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‘A Queer-Looking Lot of Women’: cross-dressing, transgender ventriloquism and same-sex desire in *The Rebecca Rioter*

Kirsti Bohata

In *Vested Interests* (1993), Marjorie Garber invites us to look directly *at* rather than *through* the figure of the transvestite (Garber 9). She sees the cross-dressing figure as a ‘third’ term which undoes binaries, creating a ‘category crisis’: “By ‘category crisis’ I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another...” (Garber 16)¹ In *The Rebecca Rioter: A Story of Killay Life* (1880), by Amy Dillwyn (1845-1935), gangs of cross-dressed men breach physical boundaries in the name of social justice, class and nationality. Beyond this surface plot of smashing toll gates, *The Rebecca Rioter* is a text invested in transitions, from the purported linguistic translation of the original story (from Welsh to English) to the multi-layered transgender ventriloquism of narrative. Dillwyn’s novel is also a queer story of same-sex desire. Jay Prosser (2013) has convincingly argued that we need to disentangle transgender bodies from queer bodies and transgender identity from queer sexuality, but in the case of Dillwyn’s novel these are deeply and deliberately intertwined. Indeed, as I shall argue, the queer erotic triangle at the heart of Dillwyn’s expression of female same-sex desire is contingent on the transgender construction of Evan who is both one of the cross-dressing rioters and a character who ventriloquises his genderqueer creator. This essay draws on recent historiography, newly available archival sources, and queer theory to investigate Dillwyn’s

¹ Though Marjorie Garber’s work on cross-dressing was published quarter of a century ago (1993), it remains some of the most useful and astute theory in the field it helped define. Moreover, the idea of the disruptive potentiality of the ex-centric figure and the insistence that we look *at* rather than *through* such figures also finds parallels in more recent work in related fields, such as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s theories of disability and literature.

representation of trans Victorian identities and acts. In so doing it claims the novel as a paradigmatic example of trans Victorian literature.

Published nearly forty years after the popular uprisings of 1839-43 known as the Rebecca Riots, Amy Dillwyn's novel is closely based on historical events in which large gangs of protesters – mainly men dressed in female costume – destroyed hundreds of toll gates, liberated a workhouse, and conducted campaigns of protest and intimidation. The riots began in the face of an agricultural depression and focused on removing the numerous and costly toll gates run by turnpike trusts, but Rebeccaism expanded to protest elements of the new Poor Law, absentee landlords, and other issues of social justice. There was an element of nationalist protest in some of Rebecca's declarations (Williams 192) and historical research suggests that there were also links between the Chartist movement fomenting in industrial south east Wales and Rebecca in the rural west (Williams 150-157). From the outset, Rebecca and her daughters (as the rioters were known) went about their protests wearing women's clothing: often a white smock-like garment, or a bedgown, bonnet and shawl in keeping with the attire of farmers' and labourers' wives, though occasionally sporting more lavish wigs and dresses. Rebecca, referred to in contemporary accounts in the third person to mean both the leader of a particular riot, the wider body of men (who are also her children / daughters), and the movement itself, took her name from Genesis xxiv, verse 60: "let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them" (*King James Bible*). Another widely circulated folk story is that the burly leader of the first riot borrowed his costume from Becca Mawr (big Rebecca) of Llangolman.

There were hundreds of successful attacks on toll gates during 1843 (D. Jones), the year in which the riots of the novel take place, and by summer Rebeccaism had spread from the rural west to industrialised Glamorgan where this story is set. The attacks depicted in the

novel are based on events in which the author's father and uncle were directly involved as magistrates who were summoned to help ambush the rioters.² Dillwyn's novel was considered by contemporaries as a compellingly realistic account of the riots and was consulted and quoted by historians (Davies, Evans). One local woman recalled that "such was the accuracy of [Dillwyn's] portrayal of the rioters, that their now respectable descendants demanded an injunction in court to withdraw publication." (Morgan 172) The London press praised the unsentimental portrayal of the working class and the Welsh press welcomed the book as an accurate and balanced portrayal of the Rebecca riots. Dillwyn's book was one of several Rebecca novels to appear at this time and is notable for being the only one sympathetic to Rebecca (Knight 14-15, Aaron 127-31).

The Rebecca Rioter is an unusual novel on several counts. Authored by an upper-class woman, it is written in the first-person voice of a Welsh-speaking labourer, Evan Williams. It tells the story of his radicalisation and enthusiastic participation in the riots during which he shoots a magistrate. Anticipating arrest, Evan goes on the run with another fugitive, heading for what he hopes is a more egalitarian democracy in America. His pride in having struck a blow for Rebecca is undermined, however, when he discovers that the man he killed was the father of Miss Gwenllian Tudor, a lady with whom he fell in love at the start of the novel when he rescued her from a carriage accident. Evan was instantly drawn to Miss Gwenllian and she in turn takes an interest in him, helping to nurse him back to health after the accident (he breaks his arm in the course of her rescue) and then, over the next two years, instructing him in reading and religion. Dismayed that he has brought grief to Miss Gwenllian, Evan returns to explain he had not meant to hurt her and is inevitably locked up.

