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Virginia Woolf: Liberating Lesbian Readings from Heterosexual Bias

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"You see Bobby dear", she said, . . . "there are two people . . . alive with emotion. Sporting with emotion, who can't walk along the street without the tears starting to our eyes . . . [at] the beauty of the spring . . . & then they take that emotion, & down comes the stamp -- {an ugly stamp & a lying stamp} . . . what is left of {that emotion?} Hatred. . . or nothing at all".

Elvira to Bobby, *Draft Y4*, p. 146.

"But this is what *I* see; this is what *I* see,"¹

Lily Briscoe, *To the Lighthouse*

Virginia Woolf scholars are long overdue in our cultivation of a consensus understanding of Woolf's sexual radicalism comparable to that developed in regard to her feminism, pacifism, class analysis, and anti-imperialism. In the 1970's and early 1980's feminist scholars initiated what is now a well-developed scholarship on Woolf's critiques of male sexual dominance over women in such forms as rape and incest, prostitution, marriage, chastity mandates, and heterosexual romantic love. Early descriptions of Woolf as a 'sexless Sappho' (by Quentin Bell, her nephew and first biographer) and claims that she saw 'life more purely than most of us . . . but less passionately' (by Clive Bell, her brother-in-law and Bloomsbury comrade) were debunked by feminist scholars. Ellen Hawkes established a foundation for discerning Woolf's erotic prose by finding 'Her metaphors intensify rather than veil sexuality . . . Immersion in the experience, not a frightened escape, moves the language'. Similarly, Sallie Sears noted that Woolf eroticized freedom for women. Marcus announced Woolf's prose a form of 'lesbian seduction', and Blanche Cook affirmed Woolf's sexual passion for Vita.²

Yet even as Woolf's sexual innovations were becoming more visible to scholars, feminists retained traces of the family stereotype of Woolf as sexually repressed. Jane Marcus, claimed that in Woolf's fiction, 'Chastity is power. Chastity is liberty', and that the 'powerful and moving

images for her own creative processes are of the chaste imagination retreating to a nunnery'³ This over-emphasis on chastity as Woolf's sexual preference and the 'chaste imagination' as her artistic ideal precludes what is still lacking among Woolf scholars: a recognition of Woolf as a self-generating, sexual adult in her private life and the creator of visionary, alternative sexualities in her writings.

Not one of Woolf's biographers has disentangled Woolf from the prude stereotype. For example, in his 1995 biography of Virginia Woolf, James King concludes Woolf is a 'eunich'. Even as prominent a feminist scholar as Naomi Black when she writes that Woolf's writing on sexual themes is marred by 'a Puritanism inherited from her Victorian forbears', repeats the old family stereotype of Woolf as sexually repressed and naive.⁴ Despite the publication in 1997 of *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, Woolf's lesbian themes are still often contested, trivialized, or limited to studies of Woolf and her lover, Vita Sackville-West.

Outdated approaches to homosexual themes are still pervasive in influential Woolf studies where Freudian and sexologist stereotypes of lesbians and gay men still prevail. Woolf biographer Mitchel Leaska insists that Virginia's passion for Vita was rooted in an unresolved infantile longing for maternal nurturance. Leaska states, 'What Virginia meant by "intimacy" was really the maternal coddling she wanted from Vita'. And again, Leaska writes, 'There was something strong and protective in Vita . . . clearly [Virginia] was responding to the nurturing, custodial atmosphere that surrounded Vita; and it was the maternal aura that attracted the thirteen year old child in Virginia'. Hermione Lee's insistence, in the most highly praised of the Woolf biographies, that we cannot identify Woolf as 'a Sapphist' because 'unlike Vita's (or Radclyffe Hall's [writings]) there are no romances between Byronic heroes and languid girls, no

sadomasochistic erotic scenes, no gloomy doomed transvestites',⁵ repeats stereotypes of lesbians as predators and sexual deviants put forth by early twentieth century sexologists.

