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Resurrecting the Women of *The Waste Land*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for Honors

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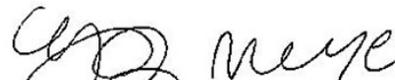
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INTRODUCTION

When *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, it marked the end of seven and a half years of T.S. Eliot's attempts to match the potency of his most significant work to date: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In the interlude between his two greatest works, Eliot had married, settled quite permanently in England, and begun to fear that his potential as a poet, once so promising, was all for naught. Yet he had not stopped writing – far from it! – he was constantly producing new work, small in scope, mostly unpublished, with various themes and ideas. It was not until 1921 that Eliot formed *The Waste Land* from his own pieces of poetry as well as the works of others – a poem whose structure was largely inspired by *From Ritual to Romance*, a book published in 1920 by Jessie Weston on the formation and origins of the Grail legend. Ultimately, *The Waste Land* follows the trajectory of the fertility cycles and Grail quests detailed by Weston, traveling through a dying land and even experiencing death in order to find spiritual fulfillment in a modern context.

Eliot read Weston's book in 1921 and was taken by her argument that the Grail legend does not exclusively originate in Christian lore or folk mythology, but instead is a combination of both, and indeed many more folk tales and cult rituals of the past. He credits the book in the notes he attached to *The Waste Land* for "the title, ...the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem" ("Notes" 21). Some critics question this generous attribution, arguing that it is a misdirection on Eliot's part, since much of *The Waste Land* had already been written before he read Weston's book. But *From Ritual to Romance* brought together the stories of spiritual quests and fertility myths already

familiar to Eliot: the Grail legends of King Arthur's Round Table and the fertility rites from Sir James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough*.

The quest for the Grail was the most holy calling for the knights of King Arthur's Round Table. It was said to be the cup that Jesus drank from at the last Passover before his crucifixion, an incredibly sacred object ("Quest"). After enduring female temptation and other obstacles to spiritual purity, the Grail could be found in a castle surrounded by wasteland and ruled over by a figure called "the Fisher King." A mysterious wound the Fisher King had sustained years before resulted in his own debilitation as well as that of his kingdom. Only the completion of the Grail quest could restore the Fisher King and return his fertility to his land.

Sir James Frazer's book also dealt with fertility and its connection to powerful figures; in *The Golden Bough*, however, these figures were not the singular Fisher King, but a multitude of fertility gods including Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. These gods, wrote Frazer, "represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead" (33). The life span and divine powers of these gods waxed and waned with the seasons. Although they originated in different cultures from Greece to Egypt, each had a festival that began with mourning over the decline and death of the god, followed a few days later with a joyful celebration of his resurrection after the completion of sacred rites.

Weston argues that the Grail legend originates in the fertility cults detailed by Frazer, fusing mythic traditions from around the globe to illustrate the ancient foundations of the Grail. *From Ritual to Romance* investigates the links between the Fisher King of the Grail and the fertility gods of Frazer to prove this point. She claims the

parallelism between the Fisher King's relationship with the health of his kingdom and the fertility gods' connection to the growth of vegetation shows the Fisher King's origin in that tradition. In the same way that the Fisher King needs the Grail quest to be completed to return vitality to himself and his land, fertility cults had to carry out rituals for the resurrection of their god and growth of the land. These rites began with lamentation over the sickness and eventual death of the vegetation god, followed by the ceremonial committing of his effigy to water, and finally a celebration of his successful rebirth resulting in spring. This pattern is very similar to that of the Fisher King's revival, which causes the waters of his land to flow again if the ritual of the Grail quest is completed. His title also shows signs of ancient origin. The fish has been a "life symbol of immemorial antiquity" both in Christianity and well before its advent, Weston writes (38). Although other scholars tend to use the connection between the fish and Christianity as proof the Grail legend originated in Christian legends, Christianity adapted it during its spread, much like the co-opted pagan festivals turned into Christmas or St. Valentine's Day. Just as the fertility cults of the ancient Attis and Adonis were shrouded in mystery, early Christians had to be secretive about their faith because of persecution they faced – and a drawing of a fish was used to reveal Christian believers to one another, since the word for fish in Greek, *ichthys*, was an anagram for the Greek name of Jesus Christ (124). Because of these similarities, Weston argues that the Grail legend and its Fisher King are the culmination of fertility rites and symbols from across the world.

Eliot constructs *The Waste Land* in much the same way as Weston claims the Grail legend came to be. The poem consists of "these fragments I have shored against my ruins," merging disparate pieces of Eliot's writing since "Prufrock" with layers upon

layers of allusion and quotation from across time and place (*Waste Land* 430). This collection of original writing combined with older history, literature, and myth simulates the creation of the Grail legend as Jessie Weston tells it. These “fragments” tell a coherent but obscure narrative of death turning to life – Eliot’s own quest for spiritual fulfillment.

For decades, the prevailing interpretations of *The Waste Land* focused on World War I and the subsequent anguish and fear of the future that consumed Europe. With T.S. Eliot encouraging scholars to ignore any possible personal interpretations of his seminal poem, many assumed that the poet had adhered to his famous “theory of impersonality” in writing it. Only later in life did Eliot divulge that *The Waste Land* had no grand meaning relating to world history, at least that he saw – it was “only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life” (Seymour-Jones 5). With that admission, a whole new realm of speculation on the poem’s meaning emerged, much of it relating to Eliot’s early career and first wife, Vivienne Eliot.

Eliot’s foremost biographer, Lyndall Gordon, argues that Eliot conceived of his life as a spiritual quest, one closely reflected by *The Waste Land* (1). From analysis of poems never published because they were likely deemed too personal, Gordon gleans a timeline for Eliot’s religious interests, dating such an interest from 1910 (51). Women and the temptations they held were opponents of the spiritual perfection he sought. He saw in them the reductive archetypes of the Madonna and the whore (36). Nevertheless, Eliot married Vivienne Haigh-Wood on June 26, 1915, perhaps in an attempt to jolt himself into a new frame of mind, one more fertile – but this was not to be (118). Vivienne once said that she “had married her husband to stimulate him, but found she

could not do it,” an admission of sexual failure (120). His marital frustrations appear in *The Waste Land*, where the relationship between the sexes is fraught, neither understanding the needs of the other. Sex is a mechanical act, done only because it must be done. The lack of satisfaction in his marriage is part of what led Eliot to seek meaning and purpose in something beyond the offerings of the world.

When Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, it was one last, almost desperate attempt to rejuvenate his career and possibly his marriage. After a disappointing visit of his family to London in 1921, during which Eliot failed to gain approval for his English bride or choice of career as a poet, his health deteriorated rapidly (Seymour-Jones 288). Vivienne went into action, making an appointment with a nerve specialist for him and ultimately deciding to go with Eliot to mainland Europe to see a psychiatrist there. It was abroad that Eliot’s efforts to write a poem initially titled “He Do the Police in Different Voices” crystallized into *The Waste Land*.

The five sections of *The Waste Land* combine the steps of both the fertility rituals of Weston and the Grail legend to compose an epic quest for spiritual fulfillment beyond the scope of its source materials. In the first section of the poem, “The Burial of the Dead,” there is a clear remembrance of times of life and growth, all the more painful to remember because of their loss. Eliot also sets up the framework of his own quest through the fake fortune teller Madame Sosostris and her ironically accurate predictions. Then follow “A Game of Chess” and “The Fire Sermon,” which detail the ways in which the modern wasteland manifests; they portray the decay of society’s morals rather than the failure of crops and lack of water. The inhabitants of the wasteland have fallen into the trap of materialism, and sex, usually the ultimate reproductive ritual, has lost its

power. Only through adhering to the philosophy of asceticism can the “Death by Water” occur. The drowned Phoenician sailor is reminiscent of those drowned fertility gods of Weston’s lore, thrown not into a dusty burial pit but into rivers, left to drown and then revive, dead to the world but alive in spirit. It is ironically through this death, and through this death only, that new life can be found. In “What the Thunder Said,” the search for spiritual understanding and peace from the constant cycle of life begins in earnest, finding resolution. By using Weston’s explicated fertility myths as well as her Grail legend as a guide for his structure and content, Eliot created his own de facto fertility ritual to bring life and growth back to *The Waste Land*.

Despite or perhaps because of his difficult marriage, Eliot’s version of a fertility ritual depends on the female figures who permeate every part of his poem, in characters, allusions, and myths. Weston too recognized their importance, finding that “the most noticeable feature of the ritual was the prominence assigned to women; they sob wildly all night long; this is their god more than any other, and they alone wish to lament his death and sing of his resurrection” (47). Women were the principal mourners for the dead fertility god and the loss of life, the ones who “weep and accompany him to his tomb.” As women, the bringers of new life through pregnancy and birth, responsible for the growth of humanity in the most literal sense, the fertility god is of course “their god more than any other,” and their god to “lament” over and also “sing” for once he returns. Instead of men wailing over the loss of their crops’ viability, it is women who are responsible for carrying out the ritual mourning and celebration. The same is true in *The Waste Land*, in which the female characters far outnumber their male counterparts. Just as ancient women were those required to publicly demonstrate their feelings of loss from

the death of the fertility god, it is the modern women of the wasteland who reveal the depths of the destruction wreaked by World War I on the people, land, and potential of the world they live in. The signs of decay are shown not through dead soldiers on a battlefield, but women who are caught in the inexorable wheels of a decadent society – they are the ones whom we may see mourning a better way of life. Although women are generally considered symbols of fertility, Eliot uses the dearth of true fertility in his women to show the sterility that pervades his world.

I

Eliot begins his modern fertility ritual with “The Burial of the Dead,” a section full of the themes of mourning as well as resurrection. Taken from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the title indicates that this poem is part of a “Common” mourning ritual shared by many (North 5). In Anglo-Catholic England, Eliot’s country and religion of choice, this rite would have been carried out at the funeral of each person in the community. This modern Christian rite indicates a belief in renewal in death; an Anglican believes that the buried dead would ascend to eternal heavenly life. Similarly, the ancient fertility rites described by Weston began with “elaborate ceremonies of mourning for the dead god, and committing his effigy to the waves,” followed quickly by “the joyous celebration of his resurrection...” (47). By titling his first section “The Burial of the Dead,” Eliot signals that the following lines will show the death pervading the wasteland as well as signs of possible resurrection – life from death. Such a eulogy, however, would include not only a look forward at what is to come, but a meditation on the past and the effect this one person’s life has had on those around them. This theme of communal mourning continues through the many figures of female anguish – women throughout

The Waste Land who are connected by their grief. They represent this “Common” mourning over the death of fertility, as they show its loss in a multitude of ways. The symbols of resurrection are entwined with these women in their grief, and while they are incapable of resurrection themselves, they play a role in ensuring its consummation.

