



# BEYOND SEXUALITY: A QUEER READING OF THE PLAYS 'A TASTE OF HONEY' AND 'MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION'.



BY VIOLET BLACKBURN  
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Although Delaney and Shaw do not explicitly confirm the existence of queer characters within their plays, *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, this essay will argue they can nevertheless be read as 'queer' plays, using See's assertion that it is possible to read plays as 'queer' regardless of whether they include a definitively queer character, if they 'cleave, fracture, and re-mold conventional identity models' (33). This essay will posit that *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can therefore be read as 'queer' in their depiction of non-conventional, non-nuclear family units, their non-conventional female protagonists (Jo in *A Taste of Honey* and Vivie Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession*), and in each woman's non-conventional relationship with her mother.

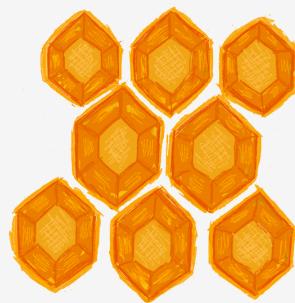
Both *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can be read as 'queer' plays in their depiction of non-conventional men and women who are figured as queer even if they are not same-sex attracted. In *A Taste of Honey*, Geoffrey Ingram, Jo's queer-platonic friend who moves in to help her prepare for her baby when she is left pregnant by another man, is figured as homosexual; he is described by Jo's mother Helen and her partner Peter as a 'pansy', a 'lily' and a 'fruitcake', all of which are derogatory terms for homosexual men, and admits to Jo that he has 'never kissed a girl' (Delaney 79, 65, 68, 58). Despite being instantly identified as queer by heterosexual characters such as Jo, Helen and Peter, Geof does not partake in any sexual or romantic relationships with men throughout the play.

EDITED BY ZEYNEP KILIC, COPY EDITED BY LEYLA KABAN BOWERS,  
REVIEWED BY REBECCA MAHAR, ART BY MADELINE BRADY

However, although Geof never explicitly ‘comes out’ as queer, I posit that through the other characters’ unequivocal reading of him as a gay man, evidenced by their use of homophobic slurs towards him, Delaney creates as much evidence for his queerness as she can while still adhering to the Licensing Act of 1737. This act, still enforced by law in 1958, restricted all ‘explicit expression of homosexual relationships and lifestyles on the British Stage’ (O’Connor 14, 20), therefore assumptions made by other characters is the most explicit she can be in line with these legal restrictions. For Clum however, this reinforces the ‘shibboleth that the only acceptable homosexual is celibate’ (106-7). See counters this, arguing this view of Geof as a ‘repressed homosexual’ is an act of ‘homosexist’ exclusion, a term which he uses to denote the ‘intentional ignorance’ of critics such as Clum in their refusal to acknowledge the ‘explicit’ and ‘real’ bisexuality and polyamory that is depicted in *A Taste of Honey*, providing the example of Geof asking Jo to marry him (Delaney 58). Whilst their arguments are in opposition to each other, Clum and See both require an explicit admission of homosexuality from Geof himself to read him as a homosexual man, which I posit both ignores the cultural climate at the time the play was written, and the evidence in the text itself. Moreover, See’s argument that Clum figuring Geof as exclusively homosexual is ‘homosexist’ disregards that Jo only feels comfortable and safe allowing Geof to stay with her because she knows he ‘won’t start anything’, which Geof confirms with his response: ‘No, I don’t suppose I will’ (Delaney 53). Whilst Geof does ask Jo to marry him, I posit this is due to a desire to protect their queer-platonic family through the legal rights granted by marriage, rather than from any genuine attraction to Jo, therefore reinforcing the argument that Delaney intended Geof to be read as a homosexual man.

Jo can also be read as queer in her remolding of conventional identity models, as she rejects womanhood through her emphatic rejection of motherhood. When Geof buys her a doll to practice on, she throws it violently to the floor, and exclaims, ‘I’ll bash its brains out. I’ll kill it. I don’t want his baby, Geof. I don’t want to be a mother. I don’t want to be a woman’ (Delaney 75). Jo’s resounding aversion to motherhood is reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s speech in *Macbeth*, in which she states she would kill her baby by ‘dash[ing] the brains

out’ (Shakespeare 1.7.58) rather than go back on her word. Since Jo’s phraseology here is so similar to Lady Macbeth’s, it is evident that Delaney invoked her speech purposely in this scene, to highlight Jo’s emphatic rejection of motherhood. Brooke denotes that traditional stereotypes of femininity, such as that of the ‘working-class mother’, were particularly valorized in 1950s Britain due to a ‘post-war nostalgia’ (775), and due to this, infanticide was considered the ‘antithesis of womanhood’ (Ficke 257). Therefore, it could be argued that, at least by 1950s standards, by rejecting motherhood, Jo rejects womanhood itself, embracing the queer-platonic home she has built with Geof over the home her societal role would have her create.



