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SUFFRAGE AND VIRGINIA WOOLF: 'THE MASS BEHIND THE SINGLE VOICE'

BY SOWON S. PARK

Virginia Woolf is now widely accepted as a 'mother' through whom twenty-first-century feminists think back, but she was ambivalent towards the suffragette movement. Feminist readings of the uneasy relation between Woolf and the women's movement have focused on her practical involvement as a short-lived suffrage campaigner or as a feminist publisher, and have tended to interpret her disapproving references to contemporary feminists as redemptive self-critique. Nevertheless the apparent contradictions remain largely unresolved. By moving away from Woolf in suffrage to suffrage in Woolf, this article argues that her work was in fact deeply rooted at the intellectual centre of the suffrage movement. Through an examination of the ideas expressed in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* and of two suffrage characters, Mary Datchet in *Night and Day* and Rose Pargiter in *The Years*, it establishes how Woolf's feminist ideas were informed by suffrage politics, and illuminates connections and allegiances as well as highlighting her passionate resistance to a certain kind of feminism.

I

'No other element in Woolf's work has created so much confusion and disagreement among her serious readers as her relation to the women's movement', noted Alex Zwerdling in 1986.¹ Nonetheless the women's movement is an element more often overlooked than addressed in the present critical climate. And Woolf in the twentieth-first century is widely accepted as a 'mother' through whom feminists think back, be they of liberal, socialist, psychoanalytical, post-structural, radical, or utopian persuasion. As Rachel Bowlby pronounced: 'like the Bible, Woolf's texts provide ample support for almost any position.'² However, to what extent such a comprehensive appropriation is compatible with her strangely equivocal position on contemporary feminist politics is a question that still demands an examination.

As is well known, in Woolf's early to middle years the women's movement was dominated by the single issue of suffrage, and her attitude to this was typically ambivalent. In principle she was in favour, and famously worked in a suffrage

I would like to thank Raphael Ingelbien, Ann Heilmann and Lucy Delap for their comments on this article.

1 A. Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (London, 1986), 210.

2 R. Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (London, 1988), 14.

office, probably the People's Suffrage Federation, for almost a year in 1910.³ But at the same time she continually expressed private reservations about both the individuals involved in the movement and the larger ethos behind it. Suffragists, with their 'queer accents' and 'drab shabby clothes', are derided in her letters and diaries, and her comments resonate with popular anti-suffrage propaganda, the chief tactic of which was ridicule. Woolf was also disparaging about the motives of the suffrage leaders, as can be seen from the following, written to Katherine Cox:

I see at a glance that nothing—except perhaps novel writing—can compare with the excitement of controlling the masses. . . . if you could move them you would feel like God. I see now where Margaret and even Mary MacArthur get their imperial thread. The mistake I've made is in mixing up what they do with philanthropy. Why don't you force yourself into some post when you get back—in six months time you'd be driving about 6,000 helpless women in front of you.⁴

Such cavalier disdain for the 'masses' together with her continual aesthetic objections to what she perceived as the lower-class manners of the suffragist 'subordinates'—in addition to her short-lived suffrage activism and the fictional creation of the 'insignificant' Mr Clacton and 'unintelligent' Sally Seal in *Night and Day*—have set the terms of a familiar analysis, one which dominated Woolf criticism up to the early 1970s. The judgement was that Woolf was a class feminist.

This charge was, to be fair, based on material provided largely by Woolf herself. On top of the aforementioned pointers, a clinching testimonial can be found in the introductory letter she wrote to *Life As We Have Known It* (1931), when after twenty years of intermittent involvement in the women's movement, Woolf candidly wrote of the insurmountable gap she felt between herself and the mass of women for whom the efforts were made. Describing herself as 'a benevolent spectator' of the women's movement, she wrote: 'I am irretrievably cut off from the

3 Though it is most likely that it was for the People's Suffrage Federation (PSF) that Woolf worked, the minutes of the PSF have not survived to enable this to be ascertained. However, there are several indicators which make it probable: Margaret Llewelyn Davies, the General Secretary of the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), who had a decisive influence on Woolf's activism, was one of the founding executive members of the PSF, and Jane Harrison was also a member. The PSF was formed in 1909 for the promotion of adult suffrage (as opposed to 'equal' suffrage, which would leave most unmarried working women and most married women disenfranchised). In this, they differed from other suffrage organizations such as the London Society for Women's Suffrage with which Woolf (and the Stracheys) was also involved, which was for equal suffrage. The PSF office was in Queen Chambers, Tothill Street, Westminster, within reasonable distance of Woolf's home in Gordon Square, though it was by no means the nearest suffrage office. See n. 26.

4 Virginia Woolf to Katherine Cox, 18 Mar. 1913: *The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1912–28*, ed. N. Nicolson (London, 1977). Margaret is Margaret Llewelyn Davies of the WCG, and Mary MacArthur was the organizer of the Women's Trade Union League. Both societies were two of the 480 affiliate organizations of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). In 1914 the National Union had over 53,000 members and 46,000 'friends' who could not afford full membership, making it the largest suffrage society in Britain.

actors. I sit here hypocritically clapping and stamping, an outcast from the flock.⁵ If this was not substantiation enough (for many have interpreted her frankness as redemptive self-critique), the following section from *A Room of One's Own* provided a sure-fire confirmation: 'Of the two—the vote and the money,' Woolf wrote, 'the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important.'⁶ So, based on her own admissions, it is tempting to maintain that for Woolf class was a stronger identifying force than gender, and from contemporary commentators to second-wave feminist critics have called attention to this aspect of her feminism.⁷

Such interpretations have been effectively pushed to the critical margins through diverse and sustained feminist readings in the last thirty years as witnessed by Bowlby. From the advocates of the idea of *l'écriture féminine* to critics such as Toril Moi and Jane Marcus, Woolf is held up as the exemplary feminist without whom any discussion of women and literature would be incomplete.⁸ However, feminist interpretations, which emphasize Woolf's texts without reference to the apparent contradictions, do not so much address the questions raised in earlier interpretations as regard them as irrelevant. And questions remain. The disjointed picture of the unflinching feminist who broke the 'sentence' and the 'sequence' of inherited English literary tradition and evolved it to accommodate her feminist knowledge, but who also rejected the word 'feminist' on the grounds that it was 'vicious,' 'corrupt,' and 'obsolete,' invites scrutiny, it seems, of a more concrete kind.

