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Camp Comedy and “Submerged Trouble”: Molly Keane’s Queer Collaborations

Naoise Murphy 

University of Cambridge, Centre for Gender Studies, Cambridge, England

ABSTRACT

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Anglo-Irish writer Molly Keane embarked on a collaborative playwriting career with her close friend and co-author John Perry, facilitated by a network of gay men in London’s West End. Through a comparative reading of *Treasure Hunt*, a collaboratively-written play that was adapted into a single-authored novel by Keane, this article argues that her unique camp sensibility was honed through her collaboration with queer creatives. Collaborative work opened up new sexual and gendered possibilities for Keane and helped her to become attuned to the dynamics of the closet as a framework for repression, trauma and “submerged trouble”. Ultimately, she depicts Anglo-Ireland—a colonial class studiously ignoring the changing world around them—as an exercise in closetedness, as engaging in a camp response to the “bad feelings” that pervade the Big House in independent Ireland.

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The writing of Molly Keane, or M.J. Farrell (her pseudonym until the 1980s), is irresistible to the queer critic. Her novels and plays, published between 1926 and 1988, depict the decaying glamour of the settler-colonial class in twentieth-century Ireland, with all their delusions, cruelties and survival strategies.¹ The epistemologies of the closet—Sedgwick’s “relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition”—seem to pervade Keane’s literary life.² Writing secretly under a pen name to hide her identity from her Anglo-Irish social circle, she produced eleven novels which alternate somewhat confusedly between romanticising the huntin’-shootin’-fishin’ world of which she was a part, and ruthlessly exposing its absurdity and callousness. Keane’s idiosyncratic treatment of the Anglo-Irish condition as an exercise in closetedness was arrived at through her theatrical collaborations with a circle of gay men in London. In collaboration with John Perry, she was a successful West End playwright in the 1930s and 1940s, though their drawing-room farces quickly fell out of favour in the 1960s. After a break from publishing, a further three novels appeared in the 1980s under Keane’s own

CONTACT Naoise Murphy  nm637@cam.ac.uk

¹Though the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy are by no means a homogenous group, my use of the term “settler-colonial” in this essay is intended to draw attention to their position within empire as the most salient feature for my analysis.

²Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

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name, novels in which all bets are off, and the full range of her caustic, satirical brilliance is on display. Throughout, her work is full of queer characters: effeminate male writers, insufficiently “hardy” heirs, gay manservants and monks, repressed daughters-at-home, spinster aunts, vicious English lesbians. *Good Behaviour* (1981), the work that heralded Keane’s triumphant return to publishing at the age of seventy-seven, is undoubtedly the high point. This is a novel so drenched in deluded self-absorption that the narrator, who lovingly murders her mother with a rabbit mousse in the opening chapter, can tell us in detail about the clandestine gay love affair between her brother and his best friend, believing it to be the story of her own romantic adventures.

Despite the limited attention paid to Keane in Irish queer studies, closeted gay sexuality is at the centre of her work. *Good Behaviour* demonstrates the importance of “camp” as an analytic category for understanding Keane. Camp describes a carefully cultivated relationship to truth originating in gay culture, revelling in incongruity, using extravagance, theatricality and exaggeration to respond to violence and bad feelings.³ In effect, Keane frames the whole of Anglo-Ireland—a colonial class studiously ignoring the changing world around them—as an exercise in closetedness, as engaging in a camp response to the “bad feelings” that pervade the Big House in the twentieth century. This approach takes flight in Keane’s lesbian-themed 1934 novel *Devoted Ladies*, which introduces hypervisible queer characters from decadent metropolitan circles to the rural world of Anglo-Ireland, to draw out the queerness lurking under the surface of the patriarchal Big House. “Out” queer characters, like the Anglo-American lesbians Jessica and Jane, serve as a blunt instrument to explore the variously closeted sexualities of Anglo-Ireland, which Keane finds far more interesting and goes on to treat with much greater subtlety and insight in novels such as *The Rising Tide* (1937), *Good Behaviour* (1981) and *Time After Time* (1983). Though notoriously difficult to define, one useful description of “camp” comes from Hotz-Davies et. al., who emphasise the constitutive “dark side of camp”; “camp is and always has been invested in a counterintuitive and culturally, in fact, prohibited fusion of the flamboyantly pretty with everything that should be excluded from it as ‘dirt’.” Camp is defined by the “simultaneity of glitter and grime”, the co-constituting quality of surface glamour and its unpalatable underside.⁴ This is the model advanced throughout Keane’s novels, and central to a dominant and fruitful strand in Keane criticism that has focused on her creative uses of abjection, violence and narratives of decline.⁵

Though gender and sexuality studies has been an obvious framework since the earliest critical responses to Keane, her work sits awkwardly within Irish queer studies.⁶ Queer readings of Irish culture, understandably, have tended to focus more on liberatory impulses and the critique of insular nationalism enabled by gendered and sexual difference. The construction of alternative forms of sociality and cultural expression against the grain of a heterosexist national imaginary has been at the centre of queer criticism.⁷ This line of argument bears little relevance to Keane’s work. Despite efforts such as

³See Dyer, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going”, 49–62; Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, 515–30.

⁴Hotz-Davies, Bergmann, Vogt, eds., *The Dark Side of Camp Aesthetics*, 2.

⁵For example, O’Brien, “Anglo-Irish Abjection in the “very nasty” Big House Novels of Molly Keane”, 35–62; McGovern, “Fattening Out Memories”, 125–36.

⁶Walshe and Young, eds., *Molly Keane*.

⁷See Mullen, *The Poor Bugger’s Tool*, A special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2010 presents a broad spectrum of approaches and perspectives; taken together, these essays constitute a key example of queer critique in Irish studies. See Kennedy, ed. “Queering Ireland”.

Catherine Bacon's persuasive reading of *The Rising Tide*—as a contribution to modernist lesbian fiction that creates a positive vision of Irish lesbian devotion, living in harmony with the land—critics have necessarily dwelled on the “problematic” aspects of Keane's representation of sexuality.⁸ Rather than simply a “doomed deviancy”⁹ or an idealised lesbian separatism, most of Keane's queer characters survive through compromise, complicity and the pursuit of their own comfort and pleasure. Lauren Rich's recent essay on “the pleasures of subversive consumption” in Keane highlights how “the economic and architectural collapse of the Ascendancy creates opportunities for individual characters to defy [the Ascendancy's repressive norms] and thereby escape the fate of their class”.¹⁰ Rich's emphasis on individualistic appetites and pleasures in Keane reminds us that what is ultimately at stake is the survival of a few unpleasant members of an oppressive class; there is little to celebrate here for queer futurity or collective liberation. Writers like Keane and her collaborator John Perry have no interest in using queer aesthetics to craft more inclusive communities, but rather, employ the positionality of the camp observer to survive as individuals in a collapsing system. As such, they complicate the idealising tendency in queer and feminist criticism, working against our impulse to search for narratives of resistance or works interested in “advancing the cause of liberty”.¹¹

Going beyond recovery work, then, or the simple presence of gay and lesbian characters, it is vital to tease out what Keane's overt interest in queering the Big House means for Irish queer culture. Why was this insistently heterosexual writer so invested in camp style, a subcultural practice that originates in and remains tied to marginality? Morris Meyer argues that any use of camp by non-queer people is simple appropriation.¹² Any claim for a “camp” Ascendancy world is uncomfortable then; they are marginal, certainly, given their receding political power, but nothing close to oppressed. It is futile to adjudicate on whether this is a case of appropriation or not; nevertheless, the patterns of Keane's life suggest she found something in common with elite gay men, who carved out a comfortable if alienated existence within institutions of hetero-patriarchal power such as the Big House. In this article, I trace one source for Keane's adoption of camp style: her friend and collaborator John Perry. Together, they shared a project of converting the serious, the unpalatable or the shameful into the frivolous, using techniques learned from gay male culture.

