

# INTARSIA

UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF QUEER & FEMINIST INQUIRY

## Heavenly Whores: Exalting the Abject in Genet's *The Screens* By Bobby Yalam

In her introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir critiques the vocabulary of her contemporary feminists, writing “these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded in order to start anew.”<sup>1</sup> Jean Genet initiates the process of starting “anew” in *The Screens* by demolishing the hierarchies which undergird patriarchal, colonial systems. Through a character study of Warda, I explore how Genet intimately tethers the so-called inferior—the dirty or abject, embodied by whores—to the supposedly superior—the heavenly or divine, embodied by macabre images. Specifically, I argue that via a rhetorical alliance between prostitution and death, Genet compels his audiences to exalt the abject, revolutionizing what they can value as sacred against patriarchal constraints.

Genet finished his play *The Screens* (*Les Paravents*, in the original French) in 1961, after a long writing process that began in 1955.<sup>2</sup> Theater and performance scholar Carl Lavery highlights that this “long gestation period of *The Screens* was roughly coterminous with the duration of the Algerian War,” and cites David Bradby (1997), who identified *The Screens* as “the only French play of the time to deal with the

Algerian War.”<sup>3</sup> Lavery attests that Genet’s mid-20th century plays, including *The Screens*, “were intended to remind French spectators that a new world was on the verge of coming into being, a world where France was no longer central.”<sup>4</sup> This historical, political context clarifies the urgency behind reading how abjection functions in the play: given Genet’s perception of “a new world ... coming into being,” a process in which often violent events of decolonization like the Algerian War upended geopolitical hierarchies that placed imperial powers like France at their apex, his reconception of the supposedly abject is fundamental to his vision of what that new world might look like once it has come to be. Genet speaks to this aspect of his play in a letter to Roger Blin, who directed its 1966 production: “I should like [*The Screens*] to be so strong and so dense that it will, by its implications and ramifications, illuminate the world of the dead.”<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I parse out some of these “implications and ramifications” through close reading, namely those arising from Genet centering “the world of the dead” in a portrait of the world being reborn amidst decolonization.

My close readings make explicit an implicit connection between death and abjection.

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Lavery, *The Politics of Jean Genet's Late Theatre: Spaces of Revolution* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Lavery, 64–66.

<sup>4</sup> Lavery, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Lavery, 83.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the latter as: “The state or condition of being cast down or brought low; humiliation, degradation; dispiritedness, despondency.” The language of lowness invokes the burial of dead bodies; “dispiritedness” can even be defined as the state of being “destitute of animation,” i.e. destitute of life. I am far from the first to analyze abjection as it functions in Genet’s work. Rather, I follow this theoretical thread, already advanced by critics like Lavery and Hamdi Hémaïdi, in a new direction via my character study of Warda.

Genet styles Warda in a fashion that destabilizes his audience’s preconceptions of the socially abject even before the first lines she delivers in the play. In his stage directions, Genet specifies that Warda wears a “*dress of very heavy gold lamé, high-heeled red shoes, her hair coiled up in a huge blood-red chignon.*”<sup>6</sup> Strikingly incongruous with prostitution, a role premised on easy access to the body, is wearing a “very heavy” dress. While Warda’s “high-heeled red shoes” evoke the overt sensuality of her role as a whore, her hair nuances this sensual dimension. The chignon is not just red, but specifically “blood-red,” an early instantiation of the theme of death that is privileged only to audiences of the play in its written form. Through these two exaggerated style decisions—a morbidly sensual color specification and Warda’s weighty dress—Genet offers his image of a whore, contrasting her opulent stylization with her profession, which positions her on the margins of her society.

