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Weighing Up Celibacy: The Fat Virgin of Molly Keane's *Devoted Ladies*

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Abstract

In Molly Keane's 1934 novel *Devoted Ladies*, the young Irish character Piggy Browne is dismissed as a "fat, hungry virgin", an insult that incites the text's denouement. This article uses the figure of Piggy Browne to juxtapose virginity and fatness in Keane's writing, asking how fat can inform our understanding of the single Irish woman in Keane. I set up both fat and virginity as relevant concerns to Keane's work, drawing on a range of her fiction as well as writing about virginity, land, and time. Focussing on Piggy in *Devoted Ladies* demonstrates how the novel is interested in the emotional lives of women, however satirically. Moreover, ideas of virginity, fat, and hunger become useful ways of thinking about Piggy's role in the ending of *Devoted Ladies*. Keane ultimately emphasizes a fall, not a culmination, concluding on a moment of agency, if not progress.

Keywords: Molly Keane; sexuality; Irish women's writing; celibacy

1. Introduction

Of the many "undesirable single wom[e]n" (Breen 1997, p. 209) in Molly Keane's corpus between the 1920s and 1980s, the character of Viola 'Piggy' Browne is one of the more singular. Dismissed as stupid, fat, and unworldly, Piggy is sidelined for much of *Devoted Ladies* (1934), in which Keane—then writing as M. J. Farrell—is primarily concerned with what she called a "new. . . subject" of homosexual relationships (Devlin 2012, p. x), as well as with other sexual politics. While Piggy can be thought of as displaying romantic desire for her childhood friend Joan, her sexuality is ambiguous, as is her place in the novel. As a single woman characterized by fat and frugality, virginity and longing, submissiveness and eventually violent action, Piggy is a complex touchstone in the Keanian themes of desire, devotion, and Anglo–Irish single life; she offers a way of reading emotional and embodied life as separate from sexual wants. I read the ending of *Devoted Ladies* especially closely: the insult of "'fat, hungry virgin'" (Keane 2012, p. 241), which is levelled at Piggy in the novel's closing pages, not only broadens the many ways of thinking about celibacy in Keane's writing, but sets the novel's strange, abruptly vicious denouement in motion. Fat and virginity provide ways of reading this ending of stasis and dissatisfaction, a seemingly nonsexual final note (that is, a conclusion in which sexuality is not prominent or not at stake) that stands apart from much of the novel's more widely discussed sexual speculation.

Introducing a volume of essays on medieval virginity, Margaret W. Ferguson rightly suggests that "[p]aradoxes pertaining to the nature of *female* virginity in particular tend to cluster around issues or images of temporal duration, epistemological and ontological status, and cultural value" (Ferguson 1999, pp. 10–11). The ways in which such "issues" might be resolved or represented vary broadly across century and national context. In this

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article I focus not on the question of whether any Keane character 'is' a virgin—however measurable it might seem, virginity is a slippery construct—but on the significance that an invocation of virginity might hold within her novel *Devoted Ladies*. What are the implications or the judgements in the word? In so doing, I contribute to recent virginity studies that have sought to look beyond any single yardstick for virginity, treating it instead as "a site around which some of our most basic questions around sexuality are confronted and from which we have much to learn about our central anxieties, paranoias, desires, and fears" (Allan et al. 2016, p. 5). Some "anxieties" around virginity are arguably similar to those around fat, which also raises questions about cultural value, aetiology, and temporality. As with virginity, I am interested in how and why "fat" is deployed in *Devoted Ladies* and not in quantifying, or judging, body size. This article therefore advocates for the aim of fat studies to "undermine hegemonic assumptions" about bodies in fiction (Huff 2013, p. 31). Keane, who uses both fat and virginity to satirical effect, is arguably part of the long "history of discourses that demonize fat" (Huff 2013, p. 34) and dismisses nonsexual lifestyles rather than being a rehabilitor.[1] But the figure of Piggy Browne in *Devoted Ladies*, "destined to become the novel's heroine" (Foster 2008, p. 468), offers more than a caricature; if fat and virginity are part of this character's seemingly futile and static life, they are also a part of her final act of agency within the narrative. Reading the potential agency of this single virgin might suggest a way of situating Keane's many other celibate Anglo–Irish women within ambiguous or ambivalent interpersonal relationships.

