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Gender performativity in H.D.'s Sea Garden

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Gender Performativity in H.D.'s *Sea Garden*

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31 October, 2009

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Abstract

Sea Garden was the first book of poetry written by H.D. in 1916. Read through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the book can be interpreted as an investigation of gender and identity in ways that challenge the confines of heteronormativity. Ultimately, I will argue that the poems work in ways close to Judith Butler's sense of 'queer', although as will become clear, my 'queer' reading of H.D.'s *Sea Garden* differs from the dominant queer readings of her work that currently exist. To this end, I will then discuss how *Sea Garden* operates as a community of different speakers and how the poems as a whole operate both *within* and *against* a heteronormative system. The poems take conventional gendered imagery and proliferate the gender and sexual identities associated with this imagery so that identity becomes simultaneously a multiple and unstable construct.

I argue there are three main locales within the landscapes of *Sea Garden*, each of which function differently in terms of external power and identity. The land in *Sea Garden* tends to function as the heteronormative world against which the poems operate, and a place in which the queer identities H.D. is exploring can be lost. The sea, in contrast, is unstable and changeable, and points to the multiple interpretations of identity that H.D.'s personae are attempting to establish. In *Sea Garden*, the shoreline is a liminal space, in which binary conceptions of identity are blurred and contested, and from where the possibilities of newly figured genders and identities can be investigated.

In the first chapter I will outline Butler's theories of performativity. Butler argues that performativity is usually thought of as manifesting externally a presupposed interior 'gendered essence', but for her 'performativity' is a repetitive and ritualised act that naturalises *cultural* assumptions about gender. I argue that H.D.'s *Sea Garden* is best understood, in line with Butler, as *performing* and *repeating* gendered identities *differently*, and in ways that disrupt heteronormative aspects of the culture that H.D. found herself in.

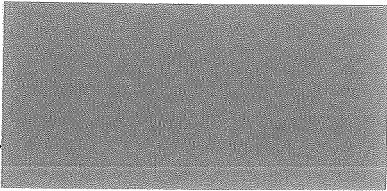
To structure the following chapters I have divided the poems in *Sea Garden* into three categories. The first I have called the 'Imagist' category, where H.D. is concerned with carefully delineating a single object. In this category, I will be dealing with those poems that seem to explore individual identity, and especially the conventions associated with femininity. In the second category I have placed the dramatic monologue and lyric poems, which I argue are concerned with desire and the gendered gaze, as they tend to exist between 'two', and therefore imply a type of *relationship* that H.D. works to radically refigure. *Cities*, the last poem of the book, constitutes the third category since it functions as a type of conclusion to the ideas set up throughout *Sea Garden*. *Cities* is principally concerned with the social world, and the way in which the refiguring of gendered identity always takes place within the confines, and indeed on the margins of, an established community.

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Introduction: H.D.'s *Sea Garden*

Sea Garden was H.D.'s first book of poetry, published in 1916. Using Judith Butler's theories of gender and identity as constituted by performance and framed by compulsory heterosexuality, *Sea Garden* can be shown to be an exploration and strategic subversion of the dominant cultural conventions that shape gender and identity. For Butler, the cultural and social expectations that constitute gender are enacted through performance, and this performance reveals how social constructions of gender can be both ambiguous and undermined, as I will discuss in chapter one. As I will argue, *Sea Garden* can be read as an exploration and destabilisation of heteronormative gender identity conventions. H.D. uses a layering of images to create multiple gender identities to the point where the term "gender" becomes questionable. Her personae exist on the margins, locations of subversion and danger, for, as Butler points out, "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and . . . all margins are accordingly considered dangerous" (Butler, 1990, p. 168). As I will argue, H.D. uses different poetic forms to explore different aspects of gender, sexuality and desire. She investigates individual identity, and in particular the conventions associated with femininity, in what I have categorised as the 'imagist' poems. In what I have termed the 'dramatic monologue' and 'lyric' poems she is concerned with the operations of desire and the gendered gaze. The last poem in the book, *Cities*, functions as a type of 'conclusion' to the work in its recognition that it is impossible to be outside the system that Butler calls the heterosexual normative but that change can be effected from within. It encapsulates the community that H.D. creates with *Sea Garden* and explores her concern with gender, principally through the terms of beauty and strength.

The way in which H.D.'s poetry has been read can be outlined in three basic stages. In the first stage critics praised her work as an exemplar of the Imagist movement, of which she was a founding member. Imagism sought to present a specific visual object or scene without comment by the poet (Abrams, 1999, p. 122). Its aim was to eliminate unnecessary words and phrases and to diminish the distance between the object or scene being represented and the language used to describe it (Raitt, 2006, p. 95). Although Imagism has had considerable influence on modern poetry, it was a small, short-lived, insular movement (Galvin, 1999, p. 105). It was also, especially in its origins, very much directed by male poets, pre-eminently Ezra Pound (Pondrom, 1985, p. 73). H.D.'s use of initials concealed her gender, with some earlier reviewers believing her to be a man (Pondrom, 1985, p. 96). From the start of career, then, she was implicated in issues of gender and identity (Burnett, 1989, p. 57). Due to her preeminent position in Imagism, H.D. became stereotyped as only an Imagist poet, although widely recognised as the best of the Imagists (Galvin, 1999, p. 106). Consequently, she was viewed as a minor poet who excelled within the limitations of Imagism, which provided the frame through which *Sea Garden* was read only (Gregory, 1986, p. 526; King, 1986, p. 214). Critics have come to recognise that this had the effect of generating praise that strictly delimited and undervalued H.D.'s work.

The publication of Susan Stanford Friedman's critical essay *Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics and Her Place in "The Literary Tradition"* (1975) ushered in a new phase of criticism of H.D.'s work, in which she was celebrated as a feminist. H.D. was interpreted as a female writer who concerned herself exclusively with

women's issues: maternity, the mother/daughter connection, the rewriting of history from a woman's position. For Friedman H.D. was "a woman, she wrote about women . . . [and as] a woman writing about women, H.D. explored the untold half of the human story" (1975, p. 803). She writes of H.D. as disputing conventional representations of women in *Sea Garden* and finds *Sea Garden* to be infused with the conflicting images of pregnancy and war (Friedman, 1990, p. 58). Later, Friedman viewed *Sea Garden* as a work in which H.D. repressed gender as a defence against the violence and constrictions that are culturally associated with the feminine (Friedman, 1990, p. 62). That is, for Friedman, gender is erased in H.D.'s work as it is operates to subjugate and dominate women. Lesley Wheeler (2003) discusses *Sea Garden* as foregrounding maternity and the intersection of motherhood and a career as a writer. She finds the presence of H.D.'s stillborn daughter throughout the poems, so that fertility within the poems is excessive and paradoxically signals death and decay. Eileen Gregory views *Sea Garden* as referencing a community of women, who are united in their worship of female goddesses (Gregory, 1986, pp. 528-530). Like earlier criticism of H.D.'s work, and *Sea Garden* in particular, criticisms focusing on feminism as the major tenet of her work can be seen, to some extent, to limit the scope of H.D.'s poetry. Robinson, for example, identifies H.D. as a feminist and then goes on to state that H.D.'s feminine perspective means that she "interprets events in terms of the natural world rather than in terms of the historical process" (Robinson, 1982, p. 56). This reading maintains the binaries that link masculine/culture and feminine/nature, thus reinforcing the denigration and restriction of women, as well as divorcing H.D.'s work from social relevance. By taking these readings as a point of departure I am seeking to prove that H.D.'s work has both social and political relevance. By establishing boundaries that resist

readings that conflict with feminist theories, feminist readings can appear to invalidate or discourage alternate or conflicting readings which are not considered relevant to women's issues. This serves to limit and restrain the meanings that can be made from H.D.'s poetry and reduce her relevance to that of a contained feminist readership. These strict feminist readings ignore the 'queer' possibilities inherent in H.D.'s work, and it is these 'queer' possibilities that I will focus on.

Recently H.D. has come to be "the Poetess", as Galvin terms her (1999, p. 110). Galvin problematically redefines the figure of the Poetess as one that transcends gender, so that the Poetess becomes positioned as a 'queer' role: "H.D.'s concern with classical and mythological subjects was driven by the desire to reclaim and enact her ancestral office, the Poetess" (Galvin, 1999, p. 110). The Poetess becomes then a mystical, magical figure that exists on subliminal borders and serves as a medium for a variety of masculine and feminine genders. One of the most significant abilities of the Poetess is the power to construct alternative sexual identities as part of her sexual magic (Galvin, 1999, p. 110). Unfortunately Galvin also associates the Poetess with other marginal and typically feminine roles such as the Witch and the Spinster (Galvin, 1999, p. 109), thereby regendering a role she is attempting to show as encompassing a multiplicity of genders. The roles of the Witch and the Spinster, like that of the Poetess, are those often reclaimed by feminists and unfortunately rely on stereotypical ideas of women, and it is from feminist critics, such as Gregory, that Galvin draws in her analysis (Galvin, 1999, p. 109). Problematically Galvin appears to equate ancient Greece and its mythology, or at least H.D.'s understanding of it, with a "nonheterocentric culture" (1999, p. 111). She proceeds to state that H.D. is trying to recover "ancient, pre-heterocentric ways" (Galvin, 1999, p. 124), although

it is not entirely clear whether Galvin believes Greece to be pre-heterocentric or whether she thinks H.D. considers Greece to be pre-heterocentric. However, if we accept Butler's thesis, as will be explained further in chapter one, then there is no original to recover; normative heterosexuality produces the idea of an origin of itself as an effect of its own enacting (Butler, 1990, p. 46). To interpret H.D.'s role as the Poetess trying to recover an original concept of gender which predates the heterosexual normative, is, as I will show, to support the ideas that H.D. is trying to destabilise. I would argue that H.D. is not using ancient Greece as some form of the original but is using it to *undermine* the theory of an original, thus creating unclear, multiple contexts for the poems.

Sea Garden consists of twenty-seven poems, and to aid my discussion I am going to divide the poems into categories. Fifteen of the poems I have designated as 'imagist' poems, which explore individual identity and principally work to destabilise the conventional gender definitions of femininity. These poems are: *Sea Rose*, *Mid-day*, *Sea Lily*, *The Wind Sleepers*, *Evening*, *Sheltered Garden*, *Sea Poppies*, *Garden*, *Sea Violet*, *Orchard*, *Night*, *Storm*, *Sea Iris*, *Hermes of the Ways* and *Pear Tree*. Eleven of the *Sea Garden* poems are principally concerned with desire, and take the form of dramatic monologues and lyric poems. I have understood a dramatic monologue to have two necessary principles: only one individual speaks throughout the poem, detailing a pivotal moment in a specific circumstance, and the poem serves as a vehicle of self-revelation for the speaker, although addressed to an implied, but unknown, other (Abrams, 1999, p. 70). A lyric poem I would define as the expression of a single speaker of a perception, thought or feeling (Abrams, 1999, p. 146). In this category I have placed the following poems: *The Helmsman*, *The*

Shrine, Pursuit, The Contest, The Gift, Loss, Huntress, The Cliff Temple, Sea Gods, Acon, and Prisoners. H.D. uses these poems to focus closely on desire, and in particular the gendered gaze of desire by exploring and destabilising the conventional form of the man as subject having the right to gaze at the woman as object. The last poem of the book, *Cities*, serves as a break from the other poems in terms of form but also works to tie together the ideas of a community of resistance to the heteronormative that H.D. has explored with the other poems of the book. *Cities* is primarily concerned with community, and the way in which community determines gender identity, through the associated ideas of beauty and strength that are, as I will show, ongoing concerns throughout the book. Essentially H.D. has written a book which is supposed to be purely Imagist, but which conforms to this design while also breaking it through her use of dramatic monologues and lyric poems. In particular *Cities*, with its much longer form, is different from all the poems that precede it.

