

# Queering Virility in F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifestos, 1909-1919

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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on the bellicose founder of Italian futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. I employ a queer reading of his early manifestos (1909-1915) to question presumptions about sexual citizenship by interrogating hegemonic conventions linking gender and desire, bodies and performances. My goal is to disturb/extend traditional critiques of Marinetti's work and make the case that his manifestos are complicated by an erotics that tends not to stabilise around consistently gendered heterosexual/homosexual binaries. I suggest first that Marinetti's opportunistic misogyny, complicated by support for masculinised femininity and disclaim for effeminate men, reflects the impossibility of stable alignments of gender with particular sexed bodies. Second, Marinetti's anxieties about the borders between homosociability and desire are illustrated by an effusive and often violent homoeroticism, punctuated by heteronormative relief, and all encoded within belligerent assertions of hypermasculinity. I make the case that these are opportunistic narratives, produced during a decade at the *fin de siècle* when what we recognise as modern sexual categories were beginning to emerge and converge in oppositional logic, which defy classification in a coherent erotic regime.

**Key words:** F. T. Marinetti; Italian futurism; queer theory; masculinities

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## F.T. Marinetti'nin Fütürist Manifestolarında Erkeklği Queerleştirmek, 1909-1919

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### Özet:

Bu makale İtalyan fütürizminin kavgacı kurucusu Filippo Tommaso Marinetti'ye odaklanmaktadır. Cinsel vatandaşlık hakkındaki önkabulleri sorgulamak amacıyla, toplumsal cinsiyet ve arzu, bedenler ve gösterimler gibi hegemonik konvansiyonları ele alarak erken manifestolarının (1909-1915) queer bir okumasını yapacağım. Amacım, Marinetti'nin yapıtına getirilen geleneksel eleştirileri yerinden oynatmak ve genişletmek; manifestolarının, tutarlı bir şekilde cinsiyetlendirilmiş bir heteroseksüel/homoseksüel ikiliğinin çevresinde sabitlenemeyen bir erotika tarafından karmaşıklaştırıldığını savunmaktır. İlk olarak, Marinetti'nin erkeksileşmiş kadınlığa verdiği destek ve kadınsılaşmış erkeklere yönelttiği ret ile karmaşık bir hale gelen fırsatçı kadın düşmanlığının, toplumsal cinsiyetin cinsiyetlendirilmiş bedenler üzerinden istikrarlı bir şekilde hizalanışının imkansızlığını yansıttığını iddia ediyorum. İkinci iddiam, Marinetti'nin homososyallik ve arzu arasındaki sınırlar konusunda hissettiği kaygıların, tümü hipermaskülinitenin çatışma halindeki savlarına kodlanmış, taşkın ve çoğunlukla şiddete meyyal bir homoerotizm ile örneklendiği ve heteronormatif rahatlama ile vurgulandığı. Bunların, yüzyıl dönümünde, modern cinsel kategorilerin ortaya çıkmaya başladığı ve uyumlu bir erotik rejim içinde sınıflandırmaya kafa tutan bir karşıtlık mantığı içerisinde birleştiği bir dönemde üretilmiş fırsatçı anlatılar olduğunu iddia ediyorum,

**Anahtar kelimeler:** F. T. Marinetti; İtalyan Fütürizmi, Queer teorisi, Erkeklikler

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## Introduction

In an airplane, sitting on the fuel tank, my belly warmed by the head of the pilot, I realized the utter folly of the antique syntax we have inherited from Homer (Marinetti, 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' [hereafter TM], 1912, p. 107).<sup>1</sup>

So begins this rather queer tale about the relationships between machines, masculinities, and modernism. Published in 1912 as a proto-Fascist utopian manifesto seeking to destroy history in the name of art, and in so doing consolidate modernist practice, it is predicated on 'the liquidation of the old rational, introspective, and sentimental "I" and on the hyperbolic expansion of the New Man's energy, intuition, [and] imagination' (Blum, 1996, p. viii). Such a vociferous will to power, what Cinzia Sartini Blum calls 'magical pragmatism' (p. 18) in its assertion that human will has the magical power to transform external things, is the voice of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1886-1944), founder and leader of Italian futurism. Known as the 'caffeine of Europe' because of his dauntless energy and strident bellicosity that valorised mechanised speed, technology, and violence (Flint, 1971, p. 6), Marinetti published a series of provocative texts in response to perceptions of the cultural malaise of *fin de siècle* Europe, a malaise rooted in anxieties about gender and sexual difference and influenced by 'lessons learned from Nietzsche, Sorel, and Bergson' (Berghaus, 2006, p. xx).