Suffrage offers a context in which her political negotiations can be situated more precisely. In his ground-breaking study of Woolf and suffrage, Alex Zwerdling placed Woolf's suffrage sympathies in the constitutionalist faction and attributed her dwindling feminist activities to the nature of the single-issue campaign which, according to Zwerdling, Woolf found restricting. In contrast, Naomi Black has assessed Woolf's activities in the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) and the PSF as an outward and visible sign of her deeply rooted feminist faith. Situating Woolf in what she calls the 'social feminist' circles of the day, Black sees Woolf's ambivalence as stemming, not from the limiting nature of suffrage, as Zwerdling argues, but from a profound disquiet based on what she calls 'social feminists' philosophy of 'difference' between men and women that ran counter to the 'equity feminism' of the suffrage movement.⁹ This has been queried by Laura Marcus, who

5 Woolf, 'Introductory Letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies,' in M. Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It* (London, 1931), p. xix. The famous foreword continues: 'All these questions, which matter so intensely to these people. . . leave me, in my own blood and bones, untouched. If every reform they demand was granted this very instant it would not touch one hair of my comfortable capitalistic head. Hence my interest is merely altruistic.'

6 *A Room of One's Own* (1929; repr. 2000), 34.

7 See Q. D. Leavis, review of *Three Guineas*, in *Scrutiny* (Sept. 1938), 203–14, and E. Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (London, 1979), 263–97.

8 J. Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Language of Patriarchy* (London, 1987); T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London, 1985).

9 N. Black, 'Virginia Woolf and the Women's Movement,' in J. Marcus (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* (London, 1985). See also N. Black, *Social Feminism* (London, 1989). Black defines 'social feminism' as a particular version of feminism 'whose most important

questions whether Woolf's intermittent activities in the WCG and the PSF can be taken as crucial indicators.¹⁰ Instead she has looked at a broader range of Woolf's feminist engagements, finding commitments in her role as publisher with the Hogarth Press, citing works by Margaret L. Davies, Ray Strachey, and Willa Muir (though it might be observed that these feminist writers were also personal friends or relations). Marcus has also extended Black's debate on 'difference' by examining conflicting models of masculinity and femininity that go beyond the duality of Black's model. Their pioneering works have undoubtedly contributed to a more grounded understanding of Woolf's feminism that goes beyond the hasty dismissal of her ambivalence as predicated on class prejudice, or the somewhat resigned view that explains her discrepancies as an imperfect part of a complex genius mind. Nevertheless, suffrage might contribute more still in making visible the specific nature of Woolf's feminism. Instead of focusing on her direct involvement (as a suffragist or as a feminist publisher), this article seeks to shift the emphasis—from Woolf in suffrage to suffrage in Woolf.

II

If we take her most-studied feminist polemics, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*—often cited as radical, original, and ahead of their time—it is evident that Woolf was much more caught up in the movement than her self-portrait or subsequent criticism allow. Because the fact is that the feminist ideas Woolf expressed were all very much in the air in the times in which she wrote.

To take *A Room of One's Own* (1929): her theories on women and fiction and on women's economic, and consequential psychological, dependence on men, the idea of a woman's language, and the invention of Judith Shakespeare had all been expressed by Cicely Hamilton, May Sinclair, Elizabeth Robins, and Dorothy Richardson, to name but a few.¹¹ They were all voicing the need for a distinctive tradition of women's literature, repeatedly and influentially, well before *A Room of One's Own*. Hamilton, in 1909, had made a forceful argument for why there are no female Shakespeares in *Marriage as a Trade*.¹² Charlotte Perkins Gilman attacked the insidious psychological effects of patriarchy in *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* (1911). Gilman, as Charlotte Stetson, had already published the internationally acclaimed study *Women and Economics* in 1898 (translated into seven languages), which gave a materialist feminist account of the subjugation of women

characteristic is a focus on values and experience identified with women' which includes material feminism and radical feminism. Black distinguishes it from 'equity feminism', of which variants include liberal, Marxist, and socialist feminism.

10 L. Marcus, 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in S. Roe and S. Sellers (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge, 2000).

11 See May Sinclair, *Feminism* (London, 1912); Dorothy Richardson, 'The Reality of Feminism', *Ploughshare* (1917), Elizabeth Robins, *Way Stations* (1913).

