

## Centrifugal Fires

### Consuming Desires and the Performative Female Subject in Karin Michaelis's *The Dangerous Age*

Madeleine Wood, Brunel University

Despite the 'sensational' status of Karin Michaelis's *The Dangerous Age* at the time of its original publication in 1910, English-language criticism of the novel is still problematically scarce, and the radicalism of Michaelis's psychological vision remains unexplored. This essay will create a dialogue between *The Dangerous Age*, Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and Judith Butler's seminal work, *Bodies That Matter*, arguing through this dialogue that Michaelis self-consciously negotiates constructivist and essentialist concepts of gender. The essay will examine the narratological, psychological and physical modalities of performance, concluding with an analysis of desire, creativity and sublimation. The image of widow sacrifice recurs throughout the novel as the social and psychological symbol of women's gendered subordination; however, by refiguring the theme of 'sacrifice' through Jeanne, Michaelis simultaneously uses the idea of sacrifice to reassert the potency of female desire and speech.

*The Dangerous Age* plays with the possibilities of subjective dissolution by presenting us with a heroine and narrator at the brink of a bodily crisis: the menopause. Looked at through a patriarchal lens, the menopause is the point at which the female body stops performing its 'proper' reproductive function. Exploiting this view, Michaelis uses the 'crisis' of the menopause to reflect upon patriarchy as a whole.

*Keywords:* Karin Michaelis, modernism, gender studies, psychoanalysis, comparative literature.

*The Dangerous Age* was a sensation when published in Denmark 1910; immediately translated into German, English and French ('All heroines not youthful', *New York Times*, 1911), the novel established Karin Michaelis as a modernist author of international stature. In the introduction to

his French translation Marcel Prévost wrote, ‘in all the countries of Central Europe the most widely read novel at the present moment is *The Dangerous Age*. Edition succeeds edition’ (Prévost 1911, 4). Michaelis was a key member of a new generation of women writers at the turn of the century (Stecher-Hansen 1999, xvi) and *The New York Times*’s notice of *Elsie Lindtner* clearly established Michaelis’s modernist credentials: ‘Those who cling to traditional definitions will be reluctant to describe “Elsie Lindtner” as a novel. It begins nowhere, ends nowhere, and in that respect is most lifelike, for life neither begins nor ends, but merely goes on’ (‘Elsie Lindtner: A sad heroine’, *New York Times*, 1911). However, despite the ‘sensational’ status of the novel at the time of its original publication, and the valuable critical contribution made by Phyllis Lassner, English-language criticism of the novel is still problematically scarce. In analysing the novel in translation, I take the novel’s global popularity and Karin Michaelis’s status as an international author as the launch point for my discussion, following David Damrosch’s premise that ‘world literature [encompasses] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language’ (Damrosch 2003, 4). In creating this analysis I seek to readdress the novel’s current international obscurity. My argument works on the basis that despite the fact that ‘the novel constantly draws attention to definitions of and distinctions between “sex” and “gender”’ (Lassner 1991, 11), Michaelis’s psychological vision in relation to twentieth- and twenty-first-century gender theory remains unexplored in English-language criticism. Lassner repeatedly indicates the novel’s relevance to such an enquiry. In her foreword to the 1991 reprint of the novel, she places the novel in the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction arguing that ‘*The Dangerous Age* is remarkable in exposing the prevailing narratives of female sexual identity as oppressive to women’ (p. 2). In ‘Women’s midlife and the crisis of writing’ she adds that Michaelis ‘followed [without necessarily approving] Freud’s theories of the psychosexual determination of character’ (Lassner 1999, 287). I work from a strictly dialogic principle: psychoanalytic and gender theory are not employed in order to ‘diagnose’ Michaelis or Elsie, but in order to indicate the text’s own rigorous engagement with concepts of gender and subjectivity. This engagement is focalised through Elsie as protagonist and narrator, but it is also the underpinning for the text’s disjointed structure. In her letters and diary

Elsie scrutinises forms of patriarchal oppression; however, the diary also shows (rather than tells) how such oppression may be internalised. Examining the novel through a psychoanalytic or philosophical lens does not necessarily place it into an ahistorical hermetic: Freud provided the theoretical inspiration for Michaelis's engagement with psychology, and twentieth-century theories of gender and sexuality. Further, much of modernist writing (in European and global perspectives) exploits the idea that first-person narration is disrupted and symptomatic. Freud discusses this concept at length in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (or 'Dora's case'). In the 'Clinical picture' Freud argues that in addition to their somatic symptoms, hysterics suffer from a narratological ailment meaning 'communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled and riddles unanswered' (Freud 2001a, 16). This idea can be directly related to narrative techniques employed in a plethora of modernist texts including *The Dangerous Age*, Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902 [1899]), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and Katherine Mansfield's short stories (1912–1923). Despite the plural forms of modernism and psychoanalysis, both explore the self as alienated or internally split. *The Dangerous Age* draws together ideas of subjectivity and narratology, posing the question of how selfhood is created in and through writing.

Reading *The Dangerous Age* through a theoretical lens refracts back onto our understanding of the theory itself: the novel consistently illustrates the impossibility of maintaining the binary opposition between constructivist and essentialist accounts of gender. *The Dangerous Age* does not represent female gender as 'voluntary' theatrical performance, nor indeed simply as a biological inevitability. This latter argument works against the thrust of Beverley Eddy's article, 'The Dangerous Age: Karin Michaelis and the politics of menopause', which argues that Michaelis presents a now outdated idea of the menopause, irretrievably tainted by notions of pathology (Eddy 1992, 502). In fact, Michaelis shows (through the menopausal theme) how the two forms of gender construction are mutually implicated. We cannot conceptualise gender without considering how the body presents a demand, which we are compelled to respond to both consciously and unconsciously. As Judith Butler argues throughout *Bodies That Matter*, performance must be understood in terms of both personal agency and unconscious forces (Butler 1993). Elsie's account of

her childhood presents us with a similar model: writing to Joergen Malthe, she confesses that her love of money and her narcissistic sense of self were created through a sequence of intrusive traumatic moments. This emphasis on childhood's formative power can be linked to Michaelis's own political stance: as Lassner writes, 'although she did not campaign for women's rights, Michaelis felt that women's independence could be fostered early by the parents' (Lassner 1991, 10). By stressing the novel's traumatic echoes, my analysis counters Lassner's argument that Michaelis's novel charts Elsie's coherent process of self-discovery (Lassner 1989, 22).

While Elsie Lindtner undoubtedly presents the reader with far-reaching social comment, her writing is also symptomatic. The structure, split between Elsie's letters and her diary, allows differing voices to emerge. Elsie's letters are analytic, self-assured, ironic and playful; her diary is alternately reflective, uncertain, hypersensitive, contradictory, pained and sensual. The fragmented narration prevents us from reading the novel in simple teleological terms. Michaelis's modernist techniques undermine the sense that Elsie's story is a *Bildungsroman*: we end – where we began – in flight, as Elsie plans to leave the white villa. *The Dangerous Age* plays with the possibilities of subjective dissolution by presenting us with a heroine and narrator at the brink of a bodily crisis: the menopause – ironically described as 'a pause while you reconsider men' in Margaret Atwood's short story 'Weight' (Atwood 1992, 179). Like Atwood, Michaelis exploits the fictive possibilities opened up by such a focus. Narrative is figured in terms of desire: female confession becomes eroticised, and Elsie's status as author is a key concern throughout.

