Notes on a Phracking: Meta for The God Abandons Antony

by counterfog

Summary

annotations, cogitations, agitations
Greetings, star-sailor, and welcome to the meta for The God Abandons Antony (formerly We Are What We Are, or The God Abandons Antony) a pornophilosophical, hemi-parasitical Phracking novella!

Below, you'll find chapter-by-chapter annotations that concentrate on the fic's historical and literary allusions with occasional meditations on points of character and canon. (I'll add to these as I can.) If you'd like to ask questions about any of these things (or other Phrack-writing business that may weigh heavy on your heart), feel free to comment and I shall try (though I may not always succeed) to answer in a timely fashion.

Progress: Chapter One annotations complete, Chapter Two annotations complete, Chapter Three complete, Chapter Four annotations complete, Chapter Five annotations complete, Chapter Six annotations in process.

Now rated "T" for allusions to the erotic imagination of the 1920s.

Annotations

CHAPTER ONE (complete)

1) August, 1929

This story takes place a few weeks after the finale of Miss Fisher's second season.

2) Epigraphs: I feel a thrill... and I am dying, Egypt, dying...

The first is a verse from Cole Porter’s “Don’t Look at Me That Way,” a song written for the musical Paris, which premiered in 1928, about a year before this story is set. Porter, a composer foundational to the Great American Songbook, was incredibly prolific in the 1920s. (He was also the writer of "Let's Misbehave," which Phryne and Jack sing together at the end of "Dead Air"). Like the other songs in Paris, “Don’t Look at Me That Way” was written to showcase the talents of Corsican French singer Irène Bordoni, who originated the part of Vivienne Rolland in the musical. You can hear Bordoni singing the song right here.

The second epigraph comes from Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, a tragic play that dates, most scholars think, to about 1607. As do nearly all Elizabethan tragedies (spoiler alert), Antony and Cleopatra kills off its eponymous characters by the final curtain. The lines quoted here are spoken by the Roman general Mark Antony (dying) to Cleopatra, queen of Egypt and his last consort. This is the first of rather a lot of Shakespearean allusions in We Are What We Are (excluding, of course, the alternate title for the story, The God Abandons Antony, which gestures at Shakespeare, even though it’s also the title of a poem by the twentieth-century Greek poet C.P. Cavafy.).

Phryne and Jack use A & C as a touchstone several times in Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries. In
“Ruddy Gore,” Jack quotes a famous description of Cleopatra, spoken in the play by Enobarbus (Antony’s loathsome lieutenant): “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety: other women cloy/The appetites they feed: but she makes hungry/Where most she satisfies” (II.i). “Murder in the Dark” sees Jack, reluctant to dress up in the Roman armor Phryne’s chosen for him, borrowing the play’s first description of Antony (which belongs to the minor character Philo) as the “[t]riple pillar of the world transform’d/Into a strumpet’s fool” (I.i) (Phryne herself is dressed as Cleopatra at the time and asks Jack for one “gaudy night”—Antony's phrase for how they ought to spend Cleopatra's birthday [III.xiii].)

One suddenly remembers three pillars appearing behind Jack at some point but one cannot seem to recall where. (ETA: aljohnson says the three pillars are part of the architecture at City South police station, the inspector's base of operations.)

Meanwhile, contemplating one of the bloodied pearls from “Murder à la Mode,” Jack quotes the message of Alexas, Antony’s messenger, to Cleopatra. The queen wants to know “[h]ow goes it with my brave Mark Antony?” Alexas replies that Antony misses her profoundly and has sent her a pearl kept warm with kissing: “He kiss’d,—the last of many doubled kisses,—/This orient pearl” (I.v.). To this flight of Jack’s fancy, Phryne responds by saying she doubts even Mark Antony would want to kiss this one.

It's interesting that the show has never had Jack quote Antony himself—so far as I’ve noticed! For one thing, it suggests that Jack identifies more instinctively with the minor characters caught up in the general’s great passions than he does with the general himself. Antony, interpreted in this fashion, represents something he’s afraid of becoming rather than something he already is. (He’s not, however, afraid to read Phryne as Cleopatra.) Jack seems to me to be working through the question of to what degree one wants to be—or can be—Antony.

The epigraphs link sex and death in ways that I hope pay off later on in the story.

3) The better part of valour is discretion

The waggish Falstaff in Henry IV, Part I (V.iv) employs these words to justify his cowardice in battle.

4) Shakespeare, I’m beginning to believe, is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

Phryne is, here, deliberately distorting a bon mot of the eighteenth-century wit Samuel Johnson: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” James Boswell, Johnson’s first biographer, tells us that his subject made this remark late in the day on April 7th, 1775.

Jack is quick to correct her for obvious reasons. Phryne enjoys giving him a chance to show off his erudition—as well needling him a little.

5) The world’s our oyster...

More Shakespeare. This one’s from The Merry Wives of Windsor (II.ii). Pistol, one of a crew of ruffians, makes this remark to Falstaff (a character so popular in the history plays that Shakespeare brought him back for an encore in Merry Wives).
6) Miners in Rothbury, bankers in New York

Phryne’s referring to the labor disputes in Rothbury (New South Wales) that would eventually explode into the Rothbury Riot of December, 1929, in which police shot into a crowd of miners, killing one bystander and wounding forty-five men. In August, when this story takes place, the miners had been locked-out for about five months.

Bankers in New York—this one’s just a touch disingenuous on my part. The American stock market crash of Black Tuesday (October 24th, 1929) ushered in the Great Depression, whose shockwaves were felt globally. Although there had been a small crash on Wall Street in March of 1929 and the country was experiencing recession by early August, the stock market in the same month was looking much more bullish. (The crash of the London Stock Exchange preceded the American event by about a month. Here’s a handy timeline.) In any case, you’ll have to imagine that Phryne is being seriously prescient about the movement of capital (maybe all that Marxist theory she’s been reading in her off-hours?).

7) Abbotsford’s chances for the Grand Final

Australian Rules Football is next on Phryne’s list of possible conversation topics (She has a lot of interests and is deeply enmeshed in multiple aspects of her cultural landscape, both immediate and distant.) The Grand Final is the match that determines a champion team, which is then awarded the league’s Premiership. Because I am congenitally allergic to sports, I will not attempt to pretend I understand this one. Because I am congenitally allergic to researching sports, I will also warn you that many other people will have thought more deeply about this topic than I have.

In any case, we learn in “Marked for Murder” that Jack and Bert and Hugh Collins are Abbotsford fans. Cec and Dot barrack for West Melbourne. Curious—and I do mean cursory—research says that the West Melbourne club was defunct by 1907; Abbotsford appears to me to be fictional. These clubs would have competed either in the Victorian Football League or the Victorian Football Association (predecessors to the Australian Football League), which were both active in the twenties and interacted in ways that are truly obscure to me. Collingwood, the club representing the suburb where Phryne was born, had a fantastic run in the VFL between 1927 and 1930. Northcote were the VFA champions for 1929, as determined by a poorly-attended match played on October 15th.

One fun thing to do if you have a history fetish and/or want to get a sense for the textures of a post-print culture era is to play around in digitized newspaper and periodical archives where you can take in everything from the major political concerns of the time to points of social history: contemporary idioms, advertisements, activities, and fashions. The link above leads to a fascinating archive of Australian and New Zealander newspapers.

I have now written everything I ever intend to write about Australian Rules Football.

8) Victorian state election

Forty-five of sixty Legislative Assembly seats were on the line in the state of Victoria in 1929 (!)—the elections were held in late November. (Phryne could also have name-checked the Australian federal election, which was held in October, 1929; I chose to have her think local in this case.) Changes in the political make-up of the Victorian Legislative Assembly were actually fairly minimal
in 1929. The same year saw the decline of the Nationalist Party, which had grown increasingly conservative in the mid-twenties.

9) Tasmanian flood

In April 1929, flooding in Tasmania caused twenty-two fatalities and injured forty people. For Tasmanian communities, the floods had profound effects—the process of response and reconstruction was a long one.

10) Garbo and the Great Lover

Greta Garbo, the iconic Swedish film actress, first appeared with John Gilbert in the silent picture *Flesh and the Devil* (1926). They co-starred again in *Love* (1927) (tagline: Garbo and Gilbert in *Love!*), *A Woman of Affairs* (1928), and, in the twilight of Gilbert’s career, *Queen Christina* (1933). Gilbert, who was known as the Great Lover at the height of his fame, had fantastic chemistry with Garbo. Garbo, arguably, had chemistry with everyone alive, including—possibly—Louise Brooks, Lilyan Tashman, and Mercedes de Acosta. In any case, Garbo and Gilbert began a tempestuous off-screen romance—much to the delight of their fans and the gossip magazines.

For more on Garbo, see Anne Helen Petersen’s remarkable series of celebrity profiles, *Scandals of Classic Hollywood*, and read, of course, the short essay “Garbo’s Face,” in which the French philosopher Roland Barthes waxes lyrical about what it means to watch Garbo onscreen.

(n.b. Rudolf Valentino, who shows up in a later chapter, was also marketed as the Great Lover during the silent film era. Like Gilbert, he specialized in playing romantic leads and the two men were often positioned—by media report, at least—as rivals for the same parts.)

Australian cinema was undergoing a period of decline in the 1920s (as the *Miss Fisher* episode “Framed for Murder” alludes to) and about 94% of films shown in Australia were, during that decade, American imports. It’s good to understand this influx of Hollywood culture partly as a result of economic drivers and partly as a result of competing imperialisms, namely the new American media imperialism and legacy of British colonialism that shaped the material and psychic landscapes of Australia in the 1920s.

Anyway, the tl;dr version is that the filmic references in *We Are What We Are* are American and that this is historically accurate.

11) Celanese coats and Basque frocks

Celanese is a *type of rayon*, a faddish new fabric in the early twentieth century. It was light and cheap and manmade (cellulose derived, hence the name), bore a resemblance to silk (which was much more expensive), and lent itself to *prêt-à-porter* lines of clothing. That said, because of its novelty it was also a glamorous fabric. We tend, now, to fetishize artisanal and traditional fabrics—cotton, linen, silk, wool &c.—those on the cutting edge of fashion in the early twentieth century had a somewhat different relationship to the wonders of the synthetic: they thought it was the bee’s knees (for a time, at least).

A Basque frock is simply a dress with a Basque waist, which extends in a pointed “V” shape, a little like the bottom of a corset. Here’s a *pattern for a Basque gown* from the 1920s.
12) Realpolitik and the Kellogg-Briand Pact

Realpolitik or (translated from the German) “practical politics” is a theory of political pragmatism that stems from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European traditions of classical liberalism and is often associated with the Machiavellian wheeling and dealing of Otto von Bismarck, first chancellor of Germany, who engineered the unification of the German states through a canny combination of diplomacy and strategic warfare. Advocates of Realpolitik care less about acting from ethical or ideological reasons than they do about acting from material ones: they tend to be interested in the ends rather than the means. Some people consider Realpolitik a morally bankrupt theory, others a realistic answer to an unjust world. You can listen to a lecture about historical Realpolitik here.

In 1928, nations including France, Germany, and the United States (and Australia!) signed the Kellogg-Briand pact (or Pact of Paris), an international treaty in which the signatories promised not to use war to resolve conflicts (so basically the opposite of a Realpolitik gesture). The treaty was designed to go into effect on July 24th, 1929 and would have, accordingly, resurfaced in newspaper coverage from that year. Technically, this treaty is still in effect—and one of the unforeseen consequences of its idealism—it did away with the legal distinction between war and peace—is that it made it a lot harder to define aggressive national actions as war. If the Italians invade Abyssinia (as they did in 1935) but don’t call it a war, is it still a war? Not according to the Pact of Paris! Still, what a lovely notion—the idea that you could sign war out of existence with enough ink.

It is both salubrious and delightful to read primary documents; you can read the Kellogg-Briand pact here.

13) Mandatory Palestine and the flight of the Graf Zeppelin

Mandatory Palestine was a geopolitical entity designated and administered by British colonial rule from 1920-1948. (It occupied a chunk of the Southern Syria—also called the Levant). I won’t go too much into detail about British interests in the region, which are quite a tangled web, but this volume on the subject looks kind of fun if you’re inclined to find out more. Phryne is probably thinking about the Palestine riots of August, 1929, when tensions erupted between Arab and Jewish ethnicities, resulting in the loss of hundreds of lives in both communities (most casualties were the consequence of British police intervention!). Miss Fisher kind of sort of deals with 1920s Zionism in “Raisins and Almonds.”

The Graf Zeppelin (really the first Graf Zeppelin—there was a sequel) was an enormous German-engineered airship named after Ferdinand von Zeppelin, who was a Graf (German for the aristocratic rank of “count”). “Zeppelin,” used to mean airship, was a brand new coinage back in the late twenties. The Graf Zeppelin was enormous and luxurious and—also—primarily an exhibition craft meant to excite interest in commercial air travel. It made its first Transatlantic voyage (from Germany to the United States) in October, 1928 and had a very dramatic near-crash scenario over the Mediterranean in May of 1929. After an engine overhaul, it began its successful Weltrundfahrt 1929 (“Round-the-World”) trip. Lady Grace Drummond-Hay, correspondent for William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers, was aboard and—three weeks later—became the first woman to circumnavigate the globe by air. Media coverage was very intense and I like to imagine Phryne eagerly following Drummond-Hay’s dispatches, which were filed every time the zeppelin touched down.
14) A consummation devoutly to be wished

He’s referring to the drink, which he would like to be given discreetly, valorously, and quickly. But! Also Shakespeare. Hamlet in *Hamlet* this time—the most famous soliloquy of them all—from III.i. “Consummation” carries the connotation of sexual completion even as it refers to the act of suicide. Jack’s ironizing here, probably at least partly in response to Phryne’s innuendoes about swords and oysters, in which she’s solicited his semi-reluctant participation. He’s still a bit flustered by that and going for the low-hanging fruit, Bardolatry-wise, but—you know—the night is young.

13) Hemi-parasitical, of the genus Viscum

Mistletoe, of course. Call-back to the most delightful delivery of this line at the end of “Murder under the Mistletoe.” Fan fiction is hemi-parasitical. Fan fiction is mistletoe. Be sure to kiss your local purveyor.
Annotations

CHAPTER TWO (complete)

1) A Balthazar’s-worth of champagne

A Balthazar is an enormous bottle of champagne, equivalent to sixteen regular bottles. It’s also possible to get Methuselahs, Nebuchadnezzars, and Mechizedeks. After the magnum size, champagne bottles start taking their names from Biblical kings. That’s how you know they are serious. In any case, a Balthazar is an awful lot of bubbly, from which one can infer that the kiss is a good one.

At some point, this story featured a champagne coupe (those saucer-like pieces of stemware you see all the characters drinking from at special occasions, like Phryne’s birthday celebration in “King Memses’ Curse”). Coupes, rather than flutes, were the vessel of choice throughout the nineteen-twenties. Apocryphal stories have long circulated about the origins of the coupe—one of the most enduring is that it was designed to resemble the breast of Madame de Pompadour, Joséphine de Beauharnais (Napoleon’s first wife), or Marie Antoinette. Take your pick. This origin story imparts an extra edge of decadence to the coupe but is, disappointingly, false.

