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“I Prefer Hiding in Plain Sight”:  
The Overlooked Queerness of Taylor  
Swift’s *Midnights*

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## Abstract

Taylor Swift is one of today's most beloved songwriters, however, all aspects of her work are not recognised. Swift frequently references queerness, yet this is often overlooked. Previous scholarship focused on Swift and queerness has either centred around Swift's support for LGBTQ+ causes or the subgroup of Swift's fans who acknowledges and embraces her expressed queerness, but textual analysis of her work in relation to queerness has been insufficient. This paper examines the traces of queerness on Swift's *Midnights* (2022) album and questions why these go overlooked. It is argued that Swift writes about queerness in multiple ways; she references queer history, she implies sapphism and she employs queer themes. However, Swift does so ambiguously, which in combination with heteronormative and autobiographical perspectives often being applied to readings of her work, result in her expressed queerness to be overlooked and overshadowed by heteronormative ideas.

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# 1. Introduction

Despite Taylor Swift being one of today's biggest pop stars and a highly praised lyricist, certain aspects of her work still go largely unnoticed; Swift's work features many references to queer culture, history and experiences, yet these are rarely talked about. On Swift's 2022 album *Midnights*, there are for instance references to historically queer flowers, notions of dealing with homophobia and implications of female addressees, but the queerness of these lyrics is often not recognised. Public perception of Swift likely plays part in this, as Swift's work is often read autobiographically based on the heteronormative assumption that Swift is heterosexual. In presenting a queer reading of Swift's *Midnights*, this essay aims to challenge heteronormative readings of Swift's work.

Heteronormative readings of Swift are done by fans and researchers alike. It has for instance been noted that there is a "devotion" among the public to the narrative of Swift as a heterosexual woman and that her work is often discussed with "sexist undertones" (Marks). In Eric Smialek's article "Who Needs To Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism", he discusses whether Swift's support for the LGBTQ+ community qualifies as queerbaiting – but does not consider that Swift might actually be queer herself. Brian Donovan provides a positive outlook on queer readings of Swift's work, but dismisses the possible queerness of Swift in listing instances where it can be interpreted that Swift is heterosexual as the closest Swift has come to stating her sexuality (119). While Swift's sexual identity is not of relevance for this essay, Smialek and Donovan's arguments show the heteronormative perspective that is often applied to both Swift's work and persona. Yvonne Eadon states that "Of course, *Midnights* was not a coming out album" (11), dismissing its queer reading as simply an alternative reading that is ultimately not "true", further highlighting a heteronormative perspective on Swift. Studies embracing the queerness of Swift's work are, however, not unheard of; Leah Dajches and Jennifer Aubrey write about Swift's *folklore* (2020) that "the popularity of the album and the circulation of fan theories related to the queer canon...render the lesbian and queer experience visible" as well as acknowledging that the track "seven" "describes a close same-gender relationship" which allows "listeners to imagine the described relationships within the lesbian experience" (256-257). Yet, the queerness Swift expresses is to a large part seemingly ignored or dismissed, which this essay attempts to investigate.

In this essay I question how Swift writes about queerness on her album *Midnights* (2022), and why this often goes unnoticed. Although Swift makes queer references almost all

throughout her discography, *Midnights* is selected as it features a wide variety of queer subtext and references, laying the ground for a diverse analysis. Narrowing down the essay to focus on one particular album also makes for a more reasonable scope to fit the nature of this essay. However, other albums are occasionally referenced to explain intertextual references within Swift's discography. Although focusing on only one album, not every song on *Midnights* is discussed – the selection of songs featured is based on relevancy. I begin the essay by discussing public perception of Swift and autobiographical interpretations of her work based on these views. Secondly, the ways in which Swift references LGBTQ+ history are examined, ranging through several songs on the album. Following, an analysis of the sapphic mentions, themes and implications Swift employs in her lyrics is conducted. Ultimately, the essay argues that Swift writes openly about queerness and sapphism; her work features references to queer history and explicit mentions of same-sex relations, as well as more subtle thematic implications. However, although the queerness is openly there, it is often ambiguous, which allows for it to be overlooked, especially in combination with the heteronormative, autobiographical perspective that is often being applied to Swift's work. In resisting this perspective and making the queerness of Swift's work visible, heteronormativity is challenged both within literary studies, and within society at large.

## 2. Background

Taylor Swift is an American singer-songwriter, hugely successful all over the world. She began her career in 2006 and has since then released eleven studio albums and had numerous songs rank number one on the Billboard Hot 100 list, including “Shake It Off”, “Look What You Made Me Do” and “Cruel Summer” (“Taylor Swift”; “Chart History Taylor Swift”). In 2023, Swift embarked on her ‘The Eras Tour’ – a tour which resulted in huge success and had by December 2024 become the highest grossing tour of all time (“Taylor Swift”). Swift's tenth studio album, *Midnights*, was released in October 2022, a few months before the start of the tour. The album later won GRAMMY-awards for both Best Pop Vocal Album and Album Of The Year, making Swift the first artist to win the latter category four times (Markowitz).

As previously established, Swift's use of queer references is generally belittled and disregarded both by Swift's fans and in the general media; however, there is a subgroup within Swift's fanbase that is dedicated to picking up on Swift's queer flagging. These fans call themselves ‘Gaylors’ and are of the belief that Swift is queer and leaves messages about her

identity in her work (Jones). In a study of 13 292 Taylor Swift-related accounts on the social media platform X (named Twitter at the time of the study's publication), it was found that roughly 9% of Swift's fans are Gaylors, whereas 28% are 'Anti-Gaylors' – people who are against Gaylor-theories (López G. and Chandra 4). Notably the percentage of Anti-Gaylors (28%) was larger than the percentage of 'Neutral Swifties' who “appear indifferent to Gaylor theories” (26%) (4, 2). Without delving further into fandom-dynamics, we can conclude that the Gaylors are a minority and that the Anti-Gaylors and Neutral Swifties control the major discourse within the fandom on X, which then likely reflects in the general media's coverage of Swift.