Eliot’s fake fortuneteller Madame Sosostri predicts the signs of the coming spiritual redemption, although she does not realize the import of what she says. With her name taken from an Aldous Huxley novel, *Crome Yellow*, in which the eponymous charlatan is a man acting the part of a female fortune teller, she is an androgynous seer, the likes of whom will appear throughout *The Waste Land* (North 4). The ambiguity the allusion gives her gender puts her in a liminal space – it is she who can convey both the role of the woman, as the mourner of the dead and the guide toward new life, as well as the man who must die to bring life to himself and the world. On the surface, Madame Sosostri seems the antithesis of a priest or anyone with a higher understanding of life. She is a parodic figure who “had a bad cold, nevertheless / is known to be the wisest woman in Europe / with a wicked pack of cards” (*Waste Land* 44-46). The absurdity of a cold affecting her wisdom or reputation, which ought to be unaffected by a paltry attack on her physical health, shows the sarcasm of these lines. Far from the “wisest woman in Europe,” Madame Sosostri is a charlatan, who might blame her mistaken predictions on a passing cough. Her cards are “wicked,” morally questionable and hardly more helpful than harmful. However, her “wicked pack of cards” somehow manages to point the way to the future, foreshadowing the rest of the poem. This discrepancy between the expected – a “wicked pack of cards” that is an accomplice to fraud – and the unexpected – actual truth found in the tarot – sums up both the figure of Madame Sosostri as well as the

theme of resurrection itself, for who could ever expect to find life from death? But although the tarot cards may now be associated with charlatans and faux mystics, their ancient predictions concerned the rising and falling of the Nile – the fertile seasons (Weston 78).

Although none of Madame Sosostris' cards correspond to actual tarot, they correspond to the figures of fertility myths and Grail legends and introduce the principal figures of Eliot's fertility ritual.

...Here, said she,

Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,

(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,

The lady of situations.

Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,

Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,

Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find

The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.

I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring. (*Waste Land* 46-56)

These cards show the characters who appear throughout the poem, signposts on the way to enlightenment. Eliot "arbitrarily" associates the "man with three staves," with the Fisher King, and the "Wheel" represents the endless fertility cycle that the "crowds of people, walking round in a ring," are caught in. Later, the "Phoenician sailor" reveals himself as Phlebas, the man who undergoes the "death by water" Madame Sosostris

predicts. However, she warns of that death because she lacks the spiritual insight that “death by water” is a resurrection rite, symbolic of baptism into new life. Thus Phlebas is a fertility god himself, given new form through his drowning when his eyes transform into pearls with a line from Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*. But his resurrection has not yet occurred; Madame Sosostri does not find the “Hanged Man,” one of the two authentic tarot cards Eliot refers to. He ignores its traditional meaning, instead associating it with “the Hanged God of Frazer...[and] the hooded figure” who appears in the fifth section of the poem (“Notes” 22). With this context, the “Hanged Man” represents the resurrected Christ, who later appears as a hooded companion to his disciples. Such a figure is certainly not present in the first section of the poem, still entrenched in a spiritual wasteland. Instead, “Belladonna” and the “one-eyed merchant” occupy the wasteland, corrupted versions of their past roles in the spread of the Grail and fertility myths. The merchant would have brought tales of fertility rites with him around the world, but now his vision is impaired, and with it his moral judgment. “Belladonna” is more complex, containing within her the harsh binary Eliot imposed on women, considered either Madonna or a whore. She may once have been a woman who led the aspiring quester to the Grail, like Dante’s Beatrice led him through paradise, or else been a temptress trying to lead knights astray. The “Lady of the Rocks” is an ironic allusion to da Vinci’s painting of the Madonna, the Virgin Mary, she who remained pure and yet produced new life (North 5). Although she herself did not undergo resurrection, she brought Jesus Christ into the world, acting as a channel through which resurrection was made possible. In Italian, bella donna means beautiful woman – but it is also a cosmetic and the name of a deadly poison, suggesting that the concealment and artificiality present

here will lead to a painful end rather than renewal. As the “lady of situations,” Belladonna knows how to bend any circumstance to her advantage, manipulating reality to suit her needs. But she presides over that which is merely dust and can bring no life – she is of the barren rocks of the wasteland. Although she appears to have potential for renewal, underneath she is empty, incapable of fulfilling her traditional role. Her duality reflects the larger position of women in the wasteland, who often signal the way to renewal even as they succumb to the despair the lack of spiritual authority engenders. Like a priest laying out what is to come in the afterlife, Madame Sosostris fulfills her function as fortune teller, explaining the future of *The Waste Land*. Eliot creates a situation of deep irony by making his portrait of a false prophet predict the truth.

The Cumaean Sibyl of Eliot’s epigraph to the poem warns of the desolation that will follow if the wasteland is left without the water or resurrection predicted by Madame Sosostris. A famous prophetess from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Sibyl was granted a wish by the Greco-Roman god Apollo (North 3). Fearing death and the unknown it represented, she chose to keep her own life for as long as possible, wishing for as many years of life as in “a handful of dust” (*Waste Land* 30). Yet she forgot to ask for eternal youth. Without an eternal endowment of youthful vitality and fertility, she became so decrepit she was little more than living dust, forced to live in a jar. The Sibyl is a woman trapped in the spiritual desert of the wasteland without hope of resurrection. She can find no solace in her mundane reality, for “the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief” (23). Like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes in the Biblical verses these lines reference, she can no longer hide from the truth. “All is vanity,” the Sibyl realizes, her life a mere “heap of broken images” (22). The Sybil, who had been so renowned for her knowledge and

wisdom, is in the end fettered and blinkered by her own human faults. Despite her role as a prophetess, she had not the foresight nor the understanding that her life is merely a fragment of something greater. She valued nothing but her own youthful experience. Unable to answer the question, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” the Sybil is spiritually dead, unable to understand anything beyond her personal reality (19-20). Her fear of the unknown in the face of death and inability to accept change chains her to a limited human existence.

Death, far from being something to be feared for the Sibyl, would allow her to pass on to a new phase of life. Her declaration, “I want to die,” signals a desire for release (North 3). Her body is the wasteland, starved of spiritual guidance. She cannot capitalize on the possibility of resurrection death presents. The Sibyl is like a fertility god herself, who must die in order to have truly lived. Like the Fisher King who longs for water, she too is caught in an unnatural stasis. In a state of androgynous suspension, her choices, like the Fisher King’s, have brought her nothing but living death. She bears the consequences of disrupting nature’s cycle. With no end in sight but madness in the desert where the Sybil resides, water is the only possible agent for resurrection. Yet there is “no sound of water,” only a dry silence (*Waste Land* 24). The Sybil shows that being deprived of death is more debilitating than death itself. Without death, there is no resurrection; without death, there is no renewed understanding of life; without death, life loses its value. The Sibyl inhabits a spiritual wilderness, separated from water and the power of the gods it symbolizes.

Eliot’s hyacinth girl represents the fertility cycle that the Sybil rejected, guiding her companion toward possible resurrection. Her title of “hyacinth girl” marks her as one

of the female mourners at an ancient fertility festival of Weston's (36). The hyacinth flower is one that bears on its petals "AI," the Greek cry of "alas." Her nameless, voiceless companion "gave [her] hyacinths first a year ago," the last time the fertility cycle ended in death and then resurrection (35). The hyacinth is an allusion to Hyacinthus, a lover of Apollo who was victim to a mortal blow. The eponymous flowers grew from his blood. Scholars speculate that Hyacinthus may even have been a vegetation god of old, made obsolete by Apollo and symbolically killed by him as Apollo replaced him ("Hyacinthus"). The younger version of the god replenishes the fertility lost in the former's death. The Spartan festival Hyacinthia followed this pattern, mourning the death of the old god and then rejoicing in Apollo. The hyacinth girl is like the lamenting maidens who featured in this festival as well as in the rituals of Weston. In this burial of the dead, she is the one who speaks and who remembers – her companion gave her life bound up in eventual death with the hyacinth flower.

This encounter with hyacinth girl is reminiscent of other rendezvous in the garden scattered throughout Eliot's poetry. Those meetings usually represented fresh, blooming love and a perfect, beautiful woman. The woman who inspired these passages was Emily Hale, Eliot's American love interest whom he long considered the ideal woman even during his marriage to Vivienne Eliot (Gordon 118). Her appearance here emphasizes the beautiful possibilities Eliot saw in her, as opposed to the daily drudgery of his marriage to Vivienne detailed later in the poem. For years, Emily Hale was Eliot's muse, triggering his creative inspiration just as the hyacinth girl's words prompt her voiceless, impotent companion to remember an existential experience much like resurrection.

The memory of transformation overtakes her companion completely:

—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (*Waste Land* 37-41)

Their return from the “hyacinth garden” suggests that they leave behind the hyacinths and the time of mourning they symbolize. The hyacinth girl now carries produce from the garden, dripping with water. Unlike the Cumaean Sibyl, literally dry as dust, the hyacinth girl is associated with the waters of resurrection. The “heart of light” her companion sees is a source of divine light – an experience beyond words, for he “cannot speak,” and beyond sight, for his “eyes failed.” They have emerged into an indescribable moment of transformation. The silence of her companion is comparable to the moment in Eliot’s 1910 poem “Silence,” about his first religious experience (Gordon 23). He had no word for the feeling that stole upon him as he walked about Boston, a student at Harvard – it was a “communion with the Divine” or a “temporary crystallization of the mind.” The companion of the hyacinth girl shares this ineffable feeling. This is a religious experience – resurrection, as the narrator remembers a past conversion from the misery of the hyacinths to the incomprehensible state of newness. “Neither / Living nor dead,” the narrator is in a state of flux, in between the two (*Waste Land* 39-40). His failed eyes are like those of Phlebas. In the same way that Phlebas’ eyes were transformed into the beautiful but unseeing pearls, the narrator’s “eyes failed,” for the feared “death by water” had taken place – yet the past tense betrays this as a memory of a past completion of the fertility ritual.

The women of “The Burial of the Dead” reveal the dynamics at play in *The Waste Land*. They reflect the past, present, and future of the wasteland, their words setting the stage for the rest. The hyacinth girl shows what the wasteland has been and could be. She symbolizes mourning and loss while inspiring transformation. The Cumaean Sybil looms large over the section and the poem as a whole, for she represents the waste land as what it is now – “fear in a handful of dust” – and what it will continue to be without redemption (30). False prophets and vices proliferate in this spiritual wilderness, and all fear tomorrow. But Madame Sosostris can soothe those worries with her prognostications. “Fear death by water,” she says, her words reflecting the Sybil’s fear of an experience beyond life – but foreshadowing the change to come.

II

“A Game of Chess” shows the extent to which moral decay has enveloped *The Waste Land* and the world as the hopes and memories of resurrection dissipate. Here, the materialism of the wasteland is the modern manifestation of the dying land of the Grail legend and fertility myths. Chess symbolizes loss of meaning, reducing the epic strategy of kings engaged in mortal combat to pawns only allowed specific movement patterns by the rules of the game. The women of “A Game of Chess” are similarly constrained by the expectations society set upon them, forced to act in certain ways to meet societal standards which have replaced religious devotion as the ruler of life. These women play their own game of chess, striving for dominance or at least survival as kings once did in a quest for glory and wealth. They turn from the desire for the sublime to mundane materialism, an analgesic for the pain caused by the meaninglessness of their lives without the future fertility promises.