2) Evidence of what the Freudians called a normal narcissism

This is an allusion to Freud’s “On Narcissism” (1914), which Phryne has probably read at some point in her researches into human character (in between more hands-on experiences). For Freud, narcissism means “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities.” “Normal” or “primary narcissism” refers, meanwhile, to a healthy amount of self-love. According to Freud, the psyche requires a certain degree of narcissism in order to maintain an interest in self-preservation and self-care. Moreover, when you care for yourself, you’re also capable of caring for others in nourishing ways. Too much narcissism and you’re a megalomaniac, too little and you’re a melancholic. Phryne is hopeful that her own way of dealing with desire and pleasure falls into this golden mean.

3) Camellia, a Chinese communist

Camellia and Lin strike me as such missed opportunities. Sometimes I wonder what the show would have been like if they’d stuck around—and if they’d been allowed to be as fully human as the rest of the cast, rather than merely representing various things to Phryne and (to a lesser extent) Jack.

This show is sometimes terribly orientalizing, even when it thinks it’s doing something else. Western cultures in the 1920s were terribly orientalizing (and are generally not much better now). Let us acknowledge these things without attempting to excuse them and speak the name of Edward Said with all respect.
When Phryne is thinking (albeit not very precisely) of the dialectic, she’s probably invoking a passing familiarity with the Marxist method of **dialectical materialism**, most likely filtered through the thought of Hungarian thinker György Lukács, who published *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* in 1923. That said, there are a couple different versions of dialectical thought circulating in the 1920s, among them the Leninist and Soviet schools of thought, which grew out of the work of Marx’s interlocutor and collaborator Friedrich Engels.

Broadly defined, dialectical materialism posits that the world evolves—and that new qualities of being, thought, and action emerge from this process of historical evolution. The dialectical thinker is after, according to Lukács, “the relation between the tasks of the immediate present and the totality of the historical process.” This line of thinking is vital for understanding material visions of history, especially if you are interested in questions like *how might understanding relations between physical and social phenomena help us to effect change in the world?*

**Difficult! But also fascinating.**

**Commodity fetishism** is a little easier. That’s when people succumb to the illusion that commodities themselves (goods, objects, and services produced by human labor) possess inherent value—and that that value is economic in nature, having to do with money and markets and trade. According to Marx, it’s actually relationships among people that possess value, a value that commodity fetishism necessarily obscures by effacing the role of human actors.

Phryne cares a lot more about practice than theory, as a rule—and much more about induction than deduction. I doubt she’d have much patience for the more elaborate underpinnings of philosophical Marxism.

5) **Red-ragger rhetoric**

Burt and Cec are communists of some kind (it’s not quite clear what that kind is, though, other than proletarian). They are, in any event, **red-raggers** according to *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*. Red-ragger is an Australian term, mostly pejorative, for someone who flies the red flag of communism—literally or metaphorically speaking.

6) **This pretty abruption**

Here is some more Shakespeare for you! This time it’s from *Troilus and Cressida* (III.ii), another play about doomed lovers, one a prince of Troy, the other a daughter of a Trojan priest. They embark on an ill-starred love affair enabled by Pandarus, Cressida’s uncle, whose name gives us “pander.” (n.b. The ship used for human trafficking in “Unnatural Habits” is called the *Pandarus*). When Troilus and Cressida meet for their tryst in Pandarus’s garden, both lovers are tripping all over their tongues in excitement. “The gods grant—O my lord!” says Cressida. Troilus really wants to know how that sentence ends: “What should they grant?” he asks, “what makes this pretty/abruption?” The pretty abruption is, of course, her plea that the gods grant her something, which cuts off suddenly. Jack is using the phrase to mean the seduction he’s meant to be carrying out (hence pretty), which seems to him, in the moment, entirely discontinuous with the reality he was occupying before walked into Phryne’s house (hence abruption). He’s also probably thinking about how Troilus and Cressida ended (badly)—he has the sinking sensation that all pretty abruptions are ripe to go ill.
7) Your favoured term for the female anatomy

Phryne’s list of body words comes from a couple different places; my first stops for period-appropriate slang are literature, films, and digitized archives of popular magazines and newspapers. (There are also quite a few informal glossaries of jazz and jazz baby slang floating around on the internet, though they’re not always well-sourced.) Another great resource, especially for the naughtier words, which rarely found their way into mainstream publications, is the work of Jonathon Green, a lexicographer (maybe the lexicographer) of slang. See, for instance, these excellent timelines of vernacular words for body parts and sex acts. Green is also the editor of Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang, which is partially visible on Google Books and, too, of Green’s Dictionary of Slang, an epic, multi-volume attempt to cover five centuries of slang in the Anglophone world. (Fair warning: not many people are lucky enough to have access to the latter.) You might also take a look—the links in this sentence, by the way, are not safe for work—at various forms of pornography from the period in which you’re interested—magazines, photographs, and stag films (if your period of interest is the 1920s) will tell you a lot both about the erotic imagination of the time and the language of desire that evolved alongside it.

With the help of these resources (plus the Oxford English Dictionary), I’ve done my best to make sure all the language in TGAA is period appropriate, though there are probably one or two anachronisms here and there. But, that said, there’s often a bit of wiggle room in terms of dating words, which is an imprecise science. Estimates about the age of a word are usually based on its first recorded use, whether in writing or by other means. I generally assume, for example, that a word first recorded in 1935 began circulating verbally about five or ten years before it began to be written down. My guess, though, is that this distance collapses as you move further along in the twentieth century. (And I bet there’s barely any lag-time at all, these days.) It’s also good to remember that definitions aren’t fixed—and that the same word accrues a lot of different meanings over time.

Neither Phryne nor Jack are young enough to qualify as bright young things—I love that about them, by the way, even if I’m still serving my limited sentence in (so to speak) the lock hospital of youth—but Phryne has her finger on the pulse of contemporary language trends. She’s on top of all the latest euphemisms while Jack’s a little behind the times (he doesn’t even go to the pictures—or says he doesn’t, at any rate). His term of choice for women’s intimate bits is, as projectcyborg has noted, a very old Anglo-Saxon usage. The Oxford English Dictionary dates the word to the early thirteenth century, though it’s probably even older. CollingwoodGirl has pointed out that this term for women’s genitalia is also a favorite of novelist D.H. Lawrence, who used it to memorable effect in Lady Chatterley’s Lover (1928), which was famously banned for obscenity due to its graphic (for the time) depiction of sex. Jack’s definitely read Lady Chatterley (though there’s no way he’d admit to it in public). I love the idea that, for him, this word is some combination of forbidden, exciting, blunt, and beautiful (rather than derogatory).

8) Antony after the Battle of Actium

The Battle of Actium (31 BCE) was a major encounter between the naval forces of Octavian on one side and those of Cleopatra and Mark Antony on the other. (It took place in the Gulf of Ambracia, just west of Greece.) Historians consider this battle a precipitating event in the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire, though the battle itself was something of an anticlimax. Mark Antony and Cleopatra had spent some time on the promontory of Actium, attempting to lure Octavian into a land battle. Antony’s armies were stronger on land than at sea and would have had the advantage. But Octavian refused to be drawn. He starved out Antony and Cleopatra’s followers
by cutting off their lines of supply. Cleopatra argued—successfully—that their fleet ought to attempt a return to Alexandria, her capital in Egypt. Antony agreed and together they staged an attempt to break through Octavian’s blockade by way of the Gulf of Ambracia. Things went badly for Antony’s ships, which couldn’t match the agility of Octavian’s, and Cleopatra (so the story goes) gave the signal for own ships to flee—either panic or strategic retreat, depending on what you’re reading. Antony, seeing his ally departing, hurried after her with the remnants of his navy. An ignominious defeat, I guess.

For the version of Actium and its aftermath in _Antony and Cleopatra_, Shakespeare drew heavily on Plutarch’s _Lives_, which offers an account both of the battle and of the characters of its major players (though Shakespeare messes with the timeline for dramatic effect). The way _A&C_ tells it, Cleopatra sails away from Actium overcome by sudden terror: “O my lord, my lord,/Forgive my fearful sails!” she says to Antony. He, meanwhile, sees his retreat as a betrayal of his identity as a soldier, a ruler, and a man: “indeed, I have lost command.” He feels deeply reduced by this blemish on his honor—for which he blames Cleopatra as much as himself. But he values her love too highly to reproach her very much: “Egypt, thou knew’st too well/My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,/And thou shouldst tow me after” (<I>III.xi</I>) is about as much as he says by way of accusation; he knows he’s a fool for love.

(You can watch Janet Suzman and Richard Johnson play the relevant scene here, starting at about 8:30.)

Anyway, the emotional climate for Antony and Cleopatra after the Battle of Actium is another kind of battle: Antony has to grapple with new understandings of shame, defeat, and of his vulnerability to Cleopatra. Cleopatra, meanwhile, is both confirmed in her power over Antony and dealing with the heart-rending consequences of that power (if you read her sympathetically, that is; less sympathetic interpretations are certainly possible). Phryne, comparing Jack to post-Actium Antony, can’t help but contemplate how this dynamic might be playing out between them, particularly when it comes to Jack’s sense of sexual shame and her own determination to help him overcome it.

More on this in notes 10 and 12 for this chapter.

9) _One of Dr. Stopes’s cunning devices_

Family planning! Of which, as we know, Phryne is a staunch partisan. Dr. Marie Stopes was, among other things, an early advocate for women’s rights and the usage of contraceptives—although when it came to the latter, her motives were distressingly eugenicist. (She did not like the idea of miscegenation, for one thing.) The methods of birth control she endorsed included the deployment of cervical caps, olive oil soaked sponges, various experimental spermicides, and coitus interruptus. So. Marie Stopes: saint of public health and white supremacist. Sometimes you just take the good with the bad.

10) _Fall not a tear_

_Antony and Cleopatra_ (<I>III.xi</I>). Antony to the penitent Cleopatra after the Battle of Actium (note 8):

Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates
All that is won and lost; give me a kiss;

Even this repays me.

Although she can’t bring herself to quote it aloud, Phryne’s contemplating her hopes for Jack by way of this speech. Whatever he thinks he’s giving up by acting on his desires—and she’s not yet sure quite what that is—she doesn’t want him to regret it. Jack unwittingly completes the thought when he quotes Antony’s next line to Phryne at the end of the scene: “give me a kiss; even this repays me.” He’s still ambivalent about what sex will do to their relationship—and to his sense of himself—but he’s also reassuring Phryne that he’s taking responsibility, that he won’t blame her for whatever happens. In the show, Jack never quotes Mark Antony himself—only his satellites and retainers. In borrowing the Roman general’s speech now, he’s showing himself willing to try Antony—passionate, intemperate, larger-than-life Antony—on for size, even if the experiment presents a number of dangers, foreseen and un.

Probably a little precious to have them thinking about the same Antony & Cleopatra speech in perfect synchrony. Definitely a little precious. Mea culpa. I am not as I was in the reign of good Cynara

11) A stunt in a Buster Keaton picture

The film Phryne’s thinking of here is Steamboat Bill Jr. (1928). You can watch a house fall down on Buster Keaton here. I cannot be the first person to have noticed the potential of this sequence for erotic metaphors.

12) “Give me a kiss; even this repays me.”

See notes 8 and 10.
Chapter 3

Annotations

CHAPTER THREE (complete)

1) *Her namesake, a hetaira . . . judges of the Areopagus . . . Athenaeus . . . “toad”*

Phryne’s named after a famous ancient Greek courtesan (or *hetaira*) who was born in about 371 BCE—and really the two women would have gotten on famously. Someone is probably writing some version of that time-travel AU right now—or should be. Imagine double Phrynes in Classical Athens! Imagine them in twentieth-century Melbourne! Imagine them right now!

Classical Phryne’s real name was Mnēsarētē. Her *nom de guerre* (or perhaps her *nom de plaisir*), which really does mean “toad,” referred—possibly—to her tawny complexion. In addition to being renowned for her wit, beauty, and sex appeal, Phryne was also, like her twentieth-century counterpart, an artist’s model: apocryphally, she lent her likeness to Praxiteles’s Aphrodite of Knidos, one of the most notorious sculptures of the ancient world. The original no longer survives but you can see one of the many copies [here](#).

Classical Phryne was so great at being Classical Phryne that Athenian sex workers (and afterwards Roman ones) were often referred to by her name. There are lots of wonderful stories about Phryne, including the (probably false) anecdote about which Jack is thinking. She really was prosecuted before the Areopagus (the court of appeals in Classical Athens), though we don’t know what for exactly. (Impiety is one suggestion.) But the baring-of-the-breasts thing is probably a later accretion made up by Idomeneus of Lampsacus.

I’m partial to the historically dubious story that has Classical Phryne, who was very wealthy, offering to rebuild the walls of Athens if the city would inscribe on the new fortifications the words “*Alexander tore them down, but the courtesan Phryne erected them again.*” Athens was not amused. But I’ll bet Phryne was.

One of the major Classical sources for Phryne’s biography is the incomplete text of the *Deinosophistae* (or *Dinner-Table Philosophers*), written by the late second century CE grammarian Athenaeus of Naucratis. The volume Jack finds at the circulating library is probably the *Loeb Classical Library* edition from 1928, translated by Charles Burton Gulick. In the mid-nineteenth century, *Loeb Classical Library* started publishing dual-language editions of significant writing from the ancient world—and they’re still doing so today—the distinctive green and red covers have changed very little over the years! Classical education was not, according to my desultory investigations of middle and working class education in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australia, a particularly high priority, so Jack would have had to seek actively any information he wanted. (It makes sense to me, also, that he was more interested in cycling than in books as a child and that it was war that really made him a reader.)

Many of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Loeb’s were bowdlerized to remove references to homosexuality. I imagine that the defunct case Jack’s using as a pretext has to do with someone smuggling these allusions back into the texts and shipping the restored Classical legacy off to the far corners of the world. For my own peace of mind, I imagine, too, that Jack was pretty relieved when
the case lost funding. (His relationship to “obscene” literature is, as I’ve written it in later chapters, complicated.) None of this made it into the fic, of course. But now you know.

2) dog-eared back issues of Photo Bits

*Photo Bits* was a British periodical that ran from 1898-1914—it specialized in softcore pornography and shows up, to boot, in the “Circe” chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Images from the magazine’s run appear to be scarce online, though I’m terribly curious about what it looked like. *Photo Bits* stopped publishing in December 1914, three or four months after Australia entered the Great War (depending on how you count involvement), which is why I had Jack’s fellow combatants reading back issues rather than fresh ones.

3) Broodseinde and Ypres

The First Australian Imperial Force or AIF (in which we know Mr. Butler served back in his boxing days!) were first mobilized at the beginning of the Great War to challenge German possessions in New Guinea and the Pacific and Indian Oceans. (Because imperialism.) They were also involved in maneuvers in Egypt (defending the Suez Canal) and on the Gallipoli peninsula. In 1916, the AIF expanded its efforts, creating several new infantry divisions and moving troops from Egypt to the Western Front (France, Germany, Belgium, &c.). We know that Jack served in France and so, depending on when he joined up, it’s totally possible he’s already been to Egypt—if not necessarily to Alexandria, a city becomes important to this fic in later chapters.

