

VAL SYMPOSIUM 2025

**GENDER ANXIETIES: (RE-)ASSESSMENTS FROM A
LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE**

**28 NOVEMBER 2025
HOEK 38, BRUSSELS**



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SYMPOSIUM THEME

In *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024), Judith Butler, whose work over decades has been a barometer for the state of gender debates across disciplines, argues that gender has been transformed into a 'phantasm' – a fabricated threat – by conservative political and religious leaders who misrepresent it as a destabilizing force. In their depictions, discourses surrounding gender appear as an ideological threat to a perceived 'natural' and morally righteous order of heteronormative family structures and homogenous, binary identity categories. Indeed, the political and institutional landscape in which literary and cultural studies, too, is embedded, is characterised by an increasing contentiousness surrounding gender debates. While 'non-conforming' gender identities have always existed, the narratives of non-binary and trans individuals have only recently begun to gain more mainstream visibility. This shift has prompted a productive rethinking of previous approaches to feminist and queer literary studies (cf., e.g. El Ghaoui and Fonio 2013; Lanser 2024; Vakoch and Sharp 2024), yet it has also provided an opportunity for supremacist ideologies to exploit these developments for political gain. These and other developments raise the question of how the academic study of literature and other forms of artistic expression responds to prevailing gender anxieties.

What role have literary and cultural studies played, and do they continue to play, in these debates? How do recent developments impact the study of women's writing, and queer, trans and masculinity studies, and how does literature react to those? To what extent do historical narratives of gender experience inform contemporary gender concepts, and how do these concepts, in turn, shape our (re)interpretation of earlier literary texts? To what extent do dominant gender theories in literary and cultural studies remain rooted in Western or Anglophone academic traditions, and what alternative frameworks might help bridge this gap (e.g. Mwangi 2009; Sullivan 2021)? What are the limits and/or possibilities of translation in understanding gendered, queer and trans experiences and how can we foreground a decolonial praxis in our considerations of these issues (Upadhyay and Bakshi 2020)? In what ways are neoliberalism, literature and representations of gender intimately entangled (Demeyer and Vitse 2024)?

Contemporary scholars in feminist and queer literary studies highlight the importance of acknowledging works by women and queer writers for their engagement with literary form, rather than viewing them solely through an ideological lens (Bradway 2017; Fawaz 2022; Warhol and Lanser 2015). They also urge literary scholars to engage with more intersectional bodies of work and to move beyond conceptualizing gender as the moral domain of white, middle-class, cisgender women (Warhol and Lanser 2015; Fawaz 2023). How can our field productively study literary and artistic gender representations across ethnicities, sexualities, class, or historical and geographical differences, while staying attuned to the material consequences of gender identification?

At the VAL Symposium, we will explore these developments and questions from an international perspective, embracing the broad methodological, transnational, and transhistorical diversity of the research domain. Keynote speakers Teagan Bradway (Associate Professor of English at SUNY Cortland and a Society for the Humanities Fellow at Cornell University for 2025-26) and Hans Demeyer (Associate

Professor of Dutch & Comparative Literature at University College London) will provide us with food for thought. In the panel debate, we will reflect on the challenges and opportunities for embedding literary and cultural studies perspectives on gender in higher education. An issue of *Cahier voor Literatuurwetenschap* (CLW) will be published on the basis of these and other contributions.

The VAL symposium is organised annually by the Literary Studies Departments of KU Leuven, VUB, UGent and UAntwerpen. It rotates between the participating institutions and receives practical and logistical support from the host institution. It is also financially supported by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR).

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CODE OF CONDUCT AND SAFE SPACE FACILITATION

During the VAL Symposium, we are committed to fostering a more respectful, inclusive, and psychologically safe environment for all participants. This commitment is not only important because of the fact our symposium's theme has often been approached and framed in contentious, divisive and weaponizing ways, but also because we believe that any discussion—academic or personal—benefits from empathy, mutual respect and an awareness of the broader contexts we share.

We would therefore like to ask everyone to uphold the following code of conduct:

- Foster a safe environment that is free from physical, written, verbal, or sexual harassment, violence, bullying, or discrimination.
- Be aware of and challenge our prejudices and privileges. Consider what influences our words, opinions, and feelings and who they might exclude or harm.
- Respect how people choose to identify. Do not assume someone's gender identity, sexual preference, background, etc.
- Respect the privacy of others. Do not take photos/videos of others and/or do not share images of or information belonging to others without their express permission.

To further help create and maintain this inclusive atmosphere, we are delighted to be joined by a safe space facilitator.

Throughout the symposium, the facilitator will be available to anyone who - for whatever reason - would like to step outside of the main symposium event for a moment, wishes to reflect on the day's discussions, or would like to share (past) experiences, insights, or emotions that may arise during the event. For those who prefer to reflect in writing, we will provide paper and a drop box where you can anonymously share your thoughts and experiences. Together with the facilitator, we aim to cultivate a compassionate environment for our academic conversations.

The facilitator will be present in the Auditorium during the opening and closing remarks, as well as during the keynote presentations and podium discussion. During the panel presentations, they will be available in the Safe Space Room (Level 1, Room 3). This room will remain open throughout the day for anyone who needs a quiet moment for private reflection.

The facilitator (bio)

Stacey Oh will join us as our safe space facilitator. She has a background in gender studies and diversity and inclusion, and she is also a certified coach. In her own practice, Stacey supports people in working through personal challenges connected to the impact of systemic harm and oppression.

Her website: www.staceyoh-lifecoach.be/

PROGRAMME

Time	Event	Room
8:30 - 9:00 AM	Registration and coffee	Auditorium
9:00 - 9:30 AM	Opening remarks	Auditorium
9:30 - 10:30 AM	Keynote: Hans Demeyer (UC London) 'I won't allow myself to be made to feel guilty here': Gender Anxiety and Whiteness in Neerlandophone Literature from Flanders	Auditorium
10:30 - 11:00 AM	Coffee break	Auditorium
11:00 AM - 12:00 PM	Parallel Panels 1	Auditorium, Rookkwarts, Magnetiet, Wortelnoot, Macassar
12:00 - 1:00 PM	Parallel Panels 2	Auditorium, Rookkwarts, Magnetiet, Wortelnoot, Macassar
1:00 - 2:30 PM	Lunch	Auditorium
2:30 - 3:30 PM	Podium Discussion: Gender Anxieties and Institutional Practice Gily Coene (moderator, VUB) David Paternotte (ULB) Andrea Pető (CEU Vienna) Alison E. Woodward (VUB)	Auditorium
3:30 - 4:00 PM	Coffee break	Auditorium
4:00 - 5:00 PM	Keynote: Teagan Bradway (SUNY Cortland) Bodies That Gather: Practicing Attachment in Queer Kinship Narrative	Auditorium
5:00 - 5:15 PM	Closing remarks	Auditorium

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Keynote Lectures

- Teagan Bradway (SUNY Cortland), “Bodies That Gather: Practicing Attachment in Queer Kinship Narrative”

Room: Auditorium

Chair: Hannah Van Hove (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Contemporary gender anxieties are intimately bound up with fears around the erosion of traditional kinship. These fears are not unfounded. As Elizabeth Freeman and I have argued, kinship is becoming increasingly queer. More and more people are departing from cisheteronormative plots for marriage, reproduction, and long-term commitment, even those who do not identify as LGBTQ+. Of course, the queering of kinship has elicited a fierce backlash, led by white supremacists, misogynists, and Christian nationalists, who aim to revive heteropatriarchy at any and all costs. Yet it has also given rise to an explosion of new kinship narratives, which chart queerer trajectories for intimacy and belonging. In this talk, I show how queer kinship narrative gives shape to the practices of attachment that sustain queer bonds over time. In particular, these narratives confront the gaps between diffuse political ideals, like “queer community,” and the concrete forms through which we live queerness as a social relation. In doing so, queer kinship narratives point to horizons for political solidarity defined less by our sexual or gender identities and more by how we practice queer kinship with others in the world. Often misread as apolitical, queer kinship narratives teach us how to nurture desires for collective interdependency in the face of fear, distrust, disappointment, and exhaustion. By focusing on the narrative dimensions of queer kinship, I strive to rebalance the disciplinary scales of gender and sexuality studies, which have increasingly tilted away from the humanities toward the social sciences. I contend that the field still has much to learn from queer literary studies and especially a queer theory attuned to the narrative dimensions of intimacy, kinship, and solidarity.