2. "Unwanted Grotesque[s]": Keane and the Fat Virgin

Benjamin Kahan includes little discussion of virginity in his landmark study *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (2013). Quoting the historian of sexology Arnold I. Davidson, he decides that "'chastity and virginity are moral categories, denoting a relation between the will and the flesh; they are not categories of sexuality'" (Kahan 2013, p. 11; Davidson 2001, p. 57). Perhaps such a division is overstated—are not all sexual labels and behaviors affected by expectations of morality in some way, not to mention by the gap between the mind and the body?—but it is true that virginity is not a coherent "category" of sexual identity, particularly in the sexological sense of taxonomic classification. Virginity might better be understood as a socially constructed pre-sexuality, a state of (supposed) sexual inexperience and ignorance. In women, it could also be thought of as a state of readiness for reproduction. Virginity as a construct is predicated on an expectation of future sexual activity. It is what constitutes the border between virgin and not-virgin, and the question of who should cross the divide when, that differs across national and literary contexts; in Keane's Anglo–Irish fiction, I will primarily use "virginity" to denote a state prior to sexual experience. Keane's young women are frequently easy to read as virgins, situated within decaying worlds of sexual ignorance, small and "ingrown" gentry (Foster 2008, p. 469), and "self-denial" (see Inglis 2005, p. 11). Virginity is not incompatible with celibacy, which can be understood as an "organization of pleasure" (Kahan 2013, p. 4) characterized in part by ongoing self-sufficiency or self-control; some scholars of virginity have located queer possibility in its sense of untouchedness and self-possession.[2] However, virginity differs from celibacy in intimating that an individual lacks any sexual history. Although celibacy can refer to "a period in between sexual activity" (Kahan 2013, p. 2), a celibate's presumed return to sexual behavior rests on voluntary decisions, while virginity is often thought of as an inherently temporary stage of life. After the rise of sexology in the late nineteenth century, the prolongation of virginity in adult women was increasingly pathologized, associated with morbid anti-sociality, thwarted fertility, and otherwise arrested development.[3]

In early twentieth-century fiction, the anticipation of virginity loss is depicted as erotic, shameful, or both, depending on a character's age and unworldliness. One of the tragicomic beats of Keane's *Good Behaviour* (published in 1981 but written and set much earlier) is Aroon's joyful sense of sexual maturity when a male friend platonically visits her bedroom one night: "I knew I was no unwanted grotesque; a man had lain there with me" (Keane 2001, p. 142). This comment exposes Aroon's real or calculated obliviousness, raising the question of whether she is pretending to be unaware that the visit was not a sexual encounter. Keane arguably gestures to such an uncertainty through her choice of punctuation. Rather than a colon, wherein the second statement would justify the first, she uses a semi-colon, which suggests a more ambiguous connection between the two comments. Regardless, the danger of being an "unwanted grotesque" is palpable in Keane's depiction of Aroon, among other female characters, in part because it is linked to a wider sense of being disconnected from society, particularly as Keane's typical backdrops are Anglo–Irish estates, decaying and sometimes oppressive relics of the past. Sexual ignorance, if not inexperience, is presented as an undesirable anachronism, one with potentially distorting effects on the body and the mind alike. Much of Keane's style in her novels is contingent on dramatic irony. If she "snoop[s] around the bed chamber" subtly in her work rather than referencing sex explicitly (Boylan 1993, p. 152), the reader seems expected to interpret euphemism without difficulty, unlike her naïve female characters. In *Good Behaviour*, for instance, by stating Aroon's belief that she is not—or is no longer—an "unwanted grotesque", Keane implies that she very much *is*.

Although Aroon's comment would seem to evaluate her place in society rather than her physiology, it can also be considered in light of her physical features. Aroon is a "big girl" (Keane 2001, p. 77) to match her Big House, with an appetite vast enough to earn the nickname of "Pig" or "Piglet" (p. 110) from her brother and his lover. Fat is sometimes discussed within definitions of the grotesque, as an instance of an exaggerated, inflated, excessive, or abnormal body (e.g., Grauland 2019; see also O'Brien 1999). In her reckoning with modern embodiment and social norms, Keane can usefully be read in light of David Cruickshank's formulation of modernist grotesques as representations of "the *present*: the uncertainty of their changing society and their consequent alienation from it" (Cruickshank 2024, p. 2). Cruickshank demonstrates how the concept of the grotesque offers a way of thinking about bodily experiences of time. An ongoing period of virginity would be viewed as socially grotesque in its (supposed) prolongation of sexual ignorance, combined with "poor dreams of future loving" (Keane 2012, p. 242). Fat, or bigness more generally, asserts presence as well as present-ness, which in *Good Behaviour* and *Devoted Ladies* alienates female characters even further from their fantasies of a future in which they are 'wanted'. It is sometimes also an anachronistic or foreign-coded vision of beauty, as in *Young Entry*, in which one young woman speculates that "'it's eight times more attractive to be fat"' on the basis that '"the women were positively bursting"' in a novel by the French writer Anatole France (Farrell 1989, p. 142), whose prose work predominantly preceded the First World War. Even elsewhere in that novel, though, male characters suggest that fat in women is unattractive.