The church of Saint Mary Woolnoth foreshadows this loss of the sublime in pursuit of worldly wealth at the very end of “The Burial of the Dead.” Her bells, calling hearers to the divine and unknowable and the Christian belief in resurrection, “kept the hours” for London’s financial district (67). Rather than bringing edification to her people, she merely tolls the beginning of the business day. Their work begins and ends at her direction. The “dead sound on the final stroke of nine” that echoes at the start of each business day suggests the hollowness that remains after the creeping erosion of her once robust societal role. The church may have been founded by Wulfnoth in medieval times, whose slight misnomer appended to that of the Virgin Mary provides its name (North 7). This addition to Saint Mary’s name suggests already the contamination that has crept into the church’s mission and the start of the adulteration of Eliot’s idealized woman. Demolished and rebuilt anew in the eighteenth century by a protégé of Christopher Wren, Saint Mary Woolnoth boasted famous abolitionists John Newton and William Wilberforce as well as proponents of the Enlightenment as congregants – but all this was for naught (Woodward). In Eliot’s time, its crypt had been hollowed out to make way for the Bank Underground Station, the church’s dead reburied elsewhere to make way for the relentless spread of the financial district (“Church”). The building itself was compromised for the sake of materialism. The church, along with Saint Mary Woolnoth’s ostensible mission – to reach people with news of eternal life and resurrection – is “dead.” Rather than toll to announce a church service, Saint Mary Woolnoth now presides over the daily ritual of business. The people it would otherwise serve stream through its crypt into the financial district, lost to the empty pursuit of money.

Saint Mary Woolnoth's would-be parishioners are as spiritually bankrupt as she. Their "sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled," revealing their discontentment as they follow the pattern society prescribes for a full life – jobs that promise the possibility of a fortune, if only they work hard for their money day in and day out (*Waste Land* 64). Eliot himself was one of their number, working as a clerk for Lloyd's bank. He knows that their "sighs" are akin to those in Dante's *Inferno* and the entrance into Limbo, from which he takes this line (North 7). Limbo is the first circle of Hell, filled with people who cannot go to heaven because they had never experienced baptism – never known death by water from a life of sin to a life of salvation. As "each man fixed his eyes before his feet," he limits himself to his own experience, unable to see beyond (*Waste Land* 65). Like the Sybil, each downtrodden man is trapped inside that "heap of broken images" that is the wasteland rather than finding transcendence under the auspices of Saint Mary Woolnoth, their Beatrice. Instead, "death has undone so many," another quotation from Dante (63). They cannot experience life beyond death – rather than reaching enlightenment, they are "undone," unraveling into the "handful of dust" whence they came. Their potential has been stifled by a single-minded drive toward material wealth and security. Guided by Madame Sosostris, the poem has descended into Hell – and those who populate "A Game of Chess" are its denizens.

It is this theme of ignoring higher understanding for the mundane that the title "A Game of Chess" evokes through its allusions. While "The Burial of the Dead" suggests a certain level of gravity and emotion, "A Game of Chess" repudiates such notions with its connotations of trivial war and cold-blooded strategy. Its allusion to Thomas Middleton's play that did the same, reducing the deadly disputes between England and Spain to "A

Game at Chess” emphasize the section’s focus on the denigration of that which is consequential to all. The materialistic figures of “A Game of Chess” no longer lament lost fertility but see it as a bargaining chip – another tool to use for their machinations to manifest their base desires. Their moral decrepitude shows the state in which the wasteland will remain without resurrection.

The women of “Women Beware Women,” the other Thomas Middleton play Eliot alludes to with “A Game of Chess” embody both the sense of myopia in the face of sometime unpleasant truths and the insignificance of love, sex, and fertility beyond the power to be gained from them. The pivotal scene of the play features a game of chess in which the moves mirror an illicit sexual encounter occurring at the same time. While a game of chess distracts her mother-in-law, Bianca, a well-born woman who eloped with a man beneath her class, is seduced or perhaps raped by a duke, “Here’s a duke / Will strike a sure stroke for the game anon; / Your pawn cannot come back to relieve itself” (Middleton 2.2.302-304). The audience knows what is happening through the game of chess, since the characters act in a pattern foretold by it (Booth 112). The movements of the rook, or as it was called often in those times, the duke, show it taking a pawn, the most powerless figure of a chess board. Bianca, whose name means white in Italian, represents purity and full naivete. She is no match for one without scruples. Her love for her husband is not enough to prevent the duke’s seduction. “Mother” fails to protect her young charge from harm, her opponent (who has perpetrated the game as a distraction) claiming “I have given thee blind mate twice,” showing her superior powers of insight and how those abilities are turned to the cause of domination rather than guidance (Middleton 2.2.394). Mother responds that “my eyes begin to fail” (2.2.395). Unlike the

hyacinth girl's companion, whose failing eyes signaled a transformation, her failing eyes show that she is blind to the reality of the mortal sin occurring – perhaps even willfully blind. The young girl's love and the protection of the mother figure, both associated with fertility, have fallen to the designs of others. Their corruption has spread, Bianca ultimately showing the depth of her adulteration due to this event. Having lost her belief in love and ultimately her husband to murder, she chooses to marry the duke for his power and riches. Deep cynicism has overtaken her view of the world. She had at the beginning of the play eloped with a poor man, but now she believes all that matters in the world is power – and so she callously plans the death of the duke's brother, a cardinal who objects to their marriage on moral terms (5.2.20-21). Her name has been besmirched by her adultery and even her conscience has been smothered as she plots to murder a man of God. No longer is the purity indicated by the name Bianca associated with her, but she believes that if she marries the duke, none of that will matter in light of his fortune and political power. She attempts to use his wealth to fill the gaping void left by new disbelief in love and the life it could bring.

Through the image of a wealthy woman sitting alone in her boudoir, Eliot draws his own portrait of dissatisfaction where naked materialism replaces true fertility. This is Belladonna, a woman focused on artificial expressions of fertility to hide her deficiencies. She sits on a chair, “like a burnished throne,” elevating even common household objects to the rank of royalty (*Waste Land* 77). Indeed, Shakespeare's Cleopatra also occupies a “burnished throne,” one which she fails to keep because of her self-destructive love for Marc Antony. In placing her trust in a fallible man, Cleopatra ultimately loses her kingdom and the trappings of power. Without them or the love of Antony, Cleopatra

commits suicide. The woman in the boudoir has a similar need for the adornments of power and a companion to consider life worth living. Surrounded by symbols of fertility frozen in gold and “sea-wood,” Belladonna’s mirror is decorated with “fruited vines / from which a golden Cupidon peeped out” (79). Luscious fruit and a messenger of love are captured in inert gold, incapable of delivering their true substance. Their form as a decoration for her mirror suggests that the poor imitations of love and fertility this woman has are only for herself, extending to no others. “A carved dolphin swam” upon her wall, forever in stasis and trapped in her world (80). The wooden animal references the dolphin’s part in ancient vegetation myths of renewal and rebirth, now simply an image for Belladonna alone to consume in her bedroom.

Yet in the place of pride above the fireplace is a painting that seems to have nothing to do with fertility, artificial or otherwise, and everything to do with deadly revenge. A painting depicting the princess Philomela from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* appears there, a woman who experienced a violation similar to Bianca’s rape but with a very different outcome. For “As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene / The change of Philomel by the barbarous king / So rudely forced” appears there (*Waste Land* 98-100). As opposed to the rest of the room, dimly lit by candlelight and full of fumes that “confused / And drowned the sense,” this painting is unmistakable, so clear to see it is to view its events “as though a window gave” a look into the world outside (88-89). What can be seen is the “change of Philomel” into a nightingale, a transformation that takes place after the horrendous rape at the hands of her brother-in-law, the king. The description of such a scene as “sylvan” would be incongruous were it not a reference to Milton’s Eve falling to the wheedling serpent in the garden, choosing to put her own

curiosity and possible material gain before what had been asked by the divine (North 8). Defying all moral authority, the “barbarous” King Tereus proves himself beyond the reach of civilization and its laws. He cares only for himself and his desires. His marriage to Philomela’s sister Procne had been motivated by his strength “in wealth and in men,” a strategic decision to create an alliance between Athens and Thrace that went forward despite the disapproval of the gods (Ovid 46). Even before his ultimate act of evil, Tereus displayed a scorn for the authority of higher beings, relying instead on his own judgment and desires. No goddesses of fertility and household harmony attended the wedding; instead he married under the evil auspices of the Furies, goddesses of vengeance. They are fitting omens of what is to come. Upon discovering his treachery, Procne kills their son, the symbol of their ill-fated union, and feeds Tereus his body (48). His realization of Philomela and Procne’s bloody revenge results in the transformation of all parties involved into birds, destined to chase each other until the end of time. This is the “change of Philomel” featured on the wall. It is not her subjugation to Tereus’ carnal desires or his subsequent cutting out of her tongue to prevent her from spreading the tale, but the moment in which Philomela gains power over her oppressor and even regains her voice by becoming a nightingale. It is only in this way that she overcomes those earlier changes “so rudely forced” upon her.

Philomela’s transformation gives her a power to move beyond her troubles in a way unachievable by any other woman in “A Game of Chess.” She is, after all, separated from them “as though a window” were between them – all the woman in the boudoir can do is aspire to such freedom from her daily dullness. She alone among the women of “A Game of Chess” fights back against her oppressors, refusing to succumb to the anodyne

cynicism of those around her. Although her tongue was cut out, her transformation into “the nightingale” allows her to “fill... all the desert with inviolable voice,” heard across the domain of the Sybil and the women of “A Game of Chess” (*Waste Land* 100-101). Her anger cannot be invalidated or ignored. Philomela strikes back against the presumptions of the women that surround her, never accepting that the strictures of others are reasons to give into wrongdoing, never assuaging her pain with immoral gains from her assignation with her powerful brother-in-law. Unlike Bianca, she does not give in to the corrupt desires of others and scheme murder for her own selfish benefit – only for an attempt at justice. Unlike Belladonna, Philomela does not use artificial means to hide her loss but proclaims its horror to the heavens. “Still she cries, and still the world pursues” her, seeking to persecute her along with Tereus (102). Or perhaps it is because Philomela holds the key to finding fertility, another woman who guides the quester on his way – for the world is desperate itself for renewal. And Philomela’s cries can be heard by all – her “‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears” resounds through the waste land, heard by those who are hardly more than a handful of dust, yet not comprehended (103).