The trajectory of the essay is as follows: part I presents the critical perspectives that underpin my reading of the novel, and how they intersect with the socio-historical conditions of the novel's production. While the argument as a whole works from a dialogic principle, in order to establish this dialogue it is necessary first to return to the relevant theories. From part II onwards I read the novel in detail: 'Call and response' examines Elsie's fragmented narrative in terms of performativity and the unconscious; part III, 'Bodily acts', examines the confession to Malthe, and its embedded childhood recollections through a notion of trauma; part IV, 'Centrifugal fires', analyses narrative and sublimation through the novel's recurring images of sacrifice and burning.

### I. Critical perspectives

Michaelis's concern with the relation between female subjectivity and sexuality (both in the novel and in her wider work) can be directly related to the emergence of sexual taxonomies, psychoanalysis and the 'New Woman' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Sally Ledger argues, the New Woman was both 'a product of discourse' and a lived reality (Ledger 1997, 3): testament to the 'crisis in gender relations at the *fin de siècle*' (p. 4). If, as Ledger argues, 'written texts are just as much 'events' as petitions to parliament' (p. 3) then *The Dangerous Age* must be seen as a radical intervention into the discourses surrounding femininity. Elsie is emphatically critical of the enclosure of women within patriarchy – as Lassner notes (1991, 2) – but her rebellion is not politicised, and her story is notably lacking in the kind of active social engagement that characterised Michaelis's own life (see p. 9). Her rebellion, as far as we can read it in those terms, is narratological as it is concerned with a contest over the means of representation. Reflecting on herself in autumn Elsie writes:

if I had more sensibility, and a little more imagination [...] I think I should turn my attention to literature. Women like to wade in their memories as one wades through dry leaves in autumn. I believe I should be very clever in opening a series of whited sepulchres, and, without betraying any personalities, I should collect my exhumed mummies under the general title of, 'Woman at the Dangerous Age'. (Michaelis 1911, 53)

This metafictional detail indicates that Elsie – as author – is both agent and subject of this wider enquiry. As Lassner argues, *The Dangerous Age* is a significant moment in the history of women's writing; however, despite this she overstates the novel's rupture with past literatures. To claim that previous fiction had reduced female 'characterization' itself to 'courtship, marriage and motherhood' (Lassner 1991, 2) neglects the significance of protagonists such as Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke (to name only two) who explicitly search beyond conventional female plots (Brontë 2008 and Eliot 2008). Emma Woodhouse can also be seen as an early rebel, who attempts to appropriate the authorial privileges of matchmaking for herself (Austen 2008). Michaelis's novel therefore can (and should) be grounded by nineteenth-century women's writing, as well as placed within the context of European modernist movements.<sup>1</sup>

Elsie enters into a self-conscious dialogue with notions of gender; at the same time, the novel as a whole reframes the issue *through* Elsie. As

Lassner shows, Michaelis was undoubtedly familiar with Freud's theories; however, where Lassner argues that Freud's sexual theories are inherently constraining and oppressive for women, I argue that Michaelis appropriates and reformulates the radical potential within Freudian thought. Despite Freud's formulation of the 'oral', 'anal', 'phallic' and 'genital' as phases in his later revisions to the *Three Essays on Sexuality* (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 35), time after time Freud negated a simplistic biological view of sexuality and sexual identity. Lassner's claim therefore that for Freud 'woman's anatomy was her destiny' (Lassner 1991, 1) is a simplification (and could – after all – be equally applied to men). Importantly, the first edition of the *Three Essays* (1905) emphasises autoeroticism and perversity, not anatomy. Throughout his theories and case histories, Freud argued that complex processes of symbolism, psychical displacement, trauma and seduction, engender us – men *and* women – as desiring subjects. Even castration – the *bête noire* of psychoanalytic feminism – is far more complicated than Lassner implies. As the analysis of Little Hans indicates, for Freud the castration complex could only be understood in relation to psychological processes such as narcissism and phantasy (Freud 2001b). The point is, then, not that certain body parts carry inherent and timeless meaning, but rather how children take on sexual identity in relation to their own (and the other's) body. This issue, debated at the time of the novel's production, lies at the heart of Elsie's confession. With that said, identifying any single narrative of gender or sexuality in Freud's writings is of course problematic, as different theoretical strands co-exist within the body of his work; we can, however, read across certain key moments. The *Three Essays* is a crucial text for conceptualising the relationship between the physical, the sexual and the psychological that most concerns us here. In the *Three Essays* Freud formulates the 'drive' (*Trieb*)<sup>2</sup> as an internal force that psychically invests parts of the child's body as 'erotogenic zones' (Freud 2001e, 182). As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis clarify, the drive is a force that lies on the 'frontier' between the mental and the physical. Freud suggests that an *external* 'source' of excitation is internalised and functions as a provocateur, determining the drive, and therefore both object choice and sexual 'aim' (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 215).<sup>3</sup>

The idea that the subject internalises an external event or excitation, which subsequently determines both physical and psychological

functioning, is the focus for my own theoretical dialogue. This Freudian notion can be linked to Butler's discursive notion of performativity in *Bodies That Matter*, and to Laplanche's reimagining of Freudian trauma in his 'general theory of seduction'. Interestingly, despite its relevance to her project, Butler does not discuss the *Three Essays* in *Bodies That Matter*, and instead uses Freud's later essay, 'On narcissism: An introduction' (1914), to discuss the emergence of an 'embodied' ego. 'On narcissism' posits the subject's psychical investment in their ego as the primary moment, suggesting a shifting motion between internal–external–internal object investments. This differs from the primacy accorded to external excitation in the first version of *Three Essays* (Freud 2001d). Looking at these two texts together, we see Freud's continuing (if uncertain) concern with identifying the dynamic of the drive, and the processes of psychical investment that simultaneously inform sexual object choice *and* formulate the 'ego' itself.

Importantly, Freud's manoeuvres indicate the theoretical difficulties underlying subsequent theories of gender: namely, how to conceptualise the relationship between body, subjectivity and society, and how to position gender within, or through, this relationship. In her early work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* Butler analyses gender in terms of a reiterated social performance, explicitly countering essentialist accounts of gender and sexuality (Butler 2006). However, in her introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, she discusses the theoretical difficulty of thinking about gender in relation to a binary conflict between constructivist and essentialist accounts. This discussion openly addresses the problems implicit in *Gender Trouble* (1990), which tended towards a reduction of the body to a 'gendered stylisation' (Butler 2006, xiv), untempered by the necessary sense of the body as material excess, central to *Bodies That Matter*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick likewise addresses the problem of constructivist and essentialist accounts of gender in *Epistemology of the Closet*. For Sedgwick, as for the Butler of *Bodies That Matter*, this binary becomes theoretically unusable, as it is irrevocably problematised by the notion that in a constructivist model we could 'choose' our sexuality, or indeed our gender (Butler 1993, 9; Sedgwick 2008, 40–41). Both theorists argue that this idea of voluntariness is just as problematic and dangerous as the essentialist idea that gender could be identical to biological 'sex'. As Butler herself acknowledges in the preface

to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (1999), in her early work she failed to create a consistent model of how performativity could operate in relation to our internal psychological spaces (Butler 2006, xvi). She writes that following the publication of *Gender Trouble* ‘I [...] also made use of psychoanalysis to curb the occasional voluntarism of my view of performativity without thereby undermining a more general theory of agency’ (p. xxvi). As this quote implies, psychoanalysis does not destroy the concept of an active agent, or a self striving for coherence, but shows how this ‘self’ is haunted by an internal other: the unconscious.<sup>4</sup> The manner in which the external other provokes the *internal* other is a key concern for Butler, as indeed it is for *The Dangerous Age*.

