1. Introduction

By depicting transgressive mothers in The Hours (1998), Michael Cunningham queers the concept of motherhood and simultaneously uncovers a similar theme in its hypotext, Mrs. Dalloway (1925). As a gay writer, Cunningham openly speaks against the hegemon-ic family structure based on monogamy and the notion of motherhood as a privilege and/or obligation of heterosexual women. Moreover, Cunningham’s treatment of mothers involves redefining his relationship with his literary precursor, Virginia Woolf. The intertextuality of literary works has often been discussed in terms of either the father-son relationship, as shown in Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence,” or the mother-daughter relationship, as dealt with by feminist scholars. On the other hand, Cunningham focuses on the mother-son relationship. The problematic mothers in Cunningham’s work represent a son’s desire to overcome the mother-fig-ure beyond the limitations of sexuality and sex.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Cunningham’s rewriting of Mrs. Dalloway as a gay writer’s challenge to the mainstream definition of motherhood as equivalent to the reproductivity of heterosexual women. The three mothers that appear in The Hours could be described as “queer” in that they all deviate from the “normal” motherhood. The paper will argue that Cunningham’s preoccupa- tion with and treatment of “queer” mothers chal- lenges the orthodox, homogenous notions of motherhood. Next, a similar theme of queering mothers in Woolf’s works including Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse (1927) will be discussed. Finally, the paper studies how this queer reading affects the intertextuality between The Hours and its hypotext.

2. Gay Writers, Queer Mothers

In his anthology of “eminent outlaws,” Christopher Bram outlines how gay writers and writings have long been rejected and repressed by the mainstream American literary traditions. In a long line of gay writers, Bram identifies Cunningham’s book at this lineage’s critical turning point. Not only is The Hours written “by an openly gay writer,” he writes, but it is about “major gay characters winning a bundle of mainstream awards” (294). The character Richard Brown, a gay poet, receives a literary award, as did Cunningham for writing the novel. The Hours, for all its homosexual references (in fact, all the characters have in one way or another an “ambivalent sexuality,” being homo- or bisexual), won the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and other prominent awards, which seemed to Bram “un-thinkable ten years earlier” (294). Bram highlights what Cunningham has managed to prove before the whole world: the (re)productivity of gay writers.

At the same time, what Bram points out regarding the sex of the protagonists is not to be overlooked. The huge success of The Hours may largely have been attributed to “the fact that the three protagonists were all female” (294). The implication is that when it comes to the problem of motherhood, sexual cross-bordering is more of a taboo than gender transgression. In other words, female mothers with parenting issues are more likely to be accepted than male mothers. This does not, however, im-pair what Cunningham has set out to accomplish: chal-lenging the heteronormative notions of motherhood, in-cluding the assumption that “ideal” motherhood occurs only within a heterosexual coupling. Furthermore, his all-female protagonists inevitably draw readers’ attention to male homosexuals, who do not fit into the framework of reproductivity and motherhood.

Consequently, when Cunningham referred to his work as “my baby” (“My Novel”), his choice of words seems
to carry more than a simple metaphor, given that Cunningham was by then widely acknowledged as a gay writer. In particular, it assumes a new resonance when we discover the theme of motherhood at the book’s center. *The Hours* is about three women who each struggle with their maternal identity. By calling his work “my baby,” Cunningham seems to be echoing Virginia Woolf’s attitude toward her own books, but he could also be suggesting that a gay man could (re)produce, hence become a mother.

The term “queer” used in this paper is synonymous with being “deviant from the norm,” but significantly, it also means “to deliberately deviate from the norm to question its validity.” Shelley M. Park likewise deals with queer mothers in order to challenge the prevailing notions of motherhood. According to Park, motherhood continues to be ideologically defined by biological essentialism and monomaternalism. Meanwhile, if mothers that appear in Cunningham’s work fit the description of being “queer,” it is as much for their deviation from “normal” motherhood as their desire to become mothers. For all the differences between time periods, cities, and other backgrounds, what connects Cunningham’s three heroines is their almost paranoid obsession with becoming mothers. Their desire stems from a shared belief that motherhood is and should be the ultimate goal for all women to achieve in their lives.