Sea Garden operates as both an organic whole and as a collection of individual poems. To treat the book as an organic whole is to recognise that H.D. is creating a community of different speakers. Rather than each poem functioning only as a separate entity, she strengthens her critique of the heteronormative, to be discussed later, by amalgamating these twenty-seven separate speakers and identities into a community of speakers, as by joining together their resistance as a group, it is stronger than the isolated resistance of lone figures/poems. Other critics have also noted the use of community in *Sea Garden*, although their interpretations are different (Gregory, 1986; Laity, 1996). Gregory views the community of *Sea Garden* as a community of women who worship goddesses such as Aphrodite, modelled on the island of Lesbos and in imitation of the poetess Sappho, (1986, pp. 528-530).

Laity, on the other hand, sees the *Sea Garden* community as one in which homoeroticism between androgynous male youths is celebrated, as well as that of the “Sapphic femme fatale” (1996, pp. ix, xii). Both of these interpretations of community rely on homoeroticism, thus supporting my argument that H.D. is directly concerned with the social conventions of gender and sexual identity, although as will be shown my conclusions are somewhat different.

The concept of the garden, as signalled by the book’s title, is a frame for the poems; a garden is something organised and contained, in which individual components come together to form an organic whole. This is a problematic concept, for H.D. is critiquing the restraint that a garden, and by extension the heteronormative, embodies. As will become clear, each individual element, or poem, in H.D.’s garden refigures conventional ideas of gender and sexuality, but always within the available cultural, and heteronormative, terms. H.D. is accepting and demarcating the boundaries of heteronormativity in her garden, while choosing to position her personae at its very boundaries. That is, the boundaries of the system are recognised as the place in which resistance to the system will be most effective and most viable. The boundaries are the places in which the differences between the accepted and the unaccepted become most obvious and most liable to change. Her book works to envision an alternative form of the garden, seeking to write itself outside the containment of a garden, and yet operates within the garden imagery. There is no escape from the system in which a subject finds oneself but there is certainly space to envision different forms or resistance to that system. By the end of *Sea Garden*, it seems that H.D. comes to realise that there is no way out of the system, and that change must take place, slowly, and with effort, within the system itself, which is the

premise of *Cities*. In contrast, the earlier personae of *The Gift*, in trying and failing to envision an escape from the garden, contemplates suicide (Burnett, 1989, p. 71).

H.D.'s use of the garden and community however help to re-centre her personae, so that while they operate on the margins of a wider community, they also create their own space in which they can centre themselves. The poems also function as individual pieces, corresponding to plants in a garden, so that the concept of individuality is not subjugated to that of community.

H.D.'s *Sea Garden* is working to collapse binaries of safety and danger, and this offers possibilities for identity to be explored. A garden is a place of fertility, as well as being traditionally associated with love trysts. H.D., however, uses one of the defining features of the garden – the enclosed space – to undo the image of the garden as fertile and life producing. H.D.'s ideal garden – the sea garden – is a contradiction, for it is impossible for a garden to exist in the sea, as Duplessis points out (1986, p. 12). I understand the sea garden to be positioned on and around the shoreline, encompassing land and sea but between them, and therefore to be in the position most conducive to resistance and change. A garden is also a domesticated space, one usually associated with safety, stability and prearrangement. Ostriker notes how enclosed spaces often function as generative for women writers but in the case of H.D. they are imprisoning, thus H.D. is rejecting another convention of femininity (Ostriker, 1986, pp. 483, 490). However, as discussed below, the sea functions in the opposite way, as a place of risk and danger but also possibility. A sea garden then operates as both an unstable area of safety and danger (Burnett, 1989, p. 60), an uneasy co-existence of two seemingly mutually exclusive terms.

The land is figured in *Sea Garden* as a place in which identity that does not confirm to heteronormative ideals is invalidated. I will argue that the land is representative of the heteronormative, in that the land offers the personae stability but also a loss of choice and independent identity. The land signifies safety but at the cost of true individuality. Personae are tempted into remaining on the land, or even to venture further into the land, as in *Pursuit*, when the speaker follows an elusive other and travels further into the forest. Personae also seek to escape the land, lingering on the shoreline, venturing out to sea, or climbing to remote cliffs or pinnacles that, like the shoreline, do not partake completely of the land. Pondrom notes how, while the land offers safety and shelter, the personae are not drawn from the shore and away from the dangers associated with the sea, as the sea offers desirable possibilities that remain compelling (Pondrom, 1985, p. 87). Furthermore, while Galvin situates *Sea Garden*'s landscape in ancient Greece (Galvin, 1999, p. 111), others, even H.D. herself, note how the landscape is that of her childhood in Maine and of Cornwall, where she resided during World War One (Duplessis, 1986, pp. 14-15; Friedman, 1981, p. 2; Robinson, 1982, p. 37). H.D.'s Greece is further layered by its reliance on the artificial image of Greece used by the Victorian Hellenists whom she admired, such as Swinburne and Wilde (Laity, 1996, p. 42). The landscape is, therefore, a contradictory and multiple layering of different interpretations of "Greece" that dispute any discrete definitions. H.D.'s Greece is an artifice, not the ideal non-heterocentric culture that Galvin positions it as. This means that the identities that H.D. situates there are themselves artificial, grounded as they are in an artificial landscape and background. The land functions as the heteronormative that both grounds the poems and provides a starting point, if you will, from which the

personae can begin to explore their identity, as it is shown to be a foundationless foundation.

The sea on the other hand is unstable and in a constant state of flux and change. It clearly signals danger and risk, but nonetheless the speakers are drawn to it. The sea, in terms of my argument, offers an alternative to the heteronormative. It offers guides, such as the Helmsman and Hermes (Burnett, 1989, pp. 65, 71), who point to multiple interpretations of identity. In the poem *Sea Rose*, with which the book opens, the image of the sea rose is one which defines H.D.'s ideas of a new form of beauty and strength, and which acts as an exemplar for the other personae on how identity and gender can be reinterpreted. The sea rose embodies a new type of beauty – harsh, marred, “with stint of petals” (line 2) – that is also marked with strength, resistance and endurance. Regarding Butler’s theory, to be discussed later, the sea offers the possibility of exceeding the binaries that the land and the heteronormative enforces and allows for multiple interpretations of gender and identity. The constantly changing and unstable state of the sea corresponds to Butler’s idea of gender identity, which is a continual process of reinterpretation and reiteration.

The shoreline is both land and sea, but cannot be said to be exclusively either, so that it operates as “a complex and interactive meeting line, an interplay of both” (Burnett, 1989, p. 58). The shoreline therefore functions perfectly as a transitional area between the stable land and the unstable sea, and it is here that H.D.’s sea garden exists. Importantly the shoreline is the marginal space or border that Butler identifies as the most potentially useful sites for challenging social systems such as

heteronormativity (Butler, 1990, p. 168). The shoreline is a liminal space, with liminal defined by the OED as “of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process” (“Oxford English Dictionary”). The shoreline acts as a threshold, through which the personae are invited to pass in order to escape the confines of the heteronormative. Many of the personae however are equivocal, and remain on or near the shoreline, unable to make the final decision to cross over. It is important to recognise also that liminal refers to the initial stage of an action. In this sense, H.D.’s poems represent a starting point or acknowledgment of resistance to the heteronormative. I would argue that the poems of *Sea Garden* operate as examples of how the heteronormative can be resisted, and some of the possibilities that this resistance can open up. Of equal importance is the concept of liminality. This is defined in the OED as “a transitional or indeterminate stage between culturally defined stages of a person’s life; such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage, characterised by a sense of solidarity between participants” (“Oxford English Dictionary,”). This refers back to the way in which H.D.’s personae act as a community, contesting the heteronormative, and enacting resistance to the heteronormative, willing to forego the stability of the heteronormative in order to explore alternate positions, while recognising the dangers that this will entail.

The heteronormative, like any system of power, is supported by institutions, practices and discourses which perpetuate and maintain its power. The wind tends to function in H.D.’s poetry as a type of pressure on the personae of the poems, and is frequently depicted as attacking or driving against them. As such, I argue that the wind in H.D.’s highly gendered world of *Sea Garden* can be thought of as the forces of heteronormativity, of social pressure. The wind polices the shoreline and attacks

those who reside on the margins. The wind drives the people from the shoreline through the city gates in *The Wind Sleepers*, thus foreshadowing the book's eventual retreat into the cities themselves. The wind is often a violent force against which the personae direct their resistance; however, it can be a wind of change, in that by opposing it personae are strengthened and purified, gaining recognition and identity. This agrees, in part, with Alfrey's assertion that the wind is not a destructive but a disseminating force (Alfrey, 1992, p. 41). In her view, the wind partakes of the exchanges between elements which is necessary to constitute identity, and which partly agrees with my own ideas of community within the sea garden.

In the following chapter I will discuss Judith Butler's theories of performativity and gender identity. In the second chapter I will deal with the ways in which the 'imagist' poems function as vehicles to explore individual identity and expose the conventional interpretations of femininity. These poems multiply the possible gender identities that femininity could encompass, so that the term "femininity" becomes almost meaningless, in that its meaning becomes proliferated beyond definition. I will focus principally on the poem *Sea Violet*, offering a close reading of the poem and reading it through the lens of Butler's theories. In the third chapter I will examine what I have termed the desire poems, and their exploration of desire and the gendered gaze. In this section I will carry out a close reading of *The Contest* and then discuss how the poem enacts Butler's ideas of the performative and gender identity. Finally in the fourth chapter, after a close reading of *Cities*, I will show how the poem encompasses the ideas which the earlier poems have set up regarding gender and identity as well as providing a possible starting point from which to move forward in a new direction. My primary concern in the second, third and fourth

chapters are to show how the poems reveal gender ambiguities and resistance to the conventions of the heteronormative, offering new interpretations of gender and identity.

Chapter 1: Judith Butler and Gender Identity

Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* is considered a seminal and founding text of queer theory. Butler's aim was to open up the possibilities for gender, without stipulating beforehand which possibilities were acceptable (Butler, 1990, p. viii). She drew upon the theories of feminism and psychoanalysis, as well as French intellectuals such as Levi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and Wittig (Butler, 1990, p. x). She was interested in the way in which normative heterosexuality regulates and monitors gender and sexuality in order to secure and perpetuate its own position of power (Butler, 1990, p. xii). Like Foucault's genealogical critique, Butler's analysis focuses on the way in which power is deployed in relation to certain forms of knowledge, in this case, heteronormativity. In this sense, Butler is drawing on a Foucauldian definition of power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them" (1978, p. 92). Therefore, for Foucault, and for Butler, power is not an assumption of sovereignty, law or domination. Instead it is a mutual support of different forces, or alternatively, irreconcilable differences between forces that separate them from each other. Neither does power operate from a single, central point but is constantly moving and being produced, and is a complex and possibly strategic condition. These force relations effectively become consolidated in state institutions, the law and social hegemonies (Foucault, 1978, pp. 92-93). That is, power operates through knowledge, and knowledge establishes which identities have validity.

