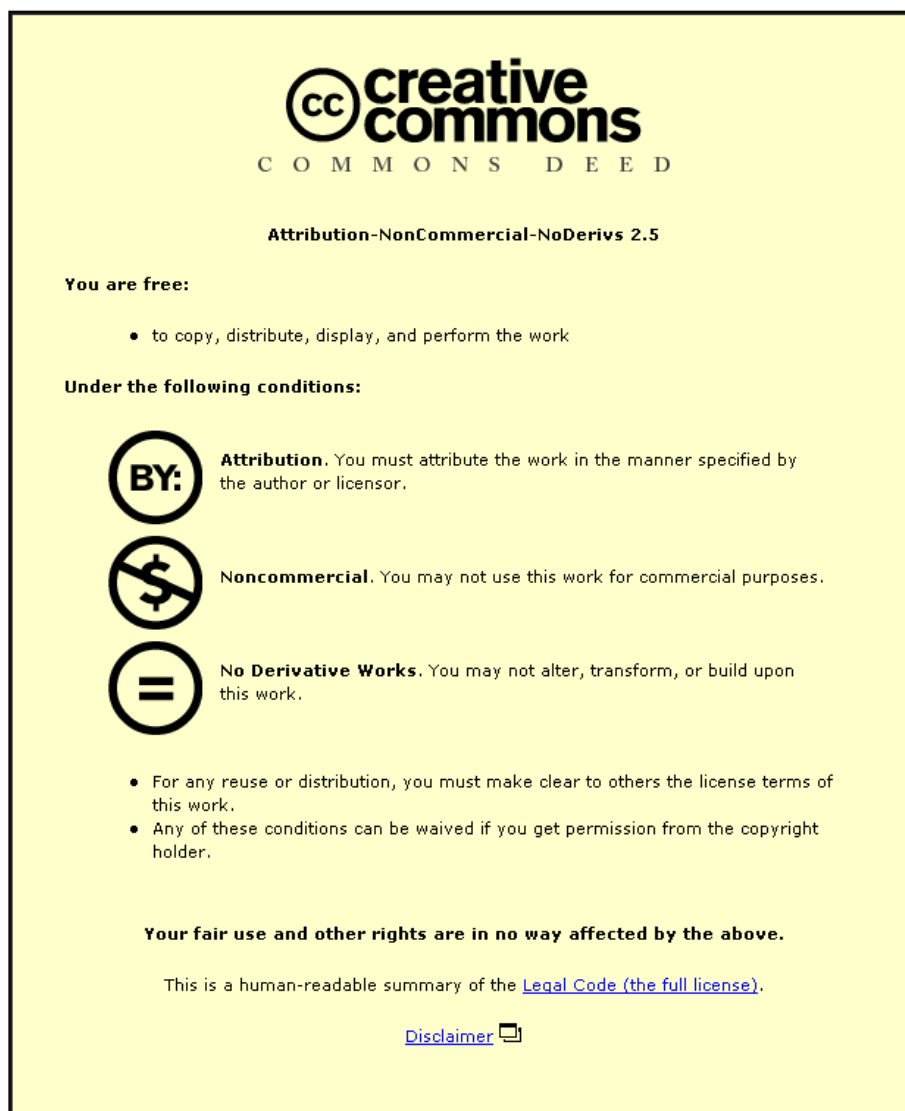


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**SISTERS AND RIVALS: THE THEME OF FEMALE RIVALRY  
IN NOVELS BY WOMEN 1914-1939**

by


Diana June Wallace

A Doctoral Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy  
of Loughborough University

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will explore representations of female rivalry in novels by women between 1914 and 1939. It will focus especially on women writers' reversal of the 'erotic triangle' paradigm theorised by René Girard (1961) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985). By using a female-male-female triangle these women novelists are able to examine the conflict between women's primary bonds to other women and their desire for the sexual fulfilment and social/economic status offered by a relationship with a man. The first chapter will offer an historical overview and reasons for a particular interest in this theme during this period. Chapter Two will compare the models of female rivalry which can be drawn from the work of Freud (of key importance in the inter-war period) and Luce Irigaray, from studies of blood sister relationships, and from a Bakhtinian model of subjectivity constructed through dialogue. Both chapters will include brief analyses of novels.