Bio-note

Teagan Bradway (she/they) is Associate Professor of English at SUNY Cortland and a Society for the Humanities Fellow at Cornell University for 2025-26. In 2024, Bradway was a Hunt-Simes Visiting Junior Chair of Sexuality Studies with the

Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Centre at the University of Sydney. Bradway is the author of *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading* (2017). Bradway is co-editor (with Elizabeth Freeman) of *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form* (2022) and (with E.L. McCallum) of *After Queer Studies: Literature, Theory, and Sexuality in the 21st Century* (2019), which won a *CHOICE* award. Bradway guest edited “Unaccountably Queer” (2024), a special issue of *differences*, and “Lively Words: The Politics and Poetics of Experimental Writing” (2019), a special issue of *College Literature*. Bradway’s articles and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *PMLA*, *GLQ*, *MLQ*, *Textual Practice*, *ASAP/J*, *Stanford Arcade, Studies in the Fantastic*, *Mosaic*, *Biography*, and *The Nation* as well as various collections on contemporary literature and queer theory, including *Contemporary Queer Modernisms* and *The Cambridge History of Queer American Literature*. Currently, Bradway is completing a book on queer forms of relationality and co-writing “Endless Love” with the late Elizabeth Freeman.

- Hans Demeyer (University College London), “I won’t allow myself to be made to feel guilty here’: Gender Anxiety and Whiteness in Neerlandophone Literature from Flanders”

Room: Auditorium

Chair: Jade Thomas (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

In light of the current linking of race and nation with gender anxieties (Butler 2024), this talk revisits the not-yet-really historical period of the early 2000s through a reading of four novels: *Los* [*Loose*] (2005) by Tom Naegels, *Het derde huwelijk* [*The Third Marriage*] (2006) by Tom Lanoye, *Vrouwland* [*Womanland*] (2007) by Rachida Lamrabet and *Fata Morgana* [translated as *Black Sister’s Street*] (2007) by Chika Unigwe. At the time of their publication these novels circulated heavily in discussions about so-called multiculturalism and literature in Flanders (Boehmer & De Mul 2012, 2). Issues of race, migration and nationalism / regionalism can in these novels however not be disentangled from questions of gender and sexuality: the main characters in *Fata Morgana* are for instance four African diasporic sex workers in Antwerp, whereas the narrator in *Het derde huwelijk* is a gay man who enters a marriage of convenience with an African woman for her to become a Belgian citizen. Following on from earlier work on ‘worlding’ and on whiteness in Neerlandophone literature (2023; 2025), I argue that gender anxieties in these novels mediate the often conflicted and tense racial relations in these novels. Through such a reading I want to disengage the novels from the discourse and affects of diversity and multicultural inclusion and relate them historically to the becoming-white of Flemings in the colonial era (Kanobana 2022) and to the contemporary increasing affective refusal to relate empathetically or sentimentally to the non-white and gendered “other”.



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Bio-note

Hans Demeyer is Associate Professor of Dutch & Comparative Literature at University College London. Together with Sven Vitse, he is the author of *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: De romans van de millennialgeneratie* [*Affective Crisis, Literary Repair: The Novels of the Millennial Generation*] (Amsterdam UP, 2021); a substantially revised and English edition of this book is due to be published in 2026. His research is broadly concerned with the intersection of postwar literature, affect and society, with one current project focusing on Dutch literature, worlding and racialization, and another on literature and destituent power. He is co-editor-in-chief of *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*.

Podium Discussion: Gender Anxieties and Institutional Practice

Room: Auditorium

- Gily Coene (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), moderator

Gily Coene is Director of Rhea and co-founder and VUB-program-director of the Interuniversity Master in Gender and Diversity. She obtained her PhD in Moral Sciences at Ghent University in 2004 and thereafter obtained a post-doctoral Marie Curie fellowship at the University of Warwick. Since 2006, she was appointed at the Chair of Humanist Studies at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences of VUB. She is currently also part-time affiliated with the Department of Political Sciences. Her teaching assignments include Introduction to Feminist Thought, Introduction to Women and Gender Studies, Philosophy and Ethics of Sex, Introduction to the Moral Sciences and Humanist Studies. Next to Rhea, she is affiliated with the Centre of Ethics and Humanism at the VUB. Her research is mainly located at the intersections of descriptive and normative ethics, feminist theory and gender studies and covers a wide range of issues related to gender, cultural diversity and ethnicity (e.g. the headscarf debate, 'honour' related violence, harmful practices) globalization, irregular migration and human rights, secularism, humanism and spirituality, sexual and reproductive rights and development.

- David Paternotte (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

David Paternotte is Professor of sociology and gender studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles. As an expert on gender, sexuality and social movements, he has long researched LGBTIQ activism. For the last ten years, he has studied anti-gender campaigns and his publications include the edited volume *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (with Roman Kuhar, 2017). At the moment, he is editing *the Global Dictionary of Anti-Gender Studies* with Mauro Cabral Grinspan, Sonia Corrêa and Roman Kuhar. More recently, he has examined contemporary challenges to academic freedom, with a focus on the politics of knowledge and anti-wokeism.

- Andrea Pető (Central European University, Vienna)

Andrea Pető is an internationally recognized academic and broadcaster. She is a Professor at the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, Austria, a Research Affiliate of the CEU Democracy Institute, Budapest, and a Doctor of Science at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Pető is an internationally sought-after public speaker, and her works have been translated into 25 languages. She has held guest professorships at universities in Argentina, Canada, Germany, Israel, Serbia, and Sweden.

She received numerous awards for her contributions to public life, including the 2018 All European Academies (ALLEA) Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values and the 2022 University of Oslo Human Rights Award. She is a Doctor Honoris Causa of Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden. Recent publications include *The Women of the Arrow Cross Party: Invisible Hungarian Perpetrators in*

the Second World War, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2020, and *Forgotten Massacre: Budapest 1944*, DeGruyter, 2021.

The highly contested category of gender is always central to her work as a researcher and teacher, and also to my engagement as a feminist public intellectual. During the last few years, she has analyzed and debated the relationship between illiberalism and the many anti-gender campaigns targeting higher education, gender studies, and gender scholars. Andrea Pető has been tireless in speaking out about the importance of historical knowledge and sustained conversation in the public sphere, creating sustainable and democratic societies where human rights are at the core.