Warda’s dress weighs heavily not just on her body, but also on her subjectivity as an individual. Speaking with three clients, Warda attests: “Here what do you fuck? Us. The beauties weighted with leaded petticoats ... It’s because we carry the treasures of the vines and mines under our skirts.”<sup>7</sup> Within her skirt, pressed against her body, are “the treasures of the vines and mines.” In this rhyming phrase, Warda captures the entire world of her clients as manual laborers, above ground in vineyards and below ground in mines. In suggesting she contains the totality of the clients’ working world under her gilden attire, Warda assumes a divine power, akin to that of Atlas bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. Warda bears that weight under her skirt, close to her pelvis, which these clients gain the privilege of accessing only through her choice to prostitute herself, a typically abject act. As a result, Warda contests the marginalization tied to prostitution. Though she receives the sex acts of these clients, Warda defends her subjectivity—she is not fucked because she is objectified, but because she allures clients with the world that she carries under her clothing. This clarification opens space for the relatively more modern idea of prostitution as sex work in reading Genet’s play. Warda’s role in attracting clients affirms her agency in choosing sex as labor, rather than passively falling into this way of life.

The introduction of death in this conversation between Warda and her clients complicates the quasi-divinity that she adopts. When the client

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Genet, *The Screens*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Genet, 20.

Mustapha begins to say, “the more you clothe, the more you plaster yourself ...,” Warda interjects: “Underneath, there’s not much left.” What is left is death: “It’s there. Quietly at work.”<sup>8</sup> Death adopts a sensual subjectivity parallel to that Warda holds as a sex worker, in the image of it actively “at work” under her skirt. Reading this moment in tandem with the previous excerpt reveals an equivalence Genet establishes between “death” and “the treasures of the vines and mines,” both of which Warda suggests she carries under her skirts. This equivalence collapses the world of the dead onto the world of the living, for how could she carry those “treasures” under her skirt, while paradoxically asserting that all there is left underneath is death, unless death constituted the very fabric of those “treasures”? By suggesting that death works upon, within, or alongside these “treasures” of the real world underneath her dress, Warda destabilizes the abject connotation of being a whore, linking it to the incomprehensible strength of carrying the worlds of life and death just underneath her skirt, close to her body, the body of a whore.

When Warda returns in scene fourteen, her golden clothing has become only more integral to her practice of prostitution. Warda animates her attire via direct address in remarking: “Poor golden petticoats! I’d always hoped that one day, instead of being an adornment, you’d be, by yourselves, the whore in all her glory.”<sup>9</sup> While initially a marker of opulence in its weight and color, the golden fabric now signals some

insufficiency, indicated by her oxymoronic “poor golden” descriptor and her reduction of the dress to “an adornment.” Here, Warda begins transcending the world of appearances by shifting between multiple pronouns which all identify the dress’s subjectivity. She addresses the petticoats first as “yourselves” before imagining a future in which they together form a notably singular, female entity identified in the phrase “all her glory.” Warda dreams of a more perfect “glory” for herself not yet actualized, embodied in her golden attire.

Within Warda’s dream of glory lies a dream of death, in which her attire persists in figuring prominently. She imagines her own annihilation when she utters to herself: “I, Warda, who was to fade away and leave in my place only a perfect whore, a simple skeleton draped in gilded gowns, here am I becoming Warda again at top speed.”<sup>10</sup> Whereas before she wished for her clothing to transcend their materiality and embody “the whore in all her glory,” Warda now alludes to some path she feels herself to be on, in which she would transcend her bodily materiality in a similar fashion to the transformation she previously imagined for her dress. For Warda, transcendence takes the form of decay: she affirms a destiny to “fade away” and become “a simple skeleton draped in gilded gowns.” Genet’s existentialism comes to the fore as Warda shifts from the bad-faith idea of destiny, represented by this macabre skeletal image, toward a commitment to the process of “becoming Warda.”<sup>11</sup> She does not indicate that

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<sup>8</sup> Genet, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Genet, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Genet, 131.

<sup>11</sup> I produced this essay having read *The Screens* in the context of an undergraduate course on French existentialism. Reading the play alongside de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon, its existentialist elements came to the

her goal of attaining perfection as a prostitute has changed; merely her role in that process has expanded. Rather than passively “fading away,” Warda will engage actively in constituting herself as an exalted, flawless whore who is not constrained to the world as it has only ever appeared to her.

