

“No Real Men”: Mary Butts’s Socio-Sexual Politics A Response to Andrew Radford*

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It is no exaggeration to say that Mary Butts is one of the most difficult and enigmatic writers of modernist prose. And it is perhaps her own personal sense of exclusion—as manifested in her short stories, journals, and novels—from the burgeoning modernist “establishment,” if we can call it that, and her consequent exclusion from the modernist literary canon, that has incited much of the recent critical interest in Butts’s life and work. Butts’s professional life was certainly troubled, to say the least. Her work, dismissed by Virginia Woolf as “indecent” and thus unsuitable for publication by the Hogarth Press, and by Marianne Moore as “out of harmony” with the *Dial*, remains difficult to place within any coherent modernist context (qtd. in Blondel 122, 188). More particularly, Butts herself was never able to fully infiltrate any defined modernist set. Andrew Radford attempts to address this exclusion in his essay, “Excavating a Secret History: Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist,” asking why Butts’s “stylistic contribution to British interwar fiction has been overlooked by [contemporary] academic criticism” (81). While I am unable to fully agree with this claim, given the increasing number of recent critical publications on her work, I would venture to say that Radford’s question can be better understood by extending his discussion toward a clearer assessment of Butts’s frequently hostile relation to modernist sets, groups, and imperatives.

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debradford01701.htm>>.

Indeed, Butts's novels and short stories manifest a blend of conservative and progressive politics that, despite her professed hostility towards them, aligns her with other modernists such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, H. D., and Wyndham Lewis, whose 'conservative' ideals—whether reflected in the reverence for political and aesthetic authority and tradition or in the repudiation of women and other groups—simultaneously encode more 'progressive' political and aesthetic formulations and ideologies. While this argument is much larger than the scope of this response allows, I would like to focus on Radford's assessment of Butts as a 'conservative' writer (cf. 81). Reading a rather wide cross-section of Butts's corpus, including novels such as *Ashe of Rings* (1925), *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1928), and *Armed with Madness* (1932), along with her journal entries and short stories, Radford does not seek to place Butts within a particular modernist genealogy, nor does he draw clear connections between Butts's prose and the often radical, experimental aims of her modernist contemporaries. However, he does add a new layer of historical complexity to the growing body of criticism on Butts by focusing elsewhere—the pastoral landscape of nineteenth-century realism. Interpreting Butts's exclusion from modernist sets and contemporary criticism as a result of her "punitive political agenda" and "intolerance" (81), he addresses her work in terms of its concern for a mystical, bucolic Englishness, as a "visceral alternative version of 'Hardy's country'" (82). Her fiction, he rightly argues, registers a sense of embattlement aimed at a "pernicious modern moment whose dynamism of progressive enlightenment had induced a split between the self and the environment" (82). In contrast, she imagines the rural English landscape, the Wessex of Hardy's "literary topography" (83), as a "stable location" (82) grounded against the intrusion of "deracinated 'foreign' figures" (83), a means of "returning 'England' to its rightful, indigenous, patrician inheritors" (80).

In other words, Butts is conservatively recasting Hardy's bucolic realism in a project that, Radford argues, is defined by Butts's nativist demonization of the foreigner as racially, ethnically, and sexually

inferior. In this vision, women, particularly Scylla of the *Taverner Novels*, are “priestly heroines”; chastity is not a priority, as they infuse the narrative with “libidinal gusto” (Radford 101). In the case of *Armed with Madness*, women do restore order to an aesthetic community that is consistently on the brink of chaos and disintegration. It is also true that women become the agents of the exclusionary nativism Radford identifies, functioning as emotional stabilizers and centers that enable collective attachment to place and location. As Jacqueline Rose has suggested, and this point accords with Radford’s own perspective, *Armed with Madness* “force[s] its reader into a position of discomforting historical identification” (99) with a trauma born from the experience of the first world war, manifesting itself in the “perceptual peculiarity” of Butts’s prose (100). One of these discomforts is Butts’s anti-semitism, particularly evident in her depiction of Paul in her story “The House Party,” or *Death of Felicity Taverner’s* Kralin, a Russian Bolshevik Jew, “who would sell the body of our land to the Jews” (*DFT* 346). Yet equally problematic, as Radford observes, are figures such as the American Dudley Carston, who, in *Armed with Madness*, arrives to a “lawn stuck with yuccas” and an “intolerable silence” (*Armed* 3). This is a bucolic but dehumanized locale, materializing around explicit distinctions between a sublime, raw beauty and the more urban, domestic milieu of London. As a stranger, Carston disturbs the ritualistic cadences of this impoverished aesthetic community with both his active desire to seduce Scylla, whose need to extricate herself from such libidinal homage drives another level of the plot. If this novel viscerally sanctifies rural England, then it does so by developing against the traditional romance plot, so that women essentially remain chaste, yet removed from trite romantic narrative formulations that would fix them as objects of desire. For example, after the first evening of Carston’s visit, Scylla guards her position of centrality in the house by accepting the good night kiss of Clarence, given “with a flourish indicating affectionate indifference to their difference of sex” (17). In emphasizing the “affectionate indifference” of man and woman, Butts creates a community of lack by placing