12 Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London, 1909), chs. 14–16.

and its psychological underpinnings. Elizabeth Robins, in *Way Stations* (1913), expressed the need for and the possibility of women's language. The need for financial independence for women was forcefully argued in Eleanor Rathbone's *The Disinherited Family* in 1924 (her campaign for state payment for mothers led to the Family Allowances Act of 1945). Ray Strachey had discussed the position of women and the lack of career and educational opportunities in great detail in *The Cause* (1928). In addition there were scores of suffrage books around this time which expound feminist theories, be they literary, psychological, sociological, or theological. In the daily newspapers, manifestos, periodicals, and memoirs of the day, feminism was a staple subject, and the texts I have mentioned were all reviewed and discussed in great detail. Zwerdling's thesis that Woolf 'probe[d] depths the earlier feminist writers had left largely unplumbed. . . . restor[ing] a sense of the complexity of the issues after the radical simplification that had seemed necessary for political action' dismisses and effectively silences the wide and extensive discussion of feminism in suffrage literature of the day, which gives little indication that the writers restricted themselves to the narrow issue of the vote, or indeed that they left many areas 'unplumbed'.¹³

As for *Three Guineas*, Woolf's exposition of the patriarchal origins of militarism is exalted for its penetrating originality. 'An extraordinary radical achievement' appraises Hermione Lee.¹⁴ Jane Marcus suggests, characteristically and perhaps a little hyperbolically, 'The book is more than a work of art. It is a major contribution to Political Science.'¹⁵ Other critics frequently point to the virulent attack the essay came under—citing Queenie Leavis's review in *Scrutiny*—and the unappreciative reception of it in Woolf's immediate literary circle, as indication of its subversiveness. Vara Neverow, who has meticulously traced the influence of Josephine Butler on *Three Guineas*, judges that 'the critical avoidance of *Three Guineas* indicates that the work is now and has always been a thoroughly relevant and extremely threatening exposé of the patriarchal system of domination.'¹⁶ And Jeanette McVicker, while charting Woolf's 'subversive career', asserts that 'Recent critical work has demonstrated that Virginia Woolf contributed significantly to a transformation of the British intellectual public sphere,' and concludes: 'Through this later critique [*Three Guineas*], she engages the public sphere at several functionally related levels, offering an alternative to the dominant hegemonic culture.'¹⁷

13 Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 217.

14 H. Lee, introduction to *Three Guineas* (London, 1991), p. xiv.

15 Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, 79.

16 V. Neverow, "'Tak[ing] our stand openly under the lamps of Piccadilly Circus": Footnoting the Influences of Josephine Butler on *Three Guineas*", in D. F. Gillespie and L. K. Hankins (edd.), *Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (London, 1997), 13.

17 J. McVicker, 'Woolf in the Context of Fascism: Ideology, Hegemony and the Public Sphere', in B. R. Daugherty and E. Barrett (edd.), *Virginia Woolf: Texts and Contexts* (London, 1996), 30, 33.

But the mass of suffrage literature suggests that, by the time *Three Guineas* was published, the ‘public sphere’ was replete with such alternative interventions. For example, Woolf’s discussion of women’s citizenship, leading up to the often quoted ‘as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world’, was familiar rhetoric to suffragists years before Woolf presented it in *Three Guineas*. ‘Woman has no country’ was such a widespread refrain that in 1915 Mary Sargent Florence and G. K. Ogden declared “‘Women of all nations unite!’; that should be the cry—not “‘Woman has no country!’” but “‘Woman must have every country.’”¹⁸ Catherine Marshall persistently and brilliantly maintained her thesis of ‘the profound enmity between militarism and feminism’ before the Great War, in speeches and pamphlets which were collected in *Militarism and Feminism* in 1915.¹⁹ *Jus Suffragii* (The Rights of Suffrage), a monthly periodical edited by Mary Sheepshanks, also published various articles on women and war by Mary Sargent Florence and G. K. Ogden, and also a mass of empirical evidence about British army regulations concerning prostitutes for the benefit of British soldiers in India.²⁰ The link between militarism and patriarchy was also incisively and closely examined by Helena Swanwick, who concluded: ‘Militarist states always tend to degrade women to the position of breeders and slaves.’²¹ It is not possible to prove that Woolf read all these texts, but, as Brenda S. Silver’s meticulous work has demonstrated, she was a ‘systematic reader of her culture’. Robins and Sheepshanks were, of course, old friends, and she was familiar with, in varying degrees, Mrs Fawcett, Helena Swanwick, and Catherine Marshall (and their work), all of whom were actively involved with *The Common Cause*, probably the most influential suffrage periodical, and whose works were discussed in *The Cause* by Ray Strachey, sister of Adrian Stephen’s wife.²²

I state that the feminist ideas in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* are ‘not single and solitary births’, not to diminish the literary significance of these works, but to establish a clearer picture of the background in which Woolf’s works are steeped. Indeed the two ‘masterpieces’ are an apt demonstration of Woolf’s own

18 G. K. Ogden, ‘Militarism and Feminism: What War Means to Women’, in *The Common Cause*, 6/307 (26 Feb. 1915). See also the report on ‘The Woman’s Movement and War’ meeting (reported in *The Common Cause*, 6/311 (26 Mar. 1915)), which thousands of people attended, and where a score of speeches were made on the same theme.

19 C. Marshall, *Militarism and Feminism* (London, 1915), an anonymous pamphlet; repr. in *Militarism Versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War*, ed. M. Kamester and J. Vellacott (London, 1987). Marshall was an active parliamentary secretary of the National Union and later became secretary to the No Conscription Fellowship.

20 See S. Oldfield (ed.), *International Woman Suffrage: Jus Suffragii 1913–1920* (London, 2002).

21 H. Swanwick, *Woman and War* (London, 1915), 3. Swanwick, sister of Walter Sickert, studied at Cambridge and was the founding editor of *The Common Cause*.

