvoir who asserts that the emancipated woman is both active and keen to reject an imposed patriarchal docility, it can be claimed that Gabriela’s secret desire to be a sexually free woman first comes to light through this encounter. Tilting from Luisa’s legs up to her seductive gesture, the camera frames her as the *femme fatale* in both the film and in Gabriela’s life. Pausing at Luisa’s face, the viewer perceives Gabriela exhibiting expressions of boredom whilst standing behind Luisa. The brief, cogent and imperative double-meaning of Luisa’s words explain why Gabriela sees Luisa as an antithesis to herself and an inspiration to redefine her meaning of sexual pleasure — as Luisa tells Gabriela ‘¡Échese un polvo!’

Luisa is Gabriela’s subordinate at work, but she embodies female power due to her self-confidence and her liberated personality. Luisa becomes the stimulus and obsession (and to a certain extent, the fantasy) for Gabriela to become a transgressive woman.

In this way, Gabriela chooses to fulfil her sex drive through personal fantasies that, based on patriarchal terms, offer a disruptive quest of further pleasures. Only as the film progresses does the viewer understand that Gabriela’s cry of frustration goes beyond the private and public spheres. Gabriela sees the need for a fundamental shift in social order to change her life in line with Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell’s conclusions on women’s sexual revolution. Gabriela pleads to be removed from her static routine and submerged into the life of a sexually independent woman. Subsequent scenes at the park walking with Luisa and at the office when they return demonstrate the main reason why Gabriela wants to abolish the masquerade she has worn. While at the park, she tells Luisa about a list of dreams she has kept for years, including fantasies of a sexual nature. The structures of fantasy are characterized, according to Linda Williams, ‘by the prolongation of desire, and by the lack of fixed position with respect to the objects and events fantasized.’ In this sense, Gabriela wishes to satisfy her desires or to live a type of pleasure she has lacked — this is primarily represented by the idea of an affair, something she has never experienced. As revealed in the film through a flash-forward of Gabriela’s imagination,

---

13 ‘Get laid!’ All translations are my own.
her sexual fantasies involve having sex with a stranger, feeling attracted to a builder, or engaging in sadomasochism. Later at work, she explains to Luisa that she does not want to be responsible for anyone nor belong to anyone. Lastly, Gabriela asks Luisa how it feels to be sexually involved with married or lower-class men. All of these occurrences become markers of Gabriela’s curiosity, as well as the prelude to her search for extramarital pleasure.

Although Gabriela initially flaunts that her marriage would not collapse because she and her husband have a good sex life, the closing sequence of the film stresses that something has not been right for a long time. Two key events allow Gabriela to fulfil the fantasy of having sex with a stranger. One afternoon, Gabriela decides to chase after Luisa, who is with an unknown man, and ends up peeping through the secret doors of a city motel in order to observe them. Gabriela’s curiosity demonstrates her restrained sexual appetite and the extramarital sexual interest, whilst the labyrinth-like aisles and a point-of-view shot emphasize her libidinal interest and gaze. At their workplace, Gabriela answers Luisa’s phone in her absence and decides to impersonate Luisa, something she repeats in person on two occasions. On the one hand, this impersonation anticipates a personality conflict and the need to disguise her desire for change, and her fear of being judged due to these behaviours. Interestingly, on the other hand, this action foreshadows the subsequent events that will re-signify Gabriela’s gender identity. Judith Butler argues that the production of gender through performative acts, gestures and enactments can be understood as ‘fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.’ Furthermore, in her use of Esther Newton’s theory to understand gender impersonation, Butler comments that ‘the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place.’ That is, the fact of construing genders as neither true nor false, but rather as a way to mock the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity, grasps the form as an illusion or a personification, and the substance as the alternative constructs of gender.

Butler’s appropriation of Newton’s theory is useful in examining the complexity established between Gabriela’s ‘original’ and ‘imitated’ female identities, although Newton addresses how gender significations can be subverted in the context of drag. The phone call Gabriela takes as ‘Luisa’ activates her need to be another ‘self’ and gives her licence to speak, act, and look different. This suggests that Gabriela wishes to reshape her gender identity

16 In the last two minutes of the film, Gabriela confronts Pablo by saying, ‘el problema viene de atrás, tú lo sabes.’ [This has been a long-standing problem, you know that].
17 In Colombia, a ‘motel’ is a place where people pay for a short stay exclusively to have sex.
19 Ibid., p. 174.
by embodying the *femme fatale* that Luisa seems to be and thereby mock the ‘ideal woman’ that Gabriela embodies. Over the phone, Gabriela agrees to a mysterious encounter where she meets the attractive, young, and bisexual Mario (Jean-Paul Leroux). However, what she expects to be a fleeting sexual encounter results in a sexually liberating therapy session that involves group intimacy with people of the same sex. Gabriela’s reaction reveals she desires only heterosexual and extramarital sex for pleasure. Eventually, she reveals her identity to Mario and that she wishes to cast off the woman she has been, at least for a while.

Butler writes that ‘[a]ccording to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification.’\(^{21}\) In this sense, as Gabriela wants to find herself with further clarity, her choice is to reconstruct her subjectivity by transcending her initial attempt at securing her desired affair, whilst hiding behind a second mask: a seemingly planned impersonation of Luisa. When Mario invites Gabriela to a club, she gets rid of her first mask by changing her personal style and exploring her gender identity performatively whilst incarnating ‘Luisa’ as she imagines her. Through out of character behaviour and appearance (she wears a wig and more make-up than usual, changes her tone of voice and wears accessories that satirize her attempt at seduction), Gabriela entices a powerful mafia-type man, Alejandro (Jimmy Vásquez), who eventually becomes obsessed with her. As he approaches her, she restates her new identity and receives a tablet he puts in her mouth, willing to enjoy the night in such terms. However, when Gabriela runs into a neighbour, she decides to run away. Under the drug’s effects, she ends up alone in an unknown drug-fuelled place. Half-conscious, Gabriela falls asleep whilst witnessing someone sexually assaulting an unconscious woman. When Gabriela wakes up the next morning and sees her trousers unzipped, she assumes she has been sexually abused.

At work the next day, Luisa discovers that Gabriela impersonated her. Influenced by patriarchal expectations, Gabriela fears the consequences of becoming pregnant with an unknown man’s child, contracting AIDS or another STI (her mental blackout does not allow her to remember what exactly happened). Nevertheless, she ignores the fundamental and deeper effects of the impersonation on her identity. As Butler asserts, ‘[c]onsider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an “act”, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.’\(^{22}\) Impersonating Luisa creates a tension between Gabriela’s need for further emancipation and her patriarchal role, but it also fosters a conscious way to transgress her subjectivity, redefining the postfeminist woman she has been. Even though Gabriela claims to ignore who she is, justifying her acts as Luisa’s fault stating ‘yo no era yo, yo era otra, yo...