In *The Dangerous Age*, Michaelis plays with a comparable notion of psychical dynamism: the novel questions what comes from within and what comes from without. As in Freud’s body of work, both possibilities are sustained. While Elsie’s childhood history represents the traumatic internalisation of adult desire and discourse, Elsie’s own theory of feminine desire (‘the centrifugal fires’ at the heart of the self) potentially offers us a prototype for Freud’s theory of narcissism, in which investment in the self is the primary moment. As we shall see in part III, the idea of ‘internalisation’ is brought to a crisis point in Elsie’s unsent confession to Joergen Malthe, in which Elsie reveals how her gendered subjectivity was produced in response to an external address. For both Michaelis and Butler subjectivity can *only* be understood in relation to the body: ‘the subject, the speaking “I” is formed by virtue of having gone through a process of assuming a sex’ (Butler 1993, 3). However, Elsie’s childhood can also productively be read in terms of trauma. In *Studies on Hysteria* (co-authored with Josef Breuer [1895]), Freud formulates the ‘primal scene’ as the originary moment in a trauma: the repression of this scene produces a proliferation of auxiliary scenes. The temporal and symbolic relation between these ‘scenes’ creates the hysterical symptom (Breuer & Freud 2001, 106–124). Importantly, for Freud, a trauma could not exist as an isolated event: a trauma is always a *post*-traumatic disorder. The initial scene is rendered traumatic precisely because it is not felt as such at the time. Laplanche uses the temporal frame of trauma as the basis for his ‘general theory of seduction’. This model of adult–child relations posits the transmission of the adult’s unconscious desire – the ‘compromised message’ – as the formative moment in the development of infant

subjectivity and the unconscious (see Fletcher 1999, 32). This primary moment of transmission is analogous to Freud's conceptualisation of the primal scene in *Studies on Hysteria*. I argue that the concept of the 'compromised message' can refract back onto our understanding of performativity: instead of emphasising the legal or punitive affect of *discourse*, the 'compromised message' involves what is not said, or indeed, not even meant consciously. Laplanche's 'general theory of seduction' helpfully mediates Butler's concept of discourse: for Laplanche, what is repressed and excluded from parental dialogue exerts the decisive influence upon the child's psychological development. In part III, I read Elsie's father's gift, and his silence, in terms of the 'compromised message'.

Reading across text and theory, Michaelis's novel can foreground the central issues within Freudian and post-Freudian accounts of gender. Her textual enterprise did not reflect, but self-consciously intervened in, the fields of sexology, feminism and psychoanalysis. Reflecting on this context, Michaelis's use of a menopausal narrator emerges as a powerful tool. Working on the premise that gender categorisation can only be theorised in relation to its necessary and inevitable subversion, Michaelis's representation of Elsie's voice as alternately authoritative *and* abject becomes even more interesting. In *Masculinity, Gender and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric*, Catherine Bates analyses the male poetic speaker's self-consciously abject positioning towards his beloved. Bates reads this abjection as a textual strategy, as well as a psychological demonstration: 'subordination' is read as 'insubordination' (Bates 2010, 5). Appropriating this idea in relation to *The Dangerous Age*, we see that the different tones of voice, and the varying narrative modes, undermine the solidity of gendered categories, while prioritising the relationship between gender and subjectivity.

## II. Call and response

*The Dangerous Age* plays with differing notions of performance, and at points Elsie simply appears as the consummate actress, self-consciously presenting her *coup de théâtre* to a dwindling audience. This is complicated by the novel's structure, which moves between Elsie's letters and her diary. We are granted access to Elsie's social and private selves. However, Elsie's agency is further displaced throughout the novel as she offers herself

different versions of the 'truth'. Her interiority is a theatrical space where she compulsively performs (for) herself: subjectivity is enacted in the public sphere and in the private theatre of the mind. Like Butler, Michaelis shows that 'performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self presentation, nor can it simply be equated with performance' (Butler 1993, 95). This psychological model is complicated by the fact that Elsie's interiority is enacted in writing: Michaelis hints at the problems and possibilities of authorship as Elsie's voice veers between dominant and abject positions.

The question of how we can give an accurate representation of ourselves to others in the light of our fundamentally alienated state of being is a key concern for *The Dangerous Age*. The question of accountability lies at the heart of Elsie Lindtner's story. The novel begins in the aftermath of the event. Elsie has divorced her husband and set up home on a remote island in a newly built white villa. The narrative opens with a series of letters, written by Elsie from her island retreat to the various people she has left behind: her 'dear Lillie', her 'dear, kind friend, and former husband', and finally her 'dear Malthe' (Michaelis 1911, 10–17). Cousin, ex-husband and potential lover are addressed in sequence. Each letter gives a different account of her departure from her husband and home. To Lillie she jokes seriously that she has been possessed with 'an absurd fancy', 'impossible fancy' or 'hysteria' to 'get right away from everybody and everything' (p. 11). To Richard, she claims that she was 'unsuited to matrimony' (p. 14). To her young admirer, Joergen Malthe, she frames herself as an enigma, and therefore retains her unspoken right to provoke his interest and desire: 'Call it madness, or what you will, but I cannot allow any human being to penetrate my inner life' (p. 16). She signs her name differently in each of the opening letters; to her ex-husband she simply writes her Christian name 'Elsie'; to Malthe she provocatively writes 'Your Elsie Lindtner'. Through the letters Elsie self-consciously attempts to control the world (and men) that she has left. She reinscribes herself in social space.

The letters' efficiency in controlling the world is immediately called into question when the narrative moves into Elsie's diary, which presents us with the capitalised phrase: 'LANDED ON MY ISLAND/CREPT INTO MY LAIR'. This is followed by a bathetic complaint: 'everything here disgusts me [...] I feel lonely and without will power' (Michaelis 1911, 17–18). The disparity between what Elsie writes to others and what she writes to herself implies that human relationships are inherently partial and

flawed. However, this symptomatic reading of her voice is complicated by the letters' self-conscious intervention into gender discourses. Michaelis's structuring is thus able to achieve two things. On the one hand, the letters and diaries perform different narrative functions, and therefore represent plural female experiences; on the other, read together, they imply Elsie's difficulty in taking ownership of her own voice. The disjunctions created between the letters and the diary imply that there is no essential self to which Elsie can turn to with security, or which can be found in writing. Her diary attempts to present a confident process of self-reflection, but this process is always fragile and brittle: a hollow shell of consciousness. She is a 'slave' (p. 33) to unbidden thought:

What am I doing here? What do I want here? To cry, without having to give an account of one's tears to anyone?

Of course, all this is only the result of the rain. I was longing to be here. It was not a mere hysterical whim. No, no ...

It was my own wish to bury myself here. (p. 18)

Michaelis's representation of Elsie's 'private' voice in the diary strikes a chord with Freud's comments in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* regarding the hysteric's inability – or unconscious refusal – to construct coherent personal testimony. Elsie seems unable or unwilling to explain herself, until she writes the revelatory confession to Malthe at the end of the novel (crucially never sent). Michaelis undoubtedly exploited the potential of the hysteric voice self-consciously; in her lecture tour of Germany she commented that 'a lot of what is written in the diary by this lady ... is hysterical and overwrought tommyrot' (quoted in Madsen 2007, 360). The voice of the hysteric woman therefore becomes a radical modernist device, undercutting the possibility of 'realist' narrative. Elsie's 'overwrought' writing is apparent in the diary, moving between empirical analyses, to the representation of a hyperreal and persecutory present. Torp's fingernails become a source of both anxiety and annoyance, as Elsie describes their 'fashionable pyramidal shape' as 'tragic' (Michaelis 1911, 21). Time is slowed down, elongated, as if it is girding itself for an attack: 'I sit here waiting for my mortal enemy. Will he come gliding in imperceptibly or stand suddenly before me? Will he overcome me, or shall I prove the stronger? I am prepared – but is that sufficient?' (p. 21). In her article,

'*The Dangerous Age* and the politics of the menopause', Eddy interprets this enemy as the menopause itself (Eddy 1992, 493); however, whilst this meaning is undoubtedly present, Elsie's language suggests not only a physical problem, but also a philosophical one. Time appears as a masculine adversary, a predator who disrupts Elsie's attempts to create a coherent sense of self through her writing.