Appropriately, Keane described her own discovery of sexual deviance in accordance with a dramatic binary of ignorance and knowledge. And it seems safe to assume that it was at Woodrooffe, John Perry's family home, that this revelation occurred. Though from the same rural Ascendancy world, the Perry family had connections with the outside world that made their Tipperary home seem sophisticated and cosmopolitan, nothing like the repressive, Victorian puritanism against which Keane had revolted at her parental home, Ballyrankin in Wexford. She claimed:

I suppose I was rather curious and shocked by coming upon all that. Before then no-one thought anything of two elderly ladies setting up house together. I'd certainly never heard

⁸Bacon, “English Lesbians and Irish Devotion”, 97–119; Breen, “*Piggies and spoilers of girls*”, 139–56.

⁹Kreilkamp, “Foreword”, 10.

¹⁰Lauren, “Stolen fruit is best of all”, 338.

¹¹Pilz and Standlee, eds., *Irish Women's Writing, 1878–1922*.

¹²Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*.

a murmur, though now everyone murmurs about everything. I was excited by finding out about lesbians and homosexuals. It was new. It made a subject.¹³

This discovery was the spark that led to an increasing attention to sexual deviance in her work. Keane and Perry began to write plays together: *Spring Meeting* in 1938, the wildly successful *Treasure Hunt* in 1949, which Keane then adapted into a novel in 1952, and the disastrous flop *Dazzling Prospect*, which brought an end to their collaboration in 1961. John Perry was Keane's connection to the mid-century queer milieu of London's theatre scene that was dominated by gay men. He introduced her to his influential lovers, the actor-director John Gielgud and producer Binkie Beaumont. As well as collaborating on plays, Perry found his way into her novels as the inspiration for characters such as the playwright Sylvester Browne, who appears in *Devoted Ladies* and *The Rising Tide*. Their West End farces follow in a tradition of Anglo-Irish comic writing, descended from Maria Edgeworth and Somerville and Ross, and capitalise on longstanding stereotypes of Stage Irishness, presenting a cast of "dotty, beguiling grotesques" to the sophisticated metropolitan theatre-goers.¹⁴ These co-authored plays are fundamentally far less interesting than Keane's subtle, dark and hilarious single-authored novels, yet they were a vital testing-ground for the techniques that became so central to her solo work, and have been overlooked in critical work so far.

Camp is integral to understanding the dynamics of secrecy and disclosure, repression and revelation, that are at the heart of Keane's writing, especially as these become filtered more intensely through sexuality. In this article, I propose that one important way of understanding this camp sensibility is in terms of the collaboration between Keane and John Perry. This builds on previous analyses of Keane's work in the framework of lesbian, gay and queer studies, drawing out a new angle through attention to her collaborative endeavours, and explores the Keane-Perry plays as a queer take on the Anglo-Irish comic tradition.¹⁵ I will primarily consider the significance of Keane and Perry's collaboration for the development of her idiosyncratic camp style, with its investment in sexual deviance, the dynamics of the closet and the management of bad feelings. The first part of the article will give some biographical context on the queer networks facilitating the production of Keane and Perry's plays. The second part will explore some questions of queer collaboration. The final part will compare *Treasure Hunt*, Keane and Perry's co-authored play, with its single-authored novel adaptation. I will show how an emphasis on camp "lightness" in their collaborative work helped Keane to refine her control of dark, distasteful or disturbing material. Considered together, the play and the novel provide a clear insight into how Keane negotiated these dynamics, at a crucial period in her writing career, to eventually develop a robust camp framework for navigating the bad feelings contained in her novels.

Queer Networks: Woodroffe and the West End

The Perry family home, Woodroffe in Co. Tipperary, plays a central role in the narrative of Keane's writing career. It was where her collaboration with John Perry began, but also

¹³Keane, quoted in Devlin, "Introduction", x.

¹⁴Bogarde, "Introduction", 4.

¹⁵The relationship between Keane, Perry and the comic Anglo-Irish tradition (not to mention the camp, dandyish influence of Oscar Wilde) deserves closer attention, though I do not have the space to do it justice here.

an introduction to stylistic and affective modes that were entirely new and exciting. Fleeing the boredom and emotional coldness of her own family home, Ballyrankin, she spent long periods of time at Woodrooffe before her marriage to Bobbie Keane in 1938. By all accounts, her experiences there were transformative. The Perry family introduced her to sexual and gendered possibilities that were unimaginable in the strict Victorian atmosphere of Ballyrankin, with her distant, poet mother and various bullying aunts. For insight into Keane's inner life, we are mostly reliant on her daughter and biographer, Sally Phipps, who offers an evocative account of the appeal of this more worldly, unconventional family. The figure of Dolly Perry, described by Phipps as "the lasting heroine of Molly's life", flickers in the background of the glamorous protagonists of her early work. John and Sivie, Dolly's children, are intriguingly characterised as having "swapped sexes": "Both were beautiful and charming and somewhat ruthless in the treatment of their bisexual suitors". Keane was "fascinated by Sivie's lesbianism", and John Perry brought her into contact with a queer cultural world centred around London's theatre scene. According to Phipps,

He brought his homosexual world into Molly's orbit and it had a profound effect on her psyche and her work. In almost every way, except sexually, she responded to it. She was drawn to the style and secrets, the sharpness and the flamboyant honed use of language. The sensitive, confiding aspects of campness suited her, as did the fact that it was full of submerged trouble, and had a dark underside which matched the sense of sin in which she herself had been raised.¹⁶

This was the world that opened out to Keane at Woodrooffe, her entry-point into a cosmopolitan sphere of glamorous parties and sexual freedom. And it is this model of camp that would define her novelistic approach: flamboyance, ostentatiousness, suggestiveness and precision, all with a pulsing undercurrent of trauma, brutality and bad feelings. Reading Keane's style as camp accounts for her attraction to distasteful realities, her sometimes shockingly comic approach to violence and brutality, the "submerged trouble" that forms camp's "dark underside".

Camp, for queer people, has functioned as a creative response to violence and oppression.¹⁷ For John Perry, concealed experiences of homophobic abuse, by his father and at school, were the "dark underside" of his "lively and malicious wit".¹⁸ There is little record of Perry's own life. He started out as an actor, though without much success. However, he soon became extremely well-connected, beginning a relationship with John Gielgud in the 1930s. This was personal as well as professional; they moved in together and co-produced a season of classical drama in the West End. In 1937, Perry and Gielgud arrived at the office of the powerful West End producer Binkie Beaumont and presented him with the script of *Spring Meeting*, co-written with Keane/M.J. Farrell, to be directed by Gielgud (as were all of the Keane-Perry plays). That same year, Perry and Beaumont began their lifelong relationship. Perry moved out of Gielgud's flat and into Beaumont's, later becoming a director of Beaumont's production company, H.M. Tennant, the firm that dominated West End theatre throughout the mid-century. In Richard Huggett's biography of Beaumont, Perry recurs again and again as a shadowy figure in meetings, testifying

¹⁶Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 66; 69; 78; 71–2.