A unique aspect of Swift's artistry and marketing strategy is her communication via “easter eggs”. In a 2019 video, Swift states that she “loves” to leave easter eggs for her fans, which she defines as “something in the background, and that something leads to sort of behind-the-scenes information” (“Taylor Swift divulges the secrets to her album Easter eggs” 00:12-00:37). She urges that “the best messages are cryptic ones” (00:37-00:41), before listing examples of how she likes to leave messages like these: e.g., on clothing and jewelry, in photoshoots or music videos, and in album booklets (00:43-03:47). Swift's fans have thus “been conditioned to hunt for symbolism” over a prolonged period of time (Smialek 111), and are inclined to dissect Swift's artistry thoroughly. Regarding Swift's increased advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community in 2019 in connection with her *Lover* album, Smialek acknowledges that it is “not surprising” that some fans began theorising about how Swift's clues “might be related to a coming out announcement rather than hints about the album” (111).

Although it is a discussion that is being held, this essay does not attempt to claim that Swift identifies in any certain way. The focus lies on Swift's songwriting, and as Will Stockton argues about using Shakespeare's sonnets to prove his sexuality: “Reading literature for evidence of the author's sexual identity ignores the distinction between fiction ... and autobiography. There is no way to know whether the Sonnets are autobiographical, and no reason to think they must be” (29). What Stockton states can similarly be applied to Swift and her work, however, not fully, as there are certain aspects that argue for Swift's work to be autobiographical. Swift has confirmed that up until her album *Folklore* (2020), her songwriting was always inspired by her own experiences (Swift, “Taylor Swift broke all her rules with *Folklore*”) and when the *Midnights* album was announced in 2022, Swift described it as “the stories of 13 sleepless nights scattered throughout my life” (“Midnights”). It is then a likely conclusion that *Midnights* is an autobiographical album. However, we cannot know if every

single lyric is intended autobiographically, and furthermore, not all tracks on the album are subject to being stories of “sleepless nights scattered throughout [Swift’s] life” as bonus tracks were later added to the album, stretching beyond the 13 nights Swift initially described. Because of the uncertainty, when analysing Swift’s lyrics, the “I” in these texts will be referred to as the speaker, rather than assuming that Swift herself is invariably the “I”. Although it is unknown what is autobiographical on *Midnights* and what is not, the autobiographical aspect of Swift’s work is important to the discussion of why the queerness of it gets overlooked and will be discussed further.

To examine the queer references and implications Swift makes on *Midnights*, an approach of queer reading will be employed. As explained by Stockton, queer readings engage with queer theory and prompts viewing sexual identity as a social construct, gender as performative and heterosexuality as “neither a natural nor a universal form of sexuality” (3). Queer readings defy the limitations of the heterosexual norm and are used to discover queerness in both literary texts and other kinds of cultural representations, no matter whether the texts are explicitly queer or not (Stockton 21; Björklund 7). This essay thus utilises the possibilities of Swift’s work to interpret queerness, mainly in terms of sexuality. The aim is to analyse Swift’s work from a non-heteronormative perspective, exploring its queer potential. Swift’s lyrics, as opposed to more traditional literary texts, will be analysed similarly to poetry: just as it has been done of the Ancient Greek poet Sappho and her lyrical poems, which were also composed to music (Robson).

The LGBTQ+ terminology in this essay will mainly be based on the definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary. The term ‘queer’ will be used as an umbrella term for the LGBTQ+ community and its identities, corresponding with the OED’s definition of “having a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to, or that challenges, traditional (esp. heteronormative) ideas of sexuality or gender” (“Queer, Adj. (1), Sense 3.b.”). Similarly, the term ‘sapphic’ will be used to describe attraction, romance and desire between women, as according to the OED: “[o]f, relating to, engaging in, or characterized by sexual activity between women or female same-sex desire” (“Sapphic, Adj., Sense 2.”). However, the OED does equate the term with ‘lesbian’, which this paper will dispute in favour of a broader definition, as presented by Yasmine Hamou. Hamou writes that ‘sapphic’ refers to women and non-men attracted to other women and non-men, but does not refer to a specific sexual identity, such as ‘lesbian’ does. Hamou exemplifies this by stating that “[w]hile lesbians can be sapphics, not all sapphics are lesbians” and that sapphism can include “lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual

trans femmes, mascs, nonbinary folks, and cis women”. Susan Lanser suggests that sapphic subjects may be defined to “encompass persons of all bodies who have been *at any point* coded as female” and argues that sapphism is “sometimes less about the power of sameness” and rather more about the “impossibility of fixity” and “the implications of gender bending and gender blending” (361, 365). Hence, when referring to Swift writing about same-sex relationships between women or feminine relationships outside the heteronormative binary, this will be described as sapphic, and when describing Swift making references to LGBTQ+ beyond the sapphic, it will be described as queer.