women outside a heterosexual logic of desire. Here, the *absence* of sexual energy augments the woman's power as "priestly heroine[...]" (Radford 101).

This situation represents a "yearning for a racially distinct bucolic motherland," as Radford attests, but it is by all means a perverted one (95). Yet Radford suggests that in *Armed with Madness*, "communal coherence depends" upon the "heterosexual alliance" requiring the "worship of a fecund female principle and a sumptuous ancestral legacy" (89). While I agree with Radford that this interest in the rural as the ground for a community built around exclusion dominates Butts's work, Radford's formulation clearly overlooks what others have found so bizarre, so difficult to categorize: Butts's sexual politics. That is, the logic of a text such as *Armed with Madness* rests on distinctions between the country and the city that extend far beyond the parameters Radford identifies. In this case, Radford aligns heterosexual reproduction with the feminine and the "communal coherence" of the rural (89). However, in *Armed with Madness*, as in other works, I would argue precisely the opposite, to suggest that Butts, as a writer intensely interested in the lives of gay men, and in love triangles involving gay men and apparently straight women, stakes the novel's development against the conclusion of the heterosexual romance. This dynamic also reflects Butts's conception of urban life, or the city, which Radford does not fully theorize; rather, he overly generalizes Butts's vision of the urban as merely the agent of deracination and uncritical progressivism. As I have argued elsewhere, Butts's consistent interest in the queer dominates her work.¹ Besides *Armed with Madness*, other stories such as "Scylla and Charbydis," "Green," and, of course, "The House Party," all deal with the lives and loves of gay men. Bruce Hainley has deemed Butts an "ecologist of the queer"; in this description, the term "fag-hag" not only describes Butts's affiliations as a woman, but a "style of writing" (21). Furthermore, in her epistolary novella, *Imaginary Letters*, illustrated by Jean Cocteau, Butts emphasized her interest in the "sensual passions of men for men" (11). Finally, the "indecent" Woolf saw in Butts's work was related to her

explicit depictions of homosexual relations. Given this setting for the reception of Butts's work, we can return to Radford's question of why it was possibly overlooked by both her contemporaries and more recent literary critics. That is, running alongside Butts's anti-semitism and derision towards other "unsavory" strangers is her overt acceptance, in fact, fascination with, the homosexual man.

Let us take a closer look at *Armed with Madness*. Jascha Kessler argues of this text that Scylla Taverner is an "earth goddess" set among "half-men, either undecided sexually, or shell-shocked, manic-depressive [...]" (213). When Scylla takes a trip into London, she visits a pair of friends, Phillip and Lydia, who urge her to get married, fearing that people take Scylla for "that kind of woman" (119) because "everyone thinks that you sleep with each other in turn" (120):

"Scylla, why don't you marry Clarence: People say he's a beauty, and it's time you picked up a husband—"

"She wouldn't," said Lydia, —"[...]. But she can't go on like this."

"Go on like WHAT?" Phillip answered her.

"You know what people say about a set with no real men in it."

"What is A REAL MAN?" (121)

Phillip and Lydia not only represent a heteronormative narrative and social paradigm but also stand for the city, at least in Butts's mind, as it exercises the reasoned control of cultural and aesthetic production. As a result, Scylla decides defiantly to "not look outside our set," returning to the bucolic environment that centralizes her importance by freeing her from a romantic narrative of development that ends in marriage.

Yet this environment, and her centrality to it, is not unproblematic. Butts is unable to imagine Scylla and her set outside the precarious and isolated milieu that has engendered it. This world is not merely rural or bucolic, but an inhospitable sublime that is irreducible to copy. A "flint-dressed road" leads to a "lawn [...] stuck with yuccas and tree-fuchsias, dripping season in, season out, with bells the color of blood" (11). As Radford suggests, this place does not offer empathy to strangers, but is strategically designed to fend off human intruders.

