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‘Albert Nobbs’, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, and Quare Irish Female Erotohistories

This article models an approach to quare Irish female erotohistoriography through analyzing George Moore’s 1918 novella ‘Albert Nobbs’<sup>1</sup> (along with two key stage and screen adaptations of Moore’s work), and Emma Donoghue’s 1996 stage play, *Ladies and Gentlemen*. Both Irish-authored works concern the lives of mid- to late nineteenth-century individuals born as biologically female who live or perform as men for the purposes of financial survival and, occasionally, pleasure. Moore’s Albert Nobbs dresses and lives as a man for financial survival in Dublin while Donoghue’s Annie Hindle (an actual historical figure) dominates the New York vaudeville stage with her male impersonator act.<sup>2</sup> Donoghue’s *Ladies and Gentlemen* may be considered, in Mária Kurdi’s terms, a lesbian version of the female biography play, while the multiple versions of ‘Albert Nobbs’ handle the question of Nobb’s sexuality or desire in diverse ways.<sup>3</sup> Love and the marriage plot are the focus of both texts even as Nobbs and Hindle initially pursue their objects of desire with differing intentions. Nobbs sees marriage as a route to companionship and social respectability, and not necessarily sexual fulfillment, while Hindle falls in love (and lust) first and considers marriage only at the prompting of her partner. These works’ treatments of marriage vis-à-vis sexual desire call into question the role of the erotic in queer Irish female historical archives.

I focus on representations of the erotic at the juncture of love and marriage in a bid to recover what I term quare Irish female ‘erotohistories’. This approach follows Elizabeth Freeman’s use of ‘erotohistoriography’ and Noreen Giffney’s embrace of ‘quare theory’ as an

Irish practice of queer theory that insists on the intersection between queer, lesbian and feminist work.<sup>4</sup> Freeman's investigation of the relationship between queer temporality and queer histories calls for erotohistoriography as a way of:

imagining the 'inappropriate' response of eros in the face of sorrow as a trace of past forms of pleasure. As a mode of reparative criticism, erotohistoriography honors the way queer relations complexly exceed the present, insisting that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensation, produce forms of time consciousness – even historical consciousness – that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

I practice Irish queer female erotohistoriography by tracing the submerged and explicit erotic desires of these works. I am inspired to do this in response to earlier readings of Simone Benmussa's adaptation of 'Albert Nobbs' by US feminist scholars that decentralized sexuality in their analyses of the character of Albert Nobbs in particular. These omissions or outright rejections of Albert's possible queer and/or erotic desires forcibly limit the dimensions of her story.<sup>6</sup>

These denials need to be located in the anxieties about queer and trans identities within US 'second wave' feminist politics and scholarship, anxieties expressed in the exclusionary policing of the category 'woman' that play out in Benmussa's adaptation and critical commentary on this work. For this reason, I remain fraught about my own choice to use female pronouns to refer to Nobbs, following from both Moore and Benmussa. While I cannot change

how the character was written, I can call into question what this use of pronouns signifies and draw attention to the dissonance between Albert's life as it is lived and how (s)he is named.

I focus on the circulation of *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* in English only. Despite the fact that Benmussa's adaptation premiered in French in 1977, it was translated into English by Barbara Wright immediately and had its English language premiere in London at the New End Theatre in 1978. Glenn Close starred in the New York Off-Broadway premiere at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1982, an engagement that would inspire the later film.<sup>7</sup> The immediate circulation of Benmussa's adaptation in English and its central role in US feminist performance criticism lead me to focus on her work within English and US genealogies of criticism in seeking to understand the place of this text within quare Irish female erotohistories.

My juxtaposition of 'Albert Nobbs'' various incarnations with *Ladies and Gentlemen* does not seek to correct earlier interpretations of Moore's work but to push at what is lost when the residues of erotohistories are foreclosed. These multiple versions of 'Albert Nobbs' offer differing presentations of what Anna Clark calls 'twilight moments' in histories of sexuality: those which 'involved sexual desires, relationships, and practices that did not produce identities, that were half-understood, expressed only by oblique gestures, veiled in silence'.<sup>8</sup> By at once pushing harder at what has been 'veiled in silence', and privileging the 'oblique' over the verifiable, engaging in quare Irish female erotohistoriography rescues queer Irish female desires from the margins. The potential payoff is significant. By working in a mode more attentive to 'twilight moments', Freeman suggests, 'we might imagine ourselves haunted by bliss and not just by trauma; residues of positive affect (idylls, utopias, memories of touch) might be available for queer counter- (or para-) historiographies'.<sup>9</sup> This article searches for the traces of and potentialities for blissful haunting within a quare Irish female archive of erotohistories. The

desires detailed in these works call into question historical understandings of Irish female identity circumscribed by heteronormative frameworks. In turn, ‘Albert Nobbs’ and *Ladies and Gentlemen* ultimately reveal how these same frameworks must conceal the quare as constitutive of their own existence.