A central concept throughout this paper is heteronormativity. Drawing upon other scholars, Stockton defines this as concerning “heterosexuality’s status in modernity as the default sexuality”, and the timelessness of this (70). Michael Warner argues that heteronormativity often exists invisibly and notes how even when the culture of heterosexual society is paired with an accepting approach of other sexualities and identities, heteronormativity still has a “totalizing tendency” (3, 8). Warner also explains how homophobia and heteronormativity is often connected with the idea of reproduction (9-10), which Jane Ward and Beth Schneider elaborate on by stating that it is also “exemplified by the institution of marriage” (435). Adrienne Rich further claims that heterosexual romance and marriage is pressured upon women, both overtly and covertly, creating a “compulsory heterosexuality”, i.e., a heterosexuality that women are socialised into (636-637). Compulsory heterosexuality is, among other reasons, rooted in the idea that women “inevitably” desire men, and works to strengthen the “male right of physical, economical, and emotional access”, assuring men’s position of power (657, 647). Heteronormativity does thus not only concern the pressures of heterosexuality, but also contributes to gender-based inequalities.

Heterosexuality being seen as the default sexuality presupposes that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. This creates a situation where queer people must “come out”, e.g., declare their sexualities and identities, in order to have these recognised (Rust 87). Our sexualities now define us, as claimed by Michel Foucault when he states that in the nineteenth-century, “the homosexual was now a species”, as opposed to previously when “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration” (43). The idea of a consistent sexuality that encompasses “a personage” and “a type of life”, in combination with the Western world being a “confessing society”, has resulted in a system of classification based on people’s sexual preferences (Foucault 43, 59, 63-64), which now manifests in the act of coming out. Paula C. Rust writes that by coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual, the default identity (heterosexuality)

is replaced with a stigmatised identity, usually causing changes for individuals both in their personal relationships and with society at large (87). A person who has come out also “holds a very different position in society than one held as a presumed heterosexual”, in the sense that they are now socially marginalised (87). To exemplify, Bonnie J. Morris notes how lesbian celebrities in the music industry risk getting cancelled performances and losing both revenue and credibility by coming out, as well as how heterosexual women are less likely to consider lesbian artists role models and trailblazers within the industry (53, 56). In coming out, queer people are in this manner more vulnerable for criticism and setbacks in both their careers and in their personal lives.

### 3. Autobiography

*Midnights* can in many ways be read as an autobiographical album and its autobiographical aspects are strongly implied by Swift herself – but it is likely also this that causes the album’s queer aspects to be overlooked. As established, in a heteronormative society it is assumed that people are heterosexual until they positively state otherwise, something that Swift has not done. There are different claims on what is Swift’s strongest indication of what her sexuality is, but she has made no clear statement, as recognised by Donovan: although he later argues for what he considers to be the “closest” Swift has come to such (119). Donovan implies that Swift is not a part of the LGBTQ+ community (119), which reflects public perception of Swift; Swift has not explicitly stated that she is queer and therefore she is not considered to be such.

As Swift is generally not considered to be queer, her music is largely not seen as queer, either. Sheffield claims that Swift “loves to lure people in to read her songs autobiographically” (11-12), which results in her work being viewed through a lens of heterosexuality that dismisses the queer possibilities. Since the early days of her career, Swift’s dating life (concerning men) has been widely discussed within the media. Smialek notes that Swift has faced “intense scrutiny” regarding her lyrics and private life (115), and to *Vogue*, Swift describes this as “I went out on a normal amount of dates in my early 20s, and I got absolutely slaughtered for it” (“Taylor Swift As You’ve Never Seen Her Before”). Although public perception today is somewhat kinder, Marks states that both tabloid press and traditional media still largely pay attention to Swift’s love life and that there is a presumption that “the right man will “finally” mean the end of [Swift’s] persistent husbandlessness and childlessness.” A heteronormative perspective of Swift is thus made clear.

When *Midnights* was released, theories about who from Swift's life each song was about circulated online. On Reddit, one user assigns nearly all songs on the album to be about different (male) ex-lovers of Swift's, prompting a discussion of over 100 comments about which song is about who ("What each *Midnights* song is about"). Similarly, news outlets and online magazines have published similar articles, such as one by Jess Cohen, in which she brings up several of Swift's exes and relate them to different tracks on *Midnights*. When Swift implies autobiography, such as she does of *Midnights*, it is not surprising that her work is discussed in relation to what is known about her life. However, when interpretations such as the ones listed become too overpowering, it resembles what Marks describes as Swift's work being discussed with "sexist undertones", in which it seems that the value of Swift's work boils down to which man inspired it. These interpretations may also fail to grasp the full account of Swift's work, as the focus lies on what one considers to align with Swift's life, rather than what Swift is actually conveying. Hence, the queerness of her work is often overlooked when this perspective is used.

The idea of Swift as a heterosexual is deeply embedded within a large portion of her fans and in the general media. Although it can be believed that Swift has attempted to part from this image, it has not been recognised by the vast majority. When Swift's work is read autobiographically, it is often done based on heteronormative assumptions, which allows for Swift's expressed queerness to be overlooked. Further, Swift often writes about queerness ambiguously, which will be illustrated in the following pages. Hence, as long as the queerness expressed by Swift is plausible, but not definite, it will likely not be largely recognised.

## 4. Swift and LGBTQ+ History

One of the many ways that Swift's *Midnights* gives voice to queerness is through referencing LGBTQ+ history. This is mainly done in lyrics, but can also be seen in music videos and live performances. Firstly, the track "Lavender Haze" is discussed; the queer connotations of 'lavender' are investigated, followed by an analysis of the track's lyrics, the music video and the live performance on the Eras Tour. Secondly, Swift's continuous use of historically queer flowers is further discussed, as well as her usage of the queer term to drop hairpins.