The heteronormative takes as its foundation the idea of compulsory heterosexuality. However, as Butler points out, there is no reason that there should be a binary system of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, p. 10). For her there is no logical link between sex and gender, and once gender is acknowledged as free from mirroring sex and instead as a cultural construct then “[g]ender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990, p. 10). This concept signals the instability of identity, for it allows for multiple meanings to be construed from gender. It opens up gaps between sex and gender, which the heteronormative works to conceal and cover up. Moreover, gender operates as a discursive operation by which a naturalised idea of sex is given an historical justification, so that sex is made to appear to predate culture and therefore becomes a supposedly apolitical and neutral fact (Butler, 1990, p. 11). In relation to this, gender therefore becomes, for Butler, a cultural conception of sex but also the productive methods by which the binary divisions of sex are created and entrenched (Butler, 1990, p. 11). Consequently gender itself is a term that is already political and inseparable from what Foucault would call the juridical powers of the law (Butler, 1990, p. 4). However the systems of power not only produce the subjects that represent those systems but also produce those subjects who will attempt to subvert the system that produced them.

In dealing with identity, Butler recognises that although gender is one of the defining characteristics of identity, it also intersects with other important features such as class, race, ethnicity and other relations that are invested with power (Butler, 1990, p. 7). Her definition of gender identity is one in which the relationships between sex,

gender, sexual practice and desire interact and operate in multifarious ways (Butler, 1990, p. 24). She admits, in the 1999 preface to the reprinted edition of *Gender Trouble*, that one of the problems with her earlier theories (of 1990) was that of universalisation, and that the universalising of patriarchy, and by extension, the heterosexual normative, can be both dangerous and reductive (Butler, 1990, p. 46). To universalise patriarchy and the heteronormative is to confirm its versions of events. This gives credence to the heteronormative's justification and (false) historical account of the inevitability of the laws that it has enacted to maintain its own power, as well as lending legality to the heteronormative's account as the only authoritative story (Butler, 1990, p. 46). However the universalisation of heteronormativity, and patriarchy, can be used as strategic starting points from which to critique concepts of gender, as long as the dangers associated with universalisation are recognised.

Repression becomes a double-edged sword, for while it works to maintain the institutions and discourses it represents, it also produces the subjects which it designates invalid and unreal. Butler, drawing upon Foucault, views repression as simultaneously prohibitive and generative (Butler, 1990, p. 119). This means that subversion is generated within the system that is designed to prohibit any questioning of that system, and it is the *prohibition* that generates the subversion. Furthermore, for Butler there cannot be a body that exists outside the law, that is, the system of power. This means that subjects who are labelled as invalid remain within the system that denies their validity. Yet the very system that labels them invalid thereby proves its own instability, so that

[t]he very notion of "the person" [identity] is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who

fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (Butler, 1990, p. 23).

Valid identities are those which maintain the heteronormative ideals so that there is “coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 23). It needs to be emphasised however that this concept is an ideal, that is, so-called “valid” identities may strive toward the apparent stability such an ideal expresses but, like all ideals, it remains elusive and unattainable. To extend this idea further means that even “valid” identities contain ambiguities and incongruities that can disrupt the matrix of the heteronormative. For Butler the imperative task is to undo notions of sex/gender binaries and to enact replications of the heteronormative that offer critical interpretations of it and which work to destabilise and even displace it (Butler, 1990, p. 40). This of course means that the system is subverted from within – for Butler, there is no way to be outside of the system.

Butler extends these ideas to discuss the heteronormative construction of desire: the way it relies upon binary oppositions of man and woman, and by extension masculine and feminine respectively. Within this system, if one is not a man then by definition one can only be a woman (Butler, 1990, p. 30). Desire, bounded by this system, reflects gender and thus expresses heterosexual desires, that is, desire for the opposite gender (Butler, 1990, p. 30). In this way, the difference between genders is maintained through desire, and the heterosexual link between gender, sex and desire is strengthened and given further legitimation (Butler, 1990, pp. 30-31). Gender, sex and desire become unifying principles of identity in the heteronormative system (Butler, 1990, p. 29). This also means that desires which exist outside the heteronormative become illegal and invalidated. To extend this idea to identity,

those subjects who experience desires that do not correlate to the heteronormative become invalid identities.

For Butler, gender, and gender identity, is ultimately performative. She writes that “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). This means that identity is not stable; it is in a constant state of reiteration. It also means that the performance is not the manifestation of an interior gender identity, but that the performance itself constitutes the gender identity. Therefore the performance is the identity, and there is no prior identity for the performance to signify. Heteronormativity, and the political practices which it uses to maintain its power, rely upon the idea of an inner gender identity to support its system and the theory of gender binaries (Butler, 1990, pp. 173-174). If there is no inherent gender identity that exists before the subject performs his/her gender then gender is revealed to be what Butler theorises it is: a cultural construction.

Here it is instructive to turn to the work of J. L. Austin and his ideas on the performative and constative utterances. The constative utterance is one that is descriptive and can be proved as either true or false; the performative utterance creates the truth it utters. That is, the performative utterance is “saying something as well as doing something” (Austin, 1975, p. 140). Austin gives the example of saying “‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’ ” while smashing a bottle against its stern as a performative utterance that is, or is part of, an action (Austin, 1975, p. 5). For Austin, performative utterances cannot be evaluated as true or false, instead they are either successful or unsuccessful (Austin, 1975, pp. 25, 54). Austin acknowledges

that concepts of true and false are abstract and artificial and depend upon point of view, making the performative utterance subject to ambiguities and instabilities (Austin, 1975, p. 149). He uses the example of saying “I promise” and then not adhering to the promise made, so that “not to perform the act is parallel to saying both ‘it is’ and ‘it is not’” (Austin, 1975, p. 51). As the subject who speaks the performative sentence is pivotal to that utterance, the subject’s identity is an important part of the utterance, or performance, made.

In relation to Butler’s theories of the performative, although she does not refer to Austin and his ideas of constative and performative in *Gender Trouble*, there are links between their positions. The performance and the performative utterance are both predicated on the subject who speaks (or performs). Therefore the same utterance or performance given by two different subjects would delineate two different utterances or performances. In this way, identity informs performance, and the performative utterance, even as performance, establishes identity. Similarly the performative is neither true nor false, but like the performative utterance is valid or invalid.

This idea can be extended to the possible and impossible, so heteronormativity would seem to want it that the true is synonymous with the possible and the false with the impossible. For Butler, however, the usefulness of the performative is that while a constative utterance can be proved as true or false, possible or impossible (in a given situation), the performative utterance and the performative remain possible if they can be spoken or performed. This opens the performative up to a multiplicity of possibilities with regards to gender, which is one of Butler’s ultimate aims. She

wants to uncover the possibilities for gender without stipulating which possibilities are valid (Butler, 1990, p. viii). Of course, for Butler no body stands outside the law, of heteronormativity in this case, so the terms valid and invalid are ones that remain inside the system. However by invalidating those gender identities which do not conform to the heteronormative then the limits of heteronormativity are exposed, and it is here that the subversion of gender identity can operate (Butler, 1990, p. 24). The paradox in heteronormativity is that for it to maintain its cultural authority it depends upon invalid identities in order to substantiate itself by opposition to the invalid (Butler, 1990, p. 98). By its very prohibition of certain acts and identities the system of power is providing a position of resistance against its own standards of validity.

Richard van Oort extends Austin's work on the constative and performative utterances (van Oort, 1997). He considers the performative utterance to be dependant on community authorisation (van Oort, 1997, ¶ 15). In this way the performative utterance gets its truth from, or conversely is deemed false by, the community. In Butler's terms, this means that the validity of identities will always depend on the values of the community they exist in.

Van Oort's belief that the performative utterance gains its truth from the community relates to Butler's theory of the performative as a cultural construct which is judged as valid or invalid according to the dominant cultural community. This has important implications for the personae of H.D.'s *Sea Garden* community, who are contesting the binary of valid/invalid identities in society. In Butler's theory this community is the one produced by heteronormativity. As she acknowledges, only performances and acts which are authorised by the community, or the system of

power (in this case, the heteronormative) have the power to demonstrate their own possibility (Butler, 1993, p. 107). Therefore performative acts which do not have this authorisation are failed attempts to bring about results that they do not have the power to enact (Butler, 1993, p. 107). The very idea of performance entails the notion of others, an audience to be witness to the performance. Performance is not an act that involves only the individual, as “one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Consequently the concepts that determine an individual’s gender remain outside the individual, that is, within the community, not from within an interior essence in the individual themselves, before identity itself is even postulated (Butler, 2004, p. 1). For the personae of *Sea Garden*, this means that they cannot exist in isolation in the garden but must interact with others in order to construct their own identity, regardless of whether this interaction takes the form of an acceptance or resistance of the community around them.

Gender is, for Butler, an act that is simultaneously intentional and performative. Gender also requires a performance that is continually repeated, and furthermore is acted in a public sense. The repeated performance is “a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation” (Butler, 1990, p. 178). The repeated performance consolidates its own cultural intelligibility, so that it both establishes and maintains the binary system of gender as well as reiterating which values and terms are applicable to each gender. Of course, if gender identity is reliant on repeated performances then it is not a stable identity, as heteronormativity posits it is. Instead it is a continuous and ongoing process, an external appearance

which can never completely signify the impossible ideals of the heteronormative (Butler, 1990, p. 179). The necessary and unavoidable failure to continually repeat and reiterate the performance is in-built into the performance, as it proves impossible to perfectly and exactly repeat time after time. However, this failure signals how the heteronormative ideal is an area for subversion to exploit.

The heteronormative governs what can be designated as a valid identity. A valid subject is one that is

A consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantialising effects [italics in original]. (Butler, 1990, p. 185).

Furthermore, the demands that adhere to being a certain gender are themselves multiple (Butler, 1990, p. 185). In other words, the single demand to be either a man or woman entails multiple simultaneous demands that are often disjunctive. Butler gives the example of a woman who is called upon to be a good mother, heterosexually desirable object and a fit worker simultaneously – demands which are different and incompatible (Butler, 1990, p. 185). Without a subject who exists prior to his/her performance then there is no way to contain these various and conflicting demands. The subject can only ever be what Butler denotes as a “failed copy” (Butler, 1990, p. 186), one that is doomed to failure.

To say that performance establishes gender is problematic with regard to agency. However Butler contends that while culture and the heteronormative “mire” the subject they do not comprise the totality of the subject’s identity (Butler, 1990, p. 182). Therefore, while there may be no subject that can pre-exist their performative identity, the subject is still able to negotiate the cultural constructions that constitute

identity (Butler, 1990, pp. 182-183). Agency for the subject is to be found in the choices that the subject makes within the heteronormative discourse. It should be remembered that it is impossible to stand outside that discourse, and indeed the subject is formed by this discourse, so that agency is located in reiterative and rearticulatory practice within that discourse, rather than an outside resistance to it (Butler, 1993, p. 15).