Unwantedness and grotesquerie are sometimes thought of as overlapping features of extended periods of virginity, especially in concert with unrealistic romantic imaginings. For the virginity scholar Anke Bernau, for instance, the "grotesque appearance" of Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* "tells a story of frustrated youth and femininity" (Bernau 2008, p. 122). The metaphor of ripeness turning to decay is a common one throughout the twentieth century. There are few more concrete speculations about what prolonged virginity might do to the body, despite a greater (quasi)scientific interest in how sexual status might be understood through physical features. One exception is

the polemical feminist text *Motherhood and Its Enemies*, written a few years before *Devoted Ladies*, in which Charlotte Haldane argues that adult virgins have little to offer society. She imagines (citing no source) that prolonged virginity in an "originally normal" woman might result in masculinization: "the non-fulfillment of the normal sex functions due to atrophy or castration may cause the emergence in later life of the secondary sexual characters of the opposite sex" (Haldane 1928, pp. 151–52). This suggestion would seem to connect virginity with then-current ideas of homosexual physiology as, again, resembling that of "the opposite sex" (in *Devoted Ladies*, Keane mocks the naturally feminine lesbian Jessica for attempting to masculinize her appearance). Fat is not part of either desirable or unwanted virgin embodiment in pseudo-medical discourse. It is notable, though, that the growth of suspicion of virginity as an anti-social or anachronistic ignorance was roughly coterminous with the increasing stigmatization of fatness as an anti-social pathology, and one with potential implications for the health and reputation, of a nation. In other words, Piggy may not model female inversion as an early twentieth-century sexologist would imagine it, but nor is she a vision of a heterosexual-in-waiting. As Elena Levy-Navarro puts it, "the thin body is equated with progress, even as the fat body is seen as an obstacle to that progress" (Levy-Navarro 2010, p. 5).

In *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*, Jed Esty introduces the term "virgins of empire" to describe young women who are unable to fully grow up in "unsettled" environments that are "often evaporating, rarely defendable" as a "structural result of the age of empire". Elizabeth Bowen's Anglo–Irish character Lois Farquar (*The Last September*, 1928) is one of Esty's examples of a coming-of-age heroine disrupted by stasis (Esty 2012, pp. 163–65). For Esty, Lois's "frozen, virginal fate" models the "historically fixed, politically vexed, permanently adolescent status of the Ascendancy itself" (Esty 2012, p. 185). Although Esty arguably overstates his conflation of adolescence with virginity—the two categories have never been synonymous, even if their age ranges are expected to be similar—his sense of temporal delay inscribed upon both a land and individual protagonists is a useful one in the context of Keane, for whom the Ascendancy is a significant narrative background. Esty's argument of a protagonist's frozen adolescence might reasonably be applied to Aroon in *Good Behaviour*, among other Keane protagonists. Other critics have stressed the wilful obliviousness of the Ascendancy as "a colonial class studiously ignoring the changing world around them" (Murphy 2025, p. 145), which raises the question of individual virgins' agency in their own 'freezing'. Certainly, the notion of virginity as a reliable category is treated as a parochial belief in *Devoted Ladies*; Sylvester muses that "to George [Playfair] a Dog was a Dog. . .and the Virginity of unmarried women as unquestioned as the Honesty of his friends at cards" (Keane 2012, p. 105). Sylvester's wry framing presents virginity and honesty as constructs to be questioned by the novel's reader. The capitalization of some nouns adds to the quaint archaism of George's perspective.

There is another vision of female virginity in Keane's writing. The ending to Keane's *The Rising Tide* (1937) also offers gardening as a space of possible self-actualization. Diana and Cynthia, whose names both evoke goddesses associated with virginity, settle into the "toil and peace" of gardening in a more modest home than the Big House in which the novel is mostly set (Farrell 1937, p. 319). A return to virginity is a specter at the novel's end for Cynthia, who has not lived "so vestal a life" as Diana: she is left to wonder if she is "outside life for ever" in moving to Diana's preferred home, Rathglass (p. 319). This comment echoes Piggy's realization in *Devoted Ladies* that she is "outside love" (Keane 2012, p. 133). While *The Rising Tide* invites an optimistic reading of such a withdrawal from Diana's perspective—a reimagining of celibate, secluded life as one of queer contentment, to summarize the argument put forward by Catherine Bacon—it is still presented as anti-social exceptionalism, which some Keane characters view with suspicion.[4]

I now want to turn to Piggy in *Devoted Ladies*, the novel that precedes *The Rising Tide* in Keane's corpus. I place Piggy's embodiment and framing as a virgin within the novel's broader mistrust of "devotion".

