

ELIOT, OVID AND APOLLINAIRE: FEMALE SEXUALITY IN "THE WASTE LAND"

Adrianna E. FRICK*

ABSTRACT

This paper closely examines T. S. Eliot's use of Tiresias in "The Waste Land" as a commentary on treatment of female sexuality in the Modern era and contrasts it to Guillaume Apollinaire's surrealist play "*Les Mamelles de Tiresias*". Eliot's use of Tiresias, in his specification of Ovid's rendition in *Metamorphoses*, his allusion to Apollinaire's own use of Tiresias, and his structuring of Tiresias as narrative frame suggests that rather than misogynistic, Eliot is actually sensitive to female sexual alienation as a result of capitalism, rather than advocating an end to Feminism as Apollinaire does. As women became responsible for repopulating nations and their reproductive organs became property of the state, society and medical community, recreational sex for women became a clinical and empty function. Where Apollinaire surrealistically advocates anti-feminist perspectives, Eliot presents a realistic decaying scene, framed by and contrasted with the Classical figure of Tiresias, a representation of female sexual pleasure.

T.S. Eliot, "common sense" seems to dictate, was a misogynist. Regrettably, this "Truth" has been accepted for so long that citing support for the statement is no longer necessary, making it all the more difficult for the uninitiated to understand precisely why. On the rare occasion people offer examples, they often cite "The Waste Land"'s scene between the typist and clerk as narrated by Tiresias. In fact, Eliot's portrayal of female sexuality in this scene, surrounded by Tiresias as a framework and taken contextually within Modernist hysterization as evidenced by an allusion to Guillaume Apollinaire's play "*Les Mamelles de Tiresias*," can be interpreted as sympathetic to the feminine, rather than misogynistic. It is Eliot's nuanced use of Tiresias as a

* San Francisco State University (San Francisco Eyalet Üniversitesi), Öğretim Görevlisi.

trope as well as character and the implicit invocation of Ovid surrounding his tableau of sex that complicate and criticize Modernist perspectives on sexuality.

Eliot's complex and layered work is often secondary to perceptions of his politics, and interpretations of his opinions seem sweeping and broad. Countless scholars and lay-readers mention the factoid of Eliot's misogyny without feeling the need for an argument, citation or support for the claim. It is now "common knowledge". For instance, Gail McDonald has noted, "both psychoanalytic and feminist approaches to literature have found the violent treatment of women a significant, even defining element of his work". Tim Dean matter-of-factly mentions Eliot's "near-phobic hatred of women" as one might mention the current state of the weather. Yet, a depiction of violence against women, a representation of industrial alienation extended to sexuality, or a portrayal of male dominion over sexual intercourse and pleasure, does not necessarily constitute an *advocacy* of such attitudes. Often elements cited as support for claims of misogyny and homophobia in "The Waste Land" are somewhat shaky. As an example, one can argue that Tiresias is blinded for allying with the "feminine other," but in the literary sense it is the feminine, Juno, that does it, and not for alliance but for opposing the feminine by disagreeing with her. Regardless, in the literal sense, it is Ovid, not Eliot, who creates this representation. It seems hardly fair to paint a subject, Eliot, not only with such broad strokes, but with a brush belonging to someone else entirely

Contemporary thought regarding sexuality in Eliot's time was certainly not what one might consider "feminist". Eliot was particularly concerned with French thought in the years preceding the Waste Land, often lecturing at Oxford on French intellectual movements and holidaying in France with friends (Facsimile x, xvii, xix). In 1903, Remy de Gourmont wrote *Physique de l'amour*, later translated into English (by Eliot's friend Pound) as The Natural History of Love. French scholar Scott Bates characterizes the work as having two arguments about the sexual relations of the couple. Firstly, the notion of "couple" is a societal device designed to protect the important reproductive functions of the female, for if there were entirely free love "the more feeble woman would be crushed by superior males and forced into slavery" (36). Secondly, human males are innately polygamous and human females are innately monogamous, so women should allow a temporary polygamy for the good of the marriage and thus the good of society (37). One contemporaneous movement influenced by Gourmont was the emergence of "surrealism", a term coined by Apollinaire in the preface to his gender-bending 1916 play.