¹⁷Dyer, "It's being so camp as keeps us going".

¹⁸Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 73; 71.

to his influence at H.M. Tennant. Huggett claims that “John Perry gave Binkie a very loving and professionally fruitful friendship: his importance in Binkie’s life and career cannot be exaggerated.”¹⁹ With connections like this, Perry’s importance in Keane’s play-writing career cannot be exaggerated either. This “homosexual world”²⁰ was fertile ground for collaborative relationships that would be, though rather intermittently, financially and artistically rewarding for all involved.

Spring Meeting was the first result of the Keane-Perry writing partnership. It premiered at the Ambassadors Theatre in London in May 1938 and was highly successful, running for 310 performances. It ran on Broadway later that year and was adapted into a film in 1941. Much more lucrative than novel-writing, the financial success of *Spring Meeting* was hugely significant to Keane. However, her next effort, *Ducks and Drakes*, was a flop. Written without Perry, who had joined the Royal Air Force, it premiered at the Theatre Royal, Bath, in November 1941 before transferring to the Apollo Theatre, London, where it ran for only 23 performances. They returned to collaborating with *Treasure Hunt* in 1949, also at the Apollo, which ran for a year. Writing in 1990, the actor Dirk Bogarde remembered seeing the play’s original run, and recalled the “roars of delight” and “the sheer hysteria of that audience before a cast of dotty, beguiling grotesques.”²¹ Keane adapted *Treasure Hunt* into a novel in 1952, and it was adapted for film the same year. Keane and Perry’s final collaboration, the unfortunately titled *Dazzling Prospect*, returned to the characters and setting of *Spring Meeting*, but failed to captivate its audience in the same way. Premiering in June 1961 at the Globe Theatre, London, the play was a convenient target for the ire of a new generation of theatre-makers. A relic of an earlier era of drawing-room comedies, it was viewed as outdated and elitist, emblematic of regressive class politics and an incestuous theatre scene. Keane was seriously shaken by the failure of *Dazzling Prospect*. She never wrote another play, and did not publish again until *Good Behaviour* in 1981.

Queer Collaboration

Situated in this elite “homosexual world”,²² the Keane-Perry collaboration invites analysis as a specifically *queer* form of collaboration. In many respects, it aligns with the model of “queer cross-gender collaboration” described by Jane Garrity and Tirza True Latimer as “a central component of lesbian and gay culture formation”, which has been marginalised in accounts of cultural production that prioritise either the implicitly heterosexual solitary “genius” or models of collaboration in erotic partnerships.²³ Queer theories of collaboration, like feminist theories, emphasise relationality and dispersed models of authorship. As Bette London writes, “collaborations exist in a range of ‘authorial’ activities not necessarily named authorship: acts of assistance and inspiration; acts of mentoring or mutual influence; acts of revision or editorial input.”²⁴ It can be difficult to track these processes of authorship, but some insight can be gained from correspondence

¹⁹Huggett, *Binkie Beaumont*, 229.

²⁰Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 71.

²¹Bogarde, “Introduction”, 4.

²²Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 71.

²³Garrity and Latimer. “Queer Cross-gender Collaboration”, 185; 197–8.

²⁴London, *Writing Double*, 19.

between the collaborators. In a letter to Gielgud analysing the failure of *Ducks and Drakes*, Keane writes that “between us something went horribly wrong”.²⁵ Her attention to the “between” space of the collaborative endeavour is instructive. It is the space “between”, the space created by their interaction, that produces the work. This seems an obvious point to make about theatrical production, where the “between space” of director, cast, producer, writers, crew, designers, audience, theatre staff, etc. constitutes a large-scale collaborative method that is integral to the creation of the work of art. Considering this “between space” in theorising collaboration makes it necessary to confront the material and financial conditions that make art possible, inextricable from creative and artistic considerations. *Spring Meeting* only became possible because Perry knew Beaumont, who liked the script and chose to finance the production. Keane and Perry’s other plays were only viable because of this first success. What did Gielgud’s direction add to the process, and the choices made by the actors? Theories of collaboration are queer insofar as they dislodge the normative model of the solitary author, replacing him with a diffuse network of creative forces.

These networks are imbued with power. Eleri Anona Watson’s work on fag-hag friendship, an important model of queer collaboration, directs attention to vital questions of inequality and potential exploitation in creative partnerships.²⁶ Keane’s close identification with Perry, Beaumont and Gielgud in her playwriting career certainly makes her legible as a fag hag, a woman (of any sexuality) who chooses to form close friendships with gay men. Watson insists on parity as a condition for fag-hag friendship, paying attention to the affective as well as the purely functional components of relationality and collaboration. Parity is, of course, difficult to quantify, but various imbalances are undoubtedly a feature of this collaboration. Phipps writes that Perry’s contribution was “critical and discursive”, focused on providing feedback on Keane’s writing rather than a process of writing together.²⁷ She claims that in Keane’s private notebooks,

Molly expresses a secret resentment at John’s lack of input into *Spring Meeting*, combined though it was with his full billing as co-author. She felt he was freeloading off her toil. At the same time, she realised that his knowledge of stagecraft and of making a play was very valuable, as was his influence and position in the theatre world, and his closeness to Binkie Beaumont.²⁸

Questions of resentment and relative power are essential to theories of collaboration. If Perry was “freeloading” off Keane’s skill as a writer, she capitalised on his connections. There are complex, multiplying vectors of exploitation here that can only be judged according to affective criteria. While Phipps’ intimate biography of her mother must be treated with some caution, given her closeness to her subject, her account suggests that Keane found this collaboration testing, artistically challenging, and affectively intense. Phipps draws attention to the difficult aspects of collaborative work alongside the positive outcomes. This functions as a useful check on the temptation to idealise collaboration, particularly queer collaboration, as a wholly affirmative and enabling experience.

²⁵Letter from Molly Keane to John Gielgud, undated, Thomas McCarthy Papers, C1641, Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

²⁶Watson, “I don’t see nothing wrong, with a little bump and grind”.

²⁷Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 74.

²⁸Ibid, 125.

