

**Parodying Lesbiansim: Deconstruction in Djuna Barnes's Ladies Almanack**  
*By Susanne Hamscha*

Djuna Barnes's Ladies Almanack can be read as a lesbian text. If we want to classify it as such, we first have to clarify what the term 'lesbian' means. According to Judith Butler, "to be' lesbian seems to be more than a simple injunction to be become who or what I already am ... [It] is a production..." (13). If we assume that lesbianism, or sexuality in general, is a production and thus socially constructed, we can further conclude that this construct leaves room for subversion and resistance. In the following, I want to analyze in what ways Barnes uses imitation and parody in her Ladies Almanack to undermine ostensibly natural categories.

Critics have often read Ladies Almanack as a joyous celebration of lesbianism (cf. Jay, 191). I would argue, however, that in this book, Barnes (intentionally or unintentionally) parodies all forms of sexual orientation and thus decomposes the illusion of the stability of sexual identity. Unlike other women who "upon reaching a certain Age, discard Duster, Offspring and Spouse, Evangeline Musset, who is described as "one Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and the Distraction" of girls (LA 6), was born a lesbian. She was intended to be a boy and therefore, when she "came forth with an Inch or so less than this, she paid no Heed to the Error" (LA, 7). Having treated her like a boy already before her birth, Musset's parents had virtually imposed homosexuality on her. With this remark Barnes challenges the assumption that sexual orientation is innate and suggests that sexuality can be instilled. By depicting Musset as a very masculine woman, Barnes also mocks the inversion model, according to which lesbians are men trapped in women's bodies (cf. Krafft-Ebing). Barnes – ahead of her time – takes up the postmodern idea that there is no "gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property" (Butler, 21) and that there are "no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality" (25). In other words, she introduces the notion of the constructedness of sex and gender.

The terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" achieve meaning through their construction as a binary pair, consisting of the natural, original (heterosexuality) and its derivation, imitation (homosexuality). As Butler argues, without the notion of homosexuality as its copy, heterosexuality could not set itself up as the authentic. Heterosexuality thus presupposes homosexuality and depends on its existence as an imitation to be able to affirm its own originality. The construction of original/imitation consequently demonstrates the instability of the categories heterosexual/homosexual (cf. Butler 22). Deconstructing the conventional hierarchy, Barnes sets homosexuality up as the "origin" in Ladies Almanack:

This is the part about heaven that has never been told. After the Fall of Satan (and as he fell, Lucifer uttered a loud Cry, heard from one End of Forever-and-no-end to the other), all the Angels, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo,

Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricornus, Aquarius, Pieces, all, all gathered together, so close that they were not recognizable, one from the other. And not nine months later, there was heard under the Dome of Heaven a great Crowing, and from the Midst, an Egg, as incredible as a thing forgotten, fell to Earth, and striking, split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying "Pardon me, I must be going!" And this was the first Woman born with a Difference. After this the Angels parted, and on the Face of each was the Mother look. Why was that? (LA, 24-26)

Barnes's tale provides an alternative to the traditional heterosexual creation myth, which by mocking she reduces to absurdity it. It tells the story of the birth of a woman who is conceived without any male participation in the act of procreation and thus stands outside the heteronormative binary of male and female. Usually, the meaning of "woman" is determined in opposition to "man." Here, in the absence of "man," the meaning of "woman" can only be achieved in opposition to other women. Just as the "Woman born with a Difference" stands outside of the Man/Woman binary, the category of lesbian also figures outside of the heterosexual binary. Or, as Monique Wittig puts it:

Lesbian is the only concept ... which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman a woman is a specific social relation to a man, ... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (Wittig, 108)

If the "Woman" and the "lesbian" both stand outside the dual sex/gender system and therefore are both different, then we can assume that just as the difference of the "lesbian", also the "Woman's" difference lies in her sexuality. Consequently, the "first Woman born with a Difference" can be read as the first lesbian. As a result of Barnes's "female myth making" (Lanser, 163), the lesbian woman becomes the origin in this subversive account of creation. Furthermore, this first lesbian woman combines the finest parts of each zodiac sign ("the hungry heart", "the longing leg", "the twining thigh", "the breast beguiling") in her body, which is depicted highly erotically. In short, Ladies Almanack "involves the textual construction of the lesbian body and lesbian desire as well as the destruction of conventional codes that govern the representation of female desire and the female body, as object of male heterosexual desire" (Fellner, 150). Similarly, Shari Benstock states that "[w]oman's body – which has been made the vehicle by which man satiates his lust – is returned to woman's control. Discovering its pleasures, the ladies of the Almanack celebrate woman's sexuality, writing the lesbian body" (250). Susan Lanser calls lesbianism as it is represented in the book "a rejection of the roles a patriarchal society has placed upon women" (161).