The play features Thérèse, a woman who rebels against being a mother and a homemaker and desires a political or military career. She opens her shirt, watches her balloon-breasts float upward and becomes a man. He becomes a successful general with many mistresses, while his husband tries to take over her job as child-producer and produces "40,049 infants in a single day" through no more than "will-power" (Apollinaire 188-190). Ultimately, the wife-general tires of a career, returns and reverts to Thérèse and "ready [...] to have twice as many children as he" (Bates 34). However, she refuses to regain her breasts, saying that she and her husband "managed OK without them", which suggests that she does not intend to return to producing children sexually (Apollinaire 206). Additionally, she kindly donates her three mistresses to the local policeman (205). Scott Bates, in his study of eroticism in Apollinaire suggested that there are two layers of meaning, an overt patriotic one and a subtle, less moralistic message (36-8). On the surface, Bates writes, Apollinaire is advocating the patriotic notion of population: "The married couple is the basis of society, leading to female fecundity, perhaps to be transcended by male parthenogenesis" (36). And yet, while Thérèse abandons her feminism and everyone happily returns to the business of producing children without sex, the male figures maintain multiple mistresses for the purpose of gratification, not reproduction (Bates 37). In Apollinaire's utopia, procreational sex will become obsolete and women will be nothing more than the occasional pleasure dolls of polygamous men. As Bates says, "the breasts of Thérèse were to have two basic functions: first to attract and nourish libidinous and polygamous males; and second to nourish a numerous family" (39). The ultimate goal of female sexuality in this time is thus characterized by two factors, neither of which pertaining to the feminine: pleasure, owned by the male and reproduction/repopulation, owned by the state.

"The Waste Land" similarly addresses these two representations of feminine sexuality. Eliot's pub-culture scene with Lil deals with the reproductive aspects of female sexuality, and Eliot's typist appears to be playing the recreational doll to the carbuncular clerk, the pinnacle achievement of Gourmont's vision of the future couple. However, this image is framed by Tiresias as narrator and tinted with Tiresias' conflicting signification. When taken in light of these French Modern representations, Eliot represents the same notions but his use of Tiresias complicates the interpretation. Tiresias not only limits the extent of the reader's perspective of the scene to the typist, but also serves as a symbolic contrast to the events he describes.

Where Apollinaire is creating a near-future utopia, Eliot's purpose in "The Waste Land" is to reflect his world in the way he perceived it, as a decaying pseudo-historical dystopia. Eliot's characters in the scene, the young man carbuncular and the typist, have very little commentary on their actions in light of the society around them. Apollinaire characters do little else than comment on reproductive duty to society, on working for society, and how a woman's desire for a career undermines society. Where Eliot uses a classical figure to narrate a realist scene, Apollinaire must invent surrealism as a method of story telling to paint the world he desires and have his feminist character repent of her political and working aspirations whilst being supplanted in her one true "function" by her husband. Where Eliot is painting a scene viewed every day, Apollinaire is attempting to create a surreal vision of how his world should be. As such, Apollinaire is advocating his representation, rather than simply stating what is currently happening. Eliot's commentary comes not from his female characters advocating an anti-feminist perspective, but from his Ovidian classical figure narrating the events in a fashion sympathetic to his female character.

While Tiresias has a long classical history in literature and many symbolic representations associated with him, Eliot is very specific about the characteristics he is emphasizing. He makes a passing reference to Sophocles' blind prophet of the Oedipus Trilogy in one line and a half-line allusion to the wise man of the Underworld in Homer's *Odyssey*, but Eliot clearly states in his verbose footnote that he is referring to Ovid's portrayal in the *Metamorphoses* (245-6). While this is not the first allusion to the *Metamorphoses*, the footnote is considerably longer than any other. The earlier reference to Philomel, for instance, merely warrants a line number. Eliot's reference to Tiresias apparently warrants an expository paragraph and the poetic passage quoted almost in entirety.