Cunningham introduces Virginia Woolf as one of the three heroines. Meaningfully, he refers to Woolf as a woman “of ambivalent sexuality” (*Woolf*), and her writing career as “a twenty-five-year roll of troubled fertility” (intro. xiii, emphasis added). As a writer, Woolf was extremely prolific. She wrote nine novels and multitudinous volumes of short stories and essays in her life. However, her mental illness prevented the Woolfs from having a child, and her biographies, as well as her personal writings, tell us that she anguished over her childlessness until her dying day. As if to compensate for this lack, she would often compare her writing to childbirth, and refer to her books as her babies. Using such biographical information about this English writer, Cunningham effectively draws out the cruelty of the biological maternalism that causes so many childless women to experience agony. By definition, only those who have borne a child are entitled to “natural” maternity. How else, then, should we refer to women who reproduced outside heterosexual relationships and biological pregnancy but as “queer”?

Another main character in Cunningham’s tripartite book is Laura Brown. She appears as a typical housewife living a secluded domestic life in the suburbs of Los Angeles in the late 1940s. She has a child and is expecting another, and yet she suffers from the obligations and responsibilities enforced by her maternal body. Cunningham here outlines suffering as a result of compulsory motherhood, which dictates the essentialist belief that a mother who has given birth will naturally love and voluntarily take care of her child. However, in the end, Laura abandons her children. Lastly, Clarissa Vaughan, who works as an editor in New York City at the end of the twentieth century, is a mother of a teenager. Despite her cheerful exterior, Clarissa is inwardly uncertain of her maternal identity. For one thing, she is not sure if she made the right choice in having a daughter through artificial insemination. She feels that Julia, her daughter, hates her for not giving her a “real” father, his being, after all, “no more than a numbered vial” from a sperm bank (157).

Brenda R. Silver’s study elaborates on how the image of “Virginia Woolf,” though not necessarily the real person, has become an icon that has continued to evoke the fear of reproduction. During the 1960s the rise of strong women as a result of second-wave feminism and the production of Edward Albee’s play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) triggered public anxiety over the emasculation of women and the feminization of male homosexuals. Two childless couples appeared in Albee’s play; for

---

2 Park argues that “[m] onomaternalism, as an ideological doctrine, resides at the intersection of patriarchy (with its insistence that women bear responsibility for biological and social reproduction), heteronormativity (with its insistence that a woman must pair with a man, rather than other women, in order to raise children successfully), capitalism (in its conception of children as private property) and Eurocentrism (in its erosion of polynaternalism in other cultures and historical periods)” (7).

5 Comparing herself with Vanessa Bell, her sister, Woolf would equate her work with Vanessa’s children: “as you have the children, & the fame by rights belongs to me” (*L.iii.270-1*); “So I have something, instead of children” (*D.iii.217*).

4 The pages in parentheses are from Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (London: Harper, 2006), unless otherwise indicated.
one couple, the wife was using birth control without her husband's knowledge, with the other, the wife was sterile. Whether they were trying to take control of reproduction or were incapable of it, childless women were equated with male homosexuals, and were regarded as queer and “monstrous” (Silver 113). Consequently, it is not without reason that the 50s, years of repression awaiting the outbreak of second-wave feminism, is chosen as the background for Laura’s flight from domesticity in The Hours. Nor is it a coincidence that Clarissa Vaughan’s apartment is set in Greenwich Village, where the famous gay rights movement started in 1969. The “Virginia Woolf” icon as a symbol of “unnatural” reproduction and queerness is thus reconstructed in Cunningham’s text.