As Warda initiates her transcendence through death, her material surroundings unravel, allowing the world of the dead to incrementally encroach upon that of the living. Before the above excerpt, she remarks to Malika: “You feel it too—that the air and the space and the time now circulating about us are like any other. The brothel’s no longer the brothel and, so to speak, we’re fucking in the open.”<sup>12</sup> Death enters covertly in Warda’s reference to an abstract final judgment, in which death leaves the entire world bare and the whores’ bodies are made vulnerable, or “in the open.” Warda has only just become aware of the vulnerability she has always experienced, as she becomes able to see beyond the veneer of the material world.

Whereas before Warda could bear the weight of both the living and the dead under her attire at the same time, once she recognizes the lack of separation between the two worlds Warda cannot bear the weight. The stage direction reads: “*uttering a long wail, she starts tearing her dress.*”<sup>13</sup> In unraveling the fabric of her opulent attire, Warda pantomimes the

unraveling of space and time she perceives. As she tears it asunder, her dress manifests her attempt to transcend materiality and “become Warda again at top speed.” The adverb “again” highlights the ironic, perhaps even dissatisfying, circularity to Warda’s process of transcending, throughout which she insists on remaining a whore. Later in the scene she affirms to Malika: “what I wanted to be was a whore, even in death.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, her goal in transcending her being as a whore is to nevertheless remain a whore. The emphasis on the subject “I” clarifies that though Warda’s goal has always been to be a whore, she now takes on an active role in becoming a more perfect, and namely less material, one.

By positioning herself in a quasi-purgatory between life and death, Warda subjects herself to a necessarily fraught condition. Her distraught reflections at the end of the scene make this clear, as she screams to a client, “round about me, with my hands, I built the whorehouse. Stone by stone, you’re demolishing it in order to get at my heart,” and later, “No! No! Not me! I’ll never float, never will I be beaten by the wind!”<sup>15</sup> As she destroys her dress, no longer can Warda ground her identity as a whore in the materiality of “the whorehouse.” She suggests the client is responsible for her vulnerability, tearing down the walls which protect her firmly in the realm of the socially abject. In her desperate claim that

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fore, especially in terms of the essential being of the colonist against the negative being of the colonized, as in the Algerian context to which the play responds. While *Britannica* suggests Genet’s autobiographical novel *The Thief’s Journal* makes his existentialism apparent, this characterization necessarily fails to capture the breadth

of Genet’s thinking, which includes absurdism, aestheticism, and more.

<sup>12</sup> Genet, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Genet, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Genet, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Genet, 140–142.

she will “never float,” Warda recalls her declaration earlier in the play: “I have to be heavy.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas her heavy attire once grounded her in the material world, the reality of transcendence is a lightness that induces fear due to its unknowability. Although she tries to blame her clients, Warda has enacted her own transcendence: the sex worker has become a death worker as well, producing her own death, so she must shoulder the vulnerability that torments her.

Though Warda has already begun transcending the world of the living, in scene sixteen her literal death figures prominently. Her body first appears unidentified in a stage direction that reads “*six women ... are sitting about the corpse of a woman and knitting in silence.*”<sup>17</sup> This staging recalls a prayer circle, the women postured as if meditating on the corpse’s former life, if not even mourning its loss. Looking upon this gathering from the world of the dead—literally “superior” in its position on the stage—the Mother describes the scene: “they’ll leave blood with their knitting needles ... Yet the spectacle’s worth a look: six knitters pounced on the lady who’d managed to become the most artful whore in the world.”<sup>18</sup> As an intervening figure, the Mother furthers the exaltation of the abject in her earnest description of Warda as an “artful whore.” She frames Warda’s death in positive terms as a “spectacle,” and specifically one “worth a look,” presenting the death of Warda’s body as the grand culmination of the

transcendence that Warda created for herself, a culmination that takes the form of a ritual carried out by six women who do not besmirch the body, but solemnly honor it. These six women perform work of their own, in knitting: this craft labor seems to revere Warda’s labor in bringing death upon herself.<sup>19</sup>