22 *Virginia Woolf’s Reading Notebooks*, ed. B. R. Silver (Princeton, 1983). Ray Strachey, née Costelloe, is sister of Karin, who married Adrian Stephen. Her book *Our Freedom and its Results* was published by the Hogarth Press in 1936. *The Common Cause* (1909–20) was the journal of the NUWSS and was succeeded by the *Woman Leader* (1920–32) to which Woolf contributed.

thesis that 'they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of the thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.'²³ *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are so deeply rooted in the culture of suffrage that, far from being isolated groundbreaking pieces—'irretrievably cut off from the actors'—they are, in fact, firmly placed at the intellectual centre of the first-wave women's movement.²⁴

To be sure, against the backdrop of English modernists, whose politics were for the large part reactionary, Woolf's views could be considered exceptional. But even 'Bloomsbury' was suffused with suffrage. Leonard Woolf was an active adult suffragist, and his sisters were strong supporters throughout.²⁵ The Stracheys, in particular, were forceful suffrage campaigners: Lytton's mother, Lady Jane Strachey, and his sisters, Pippa, Pernal, and Marjorie, were active leading members of the London Society for Women's Suffrage formed in 1907, and were the main organizers of the first mass suffrage demonstration, known as the 'Mud March', in February 1907. Lytton's sister-in-law Ray was, of course, was a committed suffragist.²⁶ Even Maynard Keynes participated in the Mud March. And Duncan Grant submitted a poster entitled 'Handicapped' to the Artists' Suffrage League in 1909 (and won £4) and canvassed a Hampstead polling station on behalf of suffrage in the 1910 general election. In other words, the effects of the suffragette movement on British social and political culture were nothing short of seismic, and it would be hard to find a writer of the day who did not hold informed opinions on the matter, which prompts consideration of the next issue: Woolf's fashioning of herself as a mere 'spectator' of the women's movement.

This is misleading as it suggests a greater level of detachment and undifferentiated endorsement than was the case. Within the range of suffrage politics, it is clear that her allegiances and influences were determinedly on the suffragist, as

23 *A Room of One's Own*, 98.

24 The 'first wave' denotes the period between 1850, when feminism as an organized movement may be said to have begun, and 1930, when it was drawing to a close as an active movement.

25 Leonard recalls one instance when his energetic campaigning met with blank rejection: Lady Ritchie, Virginia's aunt (Aunt Anny) and Thackeray's eldest daughter, argued: 'It seems to me ten thousand pities to give equal votes to unequal men . . . I would give a great many to you and to Virginia.' Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: an Autobiography of the Years 1911–1918* (London, 1964), 72.

26 The LSWS was formerly the Central Society for Women's Suffrage and had its main office on 25 Victoria Street. It had sixty-two member branches in London, and by 1912 was far bigger in scale than the PSE with 4,000 full members and 20,000 'friends' who could not afford a full membership. It was also of a different political complexion, with its aim of 'equal' suffrage and predominantly middle-class interests. It turned into the London Society for Women's Service in 1919, to which, in 1931, Woolf gave her 'Professions for Women' paper, later developed into *Three Guineas*. Lytton Strachey's sister Pippa was the secretary of the London Society for Women's Suffrage (1914–19) and the London Society for Women's Service (1919–26). The London Society for Women's Service was renamed the London and National Society for Women's Service in 1926.

opposed to the *suffragette*, side of the movement, as Zwerdling has pointed out.²⁷ But even within the suffragist camp there were different factions with distinct political and strategic identities—radical, liberal, pacifist, moral, religious, socialist, imperial—and from Woolf’s feminist essays it can be deduced that her politics lay firmly on the pacifist and more ‘conservative’ wing of the group, which emphasized women’s education but opposed militant methods. Interestingly, this wing shared many common assumptions with the progressive anti-suffragists, who believed in women’s education but who also believed that they were not ready for the vote at that point. It needs stating here that anti-suffrage was by no means a clear-cut anti-feminist position, and the terms ‘pro’ and ‘anti’, necessary though they are, often overstate the coherence of these positions.²⁸ Many anti-suffragists, such as Lucy Cavendish and Mrs Humphry Ward, were for married women’s right to own property and for women’s higher education, yet strategically against women’s suffrage at that particular point in history; some pro-suffragists rejected so much of contemporary suffrage politics that they were largely perceived as anti, such as Dora Marsden, who edited *The Freewoman*. The boundaries between pro and anti are so permeable as to render a simple equation of anti-suffrage remarks with anti-feminism meaningless.²⁹ This puts in context some of Woolf’s comments about the suffragists in her letters and diaries, and distinguishes her political statements from her more frivolous remarks. Woolf’s objections regarding the style of leadership, as seen in her letter to Cox, were undoubtedly coloured by class, but they were also observing a serious political issue which was much discussed within suffrage societies as well as in the blurred territory of conservative pro-suffragism and progressive anti-suffragism of the day. When the Charlotte Despard-led faction separated from the WSPU, taking about 20 per cent of the membership, and renamed themselves the Women’s Freedom League in late 1907, the split arose partly from precisely the kind of concerns about the autocratic control of the WSPU that Woolf ridiculed in her autobiographical writing.

However, making a distinction between Woolf’s anti-suffrage remarks and her anti-feminism does not offer a satisfactory explanation when it comes to her startling rejection of the word ‘feminist’ in *Three Guineas*. Describing it as a word that ‘has done much harm in is day’, she incites: ‘Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper.’³⁰ Read out of context the suggestion is simply bewildering, especially when rinsed clean of

27 By ‘suffragist’ I indicate the larger assembly of suffrage supporters who used constitutionalist, non-militant methods and were grouped under the umbrella organization of the NUWSS, founded in 1897. By ‘suffragette’ I refer to the militant suffrage activists centred around the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), established in 1903. This distinction, though by no means clear-cut, especially in light of recent suffrage histories, will suffice for the purpose of this article. Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, 212.

28 For a detailed discussion, see B. Griffin, ‘Class, Gender and Liberalism in Parliament’, *Historical Journal*, 46/1 (2003).