² A small band of just eleven men ambushed Rebecca at Pontarddulais, before being joined some time later by the local dragoons. An account by Dillwyn's father, Lewis Llewelyn Dillwyn (1814-1892), written shortly these events in September 1843 (with a postscript added some decades later in Amy Dillwyn's hand) is held at the Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University and digitised on *The Rebecca Rioter* pages of Literary Atlas (www.literaryatlas.wales).

He escapes hanging and is transported to a penal colony in the Antipodes through the intervention of Miss Gwenllian and another character, Bill, an abused sailor boy whom Evan has rescued and brought to live with him and who, in a rather unlikely twist of the plot, turns out to be the long-lost brother of Miss Gwenllian and heir to the Tudor estate. Evan is portrayed with energy and sympathy throughout, and the novel explicitly urges “the rich” to “see in each poor person a fellow-creature” (*Rebecca Rioter* 173-74).

This is a novel full of transitional moments: from the literal smashing and breaching of the barriers constituted by the toll gates, to the transgender costumes of the rioters. The novel itself is a ‘translation’ in that the working-class characters are all Welsh-speaking and this translation leaves a mark in the syntax and grammar of the text (Gramich xvii). A fictional editor who introduces and concludes the novel further “transcribes” and “alter[s]” the “Welshy, and sometimes uncouth, language” of the ‘original’ so that it is “intelligible to the general reader.” (*Rebecca Rioter*, n.p.) If Evan’s narrative is mediated by the ‘editor’ – a doctor in a convict establishment in Tasmania³ – Evan’s character is also an instance of “transvestite ventriloquism” (Harvey, Wallace). Evan is partly based on the author and voices some of Dillwyn’s beliefs. The genderqueer presentation of the author herself adds further layers of complexity to Evan’s quasi-autobiographical role. A tale of national and class protest, this is also a part-coded story of female same-sex desire in which both male homoeroticism and a heterosexual cross-class narrative are based closely on the author’s own life and life-writing, as an exploration of the archive reveals.

Thus in his complexly layered gender identity which resists closure or reduction to gender binaries, Evan is a supremely trans figure. *The Rebecca Rioter*, moreover, is a novel

³ Dillwyn doesn’t specify to which Antipodean location Evan is sent, but given her novel is based on the events of 1843 and that the men involved in the Pontarddulais attack were transported to Tasmania, then known as Van Diemen’s Land (Jones 1989), I have adopted this country rather than Australia as assumed by some other critics.

that may best be described as *transgenre*. Drawing on a blend of historical sources, life writing, and multiple transhistorical biographical threads,⁴ the novel is an innovative hybridisation of romance and quasi-imperial adventure story, while Stephen Knight claims it shows signs of “the police-detective stories becoming popular in the period” (15).

The following discussion of this trans novel begins with Dillwyn’s treatment of the historical cross-dressing rioters before turning to consider Evan’s transgender ventriloquism and the queer desires which are evident in both the surface plot and the autobiographical subtext of the novel.

Cross-dressing and the Rebecca Riots

From the very first attack in Efailwen in 1839, the Rebecca rioters appeared “with blackened faces, women’s dresses, fern in their caps, and whatever arms they could get hold of” (*Rebecca Rioter*, 77). A variety of other costume props including false beards were also common. This was not cross-dressing to pass, but nor was it simply a matter of obscuring the identity of the individual as generally claimed by most historians. In her ground-breaking study of gender and popular protest, *Petticoat Heroes*, Rhian E. Jones demonstrates that the cross-dressing synonymous with the Rebecca movement was a performative act whose power lay in mixing prosthetic symbols of gender.

Rebeccaite dress contained a deliberate mixture of masculine and feminine signifiers alongside other binary oppositions, and these oppositions were intended simultaneously to make visible a number of boundaries and to emphasise their blurring and transgression. The symbolic instability and uncertainty thus created allowed the wearer’s own identity to be subsumed within the transgressive and

⁴ For instance, some of the characters and incidents portrayed in the novel (set in the 1840s) seem to have their origins in the author’s own lifetime, as evidenced by her diaries which record events during the 1860s and 70s.

transitional figure of Rebecca or her daughter, thereby enabling them to act with enhanced power and potential. (R Jones 59-60)

Dillwyn does in fact use the word “disguise” (82) to describe the “woman’s dress” (91) Evan and his fellows wear. One character even remarks: “when a man’s face be black, and he dressed in a bedgown, wittle and bonnet, I do not think as his own wife shall know him on a dark night in a crowd, if he do hold his tongue” (92), though in the event the main characters have no trouble identifying each other and their leaders in costume. Dillwyn’s understanding of cross-dressing goes beyond idea of disguise, however, and the novel emphasises the blurring of boundaries and multiple transgressions and transitions in a way that demonstrates she was deeply sensitive to the queer power and performativity of Rebecca.

The coexistence of masculine and feminine signifiers are foregrounded in Amy Dillwyn’s descriptions of cross-dressed rioters: “... we stopped to blacken our faces and put on our women’s dresses in the soft July twilight. We certainly were a queer-looking lot of women with black faces, and beards and whiskers peeping out under the white caps.” (81) Significantly, this scene is set in the liminal territory of the moor, a queer space in which the usual order of things is suspended or upended. Fairwood Common is established early in the novel as the site of lawlessness and Upper Killay (the village on the edge of the moor where Evan lives) is similarly portrayed as a “wild” (1) place inhabited by poachers and thieves and barely touched by the influence of religion. Thus the act of cross-dressing is of a piece with the anarchic qualities of this liminal space.