Belladonna has no knowledge of such cries, be they for renewal or revenge. She has enclosed herself in her bedroom with her “strange synthetic perfumes” that “troubled, confused / and drowned the sense in odours” (87-89). Her artificial attempts at regaining the appearance of fertility may succeed in hiding her decrepit state, but only because they “drowned” the senses. This drowning is but a mockery of fertility rituals that require death by water, Belladonna’s “strange synthetic” substances deadening the ability to feel the effects of age to give her the appearance of renewed vitality. Instead this artificial act of death is like a poison, tainting even “the air / That freshened from the window” so that

a force of nature is converted into an agent of its spread (89-90). Her perfumes cause the candle to flame and the smoke to billow, the air around her now stifling and unnatural. Her purchased substitute for the fertility ritual can do no more than prolong the inevitable, much as the Sybil's did before her. Of all the "withered stumps of time...told upon her walls" she is but one – one who is caught in time herself, unable to escape the gradual wearing of each day on herself and her sanity (104).

Belladonna is in fact a portrait of Vivienne Eliot, T.S. Eliot's first wife, whose capriciousness and hypochondria he struggled to understand. Eliot hoped Vivienne might recreate the feeling Emily Hale inspired. Instead, he found her a stifling, demanding, querulous influence, which he expressed in the figure of Belladonna. He himself may have felt somewhat deceived in her and the concept of marriage. The second section of *The Waste Land* once held the much more revealing title "In the Cage," reflective of his new view of marital union (Seymour-Jones 307). Despite the change of name, it still betrays the trapped hopelessness Eliot felt in his marriage as he describes the incessant, insistent questions of a woman desiring attention and approval he feels unable to give. Their mutual suffering is apparent as the woman becomes increasingly importunate in her questions and the man retreats further and further from the scene, taking refuge in the response "Nothing again nothing," not answering his wife's cries but keeping to his thoughts. Vivienne noticed the same detached behavior in Eliot, writing to her friend Mary Hutchinson in 1928 that "he is *so* reserved and peculiar, that he never says anything and one cannot get him to speak. That makes one much more lonely" (308). Her words echo those of the poem.

Belladonna's agitation in her exchange with her silent companion reflects the dynamic between Vivienne and Eliot. A multitude of material possessions are not enough to bring her peace – she desires companionship that the man with her provides only through his presence. “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember / Nothing?” she importunes her silent companion (*Waste Land* 122-123). Her words echo that of the passage about the hyacinth girl, whose own silent companion's “eyes failed” and he “knew nothing,” quiet beside her. Yet this woman's words are much more accusatory, as Vivienne's would have been. She had not anticipated that marriage would be such a miserable state. For his part, the man's silence is not one of transformation but of tortured forbearance that elicits her annoyance.

Their daily routine of questions and silences is a ritual itself, but one that does not bring answers or renewal. He can “remember / Those are pearls that were his eyes” but her words do not inspire the same moment of reckoning that the hyacinth girl's did (124-125). “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” she demands (126). Instead of responding, he silently muses, “But / O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag – / It's so elegant / So intelligent” (127-130). Her companion knows of the possibility of release from this quotidian torment, remembering the metamorphosis of eyes to pearls Madame Sosostris foretold. Yet that transfiguration has been commodified through the “Shakespeherian Rag.” Once a singular experience beyond the reach of words, it is now cheap music to be consumed by the masses. The question of whether he is alive examines whether anyone can truly live in a world where even the most sacred things have been sold far beneath their value for paltry profit.

Eliot feels that such daily habits are equivalent to living death. Each day, they shall have “The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door” (135-138). Here, there is little life but much lassitude. The rhyming of the verse shows a regression into a simplistic poetic form, a sign of cultural stagnancy. The dull routines of daily life are poor replacement for the spiritual transformation Belladonna’s companion and Eliot crave. They live an insular life of baths and “closed cars” with little in between. Together, she and her companion “play a game of chess,” her moves consisting of probing questions and his moves only those of silent resistance. Both aspire to an existence other than their own, the woman desiring a companion who cares for her, her impotent companion wanting only to be rid of her. This is a sad yet accurate picture of the Eliot marriage indeed. The tired recitation of their daily ritual shows how ineffective such habits are at replacing the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. We find the answer to her question “Are you alive, or not?” through his macabre gesture of exhaustion, “pressing lidless eyes,” wearily rubbing his open eyes to remain awake. Here this common gesture is made horrifying, the eyes subject to the touch of rough fingers. The body is decaying, eyelids rotting away to leave always staring eyes fated to forever witness the meaninglessness of their lives. Incapable of transforming with water and enlightenment denied to the people in this part of *The Waste Land*, living death is the only existence possible as they wait for “a knock upon the door.” The line echoes the Biblical saying of Jesus, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in” (*ESV Rev.* 3:20). The only hope to escape from the dreariness they are consigned to is to experience a sign of the divine. Yet all that can be heard is “the

wind under the door,” a sign of flickering life (*Waste Land* 118). They can only continue to wait for the knock that would free them from their prosaic cycle.

The dissatisfaction Eliot felt with marriage, and his verdict that it offers little in the way of spiritual edification, continues with his scathing portrait of motherhood, the classic symbol of female fertility. The only mother figure in *The Waste Land*, Lil, “look[s] so antique. / (And her only thirty-one.)” (156-157). Subverting the expectation that mothers overflow with vitality, Lil has become old before her time. She blames her run-down health on “them pills I took, to bring it off, she said. / (She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)” (159-160). As a mother, Lil would be expected to cherish her fertility and her son, but far from being a boon to her, they were a burden. The new life she birthed nearly killed her. Lil’s fertility is a threat to her survival, which she responds to by having an abortion. The pills she takes cause her not only to lose the child, but also her healthy appearance. She chooses sterilization over the renewal of life and even places a price on her fertility. Her husband gave her money “to get yourself some teeth,” but rather than spend the money to reclaim some of her lost vitality, she chooses the opposite by spending it on an abortion.

Lil places a transactional value on her fertility, paying to get rid of its consequences. She finds value only in survival, not her reproductive capacity or her husband’s opinion of her. In obliquely answering her friend’s question, “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” she says, “that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon, / and they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot” (164, 166-167). Vivienne Eliot herself added the line “What you get married for if you don’t want children?” to *The Waste Land*’s manuscript, which suggests another reason for

tension in the Eliot marriage (Seymour-Jones 310). Their lack of children would have been a direct result of their sexual incompatibility and Eliot's disgust with both his wife's body and sexual intercourse. Here, her added line suggests some reproach against her husband's refusal to carry out his marital duties – a refusal that resulted not only in Vivienne's own unhappiness but a failure to reproduce. Lil has the opposite problem – it is she who does not want to adhere to society's expectations for her marriage. The reason Lil married Albert was to have “hot gammon” on the table to ensure her security. Her husband's lust for her is what she puts up with to satisfy her need of food and shelter. She uses the societal standard of marriage to strategically acquire what she needs while resisting what she does not – more children. Bound by her circumstances and the expectation that all women marry for a living, Lil must use the life path forced upon her to her advantage. Marriage is not an expression of love but a transaction – sex for survival. For Lil, marriage is not the means to propagate new life, but to simply have the necessities of life. Her sterility is more valuable to her than her fertility.

Ophelia's haunting lament, the final lines of “A Game of Chess,” signals the deterioration of society that comes from such a disinterest in the spiritual. Her last words before her tragic suicide are accompanied by the warped colloquialisms of Lil and her companion. “Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight. / Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight,” say the occupants of the bar, rushing out at closing (*Waste Land* 170-171). Their words seem a strange distortion of English repeated over and over. Paired with Ophelia's farewell in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night,” their goodbyes seem indicators of madness (172). Just as the magnificence of Shakespeare has been degraded into the Shakespeherian Rag, the

English language itself is disintegrating. The words of Shakespeare's mad Ophelia and the disillusioned Londoners blend together, neither able to fathom the possibility of life ever changing for the better. Ophelia, like Lil, is trapped within a world where she is powerless. Both are subject to the whims of the men surrounding them. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia went mad after she lost all – her father killed at the hands of her lover Hamlet. Her suicide was an escape from a deadened reality she could no longer bear. Unlike Cleopatra and “the burnished throne” on which she sat, Ophelia lives in the world of another - the world of Hamlet, the impotent prince whose inability to take action infects his country. Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark. Ophelia is another lamenting maiden crying over the dead, and although she dies in water, drowning herself to perhaps see her father in the afterlife, her suicide is not a sacrifice that will bring Denmark or her father back to life, but a mortal sin. There is only one place for which she is destined. By the time Hamlet rouses from his stupor to attempt justice for his country, it is too late to save himself or any other leader of the country, as every member of this sordid story dies, perhaps leaving behind a chance for a new start for the kingdom.

Through “A Game of Chess,” Eliot reveals the hideously mundane stasis of the wasteland with its focus on material objects. The spiritual wilderness in which they live and the lack of resolution for their forsaken state haunts every inhabitant. They attempt to adopt their own patterns and values to replace the ones that are lost, to no avail. The women of Eliot's “A Game of Chess” have adopted materialism as an analgesic in order to dull the pain of living unfulfilling lives devoid of meaning yet full of anxiety. The title suggests that each character has a role in a greater game, with little if any will of their

own – they are subject to the whims of other, greater forces that they may not recognize, mere pawns in a plan carried out around them and through them. They fruitlessly follow the patterns set out for them, attempting to use marriage, business dealings, and the pursuit of power as a new type of fertility ritual. Saint Mary Woolnoth’s peoples inhabit Hell, Bianca trades love for cynical opportunism, the querulous Belladonna lives unfulfilled, and Lil desires only survival. The different societal statuses of the women, from the clearly upper-class woman with her jewels and perfumes, to Lil and her common accent, show that in the wasteland, no section of society is untouched by decay. Whether natural or unnatural, sanctioned by society or a mortal sin, their alternatives to spiritual soul-searching fail to bring them a life beyond mere subsistence.

III

As opposed to “A Game of Chess,” the definite article of “*The Fire Sermon*” (emphasis added) suggests there is only one. This is no ordinary homily, not a common occurrence like the ritual of “The Burial of the Dead” or the ubiquitous struggles of “A Game of Chess.” No, the Fire Sermon is a specific speech of Buddha in direct opposition to the values of “A Game of Chess,” denouncing the “things of this world” as an all-consuming fire that will destroy the self. “The Fire Sermon,” in Eliot’s telling is a song of seduction, of temptation towards earthly and worldly pleasures – and the deterioration of society and feeling and meaning in the pursuit of such pleasures.