This article focuses on these categories of gender and sexual difference through interrogation of the homosocial spaces represented in Marinetti's Futurist manifestos about men and machines that were written between 1909 and 1919, the heyday of Italian futurism. These manifestos, representing a brilliant propaganda machine, 'transformed politics into a kind of lyric theatre', using the newly commercialised 'power of improvisation to outwit the reader' (Perloff, 1984, p. 77, p. 88). I employ a speculative queer reading of these manifestos to explore relationships between masculinity and modernity that play out across

contestable boundaries of manliness energised through homoerotic desire. In particular I mobilise a queer critique that investigates how gender and desire are structured in ways that unsettle hetero/homo/normativity as stable sets of unitary practices. As Lee Edelman (2004, p. 17) reminds us in a declaration about the need to move beyond identity politics: 'queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one'. I attempt here to disturb/extend traditional critiques of Marinetti's work and suggest his literary erotics emerge opportunistically, and are sustained as relatively unknowable, coalescing instead around ambiguous gender politics mobilised to proclaim a bellicose nationalist propaganda.

In this way my goal in this paper is not an attempt to recover Marinetti as a queer subject, nor does it imply revisiting his excessive macho swagger to better understand gendered relationships with women, or exploring his work as pertinent examples of modernist literary aesthetics, although I do touch on these aspects of Marinetti's *oeuvre*. Rather, my approach begins with Regina Kunzel's (2008, p. 237) notion that the 'homo/heterosexual binary [is] not only stunningly recent . . . [but] also remarkably uneven and considerably less hegemonic and less coherent than historians have often assumed'. I heed Laura Doan's (2013, p. xii) call for a queer critical history that moves beyond discovering queer subjects towards 'queerness as method' by stepping outside the logic of identity history and recognising the ways knowledge informed by modern organisations of gender and sexuality precedes and overdetermines what can be understood about the past. In other words, I seek to address the ways contemporary binaries shape our notions of the past. What might be learned, for example, if we shed our assumptions that subjects – like Marinetti – had bounded sexual identities to be investigated?

Known as a rising poet and creator of the literary magazine, *Poesia*, Marinetti founded the Futurist movement in 1909 with '*Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo*' ('The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism' [hereafter FM]): a testament bridging poetic and theoretical discourse, and a persuasive political statement aimed at a mass

audience, or what Blum (1990) describes as a 'programmatic statement of aesthetic renovation, modernity, nationalism, and heroism' (p. 196). In this sense his manifestos transformed what had traditionally been a political template into a vehicle that would address a mass audience and represent a new literary genre (Lyon, 1999). This 'quasi-poetic construct' (Perloff, 1986,p. 82), which grafted the literary onto the political, produced a tight equation between art and society in its propagandist and mobilising opposition to the decadent and feminised sentimentalism associated with contemplative aestheticism. It also exclaimed a pugnacious affirmation for war as a means of individual and collective renewal, a source of revolutionary change, and a way to position futurism as a strategy 'beyond' socialism and communism (Re, 2009,p. 108-109).The following quote from Marinetti's founding manifesto speaks to this vision: 'We wish to glorify war – the sole cleanser of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the libertarian, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman. We wish to destroy the museums, libraries, academies of any sort, and fight against moralism, feminism, and every kind of materialistic, self-serving cowardice' (FM, 1909,p. 14). During this period such cleansing notions of war were not, of course, unique to Marinetti, although he is distinct in affirming militarism as 'the basic law of life' (Blum, 2014,p. 95).

Marinetti's practical purpose was to move an audience to action and advance a programme of *arte-azione* (art-as action) that utilised war and appropriated new technologies like the airplane in the formulation of newly-virilised aesthetic practices. To create the new aesthetic of speed, exclaimed Marinetti, 'we have to destroy syntax, to scatter nouns at random' (TM,1912,p. 107), producing a chain of analogies like 'man-torpedo-boat and woman-bay' that 'connects objects that are distant in kind, seemingly different and hostile' (p. 108). Through this analogical style, what Marinetti described as 'the absolute master'of literary form (p. 109), he produced a 'lyric theatre' (Perloff, 1986,p. 84) casting the Futurist epistemological quest into a heroic gendered model and setting up a virile subject against a feminised reality to be conquered and penetrated/destroyed:'Only the poet who is detached from syntax and is

in command of Words-in-Freedom will know how to penetrate the essence of matter' (TM, 1912,p. 112), he declared. This authorial persona, whom R. W. Flint (1971,p. 5) dryly describes as 'someone [who] had to be the first to carry things to their ridiculous length and to do it with principle', put Italian futurism on the map as 'the most radical, dynamic and organised among the various modernist efforts to redeem modern life through culture' (Blum,2014,p. 90).

