

Queerness, Jewishness, and Identifying Bodies in Marcel Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah*

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In the Foucaultian historical narrative of sexuality, the demographic category of queerness gained new specificity in late nineteenth-century France. Whereas the queer individual may once have been subsumed into a larger populational corpus when discourse on sexualities was more frank, the emergence of sexological and medico-psychological concern for sexualities in nineteenth-century French discourse specified sexualities that differed from (hetero)normative bourgeois sexual practice. The process of identifying queerness and queer individuals entailed a necessary conflation of ‘transgressions’ of normative genders and sexualities. ‘Homosexuality’ necessitated a subversion of gender; the mode for conceptualizing sexuality became grounded in the (cis)gendering of bodies based on normative anatomical characteristics. Queerness was an inherent, degenerative atavism that manifested itself in the speech, the dress, and even the body of the queer individual. Accounting for queerness in nineteenth-century France required attempts at corporeal differentiation of queer bodies. Discourse on queerness centered the *gendered* ordering of queer bodies into the normativity of bourgeois sexual mores.

Marcel Proust, in his *Sodom and Gomorrah*, engages the cultural discourse on queerness in fin-de-siècle France. Part of Proust’s *magnum opus* novel *In Search of Lost Time*, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1913) contains Proust’s first explicit address of queer sexuality. Proust continues the narrative of the Guermantes family in fin-de-siècle Paris, centering the queer sexuality of M. de Charlus. The narrator of *Sodom and Gomorrah* is a sort of representative of the ‘ideal’ French male in the fin de siècle, firm in his (cis)gendered and heterosexual body. Much of *Sodom and Gomorrah* is concerned with the narrator’s reflections on heterosexual attraction and romance—especially toward the young, queer Albertine—as the narrator travels between upper-bourgeois and aristocratic settings in Paris and the countryside estate Balbec. Queerness

in *Sodom and Gomorrah* is peripheral to the narrator's own desires and actions, though perhaps more central in the reinforcement of his own heterosexual identity by frequently referring to queerness and differentiating himself from queer bodies. As much as dialogic interactions in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, reading bodies is an expression of cultural fluency in the language and tactics of identifying and specifying queerness. Bodies in Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah*, however, are not readily legible. In Proust, designating queerness to bodies is a process of indeterminate gendering, with inconclusive and contradictory readings of queerness. Perhaps contrary to the Foucaultian theorization of solidifying notions of queerness in the late nineteenth century in France, all bodies in Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* are 'queer' in their *lack of gendered fixity*, regardless the choice of sexual object.

The historiographical context of queerness in *Sodom and Gomorrah* is largely concerned with literary constructions of queer masculinities in fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century France. Michael Sibalis details the role of "depraved literature"—meaning writing with queer content—in fashioning a "purported connection between the literary avant-garde, homosexuality, and lack of patriotism" that French male Republicans lamented in the French press.¹ Sibalis frames the male homosexual in the context of what Annelise Mauge describes as a "crisis of male identity."² Anxieties concerning the feminization of French men in light of "fears of biological degeneration, moral decadence, and national decline" explicitly portrayed queer masculinities and queer cultural influence as sexually cosmopolitan and internationalist.³

¹ Michael Sibalis, "Defining Masculinity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Sexual Anxiety and the Emergence of the Homosexual," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 25, 252.

² *Ibid.*, 247.

³ *Ibid.*, 254.

Analyzing Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* as a work of 'depraved literature' in Sibalis's period of concern illumines Proust's literary construction of queerness and queer bodies.