Elsie offers us a philosophical thesis, based upon that idea that 'the human being dwells and lives alone [...] And as each star runs its eternal course through space, isolated amid countless myriads of other stars, so each woman goes her solitary way through life' (Michaelis 1911, 25). In this model, the failed relations between men and women are indicative of our more general isolated condition. Despite this, and the concomitant failure of communication, Elsie persistently inscribes herself within specifically female networks in her diary. She contemplates a series of other middle-aged women, who act as reflective and refractive surfaces for her own self. Female writing therefore becomes a means through which social bonds can be reconfigured. In an extended excursus following the reported suicide of Agatha Ussing in a 'lunatic asylum' (p. 22), Elsie writes about the nature of female friendship and the possibilities for frank and open communication:

No woman speaks aloud, but most women smile aloud. And the fact that in so doing we unveil all our artifice, all the whirlpool of our inmost being to each other, proves the extraordinary solidarity of our sex.

When did one woman ever betray another?

This loyalty is not rooted in noble sentiment, but proceeds rather from the fear of betraying ourselves by revealing things that are the secret property of all womanhood. (p. 26)

For Elsie, 'all feminine confessions [...] assume a kind of beauty' (p. 27). Remembering a summer party on 'a day of oppressive heat and the heavy perfume of roses' (p. 27), there is a sense of a mutual seduction as the women are 'caught in their own snares' and reveal their fraudulence to one another. Elsie claims that the female self is based on 'physical [...] qualities' (p. 25) and the material reality of sensuous and sensual experience: 'We laugh, talk and act at the caprice of purely external circumstances' (p. 25). Looking back, Elsie remembers that each woman confessed that 'Not one'

of them 'ever cried because of some imperative inward need. Tears are nature's gift to us. It is our own affair whether we squander or economise their use' (p. 28). What is particularly striking about Elsie's description of this claustrophobic summer party is how the confessions become the means through which desire circulates amongst the women: caught in their own erotic 'snares', the female confessional becomes unwitting flirtation. I return to the radical potential the novel accords to the female voice in part IV, in which I analyse the relationship between Elsie and Jeanne. It is, however, important to note that despite her feminised aesthetic, Elsie never confesses anything to other women herself, and it is only with Malthe that she feels the need finally to give an account of herself.

Elsie views herself as a performer. The opening letter to Lillie resonates with the language of theatrics. Elsie describes her final garden party as a 'kind of "farewell performance"' (Michaelis 1911, 11), and offers up a vision of herself as a kind of social mannequin. Anticipating Lillie's question as to what she will 'do with' herself alone on the island, she writes, 'Well, dear Lillie, I have not left my frocks nor my mirror behind me' (p. 13). She envisions herself as both a graceful actress upon an empty stage, and as an admiring voyeur of her own performance. Feminine identity emerges in this context as a masquerade, or 'drag', an ironic taking-on of gender. However, Elsie's comfortable conviction that she herself controls her gendered performance of self is brutally undercut. In her initial renunciation, Elsie has been unable to accept in advance that she will not have an audience present to validate her performance; in her diary she writes that she is 'horrified at the quantity' of clothes she brought to the island: 'They are of no use or pleasure now' (p. 18). Elsie writes later that 'just as one arranges the scenery for a *tableau vivant*, I prepared my "living grave" in this house' (p. 49). Elsie retains the props for her feminine performance – her clothes and her mirror – but these swiftly become a source of acute anxiety when divorced from their social, gendered, context. Despite the physical absence of men in the white villa – a gardener is introduced later but is the cause of an almost pathological anxiety (Michaelis 1911, 59) – male figures are structurally present throughout as objects of fear or longing. Importantly, the novel does not endorse Elsie's analyses of gendered relations wholeheartedly. Elsie categorically fails to interpret the two men in her life correctly, and her theory of subjective isolation is painfully enacted in her own life. As Eddy points out, Michaelis

undoubtedly believed that the menopause was a debilitating period in a woman's life (Eddy 1992, 501). Significantly, however, it is Elsie's debilitation (her inability to continue living in a society that repels her) that enables the novel's anatomisation of women's place within early twentieth-century society. In Freudian terms, the hysteric may indeed 'act out', but they act out a psychological truth.

### *III. Bodily acts*

The island retreat, the white villa, becomes an externalisation of Elsie's own being: her shell. It is, however, a masculine production, built using the legacy Elsie received from her elderly admirer Von Brincken, and designed by Joergen Malthe. Malthe's artistic gaze frames Elsie's retreat, and her negated desire for Malthe is therefore inscribed within the fabric of the building itself – as is Von Brincken's formative role in Elsie's development. As the details surrounding the construction of the white villa imply, the external other is internalised: an intrusive and persistent presence. As we see in Elsie's final confession to Malthe, *The Dangerous Age* explicitly posits the address of the other as the formative moment in the construction of gendered subjectivity. The confession to Malthe is unique, as it is here that the question of child development is foregrounded. Elsie presents her own 'case history', (psycho-) analysing the formative impact of her childhood. However, what she elides, or passes over, remains provocative. Elsie is both subject and analyst of her own history. By presenting the reader with Elsie's 'case' Michaelis encourages the reader to think about gender in terms of psychological and childhood experience. Further, Michaelis exploits this textual mode, not only to reinforce the novel's engagement with contemporary ideas of psychology and gender, but also to question implicitly the status of autobiography. The issue of who speaks and who listens is of concern throughout the novel, and in this context it is critical that the confession remains unsent. Throughout her non-relationship with Joergen, Elsie attempts to retain authorial authority: she fiercely protects her right to define the parameters of their knowledge and desire.

Reading Elsie's 'case' in relation to the theoretical discourses outlined previously, we can interpret her childhood in terms of both trauma and performativity. It is defined by two significant losses, which (by her own account) initiate her subjectivity and a process of compulsive repetition.

We are told at the beginning of Elsie's unsent letter that when she was a young girl, her 'widower' father lost both his fortune and reputation (Michaelis 1911, 72). The absence of the mother is entirely silenced by Elsie, but is nevertheless undoubtedly significant in a novel that deals so explicitly with women and the power of the female voice. As a consequence of her mother's death, Elsie is left to the mercy of her nursemaid, who, as we shall see shortly, provided her with a dubious, and decisive, sexual education.<sup>5</sup> In Freudian terms, we can posit the death of Elsie's mother as the repressed primal scene: the scene (itself not represented and suppressed from the narrative) provides the psychological and narratological dynamism for what follows. In the wake of her doubled loss, Elsie's identification with her father's financial catastrophe becomes compulsively (and in her confession is self-consciously recognised as) neurotic. Her response to the loss of her fortune is melancholic, as she belatedly attempts to protect the beloved object – the money – from harm. Money takes the place of familial love. The child Elsie compulsively attempts to make reparation for her losses by catching hold of something tangible, and money becomes fetishised in her imagination: 'I sometimes buried a coin that had been given me – as a dog buries his bone' (p. 72). As a result of the mother's absence, the maid becomes the formative figure in Elsie's childhood development. Whilst Elsie had (crucially under the maid's guidance) already learned to value money, she tells Joergen that it was at school that she first realised that she could occupy a profitable place within a socio-economic structure:

I was sent to school. A classmate said to me one day:

'Of course a prince will marry you, for you are the prettiest girl here.'

