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Invitation to the Waltz:
Dance Hall, Transgressions, and Women
in Inter-War Britain

Abstract

The dance hall in Britain had always served as the best place for women to meet available men. During the First World War, three million men had died in the battlefields, which created a gross imbalance between the men-women ratio. However Barbara Cartland remembered her contemporaries who "reddened their lips and [went] out to dance when all they loved most [had] been lost" (1942). After the Battle of Somme, hostesses changed their invitations from "Miss–" to "Miss– and partner," implying that women would have to bring their own partners. Hence in the dance halls and clubs, traditional gender roles and rules of courtship had been reversed: instead of men courting women, women were now hankering after the few available men. On the other hand, at the Cafe Royal, the Ham Bone Club, and the Cave of Harmony, homosexual women could dance together unafraid, as the dearth of men provided the perfect alibi. In this paper I will examine how dance halls and dance clubs became spatial sites of transgression to prescribed gender roles; how these transgressions led to the blurring of class distinctions; the perception of the problem of homosexuality as arising from the dearth of men; and above all the enacting of gender as performance. To this end, I will refer to Rosamond Lehmann's *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932) and Robert Graves's and Alan Hodge's *The Long Week-End* (1941).

Over nine hundred thousand people died from the British Empire in the Great War. According to the 1921 census, there were 1096 women to every 1000 men in the population in the British Isles. These women, as Vera Brittain recalls in *Testament of Youth,* were called 'surplus'. In this paper, I would be looking at the repercussions of this gender imbalance on the dance floors. Dancing – whether at halls or at private balls – was always considered to be the perfect opportunity for the opposite sexes to meet, where the men would court the women. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, women were conditioned to believe that marriage was their only option in life; likewise spinsters had been heavily stereotyped. After the War, the dearth of men made the women desperate to seek out and get engaged to the few available men. Since dance venues were still the perfect place

to meet such available men, the strategies resorted to by the women to attract the attention of the men took place here.

1. "Let's Face the Music and Dance": Dancing through the Wars

One of the symbols of the 'Roaring Twenties' was the craze for dancing: Along with the pub and the cinema, dancing formed the basis of mass entertainment between the wars. After the privations of war time and with the imposition of new restrictions inflicted on people by the post-War depreciation in the market, dance acted as a means of escape. The *Daily Mail*, in February 1919, described "This Jazz Age" as, "People are dancing as they have never danced before, in a happy rebound from the austerities of War […]. But the dancing is not quite what it was in the dim old years before 1914."

The insatiable demand for dances was matched by entrepreneurs who built chains of dance halls across Britain. With an entrance fee of one or two shillings, one could dance for hours. Famous bands led by Roy Fox, Ray Noble, and Lew Stone won a following that spanned the entire social spectrum. By 1926, the BBC had its own House Band, the London Radio Dance Band, and in the 1930s it devoted several hours every evening to light dance music. Consequently, with dance floors being installed by smart restaurants – the Savoy being one of the first to popularise dancing with meals – women found the attractions of dining out fashionable.

Dances organised by churches filled an important place in interwar social life. Socialising under church auspices, young people were expected to meet other people of the same denomination and affiliated to similar morals, in an environment in which anything untoward was unlikely to occur. In London, the foxtrot was already common by 1914. American jazz and ragtime bands arrived with the American troops in 1917, and peacetime saw the popularity of novel dances, including the tango, the jogtrot, the shimmy, the Missouri Walk, the Vampire, the Black Bottom, and the Charleston. In Rosamond Lehmann's 1932 book, *Invitation to the Waltz*, the "old fogey" Mr. Verity admits to taking dance lessons since the late Twenties to "get a hang with this jazz thing."

Towards the end of 1919, regular columns of advertisements for tea dances, subscription dances, and Victory dances appeared in the newspapers. Innumerable young women offered to help "Win the Peace" at the many dances held in aid of ex-servicemen, Serbian Relief, Rumanian Relief etc., by teaching tangos, foxtrots, hesitation waltzes and so on. This gesture was not immune to protests however, which filled the newspapers. A certain Bishop Weldon declared in 1920, "The use of dances as a means of raising money for war-memorials is little less than a national humiliation" (qtd. in Pugh).