---

21 Butler, p. 173.
22 Ibid., p. 177.
era usted... entonces, ¿cómo quería que actuara?’, Gabriela has embarked on a complex path as a result of supplanting Luisa, but more importantly, moving away from her past self.23

Later in the film, a seemingly concerned Luisa addresses Gabriela, implying a new process of female signification and a shift of roles: ‘como anda de mujer fatal, con múltiples personalidades y en crisis con todas. ¡Ya quisiera yo tener todo lo que usted tiene!’24 Following Butler’s argument, it can be claimed that these personality displacements actually embody ‘a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization [...of female subjectivities and sexualities, depriving the] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities.’25 Worried about having an STI, Gabriela avoids having sex with Pablo, thereby leaving aside her chief sexual desire. Her personal quest has sown seeds of chaos and given a starring role to Luisa, both at work and in Gabriela’s family. Luisa not only achieves the vice-presidency promotion that Gabriela once envisioned, but she is later shown to be close to Gabriela’s daughter and intimate with Pablo. What started as a sexual fantasy causes a self-reflective process that ultimately creates the cinematic representation of an alternative female subjectivity, albeit with its limitations. On the one hand, after Gabriela discovers that she does not have an STI, she decides to get back to ‘a normal life’ and ask for Pablo’s forgiveness. On the other hand, Luisa’s personality becomes regretful and she confesses she had sex with Pablo the night before, a fact that affects Gabriela’s new resolution.

Despite the remorse both characters feel, Borda achieves a disruptive and interesting end for both women’s narratives: the depiction of two women who choose to be aware of their inner voice and desires, and who respond to those impulses through their sex life in varying ways. Beyond moral norms, Borda’s close-ups allow the viewer to see that Gabriela reacts keenly to her bodily needs even with conflicted emotions, and that Luisa pays close attention to her drive when interacting with Pablo the night they have sex. Near the end of the film, an intense but brief discussion between Luisa, Alejandro, Pablo and Gabriela acts as a catalyst for these two women. The unstable camera moving from one character to the other highlights the chaos. Firstly, Luisa laughs at the situation in which they are in, acknowledging and declaring that she is not the issue in question and decides to leave. Secondly, Gabriela understands and stresses when talking to Pablo that ‘the problem’ was nothing new, revealing how the type of woman she was before was tiring and boring (as her company’s name always implied). Although Pablo asserts that life was real before her crisis, Gabriela contributes to the film’s decisive ending by affirming that life has only just started for her, as her redefined subjectivity suggests that her own needs are her priority.

23 ‘I wasn’t myself, I was somebody else, I was you... How would you expect me to behave?’ [My emphasis].
24 ‘You act like you’re a femme fatale, with multiple personality disorder and in crisis mode all the time. I wish I had everything you have!’
25 Butler, p. 175.
In line with Samantha Lindop’s alternative analysis of the importance of the \textit{femme fatale}'s subjectivity in \textit{Born to Kill} (Robert Wise, 1947), it can be stated that \textit{La vida} challenges patriarchal assumptions ‘especially in relation to [...] female sexuality, emotional context, and motivation.’\textsuperscript{26} Although \textit{La vida} is not a \textit{noir} film, and it is problematic that both Gabriela and Luisa still enact heteronormative depictions of sex and male fantasies, these women display disruptive characteristics that signal female autonomy and non-romanticized views of female desire that alter oppressive discourses of the classic archetype of the \textit{femme fatale}. These two characters may not be postmodern psychotic killers or classic frivolous women in \textit{noir} films.\textsuperscript{27} Nonetheless, they are a mix of desire, excess and spectacle that challenge phallocentric discourses in cinema through their levels of power and quest for sexual freedom, and most importantly, whose storylines do not conclude in patriarchal punishment or redemption. Even though the patriarchal context in which Gabriela lives is constantly attempting to punish those who deviate from norms, there are loose ends that have been left intentionally by Borda and that succeed as a successful effort of displaying female narrative agency, with characters that act as sexual subjects during the course of the film.

As Giami and Massimo Perinelli claim, and as \textit{La vida} exemplifies through female representation, sexuality can be a positive field of liberation that transforms perspectives on how women seek pleasure, demonstrating drastic social changes regarding female sexuality, and that are not strictly linked to oppression.\textsuperscript{28} By exploring female desire and sexual freedom through the film’s narrative, Borda’s representation of Gabriela demonstrates a desire to abolish the heteropatriarchal masquerades of women, without limiting their experiences of heteropatriarchal expectations. Through Rivière’s work, one could also determine that Gabriela’s quest goes beyond the desire explored in this paper: that of a potential queer path, acknowledging her hidden desire for women (or for Luisa). In conclusion, \textit{La vida} succeeds in defying heteronormative moulds by providing a fundamental twist on traditional concepts of female desire, and how these ideas can be cinematically portrayed and challenged. More interestingly, the film makes a significant statement about female freedom, visibility and ownership through a female lens, a statement that has continued in early twenty-first century Colombian cinema.

\textsuperscript{26} Samantha Lindop, ‘Female Subjectivity, Sexuality, and the Femme Fatale in \textit{Born to Kill},’ \textit{Quarterly Review of Film and Video}, 33, 4 (2016), 322–31 (p. 329).

\textsuperscript{27} For further details, see Kate Stables, ‘The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the \textit{Femme Fatale} in 90s Cinema’, in \textit{Women in Film Noir}, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 164–82.

The Camp and the Dandy: 
Class, Sexuality, and Desire in 
Gil de Biedma’s Diaries
Álvaro González Montero
University of Leeds

Abstract. This paper analyses how homosexual desire is represented in Jaime Gil de Biedma’s Diarios 1956–1985, the complete edition of his personal diaries, by exploring its connections to cultural, historical, and social notions about homosexuality in Spain. Gil de Biedma (1929–1990) was an influential Spanish poet whose diaries represent an example of the finest autobiographical literature. This is a rare case of a Spanish author who provides a complex picture of what it was to be a gay intellectual in Spain during Francoism through life-writing. By close reading a selection of fragments of the author’s diaries, this study exposes the connections between class, sexuality, and desire in the author’s autobiographical writing. This paper claims that in the nearly thirty years that his diaries span, Gil de Biedma’s strategies of representation of his sexuality undergo several changes, from a fascination with the lower classes to an ironic, camp detachment with life. These shifts of the object of desire are part of trends within the male, homosexual community in Spain throughout the twentieth century. I argue that although those strategies of representation were key for gay individuals to build their identity in Spain at the time, the freedom to change and experiment is linked to the author’s class privilege. This study shows that Gil de Biedma’s position in society allowed him to have the time to explore and perform different models of sexual resistance in his life and literary works.