(Where were Bert and Cec, by the by? What kind of war did they have?)

Broodseinde and Ypres are not far from one another—both are part of West Flanders in Belgium. Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) forces served in both battles. It’s confusing, because there were several engagements at Ypres. Jack’s probably thinking back to 1917, the Third Battle of Ypres (also known as the Battle of Passchendaele), which would put Lance Corporal Robinson in the Second Army, holding a long line of territory against mining, raiding, trench mortaring, and other horrors. If thinking about that makes you feel as grim as it does me, read Fahye’s “fighting the old ennui,” which features, among other excellent things, a sweetbitter flashback to a lighter wartime memory with a Mozart aria and an intoxicated Jack trifling with a piano in a deserted German manor house.

4) Shalimar

Ah, modernist scents, a topic very dear to my heart! Perfume culture changes drastically in the early twentieth century and—as with many other aspects of modern life—becomes glamorously synthetic. While the parfumiers of previous centuries generally brewed their potions from “natural” (although sometimes highly processed) elements, twentieth-century parfumiers experimented with a plethora of chemical novelties, including aldehydes (laboratory-manipulated organic compounds of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen). Moreover, these modern scents didn’t aim to smell like flowers or features of the natural world. Rather, they were designed to remind you only of themselves, to be as abstract, in other words, as a modern painting.

See, if interested, Luca Turin and Jessica Sanchez’s complementary books *Perfumes: the A-Z Guide* and *The Little Book of Perfumes: The Hundred Classics*. 

Chanel No. 5, composed in 1920 by the Russian-French Ernest Beaux for (of course) Coco Chanel, was one of the most successful perfumes to play with this artificial (and distinctly modern) palette of scent, though it wasn’t among the earliest. The formula for the House of Guerlain’s Jicky (1899) predates Beaux’s experiment for Chanel by a couple decades. Guerlain’s perfume would, in time, become the inspiration for Shalimar (1921 and 1925), which Jacques Guerlain himself supposedly produced by pouring a sample of vanillin into a bottle of Jicky.

We know that Phryne wears French perfume (though not what kind)—and Shalimar is certainly very French. It falls into the family of fragrances called “orientals” (term of art) and is marked by notes of amber, wood, vanilla, bergamot, jasmine, rose, incense, and a whole lot of other things. It’s an unmistakable scent and, well, sophisticated—also very modern—though it smells a bit old-fashioned by contemporary lights. In any case, it seemed a logical conjecture for Phryne’s French parfum of choice. I like to imagine Jack making a clandestine visit to a perfume counter to identify the scent, sniffing his way through the bottles of French origin until he finds the right one, dexterously not-quite-lying when the saleswoman asks him if he’s buying a gift.

5) the Bard’s Complete Works

I made up this edition of Shakespeare but it resembles, in its materials, a lot of cheaply published books from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jack has a much nicer Complete Works now. And he apparently keeps it at his office for light entertainment and in case his constable needs to consult it for romantic purposes. It delights me that he recommends Twelfth Night to Hugh. (Watch for some Twelfth Night in Chapter Four of this fic.) Of what speech is Jack thinking, though? Orsino has some good ones, though he’s such a sad-sack. I love Viola (as Cesario) courting Olivia for Orsino. And I love Olivia’s declarations to Cesario too. Antonio’s speeches to Sebastian are also full of queer passion and in multiple senses…

(Everyone in Twelfth Night ends up with the wrong person, if you ask me.)

(You didn’t ask me.)

Anyway, Jack. After-hours in his office with the Bard and a beer and his secret stash of biscuits. But it’s not all Shakespeare all the time. I feel quite certain that he occasionally condescends to read certain other, less legal materials during late nights at City South…

6) If we shadows have offended…

Shakespeare. The epilogue (V.i) to A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a speech delivered by the mischievous fairy Puck. For Jack, soldiering is a lot like being a shadow among shadows.

7) If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemn’d…

Shakespeare. The loyal Kent in King Lear (Liv). So loyal is Kent that he insists on donning a disguise to serve the irascible Lear even after the latter banishes him on a whim. This speech belongs to the moment when he decides to care for the unwitting Lear, who has just been stripped of monarchical privilege. (And now I just want to watch the third season of Slings and Arrows all over again.) Jack is a total Kent—and, as I intimate in Chapter One, obsessed with sublimating his desires into service. I think war would—for him—exacerbate that quality rather than not.
8) To move wild laughter in the throat of death…

Shakespeare. Biron (or Berowne, depending on the edition you're using), the joyous class clown of the court of the King of Navarre, to the clever Rosaline in Love’s Labours Lost (V.ii) when she charges him to use his comedic gifts to comfort the dying while the lovers endure a year-long separation. In response, Biron bemoans the impossibility of his task: “It cannot be; it is impossible/Mirth cannot move a soul in agony.” He gives in eventually and agrees to “jest a twelvemonth in an hospital.” Jack has an enviable sense of humor but hardly a Bironic one. Surrounded by death, his wartime self is very possibly dwelling in the “mirth cannot move a soul in agony” moment, which is why he so desperately needs to meet more people who are capable of living lightly. (Wait ’til 1928, Jack! You’re going to have all the light living you can handle.)

9) Peace! Thou talk'st of nothing…

Shakespeare. Romeo to Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet (Liv) just after Mercutio’s crested the virtuosic and volatile rhetorical torrent of the “Queen Mab” speech. He’s talking Mercutio down but it’s not quite taking. This is meta, I suppose, Romeo’s speech to Mercutio standing in for Jack’s less eloquent attempts to talk himself down from his fears of mortality and the various stressors of combat.

10) The bright day is done, and we are for the dark…

Shakespeare. Antony and Cleopatra again. This time it’s Iras, a lady-in-waiting, to Cleopatra in the play’s final scene (V.ii) just before the latter’s suicide by asp. More of Jack’s efforts to resign himself to the deaths of others and to his own.

11) The theory of dreams as wish-fulfillment…

Another Freud shout-out—it was in the cultural ether at the time (and still is)—but Jack has also read The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), though not with very much attention.

12) Good blokes. Bad blokes.

In other British Commonwealth countries, “bloke” is mostly just a synonym for “man.” In Australia, however, it takes on a special meaning and seems to function as one among several conflicted national ideals of masculinity. (Australians, of whom I am not one, are welcome to correct me about the nuances of this term.) A good bloke—and scholarship says that many Australians treat the term with irony—is practical, loyal, unaffected, good with people, enjoys a flutter, and can hold his liquor—a man’s man (or bloke’s bloke). One of the most enduring versions of this archetype is the title character from The Sentimental Bloke (1919), a silent film that would become foundational both to Australian cinema and codes of gender identity.

World War I did a lot to accelerate the ongoing crisis of modern, Western masculinities. This shows up all over the cultural landscape and literature is no exception. In D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover (linked in Ch. Two, note 7), Constance Chatterley’s aristocratic husband is
paralyzed from the waist down due to an injury received in the Great War. And his inability to sleep with her is one of the drivers of the plot. There’s also Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), in which Jake Barnes, the protagonist, suffers a war wound that renders him impotent (though it doesn’t paralyze him). The equation of sexual impotence with a loss of masculine agency is inescapable.

Jack, a product of a nineteenth-century upbringing, worries a lot about ethical ways to claim agency —both as a man and as an officer of the law—even though impotence isn’t his particular trial. Nonetheless, sex and desire mean differently to him than they do to Phryne—and the difference lies, I think, in how pleasure destabilizes identity. For Phryne, sex (though it may be unpredictable, strange, and always-novel) confirms her in herself. For Jack, it’s a potential undoing. One of the things I really like about his dynamic with Phryne is how quickly he comes to see her as an intellectual equal, even if he does struggle, occasionally, with how close to the edge she likes to dance and dress and drive. But she knows herself—she’s living her dreams, as she tells Jack in the final scene of “Framed for Murder.” Her independence terrifies him at times—as long as she is who she is, there’s nothing he can do to keep her safe, nothing except trust her. And sometimes that doesn’t feel just to him. (“It’s nice for other people to win, sometimes,” says Mac to Phryne over a game of billiards—and let’s acknowledge that this is a fair critique of Phryne’s character.) But Miss Fisher’s sense of her own powers has nothing to do with Jack, not in the final accounting, and it doesn’t take anything away from him either—he knows that and admits as much when he says in “Blood at the Wheel”—and at great cost—that he would never ask her to give up any part of herself —and sacrifices their partnership instead.

13) *dream-avatar*

I caviled over the use of the word “avatar,” since it’s of Hindi extraction and I didn’t know how early it had entered the English language in the sense of “manifestation.” But the OED says that usage has been around since about 1850, so I left it in.

14) *Sessue Hayakawa*

Oh, *Sessue Hayakawa*, where to begin with you? *Hayakawa* is one of my favorite semi-forgotten silent film stars. Born in Japan, he moved to the United States to study political economics at the University of Chicago (one of the precipitating events was a harrowing *seppuku* attempt on which I won’t dwell). After a couple years, he quit his studies with the intention of going back to Japan. But he stopped off in Los Angeles along the way and got distracted by the movies. His first film, *The Typhoon* (1914) made a huge splash (pun intended) and he soon became one of the highest-paid leading men in Hollywood, specializing primarily in romantic dramas, action films, and Westerns. Many of his silent films, including *The Dragon Painter* (1919), costarred his talented spouse, the actress *Tsuru Aoki*.

Hayakawa began his own very successful production company in 1918, partly in order to break away from the effects of American racism, one of which was yellow peril typecasting. (He even refused the title role in *The Sheik*, the movie—much beloved of Dot—that gave Rudolf Valentino his starmaking turn. More on *The Sheik* and orientalism when I write about Valentino for the notes to Chapter Four.) At the height of his fame, Hayakawa had the same kind of name recognition as Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks. (He sure gave Valentino, in many ways his thespian successor, a lot to live up to!)

Around 1921, things started to go wrong for Hayakawa financially, leading to his flight from
Hollywood, though he was still making movies throughout the twenties, in between writing novels and acting for the stage. Like that of many other silent stars, Hayakawa’s fame declined with the rise of the talkies, though he did film a few in the thirties.

World War II found him in France, separated from his family. And while he was there, he apparently decided to work for the French Resistance, though I haven’t been able to find out much about his war-time activities. In 1957, he played his last major role: Colonel Saito in Bridge on the River Kwai. For this performance, Hayakawa was nominated for an Academy Award (he lost). Thereafter, he only appeared in small roles and retired completely in the mid-sixties, not long after he became a Zen master.

So: Sessue Hayakawa. Pretty much a dreamboat. Even Jack, no cinephile, knows who he is and that he’d be just the sort of personality to intrigue Phryne.

15) Rolls-Royce Phantom

Phryne has a 1924 Hispano-Suiza, which is a very nice ride. The Rolls-Royce Phantom I, manufactured from 1925-1931, is just a hair newer and rivals the Hispano for luxury and speed. I’m not sure Phryne would ever trade in her Hispano (it must have a lot of sentimental value) but there aren’t very many cases in which she’d turn down a free Phantom. Jack Robinson’s obliging unconscious has, obviously, attempted to divine one of them.


The Esplanade Hotel was built in 1878 just off the St. Kilda foreshore in Melbourne. Originally designed as a resort hotel for the Australian elite, it was, by the 1920s, a somewhat more democratic location. The middle classes danced to jazz orchestras in the Eastern Tent Ballroom, a large pavilion that occupied the space just behind the hotel. St. Kilda is, of course, the suburb of Melbourne where Phryne’s house is located, as well as the site of the Palais Theatre and Luna Park, where Phryne and Jack ride the Scenic Railway at the end of “Deadweight.” I choose, also, to believe that they took a turn through the Palais de Folies (later Giggle Palace) and had a go at the bagatelles in the Penny Arcade. (Bagatelles show up in Chapter Six of this fic, though only in metaphor.)

The Espy seemed like a sensible place for a detective inspector with discovery fantasies to experience the return of the repressed. Your Scenic Railway mileage may vary.

17) his own sense of sexual fidelity…

Time for headcanons about Jack’s marriage and sexual history!

To my mind, Jack is about as close as you can get to a natural monogamist—unlike Phryne, who seems to embody something like a joyful polyamory—and, indeed, this difference in their preferences is one I see as a primary point of negotiation for their relationship going forward (I think they’d both approach these discussions with maturity and generosity). He comes by this orientation both by training and inclination.

As for Rosie, Jack’s ex-wife, I think she’s written rather inconsistently. I like her best when we first meet her—she’s so adult about the divorce, assuring Jack that things are better the second time around, telling him he’s got his fight back after escaping a marriage that didn’t suit him.
Now that I think about it, I'm quite sure I like Rosie much more than the show actually wants me to. By the time we see her in “Marked for Murder” and “Unnatural Habits,” she’s exhibiting signs of jealousy and competitiveness, especially when it comes to Phryne. (Even Aunt Prudence remarks on her unusual devotion to Jack in the latter episode.) I think the idea is supposed to be that Jack’s offer of comfort to Rosie in her time of need—just after her fiancé and her father have shown themselves morally corrupt (“Unnatural Habits” again)—is extra-noble. The problem is that it’s overkill. You don’t need it for that sequence to have emotional impact and I don’t see why sympathy for Jack has to be garnered at his ex-wife’s expense. Rosie has already experienced one failed marriage and, just as she’s about to embark on a new one, she’s brutally betrayed by the two people (so far as we know) to whom she’s closest. The show didn’t need to strip her of the sense and wisdom of her first presentation in order to make us (and Phryne) feel like Jack is a wonderful human for extending her a little compassion.

What do we know about their marriage? We know that Rosie wanted Jack to climb the professional ladder, which I choose to read as a desire to get him away from the dangers of the field as much as a craving for social advancement. (She’s almost lost him once, after all.) It might have been a wrongheaded way of caring about the man her husband had become but there’s still great potential for spousal consideration there. We also know that they got married young and that war changed Jack in irrevocable ways. (Instead of the Tour de France, he got trenches and mustard gas in Belgium!)

How about their sex life? I’m happiest with the version that says that before the war their time in bed was as lovely as youth and inexperience and fresh love could make it, though they were probably pretty vanilla. I like, too, the idea that Jack found it hard to touch Rosie after the war, that part of what we would now call his post-traumatic stress disorder manifested as a kind of self-loathing that he found hard to hide from her during sex, that Rosie felt the loss of intimacy deeply, though she tried hard to understand it. In this scenario, they drift apart naturally, unhappiness on both sides but no treachery.