Even contemporary Queer theorists underestimate Woolf's sexual passion and radicalism. Like Leaska, Sproles infantilizes Woolf's lesbian passion for Vita: 'These desires were both sexual as well as those of a child for comfort, unconditional love, attention, and security'. Colleen Lamos trivializes Woolf's sexual love for Vita by interpreting Woolf's comment to Ethel Smythe—I am diverse enough to want Vita and Ethel and Leonard and Vanessa and oh some other people too' (*L5*, p. 199)—as evidence that Woolf's lesbian emotions were mere 'fondness for women'.⁶ Clearly, Woolf loved several people, including her husband, Leonard. But if we compare Woolf's love letters to Leonard and to Vita we can easily distinguish the sexual passion Woolf expressed only for women.

In 1912, during their courtship, Virginia wrote Leonard warning that when he kissed her she 'felt no more than a rock'; in 1928, while she was in Paris with Vita, she writes to Leonard, more affectionately, that she looks forward to 'an hour of antelope kissing the moment she gets back' (*L1*, pp. 496, 535). However, in 1926 Virginia writes to Vita, with far more sexual expectation, that when Vita returns from Persia, 'Virginia will rush down to meet you-- . . . lick you all over'; and in 1928, while missing Vita, Woolf writes, 'I feel like a moth, with heavy scarlet eyes and a soft cape of down -- a moth about to settle in a sweet, bush -- Would it were -- ah but thats improper' (*L3*, p. 253, 469). Virginia's sexual passion for Vita inspired a metaphoric brilliance Woolf experience with Leonard or any other man. Lines like the following written to Vita are frequent in Woolf's letters and diaries. In 1926, anticipating two nights alone with Vita, Woolf writes, 'Still, the June nights are long and warm; the roses flowering; and the garden full of lust and bees, mingling in the asparagus beds', and in 1926, 'The flowers have come, and are

adorable, dusky, tortured, passionate like you—'(L3, pp. 275, 303). Beginning with *Mrs. Dalloway*, metaphors drawn from memories with Vita permeate the fiction: for example, nightingales (L429, 314), white pearls (L3 342; L3 342; L5 157), porpoises (L3 462), and pigeons (L5 266).

Woolf's prose is saturated with lesbian eroticism. Her attention is on the intensity and quality of sexual emotion rather than specific acts. Woolf's indirect, metaphoric representation of lesbian themes is consistent with her mistrust of realist representation throughout her fiction. Additionally, widespread hostilities toward feminist and lesbian sexual perspectives during her lifetime required Woolf, as well as other writers of her generation, to code much of the sexual content in her fiction. Key sexual 'events' in Woolf's fiction, like her narratives generally, occur within internal landscapes, not as overt acts. Therefore, to discern Woolf's lesbian erotic themes, I suggest readers suspend, at least for a while, their own presuppositions about what constitutes sexual liberation for women, especially criteria tied to heterosexual bias and quantifiable sexual acts.

The following focus on Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's sexual assessments of Woolf is intended as just one example of how unacknowledged 'heterosexual blinders' can block reader access to Woolf's lesbian passion in her life and fiction. Like so many readers, Rosenman mistakes Woolf's negative comments about *heterosexuality* as proof that she was afraid of or indifferent to sexuality entirely. Rosenman claims Woolf's 'deeply ingrained sense of herself as asexual' prevented her from 'adopting a lesbian identity'. However, the three citations Rosenman proffers in support underline Woolf's alienation from heterosexual, not lesbian sexuality.⁷

In one, Woolf gladly declares herself a 'eunich' in reaction to confidences regarding their love quarrels from both Mary Hutchinson and Clive Bell. Woolf's note that 'He made a fool of her [Mary] all over London' (L3, p. 320) suggests a far more likely explanation for Woolf's proud indifference to male sexual exploitation of women than any residue 'Puritanism inherited from

the Clapham sect'. In Rosenman's second citation, Woolf calls herself 'not a man nor a woman' in a letter to Vanessa that complains of Clive's 'Don Juan-ing' and mockingly recounts the details of Julia Strachey's wedding to Stephen Tomlin. Woolf juxtaposes these derogatory comments about heterosexual courtship and marriage with a lesbian fantasy of 'Running up the ladies skirts' (*L3*, p. 410). Julia was a gifted writer whose talents were never fully expressed. Woolf once called Julia a 'gifted wastrel' (*D2*, p. 324). Looking back on this disastrous marriage, Julia recounts how he 'hurt [her] cruelly', treated her like a 'symbol' rather than an equivalent human being, recalls his 'interminable tirades', and the last two years as especially 'frightening—even dangerous'.⁸ No wonder, in the third citation, Woolf flirtatiously invites Vita to a kind of 'falling in love' unlike the heterosexual romantic entrapments Woolf finds around her (*L3*, p. 232-33). I have somewhat belabored these citations because they reflect a common pattern in Woolf scholarship: the way the myth of Woolf as asexual is so resilient it often overrides even frank evidence of Woolf's astute sexual assessments and her lesbian preferences.