Guarding the house, "where the windows were doors and stood open" stands "a yucca," which "taller than a man, had opened its single flower-spike" (162). This carefully designed setting is an affront to humanism and its promises of "personal" relation. Nature has in essence subsumed the human, transcending conventional, human hospitality. Radford is correct in asserting that this is an "embattled bucolic enclave [...]" (82), but it is one that is completely aware of itself. In fact, the novel organizes itself around a dilemma of insularity, resolved at its ending only by the arrival of a stranger, Boris, a Russian sailor of questionable origins, who appears in Butts's short stories and will become an important player in *Death of Felicity Taverner*. In contrast to the American, Dudley Carston, Boris is our "stranger ... our nurse," an ultimately empathic figure whose detachment renders him fit for the "affectionate indifference" that supports their community (161).

The contrast between Carston and Boris suggests that, while the novel positions itself against strangers who would distort the vulnerable community it presents, the healing balm of the stranger is essential to the restoration of order in a community whose empathic abilities develop through violence. That is, if *Armed with Madness*, as Radford suggests, "posits a visceral alternative version of 'Hardy's country'" (82), then the novel is unable to do so without recourse to violence. In fact, perhaps even more disturbing than the anti-semitism and disdain for strangers is the violence and cruelty, both physical and emotional, that pervades Butts's novel. Ultimately, one cannot read her affront to "whimsical pastoralism" (Radford 82) without attempting to make sense of this gratuitous violence, which places the novel alongside other texts such as D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Elsewhere, I have tried to make sense of this violence both in terms of the novel's narrative structure and in terms of Butts's distrust and resentment of identifiable modernist groups, such as Bloomsbury.² I will touch on these arguments here, but it is first necessary to describe exactly how this violence takes place, and how it seems, rather per-

versely, to serve this “mystical formulation of femininity” Radford identifies (82).

While the aesthetic community of artists *Armed with Madness* depicts is clearly invested in fortressing itself from the intrusion of outside influences, particularly from forces of objectification that emanate from the city, it accomplishes this not by self-fortification, but through repeated, ritualistic self-inflicted violence. In this case, violence is directed towards the woman, the “sole stay” of a group of men (7). Despite this apparent centrality, Scylla is the subject of serious misogyny. Ross, one of the bunch, remarks to Scylla that he “detest[s] women” (44). Later, Picus wonders “[w]hy do I hate all women?” (110). Certainly, this prickly situation drives Dudley Carston in his romantic quest to rescue Scylla, whom he sees as a “young woman alone among young men” who are “so careless of their women” (22, 35). But his attempts to woo Scylla are perpetually frustrated by Scylla herself. Both she and the text refuse to judge this misogyny, rejecting sentimental moralism in lieu of detachment.

In this situation, Scylla, the “hypothetical virgin,” “sometimes a witch and sometimes a bitch,” willingly takes part in a cyclical group dynamic involving the “peacocks of her world” (5, 11). More so than Scylla, Picus attempts to ostracize Carston by orchestrating the game that drives the novel’s rather obscure plot. Claiming to have found a jade cup at the bottom of a well, which might be the Sanc-Grail, Picus fuels a rather tumultuous hunt for the cup’s lost origins. He also decides to take Scylla as his lover, which catapults Carston into a jealous furor. Scylla, aware that this is simply a game to thwart the intruding stranger, does register the personal humiliation of having slept with a man who does not really desire her. Indeed, Picus has been the lover of Clarence, the war veteran, whose violence and inner turmoil explodes in the novel’s climax. To soothe her wounded vanity, Scylla retreats into detachment, masochistically imagining herself crucified, “lying out on the wood’s roof: translating the stick and leaf that upheld herself into herself; into the sea: into the sky...” (69). Unsuccessful in this project and feeling “[p]arodied [...] in her bed,”

she seeks a solution to her disturbed vanity, an unsexing that will restore order to a community that has violated its code of "affectionate indifference" (69, 17), at least as that indifference ideally characterizes relations between men and women.