The central chapters will use these models of female rivalry to offer detailed analyses of texts by five women writers: May Sinclair, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Rosamond Lehmann. The chapter on May Sinclair explores her use of psychoanalysis to problematise the motif of self-sacrifice in Victorian women's novels - the woman who sacrifices her own desires in order to cede the man she loves to her friend or sister. The chapter on Rebecca West looks at her use of her sisters as models for her female characters, and at her exploration of relations between women who are brought together only by their relation to the man they both love. The following two chapters will offer an extended analysis of the friendship between Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby and their intertextual rivalry over the meaning of their friendship and female friendship in general. The chapter on Rosamond Lehmann explores her valorisation of sister relationships and her examination of the romance plot and the way that it constructs women as rivals.

Finally, the conclusion will focus on a reading of Lehmann's retrospective *The Echoing Grove* (1953), which fuses the figures of the rival and the sister. It will argue for the need for a model of female rivalry which can encompass the tension generated by the simultaneous and competing positions occupied by women as rival commodities within a 'male economy' and as 'sisters' within a 'female economy'. I will suggest that we need new plots and narratives which can encompass rivalry between women which is not over a man. We also need to consider the possibility that some kinds of rivalry between women can, ironically, be both positive and energising.

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✓



## ABBREVIATIONS

Vera Brittain

DT: *The Dark Tide*, London: Grant Richards, 1923  
TY: *Testament of Youth*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1933  
HE: *Honourable Estate*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1936  
TF: *Testament of Friendship*, London: Virago, 1980 [1940]

Winifred Holtby

CS: *The Crowded Street*, London: Virago, 1981 [1924]  
SR: *South Riding*, Glasgow: Fontana, 1974 [1936]

Rosamond Lehmann

DS: *Dusty Answer*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1936 [1927]  
IW: *Invitation to the Waltz*, London: Virago, 1981 [1932]  
WS: *The Weather in the Streets*, London: Virago, 1981 [1936]  
EG: *The Echoing Grove*, London: Collins, 1953

May Sinclair

TS: *The Three Sisters*, London: Virago, 1982 [1914]  
MO: *Mary Olivier*, London: Virago, 1980 [1919]  
HF: *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, London: Virago, 1980 [1922]

Rebecca West

RS: *The Return of the Soldier*, London: Virago, 1980 [1918]  
J: *The Judge*, London: Virago, 1980 [1922]

NOTE: Unless enclosed in square brackets all ellipses in quotations are as in the original text.

## INTRODUCTION

Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been altered had she done so! As it is [...] the whole thing is simplified, conventionalised, if one dared to say it, absurdly. Cleopatra's only feeling about Octavia is one of jealousy. Is she taller than I am? How does she do her hair? [...] how interesting it would have been if the relationship between the two women had been more complicated.

(Woolf, 1977a, 78-79)

While Virginia Woolf's contention in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that 'Chloe liked Olivia' (1977a, 78) has led to a substantial body of work which has established female friendship as an important theme in women's writing, the issue of rivalry, that 'Cleopatra did not like Octavia', has attracted less attention.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, rivalry and competition between women have been uncomfortable topics for feminists. 'Sisterhood' as an ideal of equal, supportive female friendship, both political and personal, has been a productive metaphor for the feminist movement. The political need to valorise relationships between women has left an uneasy silence around the equally central and complex issue of rivalry in fiction by women. Ironically, women's fiction is not only more complex in its treatment of the subject than, as Woolf indicates, male-authored texts, but often franker than feminist theory or criticism.

One assumption that underlies much work on female friendship is that such friendship *per se* threatens patriarchal structures by uniting women, while female rivalry supports such structures by dividing women. Janice Raymond (1986), for instance, argues that female friendship threatens 'hetero-values and ideas' (1991, 20). This is, I think, too simple. In Victorian fiction, as Tess Cosslett shows, female friendships, far from threatening the status quo, 'operate to assimilate the woman into heterosexual relationships' (1988, 7). The concept of 'sisterhood', Gill Frith argues, was used to support dominant nineteenth-century ideologies. Hence, she suggests, 'We need to disentangle the concept of sisterhood, to see that it is not a unitary or transhistorical idea, and to recognise that the bonds between women cannot always be celebrated as potentially subversive, as mysteriously "outside" ideology' (1988, 17). Gabriele Griffin goes so far as to argue that the celebration of *non-sexual* female friendship by 1980s

feminist literary critics was itself 'a form of retrenchment from the more radical stances of the early 1970s and is already part of the "backlash" currently being debated in feminist circles' (1993, 132).