Sexuality is not a category distinct from Woolf's feminist, pacifist, and aesthetic radicalism. In 1938, Woolf's habits of brave independence fortified her against the attacks on *Three Guineas*. She writes, 'no one can bully me' (*D5*, p. 163). When Woolf declares herself bored by the 'magic virtues of passion', she reacts against Ralph Partridge's bullying of Dora Carrington. Woolf's refusal to commiserate with Ralph -- she shouts at him, 'I should have left you if you had treated me like that' -- is congruent with the policy of disloyalty to dominators urged in *Three Guineas* (*D2*, p. 177; see also *L3*, p. 56, 136, 386). In her life and fiction, Woolf's sense of herself as 'fundamentally . . . an outsider' (*D5*, p. 189) had a far greater influence on her sexual choices than any 'ingrained sense of herself as asexual' left over from childhood. Read in the context of the practice of 'indifference' or 'absence' (*TG*, p. 107, 119), Woolf's sexual detachment is

recognizable as a strategy of resistance rather than an alleged personal failing. Besides, as is now well-documented, Woolf's sexual boredom entirely disappears around Sapphism (*D3*, p 51; *L3*, p. 275, p. 469).

In contrast to Julia and most of the women in her circles, Woolf eschewed the deep harm to self and art that sexual love, when pursued along the 'railway lines of convention' (*D2*, p. 178) can wreak on women. Woolf's two love partners, Leonard and Vita, both adored her and supported her work. Unlike nearly all the women around her, (Vanessa, Dora Carrington, Julia Strachey, Mary Hutchinson . . .), Woolf's sexual feelings did not entangle her in degrading or at best dispiriting romantic entanglements. Is this not a model of female sexual liberation? We might compare the love stories of Virginia and Vita, Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood, Renee Vivien and Natalie Barney, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, to theorize Woolf's lesbian choices within the context of her Sapphic peers. Woolf's sexual choices were made on behalf of personal freedom, not chaste retreat. What, exactly, does Woolf's model of sexual liberation mean in the context of Sapphic modernists of her generation?

The facts about Woolf's sexual life, just recalled, are familiar but too commonly judged by criteria about what constitutes a sexually liberated woman that are tied to heterosexuality and quantifiable sexual activities. Woolf rejected such criteria in her life and in her fiction. Re-reading Woolf's sexual choices as congruent with her political radicalism respects Woolf as an adult creator of sexual alternatives rather than victim of chastity mandates or sexual trauma inflicted in childhood. Drawing on her own violations and those of women she knew, Woolf minutely analyzes the devastation chastity and sexual violation wreak on women. But Woolf is a visionary and fighter on sexual as well as other themes. Writing on childhood trauma was especially difficult for her, but that did not prevent her from doing so.

Woolf's contempt for men's chastity ideals imposed on 'ladies' is unremitting in life and fiction. She mocked the sexual prudery of other women of her generation, as when she dismisses a Mrs. Whitehead's accusation that she and Vanessa appeared 'practically naked' when they dressed as figures from a Gauguin picture at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, or when she caricature's Elena Richmond as a 'gigantic mass of purity' (*L2*, p. 505). Woolf pointedly rejects the 'chaste imagination' as metaphor for women's creativity when she writes men's 'chastity fetish' 'twisted, & deformed' women's 'imagination' (*Draft ROO*, p. 83). In the holograph for *The Years* when Elvira (Sara in the published version) confronts Rose, claiming their upbringing to believe chastity defines a woman's virtue is a lie. Pointing to her sister, Maggie, Elvira challenges Rose to pick out which is the virgin and which is not, and of course, Rose cannot (*Draft Y4*, p. 29).⁹ Throughout her fiction, Woolf mocks chastity ideals as weapons of male domination over women: recall Willoughby's sentimental adoration of his dead wife and Mr Ramsay's 'loving' control over his 'beloved' Mrs Ramsay.