In death, Warda expands beyond her corpse to occupy the amorphous planes of space and time. Genet captures this expansiveness in two stage directions. First, he specifies, as Warda is about to join the other dead characters on stage: “*It is WARDA, as adorned by MALIKA and DJEMILA—or rather as they are going to adorn her.*”<sup>20</sup> He flattens the past, present, and future here, jumping from the present fact that the body emerging on stage is Warda, to the fact that she has already been “adorned,” before contradicting himself with the future tense—“are going to adorn her”—as he looks ahead to the act of adornment to be staged later in the play. Genet also complicates space in placing two Wardas onstage: “*The role of WARDA, below, will be played by a second actress.*”<sup>21</sup> In both directions, Genet furthers the irony that Warda, once transcended, still defines herself as a whore. Though her body was once integral to being a whore, she has internalized her identity as such, so that no longer she needs a literal body for any clients. Genet thus elevates prostitution from merely an abject profession to an abject profession that can be desired

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<sup>16</sup> Genet, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Genet, 158.

<sup>18</sup> Genet, 161.

<sup>19</sup> An expanded version of this character study could deploy the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques

Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1999) to understand Warda’s experience of working toward her own death.

<sup>20</sup> Genet, 162.

<sup>21</sup> Genet, 164.

eternally and exalted by those who live after the “perfect” whore dies.

Warda invokes the vocabulary of art that the Mother uses earlier in the play in order to reaffirm this exaltation of prostitution. Specifically, she declares “my death is of my own making. I brought my art to such a pitch of perfection.”<sup>22</sup> She posits death and prostitution as interconnected, claiming them both as an “art” that she practices. Recalling how earlier in the play she aspired to perfection, Warda attests here that she has achieved perfection in her two interconnected crafts: she has remained a whore in death, transcending her body to become flawless. Malika echoes Warda’s claim to being the artisan of her own death when, after adorning Warda’s corpse, she exclaims: “What happened was her own fault!”<sup>23</sup> Malika’s suggestion that Warda’s death passively “happened” contradicts her conclusion that her death was “her own fault.” As a semi-divine figure, Warda enacts her own final judgment, ultimately deciding she has attained perfection as a whore by transcending the material world.

Warda’s divine aura stabilizes after her death, ultimately constituting her legacy for Genet’s audiences and for the characters in the play who remain in the realm of the living. Chigha, one of the women involved in Warda’s murder, directs the following at her corpse: “You were there, in my room, and even under my bed and in my bed, on my bed, around the bed and in the closet.”<sup>24</sup> Chigha affirms that Warda’s transcendence of her body began before her

literal death, as she imbues her with an insidious presence that reached beyond her literal body even while she was alive. On Chigha’s account, Warda is omnipresent, haunting the women by staking a claim to their husbands, their bedrooms, and their psyches. Another knitter, Aicha, observes that “she’s dead and no one’ll come to condemn us. Who killed her? You? ... You? ... You? ... You? ... Me? ... Nobody.”<sup>25</sup> In claiming that the women will escape responsibility for Warda’s murder, Aicha implicitly recognizes Warda’s divine ability to transcend. Her conclusion that “nobody” killed Warda is apt in that just because these women killed Warda’s body does not mean they could disrupt her in the process of transcending the material world. Whatever their mortal motivations, perhaps jealousy or rage, they could not rival Warda’s divine agenda in her quest for perfection. In that sense, Warda’s literal death constitutes merely an inevitable consequence of her body’s inability to join her as she transcended materiality.

The lack of accountability for Warda’s murder confirms her transcendence of the material world. In framing Warda’s death as an expansive process that is not punctuated by a clear moment of passing, Genet subverts associations of violence with prostitution and with death. Instead, he nuances abjection, exalting the socially abject like whores by associating them with divinity and staging them in ways that reject the rules of materiality. Through this character study of Warda, I offer one point of entry into Genet’s project of

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<sup>22</sup> Genet, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Genet, 167.

<sup>24</sup> Genet, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Genet, 164.

reconceptualizing abjection in *The Screens*. In a longer version of this essay, I would study Warda's abjection alongside that of other characters, comparing Warda's feminine abjection to Saïd's masculine abjection, or comparing it with the multiple feminine abjections represented by the other whores, the Mother, and Leila. Studying Warda as one figure within a cast of abject characters would further demonstrate how Genet collapses colonial hierarchies by imbuing his abject characters with divine qualities which warrant exaltation.