Firstly, Eliot's invocation of Ovid itself is a commentary on seduction. Ovid's career was made as the *praeceptor amoris*, a teacher of seduction, in his persona for several books on sexual conquest. His works included *Amores* (The Loves), *Ars Amatoria* (Art of Love) *Remedia Amoris* (Cure for Love), and were all concerned with winning over a sexual partner or keeping interest in the affair. Ovid also wrote *The Heroides*, a work that retells epics of antiquity from the female point of view, giving voice to Aeneas' Dido, Jason's Medea and Odysseus' Penelope, and helped to suggest that women previously considered plot points and accessories to their respective stories not only had their own

perspectives but were frequently wronged by the supposed heroes. The *Metamorphoses*, his best-known work, is filled with stories of gods changing forms to seduce or rape young maidens, begetting demigods along the way. In fact, the passage Eliot refers to follows one such story, that of Jove, Semele, the birth of Bacchus and the passionate and violent jealousy of Juno.

In contrast, Eliot sets his own couple, the typist and the clerk and their affair. The "young man carbuncular", like Jove, plans his "assault" carefully (239). However, where Jove may have watched the habits or actions of a maiden and altered his form to suit her, the young man waits until his prey is full from dinner after a long day at work and "she is bored and tired" (236). Where Jove might engage in a courtship ritual, the clerk "Endeavours to engage her in caresses/ Which still are unreproved, if undesired" (237-8). Eliot has put this scene in stark contrast to the strategic courtship rituals or even blasé rape scenes of the classical era. This leads to the question, is the scene between the typist and the "small house agent's clerk" a rape scene?

The scene is relayed by Tiresias, an "old man with wrinkled female breasts" who is "throbbing between two lives" (218-9). While Tiresias is exterior to the scene he is capable of relating to both genders in the encounter and empathizing with both individuals. However, despite the two genders, Tiresias is grounded in the feminine from the beginning by immediately focusing on the typist's perspective. As his narrative zooms in from the outside world, the frame is centered on the typist; her exhaustion, her undergarments, her lifestyle. Just like her, he "too awaited the expected guest" and has "foresuffered all/ enacted on this same divan or bed" (230, 243-4). Despite his ability to empathize with the 'young man carbuncular' as well, Tiresias is harshly critical of the pimply, vain young man, and while Tiresias relates the internal, unspoken thoughts in the brain of the typist, he remains disconnected from the emotions and thoughts of the clerk, only describing and analyzing his actions from the external perspective. Lastly, Eliot's Tiresias repeatedly emphasizes his female characteristics: the "old man with wrinkled dug," with his "wrinkled female breasts" ties his masculine-gendered body to the feminine genitalia and sexual experience (219, 228).

Even when inside the mind of the typist, his description of the encounter is distant and filled with wearied cynicism. In this way, the reader experiences both the veneer of intimacy and the distant cold mechanics of the act that the typist and the clerk each feel. The "carbuncular" young man is "one of the low

on whom assurance sits/ As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire". Not only is Tiresias associating each sexual participant in terms of their occupation, he associates the typist with a "taxi throbbing waiting" and the young man with an industrialist. The clerk's "vanity requires no response" and he "makes a welcome of indifference" and receives it in abundance. As his "unreproved, if undesired" caresses progress towards "assault" he encounters "no defence" (238-42). The typist is not welcoming the "passionate" encounter, but she does not act to end it. Assurance is not a comfortable quality of the young man, rather like an expensive accessory on the nouveau riche, which implies his flimsy assurance and confidence in assault could be deterred; yet she does nothing to put him off. When finished, after he has "grope[d] his way" to the stairs, she isn't traumatized or relieved, but she has hardly noticed his absence (248-50). Is this an oversight on the part of a male author, incapable of considering a believable female perspective, regardless of his wife's intervention in his work? Or is it more likely that the female's lack of presence is not from misogyny but is because of her actual lack of presence: "Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:/ 'Well now that's done and I'm glad it's over'" (251-2). Just as *The Heroides* grants an audience to emblematic women of tales, Tiresias voices the emptiness and the fragmentary thoughts of the typist. She is a machine acting out what she has been programmed to do. Tiresias foregrounds the idea of a "human engine", even before introducing himself, making the industrial, robotic sexual encounter all the more blatant (216). Eliot would later critique the "tendency of unlimited industrialism ... to create bodies of men and women ... detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words a mob" (Kimball). This scene is criticizing industrialism rather than advocating rape or violence against women.