3. "Girlish Fancies": Devoted Ladies

Devoted Ladies follows the gradual disintegration of a relationship between the American widow Jane and Englishwoman Jessica. Early on, they decamp from London to Ireland to support Jane's recuperation from a bout of illness, following in the footsteps of their writer acquaintance Sylvester. They come to stay with the unmarried Anglo–Irish sisters, and Sylvester's cousins, 'Piggy' and Hester Browne, after Piggy inadvertently breaks Jessica's arm in a car crash. Jane begins a courtship with the gentleman George Playfair (who is something of a relic from earlier, hunting-suffused M. J. Farrell novels), which is threatened by Jessica's malicious presence. Piggy, who has something of a *tendresse* for George because he has shown her kindness in the past, ultimately drives herself and Jessica through the gap in a stone wall to the sea below. The novel ends with the car's drop, which would seem to assure a heterosexual happy ending for Jane and George.

Devoted Ladies is one of a number of similarly-titled novels in the first half of the twentieth century, which include Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* (1928) and Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1939), both of which are overtly concerned with lesbian relationships. There is an archness to Keane's use of 'devoted', especially since the novel is likelier to satirize than sentimentalize earnestness or affection. Even the emotive Piggy, we are told, has never in thirty-two years "experienced a sincere desire" (Keane 2012, p. 114), which suggests that any expression of want is performative or otherwise artificial. Most portraits of female characters in *Devoted Ladies* are mediated by the perspective of the writer Sylvester, who has few sympathies. The philosopher Monica Wonderly notes that devotion is sometimes contrasted with attachment, or a general sense of connectedness: "attachment sometimes calls to mind self-involvement and neediness, whereas devotion is often associated with a kind of 'giving over' of one's self to the needs and interests of another" (Wonderly 2026, p. 33). In *Devoted Ladies*, devotion is sometimes mocked because it "renders the agent emotionally vulnerable" to a range of possible emotions (Wonderly 2026, p. 38). Though Keane deals in desires and disappointments, she is not particularly interested in the phenomenology of emotional experience. So it is that "devoted ladies" does not uncomplicatedly refer to women who love (each other, or others). In roughly contemporaneous journalism, the phrase was deployed to refer to missionaries or to women working with the sick and poor (see, for instance, Dowling 1897, p. 28). It therefore connotes social or religious good—however performative—rather than anti-social lifestyles.

Although devotion describes emotional states or attachments in some contexts, then, it can also refer to actions that are externally imbued with affective motivations. Piggy devotes energy first to her married childhood friend Joan and then, after Joan insults her, to George. Piggy's identity of servitude—of devotion—is more significant than her current object, regardless of the extremes to which her devotion(s) take her. Keane's satirization of devoted Piggy blends a sense of "neediness" (as it would later be called) with "'giving over'". Keane emphasizes that self-sacrificing servitude is a major aspect of Piggy's character, with a role in her final decision: "Her blind gift for serving cast out all fear" (Keane 2012, p. 242). Piggy is at once talented at her calling (or habit) of servitude, but her "gift" is also "blind" in the sense of having no permanent object. She is consistently described as stupid or silly, despite the fact that Piggy is successfully responsible for the management of the novel's Big House; it goes unstated that she is a more self-controlled figure than Hester, her sister. In another satirical denigration of female celibacy, Hester's professed lack of interest in "the amatory side of life" is correlated with a "singular", ruinous love of money (Sylvester,

a proponent of compulsory sexuality, "took pains to point out how much. . .she had missed out on the possibilities of life") (Keane 2012, pp. 66–67).

Yet Hester's unsentimental frivolity is depicted with less repulsion than Piggy's physicality and romantic yearnings. In Sylvester, she inspires "hostility both mental and physical":

> Piggy had enormous bright blue eyes as hard as glass paper weights with an eye painted at the back and magnified up through the glass until its size was a distortion of nature. She had long lashes too, and used them coyly. Fair dry hair, a pretty skin, an ugly figure, thick, unshaped and preposterous legs. (Keane 2012, p. 78)