### 4.1 "Lavender Haze"

One of Swift's most notable references to queer history is her use of 'lavender' on the opening track of *Midnights*, "Lavender Haze". Lavender has a long history of being used in relation to

the queer community, which likely dates back to Sappho (c. 630-570 b.c.), who also famously inspired both the words ‘lesbian’ and ‘sapphic’ (McMillan; Prager; Harper). As explained by Prager, Sappho repeatedly mentions the colours purple and violet in her poems, as well as using imagery of flowers (e.g. violets, crocuses) and “purple blooms”. Sappho’s purple flowers were later possibly referenced in the 1926 play *The Captive* by Édouard Bourdet, a play focused on infatuation and desire between two female characters, where bouquets of violets are sent between the two women (Prager; Inness 312-313). The play was legally challenged due to its sapphic themes and was shut down in 1927 – however, wearing a violet on one’s lapel became a sign of support of the show (Prager). In the 1920s, sapphic women would also gift violets to one another as an expression of interest, according to Christobel Hastings. The connection between flowers and queerness was further strengthened in 1829 with Alfred Douglas’ poem “Two Loves” where he mentions both violets and crocuses – flowers that Sappho also referenced (Prager). It is from Douglas’ poem that the phrase “the love that dare not speak its name” comes from, which was taken as a reference to homosexuality and was used against author Oscar Wilde (he and Douglas were lovers) in his trial for “gross indecency” in 1895 (Prager).

Seeing as the connections between flowers, shades of purple and queerness are many, ‘lavender’ came to be used as a euphemism for queerness. Because of the legal challenges and stigma around same-sex relationships around the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, many euphemisms developed around this time, and within the queer community, “a gay man might be called a lavender lad, lavender boy, or a man with a dash of lavender” (Stollznow 103). The connection between lavender and queerness came to name several phenomena, including the 1970s “Lavender Menace” protest (Prager), “lavender marriages” and the 1950s “lavender scare” (the ban of queer people within American federal employment which caused “5,000 to tens of thousands” of gay people to lose their jobs (Rauch)). To this day, ‘lavender’ is still used interchangeably with ‘rainbow’ and ‘LGBTQ+’ in certain contexts (Prager).

Given the strong links between lavender and queerness, the title reveal of the track “Lavender Haze” caused a stir among Swift’s fans. Gaylors were pleased, as they assumed Swift use of ‘lavender’, a colour with such rich queer history, would mean that “they were winning”; however, Swift later uploaded an Instagram reel where she explained what she meant by the track title – and it was seemingly not queer (Craighead). In the now-deleted reel, Swift declared that she came across the term ‘lavender haze’ while watching the TV-series *Mad Men* and described it as meaning “to be in love” or to be in “that all-encompassing love glow”

(@kkayden 0:00-0:22). She followed this up by explaining that “we live in the era of social media and if the world finds out that you're in love with somebody, they're gonna weigh in on it” and that in her “relationship for six years, we've had to dodge weird rumours, tabloid stuff, and we just ignore it and so this song [“Lavender Haze”] is sort of about the act of ignoring that stuff to protect the real stuff” (@kkayden 0:42-1:04). Swift was seemingly referring to her heterosexual-presenting relationship at the time, and these “weird rumours” were interpreted by some to be about Gaylor-theories, causing disruption within the fandom (Eadon 1). Gaylor-forums went private and felt let down by Swift's statement, while Anti-Gaylors considered Swift's statement to prove her to be “on their side” and that Gaylor-theories are indeed “weird” (Craighshead). Naturally, we do not know for a fact what Swift was referring to, and it might as well have been engagement or pregnancy rumours, or something completely different.

Discarding Swift's video statement and whatever it might have meant (after all, it has been deleted), a lot of queer subtext can be read into the lyrics of “Lavender Haze”. In the chorus, Swift writes:

I feel the lavender haze creeping up on me  
Surreal  
I'm damned if I do give a damn what people say  
No deal  
The 1950s shit they want from me  
I just wanna stay in that lavender haze (lines 9-14).

Applying a queer perspective to these lyrics is not a difficult task. People want “1950s shit” from the speaker, but the speaker wants to stay in their “lavender haze” and concludes that they are “damned if [they] do give a damn what people say”; in other words, people expect heterosexuality from the speaker, whereas they want to stay queer and believe themselves better off not caring what other people think. The same sentiment is later repeated in the bridge, where Swift writes “Talk your talk and go viral / I just need this love spiral” (lines 23-24), the speaker again pressing that they have moved on from caring about others' opinions and would rather just focus on the love they are experiencing. As seen here, this reading does not divert from Swift's reel statement and her definition of being in the lavender haze; being queer and being in love are not mutually exclusive, and may very well exist simultaneously.

Continuing, the second verse further contributes to the queer reading. Swift writes:

All they keep asking me  
Is if I'm gonna be your bride  
The only kinda girl they see  
Is a one night or a wife (lines 15-18).

This passage highlights a heteronormative perspective being applied to the speaker. There is an expectation of marriage, and although not stated, following the analysis of the chorus and the expectations of 1950s values, the “you” that the speaker is expected to marry is a man, whereas the speaker is in these lines identified as female. The heteronormative apparition of marriage, and possibly also reproduction, is thus visible.