The passage is even more soulless and mechanized when viewed in light of the footnote. Eliot has the reader look to the story of how the seer was blinded and how he can relate to the male and female perspectives, a tale within a tale founded in sexual pleasure: "*Cum Iunone iocos et 'maior vestra profecto est/ Quam, quae contingit maribus', dixisse, 'voluptas.'*" [... jests with Juno and said "Actually, it is your sex that attains more pleasure than males"] (Ovid 318-9). *Voluptas* as defined by the Oxford Latin Dictionary means pleasure, especially sensory delight but also the act of sexual intercourse itself, and is the core of the argument that causes the divine couple to seek Tiresias' guidance. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, one of Ovid's sources for the tale, Tiresias answers "Often parts a man enjoys only one; but a woman's sense enjoys/ all ten in full"

(Hesiod Fragment 3). It is because of *voluptas* that Tiresias' tale of dual sexuality is told. It is because of female sexual pleasure that he judges in favor of Jove and that the goddess Juno blinds him and, more obscurely, it is because of *voluptas* he is granted prophecy as a consolation prize. One could even suggest he is punished for revealing the depths of female sexual pleasure to the masculine other. At the center of the Ovid is pleasure; at the center of the Eliot is indifference. Tiresias, particularly in light of the footnote, serves as signification of female sexual pleasure and his presence as the frame of the scene shows just how decayed and disintegrated sex has become.

Tiresias' presence does not serve as an endorsement of the mechanical and detached sexuality of the typist and her guest. Rather, per the footnote, the character's very essence is rooted in female sexual pleasure, and more precisely, that women are capable of greater sexual pleasure than the men. In an era where sexual pleasure was the sole dominion of the male, and accompanied by a scene in which the woman feels no pleasure at all and the man not much more, Tiresias's empathy with the typist and representational contrasts serve as a critique of modernist notions regarding sexuality. As Eliot himself said, "[n]o poet[...] has his complete meaning alone," and from Homer to Tennyson, in at least a half dozen textual examples, Tiresias is a harbinger of (avoidable) doom (Eliot 38). Kings and heroes seek his guidance, but upon hearing unpleasant warnings usually regarding self-sacrifice or personal humility, nearly always ignore his advice and face death, destruction and/or misery. Eliot, in his awareness of this aspect of the Tiresias figure, uses him as a harbinger here to challenge self-assurance in industrial progress. The typist's experience is narrated to the reader by the classical prophet of bad tidings; if sexuality continues in this industrialized fashion, just like the female typist, the feminine capacity for pleasure will reach nothing more than soulless indifference.

In addition to his role as a symbol of female sexual pleasure, and an allusion to classical grandeur to contrast the emptiness and alienation of the industrialized, Tiresias stands as a representation of hermaphroditism. However, Eliot's footnote is as explicit as it is lengthy, and notes: "*Deque viro factus, mirabile, femina septem/ Egerat autumnos; . . . / . . . 'percussis anguibus isdem/ Forma prior rediit genitivaque venit imago.'*" [...extraordinary! He was made a woman from a man and spent seven autumns. . . After beating the same snakes again, the earlier form returned and his born image appeared.] (321-9)