2. "Shadow Waltz": Dance Spaces

The numerous London jazz and dance clubs were the haunts of the upper classes: The Kit-Kat Club at Haymarket, and the Rectors Club, located in a cellar in Tottenham Court Road, as well as the Embassy Club in Bond Street, patronised not only by Edwina and Louis Mountbatten, but also by the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Kent. Murray's, owned by the racketeer Jack May and located at the banks of the Thames at Maidenhead was another popular destination for the smart set, with its clients ranging from the film star and society beauty Lady Diana Manners to the world light-heavy-weight boxing champion Georges Carpentier. The aristocratic classes had lost most of their young generation in the battlefields, and the post-War privation, coupled with death duties had made it very difficult for most of them to even keep up their country seats. A young woman from such a family had indulged in real physical labour for the first time during the War: whether by being a land girl, a nurse, or a VAD. Amid the daily constraints of post-War slump, she found the gaiety and disregard for conventions of these jazz and dance clubs liberating. She wouldn't have to be chaperoned by an elderly relative to a club or a restaurant, and even if she were, such chaperones could not dictate over the improvisations of the jitterbug. The discipline and decorum of the pre-War debutant balls or hunt balls, where each woman must match her male partner step for step within a rigidly controlled structure of dance, fell flat in front of the new dances that emerged in these clubs. The VAD or nurse working in London found this disregard for structures in dance clubs, appealing. After a strenuous twelve-hour shift of attending dying and badly wounded soldiers, and of acquiescing to the matron's strict rules, the abandon of dance clubs promised release.

The First World War had also considerably loosened the tyranny of the upper classes over their servants. While most of the male servants had left for active duty, the female servants found the prospect of moving to the larger cities to take up the jobs hitherto addressed only by men very tempting. By the time they returned after the War, or were replaced by new servants, social structures had loosened slightly. These women who had worked various assortment of jobs during the War, found the entertainment of village or church dances attractive. Often held late in the evening after the upper classes had had dinner and would not need to be served, these dances provided not only the circumstances for unbridled fun, but also opportunities for either sexes to meet more people apart from their colleagues in the Servant's Hall. Within the confines of an evening of dance, they exchanged notes on the latest Rudolph Valentino cinema, which was as much open to them, as to their masters, and compared their individual working conditions. To them, these spaces had in turn become a microcosm of the world outside.

3. "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails": Race, Class, and Gender in Jazz Clubs

The common epithets attributed to jazz in the Press during the Twenties ranged from "Night in the Jazz Jungle" to "Jazzmania." The major contention against the jazz enthusiasts seemed to be the ease with which the latter moved between assumed gender roles, and their disregard for accepted social convention. The new fashions that accompanied these dances broke down established gender barriers through women's truncated styles which looked shockingly similar to male clothing. As a features editor of *Daily Mail* described:

> Women dressed as men, men as women, youth in bathing drawers and kimonos. Matrons moving about lumpily and breathing hard. Bald, obese perspiring men. Everybody terribly serious; not a single laugh, or the palest ghost of a smile. Frantic noises and the occasional cries of ecstasy came from half a dozen negro players. Dim lights, drowsy odours, and futurist drawings on the walls and ceiling.

Clearly for this features editor, a jazz club was the supreme site of transgression, where men and women refused to conform to accepted gender roles. He sexualised matrons who he felt should not indulge in vigorous dances anymore, as much as middle-aged men. His objection to the scene was oxymoronic, because he found both the silence as well as the cries of ecstasy disturbing.

    This extreme reaction of the authorities against the popular dance forms of the time shows their inherent insecurity about new changes. To the critics, modern music and dance symbolised moral decline, especially in its disordered and suggestive dancing. The abandon with which the new free woman danced, allowing her partner a near-sexual closeness of embrace was considered "shameless," her dress and coiffure "immodest," and her looseness of language "profane." Analogies were frequently drawn between the disorder of jazz music, and that of jazz minds; and girls who frequently danced the foxtrot, were warned that "old age would claim them early." In every aspect the jazz dances clashed with the Edwardian waltzes and the German and Austrian oompah bands of the preceding decades. In this context, it is important to recall Judith Butler's demonstration that like languages, gender norms too are historically and culturally fluid and only appear natural by our repeated performances of them. Her most influential example would draw a similar strain with the setting at these dance clubs. Butler posited that in performing and parodying the opposite sex, drag acts enacted a denaturalising and defamiliarising exposure of the constructed, conventional, and supposedly binary character of all gender. Hence they potentially undermined the patriarchal oppression of women imagined to be different from and "naturally" inferior to men. In this light, these jazz clubs had already become a utopian space.