29 For an extensive study, see S. S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900–1918* (London, 1986).

30 *Three Guineas* (1938; repr. 2000), 227.

Woolf's specific negotiations with suffrage politics. And it is in her novels that one finds the best articulation of her politics, from which the significance of this political statement might be gauged.

III

Two suffrage characters stand out in her novels: Mary Datchet in *Night and Day* and Rose Pargiter in *The Years*. Both are New Women charting new territories beyond that of domesticity through suffrage, but there is as much distance and fundamental antagonism between their feminist politics as there is between the law-abiding constitutionalist NUWSS, led by Millicent Fawcett, and the militant WSPU, led by Mrs Pankhurst. Different too is Woolf's treatment of them: Woolf confers on Mary a dignity and affection unsurpassed among her minor characters, while Rose the suffragette receives little authorial sympathy. Seen together the two figures provide a snapshot overview of Woolf's outlook.

Mary Datchet is the formidable constitutionalist, responsible for the endless paperwork, the weekly discussion groups, the writing of the pamphlets. Her role in the novel—which largely adheres to the conventions of a romance—is both supportive and subversive: supportive in that her world is linked to that of the protagonist Katharine (prefiguring the relationship between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith) in mutually dependent yet reciprocally encoded ways; subversive in that Mary's life is defined by work, not romance, and as such Mary's sub-plot undercuts the premise on which romance is based. She is the 'odd' woman in the courtship narrative, characteristic of a large number of heroines in pro-suffrage fiction of the period where the trope of love is replaced with that of the 'vote'.³¹ And her role offers a corroboration of the thesis that *Night and Day* is as much an exercise in undermining the conventional novel as constructing it.³²

The life of the other, for both women, is taken as a point of definition, reference, and counter-guidance, and they throw into relief each other's identity while at the same time they vicariously fulfil each other's desires.³³ Mary offers Katharine a glimpse of what she might hold if she succeeds in breaking free from the groaning inheritance of her grand literary predecessors and the major reference-points by

31 The most representative of these novels are Gertrude Colmore's *Suffragette Sally* (1911) and Arnold Bennett's *The Lion's Share* (1916), where the conventional romance plot is employed, to varying degrees, but the ending is hijacked and the new-found vocation is credited with all the structural meaning and significance normally attached to a union of lovers.

32 Other 'odd' women in Woolf's novels challenge notions of the spinster as an object of pity and ridicule: they include Miss Allan in *The Voyage Out*, Joan Denham in *Night and Day*, and Eleanor Pargiter and Lucy Craddock in *The Years*. For a detailed discussion, see S. Oldfield, 'From Rachel's Aunts to Miss La Trobe: Spinsters in the Fiction of Virginia Woolf', in L. L. Doan (ed.), *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* (London, 1991), 85–103.

33 Julia Briggs has stated that, 'Katharine's desire for power and independence remains largely unrecognized, operating at a subliminal level, but it is vicariously fulfilled through the figure of Mary Datchet.' See her introduction to *Night and Day*, in J. Briggs (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Introductions to the Major Works* (London, 1994), 49.

which social life is ordered for women in her social location. For if Katharine has one predominant desire (more strongly manifested than even romance) it is to obtain an identity undefined by the 'personal'—and initially Mary's suffrage work symbolizes this impersonal life, the professional life for which she yearns. As Katharine says at a discussion evening at Mary's house: 'You will always be able to say that you've done something. . . . I want to assert myself, and it's difficult, if one hasn't a profession.'³⁴ But Mary's suffrage vocation is not conceivable for someone in Katharine's position, because the world of the Hilberys presented in *Night and Day* is literary, well-to-do, and late Victorian, the combination which Brian Harrison in his influential study *Separate Spheres* characterized as 'inevitable' in anti-suffragist tendencies.³⁵

Recalling the Stephens' household—Mrs Leslie Stephen, as is well known, was one of the undersigned of 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage'—the Hilberys are distanced somewhat from the more conventional and common attitudes that might be expected from such a cultural location, yet are nevertheless deeply rooted in the traditions, public spirit, empiricism, and sanctified gender roles which shaped the anti-suffrage rhetoric of the late Victorian literary upper classes.³⁶ A brilliant parody of this is found in the review of *Night and Day* by Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer):

The Hilberys, as the saying is, 'knew everyone', and that arrogant claim was certainly upheld by the number of houses which, in a certain area, lit their lamps at night, opened their doors after 3 p.m., and admitted the Hilberys to their dining rooms, say, once a month. An indefinable freedom and authority of manner, shared by most of the people who lived in these houses, seemed to indicate that whether it were a question of art, music, or government, they were well within the gates, and could smile indulgently at the vast mass of humanity which is forced to wait and struggle and pay for entrance with common coin at the door.³⁷

Ford's spoof pinpoints the latent contradictions of this liberal set-up. He is suggesting that, for all their aesthetic subjectivism, scepticism, and high-minded

34 *Night and Day* (1919; repr. 1992), 45–6.

35 B. Harrison, *Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain* (London, 1978), 22.

36 See 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage', *Nineteenth Century* (June 1889); repr. in *Before the Vote Was Won: Arguments For and Against Women's Suffrage*, ed. J. Lewis (London, 1987), 409–17. The appeal concludes: 'the undersigned protest strongly against the proposed Extension of the Parliamentary Franchise to Women, which they believe would be a measure distasteful to the great majority of the women of the country—unnecessary—and mischievous both to themselves and to the State'. The mainstays of the anti-suffrage societies were well-known literary women, such as Mrs Humphry Ward, 'Ouida', Beatrice Webb, and Elinor Glyn, as well as the wives of prominent literary men such as Matthew Arnold, Randolph Churchill, W. Bagehot, H. H. Asquith, Alma-Tàmeda, T. H. Huxley, Arnold Toynbee, and of course Leslie Stephen.