### **Quare-ing (Mother) Ireland**

‘Albert Nobbs’ and *Ladies and Gentlemen* situate the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish quareness in a transnational context through the interaction of Irish and non-Irish settings and characters. The main characters (Annie and Albert) who are born biologically female and live or perform as men are not ‘Irish’. Rather, they take or seek female Irish-born lovers who change the course of their lives. In Moore’s ‘Albert Nobbs’, English-born Albert relocates to Dublin after she begins living and working as a male waiter in London. She makes this change out of financial necessity following the death of her caretaker and parents. In Dublin, working at Morrison’s Hotel, Albert meets another ‘woman’ in disguise, Irish-born Hubert Page, who left her abusive husband and family to work as a painter. Hubert has happily married a woman and introduces Albert to the possibility of marriage with another woman as a viable outlet for her loneliness. This leads to Albert’s fruitless pursuit of fellow maidservant, Helen Dawes, who extorts money from her in cahoots with her lover, fellow servant Joe Mackins. Donoghue’s *Ladies and Gentlemen* features the story of Annie Hindle, an English-born American star of the vaudeville circuit, who falls in love with her Irish-born dresser, Ryanny, who has emigrated to the United States for work. Despite Annie’s presumption of Ryanny’s naivety, Ryanny ends up calling most of the shots in their relationship and marriage, down to her withholding knowledge of her terminal breast cancer diagnosis from Annie until the last possible moment.

‘Albert Nobbs’<sup>10</sup> and *Ladies and Gentlemen* stand among the few works, whether on stage or in film, that attempt to narrate any kind of queer Irish female history. As Fintan Walsh details, canonical and semi-canonical playwrights including Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness and Thomas Kilroy have featured gay male narratives in works that have appeared on stages such as the Abbey since the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as Louise O’Shea, Steve Wilmer and Mária Kurdi argue, the general output of Irish plays on lesbian or queer female themes - as well as their critical treatment - has been comparatively very limited, with pioneering works by Donoghue, Joni Core, Louise Callaghan, Carmel Winters and Catriona Byrne the exceptions.<sup>12</sup> A survey of the programs of the Dublin Gay Theatre Festival from 2004 to the present, as well as the once-off Absolut Dublin Gay Theatre Festival in 2010, reveals a continuing imbalance between works centring on gay/queer/bisexual/transgender men and those articulating queer female perspectives.<sup>13</sup>

A specifically Irish engagement with queer theory, what Giffney, following E. Patrick Johnson, terms ‘quare theory’, offers particularly powerful strategies for reading ‘Albert Nobbs’ and *Ladies and Gentlemen* in relation to these gaps in Irish theatre and performance history.<sup>14</sup> Giffney employs ‘the term ‘quare’ to articulate the specificities, nuances and methodological tensions between expressions of queer theory in an Irish context and theoretical formulations of queer theory that originate in Anglo-North American contexts’.<sup>15</sup> Johnson embraces ‘quare’ over ‘queer’ due to his perception that ‘queer’ as constituted within Queer Studies ‘is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from ‘raced’ communities’.<sup>16</sup> His own rooted use of the term comes from his grandmother’s use of ‘quare’ as a term in keeping with ‘traditional understandings and uses of “queer”’ as well as ‘something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings

grounded in African-American cultural rituals and lived experience'.<sup>17</sup> Johnson too finds the 'quare' in Ireland through Joseph Valente's *Quare Joyce*, but, strangely, erases the specifically Irish roots of 'quare' in Valente's formulation. Giffney (re)turns to the quare in an Irish context because, following Johnson's limning of its intersectional capacities, it 'signifies the self-reflexive interrogation of queer theory through a feminist and lesbian studies lens and vice versa'. Giffney connects this interrogative capability of 'quare theory' to specific material, intellectual, political and, importantly, transgressive institutional spaces, particularly those fostered within the lesbian feminist spaces of WERRC (the Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre) at UCD during the 1990s and early 2000s. The practice of 'quare' queer theory in Ireland, then, did not develop in conflict with feminist or lesbian feminist epistemologies, but rather these theoretical and political spaces were mutually informed. Giffney contends that in an Irish context quare theory should be used as:

a methodology rather than as an identity category or object to be scrutinized, a culturally-situated and historically-contingent analytical tool for interrogating the potentialities and limits of areas of study founded on the internalisation, deconstruction or repudiation of identity categories.<sup>18</sup>

Adapting this for the specific concerns of this essay, one could say that to approach 'quare' as a methodology means to focus on the intersection of queer, feminist and lesbian Irish histories as they are made visible by one another.