The "distortion" Sylvester finds in Piggy's fatness is a part of his disgust in her appearance, compounded by excessive mannerisms like coy lash-fluttering—which, it is later insinuated, is the result of George remarking on her eyelashes on a long-ago occasion—and a manner of referring to herself in the third person. In other words, Keane depicts Piggy's performance of modesty as undesirable and outrageous because of her size, in an instance of what Ela Przybylo and Sara Rodrigues have called "visual injustice" (Przybylo and Rodrigues 2015, p. 2): that is, prejudice against perceived ugliness. Piggy's frame is the most overtly satirized body in the novel, as her very name indicates. At the same time, she sometimes seems to be a part of the joke, since she uses the nickname to identify herself. To some extent, heightened portrayals of physicality are simply a feature of Keane's satire in *Devoted Ladies*; all bodies, she suggests, are constructed, heightened, and move ridiculously. Piggy's body is exaggerated more than most, however, perhaps because this character is a particular source of disgust for Sylvester, whose gaze tends to mediate the reader's encounters with Piggy. In the case of the above description, for instance, the idea that Piggy's legs are "unshaped and preposterous" reflects Sylvester's aesthetic distrust of maximalism and uncontained emotion: he opens the novel as a refined, economical tastemaker whose home is "all shape and no colour" (Keane 2012, p. 3). Piggy becomes the physical embodiment of an undiscriminating, consuming space, a sign of Sylvester's own return to a formless lifestyle controlled by someone else's (indeed, Piggy's) purse-strings. In other words, Sylvester is perhaps suspicious of Piggy's devotion because he is unable to give himself over to anything or anyone.

Virginity is introduced into *Devoted Ladies* through Sylvester, too. On arriving in Ireland to visit his cousins, he sees that Hester has bought him writing materials: "Could anything be more nicely calculated to upset a writer's mental excretory process than six new exercise books? All those thousands. . .of bland and virgin pages waiting for him with a frozen expectancy" (Keane 2012, p. 63). Here is a vision of virginity as characterlessness. The language of "frozen expectancy" recalls Esty's sense of arrested development; Sylvester is hardly presented as a virgin himself (virginity is associated exclusively with women in Keane's work), but nor is he a conqueror—or, like Toby in *Young Entry*, an Irishman who enjoys hunting and "believe[s] in virgins retaining a virginal purity of mind" (Farrell 1989, p. 87). Some of Sylvester's dismay at virginity might be read as a satire of his own implied impotence in the anachronistic space of Kilque, his cousins' house, as well as a horror of passive, romantic expectation. Although the metaphor of virgin paper is not an uncommon one, here there is perhaps a queasy heterosexuality to the image, especially as the notebooks are described mere lines earlier as "village virgins when new" and, in a Montaigne-like phrase, "the unborn children of my mind" (p. 63). The virgin pages scare Sylvester because they hold a frozen potential; they might offer a pseudo-reproductive future, but any vitality they hold must be activated by the writer, Sylvester, himself. If Sylvester is not depicted as a virgin, exactly, he is still affected by questions of inaccessible futurity.

He later finds a "simpering virgin" among a series of woodcuts and photographs in Piggy's home, which he finds "terrible" in part because it belongs to her, and in part because it is one of many "shades of a Past that was no Past" (Keane 2012, p. 137). This icon is probably the Virgin Mary, although Keane uses a lowercase 'v'. It represents to Sylvester a fantasy narrative of history, rather than a recognizable personal or political history. It may be that this comment relates to Piggy's sexual history, assuming that Piggy cannot have more than "shades of a Past" if she has not been sexually active. The virgin woodcut is in fact one of many objects of "futile past romance" gathered by Piggy, which suggest another side to Piggy's selflessness. Although she is characterized by her desire to be useful, described as a lover who bestows on Joan both "little" and "expensive gifts. . .like nothing so much as an amorous and impotent old man" (Keane 2012, p. 115), she also consumes "girl-friends and their mementoes" into her life in a pastiche of reciprocity. However "impotent" or self-subsuming Piggy might seem in the context of individual relationships, the capaciousness of the collection arguably offers a more hopeful reading of Piggy as a figure with a broad capacity for devotion. Piggy's archive of memento mori is "terrible to Sylvester" (p. 115), perhaps, in its abject externalization of "part of Piggy and Piggy's life", an excess of material founded on the desire for other people: an attempt, albeit futile, not to be "outside love". Sylvester, in contrast, is defined by his present actions and his solitariness.

Piggy's romantic fantasies are contingent on proximity and possible reciprocity rather than a clear portrayal of what might be called sexual attraction. Take her interest in George, which originates in an imaginary compliment about her eyelashes, "a rock on which to pitch her own attraction for men. . .George's continued celibacy was an undoubted goad for girlish fancies" (Keane 2012, p. 129). These lines hint at the social compulsoriness of Piggy's desire to be attractive to men, and a feeling of sympathy based on mutual "celibacy". Keane's choice of this word perhaps speaks to its capaciousness: Piggy has no real knowledge of George's sexual life (and nor, for that matter, does the reader of *Devoted Ladies*), so celibacy might straddle his definite bachelorhood and her presumption that he is not sexually active. The phrase "girlish fancies" is also notable. "Fancies" implies the imagination of Piggy's emotional life without being specific about her affective experiences or her desires, while "girlish" arguably implies an artificial approximation of girlhood rather than its actuality—raising the question again of how knowing a character Piggy is. The statement can be read as a generic one (George goads on all "girlish fancies") or as mediated by Piggy's own experience (in which the "girlish fancies" are primarily her own). Much of this analysis also rests on an assumption that these lines are free indirect insights into Piggy's interiority. It is possible to understand the narrator to be a more external one, which infuses the passage with an underlying irony.