The song's music video sheds a new light on the lyrics, namely, as it alludes to a fake relationship. The video, directed by Swift, starts off by showing her and a male character (portrayed by Laith Ashley) together in a room, not interacting with each other and Swift dancing around the room in a lavender smoke (“Taylor Swift - Lavender Haze (Official Music Video)” 0:00-1:09). Later, Swift and Ashley are pictured at a party, surrounded by people, and the two are embracing one another while being photographed, not once – but twice (2:10-2:35). Finally, Swift is seen back in the same room as she and Ashley were in at the start of the video, only now, Swift is pushing the room apart and the walls fall (2:54-3:09), similarly to how a film set would fall apart. Given these sequences, the video seemingly portrays a fake relationship, or perhaps more suitably, a ‘lavender marriage’; a marriage of convenience between people of opposite genders, where one of them, or both, identify as LGBTQ+ (Mohrbeck). According to Swantje Mohrbeck these marriages were most common during Hollywood’s “golden age” of cinema” (c. 1920-1960 (Fraser)) and Chuck Stephens notes how they provided cover for celebrities “concerned with keeping their homosexuality out of the public eye” (18). Austin Bryan writes that for LGBTQ+ people of Uganda today, lavender marriages are a “tactic of survival” for one’s queer identity and results in the creation of “a façade that aligns with heteronormative expectations” (101). Swift’s video, in combination with the use of “lavender” in the lyrics, is seemingly portraying just that: a relationship of convenience to please others.

Furthermore, the performance of “Lavender Haze” at the Eras Tour seemingly references a 1950s lesbian magazine. The performance begins with a visual of Swift climbing a ladder up into a cloud (“[LIVE] Lavender Haze” 1:01-1:28), which looks oddly similar to *The Ladder*’s very first issue (“The Ladder”). *The Ladder* was published between 1956 and 1972

by the Daughters of Bilitis, one of the first established lesbian organisations, and they were with *The Ladder* one of the first to specifically target lesbians as a demographic (Barnes; Morris 44). Apart from the opening visual, almost all of Swift's performance features props of ladders going up into clouds ("[LIVE] Lavender Haze" 1:37-4:47), further strengthening the connection to *The Ladder*. Swift using this imagery, while specifically singing about "1950s shit", i.e., a period when *The Ladder* was being published, makes this especially notable.

During the performance, Swift is also depicted in what seems to be a closet. Visuals of Swift in darkness, with purple light cast in stripes over her, conveys this image ("[LIVE] Lavender Haze" 2:55-3:55). Notably, in the "Lavender Haze" music video, closet doors which would cause this lightning are shown (3:02-3:06). In the Eras Tour visuals, Swift is seen in the closet with a solemn expression, with her head in her hands, and longingly looking out ("[LIVE] Lavender Haze" 2:55-3:05, 3:54-4:05, 4:44-4:54) – perhaps longing 'out of the closet'. However, near the end of the performance, Swift is seen holding the blinds apart with her fingers (5:13-5:16), revoking a sense of window blinds rather than sturdy, closet blinds. Swift thus disguises the closeting imagery in providing an alternative explanation; she is looking out of a window rather than looking out from a closet. However, the impression of Swift as trapped remains intact.

Instances like these, where Swift's queer references are also possible to explain from a non-queer perspective, exist throughout all of "Lavender Haze". The song may not only be viewed to be centred around homophobia, but also allows for an interpretation where it is centred around sexism. "The 1950s shit" may be referring to pressures of heterosexual marriage and the patriarchal doctrine, "all they keep asking me is if I'm gonna be your bride" could be referring to the public interest in Swift's dating life, and so on. Swift's deleted Instagram reel where she explains the term "lavender haze" as a phrase for being in love somewhat averts queer interpretations as Swift does not acknowledge the queer history behind 'lavender', and it may thus be viewed as coincidental. The reference to *The Ladder* can be glossed over as a coincidence, and the music video's portrayal of a fake relationship can be regarded as a story of media's interest and surveillance of celebrities' romantic relationships. The dual possible interpretations of "Lavender Haze" highlights Swift's use of ambiguity – the queer references are strong and many, yet they do not avert from a possible heterosexual reading. Thus, Swift pleases a larger portion of her fanbase, i.e., both Gaylors and Anti-Gaylors are satisfied with her work, as it aligns with their views. One may argue that one reading is more likely than the

other, given the vast amount of references and cues, however, a definite conclusion is difficult to make.

## 4.2 Hairpins, Violets, and Carnations

It comes to no great surprise that a track titled “The Great War” has historical connections; however, in this reading the focus is not on how it references the First World War, but rather, on how it references hairpins and violets – and how these have previously been written about by Swift. Notably, “The Great War” is not Swift’s first song in which she mentions hairpins. On Swift’s “Right Where You Left Me” (released on streaming in 2021), Swift states “I swear you could hear a hairpin drop” (line 13), before in 2022 again mentioning hairpins on “The Great War”: “your finger on my hairpin triggers” (line 41). The lyric from “Right Where You Left Me” seemingly references the Stonewall riots (Eadon 9), building on “one of the most well known written accounts” of the riots: an article entitled “The Hairpin Drop Heard Around The World” (““Hairpin Drop Heard Around The World””). The article’s title is playing on the concept of dropping hairpins – to drop hints of one’s homosexuality (Stanley 57). It is thus interesting how Swift’s speaker “swear[s] you could hear a hairpin drop” – are they implying that they have dropped hints of queerness? The speaker also states how dust has gathered on their “pinned up hair” (line 18), implying that although they believe to have dropped hairpins, their hair remains pinned up; the speaker dropped hints of queerness, but they were not picked up upon. This is not a new reading of “Right Where You Left Me”, but since the time of the song’s release similar things have been argued and the connotations of ‘dropping hairpins’ have been discussed, as seen on the r/GayLorSwift Reddit page (e.g., in a post by @SleepyBee90). Because of this, Swift’s second hairpin lyric becomes all the more important.