37 Ford Madox Hueffer, 'Novel and Romance', *Piccadilly Review* (23 Oct. 1919), 6. He distinguishes between novel and romance in this review, citing *Night and Day* as a modern example of the latter.

ideals, the world of the Hilberys has at its core an elitism that runs counter to democratic convictions. In short, they are the 'cultural aristocrats' as promoted by Andreas Huyssen and John Carey, about whom Ford (well within the gates himself) displays a kind of moral anxiety.³⁸ But Ford's considered satire is essentially an extension of Woolf's own take on this world. By representing the gulf between the world of high culture and the world of suffrage, as represented respectively by Katharine and Mary, Woolf dramatizes the inevitable clash of aesthetic and political principles when the peak of the suffrage campaign coincided with the advent of English modernism. At the point when modern conditions dictated that art turn its back on society and turn in upon itself—Huyssen's the 'great divide'—women writers found that their feminist principles compelled them to face the distinctly dogmatic, inclusive, pragmatic politics of suffrage. Inevitably many women writers found themselves caught between the two, and this tension is nowhere better expressed than in *Night and Day*.³⁹

For example, when Katharine, curious about and envious of Mary's work, visits her at the suffrage office she finds herself recoiling when she comes face to face with the actual work, the people, and the physical reality of the office. The ultimate dismay for her comes when the suffragists start discussing literature: Katharine finds their attempt at literary discourse pathetic. In any event, the real shock to her is that they are discussing it at all. In an attempt to come to terms with this baffling experience, she turns it into a dinner-table amusement for her parents:

'... I never saw such queer-looking people. And the man discovered I was related to the poet, and talked to me about poetry. Even Mary Datchet seems different in that atmosphere.'

'Yes, the office atmosphere is very bad for the soul,' said Mr. Hilbery.

'I don't remember any offices in Russell Square in the old days, when Mamma lived there,' Mrs. Hilbery mused, 'and I can't fancy turning one of those noble great rooms into a stuffy little Suffrage office. Still, if the clerk read poetry there must be something nice about them.'

'No, because they don't read it as we read it,' Katharine insisted.⁴⁰

Katharine's immediate reaction to the world of suffrage is an overwhelming sense of estrangement, and she is only able to make sense of the confusing emotional

38 See A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (London, 1986), esp. sects. 1–3, 'Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other', and J. Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses 1880–1939* (London, 1992). There has been considerable post-'after great divide' debate about whether it happened quite so dramatically. The counter-arguments point out that such readings ascribe homogeneous and reactionary values to modernism based on the personal beliefs of some writers, while overlooking their radical aesthetics. See M. North, 'Eliot, Lukács, and the Politics of Modernism', in R. Bush (ed.), *T. S. Eliot: The Modernist in History* (London, 1991), 191–204, and M. Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Yeats* (London, 1995).

39 That many intellectuals claimed a certain cultural aristocracy does not suggest that the upper classes were united in anti-suffragism, or that anti-suffragism was confined to the upper classes: anti-suffragism, like suffragism, cut across class and gender. But among many differing and sometimes conflicting reasons behind this pattern, the one strong basis from which anti-suffragism stemmed was an elitist idea of a cultural aristocracy to which many literary men and women subscribed.

40 *Night and Day*, 80–1.

muddle by translating it into the language of her social class, which neatly decodes this world as 'low' to her cultural 'high'. This chimes with Woolf's own reaction as expressed in her diaries and letters, but, in contrast to them, we can discern a latent revision of opinion (a full revision will not materialize until twenty years later in *The Years*) when we witness Katharine troubled by the discrepancy of the two worlds, and observe her 'comparing her home and her father and her mother with the suffrage office and the people there' for the rest of the evening.⁴¹

While Katharine's notably absent-minded, unfocused, and dreamy ways deflect her from her desire for an 'impersonal' life and lead her in the direction of romance, Mary Datchet's exceptionally disciplined, clear-sighted, and practical negotiations bring her to an alternative destination. The scene in which Mary is tempted to make Katharine realize the importance of work establishes a space, independent of romance yet equal to it: 'She must be made to realize—to feel.'⁴² thinks Mary. The last word resonates—not to 'think' but to 'feel': Woolf, by placing 'work' in the same emotional category as romance, gives support to the new possibilities for women.

Mary, however, restrains herself from proffering her recognition to Katharine:

'You'll be married, and you'll have other things to think of,' she said inconsequently, and with an accent of condescension. She was not going to make Katharine understand in a second, as she would, all that she herself had learnt at the cost of such pain. No. Katharine was to be happy; Katharine was to be ignorant; Mary was to keep this knowledge of the impersonal life for herself.⁴³

Mary's attainment of the 'knowledge of the impersonal life' has struck some readers as rather an unsatisfactory conclusion for her. David Trotter has commented that Mary Datchet's role in the novel, like many others in novels of this period, 'is to embody an unromantic independence, which the heroine admires but does not in the end want for herself'.⁴⁴ But it might equally be said that Mary, who embodies unromantic independence, does not want Katharine's path for herself either, though she may understand it. The scene when Mary realizes that Ralph, with whom she had been romantically involved, is in love with Katharine, mocks the assumptions on which romances are based and signals the independent life she will find:

The pain of her loss shot through her. Nothing would make up—not success, or happiness, or oblivion. But this pang was immediately followed by the assurance that now, at any rate, she knew the truth; and Katharine, she thought, stealing a look at her, did not know the truth; yes, Katharine was immensely to be pitied.⁴⁵

41 *Night and Day*, 83.