Through such innovations, Marinetti and Futurist comrades like Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carro, and Luigi Russolo sought the destruction of traditional arts and the implementation of dynamism not only through such formal disruptions in syntax and linguistic play, but also innovative visual representations of speed, sound, and movement. Futurism's optimistic geography of physical transcendence based upon complex invocations of speed and motion claimed to 'break down the divisions between positive and negative space, stasis and transcendence, object and environment' in quest of a disembodied virile sensibility (Merjian, 2012,p. 130). In this way the dynamism of mechanised speed, and flight in particular, provided Marinetti with artistic and cognitive possibilities, 'render[ing] "thinkable" [new] forms of literary expression' (Schnapp, 1994,p. 154).

The first section below traces Marinetti's responses to the Italian crisis in masculinity at the *fin de siècle* and makes the case that Marinetti's excessively virile gender polemics represent his response to modernity and to his anxiety about femininity as a set of social practices and erotic desires not only directed at women— a well-travelled terrain for scholars who have critiqued his 'scorn for woman' (Blum, 1990) -- but also at effeminate masculine subject positions. Shifting the lens from misogyny as the hatred, dislike, or prejudice against women to an equivalent relationship to femininity as the quality of being feminine: a set of social and cultural attitudes and practices performed by diverse bodies, provides insight not only into his appropriation of gender for opportunistic ends, but also into his acceptance of shifting subject positions embodying these categories. The next section explores Marinetti's little-studied (beyond assertions of homophobia) homoerotic

desires in the context of an impetus for grandiose homosocial schemes. It destabilises taken-for-granted notions of sexual difference, which I suggest are imported from contemporary notions of the sexual subject. Reflecting the incoherence and elasticity of sexual practices and desire that are not bounded and distinct, I suggest it is never possible to 'fix' the truth of Marinetti's erotic life as represented in his writings nor employ some template of normativity to make sense of his opportunistic texts aimed at promoting futurism as a political and literary movement. He produced an erotics shaped by gendered nationalist discourses where pleasure was ultimately both denied and celebrated in ways that draw attention to the impossibility and permeability of sexual classifications.

### **Virile masculinity and the defilement of the feminine**

**E**go-syntonic consolidation for a boy can come only in the form of masculinity . . . masculinity can be conferred only by men, and . . . femininity, in a person with a penis, can represent nothing but deficit and disaster (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 160).

Italian futurism flourished between 1909 and 1919, but continued into the 1940s, reinforced by new technologies and their application to industry, agriculture, and war alongside existential fears associated with loss of certainty and empire (Mosse, 1985; Perloff, 1986). Marinetti's modernist aesthetics are therefore rooted in an era of European modernity dominated by new means of transportation and communication arising from industrial and technical growth and by a growing military presence (Hemmings, 2015). For developing Italian fascism, the airplane in particular had 'symbolic implications that went far beyond its technical or utilitarian significance . . . Flight was a metaphor . . . for the urge to dominate, to master, to conquer' (Wohl, 1994, p. 288). Marinetti also responded to the belated industrialisation and relatively undeveloped economic situation in Italy at the time, which caused frustration and exacerbated political unrest (Hewitt, 1996). Such

unease was initiated by the *Risorgimento*, the movement for Italian unification that culminated in 1861 and helped rouse national consciousness (Fochessati, 2012). These complex social and economic forces facilitated a change in women's public roles and threatened traditional gender performances that sparked widespread anxiety and debate about national degeneracy as well as the *questione femminile* (woman question).

Out of this 'flux of irreconcilable social energies' (Lusty, 2014, p. 7) emerged the aggressive and belligerent patriotism that emboldened what Andrea Benedetti (2012, p. 227) has described as Marinetti's 'exclusive and elitist conception of nationalism' and his embrace of militarism. A strong, powerful nation needed virile rather than effeminate men as symbols of national regeneration, especially in the context of the Italo-Turkish and First World Wars (Brady, 2015; Spackman, 1994), in which Marinetti played a part. He worked as a war correspondent during the Italo-Turkish War and was severely wounded at the Gorizia front in World War I. These experiences served to increase his patriotic nationalism and exaltation of war: 'qualities' helping consolidate fascist polemics. In this sense Marinetti possessed a 'patriotic conviction and unshakable faith in the heroic "race" of the *Ardito*, the authentic Futurist soldier, moulded in forge of conflict' (Benedetti, 2012, p. 29). As Blum (2014, p. 97) notes, his was an 'exuberant display of masculine bravado' prompted by 'the masculinity crisis apparent in cultural and literary responses to the Great War'.