'Albert Nobbs' and *Ladies and Gentlemen* are paradigmatic 'quare' texts because their layers of meaning become most visible through a critical lens informed by the flexibility of queer

theory while being responsive to traces of specific female/lesbian desires. The central role of ‘Albert Nobbs’ within the then nascent field of feminist (and queer) performance criticism in the 1980s corroborates this contention. Simone Benmussa’s 1977 stage adaptation *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* served as a key case study for the consolidation of critical energies around the analysis of gender as performance. However, scholars’ repeated sublimation of sexual themes and desire in Benmussa’s *Albert Nobbs*, and by extension, the original, falsely partitioned the queer energies residing within the text from feminist theoretical concerns. My quare erotohistoriographical rereading of the legacy of ‘Albert Nobbs’ brings the traces of desire residing within the multiple versions together to argue for a quare genealogy of the life of Albert Nobbs that in turn provides methodological tools for Irish queer studies.

### **Revisiting Critical Genealogies**

In the 1980s, Jill Dolan, Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond and Susan Ammen among others used Benmussa’s adaptation, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, to interrogate how performing gender consciously onstage might lead to opportunities for the critical deconstruction of gender roles. Dolan argued that the stage ‘is a proper place to explore gender ambiguity, not to cathartically expunge it from society, but to play with, confound, and deconstruct gender categories’.<sup>19</sup> *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* indexes a moment in feminist scholarship where sex and gender were becoming understood largely in relationship to ‘performance’ as a paradigm of analysis, a shift represented most decisively by the publication of Judith Butler’s 1988 article, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’.

Butler’s landmark claim that gender is ‘an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*’<sup>20</sup> and, correspondingly, that sex is retrospectively constructed as a system of meaning



embedded in the material body according to the logic of performative gender, seems borne out nowhere better than by the character Albert Nobbs. This character's relationship to maleness is forged out of economic necessity at the outset but becomes cemented through a stylized recreation of her gender identity. The very name 'Albert Nobbs', Diamond notes, 'is also a fictional signifier manipulated by a woman who, to obtain the powers of the phallus in Victorian culture, assumes the disguise of a male. Benmussa thus shows that gender is not natural but encoded and reproducible at will'.<sup>21</sup> Here gender is emphasized, but the interconnections between gender, sexuality and queer desire are downplayed in her analysis, a foreclosure mirrored by Case and Dolan. Dolan argues that Albert 'can read desire only through the economic necessities of the gender role in which she is imprisoned',<sup>22</sup> while Case maintains that Albert's 'male-identified professional self stops her from having a successful sexual and emotional life. Her economic security suppresses her inner security – her female self is forced to go into hiding'.<sup>23</sup> According to Case, this female self does not desire others, rather she is only able to search 'for the possibility of desire within herself'.<sup>24</sup> Ammen concurs that in Benmussa's version, 'because of our immediate awareness of Albert's true sex, the coy flirtatiousness of Helen seems a false masquerade', a reading which conflates knowledge of Albert's 'female' biological sex with compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>25</sup> Of course, Ammen is also reading the affect of the actors in performance, but Benmussa's choice as playwright *and* director to neutralize sexual tension shuts down any erotic possibilities between Albert and Helen. Benmussa literally places bodies between the primary actors playing Albert and Helen following a confrontation in the park where she will not kiss her:

*They have come back from their work: they have quarreled and are furious. During the next scene, the two chambermaids are in the place where ALBERT NOBBS ought to be, facing HELEN DAWES. HELEN DAWES is thus encircled by two women Alberts and one man Albert. As for ALBERT NOBBS herself, she is encircled by three Helens by this mirror game and by trompe l'oeil; refusal and incomprehension are shown.*<sup>26</sup>

The 'refusal and incomprehension' felt by Albert in this scene may be directly connected to her rejection by Helen and failed sexual intimacy in the park, but by staging different binary gender versions of Albert (male Albert and female Albert) separating her from one Helen Dawes, Benmussa focuses on the 'true' female Albert as ultimately alienated from herself.