I carried the words home to the maid, who nodded her approval.

'That's true enough,' she said. 'A pretty face is worth a pocketful of gold.'

'Can one sell a pretty face, then?' I asked.

'Yes, child, to the highest bidder,' she replied, laughing. (p. 73)

Elsie's desire to be an object of desire within a financial economy is created by the classmate's adoration, and the maid's confirmation, and she writes that 'From that moment I entered upon the accursed cult of my person which absorbed the rest of my childhood and all my first youth [...] the

thought of money was like a poison operating in my blood' (p. 73). In Freudian terms, the maid's dubious words operate as the secondary scene in a trauma (following the primal loss of the mother, and the concurrent loss of the father's money); however, it can also be read productively in terms of Butler's concept of performativity. As this episode shows, Elsie's status as a gendered subject is a response to an external address. She 'carries' her classmate's words home like a delicate, precious, *objet d'art*: the words are alien, requiring further validation before they can be taken in and digested. The classmate's adoring words occlude social narrative within fairy tale, whereas the maid reiterates the basic point. She strips the fairy tale leaving a brutal fact: women act as prostitutes in the marriage economy. The mode of the maid's interpellation has striking similarities with Butler's theory of performativity, extrapolated in *Bodies That Matter*. Butler defines performative acts as follows:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power [...]. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse. (Butler 1993, 225)

Butler appropriates Louis Althusser's hypothesis that the subject is 'socially constituted' by the 'call or address' of the police (p. 121). However, throughout *Bodies That Matter*, Butler emphasises the excessive quality of this 'call', arguing that 'the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law' (p. 122). The maid complicates her meaning as she laughingly addresses the child: the laugh destabilises the message, and propels an unanswerable enigma towards the listening child. To the adult Elsie the 'contemptible comedy' (Michaelis 1911, 76) of gendered relations is all too apparent: she retrospectively acknowledges and translates the laugh, although perhaps too late. As the confession to Malthe reveals, Elsie is constituted by the gendered 'law' represented by the maid's interpellation: her 'I', her sense of herself as an individual *agent*, is brought into being through this address, despite the fact she enacts her agency by following the maid's dictum. However, there is a disjunction between cause and effect played out over time, as Elsie finally cannot fulfil the role of

either wife or lover. This inconsistency is not only built into the operation of a performative utterance in philosophical terms, it is also a direct consequence of the *fin de siècle* milieu of Elsie's childhood and early adulthood.

The maid's words could not, after all, express a unilateral all powerful Law, which has an abstract 'presence' irrespective of its historical manifestations. As Butler states, femininity is a 'forcible citation of a norm' (Butler 1993, 232) not the enactment of a timeless phallic Law. In fact, throughout *Bodies That Matter*, and specifically in her critique of Jacques Lacan ('The lesbian phallus and the morphological imaginary' [pp. 57–91]), Butler shows that the law can only be understood in terms of iterability, writing that 'There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability' (p. 9). In the *fin de siècle* context of Elsie's childhood, the maid's words denote a truism, represented as inadequate for women in the literature of the period. Henrik Ibsen is a key figure in this context: in *A Doll's House* (1879) Ibsen implied that femininity is assumed in response to a masculine demand (in Nora's case, her father's and then her husband's), and is not only a performance, but also a dangerous masquerade. As Nora recognises in act III of the play, this performance has the potential to crush the female self, even whilst it brings it into being: telling Torvald that, 'I lived by doing tricks for you [...] I have been your doll wife just as at home I was Daddy's doll child. And the children have been my dolls' (Ibsen 2008, 80). A similar recognition surfaces intermittently throughout Elsie's narration in *The Dangerous Age*, but is only made explicit in her confession. The representation of personal agency in *The Dangerous Age* (and indeed in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*) can be related to Butler's argument in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, in which she proposes (in reference to Foucault and Laplanche amongst others) that our alienated state of being engenders us as ethical agents. Butler argues that personal responsibility emerges in response to the need to address the other, writing that 'the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making' (Butler 2005, 21). Analysing Elsie's childhood history in reference to Butler's theories not only enriches our understanding of Michaelis's engagement with psychology, but also returns us to the question of verbal empowerment interrogated throughout *The Dangerous Age*: the way in which power

operates in and through language is consistently shown to be deeply unstable and asymmetrical.

Despite his silence and abjection, Elsie's own father plays a significant role in the construction of her gendered identity. Prior to the reported scene with the maid, Elsie writes that she had never had access to a mirror:

At home there was only one looking glass. It was in my father's room, which I seldom entered, and was hung too high for me to use. In my pocket-mirror I could see only one eye at a time [...]

I was surprised when I came home one day to find that the large mirror in its gold frame had been given over to me by my father and was hanging in my room. I made myself quite ill with excitement, and the maid had to put me to bed. But later on, when the house was quiet, I got up and lit my lamp. Then I spent hours gazing at my own reflection in the glass. (Michaelis 1911, 73)

Here Elsie recognises herself for the first time, but in a state of alienation, in the inverted unity of the looking glass, which produces the body as a 'delirious effect' (Butler 1993, 91). From this point on, Elsie obsessively stares at her reflection, with the voice of the maid resonating in her mind:

Henceforth the mirror became my confidant. It procured me the one happiness of my childhood. When I was indoors I passed most of my time practicing smiles, and forming my expression. I was seized with terror lest I should lose the gift that was worth a 'pocketful of gold'. (Michaelis 1911, 73)

The father's gift is not rationalised by Elsie. In the context of her growing narcissism, it has such blatant significance that the father is, paradoxically, occluded and silenced. The father's gift enables Elsie's obsession with her own appearance; however, he himself is not given voice or presence. The timing of his gift operates as an almost supernatural confirmation of the maid's words; in Laplanche's terms it functions as a 'compromised message', passed from father to daughter. The father's desire remains irresolvable, excluded from the narrative, but, nevertheless, provides the underpinning for Elsie's construction of herself as a gendered subject, which both is, and cannot be, voluntary. The maid's words – her appeal to discursive norms – can only be understood in the light of the father's enigmatic gift, and his abjection and silence.

The confession goes on to describe the consequences of these formative events. In her early teens, Elsie courts the notice of the elderly Herr Von

Brincken, the chief magistrate. Despite her marital ambition, Elsie is unable to ignore the sense of revulsion caused by Von Brincken's proximity and evident admiration for her: at a dinner party as a young girl she felt 'the kind of discomfort that follows upon eating something unpleasant' (Michaelis 1911, 74). The feeling of disgust is exacerbated following their engagement: 'This feeling possessed me when we looked over the house. In every direction there were lofty mirrors, and for the first time in my life I saw myself reflected in full-length – and by the side of an old man' (p. 75). Here we see the collision between Elsie's precious narcissism, and the gruesome reality of *who* it is that loves her. When she finds that she cannot avoid flinching from Von Brincken's caresses, she returns to her beloved mirror to practice, or perform her falsehood: 'I compelled myself to stand before the looking glass and receive his caresses in imagination without disturbing my artificially radiant smile' (p. 75). She fashions herself as a doll, but her body is not so easily repressed, and it acts out the truth when she collapses under the old man's touch and the latter terminates the engagement (pp. 75–76). As in the earlier scene at the dinner table, the old man's desire is figured as something that must be taken in or swallowed by the young girl, and in Von Brincken's arms, Elsie's body hysterically acts out against the crime that she attempts to perpetrate. However, in Paris later (at Von Brincken's expense) she unequivocally reaffirms her ideology: 'I cheated myself, and betrayed my first love, which might have saved me, and changed me from an automaton into a living being' (p. 76). Elsie's language implies that the rigidity of her materialist dogma (the desire for money, and her overinvestment in her appearance) has the power to turn her to stone, into an object or thing: she writes that her 'mask was [her] smile' (p. 77). This language implies that ideology has a material existence, a bodily identity, which is both psychological and physical. She claims that her greatest crime was in burying her 'disgust' for her husband and allowing her senses to be 'inflamed' (p. 77); Richard dominated her senses and this is what granted him marital authority (p. 51).