Jaime Gil de Biedma is one of Spain’s most acclaimed poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Although his literary production was brief — he stopped writing poetry in 1964, having decided he no longer had anything worth saying — Gil de Biedma was widely respected by the younger literary generations at the time. The Spanish literary magazine Litoral published a full number in homage to Gil de Biedma in 1985, including pieces by several reputed writers and poets, ‘friends and travel companions’.1 They rallied around the Barcelonan author to provide a new edition of his best poetry and an analysis of his lyrical creation. The focus on Gil de Biedma’s lyrical work has been common

in Hispanic studies — partly because Gil de Biedma himself was not very comfortable using labels to (de)scribe his own desires. This lyrical approach, still seen in contemporary authors such as Payeras Grau, is key to exploring the author’s main literary themes, the passing of time and sexual ambiguity, both of which play an important role in his life-writing. This paper complicates the relevance of Gil de Biedma’s poetical work by exploring the importance of the author’s diary craft through a particular focus on sections referring to sexuality and desire. This research analyses how homosexual desire is represented in his Diario del artista en 1956 and explores its connections to cultural, historical, and social notions about homosexuality in Spain.

Homosentimentality and Masculinity

Gil de Biedma worked on his diaries throughout his life in an attempt to train his writing craft and to ‘impose moral categories unto himself’. This notion of writing as an ethical exercise unfolds in the diaries in several different and often overlapping ways. References are made to his relationship with his family (at times strained, particularly with respect to his parents), to his career, and to his sexuality, the last of which plays a main role in the diaries. To analyse the author’s exploration of sexuality in his youth during his sojourn in Manila and his subsequent return to Spain, it is first necessary to clarify and interconnect both notions of sexuality and gender. R.W. Connell argues that gender is an agent by which different social practices are arranged. Gender is an internally complex process and structure, with several connections to other areas of the self. Richmond Ellis has argued that Gil de Biedma explores his sexuality somewhat radically in the writing of his diaries, occupying what might be construed as a progressive position. The author’s view on gender, however, remains traditional. Gil de Biedma considered himself a ‘homosentimental’ person, seemingly giving importance to affection over sexual attraction. Given this very particular blend of affection, sex, and his own masculine self, the author demonstrates Connell’s postulate that masculinity is not just a homogeneous concept that can be applied equally to any man. Instead, it is flexible, adaptable, and malleable.

According to Connell, masculinities ‘come into existence as people act[,] they are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given

---

2 María Payeras Grau, “La vida que yo viví en sus versos”: Los poetas de “la otra sentimentalidad” en diálogo con Jaime Gil de Biedma, Olivar (La Plata), 31, 20 (2020), e075-e075 <https://doi.org/10.24215/18524478e075>.
5 Connell, Masculinities.
social setting’, showing the strong link between socioeconomic background and gender. Gil de Biedma’s resources and strategies were of course characteristic of any bourgeois Spanish man of his era. He went to a good university to read law, often the preferred first choice for men at the time, and attempted to pursue a diplomatic career, albeit unsuccessfully. Although his education was excellent, befitting his family’s social background, he did not develop a love for literature until the end of his teens. Soon after he finished his higher education, he was offered an executive position in the Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas (General Company of Tobacco of the Philippines), the familial enterprise, in a classic example of paternal nepotism. To use contemporary terms, Gil de Biedma was imbued in upper-class, male privilege from the moment he was born. Indeed, with the exception of his sexuality, he was a man who generally behaved in line with the societal expectations of his time. He had some sexual encounters with women in his adult life, for instance during his brief stay in Hong Kong, and in his youth, as he explains in his correspondence. It might be considered that Gil de Biedma’s sexuality changed the course of his otherwise plain, bourgeois life. He realized in his youth that women could not provide the ‘mood’ that he would look for in a partner, as he considered himself homosentimental. In fact, he made it all sound like a conscious choice, to the extent of asserting: ‘decidí en toda deliberación pasarme al bando homosexual’. Both concepts — mood and deliberation — must be contextualized within the era that Gil de Biedma lived in and his literary influences, which had a strong impact on his self-understanding.

Diary of a Spanish Dandy

In his book *De Sodoma a Chueca*, Alberto Mira deconstructs the idea of a univocal gay sexuality in Spanish culture, with the principal objective of analysing the cultural discourse around homosexuality in Spain’s recent history. Discourse is comprised of both representation and expression, which are key to the analysis of Gil de Biedma’s identity in this paper. Rejecting any essentialist claims, Mira identifies three ‘models of resistance’ in Spanish homosexual culture. These models are related both to the way in which homosexuals give sense to their lives and to three parallel homophobic models of representation. They are malditista (decadentist, oriented towards the marginal side of society), homophile (aiming towards a normalization of homosexuality), and camp (an

---

8 Ibid., p. 12.
9 Gil de Biedma and Jaume, p. 152.
12 Ibid., p. 159. ‘I deliberately decided to swap to the homosexual side’.
13 Alberto Mira, *De Sodoma a Chueca: Una historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España en el siglo XX* (Barcelona: Egales, 2004), p. 27.
ironic perspective that questions the importance of moral imperatives and social structures). In the life and work of Gil de Biedma it is possible to find a mixture of those three perspectives, with a tendency for camp over the other two, especially in his maturity. The author’s understanding of his sexuality is modulated by his adherence or refusal of these three general trends. Social class plays an important role here: these models of resistance were likely to take place in a certain social sphere, the bourgeoisie, which would have been the one with the capacity to create such artistic resistance. Social commitment is one of the characteristics of the author’s literary generation, the Generación del 50 (also called the School of Barcelona). This stems from ‘an ability to oppose the class they belong to by birth’.\textsuperscript{14} The aforementioned models are therefore helpful in understanding the way that cultural and social influences interact with one another. As such, this research will apply these models to Gil de Biedma’s sexual identity.

As aforementioned, Gil de Biedma’s period in Manila mainly involved an active exploration of his sexuality. His style of youth is sexually explicit and clear. The author does not employ his characteristic poetical ambiguity here: the first chapter of Diario del artista en 1956 is a celebration of the author’s excesses during his youth.\textsuperscript{15} Gil de Biedma starts his diary the night before his first trip to Manila in January 1956, narrating his journey. On the first night, he already shows an inclination for a decadent lifestyle: ‘Todavía de resaca. Los amigos se dan el gusto malévolo de contarme lo que hice y dije durante los prolongados lapsos de tiempo de los que no guardo recuerdo. Todos coinciden en que disparaté de lo lindo’.\textsuperscript{16}

Here Gil de Biedma sets the tone for his diary: he wants to explore a side of his life outside of bourgeois conventions. This decision falls in line with the author’s political beliefs and with those of his generation. The author’s hedonism and penchant for excess will be a recurrent theme, not only in this diary, but throughout his life. Such a life of pleasure is, furthermore, at odds with his upper-class background and his job — hence why it was so appealing. For instance, Gil de Biedma finds a certain poetic quality in the darker, dirtier corners of the city: ‘lo delicioso es que el cubo mediado con orines, el olor a zotal y el tapete pegajoso de la mesa en la cantina participan de esa calidad paradisíaca del paisaje’.\textsuperscript{17} In his younger years, Gil de Biedma exhibits a willingness to explore the underside of society, finding beauty in the contrast to his bourgeois background; it is Gil de Biedma’s personal rebellion against his social milieu. The author’s literary influences at the time, mainly French