42 *Ibid.* 228.

43 *Ibid.* 229.

44 D. Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895–1920* (1993), 44.

45 *Night and Day*, 384.

This epiphanic moment when Mary accepts her independence as the 'truth' is surely not a moment of compensatory sentiments. She genuinely pities Katharine, because 'She doesn't understand about work. She's never had to. She doesn't know what work is. I've only found out myself quite lately. But it's the thing that saves one—I'm sure of that.' 'Truth' found through work is offered as a new experience open to young women, and Mary is consequently rewarded with the satisfaction of a sense of belonging to 'the pattern of human life'.⁴⁶ It is to Mary that the lovers go when they have become engaged, as if she embodies the ideal that they would both have liked for themselves, and as if Mary, through her suffrage work, was vicariously accomplishing that desire for them. The image of Mary's brightly lit room, as seen by Mary and Ralph from the dark streets below, overturns the spatial metaphors of high/low employed in the earlier part of the novel and their worlds now seem less divided than sequential—the future, it seems, lies with Mary. Gazing up at her lit window they imagine her 'working out her plans . . . for the good of the world that none of them were ever to know'.⁴⁷

Almost twenty years later, in her second to last novel, *The Years* (1937), Woolf returned to some of her earlier enquiries. This novel also examines the everyday lives of a middle-class family, around the same period, albeit with a longer time-span, and charts the vicissitudes of women's lives during the first wave of feminism. But it is done with an eye that shows a considerable wariness of old certainties and optimism. In contrast to the idealistic and confident keynote of *Night and Day*, the tone that runs through this chronicle is fractured. In particular, Rose Pargiter the suffragette represents altogether different judgements to Mary.

Because Rose is a suffragette, many interpretations have revolved around the view that she represents a token of Woolf's belief in feminism. Quentin Bell noted that, out of all the characters in *The Years*, only Rose is heroic because she goes to prison for the suffrage cause and wins a medal for her war efforts. Maggie Humm has written: 'Rose Pargiter joins the suffragette campaigns in *The Years* . . . [and] opposes the heterosexual story with feminist alternatives'.⁴⁸ And biographies invariably touch upon Rose when discussing Woolf and feminism.⁴⁹ This point has been taken further by Laura Moss Gottlieb. Based on Jane Marcus's finding of the number of references to the colours red and gold in *The Years*, Gottlieb makes a case for a connection between Rose and Sappho on the grounds of the prevalence of

46 This sense of belonging to the pattern of human life figures again in Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* (1941).

47 *Night and Day*, 431. The symbol of the room is one of the most significant ones in Woolf's works, signifying not confinement but space, a refuge from the patriarchal world where the female characters can seek shelter and grow. Kitty Malone's room in *The Years*, Mrs Dalloway's in the eponymous novel, and Rachel Vinrace's in *The Voyage Out*, all signal this in different ways. The most representative room of all is, of course, the room of one's own.

48 M. Humm, 'Landscape for a Literary Feminism: British Women Writers 1900 to the Present', in H. Forsas-Scott (ed.), *Textual Liberation* (London, 1991), 18.

49 L. Gordon, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1984), 255; J. King, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1994), 495–6.

roses and the colours red and gold in Sappho's poetry. Based on this, she argues that Rose is an indication of Woolf's hopes for a civilization founded on women's values:

implicit but pervasive references to Sappho, whose poetry celebrates the love between women, reinforce those hints. The red and gold images so prevalent in *The Years* and in Sappho's poetry, the similarity of themes in *The Years* and in Sappho's poems, and the emphasis on both Rose Pargiters in the novel and on roses in Sappho suggest that Woolf was interested in linking Sappho with some of the themes and characters of the novel. . . . Together, the references to Sappho and to the *Antigone* can be interpreted as an indication of Woolf's hope for a kind of Outsider's republic, inspired, by Sappho's Lesbos: a civilization founded on 'women's values'; a community based on love, respect, equality, free speech, and choice, rather than on power, privilege, money and force.⁵⁰

But Woolf's suffrage politics invite a challenge to these arguments at every point. This is because the connection between heroism and militancy is not one that Woolf herself makes in the novel. Rather, the connection that is made continually is the one between Rose's early victimization and her later violations. Those who are violated are shown to go on to violate and dominate in their turn, demonstrating the cycle of domination that results from the system of patriarchal control. *The Years* (and later *Three Guineas*) problematize patriarchy as a *system* of sexuality, the consequences of which are the profound interconnection of the subordinate status of women, militarism, and fascism. The argument is made plainly in *Three Guineas*, whereas a more oblique criticism is found in *The Years* in the story of Rose, where male force, the subordination of women, and militarism come together. Woolf makes it clear that militant suffragism as practised by Rose Pargiter is not on the side of human progress, but is rather a section in the continuum of violence that has fascism and militarism as its extreme.

One of the first descriptions of Rose is that 'She looked the image of her father'; another that 'She stood beside him, with her hand hollowed round her ears like a military man'; she is 'the very spit and image of . . . old Uncle Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse'. When Rose ventures on the forbidden evening trip to Lamley's, she does so in the spirit of an imperial conquest. 'I am Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse . . . riding to the rescue!' she pretends. Eleanor thinks of her sister: 'She ought to have been the soldier'; and that she is 'exactly like the picture of old Uncle Pargiter of Pargiter's Horse', and at another point Rose 'threw herself slightly backwards, as if she were leading an army'. But, as Kitty sums up, and as Woolf herself might have said: 'Rose was wrong . . . Force is always wrong.'⁵¹

In addition, the argument that suffragettes, represented by Rose, indicate a possibility for a civilization based on 'women's values' is not tenable in the context of Woolf's abhorrence of militancy, spectacle, and authoritarian organization, in short, the defining characteristics of the WSPU suffragettes. Mrs Pankhurst's

50 L. M. Gottlieb, 'The Years: A Feminist Novel', in E. K. Ginsburg and L. M. Gottlieb (edd.), *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays* (London, 1983), 225.