*The Dangerous Age* negotiates constructivist and essentialist accounts of gender. Elsie's childhood history suggests that femininity (and in Elsie's case, her narcissism) is created in response to an internalised external demand; however, Elsie herself repeatedly argues that female bodies are hysterical and symptomatic, and links this to the compromised nature of female identity. To be female is, it appears, to be touched with illness.

However, the sense of pathology that follows from this is not necessarily a 'natural' consequence of womanhood, but is a result of patriarchy's inability to accommodate the reality of women's lived experience in the early twentieth century. When Professor Rothe discovers that his wife, Lillie, loved another man he sends her to a 'home' to be cured (p. 85): aberrant female desire is consistently treated by men as hysterical illness. Whilst Elsie does not endorse this treatment, she tacitly reveals that childbearing and childbirth make women susceptible to a whole series of illnesses that are, by implication, gynaecological and psychological. Elsie congratulates herself on avoiding these dangers, but despite this, she is herself at the mercy of the menopause. While at times the 'dangerous age' appears to consume Elsie's experience, it also grants her a new position from which to speak. The question of what the future can hold pulses throughout: do women pass through transition to reach death, or is there a new life? These questions can only be considered through an analysis of Michaelis's representation of desire.

#### *IV. Centrifugal fires: Desire and sublimation*

*The Dangerous Age* is saturated with, and indeed coalesces around, images of flames, burning, ashes, consumption and destruction. Fire is representative of both female desire and female subjectivity in the novel, and burning represents creativity and nullification. The concept of widow sacrifice runs parallel to these images: explicitly mentioned by Elsie in her letter to Magna Wellmann, it appears in the novel as the social and psychological symbol of women's gendered subordination. However, by refiguring 'sacrifice' through the flame-haired Jeanne, Michaelis simultaneously uses the idea of sacrifice to reassert the potency of female desire. To appropriate Bates once more, 'subordination' is rendered as 'insubordination' (Bates 2010, 5). As Jeanne's confession to Elsie reveals, female communication is provoked by homoerotic desire. Enigmatic desire between women elicits *narration*.

Elsie presents a distinctive theory of the female self. She writes that 'Each woman dwells in her own planet formed of centrifugal fires enveloped in a thin crust of earth' (Michaelis 1911, 25). Reading across this symbol, we could interpret this 'thin crust of earth' as the conscious self: beneath this fragile shell is the unconscious, figured as dynamism and

desire. But we can push Elsie's planet analogy further if we remember that the earth's crust is formed from the molten mantle. The 'centrifugal fires' do not simply lie beneath consciousness: they irrupt into consciousness with a constant pushing force. The idea that 'centrifugal fires' form the 'planet' implies that the internal investment of psychological energy generates the self as a defined entity. Michaelis's psychological insight is reinforced if we remember that *The Dangerous Age* prefigures Freud's 1914 essay 'On narcissism: An introduction'. Here Freud writes that 'I am bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed' (Freud 2001d, 77). In this essay, Freud not only discusses primary infantile narcissism, but also how the subject invests their 'ego-ideal' through secondary narcissism (pp. 94–95). As the term suggests, the ego-ideal is that version of ourselves with which we feel compelled to conform. *The Dangerous Age* relies on the premise that Elsie's previous ideal is rendered null and void because of her approaching menopause. As a result, Elsie is forced to re-evaluate, and reinvest, the basis for her self.

Elsie's image of the 'centrifugal fires' at the heart of the self implies that women are defined by their desirousness: desire – as fire – is represented as a dynamic lack that is displaced and transferred from object to object, potentially consuming that which it lights upon. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, fire is not a 'thing', but 'the natural agency or active principle operative in combustion'. However, fire is not only the abstract symbol of desire, it is also a transformative force: 'burning' is bound up with sublimation, or the transmutation of desire. For our purposes here we can roughly conceptualise sublimation as the transferral of desire or unconscious fantasy into new (potentially liberating) forms, such as creativity, intellectual endeavour and the like. As we have seen, Elsie's status as a writer and author is of concern throughout the novel. The sequence of fire images implies that narration can only be understood in relation to desirousness; we speak, we write, because we want something, because we desire. Elsie's continuing right to desire *as a divorced menopausal woman* is therefore affirmed through her role as first-person narrator. The fire images move elegantly through the text; sitting in autumn, stripping the bark from each log, Elsie writes that the fire gives out an 'intoxicating perfume': 'The smell of burning birch-bark goes to my head like strong wine. Dreams come and go' (Michaelis

1911, 29). Only two paragraphs on from this, she writes that ‘Formerly my day was a *crescendo* of activity until the social hours were reached. Now the hours fall one by one in ashes before my eyes’ (p. 29). The problematic status of her desire, fluctuating between sensuality and *l’ennui*, is indicated through the metaphoric and metonymic symbolic uses of fire.

Through these images, *The Dangerous Age* raises the question of how desire is enacted, sublimated or consumed. In Elsie’s account, it is her desire and love for Joergen Malthe, and his love for her, that had the capacity to turn her into a ‘real, living creature [...] behind the mask’ (Michaelis 1911, 77); but despite this, her ‘dreams died out like fire for want of fuel’ when she allowed the fear of poverty to overcome her (p. 78). Michaelis structures the novel through this repudiated and redundant desire, and Elsie’s decision *not* to open Joergen Malthe’s letter is the central event in the novel. The unopened letter initially grants Elsie a feeling of repose, but swiftly becomes a source of persecution: she plays with it over a candle flame, toying with the idea of burning it: ‘Sometimes its weight makes me happy; sometimes it fills me with foreboding. Do the words weigh so heavy, or only the paper?’ (p. 31). The letter becomes a magical talisman, a ‘treasure’ (p. 34) rather than a text:

Malthe’s letter is still intact. I wander around it like a mouse round a trap of which it suspects the danger. My heart meanwhile yearns to know what words he uses.

He and I belong to each other for the rest of our lives. We owe that to my wisdom. If he never sees me, he will never be able to forget me. (p. 32)

Elsie’s refusal to implement their desire is seen by her as the guarantor of its survival, both for herself and for Malthe. She preserves Malthe but denies him speech.<sup>6</sup> We could compare Elsie’s treatment of the letter as a ‘treasure’ (rather than as a means of exchange or communication) to her burying of gold coins as a child. Both gestures are melancholic: they deny the loss of the object – whether her fortune, or Malthe himself.

At the same time, through this gesture, Elsie retains her authorial privileges of editing and narrative control: she is free to write Malthe’s script. However, despite this, the letter’s uncanny force is the source of anxiety; the narrative continues as Elsie bemoans the inevitable haunting

of the human psyche and memories consume her (pp. 32–33). Later, in winter, perhaps inspired by the image of Jeanne’s hair like a ‘burning torch’ against the snow (p. 45), she burns the letter:

I have burnt his letter.