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Gil de Biedma and Jaume, \textit{Diarios: 1956–1985}, p. 71. ‘Still hungover. My friends take the evil pleasure of telling me what I did and said during the long periods of time of which I keep no memory. Everybody agrees that I talked plenty of nonsense.’
\item[17] Ibid., p. 73. ‘[W]hat is delightful is that the bucket full of urine, the smell of disinfectant and the sticky tablecloth on the canteen’s table are all part of the paradise-like quality of the landscape.’
\end{footnotes}
symbolist poets such as Baudelaire (whom he quotes at the beginning of his first diary), are a sign of his tendency for romanticism. Although Gil de Biedma’s style was strongly influenced by English literature, his chosen themes (poverty, brothels, the exotic) are connected to Spanish romanticism. Fitting with the model Mira calls ‘malditista’, we can see ‘an element of romantic rebellion’ in the themes of Gil de Biedma’s diary.18

For a gay person, to be maldito or malditista implies a refusal to ‘wash the sin’ of homosexuality.19 The main purpose of the maldito is to live in the fringes of society, to avoid being integrated in bourgeois society (although, paradoxically, Gil de Biedma was very well integrated into this social sphere), which itself rejects the idea of homosexuality. The objective is to reject the current values and to experiment with the underside of society: drugs, sex, and crime. This may be coupled, as in the case of Jaime Gil de Biedma, with a dandy attitude. Dandyism is an outlook that revolves around ‘the development of individualism’.20 The focus is on image and appearance, on the masks that individuals show the world. This is combined with a feeling of superiority and a carpe diem approach to life. The concept of dandyism, popularized by Oscar Wilde, is connected to social class — it seems as if it is a privilege of the upper-classes to be able to become a dandy.21

Gil de Biedma’s fascination with the marginal side of society is explored in depth in ‘Las islas de Circe’, the first chapter of Diario del artista en 1956. Here the author expresses a candid enthusiasm, never exempt of irony. He struggled with these marginal experiences and used the diary to express his frustration: ‘me he quitado el mal sabor de boca’.22 There is an ambivalence, a certain detachment that will always influence Gil de Biedma’s malditismo — this will become more evident in later diaries, where his diaristic writing will evolve towards other ways of conceptualizing homosexuality. The author is not usually considered maldito in literary circles. Indeed, he even admits not being into malditismo, when referring to a tryst he and his friend Juan Goytisolo had with a shoe shiner in Barcelona.23 Furthermore, earlier in his diaries and in reference to Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, Gil de Biedma criticizes the lack of irony and excess of truculence in the book — in opposition to that malditista pose, Gil de Biedma opts for an ironic detachment, as shall be explored below.24

However, despite his dislike for the contrived pose of the maldito, the author describes similar experiences in his first diary. For instance, one of the main encounters with the social underside takes place in a brothel in Manila, at the beginning of the author’s stay. Gil de Biedma starts by reflecting on the concept

18 Mira, p. 115.
19 Ibid., p. 116.
20 Ibid., p. 121.
21 Ibid., p. 122.
23 Ibid., p. 236.
24 Ibid., p. 139.
of temptation, after which a taxi driver takes him to a sordid brothel full of boys
and girls. He spends no more than five minutes there, since the boy he was
given was but ‘un pobre grumete castigado a remar’. 25 This is likely the author’s
attempt at subjectivizing the abhorrent scene in front of his eyes. He frames it in
relation to a literary and camp trope that could fit with his intellectual identity.
In the fragment, Gil de Biedma reminisces about Spanish male prostitutes, who
he seems to think give better value for money. The author finds the experience
very disturbing, and rightly so: he did not agree with sleeping with someone
underage. 26 This passage, which has received a lot of media attention in recent
times, 27 is considered one of the darkest ones in the life of Gil de Biedma,
because of the events that took place, which are indeed problematic. Although
execrable in any case, it would be unfair to overlook how much the author is
at pains to prove that he disapproved of relationships with underage people:
‘[L]os chiquillos no me gustan. A cada cual, lo suyo: el colegial con el colegial, el
adolescente con su amigo íntimo, [...] y el hombre joven con el hombre joven’. 28

Even if controversial, I would like to suggest that this passage is key to
understanding Gil de Biedma’s model of homosexual desire. His malditismo
is apparent in the topic of choice, in the way he explores these early, marginal
experiences. He does not fully engage with them, detaching himself and being
critical about them. However, there is still a part of him who would happily go
for a Spanish prostitute. Yes, his character reflects a certain marginality, but
one that is coupled with a sense of morality: no underage, forced children. Gil
de Biedma’s style in this excerpt can be understood both in the realm of his
experimentation, but also in the use of the diaries as a tool to impose certain
moral standards upon himself. 29 The author uses the diaries to erase things
from his mind. 30 The process of recording and narrating his sexual experiences
can be interpreted as a way of dealing with both the positive and negative sides
of those encounters, finding ways to do what is morally correct. Gil de Biedma’s
interest in morality (a rather bourgeois concept) clashes with this model of
malditismo, which is, at least superficially, an antibourgeois attitude, hence why
in his middle age he is quick to reject that fascination for the marginal, turning
instead to a more ironic, yet deeper and more sophisticated, approach to the gay,
the colonized, the Other.

25 Ibid., p. 97. ‘[A] poor shipboy, punished to row’.
26 Ibid., p. 98.
27 Manuel Morale s, ‘García Montero defiende la inclusión del legado de Gil de Biedma en el
la-inclusion-del-legado-de-gil-de-biedma-en-el-cervantes.html> [accessed 15 June 2021]
28 Gil de Biedma and Jaume, Diarios: 1956–1985, p. 98. ‘I don’t like little boys. To each, their own: the
schoolboy with the schoolboy, the teenager with his intimate friend, [...] and the young man with the
young man.’
29 Ibid., p. 153.
30 Ibid., p. 110.
The content spanning the second chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956* to the end of the diary suggests a decrease in sexual interest on the author’s part. This stems mainly from his return from the Philippines to Spain and his subsequent tuberculosis. This change of interests and outlook was already taking place in Manila. It was also influenced by his move back to Spain; since the process of migration often triggers changes in the perception of gender and masculinity, as González-Allende posits in his study on migration and masculinity. The aforementioned process has a wide-ranging impact that goes beyond the scope of this paper, but which opens up very interesting lines of research. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to explore the change from that young *malditismo* in the Philippines (though full of doubts and irony) to the mature swing between respectability and camp in Gil de Biedma’s diaries.