Thus Scylla must become symbolically "un-sexed" to maintain her power in the community, as her "sexing" has catalyzed a rather too acute awareness of personalized pain that does not accord with the impersonal nature of the flinty, detached locale in which they live. Scylla then seeks out Clarence, and finds him in his cottage torturing a statue he has made of Picus, piercing it "with arrows of sharpened wood, feathered from a gull he had shot overnight" (143). Along with this sight, she notices torn drawings of herself "obscenely and savagely contorted" and pierced with "little darts made of fine nibs and empty cartridge-cases" (129). Like something from a horror movie, these "paper-martyrs" lie alongside a bird's "half-plucked body, bloody on the floor" (129). The violence becomes real when Clarence, "[d]azed with violence and grief," forcefully "throws" Scylla, "ties her with his lariat" against the statue of Picus, and begins shooting them both with the "indifferent arrow" (145). In this bizarre ode to Saint Sebastian, long a subject of gay and homoerotic iconography, Scylla positions herself as the male martyr to her community. She does not scream or betray pain, but instead reaches a "*clarté* the other side of forgiveness" (147). None of this is taken as we would expect. Clarence's arrow is "indifferent" because it produces no feeling, no excess of emotion. Judging from Scylla's response, the act is entirely ritualistic, devoid of sentimental emotional content and drama, particularly considering Scylla's rather willing, if not scripted entrance into this scene. In other words, the act is impersonal, and so too is Dudley Carston's ironically heroic rescue of Scylla, which underscores the emptiness of the heterosexual romance plot that provides a mock 'structure' for the novel.

Ultimately, Clarence's violence is interpreted as a "torture" that transcends his consciousness (129). His friends, including Scylla, acknowledge this and seem unwilling to explain or interpret his vi-

olence. Rather than turn him into a hermeneutically readable organization, they return to the visceral atmosphere of their world, which, a "pebble-throw from a gulf of air" promises "ruin for one who in camps and cities [...] had been heroic" (129). Clarence's heroism is denied here because such status depends on the conventional sociability and hierarchy of "camps" and "cities." In this precarious rural locale, gay men become the agents of aesthetic production and models for the avant-garde project in their agitated, often violent, vulnerability. This society, in its deliberate acts of self-marginalization, makes itself invulnerable to copy. Clarence's body, "branded with shrapnel and bullet and bayonet thrust" physically exteriorizes his own psychological trauma (128). His strength is "vast, delicate [...] not used, not properly understood [...]" (128). Similarly, Picus's face is rendered as an exterior, invulnerable in its fragility, "made-up," "steel gilt" "from the moon's palette" (14). These exterior marks comprise a form of emotional baggage that is not psychological, not offered as a form of narrated subjectivity, but rather imprints itself directly on their bodies. Because they do not possess conventional psychologies, no ascertainable motivations or inner intelligibility, they are also unable to be read as 'personalities.'

I believe this coding of the rural as impersonal, even anti-psychological, underlies the distinction Butts saw between the city and the country, the rural and the urban. Furthermore, I would argue that this reverence for the impersonal aligns Butts's work with that of other modernists such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis. Butts's refusal to romanticize the rural, along with her rejection of heterosexual romance in exchange for a skewed gay love triangle, contributes to the impersonal nature of both the narrative and the aesthetic community it honors. This kind of living is characterized by the "natural ferocity" of a "kind of ritual, a sacrifice, willing but impersonal to their gods" (5). This impersonality is not unlike that advocated by T. S. Eliot in his famous 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which urges the poet to "surrender [...] himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable" (40), an im-

personal tradition, where emotion “does not happen consciously or of deliberation”; nor is it “express[ed]” or “recollected” (*SP* 43). Rather, poetic emotion is a “concentration” that avoids the overly “conscious” nature of the “personal” (*SP* 43).

While Eliot himself was not an admirer of Butts's writing, Butts professed in a 1927 journal entry that Eliot's work had been “before her,” and, typical of the self-aggrandizing alliances she frequently drew, stressed the similarity of their projects: “T. S. Eliot ... the only writer of my quality, dislikes me and my work, I think. But what is interesting is that he is working on the Sanc-Grail, on its negative side, the Waste Land” (qtd. in Blondel 186). *Armed with Madness* indeed frames its rather circuitous plot around the Sanc-Grail quest, but even more importantly, Butts employs the term “impersonal” explicitly in relation to her interest in classical literature. In a 1932 journal entry, Butts writes that “[o]nly in Homer have I found impersonal consolation—a life where I am unsexed or bisexed, or completely myself—or a mere pair of ears” (qtd. in Blondel 22). Here, Butts characterizes the classical world of Greek literature as a stage for impersonal escape, which also facilitates the “consolation” of transcending the rigid parameters of personality, especially as defined by sex. Becoming “unsexed” or “bisexed” enables her the freedom to access a more essential form of being. As Nathalie Blondel notes in her mammoth biography, this interest in Greek literature unites Butts with a number of other modernists, including H. D. and Virginia Woolf, who, in her famous essay, “On Not Knowing Greek,” asserted that “Greek literature is the impersonal literature” (*CR* 23). Greek literature, with its “lightning-quick, sneering, out-of-doors manner” is itself a setting, which, like that of the Taverner novels, produces not a character but a being (*CR* 24-25). “Tightly bound,” the figures of Greek drama—Electra, Antigone, and Ajax—represent the “stable, the permanent, the original human being” (*CR* 26, 27). We cannot interpret such drama, as each moment already “tells to the utmost,” where “[e]very ounce of fat has been pared off, leaving the flesh firm” (*CR* 26). Bare and muscular, Greek literature is immediate; it is not a subjective literature, but an