Piggy's coy behavior towards George contrasts with her apparent desperation to please her childhood friend Joan, which Jessica describes to Jane as the "absurd passion" of a "fidgety, over-sexed woman" (Keane 2012, p. 160). Jessica locates an "over-sexed" nature in the imagination, not in experience. Perhaps it even depends on unfulfilled fantasies or expectations, in the mode of a pathologized virginity. Just as Sylvester is repulsed by Piggy's excessive emotionality (in concert with her big body size), Jessica critiques her for having "no *restraint*" (p. 160). There are several intriguing elements to this comment, particularly in the context of Jessica's disdain throughout the novel for the people she encounters in Ireland. Is Jessica implicitly critiquing Piggy as a physical representation of Irishness, as someone who too obviously exposes her "passion" for another woman, or simply as a gauche individual? What's more, Jessica's goal throughout the novel is to restrain Jane, so the critique can be read as a veiled rebuke to the American woman whose wants are beginning to exceed the relationship. Regardless, Jessica affiliates desire with a

certain hard-to-get sensibility, which resonates with her own lack of emotional expression. If Jessica divulges "passion", she does so through violence.

Catherine Bacon summarizes Jessica in *Devoted Ladies* as a "self-aware, predatory *English* lesbian" (Bacon 2009, p. 98, emphasis in original). For Bacon, Piggy's violent role in the novel is to demonstrate the Irish resistance to a sexological paradigm of lesbian identity imported from England. *The Rising Tide*, she suggests, went further than *Devoted Ladies* in "leav[ing] open the possibility of another kind of love between women in Ireland": one recognized more through intimacy and nonsexual companionship than sexological taxonomies of physiology or attraction (Bacon 2009, p. 105). Beyond Jessica, no character in *Devoted Ladies* can easily be read within sexological taxonomies—and even Jessica's masculine clothes are presented as ill-fitting, so that she is no textbook specimen of female inversion. While some critics have found this performativity to be grotesque or "a ridiculous contradiction" (e.g., Breen 1997, p. 214), it also highlights the insufficiency of sexological models for fully capturing experience or identity. Similarly, although Piggy is depicted through stereotypes of virginity, she is only labelled as a virgin by Jessica. In Bacon's reading, Piggy might be the gatekeeper to less definite sexual identities because her "girlish fancies" are not calibrated to a taxonomy; whatever Piggy's sapphic desires are, they are secondary to her 'devotions' in a behavioral sense, and they are not definitively sexual. Indeed, the "excitement" of her "devotion" to Joan is suggested to be linked primarily to a pleasure in usefulness and the gifts occasionally given to her (Keane 2012, p. 68). Her ability to shift allegiance from Joan to George does not necessarily reflect a movement from queer to normative desire, a new appetite, or a kind of unfreezing, but merely the beginning of another futile cycle of "old conceits and new hopes" (Keane 2012, p. 183). I now want to look more closely at the end of *Devoted Ladies*, to consider how Piggy is situated to weigh up her final decision.

4. "You Fat, Hungry, Virgin—": Ending Devoted Ladies

Mary Breen argues that all of Keane's oblivious female protagonists experience "moments of dreadful clarity when their isolated and unwanted state is brought home to them with appalling finality" (Breen 1997, pp. 210–11). There are several contenders for this moment for Piggy in *Devoted Ladies*, such as the "icy" realization that Joan has been "unkind" (Keane 2012, p. 183). Ice imagery notwithstanding, this instant functions in the narrative more as a melting than a freezing over, as it jolts Piggy forward out of Joan's ambit. I want to examine another epiphany in *Devoted Ladies*, this one more tangentially related to Piggy's attachments: Piggy's recognition at the end of the novel that Jessica will never let Jane marry George. As Piggy drives, Jessica prods at her mentally and physically:

> "Look here," Jessica turned round and gripped Piggy by her fat arm. "Look at me, Miss Piggy Browne."
>
> Piggy looked. Stupid Piggy. She saw in Jessica's eyes such hate and resolve as she never guessed to be possible. Jessica still held her arms, her fingers bruised into Piggy's fat arms. "Do you understand now?" she said in a very low voice, "you fat, hungry, virgin—" she whispered low.
>
> "Virgin yourself!" Piggy shrilled at her. (Keane 2012, p. 241)