At the climax of the riot, Dillwyn deploys chiaroscuro – contrasts of light and dark – to emphasise both the limit presented by the “great gate” (which in the moonlight throws “deep black bars of shadow across the white road” (105)) and the transformative power of the cross-dressed men with their blackened faces. The men break down the gate and Dillwyn describes a “wild and strange... scene” (85) in front of the burning tollhouse. The “queer-looking lot of

women” who set out from the moor are further transformed into “strange figures with negro faces and women’s clothes, [with] fierce eyes glistening the firelight” (85). “I think we must have looked more like fiends than men” (85) says Evan. Here Dillwyn’s rioters blend race, gender and the supernatural. Tinged with racial stereotypes that equate savagery with blackness though this passage is, the aim of this trans-racial description is to convey a sense of power unleashed.⁵ The riot scene is full of markers of the carnivalesque common to the Rebecca Riots: “transgressed boundaries, supernatural leadership and dual or multiple identities” (R. Jones 64). As Jones points out:

Rebeccaite costume had less to do with one gender adopting the clothing of the other, and more with the attempt to convey *an altered state of being*. By presenting a *transitional identity* which symbolically blurred the boundaries between dichotomous genders, individuals could become invested with the heightened power and abilities customarily accruing to such liminal spaces and figures. (R. Jones 70. My emphasis.)

Dillwyn makes full use of the altered and transitional identities of the rioters to evoke the power and danger of the protestors.

Some of Rebecca’s power comes from the “symbolic presentation of a ‘world turned upside down’” (R. Jones 69). Comedy was a facet of this topsy-turveydom underlining Rebecca’s associations with carnival and other “customary periods of festive misrule” (R. Jones 62). Contemporary accounts of Rebecca’s procession to Carmarthen workhouse (which was then sacked) observed that it “contained much of the ludicrous that was calculated to excite mirth” (R Jones 62, citing the *Carmarthen Journal* of 23 June 1843).

Dillwyn exploits the comic opportunities of men wearing women’s clothes as Evan and his

⁵ It is also possible Dillwyn is deliberately comparing the riot to a slave uprising. She was well acquainted with the history of her great grandfather, William Dillwyn (1743-1832), an American Quaker and leading figure of Abolition on both sides of the Atlantic.

friends meet up on the moor. She is keen to suggest that one amongst them at least may enjoy drag for its own sake:

We were all three mounted [on moorland ponies]. We were soon joined by Jenkin Thomas, coming from Three Crosses. He was dressed and mounted as we were, and – being always a bit of a dandy – had managed to arrange his bedgown and wittle so as to look quite spruce in his disguise.

“Well indeed, you do look like Rebecca’s very best daughter,” said I, laughing; “you do look as if you was never meant to be no better nor a woman in all your life – so there’s for you Jenkin.”

“Indeed then, and it shall not be hard for someone to look a better woman than you, Evan,” returned he... (81-82)

Jenkin the dandy then proceeds to arrange Evan’s wittle (shawl) in a more becoming and feminine manner.

The dandy, by 1880, was a well-recognised figure. An effeminate, fashion-obsessed man (often paired with the New Woman⁶ in hostile caricatures), the dandy “provoked fears over the malleability or disappearance of gender distinctions” (MacDonald 15). The mannered, aesthetically refined and beautiful dandy was also associated with the homoerotic or homosexual.⁷ Dillwyn’s inclusion of an unusual working-class dandy in this scene thus connects the cross-dressing of the riot with wider themes of transgender performance and same-sex desire which weave through the novel.⁸

⁶ The epithet New Woman was not coined until 1894, but she was a well-established figure by then.

⁷ As well as signifying male same-sex desire, in the early twentieth century the dandy would become a “visible signifier of lesbian desire” (Lucchesi 153).

⁸ Dillwyn’s interest in the dandy is evident in other novels, most notably in *Jill and Jack* (1887) in which the masculine heroine ridicules the dandified Jack while competing against him to perform the most chivalrous acts in the rescue of a damsel in distress. Eventually, they become comrades and marry.

Dillwyn enjoys representing a ‘dandy’ who can put in a decent performance of femininity, but the masculinity of Jenkin and the other rioters (as signalled by physical strength, heroism and action – as well as the beards) remains undiminished. Indeed, the women’s clothes so eagerly acquired in readiness for Rebecca are a symbol of the men’s dedication to a heroic cause: “I told Pugh what strong supporters Rebecca had in Jim Jenkins and Jenkin Thomas, who had already got their dresses.” (77) As Rhian E. Jones points out in her history of the riots “Rebecca [was] a model of aspirational masculinity ... the leadership, daring and virility associated with the figure of Rebecca, both by her supporters and in general consciousness, made the adoption of her identity a desirable act for individual men.” (79-80) Instead of feminising the men, their experience of wearing women’s clothes is used to make a feminist point in Dillwyn’s novel about the restrictions of female clothing. Evan recalls that “We did not much like the dresses, and felt extremely thankful that we were not obliged always to wear such uncomfortable costumes” (81) and when out on a secretive mission to spy on some of Rebecca’s enemies, Evan and Bill “changed our dresses – as we might have to run for our lives, and petticoats would bother us terribly in that case.” (93) The implication here is that women’s strength and agility may be compromised not because of their innate physical abilities, but because they too are hampered by such clothes which they *are* obliged always to wear.