One nagging headcanon says that Jack, who speaks German well enough to translate Rilke might have had an ambiguous connection to the soldier assigned to teach him German during the war—possibly romantic, un- or ambiguously consummated. (Everyone! Let’s remember that Jack speaks German. See “Death on the Vine.”) Homosexuality, as “Murder at the Green Mill” reminds us, was illegal in Australia in the early twentieth century; it wasn’t illegal in France (where it was known as the German Vice) and Jack could conceivably have been aware of this, which might have lowered his defenses a notch, even though he’s very insistent on the boundaries of what his marriage vows will and will not allow him to do. His alignment is definitely lawful good (emphasis on the “lawful”), so I think he’d have trouble with any action that violates a formal oath or legal prohibition (though, as we’ve seen, he’s capable in some instances of adhering to the mere letter of the law rather than the spirit). And I can’t help but peg Jack as hopelessly ambivalent about perceived non-normative sexual desires. But an amorphous relationship with a secret wartime almost-boyfriend—that I could see—probably accompanied by loads of guilt, this guilt amplified when the German teacher dies going over the top, possibly right in front of Lance Corporal Robinson. It would certainly feed into my preferred theory about Jack and Rosie’s path to divorce.

And after that divorce? At most a one night stand or two for Jack, carried out with discretion and kindness but a little sadly, all the same.
18) the hocus-pocus of your focus

Call-back to the lyrics of Cole Porter’s “Don’t Look at Me That Way,” which furnish one of the epigraphs for this story. (See Chapter One, note one). This is also the song that Phryne is humming in the last lines of this chapter. She really does think that his powers of concentration are, in a sense, the secret to his success (broadly construed).

19) “Is it curiosity that’s the hobgoblin of little minds?” . . . “Consistency, Miss Fisher.”

She totally knows it’s consistency—she even knows it’s really “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” So does Jack. It’s a bit of a stretch to have them both quoting the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wasn’t (as far as I’ve been able to tell) a regular on many syllabi in British Commonwealth countries in the early twentieth century. But, on the other hand, when Emerson made his tour of Britain from 1847-1848, middle and working class audiences were wild for him, so it’s not entirely impossible that Australian libraries and book stores would have carried his work.

(Emerson shows up again in Chapter Five.)

Phryne Fisher is a woman with plans. Plans that involve satisfying a number of different kinds of curiosity about Jack Robinson.
Chapter 4

Annotations

CHAPTER FOUR (complete)

1) Sinuous nude, Fauvist or Cubist...Vienna Secession painting

This description of Phryne’s bedroom takes its cues from the Series 2 version, which has some fancy wallpaper and a few other accoutrements it didn’t (or didn’t seem to) in Series 1. I think the experience of encountering Phryne in her bedroom would be a very charged experience for Jack in any case, but especially in this one. He values control. And he also takes a knowing pleasure in provoking Phryne, testing her in ways that sometimes seem downright coquettish. The balance of power between them is variable. They both want the upper hand but not quite as much as they want to prolong the bliss of fighting for it.

How heady he must find it to wrest the lead from her in their flirtation. Equally exhilarating to him (I think) are those moments in which she takes back the advantage. He admires her for it and enjoys, too, plotting how to recover his losses. Although he claims to be a simple officer of the law, he has a sophisticated appreciation for the delights of laying a stratagem. Phryne’s bedroom unsettles him because it’s defense as offense, a place of intimacy and vulnerability—not necessarily for its owner—but for anyone else she chooses to invite within. There’s also, I think, the suggestion that crossing that particular threshold means a point of no return. Technically, he’s seen the room before (in "Murder à la Mode") but it was dark and he and Phryne were apprehending a thief at the time, so I choose to believe that this is the first time he’s given any attention to the room’s disposition and effects.

The nude actually looks Modiglianesque to me or maybe like a cross between a Cezanne and a Gauguin. Jack doesn’t think about modern art very often. He knows enough to recognize something as modern—and to get in the general vicinity of the school that produced it—but doesn’t much care to understand more. Fauvism was a style of modern painting associated (primarily) with the French painters Henri Matisse and André Derain, who counted Cezanne and Gauguin as inspirations. The name comes from the French for “wild beast” and was originally bestowed as an insult by Louis Vauxcelles, a critic horrified by new work at the 1905 Salon d’Automne. Stylistically, Fauvist paintings are characterized by concentrated layers of color and rapid brushstrokes.

Cubism—Georges Braque and the early Pablo Picasso defined the style—began in early twentieth-century Paris and was another avant garde movement in modern art. Again, Louis Vauxcelles inspired the name by which we know this art: “cubic oddities,” he called these paintings when he first saw their markedly geometric contours. As it evolved, Cubist art diffused through the modern landscape, making its influence felt in sculpture, architecture, and popular media. By the 1920s it was, in effect, a visual shorthand for modernity and the machine age (though by then it had somewhat lost its power to shock.).

Meanwhile, the Vienna Secession was a loose association of Austrian artists who broke away—hence “secession”—from the more conservative society of painters based at the Vienna Künstlerhaus. Probably the most famous exponent of Vienna Secession art (which was astonishingly diverse in terms of styles and media) was Gustav Klimt, whose work with gold leaf still possesses a distinctive, burning decadence.
Phryne’s taste in art is bold, eclectic, and very twentieth-century. Art deco, art nouveau, arts and crafts, and a few accents of Victoriana make cheerful battle in the rooms of her house. When it comes to paintings, she seems to favor figural representations, albeit very modern ones, over complete abstractions. Her principles of art collection follow her principles of dress and decoration. Intense colors and line values seem to please her: warmth, audacity, and a healthy dose of glitter.

2) *The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne…*


The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne,

Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;

Purple the sails, and so perfumed that

The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,

Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made

The water which they beat to follow faster,

As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,

It beggar'd all description: she did lie

In her pavilion--cloth-of-gold of tissue--

O'er-picturing that Venus where we see

The fancy outwork nature: on each side her

Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,

With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem

To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,

And what they undid did . . .

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,

So many mermaids, tended her i’ the eyes,

And made their bends adornings: at the helm

A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle

Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,

That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Enthroned i’ the market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.

In other words, Cleopatra is dressed to kill and has arranged every element of her environment to awe and entice the passionate Antony. Even the air, claims Enobarbus, wanted to flee the city to see the queen—and would have if nature didn’t abhor a vacuum so much. Translation: Cleopatra provokes an unnatural degree of desire. Enobarbus means this at least three-quarters censoriously; Jack doesn’t. He’s looking for language to describe what it’s like to see Phryne completely within her sexual element. Also he’s just a little terrified.

3) Sock garters

In the 1920s, sock technology had not yet advanced to its current state of enlightenment. (Teleological progress narratives about phenomena other than socks will not be indulged in these pages, I am pleased to say.) Sock garters—bands of elastic with metal grips for attaching the sock—provided a solution to socks that, lacking the magic of synthetic fabric blends, gradually slackened and slouched over the course of day. You wore the garters around your calves to ensure consistent, maximum dapperness. But I really shouldn’t use the past tense.

4) “my gracious silence”

Shakespeare. Coriolanus (in Coriolanus) to his wife Virgilia (II.i). He’s just come back from war—wounded but victorious, alive, and in good spirits. Virgilia is so overcome with emotion that she can only weep silently. Phryne’s trying, partly, to reassure Jack here—but only partly. She likes him a bit off balance sometimes and there’s nothing that’s simultaneously so comforting and so dangerous to Jack as a bit of Shakespeare.

This phrase also makes a memorable appearance in Dorothy Sayers’s Busman’s Honeymoon (1937) in a scene that deals with the fallout from Peter’s service in World War I. Phryne and Jack sometimes feel to me like a genderpunked version of Harriet and Peter, Sayers’s bantering supersleuths of the ’20s and ’30s. Jack’s more of a Harriet, the sadder-but-wiser figure in whom experience has cultivated a hard-won reserve. Phryne, meanwhile, is more of a Peter, the one who responds to death and war by embracing lightness and luxury (and whose money and aristocratic clout make this possible). It’s not a perfect analogy (nor would I want it to be!) but I like thinking about “bantering supersleuths” as a cultural tradition in need of a fuller genealogy.

(ETA: It appears elizajane’s Placetne series, which takes its title from a moment in Sayers’s Gaudy Night (1935) beat me to this observation by several months. Here, here!)
(n.b. The phrase "gaudy night" is an *Antony and Cleopatra* reference, another pleasing resonance between Sayers's work and MFMM.)

5) *possum*

Jack and Phryne have a history of making wagers—and a history of betting on this word (see “Deadweight”). It seemed like a natural safeword for a wager of a more intimate nature. There’s an element of gamesmanship in almost every interaction between Phryne and Jack and it makes sense that their mutual interest in power, which occasionally has an edge of what I’m going to call a generous cruelty (as opposed to mere meanness, which is inevitably miserly), would lend itself to various iterations of dominance and submission. I know projectcyborg has a lot of brilliant thoughts about this question. After metatxt, who coined the term, she’s described Phrack an example of a “top battle” in which both parties enjoy vying for dominance in multiple aspects and at various intensities—and this feels just right to me.

(See Chapter Four, note one for more of my thoughts about that.)

Jack’s patience and steadiness temper Phryne’s quickness and verve and vice versa—but neither set of qualities wins out, really. He offers her a still point in the midst of her jubilant chaos and she acts as the catalyst that keeps him from rusting into immobility. For me, this dynamic seems to have translated to a form of Phracking in which both are switches, people who are happy to play positions across the spectrum from complete control to total surrender. Admittedly, Phryne is probably more aware of herself in this way. For Jack, I suspect it all comes as a revelation.

In “Death at Victoria Dock,” early in the course of Phryne and Jack’s acquaintance, the beleaguered inspector tells his constable that they need to take a firm line with Miss Fisher or else she’ll walk all over them: “we need to establish right up front who wears the trousers in this arrangement.” Cut to an on the nose (but kind of adorable) shot of Phryne descending the stairs in a pair of the garment in question. Who wears the trousers, Jack? Both of you. All of you. Everyone is wearing trousers. Plan accordingly.

There was also the practical puzzle of how to get Jack’s clothes off. They’re important to him, his clothes, in part because he’s a private person (which is not quite the same as an erotically reticent one) and in part because he’s acutely tantalized by the scenario in which he’s covered up and Phryne is naked and at his mercy. Don’t worry Jack, it may be a little racy for you but I’m pretty sure eighty-six percent of Melbourne has been entertaining that fantasy since she stepped off the boat in 1928.

6) “What country, friend, is this? Illyria?” . . . “perhaps it is Elysium.”

Shakespeare. Phryne’s paraphrasing the heroine of *Twelfth Night* (*Lii*). When we meet her, Viola’s been shipwrecked on an unknown shore and believes her twin brother Sebastian to be, in all probability, dead. She asks the captain of the drowned ship where they’ve washed up and when he names the country (Illyria), she answers: “And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium.” Elysium is, of course, the Elysian Fields, the place, according to Homer and a whole host of Classical writers, where the favored dead while away their afterlives. Phryne’s making absolutely certain that Jack understands and approves of the game she’s proposed—she’s also using Shakespeare in the double-edged way I’ve talked about in Chapter Four, note four—to provoke and console at once. Phryne’s keen that the rest of the night be spent as close to Elysium as they can manage, Elysium in the sense of paradise and, too, in the sense of the little death, which always remembers its great and terrible sibling.
7) “Do I dare to eat a peach?”

T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915). Heavy with allusions to Dante and Shakespeare, this long poem, which was among those that made Eliot’s career as a poet, concerns a young man contemplating the arid terrors of early twentieth-century urban life and his own ambivalence, which compasses a despondent sexual timidity.

*The Waste Land* (1922), also Eliot, is another famous touchstone of modernist poetry in which heterosexual desire goes haywire. See, particularly, the sections called “A Game of Chess,” which draws on Eliot’s own troubled marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, and “The Fire Sermon,” in which a “young man carbuncular” commits an act of sexual violence against an “indifferent” young typist.

Prufrock’s fear of bodies and decisive action are two of his signal characteristics. “Do I dare?” he asks himself over and over again (does he dare to eat a peach, disturb the universe?). The answer is that he doesn’t for “[i]n a minute there is time/For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.” J. Alfred Prufrock is exactly the man Jack fears he will become (and exactly the man he won’t).

Two years after he wrote “Prufrock,” the United States joined World War I on the side of the Allies. Eliot, an American who was then living in England, attempted to enlist in the Navy but was rejected due to physical ailments—a literalization of the problem of modern masculinity he had tried to adumbrate in his poetry.

See Chapter Three, note 12 for a more on early twentieth-century crises of masculinity.

8) Seyès-ruled paper

Seyès-ruled or French-ruled paper is the standard paper for school notes and assignments in France. (n.b. on the Anglophone web, Seyès is sometimes spelled with two accents, sometimes with one, and sometimes with none. Francophone sites staunchly cling to the single accent grave over the second syllable.) This variety of reglure—or ruling—features an 8mm x 8mm grid and a set of lighter lines placed at regular intervals within it. The ruling system owes its name to its inventor, Jean-Alexandre Seyès, a Parisian book-and-stationery-store owner who invented the reglure that bears his name in 1892. All of which is to say Phryne’s doing a great job of maintaining a calm inscrutability and Jack’s thrilled by it, though there’s an edge of foreboding there, too. The “no means yes” game is liberating for him precisely because it temporarily suspends his sense of responsibility for his actions. This way he can refuse her, which allows him to maintain his sense of self-possession, and also yield to her (which he desperately wants to do). Let not thy left hand know &c.

9) Frox and trunk drawers

The design of men’s underfurnishings was in a state of rapid flux in the 1920s. Long varieties of the combination or singlet (British English) or union suit (American English)—so called because the garment united drawers and vest or undershirt—had been popular since the mid-nineteenth century. By 1914, young men often wore the “athletic” union suit, which had quarter-length legs and tended to be made of lighter fabrics than its older counterpart. But the combination was fairly standard for another couple decades afterwards, especially among working class men. However, according to this comprehensive history of men's undergarments, among the changes wrought by the First World
War was a preference among British veterans for underwear separates: knee-length trunk drawers and undershirts much like the ones they had been issued during combat.

Jack’s a veteran, though he isn’t British, so I decided on this pretext that he too is a separates man. (Despite the best efforts of J.C. Leyendecker, whose commercial illustrations possess an undeniable homoerotic charge, I fear that the union suit is something of a smutkiller in the current climate.) So trunk drawers and sleeveless athletic vest it was. (You can see this ensemble in “Marked for Murder” on some of the football players Phryne’s eyeing towards the beginning. In the early twentieth century, there wasn’t a hard dividing line between athletic clothing and underwear.) I chose the word “frox” from among several period-appropriate terms for undershirt. “Vest” was potentially misleading for contemporary readers and “undershirt” was one too many shirts—plus frox ends in an “x,” which is always pleasing. This was before I realized I could solve the shirt-shirt problem (as I eventually decided to do) by having Phryne order Jack to take off “the rest of it” so that shirt removal is implied. Perhaps that’s what they call narrative economy: the god (assuming he hasn’t yet abandoned Antony) is in the details, especially in the ones you leave out.

(Legend has it that trunk drawers came to be called boxers after US fighter Jack Dempsey won the 1919 World Heavyweight Championship wearing a pair. I’m not sure how reliable that anecdote is, though. And even if it’s true, the term probably remained a parochial American one for a while, so probably not quite right for an Australian context.)