Oddly enough, Swift’s references to the hairpin on both tracks are not through proper phrases. “Hair-trigger” is an adjective which describes the quality of “becoming very angry very easily” (“hair-trigger”), but when searching for “hairpin trigger” in the major online dictionaries (OED, Cambridge, Merriam-Webster), there are no results. Urban Dictionary provides one user-uploaded definition from 2007, stating that it is “[r]eally called a hair trigger. It's a modification made to a gun which makes it respond to very little pressure on the trigger. Allows for faster firing” (Correy). Naturally, Urban Dictionary is not the most reliable source and since “hairpin trigger” has not made its way into the major dictionaries, it is likely not a very common phrase – or even a phrase at all. This makes Swift use of the phrase rather

interesting, as if she intentionally added “pin” to “hair-trigger” in order to get her point across. She did this similarly in the lyric from “Right Where You Left Me”, adding “hair” to the commonly used phrase “pin-drop”, used for emphasising silence (“pin-drop”). Seeing as Swift has gone to lengths to write “hairpin” into her lyrics, it is arguable that these lyrics are particularly important, making readings of their significance highly relevant.

Swift’s tendency to repeat references continues with her mention of ‘violets’ in “The Great War”, as she is thus using another flower heavily associated with the LGBTQ+ community. In “The Great War” it is stated that the speaker’s knuckles are “bruised like violets” (line 1) and as explained in 4.1, violets have a long queer history. It is thus interesting that in “The Great War”, the knuckles are particularly “bruised like *violets*” (emphasis added). While it is possible that this simile does not mean anything other than that the speaker’s knuckles are purple from bruising, it could also hold further significance in terms of referencing queerness. Considering Swift’s use of ‘lavender’ in “Lavender Haze”, the mention of violets on “The Great War” is not an isolated instance of Swift using imagery historically associated with the LGBTQ+ community, making the reference especially notable.

The historically queer flowers on *Midnights* do not end with lavender and violets, but are also made up of carnations. Green carnations have been used as a way for gay men to subtly recognise one another after being implemented as a symbol in 1892 by Oscar Wilde (Stollznow 104). Carnations are mentioned on the second track of *Midnights*, “Maroon”, where the speaker states “Carnations you had thought were roses / That’s us” (lines 23-24). In the track, the speaker is reminiscing on a past relationship and the carnations lyric seemingly refers to what led to the termination of the relationship. Following the queer history of carnations, a variety of interpretations of the lyric are possible. One possible reading is that the carnations represent queerness, whereas the roses represent heterosexuality and normativity. This implies that what the speaker considered queer, the addressee did not view the same way, which can be further developed upon in several ways. The mention of carnations serves a big role in opening the song for queer interpretations, and once again, Swift uses a symbol historically used within the queer community.

## 5. Sapphism

There are several ways in which Swift implies sapphism through her lyrics. This section examines how Swift does so on “Maroon”, “Hits Different”, “Paris” and “Dear Reader”,

discussing their explicit references to same-sex relationships, their different intertextual references within Swift's discography, and how they relate to the queer and sapphic experience.

## 5.1 "Maroon" and its intertextuality

"Maroon" has more queerness to it than its use of the historically queer carnation; the track also implies sapphism in several ways. Throughout the song, it is frequently repeated "so scarlet, it was maroon" (e.g., line 16). This repetition, at different parts of the song, goes predated by "how the blood rushed into my cheeks" and "the lips I used to call home" (lines 14-15), alluding that the shade of red of these things are indeed so scarlet, it turns into maroon. The implication that the lips of which the speaker "used to call home" are maroon has by some fans been decoded to be referring to the lips of someone wearing lipstick (e.g. as theorised by @PackageImportant4417), aligning the addressee with feminine stereotypes. This possibly genders the addressee as a woman. There are no indications of the speaker's gender, however, as Suzanne Juhasz and Cristanne Miller argue: "if [the] "I" is not specifically and obviously gendered in a way contrary to the author's apparent gender, the "I" is assumed to share the author's gender" (117). The speaker of the song is thus assumed to be a woman as well. As speaker and addressee are both assumed to be female – sapphism is evident.

"Maroon" is intertextually referenced on another Swift track, which also contributes to its sapphism. "Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus" from *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology* (2024) ponders "Will that make your memory fade from this scarlet maroon" (line 33), which undeniably ties the track to "Maroon". The queerness of "Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus" lies in its title, which the speaker elaborates upon: "Your hologram stumbled into my apartment / Hands in the hair of somebody in darkness named Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus" (lines 1-2). Here, the speaker is watching (or perhaps imagining) their lover, past or present, to be romantically involved with someone else – which could be someone of any gender. Attraction to multiple genders is thus implied of the addressee, who goes ungendered throughout the song. Similarly, there are no indications of the speaker's gender either, providing a possibility for the relationship between the two to be queer. As "Maroon" and "Chloe or Sam or Sophia or Marcus" are so closely connected, it seems likely that the songs are both narrated by the same speaker and are about the same addressee, which links together the queer possibilities.

Additionally, it can be interpreted that “Maroon” implements the trope of a homoerotic friendship. Shawna Lipton describes female homoeroticism as applying to relationships that “predate the conceptual category of “homosexual” and exceed the traditional bounds of “friendship” which suppress erotic possibilities” (34). In “Maroon”, the feeling of friendship is conjured through the lines “Laughing with my feet in your lap / Like you were my closest friend”, but is also further sparked through the allusion that the speaker and the subject are “roommate[s]” (lines 2-9). What implies that the relationship between the two is *homoerotic*, and not simply a romantic friendship between a man and a woman both stems from the mention of carnations, but also, as previously explained, from the likelihood that both parts of the relationship are women. While it may be preferably read that the relationship referred to in “Maroon” is a romantic relationship between two women, it does not necessarily have to be, and may very well be a relation existing between the lines of a traditional friendship and a romantic relationship.