This 'masculinity crisis' that shaped Marinetti's work was also rooted in specific Italian cultural traditions associated with gender and masculine desire in flux at the *fin de siècle* (Mosse, 1985; Spackman, 1996). For example, among the diverse and publicly-accepted sexual practices surviving into the nineteenth century was the *cicisbeo* (an effeminate nobleman who acted as companion and/or lover of a married woman, attending her at public entertainments with knowledge and consent of the husband), *femminielli*, men with feminine gender expressions who had sexual relationships with other men and who were accepted in Neapolitan culture providing they took on the receptive,



'feminine' role (thus protecting dominant actors from scrutiny), and young Sicilian men's sexual practices with other men, which was regarded as adolescent phases of 'normal' manhood (Beccalossi, 2015). However with the advancement of new knowledge by 'experts' in medicine, eugenics, and sexology, racial and evolutionary theories provoked 'national shame' (Patriarca, 2010, p. 48) and diverse practices were increasingly disciplined into a newly-constructed 'normality' summoned to protect the 'race' and the nation (Benadusi, 2012; Foucault, 1985). Still, the legal decriminalisation of male same-sex practices on the southern Italian peninsula alongside ongoing perceptions of Italian men's willingness to act upon homoerotic desire (often explained in terms of a classical and 'natural' spontaneity), cast the region as a mecca for homoeroticism euphemistically called the 'Italian vice' (Beccalossi, 2015, p. 187).

Marinetti's literary response to these crises in masculinity mobilised art into a polemical aesthetic obsessed with the virility of the masculine subject and the denigration of the 'other', what Blum (1996, p. ix) describes as 'code for woman, nature, and reality' that would become a central distinction of fascist discourse (Mosse, 1985). As already mentioned, scholars have particularly focused on the potency of Marinetti's anti-woman polemics, even while he was well-known for his sexual exploits with women (Blum, 1990; Contarini, 2006; Spackman, 1996). 'Yes, our very sinews insist on war and scorn for women', writes Marinetti, 'for we fear their supplicating arms being wrapped around our legs, the morning of our setting forth!' ['Second Futurist Proclamation: Let's Kill Off the Moonlight' (hereafter KM), 1909, p. 23]). He offers tropes of castration ('[domesticity] stifles all vital energies' ['Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarianism' [hereafter AL], 1911, p. 58]) and penetration ('Possessing a woman isn't rubbing yourself up against her but penetrating her' ['Down With the Tango and *Parsifal*' (hereafter DT) 1914, p. 132]) to defile women. Illustrating Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject in terms of resistance to that which poses a threat, Marinetti uses violent images of rape to celebrate the 'furious coupling of war', imagined as an 'enormous vulva that splits wide open

to offer itself more easily in the terrible spasm of immanent victory!' (KM, 1909,p. 31).

At the same time, however, Marinetti, supported political and legal rights for women like suffrage and divorce, and advocated for key woman Futurists such as Valentine De Saint Point, BenedettaCappa Marinetti (his wife), and Maria Ginanni (Contarini, 2006). Subject women acting in masculinised ways in the public sphere was thus not necessarily a threat to Marinetti's gender scheme. 'We, Futurists, want to offer you (women): directly the vote: (the right to vote) Abolition of the marital authorization: Easy divorce: Devaluation and gradual abolition of the marriage: Devaluation of virginity ... I free love', wrote Marinetti in *Come siseducono le donne* (As the women are seduced) (quoted in Tesho, 2010, p. 14). As Contarini (2006, p. 877) emphasises, Marinetti's approach to women was 'ambivalent'. She describes his voice as perplexed or 'aporetic' when it came to women, and 'always opportunistic'. In terms of this opportunism, Marinetti's political advocacy must be understood in the context of his derision of the bourgeois family and its 'daily grind of domestic economic sweat and banal vulgarities' ('Against Marriage' [hereafter AM], 1919,p. 310). Freeing women from the family would aid the Futurist political agenda, which required women's participation (Benedetti, 2012). As ArtemidaTesho(2010, p. 16) notes, Marinetti's position on women's rights was opposed to fascist ideology, which resisted women's roles in economic and politic issues and stated that 'the most important role for women was a devotion to Mussolini and then to her husband and family'.