Queer theoretical attention to questions of parity and exploitation prompts important reflection on the wider contextual power dynamics structuring collaborative work, on a personal level, but also on a broader societal level. The Keane-Perry collaboration is queer because it opened up new ways of conceptualising sexual and gendered embodiment. This process of discovery is legible in the trajectory of her published work from *Devoted Ladies* on. Like the playwright character Sylvester Browne, Perry becomes a bridging figure, originating from Keane's familiar Anglo-Irish world but integrated into metropolitan gay circles. He takes on the role of the urban sophisticate, introducing the rural naïf to new forms of knowledge, to his more worldly friends, to new forms of humour and cutting-edge fashion. While it was certainly not only her friendship with Perry, Gielgud and Beaumont that connected Keane to metropolitan settings, the "between space" created by their collaboration required a mediation across worlds, putting Irish Big Houses and London theatres in dialogue. It set up a binary opposition between urban and rural that could be exploited for comedy. When a "curious and shocked" Keane discovered "lesbians and homosexuals" as a new "subject", there was a notable shift in her work. The bringing-together of Anglo-Irish rurality and backwardness with cosmopolitan images of sexual deviance gave her a language to explore the complexities and contradictions of sex, gender and sexuality in her Ascendancy milieu. While her earlier novels show an interest in these themes, the collision of worlds that begins with *Devoted Ladies* is an explicit *queering* of Anglo-Ireland. This novel, and those that follow, interrogate sex, gender and sexuality through ostentatious deployments and deconstructions of the rural/urban, natural/unnatural, innocence/knowledge binary. The queerness of such stock characters as the spinster aunt, the daughter-at-home, and the effeminate heir, is made strikingly apparent.

Arguably, then, Keane's interest in the dynamics of the closet can be traced to her discovery of queerness and her collaborative relationships with Perry, Gielgud and Beaumont. The innocence/knowledge binary continues to be a central theme throughout her textual engagements with queer characters. In *Devoted Ladies*, the naive Piggy is the butt of the joke, failing to grasp the sexual complexities unfolding around her as queer and straight love interests compete for Jane's affections. This strand is developed in *The Rising Tide's* engagement with modernisation and the campy antics of the "Period Party", spearheaded by Sylvester, through the bumbling, clueless aristocrats of *Treasure Hunt*, to *Good Behaviour's* subtle deployment of Aroon's naive narratorial voice. Keane's faithfulness to Anglo-Ireland as a setting for her work shows an investment in untangling the violent underside of this environment steeped in colonial paranoia, abuses of power and torturous family dynamics. Read alongside her collaborative theatrical work, it becomes evident how Perry guided Keane towards a camp management of the submerged trouble of Anglo-Ireland that she explored in her novels. Their collaboration revolved around a negotiation of lightness and darkness, with the latter confronted more explicitly in Keane's single-authored works. Perry's contribution to their collaborative work becomes particularly obvious when considering the forms of comedy that are prioritised in the plays, compared with the darker, more complex, sometimes bitter novels that Keane was producing on her own in the 1930s (works like *Mad Puppetstown* in 1931 or *Full House* in 1935).

Ducks and Drakes demonstrated what happened when Keane attempted to replicate the success of *Spring Meeting* without Perry as co-author. Diagnosing the failure of the

play, Perry wrote to Keane that “you would never have had a success, that fatal uneasiness caused by your transition from serious psychological studies to purely farcical situations would always kill it.”²⁹ Perry’s influence was essential in managing that transition. Keane seemed to agree. Writing to Gielgud, she asserted the importance of “going along lightly” and regrets that “the whole thing tipped into seriousness and importance”. She complains that “all the sting was taken out of” the character of Mrs Tree by the actor, and by the cutting of any line “that suggested even a flash of the bitch”. Keane lamented that “exactly the same sense of what is funny and what is bitchy, and what is sad produced it as produced *Spring Meeting*.”³⁰ The crucial difference was Perry’s absence. Even if their sense of humour was shared, Perry brought comedic techniques to the partnership that prevented the fatal slide “into seriousness and importance”.

Perry appears as a sort of queer pedagogue in these records of their collaboration. Phipps writes that “his tutorial tone was always part of their collaboration. She both resented and depended on it.”³¹ It was clearly Perry who pushed their work towards the camp system of humour that proved so successful. This campness has its roots in queer experience. Phipps speculates that the abuse Perry suffered from his father and his experience of being “bitterly hurt emotionally on account of his homosexuality at school” were a part of his refusal of feeling. Both he and Keane preferred not to discuss their feelings openly, opting for an ironic, distancing approach, “a way of mocking and undermining seriousness that was destructive for himself and for others”.³² This was the system of comedy they favoured in their collaborative plays. Their rejection of “seriousness and importance”, resonates with Esther Newton’s description of camp as “a system of humor” that consists of “laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying”.³³ As Richard Dyer has noted, camp is “a form of self-defence”, used by queer people in order that “the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay—they need not take things too seriously, need not let it get them down”.³⁴ Once the work “tip[s] into seriousness”,³⁵ the camp sensibility is lost. Camp must be understood as the creative response to bad feelings that might otherwise overwhelm us—bad feelings that can originate in homophobia or elsewhere. Some of Keane’s un-camp early fiction grapples with the bad feelings of Anglo-Ireland—the looming threat of revenge from the dispossessed, for instance—using different methods. *Two Days in Aragon* (1942) is a notable example, where the resources of straight romance fiction feel like an inadequate response to dead babies, torture chambers and IRA murders. This strange, unsettling novel lacks a sense of balance, leaving the reader uncertain about how to interpret its distressing blend of fantasy and brutal reality. The tone is too earnest, but not tragic, the violent events not matched by enough authorial seriousness. Though this style certainly has many merits, it is perhaps unsuited to mainstream light entertainment. Tutored by Perry in the art of camp, and transmuting tragedy into farce, Keane found a way to translate the disturbing underside of Anglo-Ireland into entertaining fiction, balancing the

²⁹Quoted in Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 126.

³⁰Letter from Molly Keane to John Gielgud, Thomas McCarthy Papers.

³¹Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 127.

³²Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 73.

³³Newton, *Mother Camp*, 109.

³⁴Dyer, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going”, 49.

³⁵Letter from Molly Keane to John Gielgud, Thomas McCarthy Papers.

light and the dark, crafting that delicate interplay of the serious and the frivolous that constitutes camp humour.

A collaborative method is an exercise in balance. Keane wrote to Gielgud:

I do think, John, that anything I write is terribly hard to change. Not that I mean it is so good or so witty, or so funny, but it is peculiar and once the balance of it is upset in any direction, all its importances go astray.³⁶

Keane's anger and disappointment at the poor reception of *Ducks and Drakes* is palpable; it is equal parts self-blame and frustration with others. This snapshot of the dynamics of a collaboration—the awkward process of apportioning blame and credit—brings us back to the personal and the affective, highlighting the bad feelings that can arise through collaboration. Keane and Perry's mixed successes and failures remind us not to idealise the collaborative process. Though the image of the solitary genius ought to be discarded in favour of queerer models of artistic production, this promises neither better art nor egalitarian relationships. That said, analysis of this collaboration also offers important insights about the creative process in relation to commercial success. From a queer perspective, this particular collaboration provides a window into the understudied links between gay male creatives and their female collaborators, and the appropriation of queer modes for mainstream, presumed straight audiences. In this case, the best way to untangle some of these questions of balance, blame and credit is through a comparative reading of a work that exists as both a collaboratively-written play and a single-authored novel: the two versions of *Treasure Hunt*, from 1949 and 1952 respectively.