Benmussa's adaptation coincided with a virulent transphobic strain in US lesbian feminist theory, exemplified by the 1979 publication of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. In a revised introduction to the 1994 reissue of the book, Raymond argues that: 'Transsexualism urges us to collude in the falsification of reality – that men can be real women – all in the pretense that transsexualism breaks down the barriers of sex repressiveness, sex role rigidity, and gender itself'.<sup>27</sup> Raymond's critique proceeds largely from anxieties that male to female transsexuals will impinge upon female-only lesbian spaces. Ultimately, transphobia within US lesbian feminist criticism extended in multiple directions with Sheila Jeffreys later arguing that female to male transsexuals exhibit 'a desire to cease being women altogether in order to assume male power'.<sup>28</sup> These anxieties are echoed by Benmussa's own framing of Albert's character within her adaptation of Moore's novella.

In her introduction to *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, Benmussa vociferously denies that Albert has any kind of 'sexual problems', specifically 'fantasies about the inversion of

sexual roles'.<sup>29</sup> Benmussa's insistence is implicitly trans- *and* homophobic, as the introduction continuously emphasizes that both Albert's male self-presentation and her queer desire are aberrant: she has been *estranged* from her essential female self and therefore any romantic access to heterosexuality and it is for these reasons that (s)he is disenfranchised. Albert dresses as a man as Jeffreys fears in order to assume male power, but in Benmussa's adaptation, this is Albert's tragedy, rather than (as Jeffreys would have it) a triumph at the expense of other women. Elsewhere, Benmussa also assumes that the novella insists marriage between women must be 'as a community of interests and not as a sexual adventure'.<sup>30</sup> In turn, Ammen leaves unquestioned Benmussa's evacuation of any queer eroticism from the text, concurring that we 'see' that 'both Hubert and Albert are women', an assertion that would seem to erase the possibility of any kind of queer desire regardless of whether Albert and Hubert identify as women or men. She elaborates:

to further reduce any aspect of titillation, Benmussa deletes Hubert's suggestion that Albert feel under her shirt to see that she is indeed a woman, and also renders the Helen-Albert courtship scene less steamy by omitting the seductive kiss that Helen manages to plant on Albert before she pulls away.<sup>31</sup>

Instead, the mirror-game scene recounted above replaces the seductive deleted kiss, segregating Albert from Helen by 'properly' gendered versions of her/himself.

Benmussa repeatedly reinscribes heteronormativity in her interpretation of Albert as she conflates her frustrated heterosexuality with the displacement of a 'properly' gendered self. Emphasizing Albert's former feelings for her master, Mr. Congreve, Benmussa seizes upon the

fact that ‘Albert had picked out an evening suit from a bundle of old clothes that her former master, Mr. Congreve, had given her to sell’.<sup>32</sup> In this fashion, by choosing to wear ‘the costume of the only person that she could have loved, ... she thereby puts herself in the position of never being able to be loved by any man’.<sup>33</sup> Albert’s transformation into a ‘perhapsee’, ‘neither man nor woman’,<sup>34</sup> seems then compelled for Benmussa as much by the failure of heterosexual love as economic necessity. Certainly, Albert’s performance of masculinity or assumption of the male gender does not foreclose the potential for her to desire men. But given that the story is so strongly focused on Albert’s aborted plot to marry a woman, the possibility for queer desires seems more likely and is in fact strongly suggested by Benmussa’s omission of sections of Moore’s original text, referenced by Ammen and many others. In other words, regardless of whether Albert identifies as male or female, the story does not suggest that ‘she’ wishes or would even have the choice to return to a heteronormative lifestyle where she can desire or marry men. Instead, she actively pursues (romantic) alliances with women.

In Moore’s novella ‘Albert Nobbs’, first published in 1918, Albert is preoccupied by hyperconsciousness of sexual boundaries and the risks of impropriety. Albert’s initial fear at having Hubert in her bed arises from her assumption that Hubert is a biological male, but when she finds out about Hubert’s wife, her thoughts turn elsewhere. Albert’s response is to imagine a sexual scenario that she spins as illegal and/or perverse: ‘Did she let the girl into the secret, or leave her to find out when – The girl might have called the police!’<sup>35</sup> The ‘–’ and the omission of sexual details implied by this mark signals the possibility of a sexual scenario where Hubert would be revealed to have female sex organs during sexual intercourse. Albert’s assumption that this act might take place, ability to imagine it and fear that this act is illegal despite the fact that lesbianism was not then or ever a crime in Ireland, makes queer sexual energies central in this

moment. Throughout the novella, Albert returns again and again to wondering whether she should tell her new wife about her biological gender before or on the wedding night if she gets the chance to marry. Looking at marriages between women in a broader historical context, Judith Halberstam maintains:

...it is much easier to believe that women who cross-dressed and took wives had fully satisfying sexual relationships with these wives, and there is little or nothing to be gained from insisting that these relations were probably not sexual. Passing as a man and marrying a woman are fairly extensive forms of social subterfuge, and we must give credit to the women who participated in such impersonations – presumably they had compelling reasons for their cross-dressing and took much satisfaction in the results.<sup>36</sup>

In Adrian Frazier's treatment of celibacy within Moore's oeuvre, he argues that Moore's use of celibate meant 'unmarried persons' and did not necessarily imply a lack of sexual activity. Furthermore, Moore's 'interest in celibates was not so much in those people who get satisfaction from a member of the opposite sex, but in those who do not'.<sup>37</sup> This point implies that queer or even quare desires were central within Moore's work. Speaking for example of the publication of Moore's early volume of poetry *Flowers of Passion* in 1877, Mark Llewellyn observes that 'literary voices were united in their disgust toward Moore's blatant treatment of issues such as lesbianism, homosexuality, incest, necrophilia, and cunnilingus – to name just a few'.<sup>38</sup> Benmussa's insistent argument in favour of Nobbs's repressed heterosexuality ultimately does not square with Moore's treatment of 'celibate' sexuality in this novella and beyond.

Glenn Close's 2011 film, adapted by herself and John Banville, and directed by Rodrigo García, decisively centralizes the lesbian and queer undertones of Moore's novella. Close first came to the story of Nobbs through starring in the New York Off-Broadway production of Benmussa's adaptation in 1982, but it took almost 30 years and an investment of her own finances to bring her adaptation to the screen.<sup>39</sup> In writing about the challenges of getting the film made, Close notes: 'I knew that the movie would be sexy, maybe a different kind of sexy – except for Helen and Joe – but sexy nevertheless'.<sup>40</sup> This 'different kind of sexy' refers to the basic conceit of Close 'being dressed as a man' according to her account, but also the more explicitly queer themes of the film adaptation, as in Hubert's relationship with her wife. In the film, when Albert seeks out Hubert and her wife at home, their physical affection leaves no doubt that the relationship is sexual as they cuddle and kiss in front of Albert. When we subsequently learn that Hubert's wife has died of typhoid fever, leaving her devastated and in deep mourning, we are certain of their romantic attachment. After Albert suggests that they move in together and set up shop after Cathleen's death, Hubert tells her, 'she was my world'.<sup>41</sup>

The marriages in both 'Albert Nobbs' and *Ladies and Gentlemen* function as a strong counterweight to Benmussa's claim that marriage between women at this time indicated a community of interests and not necessarily a sexual adventure. Even if Albert's romantic stirrings cannot be verified in the original novella or adaptations of 'Albert Nobbs', Hubert's happy marriage with her unnamed wife who comes to life in the film and Annie and Ryanny's joyful union in Donoghue's play provide queer counter-narratives that subvert dominant social mores of nineteenth-century Ireland and America. These nineteenth-century quare appropriations of marriage shed light on Irish female erotohistories systematically obscured by official records that assume marriage to be a zone of unquestioned heteronormativity. Moore and Donoghue's

works provide literary and theatrical records of 19<sup>th</sup>-century quare Irish marriages that have been documented elsewhere in scholarly studies including Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*, Alison Oram's *Her Husband Was A Woman!: Women's Gender-Crossing in modern British popular culture* and Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* among others. Returning to the relative invisibility of queer Irish female histories, these works offer strategies for reading back through heteronormative Irish archives for traces of the quare desires and lives that such records both contain and obscure.

### **Stranger Than Fiction**

The end game of 'Albert Nobbs' and *Ladies and Gentlemen* remains marriage for all central characters: Albert wants to marry Helen, Hubert finds happiness through marriage at least for a time, and marriage is the realization of Annie and Ryanny's dreams until Ryanny's death from breast cancer. In fact, the notoriety of the historical Annie was brought to Donoghue's notice through a newspaper article that revealed her in mourning at the funeral of her wife, Annie Ryan. The title of the article is 'Stranger Than Fiction: The True Story of Annie Hindle's Two Marriages'.<sup>42</sup> Neither Annie's lesbian relationship nor her career as a male impersonator results in recognition or scandal; rather her ability to successfully enter into the institution of marriage with a woman as a woman is news. As Laurence Senelick reveals about the personal lives of performers like Annie at the height of her fame: 'in an age when public relations and press agency were still rudimentary, the private lives of such performers were not town topics'.<sup>43</sup> The revelation of Annie Hindle and Annie Ryan's marriage provides the sole occasion for the creation of an archival record of their relationship; otherwise, Ryan's passing and their relationship might have gone forever undocumented.