3. Queering the Hegemonic Definition of Motherhood

There seems to be a widely acknowledged consent among gay critics that Cunningham’s works are “assimilative” or “gay,” in opposition to “transgressive” or “queer.” One of the most common attacks against assimilative writers is that they are trying too hard to appeal and conform to mainstream ideology, and ultimately uphold heterosexual norms. Subsequently, Cunningham’s gay characters are often criticized as mimicking the family structure of heteronormative monogamy, trying desperately to blend in. However, Cunningham’s preoccupation with the theme of family, and especially of mothers turns out to be far from assimilative. On the contrary, he effectively depicts transgressive mothers in order to queer the hegemonic concept of motherhood.

Like its author, the three women in The Hours are haunted by the ghost of motherhood as much as they are “haunted by madness and suicide” (Bram 294). In fact, we could even deduce that the compulsory notion of “ideal” motherhood is what drove the characters to madness and suicide, if not the only reason. While Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, and Clarissa Vaughan show the desire to become mothers, they are simultaneously trying to escape the shadows forecast by their own mothers. Similarly, Cunningham must first deal with his precursor in order to (re)produce a work of his own.

In effect, the theme of a daughter’s, and we should perhaps include a son’s, need to “kill” the ghost of their mother was earlier taken up by Virginia Woolf. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf confesses to having murdered her mother, who was the typical Angel in the House. The Angel in the House, the ideological embodiment of a Victorian ideal woman, was fated to lead a life of growing from an obedient daughter into a chaste wife, and then into the mother of a future generation to support the Empire. She was indeed the “cultural icon of the Madonna,” as Ellen Rosenman observes (97). The “phantom” of the Angel would sneak up behind the daughter and try to nip any chance of or hope for finding a profession outside the domestic realm. “It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her,” Woolf writes (CE.i.285). Brought up in a typical Victorian setting, Virginia Stephen had to confront the Angel before she could pursue a career as a writer. Significantly, Cunningham suggests that Woolf’s ambivalent feeling toward her own mother “may have informed the invention of Clarissa Dalloway” (Intro. xvi).

The mother-child relationship depicted in Cunningham’s novel turns out to be as complicated and difficult as that told by Woolf’s biography of hers with her own mother. Of the three heroines, Laura Brown seems to be the most troubled. This is ironic, since technically she is the only “natural” or biological mother in the book. On the surface, Laura appears to be at the peak of domestic happiness. She has a loving and caring husband and a

---

5 The first birth control pill was approved in May 1960, and more and more women were taking control of their reproduction. Albee’s play deals with men’s growing fear of strong women in connection with the power of reproduction. For further discussion of Albee’s play and a fear of strong women, see Silver 102-16.

6 The police raided the Stonewall Inn, a famous gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York on 27 June 1969. The so-called Stonewall riots came to be known as “a landmark in the history of gay rights” (Young 15).

7 Reed Woodhouse classifies Cunningham under the category of “assimilative” gay writers. One of the characteristics common to conformist gay writers is that their book is “not intended to be a ‘gay’ book” (182), but their characters “just happened to be gay” (3). Woodhouse criticizes assimilative writer’s obsession with the themes of families and raising children to be “evasive or even homophobic” (183).
son who adores her. All she has to do is return the attention that Dan and Richie pay her, but this she cannot bring herself to do. Instead of going to breakfast with them, she chooses to stay in bed reading Mrs. Dalloway. Even when she does go to meet her family, she needs a push "as if she were to dive into cold water," and she must keep telling herself, "She does not dislike her child, does not dislike her husband. She will rise and be cheerful" (41). For her, acting the roles of wife and mother provokes in her "a dreamlike feeling, as if she is standing in the wings, about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, and for which she has not adequately rehearsed" (43).

Like Virginia Woolf and Clarissa Vaughan, Laura is convinced or at least she is unconsciously led to think, that something is "wrong with her" (43; emphasis added). She does not doubt that a mother who does not know how to love her own child is obviously a sign of wickedness, a mark of a "bad" mother, and she suffers from this realization. Hence, Laura's fixation on making the "perfect" cake can be understood as a gesture of atonement for not being the "perfect" mother for Richie. For all her anxieties over her maternal identity, there seems to be nothing that Laura would desire more than to become "a competent mother" (101). Ironically, however, to want is synonymous to not having. The perfect cake, as well as perfect motherhood, is something Laura will never achieve; "[h]er cake is a failure" (100).