    The journalistic reports on the activities of the nightclubs also fed to the horrors of the puritanical mind. One raid was reported in *News of the World* on 4 Jan-

uary, 1925, as "COLOURED MAN'S CLUB […] Black men and white girls min-gling in a Bacchanalian setting." When Uriah Erskine's club in Whitfield Street was raided at 2 am on 30 November 1924, reports of unlicensed alcohol on sale caused less outrage than police evidence of the dancing being "most objectionable from suggestive movement." They reported seeing men and women caressing one another and a white woman sitting on a black man's knees.

This report of the raid illustrates how power control pertains to cognition by not only limiting the freedom of action in others, but also influencing their minds. The police, the Press, and the people who had implemented these rules had not only prevented women and black men from engaging in pleasure in their own ways, but also, with their vested powers of implementing law and informing peo-ple, had manipulated and persuaded the readers of the report through their form of reporting and talk that *appears* quite legitimate in its outrage.

4. "Petite Waltz"

Writer Julian Fellowes (*Downton Abbey, Gosford Park*) talks about his Aunt Isie Russell Stephenson, who lost her husband Hamilton to war wounds just before Armistice. During the season of 1919, Isie was invited to a ball in London. How-ever, on entering the party, she felt that she had been invited to a "hen party," rath-er than a ball. It was only after careful scrutiny, that she discovered a few men in coat tails. It seemed that there were about ten women to every man (source/page). Isie's anecdote amply reveals the state of dance halls and balls during and im-mediately after the First World War. Until the Battle of Somme, hostesses had a list of eligible men, who were automatically invited to her match-making balls. However after the Battle of Somme, they changed their invitations from "Miss–" to "Miss– and partner," implying that women would now have to bring their own partners. Hence, as late as in 1932, in the novel *Invitation to the Waltz*, Olivia and Kate's mother Mrs Curtis, invites her friend's son to be a partner for her daughters in the Spencer's dance. When the hostess, Lady Spencer, sees Olivia at the beginning of the ball, she assures the latter (in a very rare event in social cir-cles of the time), that her son Rollo had brought a whole batch of fellow-officers at the last minute, and that they were "well off for young men" for that evening.

The women now had to go to extreme lengths to bring someone to dance with them. Barbara Cartland emphasises the desperation of the women of her generation, when she writes how many of her contemporaries "reddened their lips and [went] out to dance when all they loved most [had] been lost […]. They accepted death with a shrug of the shoulders". According to her, the new gen-eration, despite its bereavement, was "out to conquer". However, this was not restricted to just the aristocratic classes. The transformation of oneself into a properly feminine body was a way to triumph over other women in the conquest

for men. These women seemed to put on their "war paint" to vociferously make themselves the "object and prey" for the man. Beatrice Brown, a contemporary of Barbara Cartland, recalls some methods of attaining the conquest. She writes about getting out her address book every time she was asked to a dance, and call up "second-rate" young men with the hope that they would accede to dance with her:

> I was not the only one, I suspect, who after trying this out for three or four dances, swore that I would never again accept an invitation for which I had to supply my share of the party. One went to parties to meet young men, not to wear out those one had by importuning them.

If one did find a man who was willing to dance to a pressing woman, he would be in such demand that often the woman would be abandoned halfway through the evening in favour of someone he liked better.

In her autobiography, *O Dreams, O Destinations* (1962), Phyllis Bentley talks about a scene at a typical dance hall after demobilisation. The number of men was so less, that competition to gain their attention was fierce among the women. Yet, it was hard for "nicely brought-up girls" to push forward for fear of being thought "cheap". This is a classic instance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggested of the ways in which women differed from and oppressed one another along dimensions that were not reducible to the sameness of their gender. Sedgwick reminded her readers that there were much perturbation and anxiety in relations between women that were often sexually fraught and involved the pain of power struggle. Especially in this instance, women's homo-social bond was fractured not only by differences in class, but also in their (competitive) craving for male attention.

In her classic paper, Iris Young observes that a space seems to surround women in imagination, beyond which they are hesitant to move. This manifests itself both in a reluctance to reach, stretch, and extend the body to meet resistances of matter in motion, and in a general style of movement. Woman's space is not a field, in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realised, but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined. The "cheap/loose women" violate these norms: her looseness is manifest not only in her morals, but in her manner of speech, as well as, in the free and easy way she moves.

It was in pursuit of a dance partner that class distinctions eventually broke down. It is generally accepted that in the Great War a higher proportion of the officer class was killed than those of lower down the social scale. Over a hundred years ago, it was considered a taboo for a middle-class woman to marry outside her class. Yet, when the truth of the statistics hit home, women wanting to marry, found it difficult to be too choosy. While asking a man to a blind date, one was often confronted with choices that did not conform to their class background. In

these cases, they would often embrace the unorthodox arrangements. It was to these new set of circumstances that Barbara Cartland was referring to, when she wrote, "Society had ceased to have any meaning". At the waltz in *Invitation to a Waltz*, Olivia dances with an ex-soldier, Timmy, who has been blinded during action, and now runs a chicken farm with his wife. In Timmy's gratitude to have been invited to the ball lies a hint of how different the guest list would have been before 1914.