As previously noted, it is Tiresias' wrinkled female breasts that enable him/her to unite the sexes and expose this degradation of the female sexual experience from its classical origin. And yet, as Eliot's footnote CLEARLY states, Tiresias is not a man with wrinkled breasts—"forma prior rediit genitivaque venit imago" [the earlier form returned and his born image appeared] (329). Tiresias was not a simultaneous hermaphrodite, but a sequential, first being born into one form in entirety, then changing to the other, in entirety, and then returning to his original form in entirety. Ignoring that there are other examples of simultaneous hermaphrodites in classical literature, most notably the condition's name sake, there is no reason for Tiresias to retain characteristics of both genders, particularly when Eliot has gone to such great lengths to include the sequence in his notes. Unless it is the breasts of Tiresias that require focus, more than simply what the female breasts represent. "The Breasts of Tiresias" is an English translation Apollinaire's surrealist play, "*Les Mamelles de Tirésias*". Tiresias is the name Therese takes as a general, and his "breasts" are a symbol of the begrudging necessity for women in reproduction. When Therese unleashes her balloon-breasts, she creates a world where repopulation is no longer a function of women, and female sexuality becomes solely owned by a masculine drive for pleasure.

Eliot's Tiresias, however, still has his breasts, and as a harbinger warns of how the application of industrial production to sexual processes destroys the pleasurable and spiritual aspects of sexuality and sensuality. Certainly, Eliot is portraying class issues in the typist and clerk scene and much of the negativity towards the clerk is based in "being above himself", but it is the presence of Tiresias that creates complicated and nuanced sexual interpretations. Tiresias, in all classical representations, is the bearer of an unpleasant and often unheeded warning, and in Ovid's portrayal he is a symbol not only of non-reproductive sex, but of the female capacity for sexual pleasure. The invocation of Ovid is itself a sign of both sensuality and seduction and unheard female perspectives. Lastly, Eliot deviates from his source by creating a Tiresias with wrinkled breasts, despite the fact they mythologically disappeared after 7 years millennia ago, suggesting an allusion to Apollinaire's sexist utopia; creating a Tiresias with vestigial female genitalia who narrates more closely in sympathy with the typist, putting the reader's emphasis and empathy with the feminine. While the passage of the typist is, on the surface, portraying a disturbing aspect of female sexuality by emphasizing her lack of involvement, pleasure and self-defense, the presence of the contrasting narrator and his alliance with the feminine suggest a critique rather than advocacy of these attitudes.

WORKS CITED

- Apollinaire, Guillaume. "The Mammaries of Tiresias." *Three Pre-Surrealist Plays*. Trans: Maya Slater. New York: OUP, 1997. 153-207.
- Bates, Scott. "Erotic Propaganda in Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*". *Eroticism in French Literature. French Literature Series*. Vol. 10. University of South Carolina Conference. New York: Rodopi BV, January 1983. 32-41.
- Dean, Tim. "T. S. Eliot, famous clairvoyante." *Laity and Gish* 43-65.
- Eliot, T. S. *Introduction. The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Ed. Valerie Eliot.. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2003. 474-487.
- . "The Waste Land". *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry Vol 1*. 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2003. 474-487.
- Hesiod. *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric, Fragment 3. The Online Medieval and Classical Library*. Berkeley: Berkeley Digital Library, 2005. <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Hesiod/frag2.html>
- Kimball, Roger. "A craving for reality: T. S. Eliot today". *New Criterion*. <http://newcriterion.com:81/archive/18/oct99/eliot.htm>
- Laity, Cassandra and Nancy K. Gish, eds. *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- McDonald, Gail. "Through the schoolhouse windows: women, the academy, and T. S. Eliot." *Laity and Gish* 175-194
- Ovid. "Book III". *Metamorphoses*. Ed. Hugo Magnus. Gotha (Germany): Friedr. Andr. Perthes. 1892. Accessed via web through Perseus Project. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+3.314>>
- "Voluptas." *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Ed. P.G.W. Glare. 2006.