Donoghue presents marriage as Ryanny's idea because she refuses to have sexual contact outside of marriage due to her Catholic faith. Ryanny tells Annie, '... there are some things I know more about than you, and I know we should get married',<sup>44</sup> and, to further emphasise the centrality of her faith to her life, the first thing she is portrayed doing at the start of Act II post-marriage is returning from mass. Ryanny's Catholicism not only coexists with but in fact validates her lesbian marriage as she interprets the tenets of Catholicism as allowing marriage based on love rather than being determined by biological sex. She simply refuses to acknowledge the heteronormative imperatives of Catholic as well as civil marriage laws. Ryanny's relationship to religious practice and marriage is conservative and radical simultaneously: she conforms to the Catholic and legal institution of marriage but freely interprets law and religion to suit her own queer desires and love for Annie.

While *Ladies and Gentlemen* solely addresses the lives of Hindle and Ryan, the inhumane treatment of other sexually deviant young Irish women during this same time haunts their story. These ghosts include young women incarcerated by the Catholic Church and eventually the Irish state in Magdalene Laundries for out of wedlock pregnancies, prostitution, or suspected sexual improprieties from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to as late as 1996, when the last Laundry closed in Waterford.<sup>45</sup> Ryanny's journey remains inextricably tied up with these other young nameless women subsumed within the heteronormative and punitive structure of Irish Catholicism at that time. In fact, her passage to the United States was enabled through the support of the Little Sisters' religious order. She tells Annie: 'They said they'd ship me to New York at their own expense, if I joined the order in Dublin'.<sup>46</sup> While these other women are not explicitly referenced, the historical simultaneity of their stories with Annie and Ryanny's, as well



as Ryanny's near escape from a religious order and lifelong negotiation with Catholicism, suggests that these lifeworlds cannot be easily untangled from one another.

*Ladies and Gentlemen* could be read merely as the exceptional account of two individuals whose personal happiness can never outweigh the losses of a range of queer types of women caught within the regimes of Irish church and state that Ryanny manages to escape. But this reading misses the opportunity for their story to point towards other lives lived creatively that did not make it into the newspaper, other scenes of transgressive mourning that activate, in Freeman's words, 'residues of positive affect (idylls, utopias, memories of touch)' which make possible 'queer counter- (or para) historiographies'.<sup>47</sup> Fleshing out the bare archival bones of their marriage excavates a lost queer past in order to speak to a queer present that has still not adequately given voice to either Irish lesbian histories or histories of individuals trapped within church and state led institutions including the Magdalene Laundries and Reformatory and Industrial Schools for sexual or imagined transgressions. These overlapping histories of silence and erasure are represented by Ryanny's character and allow the queer and the lesbian to become visible through one another as lesbian women were not the only individuals rendered other and outside of the heteronormative structures of Irish church and state. When Freeman offers erotohistoriography as 'reparative criticism' she suggests that 'various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensation, produce forms of time consciousness – even historical consciousness – that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on'.<sup>48</sup> The joyful erotohistory of Annie and Ryanny's relationship provides a hopeful counternarrative to the material physical and emotional damage inflicted by these institutions because their story provides a testament to the survival and resourcefulness of queer lives even under dire circumstances.

Close's adaptation of 'Albert Nobbs' too concludes with the implication of a future queer wedding that defies the Irish Catholic Church by working within its very rules, just as Ryanny does. In the film, Helen becomes pregnant by Joe outside of marriage. During a physical altercation between Helen and Joe over their future, Albert intervenes and receives a head injury that leads to her death. As in the novella and Benmussa's adaptation, Hubert returns to Dublin after Albert's death, and learns of Albert's death and Helen's infant. Having confessed a crush on her to her wife and Albert earlier, she makes a beeline for her. Helen confides to her that she is being kept on without pay on the condition that she will not be turned in to the priest and have her son taken away from her. Hubert asks to hold the child, whom Helen has named Albert, and assures her: 'We can't let that happen, now can we?'<sup>49</sup> Hubert's smile holds queer implications – that she can offer Helen the protection of marriage, but maybe also passion, a quality that she demonstrates throughout the film (in contrast to Albert), and one that Helen visibly desires. While Helen does not know about Hubert's biological sex at this moment, an attraction is strongly implied. The baby Albert will stay with her mother and new father in a family unit capable of holding the surveillance of church and state at bay by means of their queer appropriation of heteronormativity.