It wasn’t all comedy. Rebecca was an allegorical figure invested in more sombre drama. In popular discourse the practice (followed in this essay) of referring to Rebecca as an individual gave her great allegorical force. Furthermore, the men attacking the gates sometimes gave a literal “performance of stylised and elderly matriarchal virtues” (R. Jones 72) in which drama Rebecca took the role of old woman whose way is wrongfully blocked by the gate; she is supported by her daughters who clear the road in an act of filial duty. Dillwyn offers a muted version of such ritualised exchange, which emphasises Rebecca’s role as a

matriarch who is gathering her children to her. On their way to the rioters' rendezvous, Evan and his cross-dressed companions are hailed by a woman who asks why young women are out so late. Evan knows this is "the signal of a friend" and gives the coded reply "that we were going to our mother", whereupon the woman confesses Rebecca "do be my mother too" and the gang make their way to the tollgate (82). Rebecca as mother is pictured as having a duty of care to her children; she is asserting their rights on their behalf thus legitimising her actions. She is an equivalent of the French Revolution's Marianne and other national female allegories (Warner), and in Dillwyn's novel Rebecca is presented as the rallying figure of an unequivocal nationalism. Wales personified, Rebecca is figured as the counterpart and rival to Queen Victoria who is invoked as the direct beneficiary of the turnpike taxes collected from the poor. In a recruiting speech for Rebecca, Dillwyn has her orator, who declaims in the manner of a Nonconformist minister, exhort the Welsh to remember their proud independent past, their native rulers. They must help their "country shake off her chains!" (65), evoking a Rebecca figure akin to the Irish Granuaile.⁹

In history and in Dillwyn's historical novel, Rebecca's cross-dressing is "present[ed as] a dual or amalgamated identity involving conflicting or synthesised opposites – a more sophisticated operation than men straightforwardly 'dressing as women'." (R. Jones 72) Dillwyn's choice of contrasting gendered signifiers with which she costumes Rebecca's daughters in the novel: bonnet and beard, gowns and weaponry, and her attribution of the simultaneous markers of masculine strength and female fecundity to Rebecca, allowed Dillwyn (and the Rebeccaites in reality) "to emphasise the blurring and transgression of a set of boundaries wider than those relating to gender" (R. Jones 72).

⁹ Granuaile as a personification of Ireland is pictured in chains in the traditional folk song (c. 1798) which bears her name: "Her neck and waist, her hands and feet with iron chains were bound." (Regan 179)

Outlaws: Cross-dressing, class, and nationality

Marjorie Garber argues that, “traversing the boundary from female-to-male also involves trespassing on the terrain of another class” (283) and that from the Renaissance “Transvestism was located at the juncture of ‘class’ and ‘gender’...” (32). Across Dillwyn’s novels, representations of trans/gender intersect and overlap with class and also race and nationality (as we have already seen). The wild, Welsh-speaking labourer of *The Rebecca Rioter* reappears in a female guise in the upper-class tomboy of Dillwyn’s third novel, *A Burglary* (1883). Imogen’s love of rough and tumble outdoor pursuits is associated with a noble savagery described as “the superiority of Red Indians” (85). Via her practical clothes, which include a Welsh flannel petticoat (like Evan’s bedgown) and mirror the costume of her brother, Imogen represents a specifically Welsh female masculinity. A more extreme version of Welsh female masculinity is Leah, a queer cottager in the serialised novel, *Nant Olchfa* who, along with a

Welsh-flannel bedgown, petticoat, and apron constituting the ordinary costume of the country-women, and she had a man’s wide-awake had upon her head. She was big and powerful looking in every way, and the short turned-up sleeves of the bedgown exhibited a pair of tanned, brawny arms whose muscles an athlete need not have been ashamed to own.” (197-198)

In Dillwyn’s fourth novel, *Jill* (1884) an upper-class girl disguises herself as a maid, and by this class transition (and a bit of theft and fraud) she is able to achieve economic independence, considerable agency and the satisfaction of her desire for adventure, thus her cross-class masquerade parallels some of the outcomes of historical woman-to-man cross-dressing. In Dillwyn’s writing, then, cross-class and cross-gender masquerade are closely linked (Bohata 2017) and often connected with a racial or national ‘other’ (Bohata 2016).

His status as protester and fugitive in *The Rebecca Rioter* endow Evan with a rough masculinity, but class, nationality and language all ‘feminize’ Evan in terms of his power. In her study of ‘literary cross-dressing’ or ‘transvesite ventriloquism’ in fiction by Edith Wharton and May Sinclair, in which the female artist is rewritten as socially disadvantaged man, Diana Wallace follows Garber in identifying a transposition of gender disadvantage on to class disadvantage: “Class rather than gender is foregrounded ... as the mark of the ‘other’” and thus “the ventriloquized male voice is ‘feminized’ through class markers” (Wallace, 325). Wallace also describes an “*exile* of gender” which is “translated into the *exile* of class” (Wallace 325, my emphasis). Exile carries with it suggestions of being debarred from a nation, and exile may even take the form of disenfranchisement or subjugation within one’s own country, as Virginia Woolf eloquently argued in *A Room of One’s Own* (see for instance 87-88). This is particularly resonant in a Welsh context; in Dillwyn’s novel Wales is presented, as Tomos Owen points out, as a “colonial outpost” (Owen 61).