To view identity as a construct generates new ways of envisioning agency that are unavailable if identity is postulated as stable and unchangeable (Butler, 1990, p. 187). Construction becomes one of the very terms on which agency can operate and a source of subversion (Butler, 1990, p. 188). Construction implies the possibility of change and of reconfiguration. Subversion here means that the subject enacts repetition in such a way as to disrupt the practices that maintain the heteronormative identity. Butler also believes that the limits of heteronormativity should be maintained, not only because they are sites for potential disruption and resistance, demonstrating the violence of the heteronormative system as well as its inability to recognise the threats to its continuing existence, but because the limits of heteronormativity also proclaim that it is not a limitless, and thus all-powerful and all-encompassing, system (Butler, 1993, p. 53). In this sense, to absorb or include all marginal and excluded subjects back into the system would eradicate difference, instead of proliferating it (Butler, 1993, p. 53). In other words, the margins are powerful and effective tools for maintaining a limit upon any type of system of power, and to erase these margins should not be the aim of resistance; instead, resistance should work toward supporting these margins while also gaining

recognition for them. It is on the margins that many of H.D.'s personae are positioned, and from where they enact their resistance.

Butler's ideas are important for *Sea Garden*, for, as Morris points out, poetry is the site of "social as well as artistic practice" (Morris, 2003, p. 3). Poetry is not produced in isolation but in response to social conditions and situations, ones that affect the poet personally and which relate to the wider community. Furthermore the conventions against which H.D.'s book are working are so obviously entrenched in social terms that she does not even need to present them. Laity notes how H.D. "omits the normative second term of the binary" (Laity, 1996, p. 44), and Engel criticises H.D. for, in his opinion, "depending on conventional associations in the reader's mind to do the work one might better expect the poet herself to do" (1969, p. 519). In part, this is H.D.'s argument – that social conventions regarding gender are so naturalised and accepted that they function as an inherent truth. Although I will argue that H.D.'s work can be seen as going beyond binaries altogether, yet it is obvious that what is being argued against is already firmly enshrined as the law. H.D. positions her personae at the margins – the shoreline – as the place in which the greatest possibilities for resistance exist.

Chapter 2: *Sea Violet* and the 'Imagist' Poems

Fifteen poems out of the twenty seven poems in *Sea Garden* I have designated as 'imagist' poems. They are *Sea Rose*, *Mid-day*, *Sea Lily*, *The Wind Sleepers*, *Evening*, *Sheltered Garden*, *Sea Poppies*, *Garden*, *Sea Violet*, *Orchard*, *Night*, *Storm*, *Sea Iris*, *Hermes of the Ways* and *Pear Tree*. All of these poems are fairly short and are concerned with the careful and precise delineation of an object or scene. The Imagist movement can be briefly described by the principles laid down in an interview with Ezra Pound in *Poetry* in 1913, which were

- (1) Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.
- (2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- (3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. (qtd. in Hamilton, 2004, p. 469).

Imagism, then, is concerned with presenting vivid visual scenes or objects without extraneous comments or phrases, often in free verse. The poems in this category in *Sea Garden* are concerned with opening up the narrow gender definitions associated with typical feminine imagery. They achieve this by taking a feminine image and showing it to exceed conventional definitions of women's roles, or conversely by taking the same image and demonstrating how these conventions perpetuate limiting and damaging precepts for women. *Sheltered Garden* is a composite of this feminine imagery, in which the pears are "wadded in cloth,/protected from the frost" and the melons are "smothered in straw" (lines 19-22). In this sheltered garden "beauty without strength/chokes out life" (lines 41-42) and the last lines articulate the aim of the *Sea Garden* poems: "to find a new beauty/in some terrible/wind-tortured place" (lines 56-58). The images of overprotection, and the associate images of women's fragility and vulnerability, are dangerous, even fatal, for women. Conventional gender identities limit and devalue women, and H.D. uses images of beauty "without

strength” and beauty that is static and useless to convey these limitations. Her alternative is a new form of beauty that does not rely on conventional gender ideas but exceeds them, incorporating attributes such as strength that are conventionally masculine.

In particular, H.D. disputes the Victorian sentimentalism associated with flowers and their meanings. Boughn, in his discussion of *Sea Rose*, notes that H.D. frees the rose from “the accumulations of sentimentality” (1987, pp. 101-102). The flowers and trees take on multiple meanings in regard to gender identity, proliferating meanings that cannot be contained by the conventional ideas that have contributed to their stereotypical feminine designation. Those of H.D.’s personae in the imagist poems who are enclosed by conventional femininity, such as in *Sheltered Garden* and *Orchard*, are conversely unable to fulfil this conventional role due to the limits set upon them – here femininity is infertile and unnourishing. However those personae that H.D. positions on the shoreline, clearly unsheltered and in dangerous or harsh conditions, benefit from the ordeals they undergo and redefine femininity as encompassing a new form of beauty as well as strength and resilience. As Laity points out, while the personae in the conventional, sheltered gardens are languishing, H.D.’s flowers are conversely flourishing in the harsh shoreline environment (Laity, 1987, p. 62). H.D. is rejecting the conventional positions of femininity, and offering up new interpretations of femininity that can be seen to undo the notion of femininity itself.

The resistance that the flowers display in the five flower poems act as exemplar models of resistance to the heteronormative in H.D.’s garden. There are constant

references to flowers throughout the other poems, and especially to the flowers dealt with in the flower poems. In this way, the flower poems provide links to the other poems in the book, thus propagating the ideas of community. The other poems assist in the proliferation of meanings of the flowers, so that when they are referenced in other poems their meanings are changed or extended from the meanings they represent in their own specific poem. I want to demonstrate this through a close reading of *Sea Violet* and by applying Butler's theories of gender identity to the poem.

In *Sea Violet*, although the title seems to refer to only one singular violet, there are in fact three different violets in the poem. There is the white violet (line 1), the sea-violet (line 3) and the greater blue violets (line 8):

The white violet
is scented on its stalk,
the sea-violet
fragile as agate,
lies fronting all the wind
among the torn shells
on the sand-bank.

The greater blue violets
flutter on the hill,
but who would change for these
who would change for these
one root of the white sort? (lines 1-12).

Therefore by the third and final stanza there is confusion over which violet, or a combination of violets, are being addressed as "Violet" (line 13). Also, it is not until the third stanza that the violet is addressed directly, rather than being just observed. The perspective in *Sea Violet* is continually changing. The violets are on the sand-bank, the hill, on the edge of the sand-bank, so that the general locale stays the same but the positions within that locale change. A similar situation occurs in *Hermes of the Ways*, so that the relative positions of the persona and Hermes on the beach are

continually changing and impossible to ascertain with any accuracy (Galvin, 1999, pp. 115-116). In other words, there are multiple viewpoints within this one location just as there are multiple violets that nonetheless collapse in the last stanza into one violet. This relates to H.D.'s use of the palimpsest, in which multiple images are layered upon one another without later images erasing the earlier ones. As Kloepper describes it, a palimpsest is "a parchment that has been written over several times, earlier versions having been imperfectly erased. . . [which] creates a strange, marginal writing that is both intentional and accidental" (1986, p. 553). The images co-exist as separate images and as one image. This is how the different violets in this poem operate, and how *Sea Garden* operates as a whole.

The violet is a flower which symbolises modesty (Friedman, 1990, p. 59). This seems at odds with the image of "fronting all the wind" (line 5) as the sea-violet does, and with the greater blue violets who "flutter on the hill" (line 9). These actions, rather than modesty, imply resistance and display. This poem, like all the 'imagist' poems, enacts a celebration of difference, which is intimately entangled with resistance. By being different from the conventional is to resist it, and H.D.'s personae all gain from this resistance. Resistance not only makes her personae stronger and demonstrates their resilience but also leads to a point of transcendence. H.D.'s violet, therefore, celebrates its difference from other conventional violets and furthers this difference to the point that it becomes, momentarily, a star.

Many of the imagist poems represent a juxtaposition of fragility and violence. In conventional terms, fragility is associated with women and violence with men.

H.D.'s images of violence often take the form of warfare imagery. In *Sea Violet*, the

violet is among the “torn shells” on the sand. Here shells can refer not only to beach shells but also to gun shells:

The white violet
is scented on its stalk,
the sea-violet
fragile as agate,
lies fronting all the wind
among the torn shells
on the sand-bank. (lines 1-7).

In *Evening* Gledhill identifies the ridges as related to the battlefield (1993, p. 173):

“The light passes/from ridge to ridge,/from flower to flower;- ” (lines 1-3). There is a constant blurring of conventional feminine attributes like fragility and vulnerability with conventional masculine attributes like strength, violence and warfare. Rather than been annihilated by these images of violence and warfare, H.D.’s feminine imagery can exist in this landscape of destruction, and transcend it. In part, her feminine images, such as the violet, appear stronger and more resilient from their existence among and interaction with such violence.

There is a progression in the poem so that the violet is described progressively as fragile, fronting, flutter[ing], frail, frost and fire. This also simultaneously exposes binaries and renders them unstable, so that the violet is both frost and fire or fragile and yet with the strength to front the wind. The imagery here serves to show how the violet can embody conventional feminine attributes while also exceeding these, and performing those actions that contradict with conventions. The sea iris, in the poem of the same name, also encompasses oppositions so that it is “sweet and salt” (line 12) and variously described as “weed”, “brittle flower”, “like a thin twig”, “fortunate one” and “scented and stinging” (lines 1, 3, 7-9). While binaries are used to establish and support hierarchal divisions, in this case with gender, H.D. overturns these binaries by making their relationship horizontal, not vertical. That is, she does not

privilege one term over another, so that the violet can be fragile, [con]fronting and fire, and the sea iris a weed, a flower and “fortunate one”. The important point is that neither the violet nor the iris are positioned to be one thing or another, but can be in a multiplicity of different, and contradictory, positions without any term, gendered or otherwise, dominating over another.

One of the ways in which H.D. begins to proliferate the meanings associated with words and images is through the use of what Morris terms “soundscapes” (2003, pp. 28-31). The meanings of certain words are multiplied without rendering the word itself meaningless, thus problematising the conventional meanings some words have come to accrue. Violet also sounds very like “violent”, and there are certainly violent images in the poem, particularly the torn shells. All of the flower poems contain violent images of the flowers being thrown and tossed about. In *Sea Rose* the rose is “flung on the sand” (line 10) and in *Sea Lily* the lily is “shattered/ in the wind” (lines 6-7) and “scales are dashed/ from your stem,/ sand cuts your petal” (lines 10-12). The title of *Sea Violet* could mean “see [the] violet”, at odds with the modesty associated with violets. Of course, the poem itself puts the violets on display – it is H.D. who draws our attention to them. The title could even mean “see violent”, that is, to recognise that violent images are on a wider social scale very much associated the cult of feminine beauty and identity that H.D.’s poem exposes. For the Imagists, the ability to see is very important and “we know what we see”, so that in vision, according to Morris, the poems find “the release from a shared system of signs into [a] spontaneous, intuitive, unmediated apprehension [of being]” (1984, p. 414). In the opening lines of *Night*, the word “cut” conveys a sense of isolation, violence, boundaries and finality but also conversely one of gentleness:

The night has cut
 each from each
 and curled the petals
 back from the stalk
 and under it in crisp rows (lines 1-5).