Before participating in the VAL Symposium, Andrea Pető will deliver a lecture on "New Forms of Holocaust Distortions". 27 November 2025, 14:00 at Kazerne Dossin. More information and registration: <https://kazernedossin.eu/en/event-item/lecture-by-andrea-peto/>

- Alison E. Woodward (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Political sociologist Alison E. Woodward (Ph.D. UC Berkeley) is Professor Emerita at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and co-founder of the RHEA Research Center Gender, Diversity and Intersectionality. She is presently Senior Associate at the Brussels School of Governance (VUB) working on European Union policy on equality, gender, diversity and decision-making. As a policy consultant she has assisted the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the United Nations and Belgian and Swedish governments with expert contributions on equality policy including gender mainstreaming.

Parallel Panels 1

Queer Forms of Storytelling on the Stage and Page

Room: Auditorium

Chair: Anneleen Masschelein (KU Leuven)

- Amber Kempynck (Universiteit Gent), "Plural, Shifting, and Staged: Gender Nonconformity and Stand-Up Comedy in 'Hannah Gadsby's Gender Agenda'"

In 2024, "Hannah Gadsby's Gender Agenda" premiered on Netflix as a stand-up comedy special hosted by Hannah Gadsby and featuring seven genderqueer comedians from various cultural backgrounds. In dialogue with broader debates on gender, visibility, and representation – particularly within the entertainment industry – the special positions itself as both a platform and a provocation. Against a backdrop of increasing ideological contestation, "Gender Agenda" does not seek to unify or clarify notions of gender and sexuality, but rather to multiply and disorient them through performance.

This paper proposes a close reading of "Gender Agenda" as a transnational, collaborative case study in the evolving relationship between stand-up comedy and gender nonconformity. Drawing on insights from performance studies, queer theory, and feminist humour studies, the presentation explores how the special mobilizes humour as a medium for negotiating gender anxieties rather than resolving them. By foregrounding the stylistic and embodied choices of each performer – many of whom explicitly challenge dominant narratives of gender and sexuality through wit, irony, and self-reflexivity – "Gender Agenda" invites viewers to encounter gender as something plural, shifting, and staged. The special thus becomes a space where humour functions as a mode of critique, survival, and world-building, making it a compelling case study in stand-up comedy's evolving relationship to gender nonconformity.

By tracing how "Gender Agenda" stages gendered humour as a collective, performative intervention, this paper contributes to the symposium's inquiry into how artistic forms engage with and challenge hegemonic gender ideologies. It positions stand-up comedy as a culturally and politically significant genre that negotiates visibility, identity, and embodiment in the face of contemporary gender anxieties.

Bio-note

Amber Kempynck is a PhD researcher in English Literature in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University. As part of the DELIAH (Democratic Literacy and Humour) project, she examines the relationship between gender and humour in the 21st-century Anglophone world. She studied Literature and Linguistics (English and Dutch, MA), Gender and Diversity (MA), and Teaching in Languages (MSc). Her previous research explored themes of gender in relation to madness, agency and likeability in Shakespeare and contemporary women's writing.

- Quintus Immisch (UCLouvain), "Spirals of Time: Queer Temporalities and Classical Reception in Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022)"

Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*, perhaps the first award-winning German-language novel authored by a non-binary writer, centers on the genderfluid protagonist's recollections of their past, particularly their childhood. While the novel contributes to the broader visibility of queer perspectives in contemporary literature, it simultaneously reflects on the ambivalences of visibility and repression—especially in relation to how queer subjects negotiate familial and cultural inheritances. In this context, the protagonist repeatedly faces the denial of belonging or, conversely, is assigned a sense of belonging in places where they do not identify. Graeco-Roman mythology becomes central to these negotiations of belonging. Stories of (Ovidian) metamorphoses serve as a foil for the present plot, superimposed on it already by the German cover of the book, depicting Bernini's Apollo and Daphne. Moreover, Odysseus' delayed homecoming functions as a matrix for queer subjectivity—at once a site of historical burden and a point of departure, a space of possibility for a liquid, non-linear mode of storytelling.

My paper traces this refraction of classical antiquity through the conceptual lens of queer temporality, showing how *Blutbuch* draws on ancient material to articulate alternative temporal structures that unfold not in linear progressions but in spirals. In doing so, the novel introduces a poetics of fragmentation and small forms embedded within its larger architecture, establishing a queer narrative aesthetic. Ultimately, I argue that *Blutbuch* does not merely represent queerness, but narrates queerly—inscribing queerness at the level of narrative form and aesthetic sensibility, and thereby opening it up to broader questions about the nature of storytelling itself.

Bio-note

Quintus Immisch, Postdoctoral Fellow in Comparative Literature at UCLouvain, visiting scholar at ULB. He completed his PhD in 2024 at the Universities of Tübingen and Aix-Marseille (cotutelle) with a thesis on the cultural history of nakedness. His research interests include the history of the body, idiorrhythmy and living-together, classical reception, and queer studies.

Metafiction and Gendered Authorship

Room: Rookkwarts

Chair: Katrijn Van den Bossche (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Eszter Vass (Universität Konstanz – Vrije Universiteit Brussel), "Traumatic Disruption and Metatheatrical Critique in Ella Hickson's *The Writer*"

A young woman and an older man meet in an empty theatre after a show. What starts out as a casual conversation quickly devolves into an argument about the role of the theatre in shaping the norms of a culture and female playwrights' place in institutional frameworks. Ella Hickson's 2018 play *The Writer* thematises the female writer's struggle within a patriarchal, capitalist system through self-reflexive forms. The opening scene is revealed to be part of a play-within-the-play, and consequent scenes from the Writer's life and work are likewise destabilised by

self-reflexive framing devices that expose them as fictive testing grounds, parts of the Writer's search for politically effective forms. Building on the understanding that patriarchal systems enact a form of gender-based violence, which in turn produces ongoing, "oppression-based" or "insidious" trauma (Spanierman and Poteat 2005, Brown 1995), this paper is interested in the representation and formal impact of gender-based trauma in contemporary theatre. It will examine the interconnectedness of self-reflexive forms and trauma theory as it manifests in two dimensions. One, as formal disruptions, repetitions, or rehearsals that signal a destabilised and disrupted collective consciousness. Two, as metatheatrical critique that highlights the depiction of gender-based violence and trauma not as a reparative act but as "depoliticizing spectacles of suffering" (Bond and Craps 2020). As the play implies, representations of anger, violence, and trauma are monetisable, but through this, they are also potentially neutralised and stripped of their political efficacy, folded into institutional frameworks that contribute to their proliferation. The play's politics are complicated and to some extent undercut, in a knowing, self-referential way, by its white, middle class, cisgender framing and its quasi-strategic-essentialist approach, ultimately questioning whose experience is highlighted as exemplary of societal ills.

Bio-note

Eszter Vass is a doctoral student in a joint PhD programme at the University of Konstanz, Germany and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium. Her research focuses on the intersection of theatrical self-reflexivity and trauma studies. Her doctoral project is funded by the Germany Academic Scholarship Foundation. Her work will appear in *The Routledge Companion to Metafiction* (forthcoming).

- Josephine Delali Ofei (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), "Metafiction and Gender Anxiety: Authorial Refusal and Speculative Selfhood in Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author*"

This paper explores how gender anxiety is not only a thematic concern but also a formal and authorial tension in Nnedi Okorafor's *Death of the Author* (2025), a genre-bending metafictional narrative that complicates identity, representation, and literary categorisation. Rather than reading the text as a public refusal of "Afrofuturism" or "Black feminism," this paper engages the inner narrative, focusing on the disabled woman protagonist who writes a speculative novel titled *Rusted Robots*, and subsequently begins to live out the futurist world she created. Her transformation from corporeal limitation to speculative transcendence allegorises both the constraints and imaginative potential of Black womanhood, situating gender anxiety not in confession but in form.