## 5.2 Argumentative, Antithetical Dream Girl

Arguably one of Swift’s most sapphic songs is “Hits Different”. The addressee of the song goes ungendered throughout most of the song, however, in the bridge they are proclaimed to be an “argumentative, antithetical dream girl” (lines 43-44). This establishes that the person the speaker feels so strongly for that they desperately cannot move on (lines 17-19), that they throw up from picturing them being in love with other girls (lines 4-6), and whose “hair”, “stare” and “sense of belief” they dream of (line 40), is another woman. The speaker of the song is ungendered and is thus assumed to share Swift’s gender, as according to Juhasz and Miller (117). With the speaker and the addressee both being women, a strong sense of sapphism is conjured.

Although Swift states “Bet I could still melt your world / ... girl” (lines 43-44), making the primary reading that the song’s addressee is a woman, it is not explicitly stated so. Therefore, the lyric is also open to claims that the speaker is describing themselves as the “argumentative, antithetical dream girl”, such as Rob Sheffield claims (23). Sheffield reads the song autobiographically and states that Swift is the “dream girl” (23). Victoria Edel agrees with this sentiment and discusses which ex-boyfriend of Swift’s the song might be about. Edel does recognise that the song could be about “a relationship Swift has never been public about” and mentions that fans have even discussed whether it is based on a fictional situation, yet no remark

about the “dream girl” being anyone other than the speaker, i.e., Swift, is brought up. This allows for the heteronormative perspective to shine through; Swift writing a romantic song about another woman is not considered a possibility.

“Hits Different” also alludes to the straightening of a public image. The speaker mentions how they used to “switch out these Kens / I’d just ghost” (lines 20-21); in which Swift is referring to the Ken doll, the supposed boyfriend of the Barbie doll. Interestingly, the Ken doll was invented as a boyfriend to the Barbie doll to improve her image and status, according to Greta Gerwig, director of *Barbie* (2023). The speaker’s history of exchanging and leaving “Kens” is thus perhaps not a history of exchanging and leaving lovers, but rather a history of using men to better her image. The allusion of lavender marriage and the act of sheltering one’s queer sexuality under heteronormative performances is here once again featured, just as on “Lavender Haze”.

Swift also mentions the Ken doll on another track: “My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys” from 2024. Here, the speaker states that they “felt more when we played pretend / Than with all the Kens” (lines 35-36), which is a similar sentiment to what is expressed in “Hits Different”. The tracks also both reference sand (“Hits Different” line 25; “My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys” lines 10, 34). A difference between the two tracks is the gender of the addressee; in “Hits Different” the addressee is assumed female, while in “My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys” the addressee is referred to as a “boy”, with he/him pronouns. While this may argue for them not being the same character, or that the addressee in “Hits Different” actually uses traditionally male pronouns, it does not have to. “My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys” does not imply male gender of the addressee in any other way than through its gendered language, and the song still contains the queer Ken metaphor and themes of friendship (and possibly homoeroticism). Therefore, one could argue that the male gendering in the song is insignificant. Perhaps the indication of a male addressee is simply a tactic for relatability and credibility for Swift’s songwriting to be commercially successful, and could easily be substituted for a female addressee and thus create a more cohesive picture of the correlation between the two tracks.

### 5.3 Somewhere the Culture Is Clever

In “Paris” queerness is again featured. The song’s speaker and addressee are ungendered, however, the opening lines of the track reveal that the addressee has been sexually involved

with a man (lines 1-2). Assuming that the speaker is a woman, as previously done, it is thus indicated that the addressee has experienced attraction to multiple genders. If we assume that the addressee is a woman as well, it is even possible to argue that she slept with a man out of compulsory heterosexuality. No matter the case, queerness is present on the track.

Apart from the queerness mentioned, the track also contains the queer theme of a relationship kept secret. The speaker mentions how there is a “Privacy sign on the door / And on my page and on the whole world” and that “Romance is not dead / If you keep it just yours” (lines 17-20), which conveys this. Secret relationships undoubtedly tie in with the queer experience given the homophobia and heteronormative pressure that surrounds queer people, making a queer interpretation of this very possible. However, the speaker also notes how they wishes “the only flashing lights” would be from “the tower at midnight” (lines 28-29), i.e., the Eiffel tower’s blinking lights and not the flashes from cameras, which ties in with celebrity culture and paparazzi photos. Swift is no stranger to this, giving the public’s considerable interest for her dating life (Marks), which implies through an autobiographical interpretation that the speaker wishes to keep the relationship secret to avoid the press. However, this interpretation is possible alongside the idea that the relationship is kept secret because of its queerness.

The speaker also notes how they want to transport their lover to “somewhere the culture’s clever”, and here they would be able to “confess [their] truth” (lines 26-27). This implies the influence of cultural norms on the relationship, which the speaker wishes to escape from. Only in their imagined “clever” cultural context would they be able to be truthful about themselves and the hidden relationship. The queer reading of this falls naturally; the relationship is kept secret because it would be denounced by the public, and the speaker dreams of a different society where they would not have to be secretive.