H.D.'s flowers are very resilient and the blurring of violence and gentleness is something that they are able to deal with. In other words, the Imagists, and H.D. in this instance, are finding new meanings that disrupt the conventions normally associated with particular words and signs.

Given the typical feminine imagery, H.D. makes a point about the vulnerability of women by placing the violet on the margins. The unassigned violet of the third stanza is "on the edge of the sand-hill", but because of its marginal position can "catch the light", implying that this violet can both be seen clearly and see clearly itself. However the violet of this last stanza is, like the violets in the earlier part of the poem, vulnerable:

Violet
 your grasp is frail
 on the edge of the sand-hill,
 but you catch the light-
 frost, a star edges with its fire. (lines 13-17).

Hatlen points out that H.D. draws clear boundaries about the objects in her Imagist poems before allowing those boundaries to be broken or transcended, and the language she uses emphasises this – words like cut, break and tear continually recur in the poems (1995, pp. 120-124). The margins are areas of danger and with a great potential for change. The "edge" of the sand-hill emphasises this – a sand-hill seems, by definition, to be unstable and the edge of it more so. Once the violet becomes a star it is edged with fire, fire that could be either threatening, purifying or both. However, the fire still represents an edge or boundary to the violet, so that the violet is continually contained by various boundaries, which it is able to transcend. The

violet's marginal position is one of vulnerability – among torn shells, buffeted by the wind, exposed on a hill. However this marginal position also posits the way to escape the conventional gendering of society, so that the margins are positions of power. In *Sea Lily* the lily experiences violence on the margins of the shoreline:

Myrtle-bark
is flecked from you,
scales are dashed
from your stem,
sand cuts your petal,
furrows it with hard edge,
like flint
on a bright stone. (lines 8-15).

The lily achieves a form of identity that is not based upon the hierarchies and binaries of the heteronormative – it proves its worth among the hostile environment of the margins, and through what Alfrey terms the “exchange and encounter” among elemental forces (2000, pp. 92-95). This is in contrast to conventional feminine imagery, in which women, especially in flower imagery, are depicted as delicate, weak, insubstantial and in need of male protection. In *Garden*, the persona calls upon the wind to “rend open the heat,/cut apart the heat,/rend it to tatters” (lines 12-14), as the heat is acting to stifle and suffocate. Here the wind becomes a liberating force, rather than a prohibitive or dangerous one.

Sea Violet, is, as are all the poems in the book, very visual and the view is in close up (Morris, 2003, p. 97). This has the effect of forcing a confrontation, of an image that is not to be ignored – a direct challenge, in other words, which relates to the violet's position. However the poem, again like the other poems in the book, records a moment of transformation, a liminal moment in which boundaries are crossed. This occurs in the last lines, in which the violet becomes “frost, a star edges with its fire” (line 17). That is, the violet transcends its own status and being, becoming (if only

for a moment) something which it is not – a star. This transformation signals the violet's strength and its ability to contest the conventions that seek to limit its identity. The image of the violet as a star denotes the violet's power to establish an identity that is not wholly constrained by social conventions. The sea violet is tested in harsh and violent conditions, but emerges "triumphant and powerful" (Duplessis, 1986, p. 12). In *Storm* the violence of the storm is transmuted into the liminal moment in which a "weighted leaf" that is "hurled out" instead "whirls up and sinks,/a green stone" (lines 9-13).

The violet also demonstrates how limiting and incompatible the conventions of femininity are. The image of the white violet "scented on its stalk" (line 2) and with its "one root" (line 12), indicate its stationary, solitary and unchanging position. This, along with its allusion to purity in its whiteness and its attracting qualities in its scent, means that it is operating within feminine conventions. The image of the other violets, in contrast, is therefore found to encompass more because they exceed these limitations. In *Sea Poppies* the beauty of the sea poppies is positioned as superior to the meadow poppies precisely because the sea poppies exceed their conventional boundaries and representations (Alfrey, 1992, p. 36). Like the violet, they also become tinged with fire in this moment of transcendence:

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf? (lines 13-17).

However, H.D. also questions how viable these conventions are. Despite its apparent obedience to feminine convention the white violet's image is made problematic by the sensuous alliteration of sibilants – is, scented, its, stalk. White traditionally symbolises purity and the violet modesty, so sensuality is incompatible with these

demands. The white violet is therefore more than what the heteronormative dictates – it exceeds the narrow definitions which society has assigned to it. It also has to inhabit mutually exclusive positions simultaneously – that of modesty and purity as well as sensuality.

There is a sense of eroticism in *Sea Violet*, as in practically all of the other *Sea Garden* poems. While Robinson categorically states that “H.D.’s poems are not poem of desire” (Robinson, 1982, p. 57), I would argue that desire is a motivating factor behind all her poems. The image of the rose is so saturated with conventional images of love and desire that by deliberately choosing to write on the rose and placing it as the first poem in the book H.D. is foregrounding desire:

you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind. (*Sea Rose*, lines 10-14).

This scene of the rose being “flung” and “lifted” is very like a sexual scene. Flowers are an appropriate metaphor for sexuality and reproduction, as well as feminine beauty and poetry, as flowers are often a significant part of the reproductive system of a plant (Wheeler, 2003, p. 496). Although flowers are conventionally used in poetry to symbolise the woman’s experience of heterosexual desire or love, H.D. disrupts these conventional desires and expectations by situating her flowers in harsh, unconventional environments and by allocating them conflicting attributes (Wheeler, 2003, pp. 505, 511). In this sense, the offerings of *Orchard*, which consist of “fallen hazel-nuts,/stripped late of their green sheaths” (lines 23-24) and “pomegranates already broken,/and shrunken figs/and quinces untouched” (lines 28-30) demonstrate the sterility of the sheltered and artificially ordered. These images, extended to the sheltered woman, evoke the damage that conventional femininity entails for women.

Their possibilities for identity remain unrealised and limited, and their contribution to community therefore is unable to be of any value, just like the offerings of broken pomegranates and shrunken figs. The violet acts as the object of desire, so that the poem functions as an image which relays desire, just as Gregory notes with *Sea Rose* (Gregory, 1986, p. 545). However, unlike conventional love poetry, the violet is both object and subject, not the powerless object displayed helplessly to be looked at and possessed by an other. The images of the violet, and its various positions in the landscape, contribute to the feeling of movement and action associated with the violet. In particular, the use of the verb “catch” in the second-last line – “but you catch the light” – implies the action of a subject. The violet achieves agency through the choices it makes in regard to feminine conventions; rather than acting within these conventions, the violet resists them.

Sea Violet can stand as a single poem, as it has been treated, in part, here. However it is also linked to various other poems in the book, and not only by the fact of being collected in the same volume. The poem *Sea Gods* is also connected to this poem in two main ways: firstly, the form of the title, the word “Sea” followed by the name of the personae of the poem, and secondly, by the extensive references to violets that make up the second section of *Sea Gods*:

But we bring violets,
great masses – single, sweet,
wood-violets, stream-violets,
violets from a wet marsh. (lines 20-23).

In *The Wind Sleepers* there are broken shells on the sand, the same image as in *Sea Violet*. In *The Gift* there are violets that “streaked black ridges/through the grass” (lines 45-46) and a hill that is “not set with black violets” (line 85). The violets in *The Gift* become part of the “tedious detail” that marks off the “self-referential,

closed world” of the garden and the image, rather than a mark of resistance and exaltation (Laity, 1996, p. 46). In other words, while the violet in *Sea Violet* functions to exceed the limits of heteronormativity, the violets in *The Gift* instead act as images that reinforce these limits. The image of the violets is therefore subject to numerous and incompatible interpretations, which are not confined to either compliance or resistance with the heteronormative; instead, the image of the violets is able to assume different and conflicting meanings at different times and places, sometimes even simultaneously. This multiplicity is a direct intersection in H.D.’s poetry and Butler’s theories of gender and identity, whereby the image is resistant but this resistance is within certain limits.

By applying Judith Butler’s theories of performativity and gender identity to this poem the violet can be seen as resisting the heteronormative, but only from within the limits of the heteronormative. As with any system of power, the heteronormative is supported by other forces, which are likewise both prohibitive and generative. The wind, as discussed earlier, acts as an agent of re-enforcement of the heteronormative; H.D. uses wind imagery to provide the pressure under which the violet’s proliferation of identity must take place. The sea-violet, at least, offers outright resistance to the heteronormative, as it “lies fronting all the wind” (line 5). The white violet is held up as the ideal that the heteronormative promotes for women – pure, attractive, and stable, and is not described in terms of movement like the other violets. The white violet therefore appears as vulnerable – it does not have the resistance displayed by the sea-violet nor the group support of the “fluttering” blue violets. Additionally the white violet is described as “scented on its stalk”, so it appears to be on display, waiting for an other who will choose it. Furthermore the

white violet is apparently denigrated in contrast to the blue violets in the second stanza:

The greater blue violets,
flutter on the hill,
but who would change for these
who would change for these
one root of the white sort? (lines 8-12).

It should be noted that this is framed in the form of a question and not an assertion.

While the heteronormative works to uphold its laws and discourage questioning of these laws, to resist the heteronormative is not to put in place another form of law that asserts, and thereby pre-validates identity, but to question discrepancies and choices within the heteronormative. Guest makes note of the fact that the Moravian religion, in which H.D. was raised, bound its congregation to “not pass judgment by uttering a word against those who differed from themselves” (1984, p. 9). This seems to predispose H.D. to being accepting, rather than condemning, of difference.

The poem creates multiple and conflicting images and demands for the violet, which resists the conventional gender binaries of heteronormativity. For Butler this is one of the main aims of resistance to the heteronormative – to proliferate gender meanings from within the system to such an extent that they become meaningless. In this seventeen line poem the conflated violet is described as scented, fragile as agate, fronting the wind, fluttering on the hill, frail, on the edge of a sand-hill, catching the light, like frost, and like a star edged with fire. This disrupts the idea of a stable identity, and demonstrates how identity is constantly being reiterated and performed. It also demonstrates how the heteronormative is both prohibitive and generative – in some cases the violet conforms to conventions (scented, fragile, frail) but in other cases it is subversive (fronting the wind, fluttering on the hill). The imagery here, in its proliferation of feminine flower imagery, shows how identity is constructed –

whatever actions the violet performs make up the violet's identity, so it can simultaneously be both fragile and resistant. Additionally, the violet exists on a variety of margins – on the shoreline, on the edge of the sand-hill and on the edges of conventions. The margins are, as Butler notes, powerful positions from which to challenge the heteronormative. If we add the other references to violets in the book then more meanings of the violet are made. In *Sea Gods*, for example, the violet's identity is multiplied beyond any restraint: the violets are single, sweet, wood-violets, stream-violets, violets from a wet marsh, violets in clumps from hills, violets with tufts of earth at their roots, violets from rocks, blue violets, moss violets, cliff violets, river-violets, yellow violets, violets like red ash, deep-purple bird-foot violets, hyacinth-violets, and white violets "whiter than the in-rush/of your own white surf" (lines 36-37). H.D.'s insistent proliferation of violet imagery works to refuse any stable focus on the image as an object, which demonstrates why to read her work purely through the lens of Imagist poetry is to ignore the way she proliferates the images of a particular object.