Though unsustainable, Marcus' early attempts to combine the 'chaste imagination retreating to a nunnery' and the lesbian erotic depicts an ongoing dilemma for feminist scholars. How to write about—or even recognize—a female erotic model that is wholly independent of men and at one with feminist and pacifist values? Can we conceive, as Woolf seems to do, of female sexual passion as pervasive, life enhancing, founded in, but not limited to sexual acts? Without reducing lesbian love depicted in Woolf's novels to fond feelings among friends and family? Can lesbian sexuality be creative, self-generating, not merely reactive or imitative of extant medical or legal models?

These questions, central to sexual studies of Woolf, are also central to current scholarship that may determine the reshaping of what constitutes modernism and influential modernists. A 2005 debate between prominent modernist scholars, Robert Scholes and Christine Froula, indicates

what is at stake in the failure to consolidate theories about Woolf as sexual theorist comparable to theories that have won Woolf iconic status as a modernist innovator.¹⁰ Significantly, despite their differences, both Scholes and Froula posit a similar question as at the heart of modernist creativity: what constitutes sexual liberation and who gets to decide?

According to Robert Scholes, Joyce and Picasso elevated the brothel as 'the' emblematic modernist textual space. In this textual/sexual place, men appropriate women's subjectivity and exclude women who are not prostitutes. Based on this model, Scholes suggests Woolf be read as impressionist or post-impressionist (in the tradition of Walter Pater and Henry James) and excluded from the modernist canon. This is, he insists, a descriptive not evaluative categorization. It is of salient importance to sexual studies of Woolf that if other criteria, familiar as markers of modernism had been isolated such as style innovations, the break with realism, or even the 'battle of the sexes', neither Scholes nor anyone else could so easily propose Woolf's exclusion. Her innovations in these areas have been too well-theorized and disseminated. But when sexuality is the key, it is still too easy, as Scholes' demarcation suggests, to exclude Woolf from core modernist debates in her own and our time.

Froula responds by establishing a continuum between modernism's brothels and the 'quasi-brothel' Virginia and Vanessa grew up in where George acted as both pimp and 'john'. She brings Woolf's sexual/textual agency into the modernist arena by positing Woolf's written condemnation of George as the prostitute talking back. Froula ends with Woolf 'wounded yet with her genius unscathed, to see with clear eyes far beyond them'.¹¹ Despite decades of resistance from Woolf scholars to incest readings, Froula posits Woolf as a strong sexual theorist whose critique reaches out of the quasi-brothel of the family home into the narcissistic heart of male modernist versions of sexual and artistic liberation. As Suzette Henke notes, Woolf's

trauma writings belong to a lineage of twentieth century women from Collette to Audre Lorde who used narrative as trauma healing.¹² Scholars might consolidate Woolf's stature as trauma theorist within this counter-tradition, but highlight, as Froula does, Woolf's trauma writings as astute theoretical engagement in contemporaneous debates around sexuality, as well as a record of personal suffering and healing.

Additionally, the ghostly presence of homoerotic writers Henry James and Walter Pater in the 'brothel debate' points to an illogic pervasive in sexual theorizing on Woolf and modernist studies. Scholes ignores the possibility that James and Pater's homoeroticism is a likely spur to Joyce and Picasso's hyper-heterosexual artistic obsessions, as well as Woolf's alliance with them. In fact, Woolf is commonly read as integral to artistic traditions initiated and shaped by homosexual men such as aestheticism and Bloomsbury. Yet David Eberly and Ruth Vanita are almost lone voices in theorizing Woolf's Bloomsbury alliances as based in their shared homoeroticism—*Woolf's homoeroticism*, not only the men's.¹³

As I argue more fully in 'Woolf and Theories of Sexuality', Woolf scholars could develop more accurate assessments of Woolf's sexual ideologies with theories developed inductively from Woolf's texts and contexts, rather than from contemporary sexual criteria.¹⁴ As Michael Bell notes, for modernists, 'Sexual liberation and liberation, through sexuality, were conscious and central projects of the time'. Increasingly, critics read modernism itself as a homosexual phenomenon.¹⁵ Woolf's sexual politics and aesthetics belong at the center of these discussions about modernists and sexuality. To integrate Woolf as the radical sexual innovator she is, Woolf scholars can begin by reading Woolf's sexual themes within contemporaneous lesbian and male homosexual contexts, and to ask what constitutes sexual freedom on *her* terms, not our own.