Using a New Formalist approach, I examine how the text's metafictional structure and genre refusal operate as a critical grammar of gender anxiety. I draw on Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024) to argue that the novel stages the author's "death" as a performance of opacity against the neoliberal demand for representational transparency. The protagonist's journey is not merely a speculative escape but a structural critique of how identity, especially when raced, gendered, and disabled, is overdetermined by literary markets and critical discourse.

This reading positions *Death of the Author* as a counter-genre, one that enacts authorial withdrawal not as retreat but as resistance: a decolonial and feminist strategy that troubles the expectation of categorical clarity. In doing so,

the paper reassesses how gender anxiety manifests not only in what is written but in how writing itself resists the regulatory frames of authorship, identity, and value. Through close reading and formal analysis, this paper offers more insight into the gendered aesthetics of refusal in contemporary Black speculative writing.

Bio-note

Josephine Delali Ofei is a researcher with the MERLIT research group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), where she is currently pursuing doctoral research on the figure of the hero in 21st-century Afrofuturist mediascapes. Supervised by Prof. Eva Ulrike Pirker, her work investigates how contemporary Afrofuturist narratives – across literature, film, and digital media reimagine heroism through the lenses of meritocracy, mobility, cultural identity, and postcolonial experience. Her project contributes to current debates on African speculative fiction by foregrounding the cultural and political work of heroic figures in reconfiguring futures from the Global South.

Women's Agency and Knowledge in Early Modern Times

Room: Magnetiet

Chair: Delphine Calle (Universiteit Antwerpen)

- Maria Pace Aquilina (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), "Dangerous Women: Gender Anxiety and Female Agency in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677)"

The theme of gender anxiety in English Restoration drama (1660–c.1710) serves as a significant framework for exploring concepts of individual selfhood in a period of intense social, political, and moral transformation. During the Restoration era – a time characterised by the revival of the monarchy, Charles II, and the re-opening of theatres after the Puritan interregnum – drama became a space for interrogating emerging tensions around personal identity, morality, agency, and today's notion of merit – tensions often articulated through questions of gender.

The Restoration stage frequently reflected the conflict between societal expectations and personal desire, revealing the period's preoccupation with the instability and performance of gender roles. The emergence of professional female actors and the increasing visibility of women onstage brought gender dynamics to the forefront of dramatic representation. This new visibility also introduced anxieties about female autonomy, virtue, and desire, which playwrights explored with both fascination and unease. Women's emotional, social, and sexual positioning became central dramatic concerns, highlighting the fragile constructs of femininity and the limitations imposed by a patriarchal order.

Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) exemplifies the era's negotiation of gender anxiety. Through characters like Hellena and Angellica Bianca, Behn interrogates the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour and critiques the double standards that dominate women's autonomy and self-expression in a patriarchal society. The play seeks to dramatise the instability of gender norms while exposing the cultural anxieties surrounding women's agency, desire, and public presence. This paper, therefore, explores how Restoration drama serves as a vital site for examining how gender anxiety operated as both a thematic concern and a reflection of broader social tensions surrounding identity, power, and performance, as depicted in Aphra's Behn's *The Rover*.

Bio-note

Maria Pace Aquilina is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in the Project Meritocracy and Literature (merlit.vub.be) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She is currently researching how dramas of Social Rise, Achievement and Merit are negotiated and shaped during the Restoration era in England. Maria holds a PhD in Tudor and Renaissance Literature from the University of Sheffield, focusing on the recovery of the authorial voice of sixteenth-century women writers. Her area of expertise includes, but is not limited, to women's writing of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, religious translations, memoirs, secular poetry, maternal genre and paratextual techniques.

- Laure Primerano (KU Leuven), "Early Modern Learned Women in Enlightenment Collective Biographies: Undoing Historical Narratives of Female Exceptionality"

Contemporary historical narratives on early modern learned communities tend to subscribe to the exceptionality principle when trying to adopt a gendered perspective. Learned women are thus oftentimes presented as exceptions to their sex, revolving around a core of male canonical figures. To some extent, this also seems to impact research currently conducted on early modern learned women, who are often the subject of singular case studies which also tends to perpetuate this vision of historical learned women as exceptional occurrences. A historical dive into the canonization tools used to shape these communities can, however, steer us in a slightly different direction.

Collective biographies, early modern publications which aimed to collect biographical information on the great figures of the time, are valuable sources that embody a conscious process of learned canonization and community shaping. Often overlooked, they reveal a different narrative when it comes to gender diversity and inclusion in the early modern learned world. Published across Europe, in different languages and compiled by both men and women, these sources often featured women as active participants in a wide variety of fields of expertise.

By studying a corpus of over 200 Enlightenment collective biographies across Europe, this paper will present an innovative perspective on the dynamics of female representation in the early modern intellectual field. Through an in-depth, gender-informed inspection of these sources, my research calls into question such fundamental concepts as learnedness and female agentivity in the early modern learned community. It also highlights a panel of female learned figures that defies traditional assumptions of class, output, time and geography. Through the study of collective biographies, my research thus aims to provide a better understanding of historical gendered dynamics of learned representation in the Enlightenment period and to inform our own practices today.

Bio-note

Laure Primerano is a second-year PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature at KU Leuven. Her research lies at the intersection of Enlightenment literary studies, gender studies and literary history studies. Her FWO-funded project, "Making the Cut: Collective Biographies and the Shaping of Collective Female Intellectual Authority in Enlightenment Europe," aims to unravel the historical mechanisms and dynamics that underline female intellectual representation in Enlightenment

Europe. A member of the Huizinga Institute's Women's Writing in History Network, she is also an active participant of the KU Leuven's Faculty of Arts Diversity Network.

Bodies of Knowledge

Room: Wortelnoot

Chair: Jolien Gijbels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Louise Benson James (Universiteit Gent), "Gut Health and Female Rejuvenation in Medicine and Popular Fiction 1910s-1920s"

This paper examines two bestselling popular novels, one British and one American: Marie Corelli's *The Young Diana* (1918) and Gertrude Atherton's *Black Oxen* (1923). Both engage with the female rejuvenation craze of their day, depicting women who regain their youth through the power of scientific anti-aging technologies. The novels point to two prominent methods of rejuvenation in this period: endocrines and arteries, aka hormones and diet. I'm interested in the overlap between the two through the primacy of the metabolism, and how this connection is embedded in works of popular fiction.

Analysing these novels alongside medical texts and culture, I make two key arguments. First, that these novels and their authors disrupted gendered ideas about science and the body in the literary marketplace, and decisively intervened in the consumer market for rejuvenation treatments. Second, that the novels speak to a growing understanding of the role of gut bacteria, and increasing popular awareness of the potential of food, diet, vitamins and probiotics to radically impact the body. Gut health is very much in the spotlight today, microbiome science having spurred a new era of scientific research and public fascination with the benefits of attending to the gut microbiome and the bacteria that live on us and inside us, in relation to physical health and mental health. This paper considers how popular fiction of this earlier era visualised the digestive system during a period in which the science of gut health was burgeoning, and how digestive knowledge was in turn "culturized" through popular fiction. Easily digestible and widely consumed, these largely forgotten bestsellers offer a barometer of the reading public and the knowledge they had access to, and are thus revealing of popular understandings and narratives of science – both rejuvenative and digestive.