Rather than presenting judgements or even overtly commenting on the positions she herself is exploring, H.D.'s ideas take the form of scenes (Morris, 2003, p. 28). H.D. sets up established social positions, such as vulnerability of women, through images, and then explores this idea with a series of further images, without overt judgement. Morris points out that often in the *Sea Garden* poems "the agent, the act, and the object collapse into a single charged ideogram" (Morris, 2003, p. 28). This occurs in *Pear Tree*, in which the pear tree functions as agent, act and object, simultaneously transcending being a pear tree while also being celebrated for this very reason:

no flower ever opened
 so staunch a white leaf,
 no flower ever parted silver

from such rare silver; (lines 8-11).

The pear tree is obviously in blossom, ripe with the promise of an abundant harvest of pears. In part a common sight, this image is layered with that of the pear tree in blossom as special and of it exceeding its status and becoming more than a pear tree. This allows for multiple interpretations to operate simultaneously. The garden within which the poems are placed acts much like the heteronormative, and the repression it exerts works both prohibitively and generatively, thus producing the resistance which H.D.'s personae exhibit. The violet is, in many ways, an invalid identity according to the standards of the heteronormative, but as an invalid identity it remains within the garden, and as such disrupts the conventions of the garden/heteronormativity.

Chapter 3: *The Contest* and the Desire Poems

There are eleven poems I have placed in the desire poem category in *Sea Garden*. They are *The Helmsman*, *The Shrine*, *Pursuit*, *The Contest*, *The Gift*, *Loss*, *Huntress*, *The Cliff Temple*, *Sea Gods*, *Acon*, and *Prisoners*. As I have established, H.D.'s gardens are already gendered, and she is seeking to explore and destabilise that gendering. These poems deal with unfulfilled desire and the pursuit of an other who remains constantly elusive. The poems operate as narratives of desire but also work to entrap the other that they desire within the poem, so that the poems self-reflexively become enactments of the narrative. However, the other is continually escaping entrapment in H.D.'s poems, which perhaps articulates the way in which desire works outside the heteronormative ideal. That is, the desire in the poems functions to frustrate the 'perfect' heterosexual union, through being beset with difficulties and often remaining unfulfilled, albeit usually remaining within a heterosexual context. Therefore, desire in the poems is not only implicated in cementing heterosexual love but can also function to destabilise heteronormative ideas of love and desire. In *Pursuit* the personae pursues his/her beloved while also attempting to entrap the beloved within the poem detailing this pursuit, and ultimately, the beloved escapes both the personae and the poem itself.

In this chapter I will argue that the 'desire' poems of *Sea Garden* work performatively (especially through their self-reflexive status) to subvert heteronormative desire from within its terms through a close reading of *The Contest*.

The exploration of desire is used by H.D. to queer the gaze. According to Laura Mulvey, in her essay on the gaze and cinema, there is a gendered split in the gaze, so

that the man is the one who has the right to 'look'. On the other hand women are considered passive and "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). A woman, in herself, is not of any significance, instead it is the fact that she "holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19) which is important. In this case, it is the man and his gaze that are the dominant terms, not the woman and her visual display. The man, with his gaze and furthermore his right to look, demonstrates his power, dominance and control. Moreover this convention places the greater importance on male desire, while female desire is negated; instead the woman becomes merely an object to reflect back male desire. H.D.'s poems however question this convention, and also question the authority of the gaze itself. Furthermore she demonstrates how gender is an imposed, not a natural, division, and is therefore in agreement with Butler on this point. By not explicitly gendering the "I" or the "you" of *The Contest*, and yet relying on certain assumptions of the 'male gaze', H.D. opens up both positions to a multiplicity of possibilities and uncertainties as regards gender and identity.

The Contest is the sixth poem in the book, and deals with a statue or bas-relief in the garden. The statue is an ornament within the garden, something man-made (although H.D. deliberately blurs this attribute of the statue) imposed on the natural landscape of the garden. Gregory sees the statue as one which is "highly liminal", with its position between nature and human artifice (Gregory, 1986, p. 545). H.D. seems to be directing attention to the way in which culture seeks to regulate nature, so that what is taken for granted as natural has in fact already being contaminated by culture

and so is not the purely natural that it appears to be. This is part of H.D.'s critique of conventional gardens, and, by extension, society. Conventions that are accepted as natural, and therefore inevitable and unchangeable, are in effect imposed by society and hence open to change.

The title, with its use of "the", obviously refers to a specific contest. However the context of this event remains obfuscated, so that questions about who the participants are in the contest, and exactly what is being contested remain unanswered. I would argue that the real contest is the one that H.D. herself sets up in the first stanza between culture and nature. The statue is described as being "modelled/with straight tool-edge" but also as "chiselled like rocks/that are eaten into by the sea" (lines 1-4). Exactly who has formed the statue and how is contested; the implication is that even though the statue 'is' modelled with some sort of tool, the *effect* is identical to the work of nature over time. The simile here works to disturb a strict opposition or privileging between nature and culture. In other words, the use of the word "modelled" implies a predetermined plan of how the statue should look has been followed, while "straight tool-edge" refers to man-made tooling and involvement. However the use of "chiselled . . . by the sea" confuses the strict involvement of nature in forming the statue, for "chiselled" refers back to "chisel", which is of course a man-made tool. Throughout the poem there are images of stone and wood, both materials commonly used in ancient sculpture (Keeling, 1998, p. 191). The binary of culture/nature which H.D. has set up is undermined, and nature is shown to be unable to be discretely separated from culture.

In line with the concept of a contest, there is a constant tension throughout the poem. This tension is associated with the binary of nature/culture, so that restraint is linked with culture, as occurs in a typical garden, and agency is linked with nature. This is evidenced in the statue itself, as it is described as “taut”, “clenched” and “bound”. It seems to be under some restraint or to be contained:

With the turn and grasp of your wrist
and the chords’ stretch,
there is a glint like worn brass.

The ridge of your breast is taut,
and under each the shadow is sharp,
and between the clenched muscles
of your slender hips. (lines 5-11).

Of course, this restraint is not necessarily imposed from the outside only – this constraint could also refer to self-restraint. Furthermore the reference to “worn brass” suggests this restraint has existed for some time. Other examples of restraint occur in the fifth stanza, where “a great band clasps your forehead/and its heavy twists of gold” (lines 17-18): the band suggests restraint with its “heavy twists of gold”, like chains. Further on in the poem the statue is described as “bent under a weight of snow” (line 21) and having “bound hair” (line 30). However most of these ‘restraints’ are related to choice, and therefore suggest a blurring of the opposition ‘restraint’ and ‘agency’. In *The Helmsman* there is tension between the land and the sea; the choice that the persona must make between them seems to be initiated by the Helmsman, and so is therefore a specific choice as to whether or not to act. In *Huntress* there is a similar tension and choice between the stationary and the active, the ploughed land and the hunt, but as in *The Helmsman*, the tension is partially alleviated through action: in *The Contest* this tension is unrelieved because the statue cannot engage in action, only in its stationary imitation.

The statue however is not only representative of restraint, chosen or otherwise. It is also described as “rigid and mighty” (line 16), and is given a sense of permanence, as it is “granite and the ore in rocks” (line 17). But, as in the first stanza, H.D. then partly undoes the image that she has set up so that the statue is treasured and worshipped (being adorned with a “great band” and “heavy twists of gold”) and therefore in a sense objectified in its idolisation by the speaker. The statue is restrained by the very items which presage its value. Rather than presenting images that can be interpreted as positive or negative, H.D.’s images are imbued with both characteristics, so that attributes and values are shown to contain no inherent characteristics in themselves. Instead social conventions apply meaning to certain attributes and values, or else attributes and values accrue different social meanings over time. The important point to note is that H.D. makes these meanings arbitrary and ambiguous by removing them from positive/negative binaries. This is the case with the binaries of nature/culture and restraint/agency that she blurs in *The Contest*, so that they cannot be said to have any inherent stability or meaning. In *Prisoners* the image of the spear-flower confutes traditional masculine-feminine iconography, by combining the two seemingly disparate images. On a heterosexual level, the spear, linked with warfare, is a masculine symbol while the flower is a feminine symbol, but here they are conflated. This demonstrates the instability of these gender divisions:

Once you lifted a spear-flower.
 I remember how you stooped
 to gather it-
 and it flamed, the leaf and shoot
 and the threads, yellow, yellow,-
 sheer till they burnt
 to red-purple in the cup. (lines 61-67).

These social conventions, such as the heteronormativity that H.D. works to destabilise, are indicative of the generative and prohibitive laws that Butler, following Foucault, writes on, and which will be discussed further below.

The persona of *The Contest* is noticeably absent. Indeed, the “I” of the persona is only indicated by the use of “you” in reference to the statue. The persona remains, or tries to remain, outside the poem. Keeling observes that the persona has “no identity to retain or lose” and exists only in the moment(s) of observing the statue (Keeling, 1998, p. 191). In other poems in *Sea Garden* H.D. uses the poem to enact the very thing that the poem is expressing, so the poem is used as a tool of pursuit and attempted capture in *Pursuit*, or as the gift to a lover in *The Gift*. The poems are performative, and their performativity establishes the identity of the personae. In this case, it is interesting to view *The Contest* as poem that does in fact embody a contest. Therefore, just as *Pursuit* and *The Gift* are narratives between two lovers, so *The Contest* becomes a contest between the “you” (the statue) and the invisible “I” of the poem. The restraint of the poem thereby becomes implicated in the form of the poem itself, so that the poem is used by the persona to restrain the statue. Of course, this then raises the question of whether the statue is really a statue at all or a device used by the persona to control and objectify the “you”, who may be an actual lover. Hatlen considers the “you” to be a man described as if he were a statue whereas Keeling definitively states that the “you” is a statue or bas-relief (Hatlen, 1995, p. 120; Keeling, 1998, p. 190). This “you” could be envisioned by the persona as a statue in order to facilitate greater control over him/her. This would explain why the statue is both exalted and controlled at the same time, as in the use of “heavy twists

of gold” to denote value and constraint. In this way, the “I” appears to be setting up a subject/object relationship, which as I will show, cannot be sustained.

As in traditional love poetry, men purport to worship women while ultimately controlling them. Duplessis terms this “romantic thralldom”, which she defines as

an all-encompassing, totally defining love between unequals. The lover has the power of conferring self-worth and purpose upon the loved one. Such love is possessive, and while those enthralled feel it completes and even transforms them, they are also enslaved. (1979, pp. 178-179).