Treasure Hunt

The second of Perry and Keane's collaborations, *Treasure Hunt* is a play that prioritises lightness and camp humour. It is a tightly controlled farce, moving on swiftly from hints of trouble. Our attention is directed firmly back to the comfortable comedy terrain of aristocrats bumbling their way through the financial difficulties of the twentieth century. The play is carefully balanced; it recovers promptly from any stumbles into difficult topics and the pace never flags. As a novel, without the ruthless cuts of the rehearsal room and the expertise of Perry, Gielgud and Beaumont, *Treasure Hunt* strays into much darker territory. The novel is much less successful at containing bad feelings within its structure. The brutal realities of coloniality, forced marriage and murder spill out over the genteel surface; unpalatable themes of sex and eugenics creep in through the wry narrative voice. This makes it a much more interesting text, showcasing a self-divided Keane wrestling with how to present her unique take on Anglo-Ireland to a wide readership. The play was written not long after the sudden death of her husband Bobbie Keane and its success provided a welcome source of income at a time of financial precarity. It seems fair to assume that the choice to adapt *Treasure Hunt* into a novel was significantly influenced by this financial need, seen as a fairly sure bet given the audience response to the stage version. Yet even in this insecure situation, it is as if Keane can't stop herself from dwelling on the darkness. Left to her own artistic devices, balance is abandoned and bad feelings surge to the surface, despite her clear awareness of their unpalatability.

³⁶Quoted in Phipps, *Molly Keane*, 128.

Treasure Hunt is set at Ballyroden, a Big House somewhere in the south of Ireland. It opens just after the funeral of Sir Roderick Ryall, who has left his family—son Phillip, brother Hercules, sister Consuelo, niece Veronica and great-aunt Anna Rose—teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Phillip and Veronica decide to take in Paying Guests to cover some costs, capitalising on the desire of war-weary English visitors for the supposed abundance and luxury of neutral Ireland. Consuelo and Hercules, dead against the idea, set about sabotaging their plans. They are aided, initially, by the devoted servants of Ballyroden; Mrs Guidera, Bridgid and William, who dote on the older members of the family and dislike the younger generation’s “modern ways and manners”.³⁷ Aunt Anna Rose spends most of her time in a sedan chair that serves as an imaginary train carriage, plane and boat, convinced she is travelling around the world. The guests, Dorothy Cleghorne-Thomas, her daughter Yvonne and her brother Eustace Mills, arrive to damp beds, no food and no heating. They stick it out however, and Eustace, an antiques expert, becomes obsessed with finding some priceless rubies that Aunt Anna Rose claims to have misplaced following her disastrous and short-lived marriage to an Austrian Baron. Veronica, meanwhile, is in love with Phillip, who is distracted by the attractive Yvonne.

The novel is adapted from the play in a fairly straightforward manner. Much of the dialogue is identical. Structurally, the two versions map on to one another, chapters corresponding to acts of the play. Though much debated by Adaptation Studies scholars, the question of fidelity, of similarities and differences between the adapted texts, remains “unavoidable”.³⁸ Alongside this, attention must be directed to the issue of “medium specificity”, the obvious but crucial observation of the differing generic investments and capabilities of plays and novels. Following Rachel Carroll’s claim that “every adaptation is an instance of textual *infidelity*”, and acknowledging the texts’ overarching structural similarities, this comparative reading will draw out their differences.³⁹ What is of interest is what Keane chooses to add to the novel, to bulk out the slight play script into 250 pages. In what follows I will explore these differences through a queer lens, with a focus on the novel’s narrative voice, its processes of characterisation, new settings introduced in the novel, and one key scene where the versions diverge significantly from one another in both style and content. These points of divergence all come to be opportunities for bad feelings to spill out over the light, campy exterior that keeps things buried in the play.

Adapting the play into a novel gives Keane the opportunity to indulge in lengthy descriptive passages. The novel opens with a typically Keanian passage describing the exterior of Ballyroden, personifying the “stony-browed” house with its “unwilling beneficence” and “cut stone round all the windows fine as skin”. The writer’s appetite for the surreal is in evidence in this fleshy image, and the strange opening description of the “armoured cat’s face of the house” seems designed to wrong-foot the reader.⁴⁰ The house and its interiors are evoked at length, the narrator poring over the carpets, wallpaper, curtains, furniture and magazines. This descriptive fervour extends to the characters, when they eventually appear. Hercules is the first to be introduced, “a little, elfish

³⁷Keane, *Treasure Hunt*, 62 and Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 34.

³⁸Bruhn, Gjelsvik, Hanssen, eds., *Adaptation Studies*, 5.

³⁹Carroll, *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture*, 1.

⁴⁰Keane, 7.

creature, very slight, prettily sunburnt, with grey hair that curled like a drake's tail at the back of his neck", "as well-made as a grey wagtail and looked as neat and clean".⁴¹ Hercules is portrayed in both play and novel as an anachronism. His masculinity is queer and unsuited to the present time. The brief description in the play opens: "If Hercules had been born 50 years earlier he would have gone down in memory as an utter darling". Though he loves his family, he is concerned primarily with "the continuance of the absolute comfort he has always known", "kedgeree for breakfast on Thursdays" and "a mild flutter on the race-course".⁴² In the novel, this idea of anachronism is developed through comparison with Phillip, who is introduced as "a solid purposeful looking young man in a dark blue suit (no tail coat or other glamour)".⁴³ Phillip's character has been formed by his experience of war ("After five years of war"⁴⁴ / "He had gone from school to war and from that to this inheritance"⁴⁵), giving him a "sobriety of judgment and a capability for hard work" that is alien to the "never-never land of Ballyroden".⁴⁶ Phillip embodies a proper masculinity, responsible, patriarchal and appropriate to his time.

Phillip is also the only straight man in *Treasure Hunt*. He is tasked with reproducing the Ryall family while Hercules practises a sort of "queer art of failure",⁴⁷ dedicated to style and personal pleasure. His camp detachment from reality endlessly frustrates his younger relatives. The decadence and extravagance of the older generation is the main source of comedy, particularly in the opening scene, where the beleaguered family solicitor, Mr. Walsh, attempts to explain the concept of bankruptcy to his uncomprehending clients. There is a running joke in this scene about Hercules' hypochondria; Mr. Walsh is recovering from flu, and Hercules insists with rising panic that he should keep away to avoid infection. Bridgid, facilitator of Hercules' health anxiety, hopes that he hasn't "caught that common cold of Mr. Walsh's".⁴⁸ In the novel, the word "common" most often attaches to Phillip, as a way of distinguishing him from his aunt and uncle: "There was a commoner colour about him, about the strong way his hair grew, about his bigger bone", "His voice had a much stronger, commoner timbre than that of his uncle or, one could be sure, of his father."⁴⁹ These mentions of Phillip's "bigger bone", and "commoner" complexion are the first points where the novel slides away from the determined lightness of the play and into the darker themes that are the necessary underside of camp comedy. Phillip's heterosexual masculinity is legible on his body, just as Consuelo and Hercules' decadence is presented as inborn, as "that air of cosseted glamour which they wore with their clothes and under their skins".⁵⁰ This emphasis on physicality is a peculiar feature of the novel version, embedded in the imagery right from the opening descriptions of the house. In the theatrical original this question of physicality was, of course, something to be decided by the actors and director. Writing

⁴¹Keane, 8.

⁴²Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 14.

⁴³Keane, 27.

⁴⁴Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 14.

⁴⁵Keane, 27.

⁴⁶Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 14.

⁴⁷Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

⁴⁸Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 34 and Keane, 62.

⁴⁹Keane, 26, 40.