Bio-note

Dr Louise Benson James is a senior FWO fellow based at Ghent University in the English Department. Her research examines literature, culture, and medicine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly hysteria, nervous disorder, internal organs, and the digestive system, in women's fiction, popular fiction, and periodicals. She is also co-editor of the *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* (DiGeSt).

- Ruth Van Hecke (UCLouvain – KU Leuven), “‘Now You’re All Grown Up, A Woman.’ The Female Adolescent in Dutch Women’s Fiction from the 1930s”

Around 1900, the Western idea of youth as a socio-cultural life stage between childhood and adulthood emerged, influenced by several profound social changes and scientific developments (Neubauer 1992; Savage 2007). This new stage of life was largely constructed from an adult, normative perspective, in which youth was viewed as incomplete and deviant, with adulthood as the natural goal. Moreover, the dominant concept of youth was heavily coded as masculine: the exponentially growing body of publications on youth typically concerned the male adolescent, while female experiences of youth were marginalized, ignored, or recognized only as deviant variants of the male model (DeLuzio 2007).

These gendered and normative constructions of youth were not confined to scientific or social discourse. The interwar period saw a remarkable increase in literary representations of so-called “mature youth” which likewise engaged in shaping and redefining the boundaries of adolescence. These texts actively contributed to the construction of youth as a distinct life stage (Neubauer 1992), yet they remain strikingly underexplored in cultural-historical research. Even in the few literary-historical studies on youth that do exist (e.g. Neubauer 1992; Dählke 2006), little attention is paid to the representation of the female adolescent (Gale 2010). Yet there was a significant rise in female novelists in (Dutch) literature (Van Boven 1992) who did engage with depictions of the “older girl” as a literary figure. This paper examines how the female adolescent is represented and constructed in some of these novels. I place these literary representations in dialogue with contemporary non-literary discourses on youth, to show how literature engaged with them and to explore to what extent these works offered space for alternative conceptions of youth and for gender-specific identity formation. Drawing on insights from age studies (e.g. Edelstein 2019; Barry & Skagen 2020) and gender studies (e.g. Driscoll 2002), and through close readings of *Wanordelikheden rondom een lastig kind* (1933) by Mary Dorna, *Waren wij kinderen...?* (1933) by Fré Dommissie, and *Internaat* (1930) by Eva Raedt-De Canter, I demonstrate how the female adolescent is narratively constructed in relation to adulthood, masculinity, sexuality, and social expectations.

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Bio-note

Ruth Van Hecke completed her Master's degree in Comparative Modern Literature at Ghent University (UGent) in 2024. She is currently affiliated with UCLouvain as a research and teaching assistant in Dutch literature, and with KU Leuven as a research associate in the Dutch Literature research group. Her current research focuses on the representation of youth, contestation, and subcultures in Dutch-language literature.

Worldbuilding through Narrative

Room: Macassar

Chair: Michael David Rosenfeld (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Jante Borremans (Universiteit Antwerpen), "Rehumanizing the Witch: Adults' Reflections on the Female Antagonist in Grimm's 'Hansel and Gretel'"

In fairy tales, a trend of antagonism surrounds women; Cinderella's stepsisters are jealous of her love story, "Snow white's" queen is jealous of her fair stepdaughter, and other (step)mothers are often unworthy of their title or dead (McDermott 2017, 2). When considering older women in fairy tales, a multifaceted sense of discrimination exists on the crossroads of gender and age. It is on this intersection that witches can be found. Among those is the witch from "Hansel and Gretel," who is described as beastly and inhuman by her sense of smell, the color of her eyes, and her questionable food preferences. Any nuance to her character, such as any potential motivations she might have to hold Hansel and Gretel captive in her gingerbread house, however, remain unclear. This study seeks to understand to what extent adults can still find bases for engagement with the witch in this tale through storyworld possible selves (SPS) (Martínez 2018). In semi-structured interviews, four participants were asked about their memory of Grimm's fairy tale and their experience of its antagonist. All participants showed a will to engage with the witch, even though they found that the story does not give them much opportunity to do so. In a variety of different ways, each participant was able to make sense of the witch's behavior to some extent: through historical views on witches, potential psychological issues, or even by using the story's own logic against itself. In each instance, they manage to rehumanize a character whose humanity was taken away.

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Bio-note

Jante Borremans was a student of the Advanced Master's in Literary Theory, academic year 2024-2025, at the Catholic University of Leuven, the Universities of Ghent and Antwerp, and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Linguistics, in combination with Theater and Film Studies from the University of Antwerp, as well as a master's degree in English Literature, Linguistics, and General Literary Theory from the same university. Her research mostly focuses on children's literature, adaptation studies, and cognitive narratology.

- Oluwadunni Talabi (Universität Bremen), "Gilead's Silenced Specter and the Limits of White Feminist Futurity: Blackness as Method in Rae Giana Rashad's *The Blueprint*"

Given our current globalized andro-fascist climate, Margaret Atwood's influential dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has re-emerged in literary, cultural, and sociopolitical conversations, and is widely invoked as a prophetic, truth-telling feminist text. The conversations in the sociopolitical scene are often mobilized unidirectionally, focusing heavily on Gilead's totalitarian regime, its andro-nationalist character, and its strategies of control, while paying far less attention to the female protagonist's identity, positionality, and subjectivity within the unfolding of the plot. In the literary domain, the novel is often referenced as a critical dystopian work that marked a departure from the limitations of the classical dystopian form. Within this context, literary critics have examined the protagonist's subjectivity within the broader dystopian narrative, offering diverse interpretations of Offred as a victim, a complicit subject, or a subversive heroine. As a victim, analyses focus on the regime's hyper surveillance and mechanisms of control. As a complicit subject, analyses emphasize her passivity prior to the rise of Gilead. And as a subversive heroine, critics foreground her use of language/stream of consciousness. What remains lacking in these analyses, however, is a critical engagement with the history, memory, and the deployment of affect and pedagogy that operate as dystopian mechanisms of degradation within the novel.

Alternatively, Rae Giana Rashad's lesser-known debut novel, *The Blueprint*, engages with similar dystopian themes, centering a Black female protagonist navigating a reality where an algorithm controls every aspect of her and other Black women's existence. In her author's note, Rashad acknowledges *The Handmaid's Tale* as a foundational influence on her writing. However, where Atwood marginalizes the Black experience and silences race, a category which is deeply intertwined with western theonomy, *The Blueprint* foregrounds this "locus of abjection" (Wilderson III 2020, 12), offering a much-needed critique and interrupting the dominant ways dystopian futures are imagined and connected to

the past. Thus, my presentation creates a dialogue between the two texts to juxtapose and unpack the world building strategies of history, memory, affect, and pedagogy vital to the dystopian form. In analyzing these texts, I examine how Blackness and the lack of, as a formula, intervenes in both novels at the level of plot, characterizations, narrative position and conclusion. I examine how the dystopian narrative form is altered when Blackness is inserted into the plot as a formula rather than an intersectional add-on, and how Blackness unfreezes histories, memories, pedagogies, and the sticky affect of resistance, all of which are vital to the dystopian narrative form. Finally, I examine how world building literature, grounded in history and memory and the historical use of affect and pedagogy, can inform feminist critical praxis?

Bio-note

Dr. Oluwadunni Talabi (she/her) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Chair of North American and Postcolonial Studies, and the executive director of the Bremen Institute of Canadian and Québec Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research and teaching spread into the fields of Black, queer, critical future, and environmental studies. Her first monograph *Woman, African, Other: Black Feminism and Intersectionality in the Contemporary Works of African Diasporic Women* was published by Transcript in June 2025.

