Michel Houellebecq is rightly known for the considerable energy that he devotes to describing and analysing the sphere of heterosexual activity. Despite this, his analysis of the moribund institutions of heterosexuality is of particular use to a queer critique that would seek to understand and challenge heteronormative systems. Although Houellebecq frequently reinvests in traditional heterosexual and patriarchal power structures through his romantic plots and his disingenuously “post-feminist” sexism, a close reading of him alongside dissimilar feminist critics reveals a symptomatic message that a feminist and queer politics cannot afford to ignore.

To ask what is queer about Michel Houellebecq may at first glance seem like a counter-intuitive, not to say an absurd and even offensive question. After all, few contemporary writers offer such lengthy consideration of heterosexual relations, and few give so much space to the explicit depiction of straight sex, much of which is clearly modelled upon fantasy scenarios familiar from pornographic culture (Morrey). The few gay characters who appear in Houellebecq’s fiction tend to be pathetic alcoholics, such as Desplechin in Les Particules élémentaires, or else the “lesbians” who occur in Lanzarote and Plateforme almost exclusively as figures of wish fulfilment in the predictable male fantasy of sleeping with two women at the same time (Clément 67, 107-10). Meanwhile, Houellebecq’s only response to the AIDS crisis is to see it as a convenient excuse for certain individuals
to withdraw entirely from sexual competition (*Particules* 234), or else as a unique and overlooked opportunity to solve the world’s population problems (*La Possibilité d’une île* 446). Houellebecq’s frequent deployment of a quasi-biological discourse and appeal to arguments drawn from evolutionary theory and natural selection tends inevitably to naturalise heterosexual relations, a gesture reinforced by the rehearsal of such hackneyed opinions as the supposed “évidence géométrique” (*La Possibilité d’une île* 110) of male-female genital copulation. If it is important therefore not to over-state Houellebecq’s affinity with a queer culture or sensibility, I will nonetheless argue that his disillusioned dissection of the contemporary social organisation of heterosexual relations, and in particular his compassion for those groups and individuals that are marginalised within the dominant sexual economy, is at the very least of use to a queer critique of heteronormativity, and may arguably be labelled “queer” if we accept the broadest definition of “an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality” (Jagose 98). What is perhaps even more surprising is that Houellebecq’s criticism of this sexual arena, when it implies condemnation of queer cultures or practices, stems less from an unthinking homophobia than from a reasoned analysis that bears some comparison to radical- and lesbian-feminist critiques of the queer cultural economy. In short, then, this essay makes no attempt to argue that Houellebecq is queer, nor even really to reclaim his work as queer writing. Instead, it suggests that Houellebecq’s analysis of the moribund institutions of heterosexuality is of particular use to a queer critique that would seek to understand and challenge heteronormative systems. Although Houellebecq frequently reinvests in traditional heterosexual and patriarchal power structures through his romantic plots and his disingenuously “post-feminist” sexism, this study will expose — in the process of reading Houellebecq alongside such unlikely bedfellows as the lesbian feminist critic Sheila Jeffreys and the queer heroine Valerie Solanas — how his symptomatic message can be usefully appropriated into the armoury of a queer sexual politics that would look to destabilise, and possibly dismantle, the straight mind and the bodies in which it is housed.

Given his phenomenal success, not only in France but in translation around the world, Houellebecq’s morbid diagnosis of Western heteronormativity has already become quite familiar. His simple but