Furthermore, the speaker expresses a wish for their lover to “Sit quiet by my side in the shade / And not the kind that’s thrown, I mean / The kind under where a tree has grown” (lines 22-24). These lyrics are somewhat clunky, and the speaker seems determined to specify exactly what kind of “shade” they are referring to. To ‘throw shade’ is an informal idiom, meaning “to criticize someone or something publicly and show that you do not respect them” (“throw shade”), which Swift has used twice before in her lyrics, both on her *Lover* (2019) album. In “I Forgot That You Existed” the speaker shares that they formerly “lived in the shade you were throwing” (line 3), and in Swift’s LGBTQ-rights anthem “You Need To Calm Down” the speaker urges the addressed subject to “control [their] urges to scream about all the people

[they] hate”, explaining further upon this with exclaiming “Cause shade never made anybody less gay” (lines 30-31). The idiom of ‘throwing shade’ being used in “You Need To Calm Down” to convey that oppression against LGBTQ+ people does not make them “less gay”, i.e., “shade” being used as a substitute for homophobia (and possibly transphobia), creates for an interesting standpoint when the speaker in “Paris” meticulously notes how that kind of shade is not the one they wish to sit in. Considering the “Paris” speaker’s wish for a “clever” society, where they can be themselves with their lover, the ideas align; the speaker wishes to sit with their lover in a space free of homophobia.

## 5.4 If You Knew Who Was Talking

Swift’s track “Dear Reader” deals with the difficulties of public perception versus the speaker’s truth. In the song, the speaker states how “these desperate prayers of a cursed man” are “spilling out to you for free” (lines 29-30). The indication of “these” implies that the “desperate prayers” are present in the presented situation, i.e., the song itself, or more generally, utterances by the speaker. The speaker describing themselves as a “cursed man” does not necessarily gender the speaker as male, as the expression is used in a metaphorical sense and may be denoting “man” as a human, rather than a male. Therefore, “Dear Reader” may still be a song of sapphism. The lyrics continue, pleading: “But darling, darling, please / You wouldn’t take my word for it / If you knew who was talking” (lines 31-33). The speaker here declares that they are not who people think they are, and believes that people would find them less believable if they knew the truth about them.

The notion of the speaker being “cursed” implies that something within the speaker is considered ‘wrong’, and might be related to why people would find them less believable “if [they] knew who was talking”. From a queer perspective, this reads as a queer speaker who worries that people would view them differently after coming out. The speaker is perceived as heterosexual, and is seemingly well-liked, but the speaker fears this might change and their credibility would be lost if their addressed audience “knew who was talking”. Following Rust’s statement that in coming out one’s personal relationships and one’s relationship with society usually changes (87), this fear is not unjustified. Morris’ claim that queer women within the music industry risk a loss of credibility, revenue, and appeal to the public by coming out (53), further exemplify how coming out may affect how one is perceived and treated. The speaker in

“Dear Reader” suspecting that people would view them differently if they knew who they truly were, thus aligns with the speaker being sapphic.

The idea that perception of the speaker does not correspond with their reality is elaborated upon. Following up on how the lines “You wouldn’t take my word for it / If you knew who was talking” (lines 31-33), the speaker states: “If you knew where I was walking / To a house, not a home, all alone / ‘Cause nobody’s there” (lines 34-36). Here it is expressed that to speaker is believed to be living with someone, but actually, they are not. This echoes the sentiment that is expressed in “Lavender Haze” – the speaker is believed to be in a relationship, but they are not in one. The speaker in “Dear Reader” is likely assumed to be in a heterosexual presenting relationship and is perceived as heterosexual, but this is not true.

The addressed audience of “Dear Reader” does not know “who [is] talking”, however, the truth about the speaker is not hidden. The speaker states that they “prefer hiding in plain sight” (line 27), which denotes that although perception of the speaker is incorrect, the genuine version of them is possible to discern. In a heteronormative society, heterosexuality is often assumed, which seems to be the case here; the speaker is not hiding their queerness, yet they are assumed to be heterosexual. This notion ultimately captures the gist of this essay; the queerness of Swift’s artistry goes considerably unnoticed, despite not being hidden.

## 6. Conclusion

Without a doubt, this paper has illustrated the many ways in which Swift writes about queerness on *Midnights* (2022). In “Lavender Haze”, she plays on the queer history of ‘lavender’ and criticises heteronormativity, while also alluding to lavender marriages, referencing the lesbian magazine *The Ladder* and using visuals of closeting. In “The Great War” she repeats her previous queer-coded line of a “hairpin drop” through substituting the actual phrase “hair trigger” in favour of “hairpin trigger” in the lyrics. In both “The Great War” and “Maroon” she mentions historically queer flowers: the violet which Sappho frequently wrote about, and the carnation which was a symbol among gay men to subtly recognise one another. Furthermore, Swift also frequently evokes a sense of sapphism in her lyrics. “Maroon” alludes to homoeroticism and a female addressee, “Hits Different” addresses its romantic addressee as a “dream girl”, and “Paris” witnesses a relationship being kept secret because it is culturally unacceptable, as well as an indication of bisexuality of the addressee and a desire from the speaker to “confess [their] truth”. In “Dear Reader” the speaker describes how people have the

wrong impression of them and how their perception of them would change if they knew the truth, translating into anxieties about coming out and becoming subject to homophobia.

While these instances of Swift writing about queerness exist, they are not entirely conclusive. For nearly all cases, there is the possibility of an alternative reading that dismisses the queer aspect. Swift's ambiguity, in combination with Swift's work often being read autobiographically while Swift is largely perceived as heterosexual, result in the queerness of *Midnights* widely being overlooked. The ambiguity of Swift's lyrics, placed in a heteronormative society, allows for the non-queer reading to be favoured and regarded as the only "true" reading, as seen by both scholars, fans and writers of popular culture. In allowing heteronormative readings this position, larger heteronormative structures in society are upheld, where heterosexuality remains the default. However, whether recognised or not, *Midnights* is, and will continue to be, an album full of references to queerness.

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