Alongside this ambiguous relationship to subject 'woman' is Marinetti's clear scorn of femininity: the root of his misogyny.<sup>2</sup> In his propagation of Italian nationalist masculinity with its 'cult of energy, aggressiveness, violence, and heroism' (Perloff, 1986,p. 89), Marinetti devalued its opposite: passéism and pacifism, and the soft, domestic and sentimental. In particular the virilities of speed were set against 'inert primitiveness and rancid romanticism [of] slowness' (Re, 2009,p. 110). Marinetti thus appropriated and celebrated the modernist aesthetic of speed by imagining hard, steely precisions that asserted a severe,

austere, and mechanical value system privileging tension and force and opposing the feminised soft and slow (Rabinbach, 1992). As Perloff (1984, p. 65) emphasises, 'violence and precision' were central aspects of Marinetti's lyrical form. For example, his 1914 manifesto employs phallic imagery to valorise speed and violent dynamism. His muse, the dreadnought battleship, 'radiated geometric and mechanical splendor . . . [with its] lyric initiative of electricity flowing through the sheaths of the quadruple turret guns, descending through sheathed pipes to the magazine, drawing up the turret guns out to the breeches, out to their final flights' (Marinetti, quoted in Flint, 1971, p. 98). For Marinetti, the rhythmic noise associated with such warfare asserts onomatopoeia as a literary device, 'enrich[ing] lyricism with brute reality' and propagating the numerical sensibility of words-in-freedom' (p. 103). In this way, the techno-warrior ethos, which relied upon militarised hyper-masculine excess and violent exuberance, derided the bourgeois masculine notion of self-control and moderation, scorned representations of femininity as sources of decadence and national degeneration, and encouraged educational models for boys of a 'lively, combative, muscular, and violently dynamic' nature (AM, 1919, p. 311).

A central aspect of Marinetti's defilement of femininity is his response to effeminacy. As he keenly recognised, one of the most lethal gender performances is that of effeminate masculinity, even though the feminised male 'invert' is essential to the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Halberstam, 1998). Effeminacy occurs as a product of policing the boundaries of hegemonic masculinities to ensure conformity and create hierarchies of subordinate masculinities (Connell, 2005; Dudink, Hagemann, and Tosh, 2004). And, indeed, Marinetti derides any masculine performances that deviate from his virile idea, especially those that epitomise the effete and leisured bourgeois dandy, an important social actor in elite European literary and social circles during this period (Katz, 1996; Linkoff, 2013). 'Our hearts are still attached to all this useless junk: peacocks' tails, strutting weathercocks, prissy perfumed kerchiefs!' he writes in 'Let's Kill Off the Moonlight' (1909, p. 25). Marinetti is particularly fearful of effeminising practices

'threatening to infect all races, turning them into jelly' (DT, 1914,p. 132). The latter quote is a derision of the 'effeminizing poisons of the Tango' (Marinetti, quoted in Flint, 1971,p. 69), an activity which still claims homoerotic currency (Kanai, 2015).

In this way Marinetti's goal of proclaiming both virile masculinity and masculinised femininity exemplifies his derision of femininity/effeminacy performed by multiple bodies and illustrates the impossibility of any stable alignment of gender with particular sexed bodies (Butler, 2004). This rupture between bodies and performances – or disconnect between bodily acts and identification -- thus illustrates the elasticity of these gender categories themselves.

### **The erotics of homosociability**

[I]t is . . . the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinative diacritical mark of social organization, people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire (Sedgwick, 2008,p. 87).

Because conduits for male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required intense male bonding, strong homosocial male cultures developed in exclusively masculine public spaces. In her discussion of homosociability Sedgwick (2008, p. 185) explains how strong bonds between men and the intense friendships they fostered was often indistinguishable from homosexual practices, which encouraged homophobia in response to the policing of these borders between homosociability and homoerotic desire. Indeed, a key aspect of Marinetti's Futurist vision is his prescription for homosociability: the desire for, and insistence upon, same-sex bonding. The first sentence of his founding manifesto begins with the camaraderie of the collective 'we': 'My friends and I had stayed up all night, sitting beneath the lamps

of a mosque, whose star-studded, filigreed brass domes resembled our souls, all aglow with the concentrated brilliance of an electric heart' (FM, 1909, p. 11). The narrative is established as a comradely journey shared by a band of friends, the 'young lions'. 'Come on! Let's go!' exclaims the narrator. 'Come on, my lads, let's get out of here!' (p. 12). Together, they declare a series of demands beginning with 'we' or using the possessive adjective 'our' to underscore their homosociability (pp. 13-14).

Such male bonding functions as definitive of masculinity rather than detrimental to it, with celebrations of comradely love not only aiding recruitment but also protecting this masculinised world from feminising principles. In order to retain power, men's bonds with women are inherently subordinate and pragmatic: they serve a purpose that ensures bonds with other men. In this sense women were used as intensifiers of the homosocial bond, taking on little currency except in terms of their circulation among men, as avenues for men's homosocial desire toward other men (Sedgwick, 1995). For example, Marinetti insists 'the young, modern male' must indulge in 'endless sexual amusement in rapid, casual encounters with women' in order to sustain a Futurist utopia ('Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine' [hereafter EM], 1915, p. 88).