Ophelia’s descent into madness presages the breakdown of societal relations in “The Fire Sermon.” This breakdown is signaled by the introduction of the Fisher King, whose injury created a wasteland of his country. While “The Burial of the Dead” created the setting of the wasteland, and “A Game of Chess” explored the moral turpitude of its

citizens, “The Fire Sermon” turns from the subjects of the wasteland to the ruler himself, the cause of all their troubles. He sits alone on the bank of the Thames, “fishing in the dull canal / On a winter evening round behind the gashouse / Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck / And on the king my father’s death before him” (*Waste Land* 189-192). In later versions of the Grail story when the knowledge that “the Fish is a Life symbol of immemorial antiquity” associated with fertility gods has been forgotten, the Fisher King’s name is explained away by having him fish in his introduction (Weston 38). In the wasteland, the absence of spiritual guidance leads to a similar ignorance of the cultural traditions behind the Fisher King. Yet Eliot twists this into an advantage for his modern avatar of the Fisher King, an actual London fisherman who hangs about “gashouses” and the like by the Thames. Although his fishing marks a disconnect from knowledge about his title’s origins, it also shows that the modern Fisher King already has a closer connection to nature than his “subjects” who reside in the financial district – including Eliot. He is no longer a high and mighty lord, or even a member of the materialistic upper class, but a simple fisherman much like the disciples of Jesus. The occupation of Eliot’s Fisher King gives him time to think on more serious things. However, his depressed mood lies heavy on the wasteland. He has not reached cruel April and the awakening that comes in the spring; instead he continues to stagnate, covered in the “forgetful snow” from “The Burial of the Dead” (*Waste Land* 6) The thoughts he has about “the king my brother’s wreck” makes him of a piece with Shakespeare’s Ferdinand, who begins in a similar state of suspended animation. Ferdinand is “weeping again the king my father’s wreck” in *The Tempest* just before the fairy Ariel leads him to the fair Miranda and happiness through a song – the same song which “those are pearls that were his eyes”

comes from (Brooks, Jr. 196). When Ferdinand says this line, he believes he is trapped alone on a desert island with the loss of his father weighing on him and no knowledge of the salvation to come. The Fisher King occupies a similar position, solitary as he fishes in London, no life in sight. Since Ferdinand cannot reach his happy ending without the guidance of Ariel to his future wife Miranda, neither can the Fisher King achieve renewal without the words of Madame Sosostriis – “those are pearls that were his eyes” – which she takes from Ariel’s song. However, notice that while Ferdinand “weeps,” the Fisher King merely “muses” – he is not emotionally affected by the loss of his family as one might expect. Instead, in “The Fire Sermon,” he has lost all emotion, in denial of his grief. His emotional impotence appears – for in the wasteland it is the women who carry the emotional burden of reality. The figure of death and resurrection, on the other hand, “knew nothing.” It is the woman’s part to mourn, to worry, to survive, to go mad. Yet in “The Fire Sermon,” women have reached the limit of their ability to bear the desolation. All that was once held sacred has fallen by the wayside. There is no mourning or desire, for anything that was valuable or good is now inconsequential in the face of the dire need for resurrection. No longer do even material items hold sway – all is vain, burning lust to satisfy carnal desires, or else abject apathy. Its meaninglessness is its madness, and therein lies the ultimate depravity of the wasteland – that sex itself no longer matters.

The origin of the Fisher King’s injury and subsequent desolation of his kingdom bears out the idea that the rejection of spiritual authority will ultimately render even sex useless at creating new life. There are a few versions of the Fisher King’s injury, although in the context of “The Fire Sermon” and its focus on meaningless sex meant to fulfill burning carnal desire, it appears that one interpretation gains precedence over the

rest for Eliot. If the Fisher King's injury is like that of Adonis, an early fertility god who suffered a disastrous wound to the phallus, the "suspension of the reproductive processes of Nature" becomes clear (Weston 44). One of Weston's examples of the early versions of the Fisher King adds to the gravity of this choice. Ensnared by his passion for the pagan daughter of the King of Norway, the early Christian king Joseph 'd'Abarimathie baptizes and marries her (22). God punishes "his loins" for this sin, making his land infertile in the process. His sexual as well as spiritual transgression makes this Fisher King impotent – an impotence reflected in the wasteland of his country. Devoid of spiritual authority, he is incapable of healing the land. His sinful reproduction leads not to new life but a loss of virility.

The departure of the nymphs from the Thames reflects the lack of spiritual authority left to the Fisher King in the wasteland. The effect this has is immediately reflected in the beginning of "The Fire Sermon" as it opens on a desolate autumn scene.

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed. (173-175)

With the disappearance of the nymphs goes the guidance they offer as guardian spirits of water and the knowledge of past mythologies whence they came. Dead leaves drift down from the broken "river's tent" that was once the nymphs' domain. The wilting leaves show the departure of the bloom of spring and summer along with the nymphs. They cannot stay in a place where the last produce of "the roots that clutch, what branches grow" cannot "clutch" at the wet bank (19). Instead, the "fingers of leaf" rot into oblivion, a grotesque continuance of the bodily decay occurring throughout the

wasteland. The leaves, evidence of what could once flourish in the “stony rubbish” of the wasteland, have passed out of memory as the wasteland transitions from the harvesting of the fall to the forgetful winter (20). Without the feminine presence of the nymphs, there is no guidance towards the memory of life and resurrection. There is no one to hear “the wind” in this dead “brown land” as there was in “A Game of Chess,” where the wind heard “under the door” represents the continued breathing of a man close to death. The nymphs are departed, unable to fill in for Belladonna and her questioning, “What is that noise?” that prompts her companion’s notice (117). Now that wind whistles by the Fisher King “unheard.”

The loss of spiritual knowledge from the departure of the nymphs is expressed again through Mr. Eugenides. While women like the nymphs are essential to the quest in the Grail legends as either temptresses or else guide, the spread of the stories through the world worked differently. A “Smyrna merchant,” he once would have numbered amongst the merchants who were the main purveyors of the fertility myths that laid the foundation for the Grail legends, hawked around the globe along with the rest of their wares (209). Yet Mr. Eugenides’ specific association with Smyrna, the center of war between Greece and Turkey after World War I, makes him a figure of impending destruction rather than the gatekeeper to ancient secrets. His purpose perverted, his status confers only the transactional values comparable to that of “A Game of Chess,” with a focus on the material above all else. His “demotic French” shows a degradation of language similar to Ophelia’s, unsuited to sharing the secrets of life (212). Indeed, rather than offer enlightenment, he suggests a homosexual liaison, a disruption of normal sexual relations. The “pocket full of currants” he carries denote the inability to reproduce, since they refer

to dried grapes of Bacchus, the god of fertility (210). Ironically, Eugenides means “well-born” in Greek, which would seem to promise birth. Instead, his replacement of woman with man results in a sterile union. Rather than offering access to mystical knowledge, Mr. Eugenides symbolizes the radical dissolution of tradition in *The Waste Land*.

The myths of old have been replaced with modern facsimiles in “The Fire Sermon.” Although the Fisher King, who has already undergone his modern transformation, cannot hear the wind, “At my back from time to time I hear / The sounds of horns and motors which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring” (196-198). This change echoes Eliot’s review of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring.”

Whether Stravinsky’s[sic] music be permanent or ephemeral I do not know; but it did seem to transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music. (“Rite”, 133)

Stravinsky’s “Rite” drew from antiquity to convert the modern cacophony into music. His rhythms and musical notes gave order to the uncivilized machinery of modern day. Eliot strives to create his own version of the “Rite of Spring” in “The Fire Sermon,” translating ancient forces into modernity and then into music. He asks that the “Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song,” the sound of rushing water from spring rainstorms kept at bay because he has not yet completed his own rite to transform his “barbaric” occupants and shift the season from winter to spring (*Waste Land* 176). The

alchemy of Stravinsky is still out of his reach. The Fisher King can only hear the sounds of modernity “from time to time,” and they are still “horns and motors” rather than music. Eliot incorporates a line from Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” with the screeching replacing the original where “at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near” (Marvell 21-22). Marvell’s lascivious narrator trumpets the importance of seizing the day before death comes to seduce the eponymous virgin. Eliot sees that modern invention has grounded the “wingèd chariot,” its magnificence turned into an ubiquitous automobile. This change has no effect on Sweeney and Mrs. Porter, who are no strangers to sex. The “horns and motors” serve not as an argumentative device but merely a means of transportation so they can sate their carnal desires. Eliot’s notes inform us that he intended their characters to ape Roman mythical figures Actaeon and Diana (“Notes” 23). Diana is the goddess of chastity and the moon, Actaeon a hunter who surprised her while she bathed (North 12). Her subsequent revenge had him hunted as a stag by his own dogs. But Sweeney and Mrs. Porter are poor imitations. Sweeney is Eliot’s idea of an “urban lout,” far from a noble hunter, and Mrs. Porter is not one to be outraged by his advances (North 12). However, this myth gives the horns an additional association with hunting and implies that sex is a sport for Sweeney and Mrs. Porter. Even though “the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter / And on her daughter,” there is no evidence of shame under Diana’s accusing eye (*Waste Land* 199-200). Her daughter is the product of such relationships with Sweeney and joins her mother in her lifestyle. Sex, which should be the definitive reproduction ritual, instead is repurposed for brutish modern ends – the extinguishing of burning lust rather than the fulfillment of love.

The ancient wasteland of the Fisher King and Weston's fertility gods manifested through lost harvests and sick people, but Eliot's modern wasteland shows humanity itself reduced to machinery. Now "the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting" for passengers (216-217). The impotence of the denizens of the wasteland has crystallized into a corresponding lack of emotion. They are now mechanical in their movements and choices, their spiritual bankruptcy rendering them incapable of anything more. Like a taxi waiting patiently for passengers, they wait without knowing for what or whom they are waiting. However, the "throbbing" of its engine suggests a pulse, as though life were straining underneath the weight of the mechanical overlay. This throbbing is that of lust, that most basic of instincts meant to ensure the reproduction and continuance of the species.

In London, Tiresias observes a consummation of lust through a dispassionate tryst between a typist and a carbuncular clerk. Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, understands the perspective of both genders because he had transformed into a woman, and then back into a man, after twice interrupting the fervent lovemaking of two serpents (Ovid 46). However, he and his "wrinkled female breasts" cannot offer any renewal – returned to a man's decrepit body, Tiresias suffered his own loss of fertility (*Waste Land* 219). But it is his understanding that is valuable, since according to Eliot, "what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" ("Notes" 23). He is "throbbing between two lives," unable to fully transform into either man or woman because what he sees in London is not the passion of the serpents which originally changed him, but sex without the hope of fertility and birth (*Waste Land* 218). Even sex stripped of love has some

potency, since Tiresias vacillates between the genders as he watches, but it cannot produce a full metamorphosis.