Gil de Biedma never promoted a passionate defence of homosexuality. References to homosexuality, both in his diaries and interviews, are clear and straightforward, yet they rarely involve an argument for or against it. Gil de Biedma shows a somewhat arrogant attitude whereby he chooses to enjoy his sexuality in whichever way he wants, without really explaining why, in line with his dandy quality. This is especially evident in his younger years. His first letter to Carlos Barral, the famous editor and lifelong friend of Gil de Biedma, starts with the following lines: ‘¿Sabes que ya casi deseo empicorotarme? *Quand je n’aime rien, je ne suis rien*’. Empicorotarme is an Asturian verb, the Spanish version would be *empingorotarme*, meaning to rise up — a connection between an erection and love (what Gil de Biedma would describe as an instance of Aphrodite Pandemos, the author’s take on the Greek tradition of sexual, romantic love). In another letter to Carlos Barral, Gil de Biedma mentions a conversation between José Agustín Goytisolo and Alberto Oliart, a writer friend of Jaime Gil de Biedma, about the author’s sexuality. This does not seem to concern the author, although he expects a more judgemental reaction from Alberto Oliart, who just answered to the effect of ‘do as you wish, just be careful’.

Such a natural way of presenting his sexuality is common in Gil de Biedma’s diaries, although this happy-go-lucky attitude will give way, in the author’s elderly years, to the opposite: a fear of being outed, in modern parlance. In his youth, however, there is no clear reference to any type of struggle or discrimination, although there is no doubt this was pervasive in the 1950s Spanish society. It is possible to glean the impact of social pressure when we analyse Gil de Biedma’s attitudes a little closer; indeed, it becomes apparent that the author does think very carefully about the ways he presents himself to society. His relationship with his parents is a good example of this

---

32 Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *El argumento de la obra*, p. 69. ‘Do you know I almost wish to score again? When I don’t love anything, I am nothing.’
33 Ibid., p. 69.
34 Ibid., p. 44.
social pressure. The references to his mother and father are scarce, but they do come up every so often. Generally, they are negative: they seem to exert a suffocating influence on Biedma. In the third chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956*, Gil de Biedma narrates an argument with his parents about a divergence of ideas about the Compañía de Tabacos. Gil de Biedma’s mother criticizes his ‘camaleonismo’, his ‘novelería’. The author explains that such chameleon-like adaptability is one of his most valued poetic qualities: the ability to absorb the surrounding culture. He displayed this in Oxford and in Manila. His parents dislike it: a subtle reference to a cosmopolitan sensitivity that is at odds with the respectability their son ought to display. Gil de Biedma points here to a fear of what they might be told — again a possible reference to the author’s secret sexuality. This illustrates that, even though the author adopts an arrogant, dandy attitude, he is more influenced by his social milieu than he would like; this has an unfortunate impact on his mental health. For example, it is around that time that Gil de Biedma starts to realize that he has a drinking problem. This happened after he crashed his father’s car against another vehicle, when he was taking a lover home. Overall, the social pressure described here does not prompt the author to a defence of homosexuality, following Mira’s homophile model, but rather to both a detachment and a criticism of social rules (following the camp model) and an attempt at being respectable and keeping an ambiguous appearance: a modern, twentieth century take on the dandy.

**Campying the Dandy**

Gil de Biedma provides an excellent definition of camp, a concept in which he was very interested. Camp has no straight translation into Spanish: *pluma* (literal translation: feather) might work occasionally, and Gil de Biedma uses it interchangeably on occasion. In Spanish, *pluma* is more related to physical effeminacy (acting and looking like the stereotypical feminine gender) and it lacks the reference to a certain gay culture the English has. For the author the idea of camp is wider than just the more physical idea of *pluma*. In 1978, Bruce Swansey and José Ramón Enríquez interviewed Gil de Biedma about the homosexual sensitivity of the Generación del 27. Nowhere in the interview does Gil de Biedma discuss his own experience; instead, he uses a full range of literary references, from Goethe to Lorca, from Susan Sontag to Christopher Isherwood, to explain the multiple facets of camp in Spanish literature. For Gil de Biedma, camp is ‘the author’s deliberate treatment of referential and thematic elements in his work [...] as mere formal categories [...] the author

---


36 Ibid., p. 235.

Ironically partakes of.

Gil de Biedma clearly distinguishes camp from homosexuality: although related, they do not always appear together, even though in the post-Stonewall era this became a common occurrence, according to Mira. The main point of camp for Gil de Biedma is the use of language and irony as a code that only those who know it (who understand it, entender being a Spanish shibboleth to ask if someone is gay) would understand. Gil de Biedma differentiates between camp and *pluma* — camp is a more general aesthetic whilst *pluma* would be ‘a deliberate projection, an ironic stylization of the queer’. The *pluma*, according to Gil de Biedma, is a way of communicating in the gay world, which involves a varied mix of people from different backgrounds with little in common but their sexual preference. *Pluma* is also loaded with provocation; it defies the straight world, it is but ‘a refined vendetta against all heterosexuals’. Gil de Biedma shows his camp in this conversation: his literary references are a sign to the initiated, i.e. to other gay people, yet he does not put it into words. Gil de Biedma’s references appear to operate on two levels, the open and the covert. One level reflects the openly social, where he might broach these issues ambiguously, thus avoiding any repercussions in his social, familial and work milieus. Secondly, there is the (supposedly) hidden gay level, which is by contrast sexually daring and open. The camp dandy quality of the author is what brings those two worlds together: his detachment and irony help to maintain his social position, whilst delivering a clear gay message to those acquainted with the conventions of camp. The question now arises: how is this camp quality reflected in Gil de Biedma’s diaries? Are Gil de Biedma’s camp characteristics a result of his class privilege, a message to his own class?

The three models analysed above, *malditista*, homophile and camp, constitute the social context for Gil de Biedma’s sexuality. They provide the theoretical basis to understand the author’s strategies of acceptance of his sexuality within his social context. The camp approach appears to be overarching in the author’s life and work, after a brief *malditista* period during his younger years. These three models of resistance are part of a wider gender and class picture, which are interrelated. Gil de Biedma’s upper-class masculinity is based on his economic privilege, allowing the author to have the time to create, explore and perform those models of resistance in his life and literature. Understanding the author’s privileged background provides nuance to his position about his own sexuality in his poetry and diaries. Jaime Gil de Biedma’s diaries present a chameleonic, multifaceted approach to the tension-ridden performance of masculine gender and queer desire in the Spanish intellectual bourgeoisie of the late 1950s.

---

38 Ibid., pp. 100–01.
39 Mira, p. 149.
40 Pérez Escohotado, p. 105.
41 Ibid., p. 105.
Longing for Life and Death: 
Eve’s Desires in Klopstock’s *Der Tod Adams* 
and Ewald’s *Adam og Ewa*

Sarah Fengler

*University of Oxford*

**Abstract.** In the Old Testament, Eve is Adam’s companion and seducer: a role which she is often reduced to in literary Bible reception. Nonetheless, some adaptations of Genesis do explore Eve’s inner life and her longings. This paper analyses the portrayal of Eve and her desires in the German tragedy *Der Tod Adams* (1757) by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and in the Danish tragedy *Adam og Ewa* (1769) by Johannes Ewald. Telling the story of Adam’s death long after the Fall, Klopstock ascribes a death wish to Eve rooted in her sense of belonging to Adam. The plot of Ewald’s tragedy, by contrast, takes place before the Fall and illustrates Eve’s longing for a life that cannot be satisfied by her present existence with Adam. That Klopstock and Ewald attribute contradictory desires to the Old Testament character is noteworthy, not least because Ewald was aware of Klopstock’s literary and theoretical works when writing *Adam og Ewa* and admired his biblical poetry in general. This paper argues that both Klopstock and Ewald, despite their differing portrayals of Eve, use the desires of the very first woman as a device to convey the Christian message of divine salvation. The varied literary interpretations of Eve shed light on the way biblical narratives were adapted for tragedy in the eighteenth century.