I had an easier time doing away with Phryne’s clothes right from the beginning. Dressing her in a peignoir eliminated the need for a second round of complicated sartorial maneuverings, though I had a hard time resisting the temptations of certain pieces of vintage French lingerie: this cunning coral slip designed by the Callot Soeurs, for example. Or this black and ivory camiknicker by Hermine, embroidered with the silhouettes of dancers. Or these witty aquamarine French knickers (also Hermine) with hunting scenes ’round the edges. (Phryne would surely not have missed the implications!)

Or, or, or…

10) Valentino

Rudolph Valentino. Even someone who rarely patronized the cinema in the 1920s (and Jack says he’s not much of a moviegoer) would have been familiar with Valentino. Known as the Great Lover (a title he shared with the silent film actor John Gilbert, who features in Chapter One, note ten), the Italian-born Valentino arrived in the United States in 1913 at the age of eighteen. After stints as a taxi dancer at Maxim’s, a witness in the divorce case of a Chilean heiress, a member of a traveling operetta company, and a bit-player in various films, Valentino began his rise to fame with a memorable tango in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921).

But the film that would cement his reputation as the ur-Latin Lover—and confirm him as the cinematic heir to Sessue Hayakawa (see Chapter Three, note fourteen)—was The Sheik (1921), based on E.M. Hull’s bestselling desert romance novel about a kidnapped English heiress who falls in love with her rapist-captor. While the film tones down the rape narrative a hair (really just a hair!), it preserves the noxious orientalism of the novel, which romanticizes an invented version of Arabic culture (and the final plot twist suggests that there ought to be quotation marks around the modifier “Arabic.”).

Interlude academic and dance break! For a fascinating analysis of the effects of Hull’s work, see the chapter entitled “Orgasmic Discipline: D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Hull, and Interwar Erotic Fiction” in Laura Frost’s The Problem with Pleasure. Frost examines the varied orgasms of Lawrence’s Lady
Chatterley’s Lover (a self-consciously literary work) in conjunction with the (supposedly) titillating intimations of Hull’s popular novel (which leaves the sex implicit) in order to make claims about how modern writers attempted to define the ethical (heterosexual) orgasm—and to inculcate this knowledge in their readers. What’s so lovely about the argument, though, are Frost’s meditations on how readerly pleasure often eludes the strictures of the text. Here endeth the interlude academic and dance break.

Both book and movie versions of The Sheik are fascinating as entries in social history. They’re also incredibly disturbing cultural artifacts. But Valentino’s magnetism on screen is undeniable and Dot, like many young women in the 1920s, particularly adores him as Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan (the film’s about eight years old by the time we meet her, so she probably encountered it at a formative stage of her life). An actor whose fortune was made by his female fans and who appeared to threaten Western ideals of manhood by virtue of his success with women, his foreignness, and his androgyny, Valentino was, at the same time, an exemplar of modern masculinity and a threat to it. Add to this his ambiguous sexual orientation. Although he was married to several women, rumors circulated about his affairs with (among others) French actor Jacques Hébertot and Mexican actor Ramón Novarro, who gets a mention later on in Chapter Four. (One of many cryptoqueer moments in TGAA. I try to work one in at least once a chapter, which is actually pretty easy when you’ve got an excuse to quote Shakespeare—all those rouged-up sixteenth-century boys playing passion for their supper. Shakespeare. More like Shakesqueer!) The actor would struggle to leave the role of the sheik behind for the remainder of his brief career. But financial pressure would induce him to accept his final role in the sequel to The Sheik, a film with the rather uninspired title Son of the Sheik (1926). In August of 1926, Valentino died at the age of thirty-one due to complications after surgery for an appendicitis and gastric ulcers. By some accounts, thirty thousand mourners tried to see him on his funeral bier in New York.

The one disadvantage of frox and trunk drawers, assuming you want to get them off quickly, is that they take a couple more gestures to remove than an athletic singlet, which can be unbuttoned and shimmed out of in one relatively smooth motion. (Perhaps one ought to reconsider the desirability of that garment). There are several reasons why I enjoy the thought of Jack wondering how Valentino would strip. Valentino! Greatest lover of them all.

11) Naughty but Nice

One hears that Book Phryne is supposed to be a ringer for Sehnsucht/saudade heart’s darling Louise Brooks. But to my mind, TV Phryne resembles more the film star Colleen Moore, both in terms of her physical presence and her styling. With its sleek, helmet-like appearance, the shingled bob with a fringe was popular among many fashionable, modern women. But Phryne’s got the side-part that Moore favored rather than the center-part that Brooks generally employed. She’s also got Moore’s brisk, energetic body language, though with more gravitas.

(Phryne and Jack have a lot of star modes, one of which is Bacall/Bogey. More on that later.)

One of the archetypal American flappers, Moore forged a persona very different from those of Clara Bow and Louise Brooks. While Bow’s calling card was her bold sensuality and Brooks’s was a rebellious joie de vivre made tragic by social opprobrium, Moore’s trademarks were her gamine lightness and comic timing. Sometimes she could seem less substantial than Bow and Brooks but she possessed, arguably, a less-freighted sense of mischief that allowed her to play the comedienne with a dazzling purity and assurance. (She was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s favorite actress and partly for this reason.)
The poster of which Jack is thinking is actually an amalgamation of the poster for *Ella Cinders*, a hit for Moore in 1926, and *Naughty but Nice* (1927). The former, visible in the first few seconds of this [video](#), features a smiling Moore gazing flirtatiously at something or someone just out of frame. The second image, a cartoon, shows a surprised-looking Moore kneeling next to a man without trousers, ridiculous in socks, sock garters, and shoes with spats. Jack’s memory has conflated the two posters so as to emphasize the resemblance to Phryne—and to the situation in which he now finds himself.

12) **Ramón Novarro**

A film actor of Mexican extraction, Novarro had his first major success with *Scaramouche* (1923), though his most high-profile part of the 1920s was the title role in *Ben-Hur* (1925), which made him an early male sex symbol, in part due to his costumes, which revealed what was then a scandalous amount of flesh. Novarro looked amazingly good in a charioteer’s racing armor. And Phryne thinks Jack looks amazingly good naked, but she’s still a bit wistful that she never got to see him in the Roman costume she brought him in “Murder in the Dark.” In Chapter Seven, she’ll try to persuade him into a makeshift toga and will be thwarted again. Jack really likes to tease her on this point—she so transparently loves the idea of him as Mark Antony and he so transparently enjoys denying her what she wants—until he doesn’t. Deferred pleasure is, with them, the game of games.

(Fun fact/Hollywood in-joke: Along with Marion Davies, Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks, Lillian Gish, and other silver screen luminaries, Colleen Moore played an extra in the star-studded audience for *Ben-Hur*’s famed chariot-race, also considered the film’s cinematographic tour-de-force.)

Valentino had inherited the vexed crown of the demon lover from Hayakawa and Novarro surely inherited it, in his turn, after Valentino’s death. Among other films, Novarro would go on to star with Garbo in *Mata Hari* (1931) and with Myrna Loy in *The Barbarian* (1933), a desert romance in the vein of *The Sheik* that couldn’t help but remind people of his former celebrity rival. The bequest of the “Latin lover” was not an uncomplicated one. In addition to the considerable cultural baggage of assuming the role, there was the question of Novarro’s possible romantic involvement with Valentino. A Roman Catholic who struggled to reconcile his homosexuality with his religious beliefs, Novarro refused to give in to studio pressure to make a “lavender marriage” (a sort of marriage of convenience to appease compulsory heterosexuality when one or both partners are queer), opting instead to continue his semi-covert relationship with Hollywood journalist Herbert Howe, who also served as the actor’s publicist. Rumors about a liaison between Valentino and Novarro circulated for years, though there’s no concrete evidence for the claim.

Trigger warning for violence and sexual violence and gossip! Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon* says that an Art Deco dildo given to Novarro by Valentino played a part in the former’s grisly 1968 murder, but multiple sources dispute the veracity of this story.

13) **Quaint mazes in the wanton green…**

Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (II.i). Titania, Queen of the Fairies, to Oberon, her husband. The exchange begins when Oberon greets her in an ill humor: “Ill-met by moonlight, proud Titania” and calls her a “rash wanton,” whereupon Titania berates him with a narrative of his numerous infidelities. The King of the Fairies hits right back, though, accusing her of favoritism towards Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Titania responds with what’s probably her best speech in the play, which begins “These are the forgeries of jealousy…” and details how their marital discord has thrown the rest of the world into chaos:
Crow's are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud,
And quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.

Carrion birds are eating the diseased flocks (murrion=murrain=a catch-all term for infectious sickness among animals), a grim imbalance in several ways. To highlight the dissonance of the situation, the Queen mentions nine men's morris, an ancient game, kind of like checkers, that the English used to play with human pieces on boards cut into village greens (like you do). When Titania says that the nine men’s morris is filled with mud, she means there’s no time for light revelry—or procreation—since the upheavals of the fairy court have made the fields barren. Similarly abandoned are the “quaint mazes in the wanton green,” which refer to turf labyrinths, locales that lent themselves to contemplative strolls, to meditation, and also to more lascivious activities. Titania’s doing something very clever with that phrase. She’s responding to Oberon’s opening accusation (“rash wanton”) by implying that with life in such disarray, lovers don’t even have time to make the usual sport in the shadows of the hedge mazes—and neither does she. She’s also making a play on words: according to the OED, “quaint” served as a euphemism for the female external genitalia as early as 1300 (and was often used, punningly, in place of “cunt.”). Conjured one way, the mazes are “quaint” (in the old sense of ingenious) retreats from the lusts of the physical world (the “wanton green”). Translated in another, the labyrinths are continuous with the wanton green, being full of mazes (a word that used to possess the meaning of delusive tricks or worldly diversions) involving a plethora of quaints.

(I’ll spare you my disquisitions on the etymology of “wanton” and on the troubled marriage of the fairy monarchs.)

Jack’s fully aware of the sexual subtext of these lines and alert, too, to his own disequilibrium in the midst of the night labyrinth. Also, he definitely sympathizes more with Titania than with Oberon (as all right-thinking people do). If he identifies with anyone in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, though, it’s Nick Bottom, whose most memorable speech he’ll cite later on in TGAA. More on Bottom’s Dream in the notes to Chapter Seven.

14) Strange fits of passion have I known…

William Wordsworth. One of the enigmatic “Lucy” poems, composed between 1798 and 1801, Wordsworth’s “Strange fits of passion have I known” is about a lot of different things, none of them particularly simple. But one of the poem’s strongest surface currents is its narration of a dreamy nighttime ride to the house of Lucy (Wordsworth’s idealized poetic vision of English girlhood). As the rider nears Lucy’s house, the moon drops behind the roof of her cottage and he’s overcome by the fear that she has died. (The other poems do, in fact, deal with the aftermath of Lucy’s death, though with scarcely less opacity.) The first stanza reads like so:

Strange fits of passion have I known
And I will dare to tell,
But in the Lover’s ear alone,

What once to me befell.

There are some paradoxes and reversals before the poem ends but suffice it to say that one way of understanding these lines is as a statement about the difficulty of translating powerful feelings into words—and of distinguishing the right audience for those confessions. “Passion,” here, has connotations of lust but also of suffering. It seemed right to give Jack, who is grappling with the best ways of articulating his desires throughout the story, a historical-poetical formula for thinking about the gap between what’s experienced and what’s communicated.

Plus, I felt I had to redeem poor Wordsworth from the sentimentalized version you get in “Murder Under the Mistletoe”—Quentin quoting “She was a Phantom of delight” to Dot (smarmily, obliviously) and Phryne complaining of Wordsworthian excess (“florid” is her word) when everyone knows that Coleridge and Keats and Shelley could out-excess Wordsworth any day of the week. Let’s be real here. I have a thing about Keats particularly, Keats and the sheer wondrousness of excess. I have a lot of feelings about a lot of Romanticism, actually. Like odi et amo.

As his inhibitions erode, Jack’s references get less early modern and more modern modern, first with Prufrock and Valentino and his recollection of the Naughty But Nice poster, next with Romantic poetry, which is at least a couple centuries younger than Shakespeare. The idea, I suppose, is that history speaks through you differently in states of phase transition.

15) Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully? Why does your tender palm dissolve in dew?

John Keats. Still in the Romantic mode. This bit comes from the long, narrative poem Lamia (1819), which tells the story of a supernatural being called Lamia who’s trapped in the form of a snake. In return for a favor, the god Hermes restores her human shape. Now a beautiful woman, Lamia goes to Corinth to seek Lycius, an attractive young man whom she’s loved from afar for ages. He returns her affections and the pair retreat to a house that shouldn’t exist to revel until forces in the world outside imperil their happiness. It’s an exceedingly complex poem that treats, among other things, encounters (particularly hostile ones) between reason and the imagination. On learning of a threat to their secluded idyll, Lamia breaks out in shivers and sweat and her lover asks her what’s wrong (these are the lines that Jack quotes). Lycius is referring to quivers of fear and perspiring palms, Jack is thinking of shudders of passion and their result: semen between the fingers.

Check out, by the way, Keats’s description of Lamia in her serpent-form if you want more evidence of the profound delights of Romantic excess:

She was a Gordian shape of dazzling hue,

Vermillion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;

Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,

Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr’d;

And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
Dissolv’d, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
Their lusters with the gloomier tapestries—
So rainbow-sided, touch’d with miseries,
She seem’d at once, some penanced lady elf,
Some demon’s mistress, or the demon’s self.
Upon her crest she wore a wannish fire
Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne’s tiar:
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!
She had a woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete:
And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there
But weep and weep, that they were born so fair?

She’s a snake! She’s a snake with a magical halo-crown and a woman’s mouth with a full set of teeth!

16) “God make you good . . . but please, oh please not yet.”

Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine). The Confessions (Book VIII). Phryne’s adapting the popular translation of Augustine’s plea to God to help him control his sexual desires: “Give me chastity and continency, only not yet.” Colloquially, this phrase is often rendered thusly: “God make me good—but not yet.”

17) infinite variety, indeed

Shakespeare. Antony and Cleopatra. Call-back to Enobarbus’s description of the Queen of Egypt in the play and Jack’s admiring declamation of the lines at the end of “Ruddy Gore.” See Chapter One, note two.

18) the painted cup

I spotted what I think is a Clarice Cliff tea-set in Phryne’s parlor at some point (can’t remember which episode, though) and decided that she sometimes leaves one of the cups in the bedroom so she can sip absently while she reads in bed. Or maybe Dot’s brought her her morning tea in it and sometimes the cup lingers on until Phryne remembers to return it to the set. Clarice Cliff was an innovative British painter of modern pottery whose designs integrated the abstract motifs of Art Deco design and Cubist painting. Her work was incredibly successful in its own time and has now become very valuable as a collector’s item. (You can see some of it here.)
I don’t think Jack knows enough about practical ceramics to recognize Cliff’s work but he’s sensitive enough to line and color to see the cup as bright and unusual—qualities he also associates with Phryne.