Evan is a subaltern figure in his own country. His class status renders him disenfranchised, and his language cannot be voiced, only ‘translated’ through the double mediation of the fictional editor and colonial servant (Owen 69) who modifies Evan’s language and the class privilege of the author which enables her to write his story. This mediated, ventriloquized ‘translation’ of a Welsh, and Welsh-speaking, voice could, however, be seen as working in a comparable way to the transgender costumes of the rioters, which Jones sees as offering a ‘liminal space’ of ‘heightened power’ (R. Jones 70). In framing the narrative and translating and modifying the language of the narrator, “Dillwyn uses the guise of the empire-serving male to ventriloquize, distancing readers from the rebel *without erasing him and thereby recovering the lost subaltern voice.*” (Owen 69, my emphasis). In a similar way, we can read the cross-class ventriloquism of the author as an instance of using class privilege to “give a voice ... to the silenced Rebecca” (Gramich xv).

Thus, a possibly enabling and certainly destabilizing array of trans class, linguistic, national, cultural and gender identities are mobilized in this ventriloquized narrative of riot and protest.

Transgender ventriloquism:

As her representation of cross-dressing in *The Rebecca Rioter* suggests, Dillwyn was aware of the power of transgender costume and fascinated by queer gender performance. Indeed, uncovering the many layers and nuances of cross-gender masquerade or transgender ventriloquism is essential to an understanding of the novel. Katie Gramich was the first modern critic to note what she calls a “quasi-Shakespearean confusion of genders” in the novel: “If Evan is, in some respects, speaking for Amy Dillwyn, we are presented with a woman masquerading as a man who [in his Rebecca costume] is masquerading as a woman.” (xv) In fact the transgender complexity of the protagonist and the overlap with his genderqueer author goes even further than Gramich suggests.

This is a very personal novel. Evan most certainly speaks for Dillwyn the feminist and her intolerance for conventional female gender roles as manifest in the restrictions of feminine clothes. He also speaks for Dillwyn the social reformer, particularly in the final pages of the book when his voice most obviously blurs with that of his author, as she expresses a political view of cross-class fraternity.¹⁰ Dillwyn began writing to try to raise money to provide more schooling in Killay, but we also know that she fell back on her imaginative work in part due to an illness that left a formerly athletic woman a semi-invalid from her late twenties into her forties. She described her writing dismissively as a ‘*pis-aller*, using my brains because I can’t use my muscles’ (Painting 60-61). It is easy to see how her

¹⁰ On the appeal of *The Rebecca Rioter*’s politics to the radical press in Russia, see Bohata and Lovatt (2012).

love of adventure stories influences her plots, how she uses her detailed knowledge of 1870s Killay in her novel of the 1840s, and how she might have found a vicarious pleasure in the creation of active and adventurous protagonists.

There is a close connection, therefore between Dillwyn the author and Evan the character and narrative voice. In her essay, ‘Venriloquizing the Male’, Diana Wallace explains that ‘the term *ventriloquism* foreground[s] both the presence and the gender of the authorial voice (and body) as well as the constructed voice.’ (327) Dillwyn speaks through Evan, but rather than this male character being feminized or queered by the presence of a more or less conventionally-gendered female author, Evan is the queer creation of a woman who herself adopted overtly masculine and feminine markers of gender. A study of contemporary newspaper reports on “Miss Dillwyn” alongside her diaries reveals a genderqueer woman who performed a very public female masculinity and who was privately thinking about gender identity. I have adopted the term genderqueer to describe her as it beautifully captures Dillwyn’s iconoclastic mixing of gender roles and costume.

Dillwyn was profoundly conscious of the performativity of clothing. In one widely reported protest, she deliberately broke Victorian sartorial codes by refusing to wear black to her father’s large public funeral in 1892 (she was acting in support of the Mourning Reform Society; *Painting* 72). Dillwyn became well-known for her chosen blend of masculine clothes (a trilby hat and mannish jacket), practical female garments (a ‘short’ skirt with pockets), and the ultimate masculine prop – a large cigar. After her father’s death she took over his beleaguered spelter works, becoming a rare instance of a nineteenth-century female industrialist. By 1902, when she was an active and successful businesswoman, she was being feted in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and other papers on both sides of the Atlantic as ‘one of the most remarkable women in Great Britain’ (11 April). In her journal at this time, she adopts

explicitly masculine signifiers, describing herself as a “man of business” and member of a “confraternity” of traders (Painting 85-86).

It is impossible to know how Dillwyn understood her own gender identity, though she clearly relished being ‘different’ (a word she uses often in her life writing). Modern research into gender and sexuality has challenged nineteenth-century sexology’s “theory of homosexuality [that] folded gender variance and sexual preference into one economical package” (Halberstam 82), taking sexual inversion as an element of gender inversion. Nevertheless, during the 1860s – at a time when Karl Heinrich Ulrichs came to understand male same-sex desire in terms of internal gender, “assuming that a love drive that was directed toward a man must be feminine”, thus postulating a female soul trapped in a male body (Kennedy 1339) – Amy Dillwyn similarly imagined a transgender identity in response to her attraction to another woman. “My own belief is that I’m half a man & the male half of my nature fell in love with her years ago & can’t fall out of it again. I care for her romantically, passionately, foolishly, & try as I may, I cannot get over it.” (27 July 1868)¹¹ Whether Dillwyn’s conjecture alluded to a long-considered sense of gender identity or was a passing theory is unknown. Certainly Dillwyn did not always regard same-sex desire as inevitably linked to female masculinity or a transgender identity.