Although for Marinetti men's desire for other men was tangled with fears about national degeneration, and certainly he used sexually abject metaphors in which homosexual acts were used as instruments to mock adversaries (Benadusi, 2012), still this contempt centered on what he considered unmanliness: an absence of virility exercised as courage and exuberance, rather than on homosexual desire itself. And, importantly, effeminate male 'inverts' were not yet rigidly cast as sexual subversives at this time. The modern male homosexual subject was not yet fully formed during this period and dandyism did not necessarily denote homosexual practices (Shorter, 2005; Sinfield, 1994). In addition, Benadusi (2012, p. 24) notes that in his everyday life Marinetti was decidedly 'less homophobic' than his Futurist contemporaries and writes about how one of these comrades, Aldo Palazzeschi, confessed a young male lover to Marinetti 'with the knowledge that he would find an

understanding listener'. Rather, Marinetti's ambiguous response to homosexual desire is again better understood as both opportunistic (in terms of what is best for Italian nationalism) and as a reflection of slippage across categories of gender and sexual desire characteristic of the period (Halperin, 1990).

Such erotic ambiguity and sexual opportunism is first illustrated in two examples. First, in a brazen speech given at the London Lyceum Club and published as the 'Lecture to the English on Futurism' (hereafter LE), Marinetti simultaneously insults and praises his perception of the English national character, including the 'absurd condemnation of Oscar Wilde', about which 'the intelligentsia of Europe will never forgive' (LE, 1911, p. 91). He tells his English audience that 'nearly all' their nation's young men indulge in homosexual practices 'at some time or other'. He insists that 'this perfectly respectable preference of theirs' stems from 'some sort of intensification of camaraderie and friendship, in the realm of athletic sports, before they reach the age of thirty – that age of work and order in which they suddenly return from Sodom to become engaged to some impudent young hussy, quickly registering their severe disapproval of the born invert, the false man, the half woman who makes no attempt to change' (p. 91). His diatribe condemns the English for their 'moral hypocrisy' and 'obsessive desire to keep up appearances at all costs' (p. 91). Bourgeois snobbery was the particular source of Marinetti's scorn: a snobbery he also condemned in his own nation: 'we have to hurl ourselves against the imbecility of fashion and head off this sheeplike current of snobbism' (DT, 1914, p. 132).

Against Marinetti's announcement of this particular sexual behaviour as a 'perfectly respectable preference' (LE, 1911, p. 91) and his 'support' for Oscar Wilde (or the opportunity to use this public national scandal to further the Futurist cause) is his derision of the 'obsession with lechery' that occurs closer to home on the canals of Venice, that 'putrescent city . . . magnificent carbuncle from the past' ('The Battles of Venice' [hereafter BV], 1911, p. 165). This ancient city, associated with ruin and decay, was a particular attraction for men seeking emotional and sexual relationships with men, especially among foreign tourists

(Aldrich, 1993). Venetian homosexual practices were grounded in cultures of masculinity among the gondoliers and facilitated by the Zanardelli Code of 1889, which decriminalised sex between men in private (Brady, 1915). 'We've had more than enough of amorous adventures, of lechery', Marinetti declared, 'you love to fawn on foreigners, and your servility is repulsive!' (BV, 1910, p. 166, p. 167).

How do we make sense of these two contrary takes on the potential anxieties between effeminacy and homoerotics: the support for Wilde, the poster child of the effete and leisured dandy and a lily-like apostle of aestheticism, and his disdain for the homoerotic practices of masculine Venetian subcultures? The question is further complicated by the fact that while Marinetti's contempt for femininity/effeminacy is clear, in the first case he offers support for the effeminate man and in the second, where this homoerotic subculture is not distinctly effete even if the tourists were, he unleashes contempt. An explanation rests again, not surprisingly, in Marinetti's opportunism and the insistence of a pragmatist nationalist politics that trumps all else. Oscar Wilde represented British decadence in such a way that it brought not only national shame to that country, but revealed its hypocrisy, snobbery, and prudery. Marinetti rejoiced in being able to elevate Italian national pride by insulting its British equivalent during his speech in London: 'That's how you carry out your obsessive desire . . . your meticulous, petty-minded mania for labels, masks, and all kinds of screens, the contrivances of prudishness and moral hypocrisy' (LE, 1911, p. 91). On the other hand, the widely-known Venetian tourist trade in homoeroticism represented Italy's own national 'shame'. Although these practices had a long cultural history and Marinetti most certainly was aware of these traditions, the need to demonstrate a virile polemic and literary aesthetic practice without hint of effeminacy was most pertinent for the movement (Contarini, 2006).