19) “faster than Jack Robinson’”…the original Constable Robinson

A Britishism, the phrase “faster than Jack Robinson” or “before you can say Jack Robinson” means something like “faster than a speeding bullet” or “before you can blink.” This book speculates that the phrase derives from some deep political maneuvering involving an eighteenth-century member of the House of Commons named John Robinson. Wikipedia offers several unsubstantiated possibilities, including the one to which Phryne refers: from 1660-1675, Sir John (Jack) Robinson held the position of Constable of the Tower of London (i.e. the office in charge of what was, in the late seventeenth century, a high-profile prison and a treasury, so exceeding a police constable in terms of powers and formal dignities by quite a lot!) Sir John Robinson was famous for the speed with which he could have a felon condemned, transported to the Tower, and executed—a process that, by some ironical accounts, took no longer than it did to say his name.

Phryne’s been dying to say “faster than you can say Jack Robinson” since Chapter Three (where she almost manages it before he stops her)! I don’t imagine Jack got teased all that often as a child (he’s too good at maintaining a protective coloration not to have had some practice blending in and being an all-around, unobjectionable good bloke). But when he found himself vulnerable, I’m fairly sure his opponents managed to find a way to taunt him with the phrase “faster than you can say Jack Robinson,” hence his current aversion and the good humored resignation when he says to Phryne at the end of “Murder on the Ballarat Train”: “You might as well call me Jack. Everyone else does.”

In this case, Jack brings up the phrase first as a way of defusing the fraught pass at which they’ve arrived—appropriating the unloved words for a weak joke about premature orgasm (the opposite of the problem he’s having). And Phryne takes the hint, grabbing at a vague recollection about the origin of the cliché in order to accelerate through the tense moment. It’s not entirely successful. They’ve both been thrown off balance by Jack’s reaction to the possum game and Phryne doesn’t yet understand exactly why (though she’s about to find out). On one hand, the original Constable Robinson is an emblem of justice made soulless, mechanical, and terrible in its efficiency—not an easy specter to fend off for a man who loves law and is ambivalent about change. On the other hand, it’s the fear of that specter that pushes Jack to the bluest articulation of feeling he’s yet managed. And it’s the airing of those thoughts that allows them to resume the game—and the delay of game—they both find so exhilarating.

I would like to state, for the record, that this author-function does feel the slightest bit guilty for denying Jack his orgasm for so long. But, well, it’s not as if he didn’t enjoy it to a degree. And his proficiency in the art of delayed gratification sure does inspire some ideas for further application, so to speak.
Chapter 5

Annotations

CHAPTER FIVE (complete)

1) It was not often . . . the verge of its completion?

Self-mockery, really (my lamentable tendency to introspection). A demi-parodic tribute to the sentences of Henry James. While I’m glad for every word he wrote, I sometimes wonder what it would have been like if he had actually written sex, instead of writing around it. James’s queerness is famously a matter of debate, resistant to attempts to describe it with contemporary terms of art for sexual orientation. To all appearances, he had no sexual experience at all (may, even, have been asexual, though that term was not really available as an identity category in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). However, he wrote passionate letters to men and women alike.

Maybe I just want an erotic detective novel with all the stylistic filigree of The Golden Bowl and the histronic glee of the man who could write to the young sculptor Hendrik Christian Andersen like this:

I have gone through Death, & Deaths, enough in my long life, to know how all that we are, all that we have, all that is best of us within, our genius, our imagination, our passion, our whole personal being, become then but aids & channels & open gates to suffering, to being flooded. But, it is better so. Let yourself go & live, even as a lacerated, mutilated lover, with your grief, your loss, your sore, unforgettable consciousness.

No, The Aspern Papers doesn’t count.

Anyway, the Jamesian mode, with its studied attention to subtle shifts of interiority and the tricky politics of guessing and knowing, seemed like the right one for Phryne to adopt as she applies herself to the serious task of trying to imagine how Jack processes desire--and how different is his way of coping from her own and those of her other lovers.

2) her friend Mac . . . jouissance . . . “a sort of genital sneeze”

Elizabeth “Mac” MacMillan! How very glad we are of your existence. If you didn’t exist, we should have had to invent you (and we have). Let us speak of headcanons. There’s so much I want to know about Mac’s history: about her training as a physician, what she does in her off-hours, how she cozies up to winsome factory girls in the lesbian bar(s) of Melbourne, who tailors her suits (embroidered waistcoats!), how she and Phryne first met, what her class background’s like, whether she’s got any siblings…

This flashback takes place either in the spring of 1919 or the autumn of 1920 (can’t decide which),
definitely after L’affaire Dubois. I imagine that Dr. MacMillan spent the Great War working with the Women’s Hospital Corps, either in their Paris branch or in the outpost at Wimereux near Boulogne. She and Phryne, who was serving as a nurse, might have crossed paths infrequently as women medical personnel. (The modernist writer Gertrude Stein, with whom my version of Mac shares a few incidental characteristics, drove an ambulance during the Great War, along with her lover Alice B. Toklas.) We know that the precipitating events for “Murder in Montparnasse” take place in the winter of 1919. Phryne has just begun her modeling career and Bert and Cec are waiting to demob. It’s also plausible that Jack’s hanging around in Paris waiting for the convoy back to Australia and that Mac is wrapping up her employment with the WHC, ill and wounded bodies being among the many inconveniences an armistice can’t sign into concord. (Which puts everyone in Paris at the same time. Which gives me ideas.) In any case, I suspect Mac, at loose ends after the war, has plans to work in a German hospital for a few months, though she encounters Phryne just as she’s about to leave town (right after the end of Miss Fisher’s toxic relationship with Dubois). They spend a few days together and Phryne asks Mac to return (in the spring or in the fall or whenever) to stay awhile. Mac agrees and they end up spending about three months together, figuring out who they’re going to be in the aftermath of the war.

This stolen season ends up being an education in a lot of ways: they’re friends, lovers, and interlocutors (more on the last category of relationship in notes 4 and 5). They read together and sleep together and come up with ideas about how to be useful in the world. They’ve got a lot to give one another: Mac transmits some of her analytic coolness and passionate eye for detail to Phryne, allowing the latter’s spontaneity to grow into a more mature kind of daring. Meanwhile, Phryne’s radical openness to experience and sense of poetry prevent Mac’s wry humor from hardening into bitterness. And when they share a bed, neither one has nightmares. Still, there’s a restlessness in them both, something that keeps the arrangement from feeling permanent.

I’ve got a lot of ideas about how possible iterations of Mac (and Jack and Phryne) would approach sex. It was especially hard to choose who would show up here. The version I’ve gone with is a sort of proto-stone butch who enjoys bringing her partner to orgasm but doesn’t, herself, have much use for direct genital stimulation. (Which is hardly to say that stone butches unilaterally practice what Jack Halberstam calls “untouchability.” As with any group, there are all kinds of rich variegations that keep the praxis of desire from congealing into a monolith.) Mac, as she appears in TGAA, finds her own orgasms underwhelming (hence “genital sneeze”) and maybe a little undignified—though she’s avidly interested in those of her partners. (I’m sure Phryne would attest that Mac puts her knowledge of anatomy to good use.) It’s an excellent thing, on occasion, to consider the diversity of relationships it’s possible to have to orgasm—and also the many reasons why a person might find sex pleasurable apart from his interest in his own climax.

Mac’s proto-stone orientation is another nod to Gertrude Stein, whose marriage to Toklas adhered to some conventions of what would later become known as butch-femme pairings, one among many models of lesbian sexuality. Stein wrote her wife a number of passionate love poems that establish Toklas as the primary receiver in bed. “I am fondest of all of lifting belly,” says Stein in a long poem called Lifting Belly. “Lifting belly/So high/And aiming./Exactly and making a cow come out.” "Cow," a word that appears many times in Stein’s oeuvre, was, between the two women, code for orgasm.

Jouissance, though it lacks some of the charms of "cow," is a French word for orgasm.

3) La Ruche

La Ruche, a beehive-shaped building located in the Passage Dantzig in Montparnasse, was a low-
cost Parisian artists’ residence established in 1902. Founded by the sculptor Alfred Boucher and built with materials salvaged from the Great Exposition of 1900, La Ruche would house a number of penniless luminaries of modern art, Marie Laurencin, Soutine, Modigliani, and Léger among them. It seemed reasonable that Phryne, in her capacity as an artist’s model, might have talked her way into one of the building’s small rooms.

4) Havelock Ellis or Edward Carpenter

Ellis and Carpenter were major figures in what was, at the turn of the twentieth century, the new field of sexology. After the publication of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s monumental Psychopathia Sexualis (1886), medical models of human sexuality were all the rage. As nineteenth-century, Western societies modernized and methods of public quantification (statistics, censuses, polls, economic bellwethers) became more widely available, the “normal” became a category of profound interest in a way that had never before been possible. And the relatively new discourse of empirical science had a vested interest in figuring out what made for a normal mind and a normal body. Human sexuality figured largely in these debates, whose terms still exert tremendous force in the contemporary cultural landscape.

In Psychopathia Sexualis, the German Krafft-Ebing coined, for all intents and purposes, the terms “heterosexual” and “invert.” The latter word described, for him, a paraphilia in which men exhibit female characteristics—including sexual attraction to men—and women exhibit male characteristics—including sexual attraction to women. (Another word he favored was “Urning,” which possesses connotations of a third gender and derives from the name of the Greek goddess Aphrodite Urania). Freud, who wrote in conversation with Krafft-Ebing’s work, was undecided about whether inversion was pathological and, if so, whether analysis might play a role in treating it. In Psychopathia, however, inversion might be innate or acquired (Krafft-Ebing felt the latter responded more easily to treatment) but it was, either way, perversion. While he argued against segregating inverts from heterosexual society at large, Krafft-Ebing’s vision of non-procreative desire and non-binary gender performance as pathological had lasting (and damaging) repercussions.

Ellis and Carpenter, both British, were members of the next generation of sexologists (Sexologists! The next generation!) and recognized many of the problems of Krafft-Ebing’s theory of sexuality. Both worked to offer alternative approaches to desire, even as they borrowed Psychopathia’s categories and vocabulary. Ellis’s Sexual Inversion (1897), a collaboration with John Addington Symonds, explored homosexual desire (primarily male, though later editions featured more case studies of lesbians) in a way meant to make it palatable for a general public. This often meant idealizing its romantic potential, as had Oscar Wilde at his notorious trial, staging men’s desire for men as hypervirile (rather than feminizing) and downplaying penetrative sex acts. Phryne and Mac are probably looking at one of the newer editions of Sexual Inversion, which would give them a chance to talk about the merits and the headaches of the theory of inversion (preferably in various states of undress)—and to get excited about building a vocabulary to talk about and study desire, scientifically and personally. (Look for more on inversion in Chapter Six, when we get to the work of a person called Radclyffe Hall.) It’s also possible they could be reading a copy of Sex in Relation to Society (1910) or Essays in War-Time (1916), both of which have an unpleasant eugenicist bent. In which case, it’s amusing to think about Phryne and Mac united in righteous indignation.

Meanwhile, The Intermediate Sex (1908) is very likely the Edward Carpenter volume they’re perusing. A passionate prediction of a new age of sexual liberation brought about by homosexual impulses, The Intermediate Sex saw in homosexual love a desire whose putative ability to cross class boundaries would bring about radical social change. Carpenter’s long-time lover George Merrill was working class and, indeed, their relationship would inspire E.M. Forster to draft Maurice, 1913-1914.
, a fairy-tale novel of gay lovers divided by their social and economic stations. Considered too hot to handle during Forster’s life, the novel would see posthumous publication in 1971. (More on Forster in Chapter Six, though probably not more on Maurice.) I wouldn’t be surprised if Mac and Phryne also had Carpenter’s leftist and pacifist writings on hand, *The Healing of Nations* (1915), perhaps, or else *Never Again!* (1916), both responses to the atrocities of the Great War.

One reason I like the thought of Mac and Phryne reading Ellis and Carpenter is because it would appeal to their medical experience; some of the most vital arguments of twentieth century medical practice were staged in the field of sexology. Another reason is that sexological writing speaks to queerness as a political phenomenon as well as a personal one.

5) *a volume of Lombroso . . . bohèmes crasseux!*

Lombroso is, here, *Cesare Lombroso*, the Italian criminologist who, taking advantage of nineteenth-century anthropometric methods, came up with a theory of atavistic criminality. Lombroso believed that his work demonstrated that criminals were not made but born—and, moreover, could be distinguished by physiological characteristics like hair color, cranial circumference, protruding jaws, low foreheads, facial asymmetries, and other chance hereditary markers. “The Blood of Juana the Mad” establishes Mac and Phryne’s distaste for the eugenicist implications of anthropometry, though (to my mind) in a far less nuanced way then it could. (It might have been nice to include a living African-American person in that episode rather than depending on the symbolic value of a dead one, whose personhood the episode forgets even as it superficially affirms it. And I do so wish the writers had made one minor but crucial adjustment to Mac’s speech about procreation at the end…)

Anyway, let’s say Mac and Phryne have reviled Lombrosoesque anthropometric stunts for a while and that that revulsion is strong enough to make them toss the book out the window. The implication is that it lands on some unsuspecting citizen outside, who cries up at the window “bohèmes crasseux!” or “filthy bohemians.”

Lombroso’s work, at the intersection of medical and criminological literature, also seems like a logical point on the continuum from war-time nurse to lady detective. A copy of M.G. Perkins’s *Inside the Criminal Mind* shows up somewhere in the first few episodes of the show, so it’s likely that Phryne’s been keeping up with the field for a while, even if she doesn’t declare herself a detective until 1928. See the notes to Chapter Six for a few more ideas about Phryne’s interest in theories of criminality and forensics.

6) *rue Delambre . . . coin . . . cafés*

The rue Delambre is located just off the major thoroughfare of *Montparnasse*, which became the artistic heart of Paris in the 1920s. By the end of World War I, painters and writers had already begun to migrate there from *Montmartre*, which had been the center of bohemian life during the Belle Époque. Among the modern artists who lived on the rue Delambre were Tsuguharu Foujita and Man Ray (of whom more in the next note to this chapter). *Coin* is French for street corner. Just 'round the coin of the rue Delambre is the Boulevard du Montparnasse, the location of famous cafés like *La Coupole*, *Le Dôme*, and *La Rotonde*, places known at the time for catering to starving artists (though I doubt they do so today). If Phryne and Mac can’t afford to eat there, they’re really in economically precarious straits!

7) *Kiki, the Queen of Montparnasse . . . the Carrefour Vavin*
Ah, Kiki de Montparnasse! Such a pleasure to have an excuse to invite her shade into the room. Born Alice Prin to a poor family from eastern France, Kiki moved to Paris (where her mother lived) at twelve and, after two years of working in factories and performing whatever odd jobs she could get, embarked, at fourteen, on a career as an artist’s model and, later, an artist. The reigning bon vivant of Montparnasse, Kiki was so much a fixture of the modern scene that her friends and admirers began to call her the Queen of Montparnasse, a title to which she was officially “elected” in 1929, a rose in her teeth, at a performance afternoon staged to benefit poor Parisian artists. With her fringed bob and her long, straight nose (which inspired Alexander Calder to several witty sculptural portraits, Kiki cultivated a distinctively modern aesthetic that appealed to a number of the artists who strove to capture her likeness: Man Ray (her lover throughout most of the twenties), Moïse Kisling, Tsuguharu Foujita, Pablo Gargallo, and many others among them. She also starred in several films. Here is a fun work of comics based on her memoirs. Speaking of which, Kiki’s memoirs are wonderful, full of anecdotes of modern, bohemian Paris as well as a harrowing account of her detainment in a French jail. For a long time, they were banned in several countries for their frank and non-moralizing depictions of sex—and they’re still hard to get a hold of—but they’re worth the effort if you’re curious about Montparnasse in the twenties. I also love this description from the part about her childhood:

We used to wait impatiently for the big summer storms, so that we could go out in the beating rain and look for snails in the bushes and in the holes in the walls; and then, there were also dandelions, which, when well washed and cleaned, could be sold for two sous the bowlful...We would go to look for strawberries in the woods and for mushrooms. All these little things helped keep the wolf away from the door. We also sold the things we stole, for we used to go prowling around in the fields and gardens. What else is a poor peasant to do?