A second assumption is that if rivalry and competition are 'masculine' characteristics women are, therefore, 'nicer' than men. Sara Lucia Hoagland has suggested that the so-called 'feminine virtues' of altruism and self-sacrifice are not only part of 'femininity' as a 'concept which makes female submission to male domination seem natural and normal' (1988, 69), but also that they can be 'a means of exercising control in relationships' (70). If we need to question the gendering of altruism and self-sacrifice as 'feminine' and 'good', I would suggest that we should also question that of rivalry as 'masculine' and 'bad', and even consider the possibility that some kinds of rivalry might be productive or beneficial. Not only are friendship and rivalry not mutually exclusive - they can co-exist in the same relationship - but 'friendly rivalry' can be, as in the case of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, a spur to greater achievement.

'Competition', Louise Bernikow writes in *Among Women* (1980), 'seems to be the language we use for the process of separation, seems to be the kind of activity we throw up against the desire to merge' (1981, 99). One of the possibilities I want to explore is that female rivalry can be, as Elizabeth Abel describes friendship being, a 'vehicle of self-definition' (1981, 416). It can reflect, not the dominance of 'hetero-reality', but the primacy of female bonds and the need to assert difference from another woman. As such it can even threaten male power structures.

The years between 1914 and 1939 were, for historical reasons which I shall outline in Chapter One, a period when rivalry between women was encouraged and even manufactured by the dominant ideologies. The result is that rivalry between women, especially in a form of what is popularly known as the 'eternal triangle' (two women who are rivals for the same man), appears repeatedly in inter-war women's fiction. In looking at how these texts reflect the reality of relationships between women during these years, I want also to consider the question of narrative structure, and the fact that, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis phrases it, narrative is 'a version of, or a special expression of, ideology' (1985, x).

The 'eternal' or 'erotic triangle' plot was schematised by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961). He asserts that it is often the relationship between the

rivals which is the determining factor in such a triangle, rather than the bonds between either rival and the beloved. Hence, 'the loathed rival is actually a mediator' (1976, 14), and the object of desire is often chosen precisely because she is already the choice of the rival: 'The mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire' (1976, 17).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of Girard's paradigm in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) uses the work of Gayle Rubin (1975), Lévi-Strauss (1949) and Luce Irigaray to expose its gender-blind nature, pointing out that in the majority of the triangles Girard discusses the two rivals are male and the love object female. As Sedgwick shows, this pattern can be read as an instance of what Rubin, following Lévi-Strauss, calls the 'traffic in women' (1975). Bonds between men in patriarchal society, Rubin argues, are cemented by the exchange of women who function as symbolic property. Drawing attention to the radical disruption of the continuum between male 'homosocial' and male 'homosexual' behaviour in our society (1985, 1-2), Sedgwick uncovers what she calls the 'male homosocial desire' (a phrase which reinserts the concept of desire into 'homosocial') in these exchanges. She reads a range of key 'English literature' texts to argue that the woman in the triangle functions as a mediator between men in order to evade the tabooed area of male homosexuality. The woman is used as 'exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men' (1985, 16). She is never an equal subject in these exchanges, but 'a "conduit of a relationship" in which the true *partner* is a man' (1985, 26).

The 'erotic triangle' as Sedgwick explores it is not the ahistorical, ungendered form of Girard's work, but

a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment.

(1985, 27)

It is this concept of the 'erotic triangle' as a locus for the play of desire and gender identity through historically specific relationships of power which informs my own project. I use the term 'erotic triangle' rather than the popularised 'eternal triangle' because the latter term implies a transhistorical paradigm.

The blind spot in Sedgwick's work is, as she remarks, 'the isolation, not to mention the absolute subordination, of women' within the triangle, which is 'a distortion

that necessarily fails to do justice to women's own powers, bonds and struggles' (1985, 18). As Terry Castle asks: 'Within such a totalising scheme, with its insistent focus on relations "between men", what place might there be for relations between women?' (1992, 131). The novels I will examine use a triangle of two women and a man, thus allowing relations between women to be centralised. They set up a test of gender-loyalty: is the woman's loyalty to the man who offers her the possibility of sexual fulfilment, or to the other woman, often a blood-sister?