A few months before she wrote the passage above, she commented in a lengthy journal entry on the way “a woman does fall in love with another woman”:

...perhaps the strangest feature in a woman’s character is the way she can fall in love with another woman & be true to that love. I have made a fool of myself that way & I

¹¹ The phrase, ‘half a man’, is exactly the same as Edith Simcox used in her diaries some years later to explain, according to Martha Vicinus, her “unattractiveness to men” and her “masculine desire” for women (Vicinus 111). Dillwyn did not consider herself unattractive to men.

can see other women do it – & there’s an inconsistency in that falling in love – it is weak & foolish but the steadfastness of the affection is strong. (10 March 1868)

Eventually, she would describe Olive Talbot (the woman she had loved since she was 15) as ‘my wife’ (22 February 1872). As did many other women who loved women (Marcus Ch 4, Vicinus Ch 1), Dillwyn adopted the language of marriage to signify Olive’s central emotional, social and erotic significance to her, though she left no record of what term she might have used for herself in this relationship. Dillwyn’s understanding of gender and transgender identities, then, are bound up with same-sex desire *and* with her frustrations about the social, professional and educational boundaries imposed on an upper-class Victorian woman.

Queer Triangles

A foundational layer of this novel of transgender adventure is a queer love story which is suggested both through the transgender ventriloquism of the narrative voice (the female author behind the male narrator) and through the ‘crosswriting’ (Wachman) of a homoerotic relationship between Evan and a boy named Bill. As already noted, many readers of the novel observe that the author’s voice is clearly audible, particularly towards the final pages of the novel where a form of Christian fraternity is articulated. Reading Evan as an avatar of Amy Dillwyn encourages a reading of Evan’s passion for Miss Gwennlian as a disguised expression of same-sex desire. Male characters, economically disadvantaged or not, were certainly used by Victorian writers attempting to represent in an indirect way same-sex relationships between women (Vicinus 80). In *Changes upon Changes* (1868), for instance, Emily Faithfull creates an economically disadvantaged young man in her story of unrequited love based on her difficult relationship with Helen Codrington (Vicinus 80-82), and Eliza

Lynn Linton portrayed herself as a man in more than one fiction, most obviously in *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885).

Several tropes familiar from lesbian literature appear in Dillwyn's novel – from spiritual union to the queer triangle in which Gwenllian, Evan and Bill are connected by erotic desire and family ties. Furthermore, there is significant overlap between Dillwyn's life writing and Evan's narrative voice, providing abundant autobiographical textual evidence to support a reading of *The Rebecca Riots* as a same-sex love story. There are minor facts such as the fact that Evan's "strange attraction" (30) to Miss Gwenllian begins when he is "between fifteen and sixteen" (5), the same age that Dillwyn fell in love with Olive Talbot. More compellingly, a study of Dillwyn's journals reveals common language and imagery between her conceptualisation and expression of feelings for Olive and the words she puts into Evan's mouth as he articulates his feelings for "the woman whom I care for above all others" (153). This shared imagery also underpins the "passionate jealous sort of way" (55) Evan cares for Bill.

In his unrequited yearning for Miss Gwenllian, Evan falls back on images of spiritual union – a trope regularly used in women's writing about an absent female lover, where the spiritual connection overcomes the barriers of distance:

I wonder if my worship of her [Miss Gwenllian] and longing for her gave my mind any sort of influence over hers – whether my thought was like an invisible thread joining our two minds together, and moving at one end when pulled at the other; so that at the moment that I thought most intensely about her, she would also have some passing recollection of me? (45)

Dillwyn often sought connection with Olive in this manner, wondering whether she had a part in Olive's prayers and thoughts: "The unseen & immaterial world is such a strange & mysterious reality altogether – have spirits an effect or power on each other? Does my spirit, which is constantly seeking for Olive and yearning for her, exercise any influence over hers or ever meet hers – so to speak – in that strange world?" (4 June 1872)¹²

In her chapter on "religion and lesbian love" in *Intimate Friends*, Martha Vicinus explains the context in which "Victorian women believed profoundly that love came from God, and that it had to be honoured as his gift." (85) Dillwyn wondered often if she was "in danger of loving the creature more than the Creator" (8 October 1871), but found religious companionship and exchange an important part of her relationship with Olive, imagining future possibilities for "know[ing] each other in Christ" (see below). Evan imagines a religious dimension to his love (though he is hardly devout in general). His devotion and unquestioning obedience to Miss Gwennlian closely echoes the way Dillwyn hopes to find greater intimacy with Olive:

Anyhow, boy or man, I was hers wholly ... Very likely she would never know this, at least not on earth, but perhaps in that heaven which I believed in chiefly because she told me of it – perhaps there she might at last see all my life, and know how true had been my affection for her. (*Rebecca Rioter* 79)

Compare this with Dillwyn's journal entry expressing faith in Olive as a moral guide and love as a path to God:

¹² Dillwyn composed and later published a poem 'on the material and immaterial worlds of course inspired by thinking of Olive.' (12 March 1871) .

the thought of her seems like a good spirit to me sometimes – helping me on – helping me on to the time when we may perhaps meet & know each other in Christ – when in Heaven there will be no more inequality ... Then perhaps she will know how she has helped me on – whether consciously or unconsciously I do not know – but I do know that my love for her has led me always to be better & never to be worse. (2 March 1871)

Both Evan and Dillwyn hope the true extent of their love will be made known in heaven, and both declare their willingness to obey their beloved women unquestioningly. Evan exclaims “...why I should even have kept away from Rebecca to please her!” (81), and Dillwyn – in one of many such statements – believes “...if I could be always with her there would be no difficulty in being good for she would always tell me right & I should always obey her.” (1 March 1872)

If Evan ventriloquises his creator’s feelings for Olive in his expressions of love for Miss Gwenllian, Dillwyn draws on the same resources to articulate Evan’s homoerotic relationship with his friend Bill. In an early twentieth-century context Gay Wachman describes the use of male homosexual stories in place of lesbian plots as ‘crosswriting’:

“Lesbian crosswriting transposes the otherwise unrepresentable lives of invisible or silenced or simply closeted lesbians into narratives about gay men.” (1)

Dillwyn would come to write directly about love between two women (in *A Burglary* and *Jill*) in similar terms to those she adopted to describe the Evan-Gwenllian relationship so it is not necessarily the case that she thought female same-sex desire was unrepresentable, during the 1880s at least. Of Dillwyn’s crosswriting, perhaps it would be more pertinent to note the way she uses her own same-sex experiences to inform Evan’s love for Bill Jones just as she uses them to underpin and ultimately to queer the heterosexual Evan-Gwenllian plot. And the two loves are intimately

linked: Evan is attracted to Bill because “he somehow seem[s] to bring Miss Gwennlian to my mind” (50) and their first meeting echoes his first contact with Gwennlian: both involve instant attraction and rescue. This is a queer romantic triangle, in which genders are blurred and which is built upon the passionate language of female same-sex desire.

Bill has a role in the reconciliation Miss Gwennlian and Evan towards the end of the novel, but his true importance seems to be the opportunity he offers for Dillwyn to extend her exploration of homoerotic friendship and unrequited desire. Evan’s frustration that Bill seems reserved towards him, and the contrast between Evan’s self-declared passionate nature and Bill’s more phlegmatic temperament again echo passages from Dillwyn’s diary. Dillwyn describes herself in one early diary entry as having “mad, hot blood” and feelings which, once let out, “acquire a vigour that makes them hard to hold in hand”. In the same passage she rails at the “stagnation” associated with being a woman when she craves adventure (17 January 1864). Evan’s impetuous and adventurous spirit is often remarked upon in the novel, and on the subject of his feelings for Bill, he says:

The more I knew of the boy the more fond I became of him, and after I had known him for six months or so I thought more of him than of almost anyone except Miss Gwennlian. He was not at all like me. I was hot-tempered, quick, and impetuous; but he was very quiet natured, and his blood did not seem to run at half the pace mine did. He was fond of me in his own quiet way, and was sure to be steady and true to his friends but he did not care about me in the passionate, jealous sort of way that I cared for him. (55)

The difference in the tenor of Evan and Bill’s feelings for each other recalls Dillwyn’s lament that “her [Olive’s] regard of me is but a quiet ordinary, affair & not a hundredth part of my passionate love for her.” (11 August 1868)

Eventually, it turns out that the rough little sailor boy, Bill Jones, is none other than Miss Gwenllian's long-lost brother Owen Tudor. Brother-sister substitutions and erotic triangles are familiar tropes in plots involving same-sex desire.¹³ Dillwyn uses female-male-female triangles in more than one novel to allow her to simultaneously represent same sex desire and emphasise female masculinity (see, for instance, *Jill and Jack*, 1887). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorised male homosocial triangles in *Between Men*, and Terry Castle adapted these in *The Apparitional Lesbian* to explore female-male-female triangles in Sylvia Townsend Warner's lesbian novel *Summer Will Show* (1936) (72-73).¹⁴ Dillwyn's erotic triangle in *The Rebecca Rioter* is similar to that described by Castle but complicated by the transgender identity of Evan. On the surface it appears to be a Sedgwickian male-female-male triangle. Evan is explicit in his feelings for Bill being connected to his feelings for Miss Gwenllian: "I doubt whether I should have gone on caring for Bill as I did if it had not been for the strange way in which he often reminded me of Miss Gwenllian" (72). Moreover, the word 'strange' is a staple adjective in Dillwyn's fiction (and diaries) for signalling powerful same-sex attraction. But as this essay has shown, it is impossible satisfactorily to reduce Evan to a male, and oversimplistic to see him only as his female author in disguise. Evan is male and female simultaneously. Thus the triangle (in which Gwenllian and Bill are connected as brother and sister) is queered by Evan's complex trans status that allows him to occupy the position of both sexes at once. This 'trans' erotic triangle simultaneously keeps in play male (Evan-Bill) and female (Evan-Gwenllian) same sex desire. Evan's liminal or trans position – like the cross-dressing of the rioters described by Jones – lends further power to 'his' queer desires and thus to Dillwyn's amplification of her own same-sex love.