The typist who engages in this emotionless affair no longer understands or remembers the true purpose of sex as a source of fertility. Her ignorance of its importance is exemplified by how her “drying combinations” hang out of her window for the whole world to see (225). Her most private undergarments are exposed to all, suggesting the insignificance of protecting her most intimate self. The typist feels no shame in this – indeed, she feels very little at all. She has no dignity to protect anymore. The young clerk’s sexual overtures which reveal a carelessness similar to that of Tereus in his rape of Philomela have little effect on her, for “his vanity requires no response, / And makes a welcome of indifference” (241-242). She lies there passively, her mind unengaged, no longer a person but an object on which he performs. The very personality of the typist has been sterilized, making the act of sex the resolution of a one-sided desire rather than a means to express love and create new life of it. Tiresias too has had this experience, but for him, it was one of more emotion and meaning, not simply another in a long line of mundane activities to be completed. The lamentation characteristic of earlier women of the wasteland is absent due to her skewed perspective. The “throbbing” Tiresias feels consists of more life than the typist has – she is merely a human machine, “smooth[ing] her hair with automatic hand, / and put[ting] a record on the gramophone” (255-256). Her actions are mechanical, with her “automatic hand” showing that she is one with the machine rather than the clerk. Even her job requires only muscle memory for the keyboard. She is an amanuensis for the thoughts of her male employers, simply a vessel through which their sentiments are expressed. The typist shows that women are the

vehicle through which Eliot conveys his message about the wasteland and its chance at renewal.

The music that comes from the typist's gramophone seems to stir something within. Her tunes, likely similar to the "Shakespeherian Rag" prompt once more a recollection of Ariel's song as "this music crept by me upon the waters" (257). Ariel has arrived to guide the quester to his heart's delight. Ferdinand and the Fisher King do not sit lonely by the water but have hope of finding what they need to heal their wounded minds and bodies. Even in the "Unreal City" that contains the living dead of the financial district, there is some hope to be found.

O City, City, I can sometimes hear
 Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline[sic]
 and a clatter and a chatter from within
 Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
 Of Magnus Martyr hold
 Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold. (259-265)

Lil's public bar in "A Game of Chess" features the "whining" of a woman made old before her time. This bar by the Thames transforms her whining into the delightful twang of the mandolin and the cheerful "chatter" of the friends of the Fisher King. Her attempts to use chemicals to regain her lost youth have not half the power of the music, with its association with the "fishmen" and the yield they bring in from the water each day. The church of Magnus Martyr also improves upon the past. Its "inexplicable splendour" shows that some beauty and hope remain in the wasteland. Unlike Saint Mary Woolnoth,

it was built not by the protégé of Christopher Wren, but by the great architect himself after the Great Fire of London destroyed the original building (North 14). This is no church hollowed out to make way for economic development, but one revived through a baptism of fire. This is no facsimile of a greater artist's work, but the product of the original. Its association with fishmongers rather than cold-blooded businessmen add to its connotations of successful resurrection. Music, the final stage of transformation in Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," appears in the gentle rhyming that gives these lines a pleasing lilt as they signal the change coming to the wasteland.

Although the music of the mandolin is an encouraging sign of hope, the protagonist only "sometimes heard" its tones, sometimes the "horns and motors" of Sweeney and Mrs. Porter's infidelities. The intermingling of music and modernity shows the wasteland "throbbing between two lives," the hollow present versus the melodious past and perhaps future. One moment Mrs. Porter and her illegitimate daughter merely "wash their feet in soda water," a dirty ritual undertaken each day by commoners (*Waste Land* 201). In the next, Parsifal, a seeker of the Grail, completes a ceremonial cleansing of his feet before finishing his quest, "*Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*" (202). In the same way that the typist's gramophone sparks the remembrance of a living part of London, Mrs. Porter's ritual leads to a reminiscence of children singing to the quester near success. Their purity contrasts with Mrs. Porter's corruption. The mixture of these two attributes results in the crying of Philomela, innocent and violated at the same time. Her song of protest echoes throughout the wasteland, having escaped the stifling air of "A Game of Chess," but still she is not understood. "Jug jug jug jug jug jug" is all that

can be heard, and one accusing note – “Tereu” (204, 206). The competing images of the past and present reveal the turmoil that precedes renewal.

The final guidance towards resurrection begins, the dirge of the Rhine maidens wending its way down the Thames towards the Fisher King. Their song is one of loss – the final piece of Eliot’s own “Rite of Spring,” since “The Burial of the Dead” establishes the role of female lamentation in preceding the completion of the fertility ritual. “Weialala leia / Wallala leialala,” they cry, wailing over the theft of their river’s gold in a Wagner opera (277-279). Later turned into a ring, the gold carries with it a curse (“*Gotterdammerung*”). The Fisher King had suffered similarly, his injury causing a curse on the land. Despite warnings of what will happen if the ring is not returned, the woman who possesses it refuses to give it back. To her, it is an irreplaceable symbol of the great love her suitor holds for her. Later, when her lover has the ring, he too ignores the direct supplication of the Rhine maidens, caught up by the pride of possessing such a rare and dangerous object. Their all-consuming desire and supreme entitlement delay justice, resulting in *Die Gotterdammerung* – the “twilight of the gods.” Their values are the same as those held by the occupants of the wasteland, which will never lead to resurrection. The gods of Valhalla are consumed by flame even though the Rhine maidens eventually get their due (“*Gotterdammerung*”). The “throbbing,” burning desires they favor over spiritual fulfillment result in fiery destruction, opposite from the “death by water” that could bring new life. Thus, the song of the Rhine Maidens perfectly frames the last parts of “The Fire Sermon,” with the songs of the three Thames maidens representing the past, present, and future of the wasteland and the quester’s journey through it.

Queen Elizabeth I appears out of the brown fog over the Thames in the first song. In the distant past she reigned over England's glorious age of peace and wealth. "Elizabeth and Leicester / Beating oars / The stern was formed / A gilded shell / Red and gold" in a barge on the river (*Waste Land* 279-283). Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was a close friend of Queen Elizabeth, rumored to be her lover. Eliot quotes from *The History of England* in this section, referring to a time when they facetiously suggested they get married (North 58). Far from being yet another example of a failure to consummate marriage and a lack of fertility, Elizabeth and Leicester herald a new order. They facilitated the breakdown of cultural norms in defying the old institution of the Catholic Church and daring to remain unmarried. Never before had there been a Virgin Queen, and never before the Elizabethan age had England had the renaissance of intellectualism and enlightenment that she presided over. Elizabeth, unlike Cleopatra, refused to give up her absolute rule for a man, and flourished in doing so. She chose marriage to her country and her duty over a marriage that would have suited her own desires.

The second song of a Thames maiden is a woman broken by her misuse at the hands of a man. Her life is strewn carelessly throughout the districts of London, for "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew / Undid me" (*Waste Land* 293-294) London is the location of her birth and her ruin. It is in Richmond that he took advantage of her as she "raised her knees / Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe" (294-295). She is undone by this emotionless encounter, losing her sense of self in the same way that the workers of the financial district were "undone" by their meaningless work. Unlike Queen Elizabeth, standing proud and tall with Leicester her aide, this woman has fallen,

“supine” to the overwhelming lust of another. Her decomposing body is buried in pieces all over London, “my feet are at Moorgate and my heart / Under my feet. After the event / He wept. He promised ‘a new start.’ / I made no comment. What should I resent?” (296-300). Her heart and feelings have been trodden upon by this man, but although he took advantage of her, she has nothing to say. Her voice does not ring out in protest like Philomela. She has been broken by the empty values of the wasteland. “What should I resent?” the woman says, unable to muster up any feeling at her violation. She does not weep over her loss like the Rhine maidens, because she does not recognize what she has lost.

The last strains of the Rhine maiden’s song, “la la,” lead into a repudiation of the spiritual bankruptcy of the wasteland (306). From London “to Carthage then I came,” the decadence of the former left behind for the reminisces of St. Augustine (307). He abandoned the sensual temptations of his youth in Carthage to become a Christian ascetic (North 15). Throughout “The Fire Sermon,” such sexual pleasures as he experienced, devoid of the higher calling of love, prove worthless again and again. It is only through abstaining from frivolous pursuits that knowledge of the spiritual can be regained. The Buddha also preaches against the sacrifice of spiritual understanding to fulfill the “burning burning burning burning” desire for worldly satisfaction in his “Fire Sermon” that Eliot takes as the section name (*Waste Land* 308). The Buddha and St. Augustine reject what modern society holds dear – its focus on material possessions and the satiation of carnal desires. Indeed, the “collocation” of these two ascetics as the “culmination” of this section proves that the selfishness of the wasteland must be rejected (“Notes” 25). Just as Weston argues that the fertility myths of many cultures came

together to create the Grail legend, Eliot brings together these ascetic traditions of the Eastern and Western worlds to emphasize the universality of their guidance. The quester must avoid empty temptations of the flesh on the way to the Grail in order to successfully restore the Fisher King and his land. However, complete abstention from sex, the most ancient ritual of reproduction, is also inadvisable – its power is so great that even in its diluted form it affected Tiresias. But Tiresias showed that loving intercourse itself has the power of total transformation. For Eliot, it is only sex tainted by a foundation in lust rather than love that must be rejected. Through that rejection, the women of the wasteland could regain their dignity and the possibility of redemption. The intervention of a higher being begins the purification process, for “O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest / burning” (*Waste Land* 307-311). The repression of words corresponds to a decrease in the burning of lust, but this is not enough. This burning can be quenched only through a “Death by Water.”

IV

Without the context of the fertility rituals described by Jessie Weston, the fourth section, “Death by Water,” seems utterly incongruous aside from its obvious contrast with “The Fire Sermon.” Many find it incomprehensible that Pound thought it “an integral part of the poem,” especially since both Pound and Eliot knew perfectly well that it was merely a translated bit of his 1918 poem, “Dans le Restaurant” (North 16). Written far before any other section of *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s usage of his old poem renews his own work and its meaning. The character Phlebas the Phoenician sailor is now a fertility god in the process of resurrection.

In “Death by Water,” Eliot follows the storyline of both the Grail legends and ancient fertility cults. Weston illuminates the purpose of this section as an essential part of fertility rites. The effigy of fertility god Adonis was not buried in the earth or burned during his festival, instead thrown in the water, his drowning acting as a charm to bring rain (Weston 51). This ceremonial death is followed by resuscitation, the vegetation spirit brought back to life by the medicine man (55). Similarly, the castle where the Grail is held is always by water. The “Death by Water” is, then, a baptism, an important step on the way to spiritual rebirth and resurrection. It is also an answer to “The Fire Sermon,” putting out the “Burning burning burning burning,” with the cold water of the sea.

Foreshadowing of Phlebas’ arrival in *The Waste Land* appears throughout the poem. He is the “drowned Phoenician sailor” of Madame Sosostris, and intimately connected with Ariel’s song from *The Tempest*.

Those are pearls that were his eyes
 nothing of him that doth fade
 but doth suffer a sea-change
 into something rich and strange (1.2.396)

Ariel’s song describes the transformation Phlebas undergoes. His drowning does not end in the decay prevalent throughout the rest of the wasteland, but changes his eyes into pearls, suggesting that after his death he sees something beautiful beyond the realities our human eyes can perceive. Eliot’s notes claim that Phlebas is “not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples,” furthering the association between the two (“Notes” 23). Since Ariel’s song helps Ferdinand find happiness and fulfillment through his love of

Miranda, releasing him from his misery after a shipwreck, it should have a similarly redemptive effect on Phlebas, and through him, the wasteland.