Parallel Panels 2

Memoirs and Autotheory by Women Writers

Room: Auditorium

Chair: Tola Ositelu (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Saleh Chaoui (U Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah – Fez), “Between Agency and Victimhood: Forms of Self-Assertion in Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman’s Journey* (1999) and Wafa Faith Hallam’s *The Road from Morocco* (2011)”

This paper examines forms of self-assertion in two memoirs—*A Border Passage* (1999) by Egyptian writer Leila Ahmed and *The Road from Morocco* (2011) by Moroccan author Wafa Faith Hallam—with reference to Arab identity as a fluid notion and its connection to Islam and gender hierarchies. In the context of contemporary gender anxieties, particularly surrounding the representation of Muslim women in Western discourse and the policing of female mobility across cultural boundaries, I argue that Ahmed and Hallam, despite being modern and privileged Muslim women from the Arab world, assert themselves in very different ways in their writings as they navigate transnational spaces. Their memoirs reveal how gender anxieties operate as mechanisms of control both within patriarchal home societies and Orientalist Western contexts, while demonstrating how women’s autobiographical writing becomes a site of resistance to these constraining narratives. Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s concept of “implicated subjects,” this paper analyzes how both authors negotiate the complex terrain between agency and victimhood, refusing the binary categorizations that dominate Western feminist and Orientalist discourse. Through examining how Ahmed’s and Hallam’s multiple journeys demonstrate resilience against political and cultural hurdles in diverse cultural settings, this paper investigates their memoirs as family archives that allow the authors to present alternative ways of seeing and exploring personal, familial, and national histories.

Bio-note

Saleh Chaoui is a lecturer at the University of Sidi Mohamed ben Abdellah, Morocco. His main research interests include postcolonialism, postsecularism, gender studies, diaspora fiction, and transnationalism, with particular focus on exploring the intersections of faith, identity, and agency in Anglophone Muslim literature. He has presented his research at numerous international conferences across Europe. His work has been published in several international journals, including *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (“Ensoulng Agential Praxis in a Secular World: A Sufi Spiritual Turn in Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*”) *Religion and Gender* (“Navigating the Religious in the Cosmopolitan: Displaced Muslim Female Identities in Camilla Gibb’s *Sweetness in the Belly*”) *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, and *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

- Helena Van Praet (Universiteit Gent – FWO), “Mirrors, Women, and Water in Contemporary English- and Dutch-Language Autotheory”

There has been a long-standing and problematic association of women and water in the (western) imagination, as the field of ecofeminism has shown and criticized (e.g. Gaard 2001). Indeed, woman-as-water has alternatively been associated with a flowing female pollution in antiquity (e.g. Carson 2000), a destructive wave in Judeo-Christian imagery (Helmreich 2017), religious ecstasy due to her wet nature in medieval times (e.g. Fraeters 2004), and a distant deep as a “territory of desire” to be conquered in fascist ideologies (e.g. Theweleit 1987: 294). Now that questions of water become increasingly more important as the Blue Humanities take off (e.g. Mentz 2024), it seems time to take stock of this woman-as-water imagery. Analyzing a contemporary selection of autotheoretical writings (in translation) by Canadian, Dutch, and Belgian authors Anne Carson, Lieke Marsman, and Anneleen Van Offel, this paper will consider how women writers reimagine questions of feminine identity through water at the intersection of ecology, self-other relations, and the body. Building on Astrida Neimanis’s (2013, 2017) identification of types of “hydro-logics,” this paper will argue that water functions as a (distorting) mirror in these works, shaping what these women writers would like to see in our current societies. Reflecting on the complexity of women-water relationships, these autotheoretical writings consider what role water can play in imagining more sustainable futures for women in the Anthropocene.

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Bio-note

Helena Van Praet is an FWO Junior Postdoctoral Fellow in Dutch and Comparative Literature at Ghent University. Her current project studies an autotheoretical impulse in contemporary Dutch-language literature in dialogue with North American works of autotheory. She received her PhD in Comparative Literature

from UCLouvain in 2024 for her dissertation on the experimental poetry of the Canadian poet and classics scholar Anne Carson and the Dutch poet-composer Rozalie Hirs. Her work has been published in journals such as *Textual Practice*, *Spiegel der Letteren*, and *Poetics Today*.

Gender and Sexuality in Genre Fiction

Room: Rookkwarts

Chair: Janine Hauthal (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Aya Chriaa (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), The Afterlives of Slavery: Posthuman Memory and Queer Bodies in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*

In her novella *The Deep* (2019), Rivers Solomon imagines an underwater society inhabited by descendants of enslaved African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. By creating historically traumatized mermaid-like beings who are simultaneously queer, genderfluid, and trans-species, Solomon reveals black identity and culture as "temporally flexible" and complex through the imagination of the Black body (Lillvis 2017: 3). This paper situates *The Deep* within the theoretical frameworks of posthumanism, post-Black studies, and queer theory to examine how the Black body is reclaimed from the historical dehumanization of slavery and repositioned as a site of posthuman possibility. I argue that through Yetu, an intersex character who carries the collective traumatic memory of her people, the novel deliberately constructs a non-human and non-gendered Black being to extend intergenerational trauma beyond anthropocentric and individual frameworks. As previous studies have mainly concentrated on themes of ecology and kinship within the novel, this paper analyzes how *The Deep* reworks the notion of the historically racialized Black body, giving it new meaning through the lens of posthumanism. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Solomon's posthuman and queer aesthetics engage with contemporary Black speculative fiction, expanding Afrofuturist discourse.

Bio-note

Aya Chriaa holds a master's degree in Linguistics and Literary Studies from the University of Ghent (2023-24) and is a teaching assistant in Linguistics and Literary Studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where she is a member of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings. She is applying for funding for a PhD project on Posthumanism and Corporeality in Contemporary African futurism under supervision of Prof. Bekers and Prof. Caracciolo.

- Christina Slopek-Hauff (TU Dortmund), "Who's Afraid of ... Female Desire beyond the Man? *Carmilla* and Its Literary Afterlives"

A classic of English literature, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire novella *Carmilla* (1872) has often been cited for its influence on horror and vampire writing and for breaching the taboo surrounding same-sex desire in Victorian times. It narrates a story with strong undertones of desire between two young women, one of whom turns out to be a vampire. Despite the allure of a story that succeeds in narrating

female desire for other female individuals, a careful reading of the novella's ending, the monster being vanquished by male characters, also reveals reinstallation of order and stifling of non-heterosexual desire. Thus, the story ultimately chimes in with discourses betraying anxieties around female sexuality and, specifically, female desire that does not involve men (Dyhouse 2017).

These worries that the instability of the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990, 7) generates are part of the answer to Judith Butler's big question, "Who's afraid of gender?" (2024). Against this background, this paper traces instances of non-heterosexual female desire in contemporary British horror writing. Bringing together gender, lesbian and queer theory (Butler 2024; Jagose 1994; Malatino 2019) and horror (Costorphino and Krämmel 2018) and gothic studies (Hogle 2014), I argue that the inclusion of female desire that does not involve men in stories of fear touch on larger anxieties surrounding female agency and sexuality. They play with fears in the sense of Josie Medd's "lesbian scandal" (2012), variously reinforcing or subverting them. As my paper will show, such narratives by Kirsty Logan, Angela Carter, Helen Oyeyemi and others reverberate with echoes of earlier social and literary discourses, refracting them through modern intersectional lenses and shedding light on how constructions of fear and gender are frequently interconnected.