As societies change, and as women themselves offer resistance to patriarchy, older forms of domination disintegrate, only to be replaced by newer forms. It is true, that around the time of the First World War, femininity centred not only on presumed heterosexuality for all women, but also on their appearance. What was also new was that, this change spread across all the classes. Each woman decked herself only for the gaze and judgment of the male connoisseur. However, what is imperative to remember is that before the War, female advances were subtle: it was up to the men to court women. But after the First World War, the men-women ratio in the population, and the single-minded determination of the women to get married to the few available men, made them adapt strategies which were more overt than their passive roles throughout history. Instead of gently decking them-selves for men, they now put on "war paint" to attract the opposite sex. Instead of waiting for a man to ask them to dance, they went out, called on, begged, and paid strangers to be their partners. This was a clear reversal of traditional gender roles, and for a heterosexual woman, under the threat of loneliness for the rest of her life, and under strict dictated modes of conduct, her resistance to the former version of patriarchy, was certainly transgressive. In an early article, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault" (1986), Judith Butler claims that gender is a "choice," not in the sense that a person simply stands outside its gender and selects it, but that (especially in the context of these women putting on "war paint" to overtly appear as feminine women on the dance floor, while covertly attempting to find husbands), ''to choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms'' page). In this way, these dance halls and ballrooms became sites of a major transgres-sion: of reversal of traditional gender roles.

5. "Love Locked Out": Forbidden Dances

It was often the general belief that women who failed to get married would turn on one of their own sex for companionship. After the Great War, homosexuality seemed to be viewed as a second option for unmarried women to find love, rather than as something natural. In *The Long Week-End* (1940), a social history of Great Britain between 1918–1939, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge noted with a slight

sense of irony, the increase in homosexuality in England with comparisons from Germany:

> In certain Berlin dance-halls, it was pointed out, women danced only with women and men with men. Germany land of the free! The Lesbians took heart and followed suit, first in Chelsea and St. John's Wood, and then in the less exotic suburbs of London […]. [They] were more quiet about their aberrations at first; but, if pressed, they justified themselves […] by pointing out that there were not enough men to go round in a monogamous system.

Marie Stopes and Havelock Ellis among others seemed to view homosexuality as deviant (where?). On the other end of the spectrum lay the psychologist Esther Harding, whose approach was more apologetic. She felt that the "rise" in lesbianism was due to the fact that career women found "all the men of their age already married […]," implying that under such circumstances such deviancy could be excused, forgiven even. Against such a background sprang classic peri-performative contexts: the bohemian sub-culture of 1920s Britain. At the Cafe Royal, the Ham Bone Club, and the Cave of Harmony, as well as the clubs in Radclyff Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), homosexual women could dance together unafraid, and found like-minded kinship in modernist poets, exhibitionists, cross-dressers, abstract expressionists, models and nightclub dancers. This crowd rode motorcycles, cropped their hair, smoked jewelled pipes, and danced jazz. Each of these clubs provided the perfect alibi for the deviance of same-sex dance partners: the extreme dearth of men had made it necessary for women to dance with each other.

6. "Twentieth Century Blues"*:* The Problem of Transgression

During the course of writing this paper, I engaged with the idea of transgression. Transgression could imply the heinous crime of breaking rules, or the simple act of overstepping the prescribed line. I realised that "transgression" was entirely subjective. This problematizes the assumption that immediately after the First World War, the women of Britain were transgressive in their behaviour in dance halls and dance clubs. Despite being avowedly vocal in their choices, and going to great lengths to get a male partner for a dance, their actions were ultimately dependent on getting the sanction of a man, and getting married. Each woman looked at it as a competition, where the other women had to be eliminated by means of increasing levels of beauty, chutzpah, and brazenness. This is not transgression, but a more defiant form of patriarchy. On the other hand, the form of all-obliging docility that women had been subjected to until the War is challenged by these women, and their brazenness is a sharp contrast to the expected social

mores. When judged within the parameters of existing principles, the actions they adopted certainly seem transgressive for their times. Commenting on de Beauvoir's statement in *The Second Sex* "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Judith Butler writes towards the end of the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*:

> If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means.

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