Phlebas may have a connection to the guileless Prince of Naples, but he also bears a resemblance to the conniving Mr. Eugenides.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
 And the profit and loss. (*Waste Land* 312-314)

He too was a merchant, sailing the seas to make his fortune. But unlike Mr. Eugenides, Phlebas retains his role as an entry into the mystery cults of the past. He forgets “the profit and the loss” that so obsess the inhabitants of the wasteland, as well as the sounds of his former life. Like the companion of the hyacinth girl, who underwent a true transformation, he forgets all – petty materialism, the water he is engulfed in, what it means to live. Phlebas finds relief from the sensory demands of the world in death, avoiding the calcification that makes his fellow characters set in their ways even as they lose sight of truth.

His death enables the continuance of the fertility cycle. Swept about by the sea, Ariel’s song says that “nothing of him that doth fade, / but doth suffer a sea-change” meaning that the parts of him that would normally rot are instead purposely preserved in a new form.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth
 Entering the whirlpool. (315-318)

Even though “the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor,” Phlebas carries no dehydrated, wrinkled fruit with him – his very flesh is “picked” to the bone. His clean bones reflect not the desiccation of the wasteland, but the asceticism espoused in the climax of “The Fire Sermon.” The “whispers” are ritual chanting and sounds of mourning that accompany him as he changes into “something rich and strange.” Whirling round and round, Phlebas overcomes the boundaries of the “temporal world” to reach a new state (Brooks 201). He experiences again the cycle of life as he goes through the “stages of his age and youth” and back to his newborn state, free now to explore a life focused on spirituality.

As the section draws to a close, Eliot emphasizes that Phlebas’ experiences are universal, one man’s enlightenment the savior of all.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,

Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you. (319-321)

Alluding to Galatians 3:28, Eliot addresses the reader as a “Gentile or Jew,” which encompasses all of humanity. In the Old Testament, before Jesus’ arrival, the Jews had been God’s chosen people, but after Jesus’ death and resurrection, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, . . . nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The power of resurrection transcends ancient societal divisions. Like Tiresias, Phlebas becomes a composite of male and female, showing that the same kind of spiritual transformation is available to men and women. He was “once handsome and tall as you,” says Eliot, addressing the reader directly to emphasize the qualities shared with Phlebas. Even those who retain control of their lives as Phlebas gives up his body to the waves

have something in common with him. Although his role in the fertility ritual is that of a god, in Eliot's ritual, everyone can experience a transfiguring death. Phlebas' ability to find redemption is unaffected by his status as an everyman, which instead augments his influence on the wasteland. In the modern fertility ritual of *The Waste Land*, any person can reject the desires of the flesh and reach a higher consciousness.

Although Phlebas has met his death, he has also found a path to renewal. The death he suffers becomes beautiful beyond imagining, the irritation a grain of sand causes an oyster becoming "those pearls that were his eyes," through hundreds of lustrous coatings. Just as the companion of the hyacinth girl found that his "eyes failed," so does Phlebas "forg[e]t the cry of gulls," beyond the reach of human senses, as well as "the profit and the loss," for no material thing matters to him now. Unlike the women from early in the poem, Phlebas has found death, unreachable by the Sibyl, mourned by the hyacinth girl, predicted by Madame Sosostris, staved off by Lil, and good as reached by the typist. He is no longer concerned with mundane routines, as some of them were, he cares not for the paltry results of "profit and loss." The "current under sea" changes him as he rewinds through "the stages of his age and youth," passing through his aged state onto childhood. Phlebas has faced the pain of life and the fate of death – now he can move beyond it to discover what comes from such experiences. The baptismal purging of his flesh from his bones leaves him genderless, demonstrating that anyone can reach this new state of spiritual purity. Having left the fleshy body behind, the person is then free to pursue the desires of the spirit. In quenching the worldly and human desires that pockmark "A Game of Chess" and "The Fire Sermon," this section allows the protagonist

as well as the reader to be able to complete the quest for spiritual enlightenment in “What the Thunder Said.”

V

“What the Thunder Said” is the culmination of the quest for fertility that takes place through the poem. Having cast off the choking stagnancy of the wasteland through “Death by Water,” Eliot and the reader can finally attain spiritual fulfillment. References to the women met along the way appear, a reminder of how much has changed after Phlebas’ “Death by Water.” The impotence of the wasteland is gone, replaced by an urgency to find water – a metaphor for enlightenment. “What the Thunder Said” is an explanation of how to restore the glory of places that have lost their holiness, for “Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves / Waited for rain” (*Waste Land* 395-396). The Ganga, or the Ganges, is the most holy river of Hinduism that can purify those who bathe in it (Das). Its goddess Ganga brought the river to India to nurture her people with her sacred waters, important for Hindu rituals of death still carried out by thousands today. But her “sunken” state in the poem signals a debilitation of Ganga’s ability to serve her people. The “limp leaves” that sag on her banks are like those of the Thames, associating Ganga with the women occupying London, the main setting of *The Waste Land*. They too have seen their traditional roles diminished into pale imitations of what they were. They too need water in order to regain love from lust and the appreciation of beauty from an appreciation of mere objects. The waters of Ganga herself are said to help free the dead from the endless cycle of reincarnation – a hint at Eliot’s true goal (Das). Through communion with this divine female figure, similar to Dante’s Beatrice or the Virgin Mary, religious adherents could finally find true peace in nirvana, the state Eliot seeks.

Only that would free the women of the wasteland from the mundane daily routines of their half-lives. But Ganga's associations ultimately go beyond the Thames – the metonymy that permeates the wasteland means that Ganga is also the river of the Fisher King in the Grail legends. The synergy between Eastern and Western traditions appears again to show the dire necessity for a universal quest to restore religion and meaning to society. The promise of rain comes from the sound of thunder. “Then spoke the thunder / DA,” it says three times, the voice of a god speaking wisdom from heaven (*Waste Land* 399-400). Part of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the Creator God asks three groups what “DA” means, and they answer in turn with three imperative commands – datta, to give, dayadhvam, compassion, damyata, control (North 62-63). It is through learning these three virtues that a person may live and find spiritual discipline leading to the rain of enlightenment.

The crashing of thunder appears with the death of Christ as well, another promise of eventual resurrection. The urgent lines detail the arrest, imprisonment, and crucifixion of Christ at the hands of the Pharisees and the Roman soldiers they used as their tools – religious leaders tainted because their love of authority outweighs their love of God.

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and palace and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains (*Waste Land* 322-327)

These lines carry with them great weight, the repetition in them emphasizing the intense moments and suffering that must occur before death, and through that death, life as the “thunder of spring” reverberates across the wasteland, heard by all. The beginning of Christ’s ordeal occurred in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Pharisees and their minions, alight with the fire of pride burning in their souls, arrested Christ for daring to challenge their power. His communion with God was interrupted, an encounter of “silence” like that which overwhelms the hyacinth girl’s companion. He too will become “neither living nor dead,” hovering between the two until his ultimate resurrection. Eventually, however, Christ leaves behind the “agony in the stony places” felt by the Sibyl, who could not resist having her dearest wish – immortality – granted by a god. Her punishment was an eternity in spiritual wilderness, all her wisdom good for naught. Christ resisted a similar temptation from the devil in the wilderness when he was offered power and dominion over all the world. His response to his temptations was that “Man shall not live on bread alone,” showing his recognition of a higher plane of existence beyond the physical reality of earth, this “heap of broken images” that the Sybil desired to experience forever (Matt. 4:4). Unlike the Sybil and the other people in the desert, Christ recognizes that there is something worthwhile beyond the human experience. Through his death, he brings that knowledge to all in the wasteland. When Christ died, an earthquake rocked the temple of the Jews and ripped the curtain of the inmost chamber in two, a symbol that the ability to commune with the most high God was no longer limited to the privileged priests but available to all. The rituals and sacrifices are no longer required. The rumblings of that earthquake are the “thunder of spring over distant mountains,” traveling far. The thunder promises spring and the resurrection of the land

that comes with it. Those distant mountains are signs of the spiritual awakening to come. It was in the mountains that Christ preached his famous Sermon on the Mount to crowds of people, explaining to the common folk how to become part of the kingdom of God, not unlike “What the Thunder Said,” or even, as Eliot says in his notes, “The Fire Sermon” (“Notes” 25). The parallels between these disparate religious traditions again emphasize the universality of these spiritual values and experiences, putting no limits on who can be brought to enlightenment. “He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience,” say the people of the wasteland, finally woken from their stupor to the realization that their lives are dry and empty as those of dead leaves carried on the wind (*Waste Land* 328-330). But they must have patience as they journey to understand the meaning of life and death in the context of their realization.

The end of that journey is nearing as the last predictions of Madame Sosostris about the fate of the wasteland come true. The “murmur of maternal lamentation,” female mourning like that which surrounded Madame Sosostris in “The Burial of the Dead,” rises in the air (367). The women of the past lament the fate of their descendants caught in the wilderness. Their descendants are “those hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth / ringed by the flat horizon only” (368-370). These are the “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” Madame Sosostris saw, and they are still trapped in the endless fertility cycle on the “cracked earth” of the desert. But there is still a “city over the mountains” visible, one they might reach if they break out of the circle and seek to follow Christ’s guidance to the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount. Around them, there are “cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London” (372-5). The “violet” light that tinged

the dissolution of society's values in "The Fire Sermon" has returned to witness the falling of the ancient centers of culture and religion along with the modern ones. This destruction shows the decay of Eastern Europe after World War I and the inability of any earthly city to achieve immortality. Even the very best cannot cast off that which will cause their decline. If the crowds of people want spiritual fulfillment, they must look beyond the cities to find what they seek, for these places have been declared "Unreal" (376). The city beyond the mountains Eliot seeks to reach is none of these, but something better, which cannot be tarnished.

Saint Mary Woolnoth no longer presides over the hapless souls of the financial district, signaling their deadened state with each toll of her bell. Instead "upside down in air were towers / Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours" (382-4). The bizarre inversion of her place in the world shows the radical changes taking place in the wasteland. The values of the world have been turned on their head; wealth and status have gone from paramount to nothing. The ringing of her bells now shows the memory of fertility returning to the wasteland, or perhaps that the half-life her constituents once lived is now barely more than a memory. Belladonna appears by the uprooted towers, adding to this strange scene as she "drew her long black hair out tight / And fiddled whisper music on those strings," a nightmarish image not bettered by the "bats with baby faces" that could have come straight from *Cats* (377-9). Her hair that had been "spread out in fiery points" has been tamed, now a weird instrument with which she makes music (109). Her "whisper music" works to change the wasteland like Ariel's song and the sea current that preserved Phlebas' bones with "whispers." This sequence shows the horror that comes with the uprooting of established customs and how strange the new world may appear.