Duplessis goes on to note how this form of love is dependant upon unequal gender divisions, and upon a relationship of dominance and submission (Duplessis, 1979, p. 179). Furthermore she sees this form of love as one that is culturally encoded and even central to Western culture, as well as being a recurring theme in H.D.’s work (Duplessis, 1979, p. 179). This is the sort of relationship that the “I” of *The Contest* is attempting to impose on the “you”, but while Duplessis points out that being the object of such a relationship brings paralysis and obliteration (1979, p. 179), here both the persona and the statue share in these attributes. The statue, as a statue, is obviously in a paralysed and restrained form, although its attitude of movement, agency and notable tension blur this. All the binaries about the statue are blurred, including those of nature/culture and subject/object. However, the persona is almost obliterated from the poem, gaining voice – for Keeling the persona has only eyes (Keeling, 1998, p. 187) – only from its relationship to the statue. In the speaker’s dependency on, and enthrallment with, the statue, H.D. deliberately points out the instability of subject/object relations, where the gazing subject’s actual status as subject is dependent on the object. This poem is attempting, in the many blurrings of binary oppositions above, to undo the conventions of romantic love based on binary gender differences that support the heteronormative.

H.D. continually furthers the destabilisation of heteronormative desire. Keeling identifies a device that H.D. uses throughout the book, and which he traces back to Sappho: that desire is sustained not because the one desired is unseen but because the one desired remains unattainable (Keeling, 1998, p. 186). Likewise in *The Cliff Temple* the one desired remains perpetually out of reach – “you are further than this,/still further on another cliff” (lines 62-63). In *Acon*, despite the persona’s efforts, the light from Hyella’s face “falls from its flower . . . [and] perishes upon burnt grass” (lines 25, 28), so that desire is not enough to retain her. Whether a statue, bas-relief or a symbolic representation of a god, the figure of this poem remains perpetually beyond fulfilling the desire of the persona, or being able to ever be completely ‘possessed’ as an object. There is no way for the “I” and the “you” to connect, and any sense of wholeness (of identity) becomes impossible, so that the persona fragments the statue by his/her gaze and is in turn fragmented, and undone, by his/her inability to exist within the poem and through his/her dependence on the object (Keeling, 1998, p. 194)

The first section presents a statue, or possibly bas-relief. The statue is inactive, but in a position that suggests movement, and the persona is concerned only with the body of the statue (Keeling, 1998, pp. 191, 193). The statue is “modelled” and “chiselled”, and there are clear descriptions of its physical appearance. The last stanza of this section offers a sweeping, downward look of the statue:

From the circle of your cropped hair
there is light,
and about your male torso
and the foot-arch and the straight ankle. (lines 12-15).

This description is one that conventionally men would write about women. As a statue, the figure is clearly meant to be displayed and looked at. It is fashioned for this purpose. Furthermore, as a statue in a garden its function is clearly ornamental. The description is a physical one, and the physical attributes described are the ones that are typically those chosen in physical descriptions of women: the wrist, the breast, the “slender hips”, the hair, the torso, the foot-arch and the “straight ankle”. However H.D. undoes this typically feminine description with the use of the words “male torso” (line 14), as well as the image of strength that is conveyed. If the statue is obviously male, then the use of the phrase “male torso” becomes redundant, so there is a sense that the adjective ‘male’ is only useful here in that the speaker is describing a woman. H.D. deliberately juxtaposes conflicting phrasing and images to obscure and proliferate the gendered and sexual meanings of the encounter. This device is also used in *Loss*, in which the persona praises the image of a beloved who could be either a youth or a woman but who remains indeterminate: “And I wondered as you clasped/your shoulder-strap/at the strength of your wrist/and the turn of your fingers” (lines 42-45).

The second section of *The Contest* presents a god-like image. However the statue is also presented ambiguously and instead of being objectified, as in the first stanza, begins to be metaphorised (Keeling, 1998, pp. 191, 193). Here the statue is “rigid and mighty” (line 16) – both powerful and unchanging, or unchangeable. It is as permanent in the landscape as the “granite and ore in rocks” (line 17). The statue becomes here not imposed on the natural landscape, as in section one, but an integral part of that landscape, and therefore begins to escape from the objectified image of the first section. Here the statue ‘becomes’ the sea:

You are splendid,
 your arms are fire;
 you have entered the hill-straits –
 a sea treads upon the hill-slopes. (lines 22-25).

For H.D. the sea functions as a symbol of possibility and transcendence of binaries.

Unlike the land, it offers multiple interpretations of gender and identity. For the statue to ‘become’ the sea demonstrates how it has avoided being objectified, as occurred in the first stanza, and how the possibility for agency is not denied to the statue.

The third section has three stanzas, each of five lines. Here the statue, rather than being imposed on the landscape or representative of the forces of nature, becomes even further part of the landscape (Keeling, 1998, pp. 191, 193). Keeling also notes how the gaze in this poem breaks the object of the poem down into fragments without establishing any sort of relationship between the fragments and the whole (Keeling, 1998, pp. 178-179):

The narcissus has copied the arch
 of your slight breast:
 your feet are citron-flowers,
 your knees, cut from white-ash,
 your thighs are rock-cistus. (lines 31-35).

The statue has now completely escaped from the persona’s totalising and objectifying view; all the persona can ‘master’ are small fragments.

This poem can be seen to engage directly with several of Butler’s ideas regarding gender and identity. By obscuring the gender of both the statue and the persona, H.D. allows for multiple interpretations to be made about both. This means that the use of the phrase “male torso” in the poem could equally apply to a male or female statue, so that the very phrase becomes what Butler terms a “free-floating artifice” (Butler, 1990, p. 10). The poem can be read as encoding either heterosexual or homosexual

desire, or both simultaneously on different levels. What is demonstrated here is the breakdown of the “coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” that Butler considers necessary for the heteronormative to function effectively (Butler, 1990, p. 23). Most importantly, the poem does not invalidate any of these readings, but instead is positioned to resist a single, dominant reading. The image of the statue and the persona enclosed within the garden demonstrates how disruption must come from *within* the garden. Other personae in the book may seek to escape the garden – notably in *The Gift* – but this is shown to be impossible. The resistance shown by H.D.’s personae must take place within the garden, as there is no way out of it, just as resistance to the heteronormative is generated within the heteronormative system and thus must take place within it.

As mentioned above, the poem creates the truth the persona speaks of. That is, the poem is the contest – the poem is the performative utterance that Austin writes of that is “saying something as well as doing something” (Austin, 1975, p. 140), which corresponds to Butler’s theory of performance. Here the binaries of true and false are not applicable; rather, whatever can be performed is possible. In this way, the heteronormative can be resisted, and identities and desires which are not validated by the heteronormative can be enacted. *The Contest* enacts a ‘blurring’ of subject/object, the gaze and both of these things in relation to desire, therefore confounding the heteronormative. In this way, the title of the poem could even be seen to refer to the contest or conflict between the heteronormative and the non-heteronormative, between stability and instability. By making the gender of the statue and the persona ambiguous the poem does not allow the heteronormative to pass judgement on their identity as valid or invalid – instead they inhabit an ambiguous position which

confounds the principles of heteronormativity. The sub-title of *The Shrine* similarly works to create ambiguities in the gender of both the persona and addressee of the poem. The sub-title of “She watches over the sea” can refer to the persona, who is clearly observing the sea in the poem, or could be the addressee of the poem, to whom the shrine is dedicated. In this case, “She [who] watches over the sea” could clearly be some form of implied title. Conversely, both the persona and the addressee could be the “she” watching over the sea. The poem itself never invalidates any of these options.

The way in which the statue inhabits different positions in the three sections is an example of the multiple but simultaneous demands that are inherent in being a certain gender, which are disjunctive and incompatible. However the construction of the statue is also relative to identity and subversion. Butler contends that if identity is viewed as a construct, rather than being stable and unchangeable, then the subject can exercise both agency and be subversive (Butler, 1990, p. 188). Here the statue embodies this idea of construction, which in this poem is used for reconfiguration and enables repetition that disrupts the notion of a stable heteronormative identity. However, as Butler herself recognises, this identity is prompted by and remains within the heteronormative discourse, although it occurs on the margins of that discourse. In *Sea Gods* this marginal and liminal space is clearly articulated: “O privet-white, you will paint/the lintel of wet sand with froth” (lines 51-52). Here the domestic image of privet hedging marks the boundary of H.D.’s heteronormative gardens, but which is contested by the sea’s froth, which works to continually remark and redefine its own boundaries. H.D. then, in line with Butler’s theories of rearticulation *within* the boundaries of the heteronormative, seeks in *The Contest* to

use certain conventions of heterosexual desire - the gaze and the subject/object position it implies - directly against the boundaries set up by heteronormative discourse.

Chapter 4: *Cities*

Cities is, in some ways, different from the other poems in the book in that it takes place in the centre of the heteronormative world of culture, rather than in the marginal, natural landscapes of the other poems. It is the last poem in the book and functions as a form of conclusion for *Sea Garden*. However, the setting is tied to the garden imagery with the reference to the hundred houses “crowded into one garden-space” (line 9), so that the natural and the social/cultural become co-existent but conflicting ideas. The city, and its associate culture, correlates to the idea of community, and the community of voices that H.D. has created in her book. The poem sets up two ideas which, although conflicting at times, H.D. works to amalgamate: those of beauty and warfare/strength. Beauty, as in the ‘imagist’ poems, is traditionally a feminine attribute and war traditionally masculine. In *Cities* this binary is represented by the old people and the new. The male maker of cities has built both the old city and the new city, and created the new people for the new city. The apparently female persona is of the old city and identifies herself as belonging to the old people, being persecuted by the new people. H.D., however, undoes this binary by attempting to form a beauty that incorporates strength through the poem, with her layering of the images of the different cities. Her lament throughout *Sea Garden* has been that of the “beauty without strength,/[which] chokes out life” (*Sheltered Garden*, lines 41-42) and in *Prisoners* she achieves beauty with strength/warfare in the image of the spear-flower, which however is consumed by flame. In *Cities* the new city and the new people are created for “slow growth/to a beauty unrivalled yet- ” (lines 38-39). It is this new beauty, with strength, that offers hope for the future, and is a reiteration of the same strategy that H.D. uses in the

flower poems. It is fitting, therefore, that the book should open with *Sea Rose* and close with this poem, which rearticulates the same idea but in a community, rather than individual, context.

The title signals how the speakers have abandoned the natural landscape, in which all the other poems take place, and retreated to the social landscape of the cities, what Morris calls the “terrain of exile: the urban marketplace” (Morris, 2003, p. 134). The social landscape also points to how the problem of reconfiguring identity is at root a social problem. The title implies there is more than one city, and as the poem progresses there seem to be four cities within the city the speaker is in – the city of “the old splendour” (line 76), the present new city “for new splendour” (line 38), the future new city for which the persona waits, and finally a city “peopled/with spirits, not ghosts” (lines 78-79). All of these co-exist with H.D.’s use of the palimpsest.

The poem is essentially concerned with forms of beauty. Like the poem *Sheltered Garden* the prearranged city with its “street after street/each patterned alike” (line 5-6) is antithetical to real beauty and thus life itself. While beauty has been worshipped in the city, with the references to the temples, it is a beauty that is prescribed and conventional, following a preordered plan:

with the beauty of temple
and space before temple,
arch upon perfect arch,
of pillars and corridors that led out
to strange court-yards and porches (lines 14-18).