Alongside ambiguous opportunism in response to the sexual anxieties and gender uncertainties of modernity are Marinetti's own homoerotic representations of hypermasculinity associated with the Futurist man 'whose sleek shaft traverses the Earth' (FM, 1909, p. 13). As

Klaus Theweleit(1987) suggests in *Male Fantasies*, phallic representations of hypermasculinity were endemic to fascism because anxieties about the penetrability of the male body were tied to vulnerabilities of the nation state. And, indeed, it is exactly metaphors of penetration, ejaculation, and sadomasochism that Marinetti employs. In the founding manifesto, for example, Marinetti writes about the band of friends who ‘approached the three panting beasts to stroke their burning breasts’. The narrator declares: ‘I stretched myself out on my car like a corpse on its bier, but immediately I was revived as the steering wheel, like a guillotine blade, menaced my belly’ (FM, 1909, p. 12). Alive after an automobile accident, he has ‘a wonderful sense of [his] heart being pierced by the red-hot sword of joy!’ Then ‘[t]hey thought it was dead, that gorgeous shark of mine’, he explains, describing the car that survived the accident, ‘but a caress was all it needed to revive it, and there it was, back from the dead, darting along’ (p. 13). Similarly in ‘Let’s Kill Off the Moonlight’ the Futurist journey (imagined as ‘an awesome surge from a huge sluice gate’ [KM, 1909, p. 26]) involves an attempt to ‘tame the winds and keep them on a leash’ (p. 25). ‘The army of madness hurled itself from plain to plain’, writes Marinetti, like an ‘irresistible, free-flowing power of a liquid passing between enormous connecting vats’ (p. 26). He describes the journey, ‘tensed, twisted, and delirious . . . eddying with froth, that oozed ceaselessly from its gates, whose drawbridges had become pulsating, echoing funnels’. As they advanced they scattered the crowd like ‘sowers spreading seed’ until a man appeared, ‘very young with innocent eyes’ holding a flower ‘whose pistil wagged like a woman’s tongue’. Marinetti declares that ‘some wished to touch it, which would have been dreadful, since . . . a sighing foliage rose miraculously out of an earth rippling with unexpected waves’ (p. 27). As the excitement mounts ‘turbines transformed the rushing waters into electric pulses that clambered up along wires, up high poles, till they reached globes that were buzzing and glowing’ (28) when at the climax ‘great gouts of white foam that rolled and plunged, shower[ed] the backs of the lions’ (p. 29).



Alongside these representations of penetration and ejaculation are reproductive metaphors employed as strategies of mastery and control. Marinetti both appropriated and overpowered the geometries of nature by projecting homoerotic fantasies onto the hypermasculine symbol of the fused machine/man, the 'quite naturally [. . .] cruel, omniscient, and warlike' *superuomo* (EM, 1915, p. 86) who is born the product of male pathogenesis. As Marinetti exclaims, '[w]e've even dreamt of one day being able to create our own mechanical son, fruit of pure will, synthesis of all the laws the discovery of which science is about to hurl down upon us' (AL, 1911, p. 59).<sup>3</sup> Reborn in the form of an airplane (what Jeffrey Schapp [1994, p. 165] calls an 'aerial phallus'), 'he will possess the most unusual organs: organs adapted to the needs of an environment in which there are continual clashes. Even now we can predict a development of the external protrusion of the sternum, resembling a prow, which will have great significance, given that man, in the future, will become an increasingly better aviator' (EM, 1915, p. 86).

In this way homoeroticism is displaced onto a fetishised machine that becomes animated and fused as a masculine prosthetic. Such a mechanistic future, Marinetti declares, will be 'controlled from keyboards with a fertilizing abundance that throbs beneath the fingers of the engineers' (Marinetti, quoted in Flint, 1971, 104). Alongside love for the machine, writes Marinetti, is 'our growing love for matter [and] the will to penetrate it and know its vibrations' ('Geometrical and Mechanical Splendor and the Sensitivity Toward Numbers' [hereafter GM], 1914, p. 140). The hypermasculine machine sustains the erotic pleasures of mastering/penetrating effeminate (passively receptive) nature and illustrates the ways ambiguous eroticised virilities create an idealised notion of masculine strength elastic enough to contain physical prowess, nationalist strength, and sexual desire in one narrative. As Pursell (2008, p. 115) suggests, fascist regimes used body icons to defend dominant gendered nationalist norms and produce images that 'moved between aesthetics of domination and those of titillation'.