¹³ The section in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) in which Angelique dresses up as her brother is a well-known example.

¹⁴ Sharon Marcus discusses marriage plots in which female amity is sealed by marriage to a brother in *Between Women* – a different but related alliance.

On the one hand *The Rebecca Rioter* offers Dillwyn an opportunity to vicariously imagine adventure and physical outdoor exertions (at a time when she was physically incapacitated for long periods). She had a particular liking for adventure stories and would later be an early champion of *Treasure Island* (1884) (Painting 65); in the dramatic history of the Rebecca riots she could indulge in her long-held desire to write an “uncommon” novel (17 March 1863). On the other, Dillwyn was able to use fiction to explore feelings which had apparently found expression only in her diary.¹⁵ In *The Rebecca Rioter* she created a space in which she could imagine action and adventure, eulogise the woman she thought of as ‘my wife’, and propound the value of even unrequited love (a theme to which she would return repeatedly in later fiction). Evan laments that it is “weary work being fond of a person who never gives any sign of difference between you and anyone else in their affection” (72), words which Dillwyn must have felt described her own difficulty of loving without the full return of her passion. Dillwyn lamented Olive’s “quiet” regard for her (above) while in an early journal entry she had written: “Six years is a long while to love like this – to go on loving & yet to behave much like other people to the individual I love.” (7 January 1867)

The Rebecca Rioter, then, is a profoundly autobiographical novel in the way it uses details of Dillwyn’s life, home and family to provide a framework for her pacey adventure story. One might even see the autobiographical erotic subtext influencing the very locations and action – the literary geography – of the novel (which is set in an area Dillwyn knew intimately). Evan moves around his home terrain unobserved by his foes, and *The Rebecca Rioter* includes multiple scenes of “concealment and voyeurism” as critics have noted (Gramich xx). Clandestine observation was an ingrained part of Dillwyn’s life and she

¹⁵ Dillwyn’s journal records a particularly low point in her physical and emotional health: ‘I feel as if I was quite broken down... I think of one thing – & what that is no one else knows & so I talk of some thing else; altogether my life is thoroughly unnatural & I don’t see how to help it.’ (3 8 72)

records her hyper-awareness and secretive watching of Olive in an early journal entry: “When she’s in the room with me I can’t do anything hardly because all my senses seem given up to attend to her – not outwardly – outwardly I sit quiet & pretend to read perhaps, but really I know every movement & every word of hers the whole time.” (7 January 1867)

In the second half of the novel, Evan’s clandestine watching is transposed to a location directly connected with Olive herself: Penrice Castle. Evan and his fellow outlaw, Tom, have taken flight from Upper Killay, across the moors, heading for a port at Oxwich Bay and thence, eventually, America. After getting lost and wet on the upland moor, the two men spend the day holed up at Penrice Castle, hiding in the ruins of the medieval castle which stands on a rocky outcrop directly above a modern, eighteenth-century, mansion of the same name. Musing on the injustice of the social order in Britain Evan looks down at the scene of wealth and comfort below. “It served to amuse us now and then to look out through chinks in the castle walls at the modern house just below, and to watch the inhabitants going in and out of the house, without ever dreaming how near they were to two of Rebecca’s children!” (128) Penrice was the country residence of the Talbots, where from childhood Dillwyn would often visit Olive. Indeed, if one follows the literary geography of the novel, we can trace in Evan’s fugitive line of flight a direct line of affect from Dillwyn’s home in Hendrefoilan near Killay, straight to Olive Talbot’s Penrice.¹⁶ Thus Evan’s covert watching of Penrice and its inhabitants appears to carry a homoerotic subtext, while Dillwyn would make further use of a marked voyeurism in later novels, *A Burglary* and *Jill*, to convey erotic attraction between two women.

Conclusion

¹⁶ This ‘plotline’ is traced on the website Literary Atlas: Plotting English-Language Novels in Wales www.literaryatlas.wales

The autobiographical subtexts of the novel support a reading of Evan as a transgender figure, while a close reading of trans/gender signifiers in the text reveals a radical and destabilising understanding of fluid gender identity and sexuality. Dillwyn's thoughts on her own gender identity prompted by her sexual orientation chime with the thinking of her better-known European contemporaries, reflecting nineteenth-century emphasis on gender duality and the attraction of opposites. Yet Dillwyn articulates a gender identity, and a performative gender, that is *half* a man, a blending of masculine and feminine. In life, she campaigned for women's rights while embracing a female masculinity which, as symbolised by her cigar, was acutely aware of the prosthetic nature of masculinity (Halberstam 19). In the figures of the cross-dressed Rebecca rioters, she found a means to create a pioneering narrative of adventure told from the perspective of the marginalised and fugitive while radically queering gender. By bringing into play multiple signifiers of gender in one figure – as the Rebeccaites did in their costumes – Dillwyn could imaginatively enact multiple transitions, transgressions and border crossings which foreground the instability or provisionality of identities. Gender, class, language and nationality are all subject to transliterations or masquerades of different kinds. Garber describes the figure of the transvestite as signalling a third term and a category crisis and Dillwyn made the most of such blurring of boundaries in her novel, particularly in her use of queer erotic triangles which include a non-binary transgender figure. In *The Rebecca Rioter*, Garber's 'third term' is constantly in play.

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