This form of beauty produces a torpor in those who see it, so that the maker of cities “grew faint/with the splendour of palaces” (lines 22-23). Alfrey identifies the maker of cities as an outsider, who threatens the native community of the city as through his interference he creates an imbalance in the city (Alfrey, 2000, p. 96). Clearly

designated a male by H.D. (with the use of the pronoun “he”) the maker of cities is a god-like figure who imposes his ideas on others. This maker can even be figured as a gardener who attempts to impose his will on nature. As such he is an embodiment of the dominant/submissive relationships H.D. is attempting to undo in *Sea Garden*. As in *The Contest*, the worship of beauty is a form of control and the maker of cities attempts to construct beauty to his own preordered plan of how beauty should be.

In his attempt to create new beauty and new life, the maker of cities instead creates “souls [who] live, hideous yet - /O disfigured, defaced/with no trace of the beauty/men once held so light” (lines 48-51). These new people are alienated and mob-like, divorced from the appreciation of beauty by the mechanics of modern life (Alfrey, 2000, p. 96). Their speech is machine-like, abrupt and static:

You are useless. We live.
We await great events.
We are spread through this earth.
We protect our strong race. (lines 61-64).

This image contrasts strongly with that of the old people, who are compared to bees with “old dust of stray pollen/dull on our torn wings” (lines 55-56). The old people are essentially part of a strongly bonded and interdependent community, like a hive of bees. For Alfrey, the persona is clearly a woman (Alfrey, 2000, p. 97) but I would argue that instead the persona embodies only some conventional feminine qualities. The very reference to the old people (of which the persona is one) as bees problematises the speaker as female, as in the Victorian sentimentalism associated with flowers that H.D. draws upon and disputes in *Sea Garden*, the bee typically encodes the man while the woman is encoded as the flower (Guthrie, 2007, p. 73).

The persona does act, in part, as a counterpoint to the maker of cities. While his designation as “maker of cities” sets him apart from the community, and places him in a dominant position over the people of the city, the persona’s use of the pronoun “we” places him/her clearly within the community. Likewise, in the bee analogy, the persona is placed as one of a number of worker bees, in contrast to the isolation and dominance of the god-like maker of cities. The new people whom the maker of cities produces also reproduce his idea of dominance: “You are useless./Your cell takes the place/of our young future strength.” (lines 65-67). Furthermore, the old city that he created, with the “beauty of temple/and space before temple,/arch upon perfect arch” (lines 14-16) contains no reference to the people of the community, only its surroundings. There are gender divisions that can be discerned here: the maker of cities can be interpreted as a male god-like figure who imposes his will on others, just as the Christian god or the Greek god Zeus are portrayed. On the other hand, bees are ruled over by a queen bee. However the tension Gledhill (1993, p. 176) identifies between the old civilisation being destroyed and the future new city (as opposed to the present new city), yet to be built, which provides hope at the end of the poem, resists gendering. The maker of cities has contributed to both the old and new cities; it is his vision which created the old city “not in utter disgust,/in ironical play” (lines 11-12) and the new city:

So he built a new city,
 ah can we believe, not ironically
 but for new splendour
 constructed new people
 to lift through slow growth
 to a beauty unrivalled yet - (lines 35-39).

Neither city then can be designated discretely masculine, as they are undone by the “ironic play” which points to a form of subversion of such stable binaries as masculine/feminine. Conversely the persona is one of those from the old city, but

she looks forward to the hope offered by the future new city: “is our task the less sweet-/who recall the old splendour,/await the new beauty of cities?” (lines 75-77). There are actually two new cities, the present new city and the future new city, that has yet to be built. This addition of a third city further blurs the simple binaries of old/new. The old city glorified beauty and the present new city glorifies war and industry, whereas the future new city can possibly encapsulate both. Essentially, within *Cities* binaries are set up and then destabilised, which itself works to undermine the binaries that support the gender binary, thereby destabilising gender itself. The maker of cities, for example, is able to create “seething life” (line 45), so that he is conversely able to bring forth life, a feminine attribute, but it is life which is “disfigured, defaced” (line 49) and machine-like, pointing to his inability to fully inhabit the feminine space of fertility.

The last section of the poem is titled, in square brackets, *The city is peopled*. It serves as a coda not only for the poem but for the book as a whole. It is worth therefore quoting in full:

*The city is peopled
with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:*

*Though they crowded between
and usurped the kiss of my mouth
their beauty was your gift,
their beauty, your life.* (lines 78-83, italics in original).

Exactly who is speaking here is uncertain; it is possibly the persona for the main poem, *Cities*. However the use of “your” indicates a you/I dialectic, rather than the communal “we” of the main poem. This section collapses all the personae in the book into a “you” and “I”, and encapsulates H.D.’s main concerns throughout *Sea Garden*: beauty, life and desire.

Firstly there is a need to distinguish between ghosts and spirits. Ghosts are forms assumed by the dead, often because of past regrets or to avenge wrongs from their lifetime that have remained unresolved. Spirits is a more problematic term, and blurs the binaries of life and death. Spirit is implicated in the binary of body/spirit or material/immaterial. While spirit can be associated with death there is also the spirit of life, which animates the body and without which the body would be dead. In this case, spirit can be linked to Butler's idea of an inner core of identity, which escapes a definite explanation in performativity. The term spirit then crosses over between life and death, and can signal either, whereas the term ghost is indicative of death.

Spirits exist on the margins between life and death. Like the people in *Cities*, the spirits are trapped within the city, and defy binary divisions. The new beauty, and new forms of identity, that H.D. is seeking for are therefore to be found within the city. There is the possibility that if there is a future new city, that collapses beauty and strength, these spirits – potential identities - will be able to inhabit it. The spirits embody the past, and their inclusion in the city signifies what Morris describes as the pastoral past and the “urban, industrial present” (2003, p. 134) and also blurs the boundaries between the two, as they also represent the future possibilities.

The identity of the subject, according to Butler, is unstable and constantly changing. Likewise the identity of the city, and therefore its people, are shown to be subject to processes of change. The city can simultaneously accommodate the old people, who are associated with beauty, and the new people, who glorify war, so that the city contains the incompatible demands of the two peoples, as well as offer hope of a future new city that could accommodate the spirits, who are potential beings. The old city, dedicated to beauty, has produced subjects who conform to its ideals, and

those who rebel against them, just as heteronormativity does. Robinson notes that H.D. frequently uses the imagery of cities to symbolise heterosexual marriage, one of heteronormativity's most important institutions (1982, p. 101). If so, then the city's depiction is an implicit criticism of marriage, and how it can function as entrapment or containment, subject to conflicting and incompatible demands and expectations. It rearticulates the ideas of romantic thralldom explored in chapter three, in which heteronormative love is reliant on binaries that link men with dominance and women with submission.

The construction of the city implies, and indeed is demonstrated in the poem, as being open to the possibility of change and reconfiguration due to its very constructiveness. Construction, even of a city, implies possible agency. Within the city, and in the book itself, there is a reconstruction of beauty and ideas of beauty being perpetuated. This reimaging of beauty takes place at the margins of, and yet within, the heteronormative. Van Oort's ideas on community authorisation, like Butler's theory of the performative being authorised by the dominant (heteronormative) cultural community, are central to these ideas of beauty. The city, as a community, provides the standards and ideals for the community, and conventional beauty is at first promoted. Butler's belief is that the concepts which determine a subject's gender and identity come from within the community, not the subject (Butler, 2004, p. 1). In this poem the maker of cities and the persona are reacting to and commenting on these community ideals. However, while the choices subjects make are informed and prompted by their community, they are not dictated by it, and so there remains space, and thus agency, for the subject to manoeuvre. The

book ends then with the hope of a future new city that has yet to be built but which could possibly take the place of H.D.'s *Sea Garden* in the real social world.

Conclusion: H.D. and Gender Identity

H.D. is often accused of being apolitical, or of subscribing to old-fashioned conservatism (King, 1986, p. 93). However, as this thesis has shown, her first book of poetry can be read as an investigation of gender identity as would be advocated by Judith Butler. As Butler herself points out, this is always a highly politicised area, and gender itself is a term that is already political (Butler, 1990, p. 11). Therefore H.D. cannot write about gender in any way without already being implicated in politics or the social world. Those critics who write about her isolation and “escapism” from the world, seem, to me, to be misinterpreting her.

Rather than writing in an area that is outside historical time and space, as some critics have positioned her work, H.D.’s early work is highly relevant to social issues that existed in her own time and in the present. That she knowingly engaged with gender and identity issues in her work is undisputable; however, applying Butler’s theories to her work opens it up to new interpretations. Instead of the overly-simplistic and “crystalline” qualities that early reviewers saw in her work, H.D.’s first book of poetry is far more complex and far more engaged in social and political issues.

Her ‘imagist’ poems expose the conventions regarding gender and identity associated with women. She proliferates the meanings that conventional feminine imagery, such as that associated with flowers, embody, so that they exhibit a new form of beauty, which incorporates strength and resistance. H.D.’s desire poems explore new forms of desire that open up multiple possibilities for how desire can be interpreted

and enacted upon, rather than the narrow and restrictive definition of desire as advocated by the heteronormative. *Cities* seems hopeful that the community of speakers she has created with *Sea Garden* will one day find a real social world to inhabit. All of the *Sea Garden* poems can be read as an investigation of the way in which the nature/culture binary is employed to stabilise conventional definitions of gender, as well as the way in which the destabilisation of such implicit binaries works to open up the notions of gender and identity.

H.D.'s *Sea Garden* offers the forms of resistance and dissidence that Butler advocates in regard to gender and identity. Rather than advocating a new form of law, H.D.'s book offers various interpretations and situations that explore various forms of embodying gender and identity, including the associate qualities of sexuality and desire. While I agree with Galvin that to use queer theory to interpret H.D.'s work is both instructive and illuminating, and that H.D. was certainly "seeking images of queerness, role models if you will, and new ways of thinking" (Galvin, 1999, p. 124), I have to disagree with her that H.D. was doing this with the "recovery of ancient, pre-heterocentric ways" (Galvin, 1999, p. 124). For Galvin to speak in this way is to negate the basic notions of queer theory. Furthermore for Galvin to see H.D.'s work as primarily a "healing vision" is to underestimate the part that resistance plays, both in queer theory and in H.D.'s poetry. Furthermore Galvin sees H.D. as seeking to repair the "fragmentation by heterosexist patriarchy" (Galvin, 1999, p. 125). However, as Butler states, gender and identity is, by necessity, fragmentary. Galvin appears to be seeking a unity in H.D.'s work, and instead ends up undermining some of H.D.'s central concerns. While *Sea Garden* operates as an organic whole, it is at the same time fragmented into different poems and personae,

so that is never quite contained in the garden imagery H.D. employs. While Butler contends that a subject cannot be outside the system of law, in this case heteronormativity, the subject finds agency in the choices to be made within that system, choices which can include ideas marginalised, invalidated and denied by that system.

H.D. is exploring new forms of beauty and desire that can encompass and exceed gender binaries, thus opening up new ways of envisioning identity. She is, in effect, “queering” the way in which beauty and desire are viewed, which has important implications for gender and identity.

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