⁵⁰Keane, 26.

the novel, Keane chooses to foreground a concept of embodiment that draws together sexuality, gender and elements of race science, most forcefully, an interest in the “lightness” of bone.⁵¹ The comparisons continue in the distinctions between Consuelo and Dorothy, whose “good looks showed none of the quality so luminous through Aunt Consuelo’s mountainous body”. Instead, she has “a trained, fashion-plate kind of elegance” and her “jaw bone was weighty though fleshless in contrast to that tilt of light bone that cannot be lost”.⁵² Again, there is an emphasis on inborn “quality” compared with “weighty” bones that signify a class difference for Keane. Aunt Anna Rose comments (to their faces, hilariously), that Dorothy, Eustace and Yvonne are “Not quite in the stud-book, I gather—but very rich”.⁵³ She reminds us that this is a milieu concerned with preserving the purity of Ascendancy bloodlines. Commonness can be caught (like Mr. Walsh’s cold) through contact with the harshness of real life; war, farming, having to make a living. Dorothy is defined by having worked through World War Two, while Phillip is insistently characterised as a man of his moment. Hercules, “that exquisite of another date”, preserves a queer embodiment that resists the reproductive imperative embodied by Phillip, who becomes “common”, though also “tough”, “handsome”, and properly masculine, by moving with the times.⁵⁴

Dorothy arrives at Ballyroden intensely interested in Phillip as a potential partner for her daughter Yvonne, who is inappropriately involved with a “hopeless common young man” who works in Eustace’s textiles factory.⁵⁵ Yvonne, happily, is interested in Phillip too, and decides to learn about farming in order to impress him. Her studies give an insight into the different ways sex is handled in the two versions of *Treasure Hunt*. Continuing the discourse of the “stud-book”, livestock farming is entangled in human romance, comically juxtaposed as Yvonne tries to learn a set of tables describing “Periods of Gestation on the Farm”. Hercules and Consuelo are appalled. In both versions, Consuelo exclaims, “Good gracious! I have lived in the country all my life, but I wouldn’t dream of knowing anything like that for certain”.⁵⁶ In the play, Yvonne replies, “Oh, I’m keen” and insists they test her on her knowledge from the book. In the novel, Keane adds further nuance to the sexual politics of the text: “I’m keen. I don’t think one can go in for old-fashioned repressions these days. I want to look at it all from a real, clean, scientific point of view”.⁵⁷ Yvonne represents a form of modernity that claims to want to confront the unpalatable, to uncover the reality that is repressed in the campy antics of the old-fashioned aristocrats. Their way of life is premised on not talking openly about sex and reproduction, while Yvonne advocates a modern approach that suggests she would bring a dose of contemporary reality to Ballyroden, disrupting the purity of the Ryall bloodline and making it common. Of course, this eagerness to do away with repressions is immediately undermined in both versions: when Hercules opens the wrong page of the book Yvonne hastily responds “That’s the start of the business—we needn’t go into *that*”.⁵⁸

⁵¹Saini, *Superior*, 24.

⁵²Keane, 82.

⁵³Keane, 93.

⁵⁴Keane, 67.

⁵⁵Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 46.

⁵⁶Farrell and Perry, 66 and Keane, 164.

⁵⁷Keane, 164.

⁵⁸Keane, 165 and Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 66.

The single-authored novel finds new opportunities for sexual double-entendre, mining the romance plot for risqué farm and animal-related humour. In the play, Yvonne and Phillip's courtship proceeds mostly through suggestive discussion of farm machinery. In the novel, the availability of settings other than the drawing-room finds them out in the cow-shed, watching the milking. Here, Phillip starts to realise Yvonne's unsuitability, his discomfort with her sexualised, "pulsing beauty" and his preference for Veronica, who "took it all like the district nurse". Yvonne is fascinated by the milking process, but he "wanted to get her eyes off the men's hands". The passage ends with Yvonne playing with the calves: "She gave the calves a finger to suck and they took her cold hands into their mouths and she cried out in her rich, giggling voice: 'Stop it. I like it,' quoting from some wanton little saying".⁵⁹ Where the "Periods of Gestation" scene is fairly explicit in its differentiation of "old-fashioned repressions" and modern points of view,⁶⁰ the cow-shed scene demonstrates how Keane adopted the techniques of camp comedy in her single-authored fiction. Channelling a sexual encounter through this comedic set of double-entendres is exactly the kind of repression of the unsuitable or the unpalatable that characterises camp. It combines the campy, knowing wink to the reader with a refusal to treat sex with any moralising seriousness. This scene also contains a dark underside that connects its comedy to the more disturbing theme of the stud-book: the strand of race science and eugenics that conceives of sex and reproduction in terms of bloodlines and purity. This racial thinking is never disavowed by Keane; instead she employs camp (and elsewhere, the Gothic⁶¹) to raise the spectre of coloniality and refuse to put it to rest.

In this way, camp provides a discomfiting current of irresolution that works against the demands of light entertainment, in both theatre and fiction. Both versions of *Treasure Hunt* move towards resolution, using the typical Keane device of a throwback to the late 1800s that unsticks a dilemma in the present. The problem here is that Aunt Anna Rose, traumatised by a mysterious experience on her honeymoon resulting in the death of her husband, has retreated into a fantasy world. Her refusal to face this trauma means that she has forgotten the whereabouts of some priceless rubies, given to her by her late husband. If it exists, this treasure would (as we are constantly reminded) save Ballyroden from financial ruin. In both versions, Eustace attempts to help Anna Rose to remember, which involves dressing Veronica in the clothes that Anna Rose wore on the fateful train ride. Dressing up as ancestors, drawing-room games ("hunt the thimble") and dodderly old relatives are standard fare for Keane's comedy, often hinting at violent histories. Here, the dark truth underlying the treasure hunt—the constitutive "submerged trouble" of *camp* comedy—is that Anna Rose killed her husband by pushing him out of the Orient Express. The form that this scene takes is strikingly different in the two versions, making *Treasure Hunt* a useful insight into how these dynamics were handled collaboratively by Keane and Perry, and then changed radically by Keane in her single-authored work.

⁵⁹Keane, 207–8.

⁶⁰Keane, 164.

⁶¹As explored in Mooney, "Dark, established currents", 195–211. Mooney also draws attention to Keane's treatment of "Anglo-Irish eugenics" in *Full House* (1935), in which themes of bloodlines and hereditary insanity are central to the novel's romance plot.

In the play, the scene between Eustace and Aunt Anna Rose demonstrates the all-important adherence to “lightness”, occasionally dipping into “seriousness and importance” but recovering quickly. There is just enough information to convey the truth, that Anna Rose pushed the Baron out of the train, but these facts are never confronted openly. Dorothy has taken refuge in the sedan chair for its warmth, and an outraged Anna Rose gives a “maniacal push” to remove her, remarking “That was *nice*. Did I kill her?” and “I haven’t enjoyed anything so much since my honeymoon”. Eustace’s question, “why does killing my sister remind you of your honeymoon?” prompts Anna Rose’s recollections.⁶² Overcoming an initial unwillingness, she relates her meeting with the Baron at the Viceregal Lodge in the 1890s, her preference for her “special friend” Billy Wildbore-Blood, and her father’s insistence that she marry the Baron instead for his money. Eustace asks outright, “was he unkind to you?” and the response is “No, he didn’t have time, but he breathed heavily and he had fishy eyes”. She describes the “accident” on their honeymoon, the Baron “a weeny teeny bit tiddley if you ask me” opening the door instead of the window, and the scandal created by his family’s suggestion that “I had given him a tiny push—just fancy!”⁶³ They move on to discussing how to make Veronica look attractive enough for Phillip to notice her, wishing they had the rubies to give to her.