The construction of homosexual identity itself was a product of the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault finds the biological solidification of the homosexual in the second half of the century: "[A] new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*... Homosexuality appeared as one form of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul."⁴ In the discursive act of naming sexual identity, the homosexual is *incorporated* into the larger body of sexualities. Theories of inversion from sexologists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld predominated the medical, psychological, and cultural strategies of classifying the homosexual. The notion of inversion—that the male homosexual was part female in either spirit or body—confirmed the general incoherence of the homosexual in mind and body.⁵ Regardless of the historical specificity of Foucault's claim that queer, or indeed heterosexual, sexual identities did not discursively exist until the nineteenth century, Foucault emphasizes the preoccupation with categorizing sexual identity that left the now *homosexual* individual denuded and destabilized.⁶

The place of queerness and queer bodies in *Sodom and Gomorrah* is in intimate relation with the place of Jewishness and Jewish bodies. In the history of anti-Semitism in France, the Dreyfus Affair was perhaps the primary political event in fin-de-siècle France—a political and cultural moment that solidified French anti-Semitic tendencies. Following Édouard Drumont's

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Editions Gallimard, 1976).

⁵ Michael Lucey, "Sexualities," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 572.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 575.

extensive, widely-read anti-Semitic text *La France juive* (1886), which detailed Drumont's theorization of Jewish political schemes for domination over the French political apparatus, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a cultural validation of anti-Semitism based in Drumont's contrived threat of the political insurrection of the Jewish population in France.⁷ In 1894, French civil authorities accused Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus of having written a treasonous letter to the military attaché of the German embassy in Paris, resulting in Dreyfus's conviction of treason and sentence to life in prison.⁸ 'Dreyfusards' defended Dreyfus after the possibility of a false conviction became public. Émile Zola criticized the French military's juridical malfeasance in "J'Accuse...!" (1898), an article in the Parisian newspaper *L'aurore*.⁹ Spurred by Drumont's incendiary articles in his newspaper *La libre parole*, Anti-Dreyfusards intensified their political anti-Semitism, inciting large-scale riots in Paris.¹⁰

The crisis of masculinity and anxieties concerning the homosexual were functionally similar to the association between Jewishness and political instability in fin-de-siècle France. Erin Carlston historicizes Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past (In Search of Lost Time)*, including *Sodom and Gomorrah*, within the context of the Dreyfus Affair, as "a rich, politically current discursive paradigm for analyzing both Jewishness and homosexuality in relation to national identity."¹¹ Jewishness and homosexuality were more than morally or culturally marginalized. The conflation of these "subaltern cultural and sexual identities" portended the

⁷ Kritzman, Lawrence, "Anti-Semitism," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence Kritzman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ Erin Carlston, "Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 938.

immediate jeopardization of the French political corpus—particularly the French military.¹²

Carlston traces the concatenations of Jewishness with homosexuality, as well as gender-transgressive anatomical differences, that persisted from the medieval period through the fin de siècle. Particular cultural assignments of femininity to both the Jewish person and the homosexual entailed a degradation of their status as French citizens, since women were not part of the franchise of French citizenship.¹³ In their relationship to the French state, the Jewish person and the homosexual were in a liminal position, navigating the borders between cultural Otherness and a kind of subordinated Frenchness.

For both the ‘homosexual’ and the ‘Jew,’ nineteenth-century French cultural and political discourses not only specified and categorized these Others, but also gave each a connotative insinuation of criminality and political deviance. Scholarship on the legibility of queer and Jewish individuals and their bodies has primarily relied on a binary (cis)gendering of bodies according to sexual object choice. Foucault’s ‘hermaphroditism of the soul’ has perhaps colored the discourse on queer bodies as referring to an inner, non-corporeal site of queerness. Expanding, or perhaps restoring, the definition of queerness to incorporate both sexual object choice and gender difference illumines a far less solid or delineated understanding of queerness in fin-de-siècle cultural discourse. Queer and Jewish bodies in Proust’s *Sodom and Gomorrah* are sites of the indeterminacy of the cultural classification of bodies according to the dominant narratives of nineteenth-century corporeal specification.