When such spectacular hypermasculinised homoerotic visual images collide with the fragmented and inchoate literary forms produced

in the manifestos, the result is an imaginative, but still relatively incoherent, narrative. Such modernist narrative highlighting ambiguities through oblique associations and characterisations provides resistance to realist literary traditions of the *fin de siècle* (Felski, 1995). Marinetti relied on such outrageous assertions to build his movement and to cultivate a public persona ready to feed a public hungry for patriotic nationalism at the very same time that he encouraged an innovative literary approach whose performative bent would foreshadow queer literary aesthetics. His authorial persona thrilled by asserting a mechanised precise logic that replaced outdated 'effeminate' language with the excesses of 'geometric and mechanical splendor' (GM, 1914, p. 142) even while this extravagant narrative, seething with internal contradictions, was irrational at base: 'a crazily naïve, exuberant paradox and divination' (Flint, 1971, p. 3). Such excessive and exaggerated ambiguity ultimately renders the author unknowable and prevents him from being fixed as a sexual subject. In other words, Marinetti's writing is inherently sexualised, but he resists binary oppositions and subverts coherent understandings of morality and transgression. Such queering of literary aesthetics to encourage a reading public to exercise power-over is cause for ponder, as also is the queering of fixed subjects and normative categories in the name of fascism.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to knowledge about the fictive and insecure nature of homosexual/heterosexual binaries and the role of gender performances in the establishment of these categories. I make the case for a rupture between bodies and performances that disconnects bodily acts and identification. I also suggest that Marinetti's anxieties about the borders between homosociability and sexual desire are illustrated by an effusive and often violent homoeroticism, punctuated by occasional heteronormative relief, and all encoded within belligerent assertions of hypermasculinity associated with penetrative agency: a polyvalent narrative that marks a

refusal about the terminologies of desire. Importantly such narrative is contextualised in Marinetti's rabid nationalism and his seemingly 'natural' capacity for opportunism, all of which cumulate to defy attempts to place him within a coherent regime of erotic classification. In other words, while the narrative is animated by desire, exaggerated claim and counter claim renders Marinetti elusive and unknowable. However, although for Marinetti desire is articulated through multiple – and sometimes competing -- registers of the abject, the magical, and the pragmatic, it is always shaped by patriotic nationalism. Rather than a function of distinct sexual desires, Marinetti's opportunistic narrative reflects the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory socio-political practices associated with Italian futurism and encourages us to 'draw attention to the points of convergence between the social and the sexual', a methodology identified by Matt Houlbrook (2013) as 'essential' to queer historical analysis (p. 158). Such practice has implications for contemporary Italian queer theory in its refocus from queer subjects (somewhat of an oxymoron given queer theory's disruption of fixed identities) to queering as methodology (Pustianaz, 2010).

History has been faced with the difficulties of placing Marinetti's exaggerated rhetoric within coherent systems of classification. What I have tried to do here is problematise gender and sexual categories as distinct and bounded, hopefully revealing the fictive nature of these modes of categorisation and the impossibilities of classification beyond what we have come to understand as the modern sexual subject. Such an approach that attempts to problematise, defamiliarise, and destabilise what we think we know about the boundaries between gender and desire in Marinetti's work invariably accepts 'an irreducible dimension of opacity' regarding these categories (Kaplan, 2005, p. 270). Perhaps rather than understanding Marinetti in terms of his refusal to be aligned with a more or less fixed sexual subject, a situation that assumes there is a sexual subject with which to identify or align all along, his work can best be understood in response to contextualised cultural 'takes' on

sexual subjectivity (such as opportunism and the prerogatives of Italian nationalism).

What I have only begun to address here – and hopefully something other scholars will continue to pursue -- is the ways literary innovations of language and style in Marinetti's texts are specifically linked to non-normative sexual practices, or the similarities between his modernist syntax (or lack of it), ellipses, juxtapositions, and disjointed narratives, and queer theory's circumspection and strategic ambiguity. Both of course privilege transgression and the metaphorical language of substitution and digression; both can encode and decode homoerotic desire even while one is positioned to sustain fascism and the other seeks to interrogate power.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all page references to Marinetti's manifestos are from *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings* edited by Günter Berghaus (2006).

<sup>2</sup>Complicated, perhaps, by the politics of translation where the Italian adjective '*femminile*' can be translated into English as both woman/womanly/womanish and feminine.

<sup>3</sup> Marinetti's reproductive fantasy is best represented in his 1909 novel, *Mafarka*, a 'tale of rape, carnage, and Futurist declamation set in Africa' (Spackman 1994, 89), where he creates an Orientalised virile character, an African king who steals the gift of procreation from women and through imperial fantasies and male pathogenesis generates new machine/human life.