I have burnt his letter. A few ashes are all that remain to me.

It hurts me to look at the ashes. I cannot make up my mind to throw them away.

I have got rid of the ashes. It was harder than I thought. Even now I am restless.

I am glad the letter is destroyed. Now I am free at last [...] very often I feel like my thoughts had come to a standstill, like a watch one has forgotten to wind up. But this blank refreshes me. (p. 45)

With the destruction of the letter, desire, even time, seem to cease briefly, only to be relocated in a different form as Elsie reorientates herself to the world of the white villa and its snow-covered garden (p. 47). However, the potential moment of liberation implied in the burning of the letter is swiftly recuperated in a conservative and violent motion. On a foggy night Elsie is consumed with overwhelming anxiety, she feels ‘damp through and through’, and remembers childhood terrors:

I feel the same cold shivers down my back that I remember feeling long ago, when my nurse induced me to go into the churchyard. I thought I saw all the dead coming out of their graves. That was a foggy evening too. How strange it is that such far-off things return so clearly to the mind. (p. 54)

The recurrence of this uncanny childhood terror is used to undermine, even mock, the optimistic view expressed not long before that Elsie was approaching ‘Nirvana’: the Buddhist utopia where subjectivity itself ceases (p. 45).<sup>7</sup> Instead, the scene hints at a compulsive repetition, the inability to escape the cyclical motion of time. In the winter fog, nothingness seems persecutory: a threatening and haunted absence, peopled by childhood phantoms. Elsie’s desire for Malthe is set in motion later through the scent of ‘yesterday’s’ roses, in an image that provocatively brings to mind the women’s garden party described earlier in the novel (p. 70).

In her confession to Malthe, Elsie describes herself as ‘a pile of burnt out ashes’ (Michaelis 1911, 79), and, as such, she identifies with the remnants of his letter: with a redundant remainder. Her desire is consumed, and her

self deadened. Throughout the novel, there is a slippage between textual objects and material bodies: Elsie remarks after burning Malthe's letter that 'People become like books to me' (p. 33), and this slippage is reiterated in Elsie's final letter to Richard where she writes that 'I can see from your letter that you felt some embarrassment, and blushed when you wrote it' (p. 90). The burning of Malthe's letter is like a sacrifice: a ritual murder through which Elsie attempts to ward off her own mortality. However, by burning the symbol of her *own* projected desire, she consumes herself, leaving Malthe intact and unknown. Her act implies the exhausting and exhaustive nature of desire: her sublimatory act is rendered as self-destruction. After Malthe's visit to the island, and his rejection of Elsie, she once again denies him speech by burning his second and final letter:

I have burnt his letter unread. What could it tell me that I did not already know?  
Could it hold any torture which I have not already suffered?

Do I really suffer? Have I not really become insensible to pain? Once the cold moon was a burning sun; her own central fires consumed it. Now she is cold and dead; her light a mere refraction and a falsehood. (p. 83)

Desire is figured here as an all-consuming force, which is capable of destroying the self. The connection between speech and power is interrogated through this episode. While Joergen is purposefully silenced throughout Elsie's narration, within their relationship it is she who is finally abject: her narrative fails to enact her desire. This abject positioning is, however, recuperated by the text as a whole.

Elsie's narrative is illuminated and haunted by the flickering presence of burning, and the idea of ritual sacrifice recurs. Michaelis draws together the social and psychological nuances of performance through the idea of widow sacrifice, which is referred to by Elsie in her letter to Magna Wellmann: 'Perhaps there ought to be some law by which penniless widows with children to bring up should be incarcerated in some kind of nunnery, or burnt alive at the obsequies of their husbands' (Michaelis 1911, 39). This act of feminine subservience is the performance to end all performances, testifying to women's abject role in the construction of masculine identity: the consumption of women within patriarchal economies. Elsie implies that widow sacrifice is both a communal and an individual act: an inverse marriage ceremony. Like marriage, the idea of widow sacrifice is reliant upon the concept that

women are a function of their husband's identity. It is of course appropriate that this idea is introduced via self-conscious irony: by divorcing her husband Elsie has already shown that life after marriage is a possibility (if not necessarily a happy one). However, the text's symbolism complicates these ideas; as we have seen, in burning Malthe's letter Elsie performs a ritual sacrifice in an attempt both to satiate and nullify her desires; nevertheless, symbolically she unwittingly clammers onto the pyre as her idea of herself is irretrievably bound up with her desire for him. The burning of the second letter appears more as a conscious suicide: a cremation, and a violent denial of all desire.

Michaelis recuperates the idea of sacrifice and abjection through Jeanne. Jeanne's hair moves flame-like across the blinding white snow, her eyes 'flicker fitfully' and the 'fog floats over her red hair like smoke over a fire' (Michaelis 1911, 55). As this recurring fire imagery implies, Jeanne's presence in the white villa rewrites the possibility of continuing desire. Elsie watches her fascinated, seduced, asking 'Good heavens, what can that girl be doing here?' Jeanne returns Elsie's gaze, following the latter 'with her eyes as though she wanted to learn some art' (p. 20). Jeanne acts as a silent interlocutor: her 'look has something gliding and subtle about it that keeps me company like a witty conversation' (p. 22). The foggy night is illuminated and saved by Jeanne's flame-like presence, and it is here that the desire between the two women becomes explicit: 'She assures me I am the only human being who has ever attracted her. If I were a man she would be devoted to me and sacrifice everything for my sake' (p. 59). Female sacrifice, or the negation of the self, is not conceptualised here as obligation (as in Elsie's letter to Magna Wellmann) but as desire, and desire between women. This dramatically modifies the dynamics of sacrifice previously represented in the novel. Sitting together in the gloom of the fog, Jeanne speaks to Elsie openly for the first and only time by confessing her childhood story. As a little girl, falling asleep on a couch in a darkened room, Jeanne woke to realise that her mother was having sex with a young officer close by (p. 57). Michaelis once more, as in Elsie's history, implies the significance of familial trauma in the construction of subjectivity and gender. Jeanne's loss of innocence in this 'primal scene' engenders her heartless assumption of sexuality. As Elsie writes, 'This one hour, with its cruel enlightenment, sufficed to destroy Jeanne's joy in life for ever. At the same time it filled her mind with impure thoughts that

haunted her night and day. She matured precociously in the atmosphere of her own despair' (p. 57). As Jeanne's confession to Elsie reveals, female communication is provoked by homoerotic desire. Enigmatic desire between women elicits narration. Michaelis therefore implies that homoerotic desire is itself a kind of sublimation: a transformative force. Tellingly, it is only when Jeanne hands in her notice that Elsie writes her confession to Malthe, and it is to Jeanne that Elsie returns when both her love affair and appeal to Richard fail, writing briefly in her diary, 'Jeanne has agreed to go with me' (p. 87). In *The Dangerous Age* fire burns, but it also transforms; fire's devastating force does not simply annihilate the object, it provokes a translation from one material state to another. Michaelis invokes negativity as a potentially creative force, as well as a destructive one: the condition for continuing desire and *speech*. The radicalism of this conclusion is suffered to stand unchallenged at the end of *The Dangerous Age*.<sup>8</sup>

By creating a dialogue between *The Dangerous Age*, psychoanalytic and gender theory, Michaelis's psychological vision and rigorous engagement with concepts of gender become manifest. Michaelis creates a nuanced model of the self in which the primary address of the other both engenders and genders the subject. Elsie's narration is dependent on her desertion of the social theatre that had validated her performance of selfhood; however, as her fragmented narration demonstrates, performativity cannot be understood as a wilful act, but is also the origin of her 'self'. This model is enriched by Elsie's own theory: she argues that the female self is little more than a fragile shell, formed by 'centrifugal fires'. This image of fire places desirousness at the heart of our subjective existence, and indeed the act of writing itself. Elsie's narration is predicated upon the anticipated failure of normative heterosexual desire, and this failure is intimately linked to the body. As *The Dangerous Age* shows, menopausal women are defunct within patriarchal marital economies, but also potentially threatening. By exploring subjectivity through a state of seeming negation, Michaelis's novel reaches towards (to appropriate Butler's terminology) a 'new horizon' from the exterior, or object (Butler 1993, 53). As we have seen, the failure of heterosexual desire allows the emergence of new forms of female sublimation and creativity, expressed in the relationship between Elsie and Jeanne. This 'object' status grants Elsie, and therefore Michaelis herself, a new position from which to speak.