Cunningham treats the queer mothers with deep understanding and sympathy. His generous and sympathetic treatment of "bad" mothers may be attributable to the fact that he himself has experienced the denial of maternity. Being a man and gay has become an obstacle to his acquiring a maternal identity. By depicting Laura's suffering and her subsequent suicide attempts, Cunningham effectively questions if becoming a mother is and should necessarily be what every woman should wish for. He simultaneously challenges the assumption that a biological mother would make the "ideal" mother, and that a heterosexual woman is a better mother than a homo-

sexual woman or, moreover, a man. 10

Significantly, young Richie is repeatedly depicted as a "watcher." He is always closely observing his mother, and yet it is hinted that he is not necessarily a reliable observer as the following passage shows:

Her son watches her [Laura] adoringly, expectantly. She is the animating principle, the life of the house. Its rooms are sometimes larger than they should be; they sometimes, suddenly, contain things he's never seen before. He watches her, and waits. (47; emphasis added)

Richie's gaze is as hungry as his need to be loved. Consequently, he sometimes sees things that are not their actual size, or things that are not really there. Laura feels pressured by her son, who "wants what he wants so avidly." She feels completely at a loss because she is without a "mother-self to guide [her] in negotiating the days spent alone with a child... Alone with the child... she loses direction. She can't always remember how a mother would act" (47; italics original). It has been taken for granted that a mother would act toward her child in a "motherly" way, and yet, there is actually no definition of the nature of the "motherly" way. In this way, Cunningham uses both Richie's unsatisfied desire and Laura's loss of direction to reconstruct the myth that surrounds motherhood. Young Richard is expecting what he knows not, while Laura is missing what she knows not.

4. Reexamining the Mother-(in)-Text

We have seen that Cunningham's text is literally occupied with the presence/absence of mothers. What is more, his book queers the motherhood in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway as well. In that sense, Tory Young is certainly right to point out that readers can no longer expect to read Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway in the same way as they had before reading The Hours. Readers who have read The Hours cannot "replace Mrs. Dalloway outside its sphere of influence." As Young puts it, The Hours now "haunts"

9 As for his own relationship with his mother, Cunningham has kept silent; however, he admits that Laura Brown was partly modeled on her. See Schiff, Interview 114-15. Also, for Cunningham's biographical background, see Young 11-32.

10 A similar theme appeared in Cunningham's earlier works, such as A Home at the End of the World (1990) and Flesh and Blood (1995), where a gay protagonist and a drag queen are led to take on maternal roles and act as "mothers."
Mrs. Dalloway instead of vice versa (44).  
Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway begins with the protagonist remembering her youth while preparing for an evening party. Her memory predominantly consists of her friends, Sally Seton, Peter Walsh, and Hugh Whitbread. She also recalls her father and her ridiculous aunt, but there is no mention of her mother, nor is there any explanation for her absence. The mention of her mother by one of her guests is received by Clarissa with surprise, even shock, such that it brings tears to her eyes (MD 193). In addition, Clarissa is described as quite the opposite image of what would "normally" be associated with a mother figure. Her body is described as empty and barren like the attic bedroom where she now sleeps by herself: "clean, tight" and "narrow" (MD 33, 34). Furthermore, she is haunted by "the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now" (MD 11). She feels "suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless," and "like a nun" (MD 33). "It was all over for her," Clarissa thinks, feeling her body left "blackberrying in the sun" (MD 51). Elaine Showalter identifies the source of Clarissa's depression as a symptom of menopause, whereby Clarissa's "empty" body represents her lack of sexuality and subsequently her inability to reproduce. Consequently, throwing parties could be Clarissa's alternate manner of mothering, just as making a cake was for Laura. Clarissa's possessive attitude toward her daughter, which is observed by Peter Walsh when she introduces her daughter as "My Elizabeth," only underlines her anxiety over her maternal identity (MD 61; emphasis added).