51 *The Years* (1937), 16, 386, 449, 27, 169, 174, 451.

militant rhetoric, for example, when she stated that ‘One of the joys of life men have taken from women is the joy of warring’, was anathema to Woolf’s thinking on this issue, as were the anti-egalitarian facets of the WSPU and their love of spectacle, processions, and public demonstrations. As is clear in *Three Guineas*, Woolf came to associate feminism very strongly with pacifism, while with the impact of the Great War, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst turned into full-blown nationalists, changing the WSPU journal’s name from *Suffragette* to *Britannia* and making it a platform for the advocacy of military conscription for men, industrial conscription for women, and the internment of all people of the enemy race. Strikers and pacifists were severely denounced.⁵² Given all this, Rose cannot but be an impassioned critique of the kind of feminism the WSPU endorsed, representing what Woolf saw as the other extreme to ‘women’s values’.

One final point about Woolf and suffrage politics is that there is a thread of constant revision. Though Katharine’s reactions towards suffragists in *Night and Day* reiterate Woolf’s own when she was working for the branch of the National Union, a complete rethink culminates in *The Years*. In this sense, this novel is a coda to Woolf’s earlier feminist enquiries in *Night and Day*. Mary’s colleagues in the suffrage office in *Night and Day*—Sally Seal and Mr Clacton—were the objects of Woolf’s penetrating ridicule. Scatterbrained and inefficient, Sally Seal recalls one of those ‘helpless women’ Woolf wrote about in her letter to Katherine Cox, who suffered from a case of uncritical heroine-worship of a barely disguised version of Mrs Fawcett. Not only was she mindlessly and pointlessly driven, but she embodied the type the anti-suffragists often caricatured and lampooned—the sexually repressed women for whom suffrage was a way of avoiding the deeper failings of their empty lives.⁵³

A remarkable follow-up, as well as a reversal, which captures Woolf’s changed perspective is found in a fleeting description of Eleanor Pargiter. Like Sally Seal who runs the Russell Square branch of the Society for General Suffrage (SGS), Eleanor is devoted to philanthropic work. But in *The Years* Woolf problematizes social stereotyping and projection, and portrays Eleanor with much more empathy. In a near parody of her own previous delineation of the philanthropic worker, Woolf sketches a scene where a stranger is observing Eleanor on a bus: ‘a well-known type; with a bag; philanthropic, well nourished; a spinster; a virgin; like all the women of her class, cold; her passions had never been touched; yet not unattractive.’⁵⁴ The stranger grossly misperceives Eleanor, and through this sketch, flanked by extensive description of Eleanor’s full and hectic inner life, Woolf demonstrates how inaccurate the social perception of such women can be, calling to mind her own use of such social types in her portrayal of Sally.

52 Emmeline Pankhurst finished her career as a Conservative candidate for parliament; Christabel Pankhurst also tended towards Conservatism.

53 For example, Sir Almroth Wright, *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage* (London, 1913), 181.

54 *The Years*, 74.

In *The Years* Woolf revises her earlier predisposition towards a certain type of suffragist (in a similar way she also revises her semitic position) and affirms her place at the intellectual centre of the pacifist wing of the constitutionalist activists by linking suffragette militancy with patriarchy and militarism. In this light, her attack on feminists in *Three Guineas* is a highly specific condemnation of the militant suffragettes who had, by this time, become synonymous with feminists in the popular imagination (a conflation of suffragettes with the first-wave feminists still persists). The manuscript notes on *Three Guineas* reveals that Woolf, like many other feminists of the day, including Helena Swanwick and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, believed in the humanist case for feminism: 'Let us substitute for the word "feminist" the word "humanist" to signify we who believe that we hbs [human beings] though now shreds and patches can be brought to a state of greater completeness.'⁵⁵ It also seems noteworthy that *Three Guineas* began as the speech 'Professions for Women', which was given to the London and National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931. Prior to 1919 this society had been the London Society for Women's Suffrage (1907–19) and Pippa Strachey was the secretary to both. Though not as militant as the WSPU, the LNSWS was perceived to be more autocratic in organization and of predominantly middle-class pre-occupations compared with the rest of the NUWSS. And during the Great War they opened the Women's Service Bureau as part of the war efforts. In this context, it appears that Woolf's reference to feminism is highly nuanced. At one point, Woolf pointedly refers to the WSPU while speaking through Mr C. E. M. Joad: 'Before the war money poured into the coffers of the W.S.P.U in order that women might win the vote which, it was hoped, would enable them to make war a thing of the past. The vote is won . . . but war is very far from being a thing of the past.'⁵⁶ The WSPU's belligerent nationalism is continually, albeit obliquely, upbraided and simultaneously subsumed by Woolf's metaphorical co-optation of militancy while she urges other forms of action to appropriate and neutralize this brand of feminist politics.

In short, the suffrage context makes visible the field of forces in which Woolf was writing and brings the concrete particularity of her feminist judgement into relief. As I have argued, Woolf was much more deeply implicated in contemporary politics than either intermittent activism or her autobiographical writing suggest, and her deep-seated feminist convictions were specified to the highest degree, distinctly removed from certain feminist practices for which she believed there could be no ample support.

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⁵⁵ Monks House papers B16b.

⁵⁶ *Three Guineas* (1938; repr. 1991), 164.