## NOTES

1. As this is not the main focus of my essay I cannot do more than remark on this point of comparison with nineteenth-century female narratives, but there is certainly scope here for further comparative reading.
2. Laplanche and Pontalis discuss the faulty translation of *Trieb* as 'instinct' in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 214).
3. Eve Sedgwick describes sexual aim as 'the kind of sexual pleasure received' (Sedgwick 2008, 218).
4. As we shall see, Butler returned to such questions in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler 2005).
5. Whilst Elsie repudiates motherhood throughout *The Dangerous Age*, in the sequel, *Elsie Lindtner*, Michaelis resolves the story by Elsie adopting a young street urchin. In the later novel, Elsie writes to Magna Wellmann, 'I have very little to tell about myself. Since I linked my fate to Kelly's I live in a new world. Every day that goes by I come nearer to myself, but I cannot write about it. It is too sacred a subject' (Michaelis 1912, 145). As this quote shows, Elsie's assumption of the maternal role provokes a form of rebirth in her own self. This ending is not without its irony, however, as Elsie unconvincingly rewrites her entire history in teleological terms, with the child as the ultimate goal (p. 194).
6. It is tempting to compare this enforced silence to the silencing of Elsie's father in her confession.
7. In this context, Elsie could undoubtedly be compared to that other great, female, middle-aged modernist protagonist: Mrs Ramsay from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Both women have a sense of their own being as negative space: finding herself alone, Mrs Ramsay reflects that, 'All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others'. It is only in this negative, invisible, space that she finds room for herself (Woolf 2008, 52–53). Elsie's negative spaces are, however, distinctly more threatening than Mrs Ramsay's.
8. *Elsie Lindtner* resolves Elsie's story in a quite different way by making reparation for the silenced absence of Elsie's own mother. Feminine desire is refigured as desire for the son as in the final lines of the novel Elsie anticipates Kelly's return from the farm: 'then I shall see him, have him to myself ... Kelly, Kelly ... why aren't you here at this hour? Kelly, I want to see you, and to thank you. Be good ... be happy ...' (Michaelis 1912, 202). This ending can be linked to the dynamics of sublimation found in the earlier novel: Elsie's voice, or pen, trails away into nothing as she anticipates Kelly's imminent presence: narration ceases when desire is satiated.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 'All heroines not youthful' 1911, *New York Times*, 30 July, available at <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60C15FF3E5517738DDDA90B94DF405B818DF1D3> (last accessed 3 July 2012).
- Atwood, M. 1992, 'Weight' in *Wilderness Tips*, Virago, New York, pp. 177–194.
- Austen, J. 2008, *Emma*, ed. A. Pinch & J. Kinsley, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Bates, C. 2010, *Masculinity, Gender and Identity in the English Renaissance Lyric*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Breuer, J. & Freud, S. 2001, *Studies on Hysteria in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. ii.
- Brontë, C. 2008, *Jane Eyre*, ed. S. Shuttleworth & M. Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Butler, J. 1993, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London & New York.
- . 2005, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York.
- . [1990] 2006, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, Abingdon & New York.
- Conrad, J. 2008, *Heart of Darkness and Other Stories*, ed. C. Watts, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Damrosch, D. 2003, *What is World Literature?* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Eddy, B. 1992, 'The Dangerous Age: Karin Michaelis and the politics of menopause', *Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 491–504.
- Eliot, G. 2008, *Middlemarch*, ed. F. Bonaparte & D. Carroll, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 'Elsie Lindtner: A sad heroine' 1911, *New York Times*, 27 August, available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9F06E2DE163CE633A25754C2A96E9C946096D6CF> (last accessed 3 July 2012).
- Fletcher, J. 1999, 'Introduction: Psychoanalysis and the question of the other' in *Essays on Otherness*, Routledge, London, pp. 1–51.
- Freud, S. 2001a, 'Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. vii, pp. 1–122.
- . 2001b, 'Analysis of a phobia in a five year old boy' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. x, pp. 3–149.
- . 2001c, 'A project for a scientific pathology' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. i, pp. 283–397.
- . 2001d, 'On narcissism: An introduction' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. xiv, pp. 67–104.
- . 2001e, 'Three essays on sexuality' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, Vintage, London, vol. vii, pp. 125–245.
- Hamsun, K. 1996, *Hunger*, trans. S. Lyngstad, Canongate Books, Edinburgh.
- Ibsen, H. 2008, *Four Major Plays: A Doll's House, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder*, trans. J. MacFarlane & J. Arup, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- James, H. 2008, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories*, ed. T. J. Lustig, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Laplanche, J. 1999, 'Notes on afterwardsness' in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. J. Fletcher, Routledge, London & New York, pp. 260–265.

- Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J.-B. 1973, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Hogarth Press, London.
- Lassner, P. 1989, 'Women's midlife and the crisis of writing: Karin Michaelis' *The Dangerous Age and Rose Macauley's The Dangerous Ages*, *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 21–31.
- . 1991, 'Foreword' in *The Dangerous Age*, trans. B. Marshall, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., pp. 1–24.
- . 1999, 'Karin Michaelis' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Volume 214: Twentieth-Century Danish Writers*, ed. M. Stecher-Hansen, The Gale Group, Detroit, San Francisco, London, Boston & Woodbridge, Conn., pp. 282–287.
- Ledger, S. 1997, *The New Woman. Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Madsen, P. 2007, 'Elsie' in *The Novel: Volume 2: Forms and Themes*, ed. F. Moretti, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., & Oxford, pp. 559–567.
- Mansfield, K. 2008, *Selected Stories*, ed. A. Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Michaelis, K. 1911, *The Dangerous Age: Letters and Fragments from a Woman's Diary*, trans. B. Marshall, John Lane Company, New York.
- . 1912, *Elsie Lindtner*, trans. B. Marshall, John Lane Company, New York & London.
- Prévost, M. 1911, 'Introduction to the French edition' in *The Dangerous Age*, trans. B. Marshall, John Lane Company, New York, pp. 4–9.
- Sedgwick, E. K. [1990] 2008, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London.
- Stecher-Hansen, M. 1999, 'Introduction' in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Volume 214: Twentieth-Century Danish Writers*, The Gale Group, Detroit, San Francisco, London, Boston & Woodbridge, Conn., pp. xv–xxiii.
- Woolf, V. [1927] 2008, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. D. Bradshaw, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

---

Madeleine Wood (madeleine.wood@brunel.ac.uk) is a teaching fellow in Nineteenth-Century Literature at Brunel University. She is also a member of the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education tutor panel. Her research and teaching interests include the nineteenth-century and modernist novel, comparative literature, psychoanalysis and gender studies. She has published on Charlotte Brontë, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, psychoanalysis and gender theory.