The role of the first woman’s inner life in the Fall of Man (Genesis 1–3) is a recurring theme in early modern literature. Inspired by John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667),¹ the German writer Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock wrote not only an epic poem on the Passion of Jesus, *Der Messias* (1748–1773, ‘The Messiah’), but also a tragedy, *Der Tod Adams* (1757, ‘The Death of Adam’), on the last hours of Adam’s life many years after the Fall. In the tragedy, Klopstock ascribes to Eve a desire for death, deeply rooted in her sense of belonging to Adam. The Danish writer Johannes Ewald was also familiar with *Paradise Lost* and knew Klopstock’s *Messias*. Unlike Klopstock, however, he dedicated his tragedy *Adam og Ewa* (1769, ‘Adam and Eve’) to the Fall itself and attributes to Eve a longing for life and knowledge that Adam cannot offer her.

The present paper argues that Klopstock’s and Ewald’s contradictory portrayals of Eve’s desires in *Der Tod Adams* and *Adam og Ewa* serve the same

---

purpose: to convey the theological concept of divine grace and redemption. The paper seeks not only to shed light on how the inner life of the biblical character was conceived in eighteenth-century tragedy, but also to highlight the enduring relevance of the Old Testament narrative in early modern Europe. The first section of this paper examines Klopstock’s tragedy and his depiction of Eve’s longing for death, followed by a section analysing Ewald’s tragedy and Eve’s longing for life. The findings of the two sections and their implications for further research are discussed in the conclusion.2

Eva’s Longing for Death in Klopstock’s Der Tod Adams

Klopstock’s first tragedy, Der Tod Adams, is closely linked with his epic poem Der Messias.3 At the time, Milton’s Paradise Lost had already established the genre of biblical epic in Western European literature, but dramatizations of biblical stories were rare.4 With the Messias, Klopstock sought to treat a subject even greater than that of Paradise Lost,5 which he, like Ewald, knew from Johann Jakob Bodmer’s German translation.6 Although the Messias is mainly based on the New Testament, it also contains many references to the Old Testament, including one to Adam’s death in the fourth canto.7 In Der Tod Adams, a three-act prose tragedy, Klopstock extends the story of Adam’s death from only one Old Testament verse (Genesis 5. 5) to about 30 pages.8

With the composition of Der Tod Adams, Klopstock follows his own poetical programme.9 In his treatise Von der heiligen Poesie (1755, ‘On Sacred Poetry’), originally the preface to the first volume of the Messias published in Copenhagen (cantos I–V), he states that literature may fill the gaps of

2 In this paper, the English spelling ‘Eve’ refers to the biblical character, while Klopstock’s and Ewald’s deviating spellings of the name refer either to Klopstock’s (‘Eva’) or to Ewald’s (‘Ewa’) respective depiction of the biblical character.
biblical stories if it is according to the rules of probability and serves the moral tenets of Revelation.\textsuperscript{10} Still, despite the expansion of the biblical narrative in \textit{Der Tod Adams}, Eva\textsuperscript{11} remains a minor character.\textsuperscript{12} In the \textit{Vorbericht}, the preface to the tragedy, Klopstock justifies having chosen Adam as the protagonist by comparing him with the heroes of classical tragedies.\textsuperscript{13} He does not say a word about Eva, and the first woman has her first appearance only in the final act.

Given the title of the tragedy, it is no surprise that Adam, his imminent death, and his inner life are central to the plot.\textsuperscript{14} However, Eva’s death is important to the plot as well, or at least its possibility. When Adam realizes that he will die soon, he wonders if this is also true for Eva, his beloved companion:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{ADAM} Die Mitgeschaffne! die Geliebteste unter den Geliebten, wird sie mit mir sterben? Du weißt es, und nur du, der den Fluch über uns aussprach!\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

By mentioning the curse, Adam alludes to the fact that God, before the Fall, threatened the pair with death should they eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2. 17). In \textit{Der Tod Adams}, the wording of the Luther Bible, ‘des Todes sterben’ (to die of death), is first repeated by Adam,\textsuperscript{16} then by the ‘Todesengel’,\textsuperscript{17} who announces that Adam and his descendants will die in different ways:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{DER TODESENGEL} Eh die Sonne den Cedernwald hinunter gestiegen ist; sollst du des Todes sterben! Einige deiner Nachkommen werden entschlummern; einige sterben: aber du sollst des Todes sterben!\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

However, the death angel does not explicitly mention the fate of Eva or the means and time of her death. The answer to Adam’s question remains thus unknown, but Eva’s death is introduced as a theme.

Indeed, Eva longs for death as soon as she learns of Adam’s fate. In a similar vein to Adam, she wonders if she, too, must die. Having been created together

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Klopstock uses the conventional German spelling of ‘Eve’, which is ‘Eva’.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, ‘Der Tod Adams’, in Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock: Biblische Dramen, ed. by Monika Lemmel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 3–28 (p. 5).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Strohschneider-Kohrs, ‘Klopstocks Drama ‘Der Tod Adams’’, p. 188.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Klopstock, ‘Der Tod Adams’, i. 4 (p. 12). ‘Adam: She who was created with me! The most beloved among all the beloved, will she die with me? You know it, and only you who has put the curse on us!’ All translations of \textit{Der Tod Adams} are mine.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., i. 3 (p. 11).
\item \textsuperscript{17} ‘Death angel’.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., i. 7 (p. 14). ‘Death angel: Before the sun has set by the cedar forest; you shall DIE OF DEATH! Some of your offspring will pass away; some die: but you shall DIE OF DEATH!’
\end{itemize}
with him — that is why Adam calls her his ‘Mitgeschaffne’\textsuperscript{19} — the prospect of dying together gives her solace:


It is noteworthy that Adam’s and Eva’s words carry different connotations: while Adam’s question is simply whether Eva will die with him, the way Eva frames her question expresses a strong desire to die with him.