Both Girard and Sedgwick choose novels from the traditional canon of English literature. Girard argues that 'triangular desire is the basis of the theory of the novelistic novel' (1976, 52). Sedgwick, gendering his argument, contends that the entire European canon itself is 'a male-homosocial literary canon' which is 'most so when it is most heterosexual' (1985, 17). The equation works both ways, as Castle glosses it: 'Literature canonises the subject of male homosociality; in return, it would seem, the subject of male homosociality canonises the work of literature' (1992, 131).

Castle's illuminating essay on Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936), which she reads as a self-conscious revision of Flaubert's canonical *Sentimental Education*, shows how Warner destabilises and collapses the male homosocial triangle and replaces it with a triangle of female desire. She argues that Warner's novel is 'an exemplary "lesbian fiction"' which follows a 'kind of subverted triangulation, or erotic "counterplotting", that is in fact characteristic of lesbian novels in general' (1992, 134).

I want to take issue with Castle's conclusion that this revision of the erotic triangle is 'characteristic of lesbian novels in general'. My own argument is that the female-centred triangle plot (two women and a man), is one which has a particular appeal to women writers, and is widely used in women's fiction, especially in the inter-war period. Indeed, it crosses the boundaries of genre, style and sexuality in women's writing, being used by modernists such as Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair, as well as by 'traditional' writers such as Winifred Holtby, 'popular' writers like Daphne du Maurier, and 'lesbian' writers like Warner and Radclyffe Hall. Its woman-centredness is one reason why so many of these novels have not become part of the canon but are seen as 'middle-brow', 'women's novels' or 'romance'. Not only has literature failed to canonise the subject of female homosociality, but the subject of female homosociality seems to

actively mark a text as *not* canonical. This applies not just to lesbian fiction but also to texts which explore female homosocial relations within the heterosexual romance novel.

Romance novels often (although not always) use a version of the erotic triangle. The 'other woman' as rival then becomes a key structuring element and the heroine's identity is ratified by the man's choice of her as *different* from her rival. Rivalry here is a vehicle of self-definition, but one which inscribes the woman into the status quo by separating her from other women. The romance plot, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) and Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) have argued, has exerted a stranglehold over women's narratives: 'women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over - take control of - their own lives' (Heilbrun, 1989, 17). With its marriage ending, the romance plot works to obscure the importance of female relationships and to reinforce the stereotype that rivalry between women is both inevitable and always over men.

One of my concerns will be to examine how the dominance of the romance plot affects representations of women's rivalry. The five writers I concentrate on - May Sinclair, Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Rosamond Lehmann - all use versions of the triangle plot to explore relations between women. With the possible exception of May Sinclair, each of these writers was also involved in a 'triangle' in her own life. My strategy here is to read the fiction against autobiographical and biographical writings in order to examine the disjunctions between the texts. My interest is in how the narrative structures of fiction, especially the romance plot, shape and distort the accounts these writers give of their own lives and of their 'sisters' and 'rivals'.

While the concept of 'sisterhood' has been central to feminism, the kinship bond which underlies this metaphor is rarely examined. Amy K. Levin in *The Suppressed Sister* (1992) argues that literary critics have blurred the distinction between biological and non-biological 'sisterhood'. Attention to this slippage reveals a 'silence', she argues, which 'allows critics to avoid discussing the frequent friction among biological sisters that is so much at odds with ideals of sisterhood' (1992, 16). My own feeling is that it is precisely the fact that the reality of blood sister relationships so often conflicts with the ideal of 'sisterhood' that makes it so suggestive, and allows for a more complex consideration of rivalry. Studies of sister relationships, such as those by Elizabeth Fishel (1979), Doris Faber (1983), Toni McNaron (1985) or Brigid McConville (1985), show

that they are distinguished by a complex tension between similarity and difference, closeness and separation, friendship and rivalry - what Fishel calls the 'sister knot' (1994, 78). The sister relationship, as these studies show, is a primary and formative element in a woman's sense of identity. Moreover, 'Like mothers and daughters, sisters are by definition a woman-to-woman dyad and, as such, may well constitute a threat within patriarchy' (McNaron, 1985, 5). Like the bonds of female sexual desire Castle examines, sister bonds can disrupt and collapse the supposedly canonical male-female-male triangle and offer another form of 'counterplotting'. The rival sisters novel is a special version of the triangle novel. Levin notes that

sisters generate plot [...] in much the same way as Tony Tanner [in *Adultery in the Novel*] has indicated that adultery generates plot [...] When sisters compete for a lover, the resulting triangle is a mirror image of the adulterous triangle [...] More than that, the existence of sisters generates tension as the reader seeks to understand how something can be at once similar and different.