Despite Piggy's position as driver, Jessica forces a moment of eye contact, which might be an instance of like recognizing like. Rather than "understand[ing]" Jessica in a sympathetic way, however, Piggy instead parrots the final insult hurled at her, beaming virginity back upon Jessica. How knowingly Piggy employs the word is arguable: is it a calculated insult based on Jessica's possible lack of sexual experience with men, if not women? (There was little to no discussion of what sex acts might constitute virginity loss until late in the

twentieth century.) If so, "virgin" might then be read as a casual euphemism for a word Keane would later use to describe female homosexual relationships, "lesbian" (Devlin 2012, p. x). Such a speculation is intriguing because it changes the meaning of the word throughout the novel, but particularly in Jessica's usage. Is Jessica too alluding to Piggy harboring sexual or romantic interest in Joan?

I want to focus, though, on the conjunction of "fat", "hungry", and "virgin", a seemingly unfinished thought that nonetheless triggers a decision in Piggy. While "fat" is an incessant adjective for Piggy and characters' disgust about her body throughout *Devoted Ladies*, it is usually employed in narration rather than in dialogue in her presence. Here her body fat serves as the site of Jessica's vengeance; her arm is a counterpart to Jessica's leg, broken in a collision with Piggy's car. "Hungry" is the most surprising of the adjectives, as Piggy's fat is presented as static. Piggy has seemingly no physiological appetite in *Devoted Ladies*; unlike other fat characters in Keane, she is not depicted eating, and there is no suggestion that her body size changes during the novel. Such changelessness reflects Piggy's difficulty in forming reciprocal relationships, as a psychological hunger seemingly coexists with self-containment. As Elspeth Probyn describes, "[t]he openings and closings of our bodies constantly rearrange our dealings with others" (Probyn 2000, p. 18). Piggy's statically "fat" body is not rearranged, and nor (beyond vague "hopes") are her relationships. Moreover, Lauren Rich has persuasively argued that eating is one of the chief pleasures in Keane's novels—a gratification "in itself" that does not necessarily have a latent sexual element (Rich 2020, p. 337).

There is a vicarious act of eating, perhaps, in Piggy's childhood devotion to Joan, as Keane describes it. On coming to stay at Kilque, Joan "was a long, thin, romantic creature who. . .ate biscuits in bed and said she liked the feel of the crumbs. Such romantic originality! And Piggy? She was fat and six. She watched and worshipped" (Keane 2012, p. 115). This moment of attraction is deeply imbricated with body size and consumption. In her distance from Joan's experience of ingestion, Piggy becomes an enabler, or a witness akin to one of the leftover "crumbs".[5] While Piggy's name would imply greed, it is Joan's mode of eating that is portrayed as hedonistic or wasteful. Keane juxtaposes Joan's thinness, selfish consumption, Piggy's pseudo-religious devotion, and Piggy's fat, without proposing a causal relationship between them (though this anecdote supports Rich's argument that the "repressive atmosphere" of the Big House leads to "disordered appetites and fraught relationships to both food and sex" in Keane's young women (Rich 2020, p. 340); Joan, who is not from a Big House, can access pleasures debarred to Piggy). "Hungry" can be understood in abstract terms, then, perhaps as the equivalent of Jessica's previous assessment of Piggy's "over-sexed" state: a near-connection that remains firmly on the level of romantic fantasy or idealization, coexisting with a sense of self-containment and bodily constraint. Its very abstraction makes hunger somewhat aimless, anticipatory, without the possibility of resolution. If physiological hunger is a drive in which "consummatory activity has to be repeated over time", as Silvan Tomkins explains it (Tomkins 1962, p. 49), Jessica's use of "hungry" to taunt Piggy implies that any "consummatory" desire has never been met.[6] "Hungry" is one of many occasions in Keane when a word can be read as sexually charged or not; its duality is a major aspect of the ambiguousness of Piggy's sexual subjectivity.

The backdrop of Piggy's driving arguably also adds to the sense of temporariness in the final car ride, which would typically end with a destination. Jessica's goading of Piggy disrupts any sense of temporal progress. In general, Piggy's constant driving in *Devoted Ladies* can be read as a metaphor for her cycles of aimless devotion; it is motivated more by situation than sincerity, circuitous rather than propulsive. She has no 'drive' in the sense of an inner motivating force. Driving is one of the activities pursued by what Kat, a character

in *Young Entry*, disparagingly calls "moderns" (Farrell 1989, p. 132). Though Piggy might not seem to fit into this category, her pragmatic driving puts *Devoted Ladies* in conversation with earlier satires of modern malaise and sexual disappointment, such as Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay* (1923), which ends with a platonic couple "driving for driving's sake" (Huxley 1923, p. 311).