Bio-note

Christina Slopek-Hauff holds a postdoc position in the section for British Studies at TU Dortmund. She recently completed her doctoral studies at HHU Düsseldorf, where she worked in the section of Anglophone Literatures / Literary Translation. In the context of her dissertation on psychology and African fiction, she also was a visiting researcher at Universiteit van Amsterdam in 2024. Christina Slopek-Hauff has widely researched and taught medical humanities, postcolonial literatures, queer and gender studies and ecocriticism and she has published in *Anglia*, *Postcolonial Text* and with Brill, among others. Next to other projects, she is working on the publication of her first book (under review with Brill) and co-editing *Participation in Postcolonial Wor(l)ds*, under contract with Routledge.

Gender Roles and the Private/Public Body

Room: Magnetiet

Chair: Inge Arteel (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

- Charlotte Becuwe (Universiteit Antwerpen), "The dialectics between the 'mère intrépide' and the 'mère coupable' in Jean Racine's oeuvre"

What is a good mother? Is maternal love truly unconditional? For the past few decades, these questions are at the centre of sociological, feminist, historical and literary debates. In France in particular, Elisabeth Badinter caused a scandal with her *Histoire de l'amour maternel (XVIIe – XXe siècle)* (1980), where she questions the innate character of maternal love: a mother is not naturally good and sometimes behaves irresponsibly towards her children. This duality of the maternal figure has, however, already been explored for a long time in French literature, particularly in the tragic theatre of Jean Racine in the 17th century. His plays, among which *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre*, paint an even more

ambivalent portrait of the woman as she desperately tries to navigate between her roles as mother and wife or mistress, between maternal love, marital duty and passionate love.

My contribution examines how Jean Racine elaborates the tension between a “good” mother and a “bad” mother in *Andromaque* and *Iphigénie* and how this maternal characterisation relates to the depiction of the wife. The conception of the tragic hero of Aristotle, according to which the tragic character does not have to be entirely good nor entirely bad, serves as a basis for an in-depth exploration of the dialectics between these two feminine roles. An analysis of the discourses of the mothers-wives themselves, the filial figures and the other characters concerning the protective attitude of these women vis-à-vis their children and their behaviour vis-à-vis their husbands will feature the woman in all her facets. Thus, my contribution sheds new light on the roles of the mother and the wife in Racine’s oeuvre as well as on their truly tragic nature.

Bio-note

Charlotte Becuwe obtained her bachelor’s degree in Linguistics and Literature, with the options French and TFL (theatre, film and literary studies), in 2024 at the University of Antwerp (summa cum laude). Her bachelor’s thesis was about the children’s and young adult literature of Bart Moeyaert. She completed her master’s degree in French Linguistics and Literature in June 2025 (summa cum laude). Her master’s thesis in French literature, *La dialectique entre la « mère intrépide » et la « mère coupable »*. *La figure maternelle dans Andromaque, Britannicus, Iphigénie et Phèdre de Jean Racine*, examines the characterisation of mothers and wives in the oeuvre of Racine in 17th-century France. During her master’s year, she represented the University of Antwerp in the jury of the *Choix Goncourt de la Belgique*. In September 2025, she started a Master of Teaching in Languages. In addition, she is preparing a PhD proposal in French literature.

- Anna Praet (Universiteit Gent), “Masks, Materials, and Stammers. A gender theory-based retrospective reading of Patrizia Vicinelli’s *à, a. A,*”

In her debut poetry collection *à, a. A,* (1966), Patrizia Vicinelli (1943-1991), author and actress associated with the Italian neo-avant-garde, offers a radical exploration of the relationship between language and gender, materialising language and performing a transgressive lyrical ego. The “poema concreto” (Spatola 2013) is characterised by visual experiments, audio recordings, and onomatopoeia and neologisms. Despite its relevance, this work remains overlooked in existing research on Vicinelli, which is often feminist-oriented. While the presence of a male lyrical ego has been noted and described as “unsettling” (Valentini, 2021), a further text-oriented analysis of the collection is lacking. The striking shift from a female to a male lyrical ego, in a work that, as Spatola argues, must be approached as a whole, nevertheless raises fundamental questions about how subjectivity and gender are staged and potentially subverted within the text’s poetic discourse.

My hypothesis is that this shift functions as an ironic performance and sharp criticism of essentialist and pathologising tendencies within psychoanalysis. In doing so, as a female outsider, she also criticises tendencies within the Italian neo-avant-garde. Psychoanalysis had gained influence within this movement, which profiled itself through an interdisciplinary scientific interest. Within a staged “masculine” literary discourse, evoked by an objectifying clinical discourse, intertextuality and the masculine lyrical ego, pathologised “feminine” language use is employed poetically. In this way, the masculine lyrical ego ultimately also lapses into an “afasia critica” (Vicinelli 1966): a suspension of linguistic speech in which the materiality of language comes to the fore and the logocentric is undermined from within.

To support this hypothesis, I draw on Julia Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic (1974), which helps to grasp the formal innovation in Vicinelli’s work. This is supplemented by critiques by Carla Lonzi (1974) and Judith Butler (1990) of the respectively misogynistic tendencies and essentialist assumptions of psychoanalytic thinking. A retrospective reading of Vicinelli’s *à, a. A*, using later gender-theoretical concepts, reveals how her work not only anticipated but also critically reflected on dominant discourses around gender and language.

With this analysis, I aim not only to contribute to a revaluation of female voices within the Italian neo-avant-garde but also to offer a starting point for reflection on how later concepts within gender theory can deepen the (re)interpretation of earlier experimental poetry and, by extension, literary texts.

Bio-note

Anna Praet is a PhD student at Ghent University. Her research project focuses on neo-avant-garde poetry by female Germanophone and Italian writers. She holds an MA in German and Italian Linguistics and Literature, as well as an MA in Comparative Modern Literature, both of which she obtained at Ghent University. Her first master’s thesis examined utopia and self-love in Barbara Köhler’s *Deutsches Roulette* (1991). Her final master’s thesis focused on translingual strategies in Uljana Wolf’s *Muttertask* (2023) and their intersection with the ethics of care.

Approaching Masculinity in Twenty-First-Century Prose and Drama

Room: Wortelnoot

Chair: Luke Shirock (Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris 3)

- Lore Goossens (Universiteit Antwerpen – Universiteit Gent), “Trauma as Old as Time? Beastly Transformations and Masculinity”

“And they lived happily ever after”: this classic phrase highlights the expectation that fairy tales end positively, despite the dark and gruesome elements these stories historically feature (Tatar 1987). Even containing murder, kidnapping or abandonment, fairy tales barely dwell on the psychological consequences.

Retellings for young adults often delve into this 'dark side' of the fairy tales by focusing on the traumatizing effects of these events to appeal to their audience who have outgrown the child-friendly versions of the tales.

This presentation looks at the representation of trauma in two "Beauty and the Beast" retellings for young adults: Brigid Kemmerer's *A Curse So Dark and Lonely* (2019) and Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015). Both the male and female characters demonstrate symptoms of trauma, but this presentation zooms in on the male representation of trauma through the figure of the Beast. In both YA retellings, the physical transformation of the Beasts is closely tied to a traumatic history or even constitutes a trauma by itself. I will explore the link between the Beast as a particularly embodied manifestation of trauma and masculinity, specifically toxic masculinity and men's mental health. In today's context that proclaims crises in both mental health and masculinity, it is vital to explore how the traditional stories adapt to a contemporary context and what lessons they might contain for today's young adults.