And this gleeful reminiscence from Foujita’s short essay, “My Friend Kiki,” included in the front matter, says a lot about them both:

It was a long time ago when Kiki Kiki came to my studio to pose for the first time, in reality it was not a studio but a simple garage where I lived. She came in slowly and timidly, her cute little finger held up to her small red mouth, swinging her behind confidently. When she took off her coat, she was absolutely naked, a small handkerchief, in lively colors, pinned to the inside of her coat gave the illusion of her latest dress. * She took my place in front of the easel, told me not to move, and calmly began to draw my portrait. When the work was finished she had sucked and bitten all my pencils and lost my small eraser, and delighted, danced, sung and yelled, and walked all over a box of camembert. She demanded money from me for posing and left triumphantly, carrying her drawing with her. Three minutes later at the Café du Dôme a rich American collector bought this drawing for an outrageous price.

That day I wasn’t sure which of the two of us was the painter.

* According to the endnotes in my edition of Kiki’s Memoirs, nakedness under a demure coat was Kiki’s way of solving the problem of the elastic marks left on the skin by the underwear of the day, marks which were undesirable if you were a model on your way to pose for an artist. Lots of things to say about retrograde gender relations between modern artists (generally male) and their models
(generally female) but I’ll restrain myself. I love how Kiki totally upends the conventional power dynamic in Foujita’s recollection.

Kiki had been modeling for four or five years in 1919/1920. And while she wasn’t at the height of her fame—her star would rise throughout the twenties—she would have been a familiar face around Phryne’s neighborhood after the war. I’ve taken a small liberty by having Miss Fisher think of her as the Queen of Montparnasse—records about when Kiki first began to be named in this way are contradictory—but I liked the idea of giving the long-haired, post-war Phryne a colleague whose gay abandon, along with her modern haircut, seemed worthy of emulation.

The Carrefour Vavin, now La Place Pablo-Picasso, after the artist, was the great intersection where the Boulevard du Montparnasse met rue Delambre and the Boulevard Raspail.

8) whether the scale of Maat bent towards the heart or the feather

According to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Ma’at (or Maat) is the goddess who embodies truth and justice. Before they can proceed to the afterlife, the souls of the dead must pass through the Hall of Two Truths and offer their hearts (the seat of the conscience in ancient Egyptian theology) to be weighed against Ma’at’s feather on her sacred scale. If the heart was equal to or lighter than the feather, then the soul would journey to paradise in the fields of Aaru, if heavier, then the deceased would be fed to Ammit, the devourer.

By invoking Ma’at’s balance Phryne is saying, indirectly, that she understands that Jack’s hesitance about coming with her has very little to do with conventional sexual morality and everything to do with how deeply it might change his sense of self—and self-control. Masturbation, she guesses rightly, is probably a different question in that an unwitnessed orgasm has much lower stakes for him.

I like to think that Phryne picked up a copy of E.A. Wallis Budge’s (admittedly flawed) translation of The Book of the Dead in order to educate herself about ancient Egyptian religion after the travesty of Nilotic culture to which Murdoch Foyle (and the writers) subjected her and us and everyone. I think this is about as close to an Antony and Cleopatra reference as this chapter comes.

9) the taste of sa verge (as a hypocritical lady novelist might have put it)

Sa verge is French for “his cane” or “his rod,” well-established slang for penis, in other words, though slightly primmer (as I understand it) than la bite or la queue, decorous enough, even, to show up in medical periodicals and anatomy texts. Phryne’s thinking about how French slang, which modern English-language speakers often associated both with passion and lingua franca diplomacy, might have appealed to novelists too delicate (or too wise to the prospect of censorship) to say “cock” or “prick” or any of the other Anglo-Saxon derived terms for the male genitalia. (Surely I’ll think of something else to link here eventually!) It’s a word Phryne could only ever use with a touch of self-directed irony. She’s thinking here about the theatrical tableau of oral sex—and how much she likes staging it.

I’m particular about words for the body. I like accuracy but only when it can be employed without severely clinical connotations, vulgarity but without animosity, euphemisms only when they announce their own ridiculousness. How impossible. The hypocritical lady novelist, c’est moi!
10) alchemical cocktail . . . panacea and alkahest and philosophers’ stone in one . . . reviving and dissolving and turning into gold

After “Raisins and Almonds,” it seems reasonable to assume that Phryne’s got a passing knowledge of alchemical terminology. Practitioners of alchemy, an arcane forerunner to chemistry, were always on the hunt for three substances: the panacea (a universal cure-all, no matter the disease or condition), the alkahest (a universal solvent, though finding a container to keep it in would pose a real challenge!), and the philosophers' stone (though it probably needs no introduction, which could turn lead into gold and grant immortality to the wielder). One thing Phryne loves about sex is its potential for alchemical change, the transformation (temporary or otherwise) it offers its participants; it’s the same thing that this version of Jack tends to resist.

Phryne’s images get more extravagant the more deeply her desire involves her. Moreover, they preserve (I hope!) the sheer ridiculousness of sex, which is woven into its pleasures. The involuntary thought of the plum at the top of the graduated cylinder (added to the ache in her hip) somehow makes the whole scenario more real to her and unpredictable and, because real and unpredictable, even more exciting than a seamlessly executed fantasy in which there’s no one to battle for control of the action. In fantasy, the mind tends to erase sheer silliness and small discomforts. In reality, these factors prove for her that there really is another person in the room and that their negotiation for enjoyment can’t help but be mutual.

As a first-time writer of smut, I’ve only just begun to reflect on the associated body of craft. And I’m probably pretty unreliable on the subject but here is a line of speculation about why I’ve written this the way I have. Obviously there are lots of different ways of writing arousal, sex, orgasm—and of capturing their psychic dimensions. But I think imagery is one strategy that appeals to me in that the images people choose—or are granted—in extremes of sensation seem to tap into individual peculiarities of experience in ways that make the long-awaited contact of Part A and Part B feel exceptional, even if you happen to be describing a relatively mundane maneuver. All happy sex acts are alike (leaving aside, for the moment, the prospect of unhappy ones) but each happy sex act is happy in its own way. Images can help you to make the latter part of this maxim seem real, though it’s definitely possible to go overboard, as if you were writing a clumsy blason.

It may be fear of crossing the purple boundary (which I hope I haven’t violated overmuch) that keeps me from dwelling at length on raven hair or rippling muscles or rosy nipples but it’s also a sense that descriptions of interior states can be just as interesting (if not more so) than descriptions of exterior action. (Plus, I’ve got a sense that certain checks on physical description allow for richer possibilities of disidentification.) But, then, of course there has to be enough bodily choreography available so that smut can fulfill its most delightful and basic function and the thing doesn’t spin off into cascades of pure abstraction. I wonder if TGAA didn’t fall off that tightrope a time or two anyway.

 Probably this is glaringly obvious but there you are.

11) “French letter?”

French letter was, for a long time, British Commonwealth slang for condom (the OED dates the first written usage to 1844). Meanwhile, among the French, condoms were known as capotes anglaises or “English coats,” because it’s always the other guy who’s got venereal diseases. The term French letter has left its mark on contemporary Australian slang, where “franger,” supposedly a contraction of French letter, is the word for this form of prophylactic. Phryne probably has a stash of French letters in her bedside table but, as the series establishes, the diaphragm (see Chapter Two, note nine)
is her preferred form of contraception and she absolutely trusts that Jack would tell her if there were anything else amiss. He, meanwhile, has just enough presence of mind to remember that crucial bit of business. In this, Jack trusts her as well. And he’s glad, on some level, not to have to wait any longer. Not because he has any objection to wearing a condom but because he’s committed himself now and doesn’t want any pauses that might make him rethink that decision.

12) “Don’t come, then, until I like it.”

Jack and Phryne’s interactions over the course of two seasons have been nothing if not an impossibly lengthy bout of foreplay, so to some extent they’ve extrapolated one another’s physical reactions from their acquaintance along other axes, though there are always surprises when anticipation and conjecture smash up (ahem) against reality. Jack articulates this explicitly when he compares sex with Phryne to a campaign of detection. The series makes this analogy most clearly at the end of “Unnatural Habits,” just after Aunt Prudence has interrupted Jack and Phryne’s tête-à-tête on the staircase. The moment lost, Phryne says lightly: “Until our next murder investigation then.” Jack replies: “I look forward to it.” And then, after a pause, he comes out with the rueful addendum: “The investigation, not the murder.” It’s a qualification made from his foundational goodness but also one that acknowledges what investigation is to them: the transformation of malice and misfortune to intelligence, generosity, and breathless improvisation.

Jack’s orgasm denial game is, in a sense, a condensation and a literalization of their entire relationship to date: the push and the pull of it, the feints and ripostes. It also, as I think I said in a comment somewhere, serves the triple function of satisfying Jack’s desire for control, proving to Phryne that his promise not to stop isn’t a bluff, and increasing her pleasure in the act. (The request also entails a healthy dose of that generous cruelty I mentioned in Chapter Four, note five.) She comes frequently, joyfully, and without restraint, whereas, until this point in their sexual relationship, he has practiced extremes of self-command. In return for the challenges she’s dared him to surmount, he sets her a task equally as difficult. CollingwoodGirl has remarked, acutely, that this game levels the playing field between them. I’d add, only, “again,” because the constant instability of their power dynamic is--and seems like it might always be--one of the major engines of their interest in one another.

13) our moods do not believe in each other

Emerson (see Chapter Three, note nineteen). This time the quotation comes from the essay “Circles” (1841). Jack’s getting at the unreality of happiness when one is sad and vice versa. His acknowledgment of the constant effort it takes to remember that states of feeling forget one another is a sign of his brand of emotional maturity. Odd thing to think on the verge of an orgasm, perhaps, but that’s the Inspector for you.

14) The wide world dreaming on things to come

Obligatory Shakespeare. This was almost a quotation from Marlowe (“a globe may I tearme this, /By which louve sailes to regions full of blis”) and then, blasphemously, Aemelia Lanyer (“Whose love, before all worlds, we doe preferre”) and then John Donne (“Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.”). Because why should Shakespeare be the only early modern poet to get any play? But I gave in and let Jack have “Sonnet 107” for fear of rising into the critical zone of the Crawford of Lymond Scale of Inveterate Quotation.
"Sonnet 107" begins with these lines: “Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul/Of the wide world dreaming on things to come./Can yet the lease of my true love control.” Jack is, here, punning on his earlier comparison of himself to a representation of the earth’s axis. “Things to come” are both indistinct futurities and the body on the edge of orgasm. He’s also thinking, though he doesn’t say so, about the next line of the poem, in which not even dire prognostications can “control”—always a charged word for Jack—the expression of sincere feeling. At long last, his cup runneth over.

Which reminds me: this meta is now officially longer than the original fic, which surely means we’ve crossed some event horizon of absurdity. Is gravity now passé? Jury is out!
Chapter 6

Annotations

CHAPTER SIX (in process)

CHAPTER SIX

1) a first edition of Tristram Shandy

This chapter needed a bawdy work of literature that was also likely to be valuable to bibliophiles in the 1920s: Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* fit the bill. Another candidate for the position was Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* but I decided to go with Sterne on account of the latter’s importance to various modern literary experiments. Both novels are rife with body humor of various kinds, and particularly sex jokes.

2) the copy of The Well of Loneliness

Here we go with the pageant of period-appropriate bath-time reading! Deep breath.

*The Well of Loneliness*--a novel by Radclyffe Hall, who was an upper-class Englishwoman as well as a writer and an occasional member of Natalie Clifford Barney’s Parisian salon (sometimes shorthanded as Lesbos-sur-Seine)--is one of five literary works one might shorthand as the Sacred Lesbian Quintet of Nineteen Twenty-Eight (SaLQuiN?).

(The other four are Djuna Barnes’s *Ladies’ Almanack*, Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Hotel*, Compton Mackenzie’s *Extraordinary Women*, and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.)

*The Well* details the upbringing and loves of Stephen Gordon, a young aristocratic Englishwoman (much like Hall herself!) born in the Victorian era and growing up modern. Stephen knows she’s different from other girls from her first moments of self-awareness and eventually finds some vocabulary to identify her difference: the discourse of “inversion” that early sexologists used to describe same-sex desire. (See Chapter Five, note four). The novel makes a transparent case for the invert’s “right . . . to existence” and it was this transparency that helped to make it a target for trial under Britain’s Obscene Publication Act of 1857. The trial was a public spectacle that featured a number of famous attendees—some of whom were witnesses as well.

(Hall’s longtime lover, Una Troubridge, was a sculptor and also a translator of Colette, a French novelist known for her own lesbian leanings. The Troubridge-Hall relationship got complicated when, towards the end of her life, Hall began to yearn for the affection of a White Russian nurse named Evgenia Souline but that’s a story for another time.)

Leonard Woolf and E.M. Forster (of whom see Chapter Five, note four, as well as Chapter Six, notes twenty-one and twenty-three) drafted a public letter in defense of Hall’s book, which was to be signed by a number of important modernist figures. Hall objected to the wording of the letter—it
failed to mention the “genius” of *The Well*. Privately, Virginia Woolf thought Hall was—stylistically speaking—something of a hack, though she consented, in the end, to add her name to the open letter. To be fair, Woolf’s aesthetic snobbery is matched by the class snobbery of Hall’s novel, which critics have often read as suggesting that only aristocratic, English inverters are truly capable of love. Despite the efforts of her fellow writers, all copies of the novel were ordered to be destroyed at Hall’s expense. A trial in the United States came to a similar conclusion and, subsequently, copies of the novel would not be sold openly until 1949, seven years after Hall’s death.

This biography is a good place to start if you’re interested in Hall’s life, work, and notoriety.

3) *pile of her companion’s Table Talk magazines*

*Table Talk* magazine was a social periodical published in Melbourne from 1885 through 1939—its items included what we would now think of as pop culture, less salacious varieties of gossip, and lightly satirical cartoons.

Both Dot and Miss Esperance mention *Table Talk* magazine in the season one episode “Ruddy Gore.” I’m sure Phryne enjoys a little light reading—and also that Dot occasionally takes a swim in this particular bathtub. (Miss Fisher probably recommends combinations of esoteric modern bath products to her companion.)