Devoted Ladies ends not in the stasis of driving but that of falling. After praying to God for a "way out" for herself or for George, Piggy has a "sudden wet arc of clearness": "a broken gap in the stone wall and the invisible drop to the sea below. . .She put her foot down on the accelerator and the car leapt forward and dropped" (Keane 2012, p. 242). Even here, Keane does not provide a conclusive "out", but a presumable one, in another avoidance of definite resolution. This decision echoes the novel's earlier off-page car crash, in which Sylvester witnesses the arrival of the injured party at Kilque, Piggy's subsequent self-recrimination, and Jessica's broken femur—but not the accident itself. That crash is primarily a plot device to set up the "invasion" of Jane and Jessica into Kilque (Keane 2012, p. 97), but again it is instigated by a decision of Piggy's: Sylvester muses that "the Cottage hospital had been nearer to the scene of the mishap by nearly two miles, but then Piggy enjoyed overflowing with Irish hospitality, a tradition of wasteful jollity behind her" (Keane 2012, p. 96). If the pleasure of eating unlocks a survival instinct in certain individuals within Keane novels, as Lauren Rich has argued, Piggy's pleasure at giving herself over to others goes nowhere because (unlike an act of eating) it is dependent on a kind of reciprocity that is rarely offered to Piggy.

Although Keane emphasizes that the "force. . .set loose" in Piggy by Jessica is directed toward "George's happiness", the ultimate "way out" is a transcendence of Piggy's cycles of devotion, too. In one final act of servitude, Piggy is able to free herself from the next disappointment and from her "poor hopes of future loving". She is left suspended but not textually dead. If her decision makes George's hoped-for heteronormative union possible, it remains "invisible", beyond the scope of the novel. Falling, as the literary critic Allan L. Carter posited in the 1920s, "delightfully implies finality" while being a process; trial by falling "carries with it the authority of any method intended to kill or cure" (Carter 1923, p. 341). Indeed, the ending of *Devoted Ladies* does function as a kind of trial by fall, in which Piggy is forced out of her futile cycles of dependency. In the anticipatory gap between the wall and the sea, Piggy is unfrozen, with a purity of purpose. Being outside of love is briefly made triumphant.

5. Conclusions

I have suggested that the prominent reference to Piggy as a "fat, hungry virgin" offers a way of reading single life in *Devoted Ladies* as narratively significant: that is, that these attributes do not stand in the way of narrative but are structural attributes of it. I read Piggy as a figure of aimless hunger for interpersonal relationships, of desire that borders on the sexual but cannot neatly be categorized as such. In some respects, Piggy is a typical instance of a stunted or "frozen" figure with little "Past" or hope of a sexual future. She also serves at times as a character of vicarious desire. In the novel's final movement of falling, I suggest, the cycle of her "devotions" is left in a hopeful rather than a futile place; Keane neither kills nor cures any character's fate but leaves the presumed conclusion suspended. In Keane's writing, which often privileges the socially and sexually knowing above the (seemingly) oblivious or inexperienced, single characters can be depicted as disturbingly hermetic; to desire any affective connection with others, however, is to risk being undesirable. Piggy highlights the "impotence" within any love–relationship, but also the potential freedom of being "outside love".

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Notes

1 By "nonsexual lifestyles", I refer broadly to lives in which an individual is sexually inactive, particularly where that inactivity is known to (or, accurately or not, assumed by) others.

2 See, for instance, *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, edited by Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (2007); Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (2000). Depending on how virginity is understood, it can be considered compatible with queer sexual activity as well as being 'queer' in its separateness from heterosexuality.

3 On the presumed temporariness of virginity and the threat of morbidity, see (Oldham 2023, pp. 425–28).

4 Earlier in *The Rising Tide*, Keane describes Cynthia's former wedding dress as it hangs, voluptuously, in a closet: "Inviolate, unaltered it hung. . .its sleeves puffed still, as by the breath of romance, its sweeping white line a gorgeous full memorial to ripe virginity" (Farrell 1937, p. 289). The wedding dress maintains a possibility of virginity even if Cynthia is not herself a virgin.

5 This scene perhaps anticipates the opening of *Good Behaviour*, in which Aroon poisons her mother's food and observes her consumption of it. If acts of eating are negotiations between desire and self-control, acts of watching others eat suggest other power dynamics: for instance, the interplay between a fulfilled and vicariously fulfilled individual, or the earthly eater versus the distant observer removed from bodily needs.

6 Lauren Rich observes that "Keane's insistence on the consolatory powers of food may seem heretical indeed, in light of Anglo-Irish landowners' culpability for mass starvation in Ireland during the Great Famine" (Rich 2020, p. 348). The same might be said of Keane's use of "hungry" to describe Piggy, the heiress of such a landowner.

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