(1992, 19-20)

This tension between similarity and difference is also evident in the use of the sister metaphor to figure the relations of writers themselves. The writers of the inter-war period were concerned especially to locate themselves in relation to nineteenth century women writers, particularly the Brontës, and often did this, as Woolf does in the following passage, through familial metaphors:

it is by no means certain that every woman is inspired by pure envy when she reads what another has written. More probably Emily Brontë was the passion of her youth; Charlotte even she loved with nervous affection; and cherished a quiet sisterly regard for Anne. Mrs Gaskell wields a maternal sway over readers of her own sex; wise, witty and very large-minded, her readers are devoted to her as to the most admirable of mothers; whereas George Eliot is an Aunt, and, as an Aunt, inimitable.

(1979, 75)

Noting the number of women who produced critical or biographical commentaries on the Brontës during this period (among them Woolf, May Sinclair, Rebecca West, Phyllis Bentley, Elizabeth von Arnim and E.M. Delafield), Patsy Stoneman has suggested that the 'combined prominence and ambiguity of the Brontë inheritance meant that coming to terms with the Brontës, like killing the Angel in the House, was "part of the occupation of a woman writer" [a phrase of Woolf's]' (1996, 78). Writing about their predecessors, either critically or by using their novels as intertexts, was a way of both locating themselves in a tradition and marking difference from earlier writers. Jane Austen,

Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot were also important. But it was specifically the Brontës who offered models of three women writers as ‘sisters’, with all the connotations of sisterly support and rivalry that implies. Equally important in this period, the Brontës offered models of the woman writer as unmarried, yet conversant with sexual passion.

The rewriting of the *Jane Eyre* plot, a ‘paradigmatic romance’ (Stoneman, 1996, 92), is a widespread and important phenomenon in this period. The economic and class differentials in this plot - the lower-class woman in love with a wealthy, upper-class man with a big house and a mad, invalid or dead first wife - demonstrate the potential of the triangle as, in Sedgwick’s words, a ‘sensitive register’ of relationships of power and meaning, and of the ‘play of desire and identification’ by which women ‘negotiate with their societies for empowerment’ (1985, 27).

This thesis will aim to expose the historically specific politics which underlie the naturalisation of female rivalry in the Freudian Oedipal triangle, and will draw especially on Luce Irigaray’s theorisation of the way that patriarchy constructs women as rivals. ‘Dialogue’ is a crucial concept here. Conversation between women is a key motif in these novels, anticipating Irigaray’s emphasis on women ‘speaking together’. This is not necessarily an ideal - dialogue can be rivalrous as well as friendly and supportive. The novels themselves, in rewriting previous texts, including Freud, are part of an ongoing intertextual dialogue. They illustrate Mikhail Bakhtin’s point that any utterance is ‘*only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication*’ (Bakhtin, 1994, 59, original emphasis). Each word (or text) is reciprocal, both a response to previous utterances and anticipating a response in the future. Bearing this in mind, my own approach to theory has been to try to set up dialogues between different theoretical models of female rivalry and between the theory and the fiction itself. Above all, I have aimed to situate my discussion of both fiction and theory within the specificity of its historical context.



## Note

<sup>1</sup> Studies of female friendship and community in women's literature from the eighteenth century onward include: Nina Auerbach *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978), Janet Todd *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980), Elizabeth Abel '(E)merging Identities: the Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women' (1981), Pauline Nestor *Female Friendship and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell* (1985), Tess Cosslett *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Literature* (1988) and Gill Frith 'The Intimacy Which is Knowledge: Female Friendship in Novels by British Women Writers' (1988); as well as chapters in Louise Bernikow *Among Women* (1980) and Annis Pratt *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1982). A useful summary of theoretical work can be found in Pat O'Connor's *Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review* (1992). Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) has been particularly influential. Janice Raymond's *A Passion for Friends: Towards a Philosophy of Female Affection* (1986), which utilises Chodorow's work, does identify the blindspot around conflict between women and theorises it as a result of patriarchal structures. Raymond's book also illustrates a common slippage between the terms 'friendship' and 'lesbian relationship', a slippage which itself leads to 'rivalry' between feminists who wish to claim as either 'lesbian' or 'just friendship' the relationship between, for instance, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby. Relevant work on lesbian relationships in literature includes Lillian Faderman *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present Day* (1981) and Emma Donoghue *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* (1993). Gabriele Griffin's *Heavenly Love? Lesbian Images in Twentieth Century Women's Writing* (1993) offers a survey and critique of work on female friendship.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 'AN AGE OF TRANSITION': HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The inter-war years were, as Winifred Holtby put it, an 'age of transition' (1934, 96), characterised by an acute sense of destabilised gender roles. Rosamond Lehmann conveys this sense retrospectively in *The Echoing Grove* (1953) when Dinah comments:

'I can't help thinking that it's particularly difficult to be a woman just at present. One feels so transitional and fluctuating ... To [sic] I suppose do men. I believe we *are* all in flux - that the difference between our grandmothers and us is far deeper than we realise - much more fundamental than the obvious social economic one. Our so-called emancipation may be a symptom, not a cause.'

(EG 311-12)

Gender identity was a site of special conflict and anxiety, exacerbated by an anti-feminist backlash. 'There had been a rise of feminism', Holtby remarked, 'there is now a reaction against it' (1934, 151). According to Deirdre Beddoe in *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* 'the single most arresting feature of the inter-war years is the strength of the notion that women's place is in the home' (1989, 3). Fears that women were encroaching on traditionally male territory led to endless debates over women's education, work, appearance, sexuality, morality and so on. Holtby pin-points three key concerns - employment, the spinster, and motherhood:

No popular magazine considers its appeal to public taste secure unless it advertises symposia on 'Are Women Blacklegs?'; 'Are Spinsters Superfluous?'; 'Is there a right to Motherhood?'[...] Novels are written to drive home the conclusion that women can or cannot successfully combine marriage and motherhood with professional employment; they are written to prove that 'Every woman is at heart a rake' [...]. The Ibsen thesis that women are captives, the Strindberg thesis that women are devils, the Barrie thesis that women are wistful little mothers, the Ethel M. Dell thesis that they are neurotic masochists yearning for the strong hand of a master - all these in different forms transform contemporary fiction.

(1934, 2)

In *Goodbye to All That* (1929) Robert Graves remarks that his wife, Nancy,

could not bear a newspaper in the house, for fear of reading some paragraph that would horrify her - about the necessity of keeping up the population; or about women's limited intelligence; or about the shameless, flat-chested girl; or anything at all about women written by clergymen.

(1960, 237)

Graves presents this as Nancy's neuroticism but it indicates the mental battering women underwent from newspapers, magazines and novels. The 'theses' Holtby identifies are an attempt to stabilise a gender identity which was perceived to be dangerously free-floating.

This anxiety over women's changing role was part of a wider sense of transition and division within the period. Images of the General Strike, of mass unemployment (reaching a peak of just under three million in the winter of 1932-33) and the Hunger Marches have come to characterise the inter-war period. But, as John Stevenson remarks, against these images must be placed 'the pictures of another Britain, of new industries, prosperous suburbs, and a rising standard of living' (1977, 12). Against the slum dwellings of Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester and East London must be placed the rapid growth of private housing - over two-and-a-half million houses were built during the 1930s, two-thirds of which were for private purchase (Stevenson, 1977, 34). The decline of traditional industries such as textiles, coal, iron and steel was accompanied by the growth of engineering, building and the new car, electricity and plastics industries. By 1939 two thirds of houses were wired for electricity (Stevenson, 1977, 17), and there were over three million motor vehicles on the road (39). The 1920s were the 'Jazz Age' of flappers with their cocktails, cigarettes and new dances - the 'Charleston', the 'Turkey Trot' and the 'Black Bottom'. The cinema and wireless brought new forms of mass entertainment. New ways of thinking - Einstein's theory of relativity, Bergson's philosophy, Sir James Fraser's anthropology, and the work of Sigmund Freud - had destabilised notions of both the physical world and of human psychology, and contributed to the development of Modernist literature, painting and architecture. In this rapidly changing and divided nation, the middle-class woman, especially if she were married, might have a car, a new house and consumer goods, but the working-class woman, especially if she were single or her husband unemployed, would see little of this.