impersonal literature of exteriority in which “emotions stand still and suffer themselves to be looked at” (CR 34). Emotion becomes anti-subjective and anti-psychological, manifesting itself on the surfaces of things, immediately visible to the eye. Not subject to personalized acts of psychological interpretation, its characters yield no hidden recesses or depths, nothing that would resemble a personality.

If the rural English countryside is the embodiment of this sort of impersonal aesthetic, then “personality,” for Butts, resides within the conventional sociability represented by the city, a place of humanistic safety. Indeed, Butts employed the term “personality” in her scathing critique of urban intellectualism, “Bloomsbury,” written one year before her death in 1937. In the essay, she demonstrates both her *resentiment* and her sense of the group as a singular and recognizable “personality,” founded upon self-serving networks of affiliation. Her “hit list” explicitly targets the men that she connects to the group, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Lytton Strachey, whom she characterizes as both overtly masculine in their aims of dominating the world of art and culture and as lacking virility. They are: “‘intelligentsia in excelsis,’ ‘[...] barren leaves,’ ‘N. B. G. [No Bloody Good],’ [...] ‘Mental Hermaphrodites,’ ‘brittle intellectuals’” (33). As a casual “observer, some sort of witness” to this phenomenon, Butts claims that she would never be out of touch “so far as Bloomsbury *personalities* were concerned” (33; italics in original). Bloomsbury’s “personality” involves its status as a cohesive group people recognize and more importantly, emulate.

The purpose of Butts’s work is to forge an impersonal anti-group lifestyle that resists copy and emulation. This is evident not only in the *Taverner Novels*, but in stories such as “In Bloomsbury,” and most obviously, “From Altar to Chimney Piece,” which contains her most venomous attack on Parisian salon culture. Originally titled “The Gertrude Stein Song,” this charge to a developing modernist establishment built upon inherited financial security and social prestige is an outright attack on Stein’s salon and its web of tightly guarded affiliations. But it is *Armed with Madness* that most explicitly fuses this

critique of urban intellectualism with Butts's bizarre theory of socio-sexual relations. Quite problematically, Butts is unable to imagine her critique of privatized, privileged social structures without recourse to violence. However, this violence also accounts for the intriguing difficulty of Butts's work along with its "disturbing association[s]" (Radford 89). Certainly, Radford's work advances Butts scholarship, particularly as he considers her writing beyond the "strange" nature of its subject matter, placing it within the larger, historical frame of a nativist English tradition that valorizes the rural landscape. In this vision, Radford is correct in arguing that Felicity Taverner, and most likely Scylla Taverner, is a "beguiling distillation of the endangered countryside itself" (89). My point here has been to connect this new layer of analysis of the city/country divide in Butts's work to her consciousness of modernism itself. And while Butts, as Radford points out, depicts this endangerment to national "purity" as it arises from the intrusion of "deracinated 'foreign' figures,"—it also develops from the invasion of a hetero-normative social organization (101, 83). Furthermore, Butts is firmly invested in maintaining this endangerment as a condition of an impersonal avant-garde aesthetic that rests on its fragility, its refusal to stabilize itself. Within this paradox, the stranger is the lifeblood of an aesthetic community, and a rural countryside, that, in a modernist vein, refuses to offer itself for realist copy.

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NOTES

¹See my previously published articles on Mary Butts, "Problem Space: Mary Butts, Modernism, and the Etiquette of Placement," and "'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy: Mary Butts' 'Fag-Hag' and the Modernist Group."

²See "'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy': Mary Butts' 'Fag-Hag' and the Modernist Group."

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