### **Something of the Fairy In Her**

Close's film may appear to most decisively open up the quareness of 'Albert Nobbs' through her expanded treatment of Hubert's and her wife's characters and explicit foregrounding of queer sexualities. But perhaps I have travelled too far, for an imaginative quare Irish female historiographical approach also emerges within the last moments of Moore's own novella, preserving quare counter historiographies in the very moment at which the novella might seem to

erase them. In the final moments of the novella, Alec, the narrator's fictional interlocutor, tells the narrator that if Hubert were to return to her/his abandoned husband as a woman, she could easily get away with her activities in the lapsed years. Alec explains, 'In these parts ... a woman who left her husband and returned to him after fifteen years would say she was taken away by the fairies whilst wandering in a wood'.<sup>50</sup> When pressed by the narrator as to whether she would be believed, Alec reasons, 'A woman that marries another woman, and lives happily with her, isn't a natural woman; there must be something of the fairy in her'.<sup>51</sup> The 'fairy' here represents *both* an alibi that allows resumption of heteronormativity *and* the zone of an alternative queer reality.

Fairies, by the time Moore was writing in 1921, had an established association with both rural Irish heteronormativity and Irish queerness. In attempting to account for the grotesque death of Bridget Cleary who was burned to death in 1895 by her husband and relatives for being 'off with the fairies', Angela Bourke explains that fairies 'belong to the margins, and so can serve as reference points and metaphors for all that is marginal in human life'. It is fairies' 'underground existence' that 'allows them to stand for the unconscious, for the secret, or the unspeakable'; 'their constant eavesdropping explains the need sometimes to speak in riddles, or to avoid discussion of certain topics'.<sup>52</sup> If this article has been concerned with the invisible presence of Irish queer female histories, there is perhaps no better symbol than the Irish fairy for this historiographical predicament, and furthermore, Moore suggests that it is in the very realm of the fairy that queer Irish female histories reside.

Moore's symbolic inscription of the fairy resonates with Freeman's idea of residues of affect as the key to memories of lost or hidden queer idylls or utopias. When feminist theatre and performance criticism seized upon Benmussa's *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* in the 1980s,

scholars focused on Albert's physical sex at the expense of pursuing more nuanced and erotohistorically productive understandings of gender and its relation to desire and to the body. The emergence of lesbian, gay and queer performance criticism and the expansion of feminist work quickly followed these mid-1980s essays on Benmussa's *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* with Case and Dolan in fact leading the way. Nevertheless, these initial treatments of 'Albert Nobbs' matter because they signal not just a limited rereading of Moore's work, but also the continuing need for quare accounts of Irish female lives within not only Irish theatre and performance studies, but the field of Irish Studies at large. Giffney offers the 'quare' as a methodological approach that makes visible the active intersection of lesbian, queer and feminist approaches to theory and activism within an Irish context, and I would suggest that following the fairies through oral, literary and other histories will yield an even more extensive archive that reveals not a lack of quare Irish female erotohistories, but a multitude of quare lives lived hiding in plain sight. As Moore's text suggests, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (and, indeed, up to the queer present), queer Irish lives were lived in a delicate balance between punitive heteronormative structures and institutions and alternative zones of queer desire, but these lives survived and maybe even flourished, to become both repressed and preserved within the sign of the fairy and other metaphorical erotohistorigraphical 'archives'. It is by tracing these particular quare signifiers back through both the institutions that make up the church and the colonial/postcolonial state, and literary/cultural texts and archives, that a thorough account of quare Irish female histories as well as other erotohistories will continue to become possible.