In mapping out the historical factors which influence representations of female rivalry in inter-war novels, my argument is that male anxieties about women's changing role were displaced in the 1920s by media manipulation of women's fears about the man 'shortage', and in the 1930s by an ideology of domesticity which valorised marriage. Other women were presented not as potential political comrades but as rivals for the limited supply of men. As I will argue, rivalry between women was encouraged and even

manufactured within the dominant discourses as a way of distracting women's attention from the real competition - between men and women for political power and jobs.

In inter-war novels anger, guilt and hate are often directed not at men but at other women, especially women of different sexuality, age, marital status or class. Nicola Beauman sees the inter-war 'woman's novel' as 'written by middle-class women for middle-class women' and 'permeated through and through with the certainty of like speaking to like' (Beauman, 1983, 3). Alison Light, however, detects a tension between women in such novels, which she locates in the class struggle. She argues that the history of the 'private sphere' is 'one fraught with conflict between women, as well as between the sexes' and that feminism must 'confront the schism between women which separated them in the very heart of "private life"' (1991, 219). The relative freedom of the inter-war middle-class woman was predicated on the labour of other women, as Naomi Mitchison acknowledged: 'Clearly without domestic help I could not have had a family and been a successful writer' (1986, 27). The recurring 'servant trouble' in E. M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) or Jan Struther's *Mrs Miniver* (1939) is one place where class tensions between women break through. The triangle novel, where the women are positioned as opposites, often in class terms, is another.

Light argues that the dominant mood of the inter-war period is a 'conservative modernity' - 'a conservatism itself in revolt against the past, trying to make room for the present' (1991, 11). While the authors I want to focus on are more radical in their politics than those Light considers, her analysis of class is extremely useful:

being 'middle class' in fact depends on an extremely anxious production of endless discriminations between people who are constantly assessing each other's standing. The grocer's wife in Grantham, the female bank clerk in the metropolis, the retired memsahib in Surrey, were far more likely to be aware of their differences than their mutual attitudes.  
(1991, 13)

These 'discriminations' which established difference from other women, particularly those of class, but also marital status or sexuality, are played out especially clearly within the triangle plot.

*Clash* (1929), written by the Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, and set during the General Strike of 1926, is a case in point. Joan's animosity towards the wife of Tony, the man she loves, is based partly on Helen's middle-class status, contrasted with Joan's work as trade union activist. Joan offers an interesting analysis of this triangle when she

remarks to a friend: '[Helen] and I are the two people most nearly concerned. Tony, apparently, has become merely the prize for the victor. I suppose most men are that, though they don't know it' (1989, 172). The rivalry between the two women is defused when Joan comes to see Helen as a suffering human being not just a representative of the middle classes. It is women of Helen's class, however, who attack Joan during her final speech and who inspire her decision to 'stick with my crowd' (1989, 309).

In the next sections I want to look at four factors which encouraged divisions between women: the population imbalance; the war; the impact of the work of Freud and the sexologists; and the anxiety around women's education. Finally, I will look at the divided nature of the inter-war feminist movement itself.

### **i. The 'surplus woman'**

The population imbalance in Britain caused mainly by male emigration to the colonies dated from at least the 1840s (see Appendix i) and concern over the 'superfluous', 'surplus' or 'redundant woman' began during this period (Vicus, 1985, 1-46). The words 'surplus' or 'superfluous' or 'redundant' indicated an 'excess' (another common word) of women who were 'surplus' because they were unmarried. The problem 'was considered particularly vexing,' Jane Lewis comments, 'because [...] it affected middle class woman most' (1984, 4), and thus it is a concern which surfaces continually in the 'woman's novel' of the inter-war period.

Exacerbated by the casualties of the First World War, the imbalance peaked in the 1920s, coinciding with the campaign for the extension of the vote to women under 30, and concern over increasing unemployment, particularly as it affected returning soldiers. The 1921 census, which recorded nearly two million more women than men, generated almost hysterical anxiety in the media. The hidden subtext of the media coverage is the male fear of being outnumbered by women who, following the war, were encroaching on hitherto exclusively masculine domains such as politics, education and the professions. Focusing women's attention on the 'man shortage' and constructing other women as rivals rather than potential political allies, was one way of controlling women.