This death wish arises not only from Eva’s sense of belonging to Adam, but also from her sense of inferiority to him. In the play’s final scene, Adam asks Eva to bless their children together. Eva, however, rejects Adam’s request and asks him, kneeling, to bless her too, instead of behaving like an equal:

\begin{itemize}
\item **Adam** Eva segne ihre Kinder mit mir! (Sie knien um ihn)
\item **Eva** (indem sie zuletzt auch niederkniert) Du mußt mich auch segnen, Adam!
\item **Adam** Ich soll Eva auch segnen? Da hast du meinen Segen: Komm mir eilend nach! Du wurdest bald nach mir geschaffen, du Mutter der Menschen! So müßtest du bald nach mir sterben. Hier ist mein Grab!
\item **Eva** Das waren Worte eines Engels, die du sprachst, o Adam!\textsuperscript{21}
\end{itemize}

When Adam blesses Eva and asks her to die shortly after him, he knows that the death angel did not mention the time of her death and therefore has an advance in knowledge. Eva is not aware of that, and she regards Adam’s words as angelic and accepts their authority: Adam’s confidence gives her solace.

Eva’s desire for death is even stronger than her sense of responsibility for the needs and wishes of her children. At one point, Adam asks Sunim, one of their children, to talk to Eva instead of Adam himself. Eva, on her part, sends Sunim away, claiming that the child no longer has a mother:

\begin{itemize}
\item **Adam** Geh zu deiner Mutter, mein Sohn! (Sunim geht zu Eva)
\item **Eva** Geh zu deinem Bruder Seth! Ach du hast keine Mutter mehr.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{19} The term ‘die Mitgeschaffne’ is used several times in Der Tod Adams. In the context of the tragedy, it can be translated as ‘she who was created together [with Adam]’.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., iii. 4 (p. 25). ‘Eva: Did the death angel not say my name together with your name? Oh, should I not die with you? That was always my refuge in my sorrowful hours, my only quiet consolation then was that I would die with you. I was created with Adam! But I am forsaken! Lonely me! Should I not die with you?’

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., iii. 4 (p. 27). ‘Adam: Eva bless her children with me! (They kneel around him) / Eva: (kneeling down at last) You must bless me too, Adam! / Adam: I shall bless Eva too? There you have my blessing: come follow me quickly! You were created just after me, mother of man! So you would have to die just after me! Here is my grave! / Eva: You spoke the words of an angel, oh Adam!’.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., iii. 4 (p. 26). ‘Adam: Go to your mother, my son! (Sunim goes to Eva) / Eva: Go to your brother Seth! Alas, you do not have a mother anymore.’.
Her reaction implies that she no longer feels able to fulfil her role as a mother and has lost interest in life. Adam is the one she belongs to, at least this is her own perception, and without him, she will be in an absent state of mind that is tantamount to death.

Whether Eva’s sense of belonging to Adam in Der Tod Adams stems from love, from fear of loneliness, or from the fact that she is his ‘Mitgeschaffne’ is open to interpretation. However, the function of her desire for death is linked to the Christian message of divine grace and salvation. Adam at one point refers to the Messiah and claims that his coming is the only reason why Adam can stand the thought of his own death:

\[
\text{Adam: Erbarmet euch meiner, meine Kinder, wenn ihr mein Grab seht, oder wenn ihr an mich denkt! [...] Denn Gott, der Mensch werden wird, die Hoffnung, die Wonne, der Retter des menschlichen Geschlechts hat sich meiner erbarмет! Sag ihnen: Ohne ihn, der kommen wird, wär ich den Schrecken meines Todes ganz unterlegen!} \]

Adam accepts God’s punishment in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. That is why his descendants, to quote the death angel, can simply die or pass away, while Adam himself still must die ‘of death’. Hence, his death is a late atonement for the Fall and leads to mercy. Klopstock’s interpretation of the death of the first man is evocative of the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of mankind: 24 he tells the story of Adam’s death through the lens of the New Testament and depicts Adam as a prefiguration of Jesus Christ, based on the concept of Christian typology. 25 Eva, not one of Adam’s descendants but his ‘Mitgeschaffne’, has a special status in this context: death, she believes, will relieve her from suffering, but the fact that she, unlike Adam, does not have to die ‘of death’ proves God’s mercy.

Ewa’s Longing for Life in Ewald’s Adam og Ewa

Ewald’s tragedy Adam og Ewa (1769) dramatizes the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise (Genesis 1–3), just like Milton’s Paradise Lost. 26 In the chronology of the Old Testament, the plot of Ewald’s play precedes that of Klopstock’s. The writers met only after the publication of Adam og Ewa, 27 but Ewald was familiar with Klopstock’s work. 28 When Adam og Ewa was published, the first fifteen

23 Ibid., ii. 8 (p. 22). ‘Adam: Have mercy on me, my children, when you see my grave or when you think of me! [...] For God, who will become man, hope, bliss, the saviour of mankind, has had mercy on me! Tell them: without him who will come, I would be completely defeated by the horrors of my death!’.
25 Ibid.
28 Ibid., p. 82; see also: Leopold Magon, Ein Jahrhundert geistiger und literarischer Beziehungen
cantos of the *Messias* had already been published, with the remaining five cantos following in 1773.\(^{29}\) Around 1776, Ewald even started to translate around 300 verses from the first canto into Danish.\(^{30}\) There is no evidence as to whether he knew *Der Tod Adams* as well, but the prerequisites were met: Ewald knew German and the play was translated into Danish in 1757.\(^{31}\)

*Adam og Ewa* is based on an ode that Ewald wrote for a competition for the best ode on a divine quality,\(^{32}\) organized by the Selskabet til de skønne og nyttige Videnskabers Forfremmelse (‘The Society for the Advancement of the Beautiful and Useful Sciences’) in 1764.\(^{33}\) He submitted his ode no later than 1765, and after its rejection he started to rewrite it in 1768 as a five-act alexandrine tragedy with cantos.\(^{34}\) The rewriting process was closely linked to Ewald’s reading in this time span: in the preface to his *Samtlige Skrifter* (‘Complete Works’) from 1780, he states explicitly that apart from Pierre Corneille’s *Trois discours sur le Poème dramatique* (1660, ‘Three Discourses on the Dramatic Poem’), the *Messias* served him as inspiration.\(^{35}\)

Despite the literary ties between Ewald’s and Klopstock’s work, the composition of *Adam og Ewa* is quite different from that of *Der Tod Adams*, as is the portrayal of Ewa’s\(^{36}\) inner life and her longings. In Ewald’s tragedy, set in the Garden of Eden, Ewa is the first human being to appear, and her very first words reveal that she suddenly feels a still-undefined desire: ‘Mig længes inderlig — men veed jeg selv hvorefter? — / Gud! — ’.\(^{37}\) The catalyst of her longing is a dream she had in the beginning of the tragedy, given to her by Satan.\(^{38}\) Together with the other ‘onde Aander’, he seeks to take revenge on God for his fondness of Adam and Ewa.\(^{40}\) Ewa’s exclamation ‘God’ suggests that her newly awakened desire is related to God, too, but it is not clear in what way.

\(^{29}\) Kohl, p. 69.


\(^{33}\) Möller, p. 64.

\(^{34}\) Sørensen, p. 31.


\(^{36}\) Ewald uses the spelling ‘Ewa’ for the biblical Eve.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., iv. (p. 216).