Homosexuality, however, is as unstable an origin as heterosexuality. According to Butler, "heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – *and failing*" (21). Thus, in analogy to

this argument, setting homosexuality up as the norm would fail as well, because its consequential need for constant self-repetition would also prove its instability. Therefore I think that in Ladies Almanack, Barnes does not attempt to establish homosexuality as the norm. She rather wants to demonstrate that both, heterosexuality as well as homosexuality, are equally unstable categories. Being as constructed as the traditional biblical creation myth, Barnes's lesbian creation myth challenges the idea of the innateness of sexual orientation on the one hand, and essentialism of any (sexual) category on the other.

This assumption of the constructedness of any category manifests itself on multiple levels in this text. Just as Barnes shows the constructedness of sexual identity on the content level, she also parodically exposes the instability of categories on the level of genre, style, and illustrations. Karla Jay argues that although some critics might categorize Barnes's work as an almanac, rather than a novel or tale, it belongs to neither genre: Ladies Almanack "does not fit the traditional description of an almanac, which usually contains such items as weather forecasts, tide tables, and lists of facts. Nor is it for a specific profession, such as farmers. Neither can [it] be classified as a novel..." (Jay, 190). Ladies Almanack incorporates stories, poems, myths, and even a lullaby. Thus it fits into no literary genre and resists the rigidity of categorization. Jay suggests that "by placing the work beyond recognizable genres, Barnes...hoped to escape the limitations and expectations of such forms..." (190). Ladies Almanack not only transgresses the conventions of literary genre but also of style. Lanser describes Barnes's prose as "dense and highly allusive" and remarks that "almost nothing is made clear; the text speaks cryptically, figurally, and evasively. Sentences are winding, inverted, unfinished or impossibly long. Antecedents get misplaced, verbs dangle, pronouns lose their source" (157-158). Lanser also notes Barnes's frequent use of archaisms and neologisms, her mingling of registers and lexicons, the resurrection of grammatical forms from the Renaissance, and the capitalizing of nouns, adjective and verbs, which gives the text an ancient and fantastical twist. Barnes's language is a derivative of "Chaucer, the King James Bible, Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy ... and a number of Restoration dramatists. But the language is also contemporary with some of the experiments Joyce was making" (LA, 90). Barnes's style crosses the boundaries of genres and literary epochs and, as Louis Kannerstine puts it, "discovers its own values and ... gradually turns upon itself in parody" (49). Also the illustrations in Ladies Almanack are derived from older models. Barnes's drawings show "baroque cherubs, medieval grotesques, parodic iconography, feminized zodiacs, sexual caricature, and other emblems archaic and arcane" (Lanser, 157). Thus, the ancient character of the book is reinforced. Additionally, by imitating and parodying these old illustrations, Barnes creates an ironic distance which also manifests itself in language and style. Hence, imitation and deconstruction on one level support and reinforce imitation and deconstruction on another level.

Judith Butler argues that "[part] of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that, which, to some degree can never appear. This

is perhaps the most fundamental reason why sexuality is to some degree always closeted, especially to the one who would express it through acts of disclosure” (25). Djuna Barnes, despite her long relationship with Thelma Wood and love-affairs with other women, refused to label herself a lesbian. Just as Mina Loy (Patience Scalpel), who identified herself as heterosexual, Barnes was thus sexually alienated from Nathalie Barney’s (Musset) group. In the *Almanack*, Barnes omits herself from the cast of characters and takes on the role of an outsider, who observes a sensual and sexual circle she does not belong to (cf. Jay). Barnes’s refusal or inability to label herself is mirrored Ladies Almanack, in which categorization is rejected on multiple levels. Genre, style, and illustrations thus work together in underlining the representation of sexual identity, which through the use of imitation and parody, is exposed as a social construction.

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