In Mrs. Dalloway, the wish of Septimus Warren Smith's Italian wife to have a baby is as desperate as Kitty's in The Hours. In both cases, the neighbors begin to wonder. "[S]he must have children. They have been married five years," Rezia pleads to her husband, for whom, however, love between man and woman appears "repulsive" and copulation a matter of "filth" (MD 97). Still, Rezia implores him that "she must have a boy" (MD 97). And that, "She could not grow old and have no children! She was very lonely, she was very unhappy!" (MD 99; italics original). What torments Rezia is the compulsory notion that "A married woman will have a child. If she doesn't, whatever is the matter with her?"

If Woolf dealt with the absence of an "ideal" mother in Mrs. Dalloway, her next novel, To the Lighthouse, was about rejecting and escaping from a mother. Mrs. Ramsay appears as a formidable and impeccable mother, who reigns over her eight children. Interestingly, as much as the story is about the domination of a mother, it is also about the death of a mother, for Mrs. Ramsay dies in the middle of the book. The significant point is that only then, in the wake of the mother's disappearance, can Lily Briscoe, a painter and author-surrogate, finally complete her artwork.

In the final pages, Lily draws a line across the empty space of her canvas. The "meaning" of this gesture has been much disputed, but one interpretation, offered by Gayatri Spivak, seems particularly compelling. Spivak discusses the line as a "deliberate erasure" of the empty space, bringing forth a successful copulation between the subject of the painting (Mrs. Ramsay) and the predicate (the painting itself) (325). Meanwhile, Lily's gesture of "erasing" the empty space could also represent the erasure of the mother from the text. After all, Mrs. Ramsay, who vanished without warning in the middle of the book, stood at "a center of complete emptiness" (TL 241). As the Angel of the House and the Great Mother, she represented the invisible but domineering ideology that upheld patriarchy based on heterosexual monogamy, and it was she who queered those daughters who refused to follow in her footsteps. What caused great anguish to Virginia Woolf and Lily Briscoe was the awareness of their own failures at becoming Angels like Mrs. Ramsay. If Woolf suffered from a sense of "failure" (D.iii.110) at her own childlessness, Lily was also acutely conscious of "her own inadequacy, her insignificance" (TL 28). Not being an Angel tormented them as a kind of mortal defect: "to want and want and not to have" (TL 272).

Hence, Lily's gesture of drawing a central line at the end of the novel could be interpreted as a gesture of matricide and what the mother represented. By erasing the central space where the Angel presided, the artist-surro-

11 David Cowart, in The Literary Symbiosis, discusses a tendency often seen among postmodern rewritings/retellings where a hypertext no longer holds authority over the hypertext.
gate can finally achieve her "vision" (*TL* 281). Moreover, her gesture could also be understood as filling the empty space as well as erasing it. The new occupant, however, would not necessarily be the mother, but the artist herself. Either way, this is a symbolic moment in which the young artist can finally be rid of the mother’s influence. After finishing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote in a letter that she could "at last . . . write easily" (*L.iii.386*); she "ceased to be obsessed by mother. [She] no longer hear[s] her voice; [she] do[es] not see her" (*MB* 81).

5. **Reconstructing Mothers Queerly**

Apparently, writing about her mother, or to be more exact, expressing her ambivalent feelings toward her mother enabled Woolf to confront with "the simultaneously Great and Terrible Mother" (*Lilienfeld* 355). In the same way, writing *The Hours* enabled Cunningham to simultaneously pay homage to and reject Virginia Woolf as his literary mother. Needless to say, Cunningham’s desire to be one with the mother cannot be attributed to the Oedipus complex. The Freudian analysis presupposes the son’s heterosexual desire toward the mother. Instead, it is Cunningham’s desire as a homosexual man that drives him to subvert heteronormative motherhood. To be sure, Cunningham appears obsessed with the idea of mothers. However, his intention lies not in expressing admiration for the motherhood as it is but in treating it as a text, so that he might undo it to create a new one. Consequently, the problematic mothers in *The Hours* are extremely subversive. Cunningham challenges the authority of *Mrs. Dalloway* by queering the concept of motherhood.