## NOTES

1. Originally published in *A Storyteller's Holiday* and later as part of *Celibate Lives* in 1927, see Adrian Frazier, 'Albert Nobbs and Company: Introduction to an Unpublished Reprint of *Celibate Lives*', in *George Moore: Dublin, Paris, Hollywood*, ed. by Adrian Frazier and Conor Montague (Dublin; Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2012), pp.194-195. This essay will also analyze two later adaptations of Moore's novella, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* by French feminist playwright Simone Benussa in 1977, and then as the 2011 film, *Albert Nobbs*, adapted by and starring Glenn Close.
2. For a lengthy account of Hindle's career, see Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp.329-331.
3. See Mária Kurdi, 'Lesbian Versions of the Female Biography Play: Emma Donoghue's *I Know My Own Heart* and *Ladies and Gentlemen*', in *Deviant Acts: Essays on Queer Performance*, ed. by David Cregan, (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), p.39.
4. Noreen Giffney, 'Quare Theory', in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, ed. by Wanda Balzano, Anne Mulhall, and Moynagh Sullivan (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.198.
5. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.120.
6. I use female pronouns for Albert here and throughout as these were used in Moore's original novella.
7. Simone Benmussa, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, trans. by Barbara Wright (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2012), p.2.

8. Anna Clark, 'Twilight Moments', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14. 1 & 2 (April 2005), p.140.
9. Freeman, p.120.
10. In terms of the Irish stage life of *Albert Nobbs*, Mary Elizabeth Burke Kennedy also presented her own adaptation of *Albert Nobbs* in the 1980s with her feminist theatre company, Raised Eyebrow, in Dublin but no original script exists while Simone Benmussa herself mounted *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* for Druid Theatre in 1996. However, a full excavation of that particular production lies outside the scope of this article. See 'The Many Lives of Albert Nobbs'. <http://nuigarchives.blogspot.ie/2012/05/many-lives-of-albert-nobbs.html>, accessed 3 December 2012.
11. Fintan Walsh, 'Introduction: The Flaming Archive' *Queer Notions: New Plays and Performance from Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), pp.6-7.
12. See Louise O'Shea, 'Sapphic Stages: Irish Lesbian Theatre', *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies* 5.1 & 2 (2003), 101-110; Steve Wilmer, 'Women's Theatre in Ireland', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7 (1991), p.358; Mária Kurdi, 'Lesbian Versions of the Female Biography Play: Emma Donoghue's *I Know My Own Heart* and *Ladies and Gentlemen*', in *Deviant Acts: Essays on Queer Performance*, ed. by David Cregan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), pp.37-54.
13. See Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, <http://www.gaytheatre.ie>, accessed 13 October 2012; Absolut Dublin Gay Theatre Festival 2010, <http://www.absolutgaytheatre.ie>, accessed 13 October 2012.
14. See E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies or (Almost) Everything I Needed to Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother", *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001), 1-25.

15. Giffney, p.198.
16. Johnson, p. 3.
17. Johnson, p.2.
18. Giffney, p.198.
19. Jill Dolan, 'Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 2 (1985), p.10.
20. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), p.519.
21. Elin Diamond, 'Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras', *Theatre Journal*, 37.3 (October 1985), p.279.
22. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), p.105.
23. Case, p.22.
24. Case, p.23.
25. Sharon Ammen, 'Transforming George Moore: Simone Benmussa's Adaptive Art in *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 11 (1991), p.308.
26. Benmussa, p.50.
27. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1994), p.xxiii.
28. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (North Melbourne: Spinefex Press, 1993), p.129.
29. Benmussa, p.vi.
30. Benmussa, p.viii.

31. Ammen, p.309.
32. Benmussa, p. v.
33. Benmussa, p.v-vi.
34. George Moore, 'Albert Nobbs', *Celibate Lives* (London: Chatto and Wintus Ltd., 1968), p.59.
35. Moore, p.63.
36. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p.55.
37. Frazier, p.187.
38. Frank Lllewellynn, 'Pagan Moore': Poetry, Painting, and Passive Masculinity in George Moore's *Flowers of Passion* (1877) and *Pagan Poems* (1881)', *Victorian Poetry*, 45.1 (Spring 2007), p.80.
39. David Rooney, 'The Heart That Beats In *Albert Nobbs*', <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/movies/glenn-close-as-a-man-in-albert-nobbs.html>, accessed 29 November 2012.
40. Glenn Close, 'On *Albert Nobbs*', in Frazier and Montague, *George Moore*, p.199.
41. *Albert Nobbs*, dir. Rodrigo García, Chrysalis Films (2011).
42. Cited in Donoghue, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, p.104.
43. Senelick, *The Changing Room*, pp.331-332.
44. Senelick, p.57.
45. See Rebecca Lea McCarthy, *Origins of the Magdalene Laundries: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010); James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).



46. Donoghue, p.74.
47. Freeman, p.120.
48. Freeman, p.120
49. *Albert Nobbs*, dir. Rodrigo García.
50. Moore, p.96.
51. Moore, p.96.
52. Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.28.