\(^{40}\) Ibid., (p. 145). ‘evil spirits’.
Initially, the object of her longing is unknown to Ewa, but she experiences it as something positive and describes it as ‘hellig Længsel’. Yet, she does not anticipate that this seemingly sacred desire comes with a test of obedience, as the angel Raphael states in her absence: ‘Lyd, Ewa, lyd din Gud! — / Nu gielder det — i Dag — at holde Prøven ud! — ’. The nature of this test is evident from the prohibition that is imposed later: on God’s behalf, Eloah, the highest angel, forbids Adam to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge and threatens him with death: ‘Da doer du Døden — ’. Ewald here quotes the same biblical passage as Klopstock (Genesis 2. 17).

Shortly thereafter, Ewa recalling her dream and suddenly believes the unknown object of her desire to be lost, even though she does not know about the prohibition yet:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ewa (aside)} & \quad \text{Jeg er ey stor som før.} \\
\text{Adam (som hører det)} & \quad \text{Hvad tabte du?} \\
\text{Ewa} & \quad \text{En Drøm.} \\
\text{Adam} & \quad \text{Da er du som du bør.} \quad \text{—}
\end{align*}
\]

Adam now tells her of the prohibition and believes that stating she has ‘only’ lost the tree and its fruit will give her solace: ‘Kun dette Træ — kun dette har du tabt. — / Kundskab paa got og ont — den Frugt af disse Greene — ’. He is the first one to mention what Ewa longs for, with neither him nor her knowing it yet: the forbidden fruit and the knowledge it has to offer.

When Ewa finally becomes aware of the object of her desire, she ponders on ‘hvorledes denne Frugt / Kan smages uden Synd’. However, she refuses to give in to her desire. Instead, she attempts to talk herself into believing that being with Adam is sufficient for her to be happy: ‘Adam ene giør Mandinden lykkelig! — ’. Nonetheless, when Satan approaches her and questions the prohibition imposed on Adam and Ewa, he convinces her to admit that she, in fact, is not happy. The forbidden fruit entails not only the risk of death, but also the possibility of happiness, which is decisive for Ewa: unlike Adam, she feels like a prisoner in the Garden of Eden and desires to know what the world outside is like.

---

41 Ibid., i. (p. 159), ‘sacred longing’.
42 Ibid., i. (p. 163), ‘Obey, Ewa, obey your God! Now it is time — today — to pass the test!’.
43 Ibid., ii. (p. 174), ‘Then you die death — ’.
44 Magon, p. 528.
45 Ewald, ‘Adam og Ewa’, ii. (p. 181). ‘Ewa (aside): I am not as great as before. / Adam (who hears it): What did you lose? — / Ewa: A dream. — / Adam: Then you are as you should be. — ’.
46 Ibid., ii. (p. 182). ‘Adam: Only this tree — only this one you have lost. — / Knowledge of good and evil — the fruit of these branches — ’.
47 Ibid., iv. (p. 222). ‘how this fruit / Can be tasted without sin’.
48 Ibid., iv. (p. 224). ‘Adam alone makes the woman happy!’.
49 Magon, p. 311.
50 Sørensen, p. 32.
51 Ibid.
It is only in the final act that Ewa confesses her longing to Adam and confronts him with her decision to eat the fruit. She desires knowledge of God, which includes both ‘at ligne Gud’ and to see God. To her, this is not opposed to praising him:

Ewa: Can knowledge do less? — / An evil that is seen can wisdom best prevent. — / [...]. And God! — then your blissful woman would / Look at him, whom she now blindly worships! — / Then I will see my God! — / And know the path to good, / And praise it! — / And then! — / Have joy! — Why do I not die?’.  

Ewa even accepts the risk of death for her desire: ‘Blind i en Evighed? — Ney! — bedre død i Hast!’. Although she is manipulated by Satan, Ewald presents her as more than equal to Adam: she asserts herself in their discussion and makes her own choice to indulge her own desire. Ewald thus endows Ewa’s actions with a psychological dimension, and her desire with a certain emancipatory power.

What, then, is the function of Ewa’s longing for life in Adam og Ewa? It is her desire that initiates the Fall and the expulsion from Paradise. However, the tragedy does not end with a catastrophe. Ewa and Adam eat the forbidden fruit, but owing to God’s grace, they do not die, or at least not yet. The highest angel Eloah now announces on God’s behalf that mankind is ‘bestemt til Evighed’, whereupon Adam and Ewa praise God as ‘Evig, evig gode Gud!’. Hence, divine grace and salvation are possible, even for Ewa, whose longings are contradictory to God’s will. Consequently, Ewa’s desires in Ewald’s tragedy emphasize the mercy of God, as he forgives her for her wrongdoings.

### Conclusion

At first glance, Klopstock’s and Ewald’s portrayals of Eve’s longings in Der Tod Adams and Adam og Ewa could not be more different: Klopstock’s Eva longs for death because of Adam, while Ewald’s Ewa longs for life and knowledge despite Adam. Eva wants to prevent herself from misery and hopes for solace, while solace is not enough for Ewa, she seeks happiness. Finally, Eva has a passive role

---

52 Ewald, ‘Adam og Ewa’, v. (p. 238). ‘to be equal to God’.
53 Ibid., v. (p. 240). ‘Ewa: Can knowledge do less? — / An evil that is seen can wisdom best prevent. — / [...]. And God! — then your blissful woman would / Look at him, whom she now blindly worships! — / Then I will see my God! — / And know the path to good, / And praise it! — / And then! — / Have joy! — Why do I not die?’.
55 Frandsen, p. 32.
56 Magon, p. 307.
57 Ibid., p. 309.
59 Ibid., v. (p. 265). ‘Eternally, eternally good God!’.
60 Sørensen, p. 31.
and does not have control of the fulfilment of her desires, while Ewa actively chooses to give in to her desire.

No matter what their Eves long for and why they long for it, though, Klopstock and Ewald agree on a crucial point: God grants salvation. Both their portrayals of Eve serve the purpose of conveying the Christian message of God’s mercy, only in different stages of her life: in Der Tod Adams, Eva’s longing for death demonstrates that she conceives death as a possibility of redemption from suffering. As Adam dies ‘of death’, Eva and their descendants can simply die or pass away, which proves God’s benevolence. Adam og Ewa conveys a similar message: God shows mercy to Adam and Ewa despite Ewa’s longing for life that is symbolized by the fruit, because God is eternally good. These rather untragic endings of Der Tod Adams and Adam og Ewa are rooted in a Christian interpretation of Genesis.

These findings encourage further research on a number of aspects. First, the intertextual relationships between the two plays and Milton’s Paradise Lost should be examined to determine whether their portrayals of Eve’s longings are inspired by the same model. The findings also raise the question of whether the genre of tragedy enables a more psychologizing depiction of Eve’s inner life, as opposed to, for instance, the genre of the epic. Finally, a study of the religious and intellectual trends of the historical context of Der Tod Adams and Adam og Ewa could shed light on traces of Pietism and Enlightenment thought that are apparent in the plays.