4) “*Banned for obscenity. Though compared to Mr. Shandy…*”

As Chapter Six, note one says, *Tristram Shandy* is seriously obscene in places, while *The Well of Loneliness* often quits at “serious.” (The latter is really a very chaste novel!) Anyway, Jack and his omnivorous literary proclivities are so busted! And Phryne’s taking notes, well, one note: if you want to know the inspector’s secrets, catch him during the refractory period.

5) “*Bloody port officials keep confiscating them at customs—*”

Although the Australian Classification Board wasn’t formed until 1970, Oz has a long and complicated censorship history. Here is a good source for what Australian censorship looked like in the first half of the twentieth century. Scholarship on the exact mechanisms for dealing with banned books in 1920s Australia is still emerging, so I’ve taken a little imaginative license here. But we do know that in the aftermath of World War I customs ran an extensive secret bureaucratic network whose object was to find and sequester banned materials. Booksellers’ shipments and travelers’ luggage were regularly examined and the contraband items seized by police under cover of laws including the Customs Act. (Obscenity and sedition were the usual offenses.)

In the late 1920s (*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*—See Ch. 2, note 7 and Ch. 3, note 12—was banned in 1929), public backlash against the sub rosa dealings at customs soon led to the creation of the Literature Censorship Board in the 1930s, a body meant to make more transparent the shadowy procedures of bans and seizures.

As I’ve written it, customs occasionally asks for a little back-up from the constabulary. So it’s plausible (though perhaps not provable) that a satellite police station like City South might have a few banned books locked away in the evidence room (or else in the extremely safe confines of an upstanding detective inspector’s office).
“Just a creaky old waterback on the stove.”

Had to do a bit of digging to figure out what early twentieth-century plumbing looked like across economic strata in early twentieth-century Melbourne. (This book chapter was of help.) Unsurprisingly, perhaps, middle and upper class households tended to have better access to hot water service than working class establishments. For Jack’s bachelor flat, I decided on a technological compromise: the waterback (or water back) was a kind of reservoir that connected to a coal or wood-burning range. You could use it to heat water or to store cold water for future use—not bad but not nearly as nice as heated water on demand, which is a feature of Phryne’s home. You can read more than you ever wanted to know about water backs in this plumber’s trade journal from 1922.

like a marble whizzing through a bagatelle in a penny arcade

Bagatelles were the direct ancestors of the pinball machine—and they operated on much the same lines—a ball is propelled through a series of pins (and later gates) along a roughly rectangular surface. I needed a period-appropriate metaphor here and the spring-loaded pinball effect seemed apt to Phryne’s state of mind as she processes this new stage of intimacy with Jack. But it isn’t until the 1930s (roughly) that bagatelles became known as “marble games” or “pin games,” so I went with the term that would likely have been more familiar to her, games-woman as she is. I enjoy the idea of Phryne in a penny arcade—that ancient precursor to the video arcade. It would be full of weird, novelty games of chance and fortune-telling machines. Phryne would dispense her pennies liberally and bet Jack a sampler of sexual favors that she could beat his score on every game. Then they would blithely play through the arcade while Jack alternated between enjoying her glee and coming up with double and triple entendres to throw her off her game.

Last Friday’s Argus

From the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, the Argus was the most prominent conservative newspaper in Melbourne. Its comparatively liberal counterpart was The Age and I almost gave Phryne copies of both, since I’ve no doubt that the Argus occasionally makes her blood boil (assume The Age, blood boiling for different reasons, is in the parlor or something). I chose the Argus primarily because in “Away with the Fairies” (Season 1, episode 8), much is made of the fact that the redoubtable Miss Regina Charlesworth, Phryne’s former teacher, left a promising career at the Argus in order to begin Women’s Choice. And now that I think about it, I should have included an issue of the latter as well!

We of the Never Never

Some Australian literature, at last. Published in 1908 by Jeannie Gunn, We of the Never Never might have been a book Phryne encountered in her adolescence. A description of life in the bush in the northern part of Australia, We of the Never Never is lyrically written and also, in many ways, naively colonialist (it looms large in the mythos of the rugged, Australian outback). I imagine Phryne returning to this book after time abroad in an attempt to reconnect with the geography of her youth—and grappling, as one so often does when returning to childhood classics—with the disturbing subtext of Gunn’s work.
10) Orlando

Another pillar of SaLQuiN (see note two for this chapter), Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (1928) is famously known as “the longest and most charming love letter in literature.” (The coiner of that bon mot? Nigel Nicholson, the son of the woman to whom that love letter was addressed.) Orlando is about as light as the fictional Woolf gets (novels like Mrs Dalloway and The Waves have much stronger dimensions of tragedy.) Written by Woolf as an homage to her intense love affair with Vita Sackville-West, Orlando tells the story of a young Elizabethan nobleman, seemingly immortal, who, over the course of several centuries, becomes a woman. Although its primary romantic relationships appear heterosexual (boy-Orlando and the Russian princess Sasha, girl-Orlando and the sea captain Marmaduke Bonntrip Shelmerdine), its subtext is profoundly queer and it’s often read as a touchstone of modern lesbian discourse (which is to say nothing of its transgender and gender non-conformist potentials). (Here is a charming essay about Orlando and the problem of time.) Unlike The Well of Loneliness (see note 2 for this chapter), Orlando was able to fly under the radar of the Obscene Publication Act, perhaps because of its more deeply coded and stylized rendering of queer desire.

Phryne might not identify with the tentative naivety that characterizes the protagonist for most of the novel but she might very well see something of herself, some echo of her own ways of queering and being queer, in the growing self-possession of the genderfluid Orlando as she realizes herself to be ageless and possibly immortal.

What else is there to say about Woolf? About her fierce wit, her snobbery, her tenderness, her audaciousness, her many blindspots? Lots! But more, I think, than there’s room for here.

11) Cinema Romance

Back issues of this periodical make an appearance in the Season 2 episode “Framed for Murder” as one of Dot’s varied and useful forms of reading material (Picture Stars and Movie Papers are the other two she mentions). I wasn’t able to find anything about these publications online (are they Australian? English? American?) so they’re either mock-ups made for the show (the issue of Cinema Romance on which the camera lingers has a very convincing patina of age) or another example of the myriad gossip and rumor fan magazines of the early twentieth-century. Many of these were considered disposable entertainment rather than archival treasure and were, consequently, lost to history. Dot, standing in, perhaps, for the beleaguered designers of the show, encounters this stack of magazines in the trash. Who, she wonders, would throw away such excellent reading (and by extension such excellent costume and set reference)? Hugh disparages her frivolous interest in film gossip until she tricks him into thinking that The Kid Stakes (1927), a popular silent film based on Australian artist Syd Nicholl’s Fatty Finn comics, will be remade as a talkie.

I liked the idea that the bathtub archive would reflect a catholic taste—a pleasing jumble of high, low, and middle brow materials. More on the notion of an ideal library in a bit.

12) Miles Franklin

Miles Franklin (born Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin) was an author foundational to the establishment of Australian literature. In some ways, Franklin might have represented a feminist role model for Phryne. Well-traveled, Franklin remained concerned with Australian conditions and
themes throughout her life. She was also extremely suspicious of marriage as a social institution. Like Phryne, Franklin served in World War I, not as a nurse but rather as a volunteer cook in the Scottish Women’s Hospitals. Her unit, posted to Lake Ostrovo in Greek Macedonia, worked to support the Serbian army.

Franklin’s most famous work is the bleakly comic My Brilliant Career (1901), which tells the story of Sybylla Melvyn, a young aspiring writer growing up in New South Wales. And it’s either this book (adapted for film in 1979) or the satirical novel Some Everyday Folk and Dawn (1909) that features in Phryne’s bath-time library. (For various reasons, some having to do with her health, some with difficulty finding a publisher, Franklin’s next novel wouldn’t appear until the 1930s.) Her influence is still felt today in Australian letters, partly through prizes created in her name: the Miles Franklin Literary Award and the Stella Prize.

13) Hungarrda

Hungarrda (1927), a pamphlet on Aboriginal myths, was the work of the polymath David Unaipon, who was also an Indigenous Australian of the Ngarrindjeri people and a key figure in the history of Australian letters and sciences. (His work is commemorated by a portrait on the Australian fifty-dollar bill.) He was the inventor of, among other things, a centrifugal motor and a multi-radial wheel, and also an advocate for Aboriginal rights. In addition to these accomplishments, Unaipon produced poetry, life writing, journalism and, significantly, a number of pamphlets on Aboriginal mythology. (Hungarrda is the first of them.) These were compiled in 1930 into a book called Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborignals; the commissioner and publisher of the volume, William Ramsay Smith, shamefully failed to acknowledge Unaipon as the author in the book’s initial printing. Unaipon’s legacy is not unmixed—newspaper accounts of his work contemporary with his life, though they were in no way his fault, offer an object lesson in racist exceptionalism. During his lifetime, Unaipon showed that Indigenous Australians could, on occasion, succeed on the terms of the colonizer but also that, for native populations, the problems of assimilation and cultural particularism often remain intractable.

That said, Unaipon played a major role in the Bleakley inquiry, which began to address issues of Aboriginal welfare in 1928-29. At one point, I’d really hoped Miss Fisher would manage a Bleakley inquiry episode but alas not—there are Aboriginal characters in Season 2, episode 4, “Dead Weight,” but the episode doesn’t really engage with the substance of this particular postcolonial dilemma.

Hungarrda makes an appearance here partly as a mark of how the Phryne of this story tries, wherever possible, to educate herself about the cultures in which she moves and partly as a memorial to an imagined version of the show in which representation works a little more capaciously. And this too has to do with the Library of Alexandria but it’ll be a few more annotations before I’m ready to talk about why.

14) Flaubert

The book Jack’s referring to here is either Madame Bovary (1856) or A Sentimental Education (1869), both by Gustave Flaubert, a nineteenth-century French novelist known for his particular brand of psychological precision and literary realism. His work is foundational to literary modernism and also features layers upon layers of irony and passion, so difficult to extricate that they seem, in fact, to construct one another. This element, I thought, might be what appealed to Phryne.

It was going to be either Proust or Flaubert but I suspected Phryne might get rather impatient with
Proust’s tendency to dwell in jealousy, no matter how compelling she found his prose, his psychological observations, or his descriptions of Sodom and Gomorrah. Certain kinds of novels, Proust’s and Flaubert’s among them, are particularly good at helping you imagine other people’s inner lives, a useful skill for a detective, though Phryne hardly chooses her fiction for its instrumental qualities!

15) a Russian Grammar

As we know from “Death at Victoria Dock” and “Blood at the Wheel,” Phryne has a working knowledge of Russian (though her language abilities seem, generally, to wax and wane depending on whether it’s convenient for the plot). And as we know from “Cocaine Blues,” she doesn’t mind the occasional Russian dancer. I suspect that bath time is about the only time Phryne sits still long enough to brush up on her skills. The particular grammar in question is this one by Nevill Forbes, first published in 1916 (note that Oxford Clarendon has a Melbourne branch!).

16) a Dorothy Sayers

The book referred to here is probably Unnatural Death (1927). In Chapter Four, note 4 I observe that Phryne and Jack fit into a sub-genre of bantering supersleuths that also includes Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, the creations of British writer Dorothy Sayers, who wrote (in addition to fiction) poems, plays, and essays on craft and Christian humanism. Sayers first began writing about Lord Peter in Whose Body? (1923). By the year in which TGAA is set (1929), Sayers had published three more books featuring Wimsey and his set: Clouds of Witness (1926), Unnatural Death (1927), and The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club (1928). Peter Wimsey is a slight, blond, and keenly observant aristocrat who is fond of Bach, incunabula, making witty remarks, and quoting Donne, Shakespeare, and Ernest Bramah. Bodies frequently turn up in his vicinity. Meanwhile, Harriet Vane, introduced as a murder suspect in Strong Poison (1930), becomes Peter’s recurring partner-in-solving-crime and, eventually, his wife.

Here is a lovely essay, written by a queer historian, about the appeal of the Peter/Harriet relationship.

The Wimsey books are very much a product of the 1920s and 30s from their occasional nods to queer, modern subcultures to their deployment of Peter’s history as a World War I veteran. Sayers, who has been accused of falling for her fictional hero, explained her attraction to Peter’s world of wealth and privilege as a response to the poverty of her daily life: “at the time I was particularly hard up and it gave me pleasure to spend his fortune for him. When I was dissatisfied with my single unfurnished room I took a luxurious flat for him in Piccadilly. When my cheap rug got a hole in it, I ordered him an Aubsson carpet.” I certainly don’t scoff at the notion that one good use for literature can be to provide a refuge from the difficulties of everyday life (fantasy, the ability to imagine things other than as they are, is a crucial human faculty and sometimes even consistent with a radical politics!). But I confess I’ve always been a little suspicious of Peter’s wealth and aristocracy. Not unilaterally, but often enough, there’s an uncritical acceptance of class hierarchies in the Wimsey books that results in demeaning stereotypes of middle and working class people, as well as patches of anti-Semitism. Maybe this is indicative of a problem that the cozy mystery genre in general poses for readers. Its view of morality tends to stress individual and/or interpersonal responsibility but downplays (or is it conceals?) the way larger social structures set conditions for transgressive acts. In other words, even though crime (particularly murder) is everywhere in the cozy mystery, it’s not an ordinary condition of life. Rather, it’s experienced as deviation, the rupture of a world that is, more or less, in pretty good order.
I’m uncomfortable with Phryne’s blue blood and bottomless resources for reasons that echo my discomfort (and my attraction) to the Wimsey books. The romance of aristocracy is one that doesn’t really register with me. Even as I respond to the rags-to-riches fantasy of her story (those clothes! that house! that hat!), I have a hard time finding much to get excited about when it comes to her courtesy title. (I often wonder about a version of the show in which Phryne, still possessed of all her wit and resourcefulness, had fewer financial resources, a little less social capital. How interesting her investigations of cross-class murders would be if she approached them as one of the plebs...) Dorothy Sayers is here in part as a tongue-in-cheek reference to Phryne’s forebears in sexy sleuthing and in part as a monument to my ambivalence.

17) a treatise on—Samoa, is it?

The book Jack almost names here is Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), a blockbuster classic of twentieth-century anthropology that has since been at least partially discredited. (Here’s a brief essay about that story by an equally controversial scholar.) Mead, a pioneering anthropologist (with all the nerve and the corresponding limitations that implies, is known as much for her odd and passionate life as she is for her scholarship and career. A student of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict at Columbia, Mead dedicated her life and her work to explorations of sexuality (she was famously married three times) and cultures of parenting, among other interests. She also served as a major architect of the discipline of Western anthropology (to give her a fair share of credit or blame, depending on your perspective), not least through her mentoring of a number of younger anthropologists. Late in life, her romantic partner was the anthropologist Rhoda Métraux.

*Coming of Age in Samoa* seems right for Phryne’s collection in that it attempts to theorize many of the questions of sexual and social practice that Phryne simply (or not so simply) lives. Upon its release, Mead’s book also acquired a titillating reputation, which it has never managed to outrun, and this touch of scandal also seemed like it might be special bait to Phryne’s admittedly catholic tastes. Although Mead did not identify publically as bisexual, her late-in-life relationship with Métraux makes her a reasonable gambit (to my mind) in the game of cryptoqueer authorship this story of mine seems to be playing.

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