In an interview, Cunningham admits writing *The Hours* as a "riff" on *Mrs. Dalloway*: "I think it’s more like the way a jazz musician might do a riff on an older established piece of music" (*Wroc*). As the word "riff" suggests, Cunningham reiterates Woolf’s story but with such freedom and improvisation that the retold story has turned "into something else." Hence, we may well say that he resurrected Virginia Woolf only to refuse her. His ambition is already indicated in the title. By choosing *The Hours*, which was the working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*, he reverses the sequence of Woolf coming before him, of *Mrs. Dalloway* being written before his work. Ultimately, he seems to be rejecting the very idea of origin. Recreating Virginia Woolf as one of his characters must have helped him through this process. However much the details are based on biographical "facts," the Mrs. Woolf that appears in *The Hours* is the production of Cunningham’s ingenuity. Therefore, although Hermione Lee, in her review of *The Hours*, questions the validity of the biographical "facts" it uses, uncovering the source is not the issue here ("Mrs Brown’s Secret"). "I was never writing about Virginia Woolf," Cunningham answers to an interview, "Mine is a fictional character . . . She is somebody I invented named Virginia Woolf. It is not the real person" (*Schiff* 116). *The Hours* is a postmodern pastiche in the sense that, as Monica Girard puts it, "[t]he pastiche lays bare the mechanisms of the original text, but it is also creative; it is paradoxically both deconstructive and constructive" (59).

In *The Hours*, Richard Brown receives an award for a book, in which he writes about his mother, but Clarissa is aware that it is merely "Richard’s fantasy about some woman who vaguely resembles me" (129, emphasis added). Taking care of him when other friends have deserted him, Clarissa appears more as a mother than his ex-girlfriend. In the final chapter, Clarissa, who has acted as a sort of surrogate mother for Richard, comes face to face with Laura, his biological mother. Following a moment of tension and hesitation, Clarissa comes to feel that both Laura and herself, who have been "mothers" for Richard, are finally freed from "the ghost and goddess in a small body of private myths” (221). The Great Mother that Richard has long worshipped, and who only existed in his fantasy, can finally be put to rest. Clarissa feels that "the end of Richard’s earthly life" is "the beginning of the end of his poetry" and hence, the end of a myth of motherhood: "Clarissa, the figure in a novel, will vanish, as will Laura Brown, the lost mother, the martyr and fiend" (225). The book closes in such a way that it promises a new beginning: "Here she is with another hour before her" (226). This must surely represent the beginning of a "new" motherhood.

6. **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how Michael Cunningham, with the ambitious goal of questioning the orthodox notion of motherhood, depicts queer mothers. His treatment of queer mothers in *The Hours* effectively under-
mines the narrowly defined and discriminating discourse of motherhood. He deals with the sufferings of both men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, who deviate from the heteronormative and compulsory motherhood. Cunningham’s preoccupation with the theme of motherhood also affects his relationship with Virginia Woolf, his literary precursor and genesis. While he openly admits that The Hours was written in homage to the prominent British novelist, he at once subverts her authority by queering her work, Mrs. Dalloway. This paper concludes that Cunningham “kills” the mother-writer in order to create a work of his own. Cunningham challenges the traditional discourses of motherhood that have long confined it to the reproductivity of heterosexual women. Finally, he tries to venture beyond his own reproductive limitations as a gay writer and become a mother in his own right.

*This is a revised and expanded version of the paper read at the Conference of Kansai English Literary Society of Japan, held at Kyoto University on 22 December 2012.

Works Cited