The sexual preferences of the narrator of *Sodom and Gomorrah* explicitly conform to normative French bourgeois conceptions of gender and sexuality. The narrator’s own sexuality,

¹² Erin Carlston, “Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair,” 938.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 940.

however, is in frequent if not constant reference to queer sexualities, most especially of M. de Charlus but also of Albertine. Reading the bodies he meets in the streets and *foyers* of Paris, the eye of the narrator is a prism most simply designated as reflective of a typical bourgeois attitude toward Proust's 'deviant' characters and content. The narrator's fascination with M. de Charlus borders on the voyeuristic, particularly when observing de Charlus's queer-coded sexual interactions. The narrator finds de Charlus crossing a street to visit Mme de Villeparisis, a mutual acquaintance:

Blinking against the sunlight, he seemed almost to be smiling, and in his face, seen thus in repose and as it were in its natural state, I found something so affectionate, so defenseless, that I could not help reflecting how angry M. de Charlus would have been had he known he was being watched; for what he put me in mind of, this man who was so enamored of, who so prided himself on, his virility, who found everyone hatefully effeminate, what he suddenly put me in mind of, so unmistakably did he have, fleetingly, the features, the expression, the smile of one, was a woman!¹⁴

Having already insinuated M. de Charlus's queer sexual relationship with the 'waistcoat-maker' Jupien, the narrator proceeds in his introduction of M. de Charlus by detailing his physical appearance, first comparing his visage to being as "pale as a marble statue," with a "large nose" and otherwise "fine features."¹⁵ In his observation of M. de Charlus's movement across the street, however, among the urban accoutrements of the bourgeoisie, the narrator's reading of M. de Charlus's body is feminized. M. de Charlus's pride in his "virility" reflects the at times emphasized masculinity of the *fin de siècle*, reacting to cultural anxieties concerning the feminization of the French male. The narrator's feminized transfiguration of de Charlus's body—particularly the reexamination and redesignation of his face as that of a 'woman'—is, as

¹⁴ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 5-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

the narrator admits, a fleeting impression. Reading and gendering bodies is, for the narrator, an unfixed process.

Despite the indeterminacy of the narrator's gendering of M. de Charlus's queer body, the narrator relies on the *assumption* of normative sex categories when reading bodies. Perhaps to reconcile the indeterminacy of gendering queer bodies with the cultural imperative to categorize by 'sex,' the narrator conceptualizes queer bodies in their sexual relationships with other queer bodies. The metaphor of flowers' fertilization is the narrator's primary frame for understanding queer sex in heterosexual terms. The narrator visualizes this metaphorical heterosexualizing of queerness in Jupien:

Jupien... at once shedding the humble, kindly expression I had already seen him wear, had—in perfect symmetry with the Baron—drawn back his head, set his torso at an advantageous angle, placed his fist on his hip with a grotesque impertinence, and made his behind stick out, striking poses with the coquettishness that the orchid might have had for the providential advent of bumblebee.¹⁶

In the eyes of the narrator, the “impertinence” and “coquettishness” of Jupien's body likens him to an “orchid” waiting for the fertilizing, phallic “bumblebee.”¹⁷ The botanical metaphor of queer sexuality—that implies a sort of heterosexual homosexuality, with not only ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles but also corresponding *bodies*—is intentionally separate from a comparison to legitimate heterosexuality, relying instead on a dehumanized, exoticist portrayal of queer sex. A legitimate comparison to heterosexuality would jeopardize not only the integrity of heterosexual sex but also the entire system of categorizing sex and sexuality. The botanical metaphor, rather, lends a measure of determinacy to queer sex, in the *fact* of its ‘self-fertilizing’ infertility and the impossibility of biological reproduction.¹⁸ Normative male and female anatomies are the implicit

¹⁶ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

point of contrast to the narrator's subjective determination of the anatomical incompatibility of queer bodies.