But of all the radical changes taking place in the wasteland, the strangest is this: the desert domain the Sybil inhabits has finally experienced a spiritual awakening. Unlike those who came before them, these people realize what they have lost. The “son of man” seeks water, desperately wishing for even the sound of it. “If there were the sound of water only / Not the cicada / And dry grass singing / But sound of water over a rock” these new pilgrims might find relief from the vanity and meaninglessness that has plagued them (352-355). Finally, they understand the argument of Ecclesiastes, to which these lines allude – that life can mean nothing without a spiritual calling. As Phlebas showed in the stages of life he went through, water could reverse old age and wash away the dirt and vices that clung to them in the desert. Water can return life to a land gone stale and hard. Had the Sibyl undergone the “sea-change” of Phlebas, she too might have become “something rich and strange” instead of continuing her dusty existence. But she was too afraid. Her example cannot guide the others out of the desert; they must continue although “there is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road / the road winding above among the mountains” (331-333). There is nowhere to go but on forward the “sandy road,” trekking up the mountains to where Jesus gave his sermon to try to reach the “city over the mountains” and get out of the wasteland. The path is hard, for “there is not even silence in the mountains / but dry sterile thunder without rain,” the acts of God that started them on this quest disappearing (341-342). The thunder they hear now carries no message, and there is no silence in which they can attempt to call upon a higher authority. They must trudge on, hoping that their faith can carry them through.

However, a spirit guide appears to them when they keep their eyes upon the road, like Tiresias or Madame Sosostris in its androgyny.

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

but when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

But who is that on the other side of you? (*Waste Land* 359-365)

The Hanged Man Madame Sosostris failed to find has arrived. The god who was absent from the beginning of the wasteland now appears to guide the pilgrims to their final destination. The two questions asking about the identity of the figure reveal puzzlement, for no such resurrected spirit has appeared as a guide in the wasteland before. This episode is reminiscent of the road to Emmaus from the Bible, when two disciples walked with the resurrected Jesus without realizing who he was (North 17). Eliot also draws on a more modern example, an Antarctic expedition where men at the limit of their strength and sanity continually imagine another companion is with them – identified as Providence in the account of it (North 60). When the people of the wasteland keep their eyes on the “white road” and focus on the future, that is when the “gliding” spirit appears to them.

If they follow the path closely, the pilgrims might find the “Chapel Perilous” of Grail lore in the mountains. There too “the grass is singing” under the auspices of “faint moonlight” (*Waste Land* 386). Diana is not violated here, her purity and innocence shining the way “over the tumbled graves, about the chapel” (387). This chapel featured a deadly “Black Hand,” that would appear to snuff out the candles – and the life – of those

who presumed to trespass upon the chapel (Weston 38). It was the last great obstacle for the quester before the finding of the Grail, a deadly threat. Now it is the last place the pilgrims of the wasteland encounter in their search for rain. Past questers succumbed to the Black Hand here, filling the graves outside with the performance of “The Burial of the Dead” ritual restarting their journey to spiritual fulfillment. But now “the empty chapel, only the wind’s home,” has no more life-threatening danger, for “dry bones can hurt no one” (*Waste Land* 388, 390). The disembodied Black Hand has been stripped down into innocuous bones, its malicious presence replaced by the wind, a sign of persistent life in *The Waste Land*. These “dry bones” are like those resurrected by Ezekiel, who spoke the will of God in commanding the dry bones of graves to put on flesh and sinew and breathe anew (Ezekiel 37). With this final omen of resurrection, “the door swings” open, and there is “a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust / Bringing rain” (*Waste Land* 389, 393-394). The pilgrims have found the meaning missing from their lives at the chapel. The “thunder of spring” that beckoned them into the mountains has fulfilled its promise.

However, although the rain has come, the final transformation of the entire wasteland still needs to occur, as the Fisher King remains on the bank of the river. “I sat upon the shore,” he says, “fishing with the arid plain behind me” (423-424). Since the wasteland is behind the Fisher King, he appears to have passed through, ready now to look ahead to a possible resurrection. The Fisher King knows that there is life after death and that a way can be found out of even the driest desert of the wasteland.

With his very next words, the Fisher King himself brings on the final cataclysm that ends *The Waste Land* and perhaps the cycle of fertility for good. “Shall I set my

lands in order?" he asks, wondering if he himself can set them aright. In some of the Grail legends, all that is needed for the healing of the land is a question, "for so soon as Sir Gawain asked of the Lance... the waters flowed again thro' their channel, and all the woods were turned to verdure" (Weston 13). "What the Thunder Said," is similar in effect – for what the thunder says will bring water and life with adherence to the principles of generosity, compassion, and self-control set out by its grave pronouncement of "DA DA DA" as well as with its lightning and rain. But in Eliot's telling, it is not only the meaning the thunder carries through Christ and the tale of the *Upanishad* that brings on the final breakdown of the fertility cycle, it is the impotent Fisher King himself taking responsibility for his dying kingdom, asking after his own duties rather than leaving the action to a foreign quester.

After the Fisher King asks his question, *The Waste Land* enters a frenzy of allusions, going through the pattern of fertility set out through the course of the entire poem in a space of a few lines. The speed with which *The Waste Land* itself is deconstructed under the eyes of the Fisher King portrays the thundering storm of transformation that must precede spiritual peace.

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascese nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih (*Waste Land* 426-433)

In quick succession, every part of the wasteland meets its end. The corrupted version of London is destroyed by the innocent cries of children, much like the children's voices singing to Parsifal "*dans la coupole!*" (202). Its inhabitants were the residents of Dante's *Inferno*, ensconced in a living Hell without their knowledge. Yet here, even Dante finds release from his troubles as Eliot quotes the last line of *Purgatorio*, anticipating the heavenly paradise to follow. Philomela has found her justice with the support of her sister, the swallow. Even the Prince of Aquitaine, like the Prince of Naples and the Fisher King, has found that "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" may save him and his broken kingdom. The world and "Hieronymo" are mad again, seeking justice for the wrongdoing that occurred in the nadir of every fertility cycle. But this is the last time such justice must be meted out, for nirvana for the entire world is coming. The ritual chanting of thunder's speech symbolizes the achievement of those three standards. "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata" together can lead only to the peace which passeth our understanding, the achievement of enlightenment that means the end of the reincarnation cycle – "Shantih shantih shantih. With these last words the striving and the living and the dying come to a peaceful end in *The Waste Land*. The quest is complete.

CONCLUSION

In *The Waste Land*, it seems that T.S. Eliot may have completed his own fertility ritual through his words, capable of inspiring a resurrection in both his own life and career as well as that of his readers. He finished his exodus from civilization to the wasteland to the realm of spirits beyond human knowledge, bringing the reader with him in his exploration of spiritual possibilities. Eliot's aim in *The Waste Land* was to

complete the fertility ritual to end all fertility rituals and so render continual cycles of spiritual renewal unnecessary. In finding the “peace which passeth understanding,” at the end of the poem, Eliot discovered what he considered the final goal of all religions. Yet partially represented in the poem as the all-knowing seer like Tiresias, and partially as the Fisher King, Eliot could not have achieved the object of his quest alone. It is in large part the women of *The Waste Land* who drive the search for fertility forward to its conclusion.

Eliot’s own writing process reflects the guiding hand of female influence. Jessie Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* is clearly key to Eliot’s final formulation of the poem’s parts. With her argument that the Grail legends came from fertility myths like those detailed by Sir James Frazer, Weston gives Eliot the “object correlative” that brings order to his various pieces of poetry (“Hamlet” 120). Imitating James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,” Eliot relies heavily on the conclusions drawn by Weston to support his argument that the spiritual enlightenment achieved with the discovery of the Grail is still possible even in the corrupted modern world. It seems likely that Eliot recognized the similarity between the work that Joyce had consciously done in crafting a tale so closely linked in theme and meaning to the earlier *Odyssey* myth and Weston’s argument about the Grail. She claims that the Grail legend was the product of much the same unconscious work – an ancient ritual surviving through the ages through constant revisions and modernizations, blending elements of yore and contemporary mores just as *The Waste Land* does.

If Jessie Weston is analogous to the mistress of the Grail castle, assisting the quester at the crucial point near the end, Vivienne Eliot was the temptress who determined the quest’s level of difficulty and thus its level of importance. She too was

instrumental to the formation of *The Waste Land*. Despite the fact that his marriage to Vivienne was disastrous for both of them in the end, Eliot acknowledged later in his life that Vivienne was probably the reason he became a poet of such renown. Had she not believed in him and his abilities in 1915, before there was any proof beyond “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” of his poetic prowess, she would not have married him (Gordon 117). Had she not married him, Eliot likely would have acquiesced to the wishes of his family, who wanted him to return to Harvard to become a professor and leave literary London and its stimulation behind (119). Through his marriage, Eliot found the courage to defy his parents and return to England and poetry rather than Harvard and philosophy. He could hardly abandon his new bride (although later he did just that) and felt he had gained a foothold in English society. Vivienne inextricably bound Eliot to England, for better and for worse. While Eliot’s multitude of allusions served to make his poem a universal experience, they also masked the intensely personal nature of the poem. As their relationship deteriorated, the frustrations their marriage caused led Eliot into the mental state from which he produced *The Waste Land*. Despite the infertility of their marriage in the traditional sense, Eliot’s relationship with Vivienne led to great creative richness.

The women in *The Waste Land* itself reflect the agency of the principal religious women influencing Eliot: The Virgin Mary and Dante’s Beatrice. Dante’s Beatrice showed him the way through paradise in much the same way the women of the poem guide questers on their journey. Meanwhile, Mary, Mother of God is responsible for the birth of the Christ. In some sects of Christianity, notably Catholicism, her importance is equal to Christ’s because without her, he would not exist. The same could be said of the

men in *The Waste Land*, whose transformations are brought on by the actions of their female counterparts.

For every section of the poem other than “Death by Water,” the experiences of the women in that section define its meaning. Madame Sosostris and the hyacinth girl set up the framework of the fertility ritual in “The Burial of the Dead.” The failed marriages of Belladonna and Lil show the artificiality that weighs down society in “A Game of Chess.” The songs of the typist, Philomela, the Rhine maidens and more reveal the truth of “The Fire Sermon” of Buddha: a lack of love is a lack of fertility. Even Phlebas in “Death by Water” is transformed into a genderless being, both male and female. Finally, in “What the Thunder Said,” the goddess Ganga is ultimately the one who can break the cycle of reincarnation and provide eternal peace to the quester. When Eliot says that “all the women are one woman,” he speaks the truth – because each woman is a catalyst for *The Waste Land* (“Notes” 23).

Women are the principal drivers of *The Waste Land*'s narrative because they are the ones who can best demonstrate the horror of lost fertility. Without love, women are forced into reduced versions of themselves, degraded into Belladonna and Lil, grasping at any scrap of affection or care they can get. Sex becomes meaningless, and along with it women like the typist lose the importance of their humanity. The Sybil shows the consequences of a dearth of spiritual experience. But while women are the most affected by the loss of fertility, figures like the hyacinth girl and Ganga show that they also have the ability to inspire the resurrection of love and hope for themselves and everyone else, even in the midst of *The Waste Land*.

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