In the novel, every detail of this scene is expanded in new, horrifying directions. In the play, Eustace pretends briefly to be a “good, kind guard”, comforting Anna Rose on the train.⁶⁴ In the novel, he plays a variety of roles as Anna Rose lives the incident over again. Together they reenact the disturbing scenes preceding and following her wedding, which is revealed to have been entirely and violently against her will. She believes Eustace to be her father, and pleads with him “don’t let him have me”, “don’t let me be married”. She drinks glass after glass of wine “for luck” and takes a “little tablet too”.⁶⁵ Eustace becomes her “Mama” who has neglected the “something you were to tell me on my wedding morning”, and then morphs into the Baron. At this point, any remaining silliness in the idea of this re-enactment falls away, as Eustace embraces the violence of his role in a single-minded pursuit of the facts. Faced with her fear and “revulsion”, Eustace does not relent, but “leaned near again, desperately determined on the last truth”. The Baron’s death is replayed, Anna Rose striking him and watching with “frightened eyes” as he falls from the train.⁶⁶ Eustace continues to press her, taking advantage of her “terribly entranced” state to ask about the rubies. She still doesn’t know where they are, and he gives up, finally, “thwarted, exasperated and ashamed”.⁶⁷ It is easy to see why none of this happens in the play. The encounter is completely unsuited to a light drawing-room farce; parents drugging their daughter to marry her off to a rich old man, a young woman resisting sexual assault by her husband in a train carriage. In this version, the dark secret is not the murder, but the violences that preceded it. In the camp comedy, this must remain buried, hinted at ever so subtly, available to our imaginations but never confronted. In the novel, by contrast, Eustace is “that wanderer

⁶²Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 79.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 80–1.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁵Keane, 192.

⁶⁶Keane, 193.

⁶⁷Keane, 194.

in a graveyard who comes to an open grave and in the grave a coffin which now he must see opened".⁶⁸ He re-enacts her suffering and adds new violences, forcing her to experience the trauma over again.

Adapting the story of Aunt Anna Rose's marriage for the novel, Keane turns it into a study of the effects and management of trauma. Aunt Anna Rose has established a new relationship to temporality in the wake of traumatic experience, a form of "trauma time", to use Clementine Morrigan's phrase, in which "the present is disconnected, disoriented, unmapped".⁶⁹ Her firm belief that the sedan chair takes her travelling all over the world is a willed fantasy, a retreat from linear time and material space into a self-protective alternative reality. The novel's themes of timeliness and the out-of-time come to a climax in this moment, when Anna Rose, "this fairy being from the past century",⁷⁰ is forced to live the past over again. Her experience is the antithesis of camp, a total submersion in the felt reality of her trauma. This episode is an important meditation on the function of camp narration. After she recovers, Anna Rose tells another version of the story, a perfunctory recounting of the Baron's "nasty fall" and how she was "dreadfully upset about it all", prompting Eustace to reflect:

So, with masterly indifference the story was rounded off. He felt quite moved by the skill which had manufactured this airy version of the truth and terror. This was the story built up in her mind. This pure trite *histoire* for *jeunes filles*; cool as a stream; full of sympathy for the little bride and widow. This respectable narrow caging of the truth which only hopped, a tamed bird, from perch to perch in her mind, had equally forced on her forgetfulness of such a blinding reminder as the rubies.⁷¹

This could be a description of the operations of camp in Keane and Perry's collaborative work; the deployment of "masterly indifference", airiness, triteness, coolness, a "caging of the truth" within an inoffensive narrative. Anna Rose's comedy travels in her sedan chair, in both the play and the novel, are definitively camp, a habitual, frivolous set of behaviours built around a kernel of trauma.

Despite the discomfort this scene generates in the reader, the novel, like the play, tends towards resolution. The *Treasure Hunt* is successful, the rubies are found sewn into the stuffed bird atop Aunt Anna Rose's hat (which she has been wearing the entire time), finally remembered after Veronica appears in "the very clothes she wore when she did the thing", unearthed from "that strangely opened grave in the dusk of the boot room".⁷² This confrontation with her younger self, and a game of "hunt the thimble", is the final piece of time-travelling needed to find the treasure. The inheritance of the rubies makes Veronica an attractive and sensible marriage prospect for Phillip: "Suddenly she was a moneyed woman offering him, not an unpaid lifetime of work and love, but simply twenty thousand pounds or so."⁷³ Andries Wessels argues that in *Treasure Hunt* a "vital older generation from a vigorous aristocratic past" (Aunt Anna Rose) must intervene in the present to resolve the predicament caused by a "decadent, devitalised, middle generation" (Hercules and Consuelo) that has left the younger generation

⁶⁸Keane, 192.

⁶⁹Morrigan, "Trauma Time", 50.

⁷⁰Keane, 159.

⁷¹Keane, 196–7.

⁷²Keane, 225.

⁷³Keane, 254.

(Phillip and Veronica) unable to move forward.⁷⁴ The conventional romantic ending is a reassertion of the proper configuration of sexuality, gender, class and race, a preservation of Anglo-Irish endogamy that permits futurity. Queerness is firmly aligned with the middle “decadent, devitalised” generation, in Wessels’ schema, a model of queerness as unproductive, pleasure-seeking and detached from the moral values of the patriarchal colonial family. Wessels’ use of eugenic rhetoric is apt; the narrative is invested in rescuing the vitality of the settler-colonial family from the degenerate queers, ejecting the bourgeois interlopers with their inappropriate bodies and sexualities.

Dorothy, Eustace and Yvonne, bewildered and enchanted by the Ryall family, stand in for the uninitiated London audience, confronted with the bizarre cast of various Irish types. Part of the play’s success is through the comic manipulation of this relationship between the audience and the characters, the colonial set-up where Irish rustics—settlers and “natives”—are caricatured for the entertainment of the metropolitan audience. Dirk Bogarde evokes this relation of disgust and fascination characteristic of Stage Irishness in his description of the “cast of dotty, beguiling grotesques” that so amused the London audience.⁷⁵ The jokes are unevenly distributed at the expense of all involved. For instance, when Eustace and Dorothy first arrive at Ballyroden, Eustace attempts to communicate with Bridgid in a ludicrous parody of Hiberno-English: “Begorra and begabers, now, find them like a clever colleen and tell them we wish them the top of the morning.” Her response, “Pardon me, sir—I don’t understand *one* word you’re saying”, prompts Dorothy to chastise him: “My dear boy, when *will* you learn that the natives never understand their own ghastly language.”⁷⁶ Keane and Perry seem to be invested in dismantling stereotypes of the “native Irish” in this moment, while simultaneously exploiting their “grotesque” image for entertainment. There is a sense that both Anglo-Irish writers are aware that the metropole views both the settler-colonial Big House families and the “native Irish” as equally abject, that there is a purported equality in the depictions of their eccentricities. For the English guests, and the audience, every inhabitant of Ballyroden is represented as preposterous and hilarious. Yet, despite some rebuttal of national stereotypes, a traditional Stage Irishman arrives for the climax in both versions, a taxi driver with a love of ferrets who joins in the final game of, as they have him pronounce it, “hunt-de-timble”.