The botanical metaphor is inconsistent and incongruent with the narrator's later reflections on the anatomical mechanics of queer sex. Despite the narrator's insistence that the botanical metaphor does not reflect an *actual* "homosexuality" but rather a nonsensical kind of animal activity, the narrator attempts to make sense of queer sex and queer bodies only through the lens of heterosexual sex and binary gender presentation that the botanical metaphor communicates.¹⁹ A constant participant in M. de Charlus's social gatherings with the aristocratic Guermantes family, the narrator is witness to both M. de Charlus's speech and actions concerning queerness in these settings. Aghast at the frankness with which M. de Charlus lays out his strategies for having sex with young men, the narrator transmutes de Charlus's confidence in sexual object choice into a reflection on the solidification of de Charlus's sexual, and indeed broader, identity:

Now that the abstraction had been materialized, this creature, understood at last, had at once lost its capacity to remain invisible, and the transmutation of M. de Charlus into a new person was so complete that not only the contrasts in his face and his voice but... all that thus far had appeared incoherent to my mind, became intelligible, showed itself to be self-evident, just as a sentence that had presented no meaning for as long as it remained broken up into letters arranged at random, expresses, if the characters find themselves restored to their rightful order, a thought we will not again be able to forget.

M. de Charlus's specificity in detailing his sexuality solidifies the narrator's understanding of the "abstraction" of the "creature" of de Charlus.²⁰ The "transmutation of M. de Charlus into a new person" implies a sort of *transitive* quality to queerness in terms of gendered specification of de Charlus's body. Perhaps beyond a mere insinuation of M. de Charlus's 'inversion,' the narrator's

¹⁹ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

understanding of de Charlus's "transmutation" allows a potential *transgendering* of de Charlus's body, though even this transgendering lends a binary fixity of gender and sexual identity. The narrator explains this binary solidification of de Charlus's queerness by connecting his initial impression of de Charlus at Mme de Villeparisis's earlier in the day:

... I understood now why, a moment ago, when I had seen him coming out from Mme de Villeparisis's, I had been able to think that M. de Charlus had the look of a woman: he was one! He belonged to that race of beings, less contradictory than they appear to be, whose ideal is virile precisely because their temperament is feminine, and who are in life like other men in appearance only...²¹

Just as a reader cannot mistake the meaning of a sentence when presented coherently, the narrator cannot deny M. de Charlus's 'womanhood' upon visual and then literal investigation of his sex category and sexuality. The narrator's association between 'womanhood' and queerness relies on a binary transgendering of queer gender *identity*, neglecting the possibility of a freer gender *expression*. Yet, despite the narrator's claim that M. de Charlus and other 'men-women' like him are "less contradictory than they appear to be," contradiction abounds in the narrator's conception of queerness and the gendering of queer bodies.

The narrator's purported materialization of the abstraction and resolution of contradictions of M. de Charlus's sex category and sexuality is ironical and illusory. The narrator at once claims that de Charlus has the 'look of a woman' and indeed *is* a woman, while also concluding that de Charlus is of a separate 'race' and is 'in life like other men in appearance only.' The narrator does not settle on an identification of M. de Charlus as 'woman' or 'invert.' Categorizing de Charlus as part of a separate 'race' obviates the need for clarification—the narrator's 'materialization' is a kind of racialization. For the narrator, racialized categorization is a means of reconciling contradiction in queerness and queer bodies.

²¹ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 16.

Part of the larger French projects of categorizing the Other, the narrator's conception of queerness is in reference to the cultural and political subjugation of Jewish and Black populations.²² Like the queer individual's preference for a dangerous yet 'pleasurable' life, the "blacks... prefer the risks of uncivilized life and its incomprehensible joys."²³ The narrator's primary racializing frame of reference for queerness, however, is not Blackness but Jewishness. Even in conveying the racialized view of the queer individual, the narrator is imprecise, claiming that the queer race finds its origin in either the "ancient East or the golden age of Greece," or perhaps even in the "experimental epochs" when hermaphroditism was ubiquitous.²⁴ For the narrator, the central commonality between queerness and Jewishness is the political unity of each behind regaining a respective geography in the Middle East—Zionism for Jewish people, and 'Sodomism' for male homosexuals.²⁵