Bio-note

Lore Goossens is a PhD student at the University of Antwerp and the University of Ghent, where she researches the representation of bodyminds in young adult fairy-tale retellings. Her research interests primarily revolve around popular and children's literature, including romance, fantasy and young adult literature. She has co-authored a chapter titled "Fairy Tales as Children's and Young Adult Literature" for the upcoming *Routledge Companion to Fairy Tales* with professor Vanessa Joosen.

- Tara MacMahon (Cambridge University), "Performing Manhood: Confessional Monologues and Masculinity in Katie Cappiello's *Now That We're Men*"

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not an innate identity but a series of repeated acts that become naturalized and perceived as essential over time. Individuals, therefore, perform gender by enacting roles that conform to, subvert, or resist established norms. Katie Cappiello's play *Now That We're Men* (2020) extends this framework by portraying young male characters navigating the complexities of masculinity in contemporary American society. Set in the weeks leading up to prom, the play follows five high school juniors through six scenes addressing issues such as shame and insecurity about penis size, sexual performance, sexuality, homophobia, and the pressure to surpass their fathers' masculinity. While much of the play features ensemble scenes where the characters 'try on manhood' (Fumusa, 2020, p.15), the boys also deliver intimate confessionals that expose their interior struggles. As Dominic Fumusa notes in the Introduction, these moments reveal the boys' profound need for love and acceptance and highlight the exhaustion of constantly performing masculinity—not just on stage, but in everyday life (p.16). Drawing on scholarship that examines the monologue as both a mode of personal testimony and a performative expression of identity (Wallace, 2006; Paterson, 2015), alongside contemporary discourses on masculinity and its challenges for young men (Reichert, 2019; Orenstein, 2020; Brown, 2021; Reeves, 2022), this analysis examines each boy's confessional to uncover what it reveals about his inner life and struggles with performing masculinity. I argue that these confessions operate

as spaces of vulnerability and resistance, where normative masculine ideals are negotiated, contested, and sometimes internalized.

Bio-note

Tara MacMahon is a third-year PhD student at the University of Cambridge, where she dives deep into what constitutes a 'good guy' in current literary discourse. Her research unpacks how young male characters in YAL navigate masculinity, rape culture, and the tricky yet tenacious 'good guy'/'bad guy' binary. Before landing in Cambridge, Tara studied at Gettysburg College and earned a Master's in English Literary Studies at Durham University. She also spent three years teaching English to teens in Pennsylvania, U.S.A.—and, despite the voice in her head urging her to reconsider, she audaciously and somewhat eagerly plans to return to the classroom in those fabled post-PhD years (if they actually exist).

Cultural Translations

Room: Macassar

Chair: Kris Van Heuckelom (KU Leuven)

- Yunqian Wang (Universiteit Gent), "Performing Mulan: Female Aspirations in the Creation and Reading of Boy's Love (Tanbi) Fiction"

This study focuses on the phenomenon of Tanbi literature in the Chinese internet context, examining why female audiences dominate its creation and reading practices, and what drives their engagement. Originating from modern Japanese literature and adapted through anime culture, "Tanbi" (耽美) has evolved in China's online sphere into a form of BL (Boys' Love) literature centered on female audiences. Unlike queer literature that emphasizes identity politics, Chinese Boy's Love Fiction are primarily created and consumed by heterosexual women, who construct a unique subculture of "Fujoshi (腐女) Culture" through romanticized depictions of same-sex relationships between men.

As a literary practice deeply involving female communities, Tanbi Fiction allows women to engage in a form of "gender performance" akin to Mulan's cross-dressing in traditional narratives. Drawing on Chinese feminist scholar Dai Jinhua's analysis of Mulan, whose image in modern China symbolizes "women holding up half the sky" but at the cost of erasing femininity to become "genderless masked heroes," this study argues that Tanbi creates a virtual space for female identity experimentation. Here, women transform from "imitating male social roles" to "occupying male gender identities" by endowing male characters with emotional agency. This is not about hiding female identity to enter the male world, but reconfiguring emotional power dynamics through male avatars—a reversal of traditional gender hierarchies. The research connects the psychological mechanisms of gender substitution to China's socio-political context, particularly the "degendering" effects of policies like the one-child policy and "gender equality" discourses, which clash with traditional norms of wifehood and motherhood. Tanbi offers a dual escape: male same-sex love avoids real-world gendered burdens (e.g., childbearing, domestic labor), while portraying men's tender emotions subtly challenges "hegemonic masculinity."

Analyzing representative works from platforms like Jinjiang Literature City(晋江文学城) and Tomato Novels(番茄小说)—such as *The Untamed* (魔道祖师) World

of honour (山河令) and their adaptation. This study explores how Tanbi subverts gender power structures implicitly. It also examines the co-optation of Tanbi by mass culture: while capital commercializes male characters as consumable “objects of gaze” for female visual pleasure, female audiences resist through fan discussions and reinterpretations, negotiating and challenging mainstream gender norms.

As a “gendered paratext” in the digital age, Tanbi reflects women’s post-Emancipation confusion about social roles and persistent gender double standards. By performing “Mulan-style” role reversal, women navigate moral boundaries and articulate unspoken desires. This study attempts to offer new perspectives on contemporary Chinese women’s emotional needs, aesthetic politics, and subcultural development, while providing insights for cultural industries and literary research.

Bio-note

Yunqian Wang is a PhD candidate at the Department of Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University. She has a Master of Arts degree from Shanghai University: Film (2024). Her current research project focuses on the literary representation of gender issues in the digital media space and the sociocultural motivations behind them. Her research interests focus on the presentation of literature in the media and literary modernity.

- Oliwia Napierala (Universiteit Gent), “From Invisibility to Resistance: Women Translators as Cultural Agents in Soviet Russia”

In Soviet Russia, literary translation was deeply entangled with state ideology, functioning as a mechanism of control and cultural propaganda. As scholars have shown (Witt 2011; Kamovnikova 2019), translators worked within a highly politicised environment, navigating systems of state-mandated censorship. Yet, especially during the post-Stalinist period of relative liberalisation – often referred to as the Khrushchev Thaw –, translation could also become a site of negotiation, creativity and even subtle resistance. However, despite the crucial role translators played in shaping Soviet literary culture, they have often been marginalised in literary historiography, cast as secondary and reproductive. For women translators, this invisibility was doubled: they were marginalised both as women and translators;

Drawing on Gender and Translator Studies (Simon 1996; von Flotow 2011; Kaindl, Kolb & Schlager 2021), this paper focuses on the role of women translators in Soviet Russia and explores how they operated as cultural mediators within a system that limited translators’ agency. Making use of (para)textual analysis, I will examine selected case studies to illustrate how these women navigated the demands of ideological censorship and argue that their work may be understood as a form of translational rebellion. By foregrounding the often-unseen work of women translators, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions around gender and translation, seeking to reposition these women not as shadows behind the text, but as vital, if often hidden, agents of translation.

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Bio-note

Oliwia Napierala is a Research and Teaching Assistant at the Russian section of the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication at Ghent University, where she is a member of the TRACE research group. She holds a Master of Arts in Translation and a Master of Arts in Multilingual Communication (Dutch, French and Russian) which she obtained at Ghent University. Oliwia is currently working on a PhD project on (feminist) women translators in Soviet Russia and Polish People's Republic.

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