The wry narrative voice of the novel does however serve to introduce a layer of camp critique through which Keane regards the coloniality that suffuses the setting. The Ryall family’s status as part of the global imperialist class is self-evident; “black boy” statues, and the racist terms used to describe them, are omnipresent in both versions of Ballyroden.⁷⁷ *Treasure Hunt* stages this entanglement as much as any of Keane’s other works. Aunt Anna Rose’s imaginary globe-trotting shows her equally at ease calling to a “boy” for “hot langoustes, fried chicken and curried yams” in an imaginary Caribbean, disembarking from the Orient Express in Budapest, or watching a racist film in Clonmel.⁷⁸ In the novel, medium-specific techniques of free indirect speech give Keane a way to approach these disturbing proximities while maintaining an ironic distance. In a wry,

⁷⁴Wessels, “Resolving history”, 31.

⁷⁵Bogarde, “Introduction”, 4.

⁷⁶Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 45 and Keane, 84.

⁷⁷Keane, 76 and Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 42.

⁷⁸Keane, 127.

metatextual flourish, the author collapses the plot of the “Jungle Queen” film (a colonialist fantasy where pre-WWII political tensions are played out in a fictionalised African country) into the plot of the novel. Aunt Anna Rose and William are devoted to this series of films, travelling to town on William’s motorcycle every week to see the newest instalment. At the climax of the novel, while Veronica is dressed up in 1890s costume as part of the plan to attract Phillip, Anna Rose is watching the film. In one of many knowing winks to the reader throughout the novel, the author has Aunt Anna Rose wonder, “Would the passionate, beautiful girl make good use of her opportunities? Oddly enough Aunt Anna Rose hoped she would.”⁷⁹ The “treasure hunt” for lost rubies in an imperilled Anglo-Irish mansion is directly compared to the efforts of a British colonial heroine in a lurid, racist fantasy of Africa. This moment of comedic self-consciousness demonstrates the text’s awareness of its entanglement in colonial discourses. Again, the novel goes further in making this analogy explicit. A similar rhetorical move occurs in the play, when Anna Rose suggests, “Why not get a leopard skin for Veronica? The Jungle Queen always wears leopard skins, and the gentlemen can’t resist her.”⁸⁰ Where the farcical theatrical version plays for laughs, the novel has the resources and inclination to stage a more complex colonial story. Here, as elsewhere, Keane’s inclination is to adopt the pose of the ironic, camp commentator, refusing to take a position on moral questions but ensuring they are laid open for the reader with flagrant disregard for good taste.

Queer Keane

This mischievously apolitical stance puts Keane at odds with politicised scholarship that frames women’s writing or representations of dissident sexualities as a social good, or as “advancing the cause of liberty”.⁸¹ Studying Keane in the context of Irish women’s writing, it is imperative to move beyond recovery work and recognise the complexity of her long and diverse contributions to Irish literary culture. Attention to her collaborative relationships provides one productive way to do this. What interpretative possibilities arise if we discard attachment to the category of “Irish woman writer” for Keane, and consider her primarily in the light of her most important collaborators—this gay male London-based theatrical network? Her single-authored work and co-authored plays might be better read as central contributions to queer cultural politics in twentieth-century Ireland and Britain. Keane is a camp commentator on Anglo-Ireland, building on aesthetic modes drawn from queer experience to respond to the changing social world she observed in the twentieth century.

This analysis of collaboration between queer and straight writers reminds us that queer sexuality is not a condition of inclusion in the queer archive. In the Irish context, it is vitally important to recognise the queer cultural work, not only of dissident, activist queers, but also of privileged women writers with little interest in collective politics; Maria Edgeworth, Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Molly Keane.⁸² This is a

⁷⁹Keane, 226–7.

⁸⁰Farrell and Perry, *Treasure Hunt*, 83.

⁸¹Piiz and Standlee, *Irish Women’s Writing, 1878–1922* or Kennedy, “Queering Ireland”.

⁸²Edgeworth is a staple feature of queer eighteenth-century criticism: see for example, Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies*; Gonda, “Maria Edgeworth’s *Angelina*, or *L’amie Inconnue*”, 279–90; Kavanagh, “Queering Eighteenth-Century Irish

crucial point of deidealisation, to use Kadji Amin's term, a method that "deexceptionalizes queerness in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power, queer deviance as intertwined with normativity, and queer alternatives as not necessarily just alternatives".⁸³ Reading Keane as a queer writer does not assume anything about her politics or style. Rather, her inclusion works to de-idealise queer Irish history, taking account of complicity and accommodation as much as resistance and subversion. Camp is a way of dealing with the "bad" subjects of queer theory, those who do not uphold the presumed link between queer subjectivity and subversive politics. As Brostoff argues, camp continues to be useful as a queer method because it offers "an excellent tool for dealing with precisely the complexities of power and dispossession that intersectional queer and trans critique seeks to tease out".⁸⁴ Analysing the apparently contradictory figure of Caitlyn Jenner as camp, Brostoff demonstrates how this queer technique of reading can send up the conventions of queer theory and politics, particularly the desire for queer subjects to conform to a certain model of antinormativity. As Wiegman and Wilson have urged, it is imperative "to think queer theory without assuming a position of antinormativity from the outset", to be alert to the reductive effects of this common idealisation in queer studies.⁸⁵ Appropriately for a writer so invested in the uncomfortable, in "bad feelings" and the out-of-time, Keane functions as a usefully unpalatable queer ancestor, a "bad" queer subject who unsettles assumptions about queer culture and politics as necessarily tied to liberation.

This article has canvassed the collaborative network around Keane and her gay male colleagues in mid-century London, teasing out the affective and political stakes of collaborative work through a queer lens. Through a reading of *Treasure Hunt*, I have shown how Perry's authorial hand encouraged a strict adherence to "lightness" in their collaborative plays, while Keane's single-authored novels luxuriated in the "dark side of camp". I argue that collaborating with Perry, but also with Beaumont and Gielgud, opened up new sexual and gendered possibilities for Keane, and helped her to become attuned to the dynamics of the closet as a framework for repression, trauma and "submerged trouble". This queer reading of Keane and Perry's collaboration goes beyond adjudications of their politics, beyond the binary of conservatism (are they invested in preserving Anglo-Ireland?) versus subversion (or satirically puncturing its delusions in the spirit of critique?). Instead, I foreground their occupancy of the positionality of the camp observer, alienated from their Ascendancy milieu but invested in its aesthetics. With camp flair, Keane and Perry prioritised aesthetics over political or ethical questions, using this queer strategy to manage their continuing entanglement with the site of shame and suffering.

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Writing", 244–62. Jill Ehnenn (2008) has drawn attention to the feminist, lesbian and queer resonances of the Somerville and Ross writing partnership, while Shawn R. Mooney (1992) has discussed the question of lesbianism in their biographical representations.

⁸³ Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 10.

⁸⁴ Brostoff, "Notes on Caitlyn, or Genre Trouble", 13–14.

⁸⁵ Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction", 2.

ORCID

Naoise Murphy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5473-8463>

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