Endnotes

- ¹ Virginia Woolf, 1933/1993. *The Years*, holograph, microfilm. 8 vols. *The Virginia Woolf Manuscripts* from the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications International. { } indicate words crossed out in the draft. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1927/1955), p. 19, emphasis added. All further references to Woolf's texts are to the HBJ editions.
- ² Clive Bell, *Old Friends: Personal Recollections* (London: Orion Publishing Co., 1988), p. 113. Ellen Hawkes Rogat, 'The Virgin in the Bell Biography', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 20. 2 (April 1974), pp. 96-113; p. 111. Sallie Sears, 'Notes on Sexuality: *The Years* and *Three Guineas*' (Bulletin of the New York Public Library 80 (1977), pp. 211-20, pp. 217-20. Jane Marcus, 'Sapphisty: Narration as Lesbian Seduction' in *A Room of One's Own* in *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 163-87. Blanche Cook, '"Women Alone Stir My Imagination": Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 4 (1979), pp. 718-39.
- ³ Marcus, 'Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny' in eds. Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret R. Higonett, *The Representation of Women in Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 60-97, pp. 64, 67.
- ⁴ James King, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 386. Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 184-85.
- ⁵ Mitchel Leaska, *Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998), pp. 248, 230. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 485.

- ⁶ Karyn Z. Sproles, *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006), p. 54. Colleen Lamos, 'Queer Conjunctions in Modernism' in ed. Bonnie Kime Scott, *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2007), pp. 336-45; p. 337.
- ⁷ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Sexual Identity and *A Room of One's Own*: "Secret Economies" in Virginia Woolf's Feminist Discourse', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14. 3 (1989), pp. 634-50. p. 644 note 48. On 'heterosexual blinders' see Toni McNaron, 'A Lesbian reading Virginia Woolf' in eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 10-20.
- ⁸ Julia Strachey, *Julia: a Portrait of Julia Strachey by Herself*, ed. Frances Partridge (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983), pp. 126-28.
- ⁹ Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury' in *Moments of Being* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 159-79, p. 178-9. Woolf, *Women and Fiction: The Manuscript versions of 'A Room of One's Own*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).
- ¹⁰ Christine Froula, 'On French and British Freedoms: Early Bloomsbury and the Brothels of Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 12.4 (2005), pp. 553-80. Robert Scholes, 'In the Brothel of Modernism: Picasso and Joyce',
www.brown.edu/Departments/MCM/people/scholes/PicJoy.
- ¹¹ Froula, 'Brothels', p. 576.
- ¹² Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). See also, Henke and David Eberly, *Virginia Woolf and Trauma: Embodied Texts* (New York: Pace University Press, 2007).

- ¹³ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Vanita, 'Bringing Buried Things to Light: Homoerotic Alliances in *To the Lighthouse*', in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*. David Eberly, 'Talking It All Out: Homosexual Disclosure in Virginia Woolf', *Virginia Woolf: Themes and Variations: Selected Papers from the Second Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (New York: Pace University Press, 1993), pp. 128-43.
- ¹⁴ Patricia Morgne Cramer, 'Woolf and Theories of Sexuality' in eds. Jane Goldman and Bryony Randall, *Virginia Woolf in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
- ¹⁵ Michael Bell, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism' in ed. Michael Levenson, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 9-32, p. 25. See also, Michael F. Davis, 'Latent Intelligence and the Conception of Queer Theory' in eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams, *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire (1880-1920)* (Greensboro, North Carolina, ELT Press, 2002), pp. 261-85. Christopher Reed, 'Making History: The Bloomsbury Group's Construction of Aesthetic and Sexual Identity' in ed. Whitney Davis, *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History* (New York: Harrington Park Pres, 1994), pp. 189-224.