The scandal of the Dreyfus Affair figures significantly in the narrator's conception of Jewish and non-Jewish bodies, though the association between queerness and Jewishness diverges with the introduction of the political question of Jewishness. Whereas being outwardly queer in the circles of the narrator, M. de Charlus, and the Guermantes is cause for a kind of speculative racialization, being Jewish in the upper-bourgeois and aristocratic circles of Paris is cause for a *certain* racialization, with more fixed stereotypical conceptions of Jewishness and Jewish bodies but no less contradiction in discursively tying queerness to Jewishness. Orientalism informs the narrator's conception of Jewishness, and the Jewish presence is visible and erotic, central to the geography of Paris:

²² Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

Although it was after nine o'clock, it was still daylight that, on the Place de la Concorde, had given to the Luxor obelisk an appearance of pink nougat... the obelisk did not only become more precious, but seemed thinner and more flexible. You fancied that you might have been able to twist it, that this jewel had already been bent out of true perhaps. The moon was in the sky now like a quarter of an orange, delicately peeled but with a small bite out of it... a poor little star was about to serve as the solitary moon's one companion, while the latter... would brandish, like an irresistible weapon, like a symbol of the Orient, its marvelous, ample golden crescent.²⁶

The "Luxor obelisk" is a nearly explicit phallus, an "ample golden crescent." The specific Orientalization of this phallic object, geographically located in the center of Paris, speaks to the cultural visibility of French Orientalist eroticism. The narrator's description of the "Luxor obelisk" with the "delicately peeled" moon finds repeated expression in his later description of the Jewish character Charles Swann, "whose cheeks had been so eroded by disease, like a waning moon."²⁷ The Jewish presence in Paris, whether an Orientalist fetish or an ill body, is dissimilar to the queer body in its racial identifiability.

The narrator's identification of Jewishness in Swann centers on a perceived corporeal Jewishness. After Swann enters the ballroom at the Guermantes', the narrator notes a sort of physical transformation of Swann's body and attributes Swann's physical degradation, the visible evidence of 'disease', to the cultural discourses on the Dreyfus Affair and broader French anti-Semitism:

Swann's Punchinello nose, for so long reabsorbed into a pleasing face, now seemed enormous, tumid, crimson, more that of an old Hebrew than an inquisitive Valois. Perhaps, in any case, in recent days the race had caused the physical type characteristic of it to reappear more pronouncedly in him, at the same time as a sense of moral solidarity with other Jews, a solidarity that Swann seemed to have neglected throughout his life, but which the grafting, one on to the other, of a mortal illness, the Dreyfus Affair, and anti-Semitic propaganda had reawakened.²⁸

²⁶ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 37-38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

Along with the vague assignment of a “mortal illness,” the narrator characterizes anti-Semitic cultural and political currents as having accentuated Swann’s ‘Jewish’ physical characteristics. For Proust’s narrator, identifying the Jewish individual and determining the place of Jewishness in the larger scheme of Frenchness entailed relying on traditional conceptions of Jewishness within the non-Jewish European cultural landscape—a landscape in which the narrator finds Swann’s explicitly Jewish features sexually unattractive and a sign of illness.²⁹

Queerness and Jewishness are racialized categories of belonging in *Sodom and Gomorrah*. The narrator locates both queerness and Jewishness in queer and Jewish bodies, though the surety of their difference from the populational corpus is more certain in the narrator’s readings of Jewish bodies. Gendering bodies in *Sodom and Gomorrah* is part of a larger project of racializing queerness and queer bodies into identifiable, determinable categories. In Proust, the narrator’s Frenchness is French only in its relation to the racialized categories of queerness and Jewishness. The Jewish body, for the narrator, is far more visible and determinable than the queer body. The queer body is indeterminate in its unpinnable expression of gender, paired with an equally indeterminate sexual object choice. Racialized queerness in Proust is less fixed than the Foucaultian narrative of nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality might suppose. In light of the sexological and medico-psychological attempts at defining queerness in the late nineteenth century in France, the indeterminacy of the queer body in Proust, as part of fin-de-siècle French literary culture, is perhaps a cultural rebuttal of scientific approaches to the sexualities of racialized and criminalized bodies.

²⁹ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 92.

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