*Mrs Warren’s Profession* can similarly be read as a queer play, despite its lack of explicitly queer characters. According to Halberstam, as long as masculinity has existed as a recognisable characteristic, butch women have been ‘transform[ing] the mechanisms of masculinity’, and their mode of living as explicitly outside of patriarchal values of femininity has had to be constantly defended and rationalised to others (276). Vivie Warren, described by Shaw as ‘sensible, able, highly educated’, who wears ‘plain, business-like dress’, rides a ‘bicycle’ and smokes cigars (Act I), is undeniably masculine in both ‘outlook and appearance’ (Greco 94), and therefore could be interpreted as a butch woman. She is also evidently figured as the ‘New Woman’ stereotype of the 1890s, who was criticised by contemporary anti-feminist Eliza Linton as a woman who ‘does anything specially unfeminine and ugly’, who ‘smokes in public’ and ‘flouts conventional decencies’ (qtd. in Ledger 154). Vivie Warren is chastised for these very behaviours by characters such as Praed for ‘destroying all that makes womanhood beautiful’ (Shaw I), thereby proving Halberstam’s assertions that female masculinity has always caused ‘widespread cultural anxiety’ (273) due to fears of diversity disrupting the status quo.

Moreover, although Vivie is romantically involved with Frank, near the end of the play she chooses to end their relationship. Whilst Frank believes this is because of Sir George Croft's assertion that him and Vivie may be related, she attests that she knows this is untrue, however she thinks that 'brother and sister would be a very suitable relation' for them, and that it is the 'only relation' she wishes to have with him (Shaw IV). As Engels' 1884 socialist work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* points out, marriage at the time involved the woman being 'placed in the man's absolute power' so that the paternity of the children produced from that marriage could be made certain (qtd. in Allett 30). Therefore, as Allett argues, Vivie's sudden change of heart is due to a realisation that marriage is the 'crystallization of male/female relations, putting into high relief men's pervasive and persistent desire to dominate women' (36), and so she cannot marry Frank, as his status as a 'prosperous Victorian male' means he does not wish to marry a woman with agency, but an 'upholstered angel whom he could set on a pedestal' (Laurence 40). Even a man such as Frank, who has never shown any desire to dominate Vivie, is still a part of the Victorian patriarchal system that oppresses women, a system which, according to Shaw himself, is just as 'venal' as prostitution (qtd. in Allett 81). Therefore, I argue Vivie's choice to live outside of patriarchal society figures her as a butch woman who embodies queer values, even if she is not same-sex attracted.

Both texts can also be read as 'queer' in their depiction of female protagonists who are particularly unconventional for the time period, in contrast to their mothers, who in theory represent unconventionality but do not in practice. The fraught nature of Jo and Helen's relationship is evident in the play's opening scene, in which Jo and Helen exchange passive-aggressive remarks such as, 'She'd drive you out of your mind!' and 'She'd lose her head if it was loose' (Delaney 15, 7). The fact these remarks break the fourth wall, as they are addressed directly to the audience, emphasises the familial nature of the women's relationship, as their grievances are constant, yet they are unwilling to address them directly. Furthermore, when Helen criticises Jo and Geof's living situation for being 'trouble', Jo responds, 'I have been performing a perfectly normal, healthy function. We're wonderful!', a 'deliberately radical'

choice of phraseology, as her life by heteronormative, conventional standards is the antithesis of 'normal' (Delaney 81, See 44). Helen is described as a 'semi-whore' in the play's opening stage directions and since, in the 1950s, society 'demanded the idealization of traditional stereotypes' such as 'mother and wife', she would have been considered the antithesis of a conventional portrayal of a woman (Brooke 777). However, Helen calls Geof insults such as 'Bloody little pansy' and 'arty little freak' due to his effeminate behaviour, and abandons Jo, who is about to go into labour, to console herself with a drink at the end of the play when she finds out Jo's baby will be half black, which thereby reveals Helen's attitudes to be far more conventional than Jo's (Delaney 79, 87). According to Leeming, in popular psychology, disliking milk symbolises rejection of one's mother (xvi-xvii), therefore, the fact that Geof tries to make her drink warm milk perhaps suggests his attempt to become a 'dual substitute mother' who unconventionally prepares for the baby's arrival instead of Jo (Wandor 61). However, even though Geof is seemingly a better mother to Jo than Helen ever was, their non-conventional family is overridden by the 'hegemony' of the nuclear family (Wandor 50) when Helen returns at the end of the play and evicts him, and the play ends on an uncertain note as to what will befall Jo, Geof, and Jo's baby. Thus, the 'PolyFamily's' (See 43) attempt to live as a unit outside of societal norms fails as it cannot ultimately prevail over the nuclear family. Accordingly, despite the radical nature of 'A Taste of Honey' in depicting a queer family unit, I argue Delaney evinces the queer mode of living to be unsustainable in 1950s Britain.

Similarly, in 'Mrs Warren's Profession', although Mrs Warren's occupation as a prostitute ostensibly makes her the least conventional character in the play, her values and actions reveal her to be one of the most. Mrs Warren tells Vivie that she became a prostitute as she had no other financial option, however Sir George Crofts informs her that he and Mrs Warren now own a chain of international brothels, no longer out of necessity, but 'for the sake of 35 per cent', which leads to Vivie's revelation: 'I myself never asked where the money I spent came from. I believe I am just as bad as you' (Shaw III). Here, Shaw speaks directly through Vivie, in order to shift the 'liberal moralizing' (Allett 31) of the previous acts

towards the true moral of the play as an indictment of the capitalist system as a whole. Therefore, resolved to never again be complicit in her mother's money, earned by corruption, Vivie returns to her work at Honoria Fraser's Chambers in Chancery Lane to support herself. The play ends with a visit from her mother, whose acquaintance Vivie rejects forever, with the statement:

'You are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you goodbye now' (Shaw IV). As Allett theorizes, Vivie's total renunciation of her mother is due to Mrs Warren's hypocrisy as a woman who, in her youth, had 'railed against the power that men exercised over women', yet now profits from surrendering women 'to men for a price', therefore perpetuating the patriarchal system that will 'disempower' her daughter despite her 'middle-class advantages' (36-7). Indeed, if one reads Vivie as the epitome of socialist values, as Shaw himself appears to present her, it stands to reason that she would cut her mother and her money out of her life, as it is the only way to truly be non-complicit in her mother's exploitative business, which embodies convention through its capitalist practices.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that both *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can be read as queer through their characters' defiance of conventional gender and social roles, and the mothers in both plays who ostensibly defy convention whilst adopting a conventional mindset, challenged by their daughters. However, both plays feature protagonists whose willingness to embrace and exemplify queerness culminates in them being alone at the end – Jo is forsaken first by her boyfriend, then Geof, then her mother, and Vivie chooses solitude as she is unwilling to benefit from her mother's exploitation of other women. Therefore, whilst both plays capture the non-conventional, both seem to argue that, in Victorian England, and post-war 50s Britain, defying conformity, and adopting a queer mode of living, ultimately leads to isolation.

## Works Cited

Allett, John. "‘Mrs Warren’s Profession’ and the Politics of Prostitution." *Shaw*, vol. 19, 1999, pp. 23–39.

Brooke, Stephen. 'Gender and Working Class Identity in Britain during the 1950s.' *Journal of Social History*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2001, pp. 773–95.

Clum, John. *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*. Columbia University Press, 1994.

Delaney, Shelagh. *A Taste of Honey*. Edited by Glenda Leeming and Elaine Aston, Bloomsbury, 2014.

Ficke, Sarah H. 'Crafting Social Criticism: Infanticide in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” and “Aurora Leigh.”' *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2013, pp. 249–67.

Greco, Stephen. 'Vivie Warren’s Profession: A New Look at “Mrs. Warren’s Profession.”' *The Shaw Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1967, pp. 93–99.

Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press, 1998.

Laurence, Dan H. "Victorians Unveiled: Some Thoughts on ‘Mrs Warren’s Profession.’" *Shaw*, vol. 24, 2004, pp. 38–45.

Ledger, Sally. 'The New Woman and Feminist Fictions.' *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Gail Marshall, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 153- 168.

O’Connor, Sean. *Straight Acting: Popular Gay Drama from Wilde to Rattigan*. Cassell, 1998. Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U.C. Press, 1990.

See, Sam. 'Other Kitchen Sinks, Other Drawing Rooms: Radical Designs for Living in Pre-1968 British Drama.' *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 4, no. 3–4, 2004, pp. 29–54.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Wordsworth Editions, 1992.

Servaes, Sabah et al. 'What is diversity?' *Pediatric Radiology*, vol. 52, no. 9, 2022, pp. 1708-1710. doi:10.1007/s00247-022-05356-0.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. Project Gutenberg, 11 Feb. 2002, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1097/pg1097-images.html>.

Wandor, Michelene. *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*. Routledge, 2001.