Newspapers were heavily implicated in this strategy. Between 1920 and 1939 the circulation of national dailies sprang from 5.4 million to 10.5 million (Curran and Seaton,

1985, 55). Billie Melman in *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties* (1988) has shown how between 1918 and 1928 ‘the disenfranchised female haunted the popular imagination’ (1988, 1). The debate over the ‘flapper vote’ was ‘Orchestrated by the mass-circulation newspapers of the Harmsworth brothers’ and reverberated in popular novels and pulp magazines (1988, 1). The unmarried female was described in the popular press as ‘a menace to the country’s economy and its social and political order’ (1988, 20). On 26 June 1923 the *Daily Mail*, for instance, asserted: ‘The superfluous women are a disaster to the human race [...] spinsters compete with men and aggravate the economic war’ (quoted in Melman, 1988, 20).

When Curran and Seaton argue that ‘The papers controlled by the press barons conjured up imaginary folk devils that served to strengthen commitment to dominant political norms and to unite the centre and the right against a common enemy’ (1985, 66), they have in mind the treatment of Marxists, and Rothermere’s brief flirtation with the British Union of Fascists in 1934. However, their remarks shed light on the papers’ transformation of the ‘surplus woman’ into a similar sort of ‘folk devil’. She was pursued with particular vigour in the *Daily Mail*, the first mass-readership popular daily and the first to cater for women and children. Its founder, Lord Northcliffe, advised his editors always to have a ‘woman’s story’ in the headlines (Graves and Hodge, 1941, 59), and it regularly included fillers and opinion pieces on women.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act had enfranchised some 8,479,156 women (Pugh, 1992, 34) - 39.6 per cent of the total voters. Had all women been enfranchised instead of only those over 30 (subject to a property qualification) women voters would have outnumbered men, a possibility which generated intense anxiety. ‘With the preponderance of women, if all spheres of political and intellectual activity are opened to women, what will be the result? Slowly, but insidiously, will she become the dominant sex?’ asked one piece in the *Mail*. Reassuringly, the (woman) writer concluded:

I think not [...] women care very little about politics or party, but they *do* care about the betterment of mankind, the abolition of war, the improvement of the marriage and divorce laws, and, most of all, the welfare of the race, in so far as it concerns the child [...] *It is here that woman will become the dominant sex.* She will protect the race, she will improve the laws concerning children [...].

(Thursday, 22 January 1920, 6, original emphasis)

This essentialist ideal of women as apolitical housewives and mothers became increasingly dominant.

The population imbalance coincided with a decline in the birth rate - from 35 per 1,000 in 1870 to 24 in 1913 (Pugh, 1992, 1) - which exacerbated the fear that the androgynous flapper was not 'womanly' enough to bear children. Pugh comments: 'Fears about a decline in both the mental and physical capacity of British women to fulfil their role as mothers was a characteristic of the inter-war period' (1992, 87). While the image of the housewife and mother was the 'only one desirable image [...] held up to women by all the mainstream media agencies' (Beddoe, 1989, 8) women were repeatedly confronted with the statistical improbability of their marrying.

In 1920 the *Mail* reported a lecture by Dr Murray Leslie at the Institute of Hygiene in London, which epitomises the media hysteria. Headed 'Million Women Too Many/ 1920 Husband Hunt/ Dr Murray Leslie on Girl Rebels/ Secret Love Affairs', it addressed the alleged breakdown in moral standards due to the fact that 'There are now more than a million excess females of reproductive age' in Britain. Dr Leslie reported:

Never had there been so many unhappy marriages. Many married women were demanding divorce by mutual consent [...] while married men often sought happier relationships among the numerous unattached women.

Speaking from his own medical experience he had no hesitation in saying that much of the existing unhappiness was traceable to the clandestine relations between young women and married men.

(Thursday, 5 February 1920, 7)

Castigating the 'frivolous, scantily-clad "jazzing flapper"' as 'irresponsible and undisciplined', Leslie remarked that 'The type contained a large proportion of physically attractive girls with strong reproductive instincts and they were *ever vying and competing with each other for the scarce and elusive male*' (my emphasis). He advocated female emigration, a solution which was mooted repeatedly, though it never got as far as government policy.

It was not only the *Mail* which concerned itself with this issue. Following the 1921 census, a *Times* leader on the subject provoked a letter from Brittain to Holtby commenting: 'Personally I haven't the least objection to being superfluous so long as I am allowed to be useful, and though I shall be delighted for any work I may do to take me abroad, it will not be because I shall thereby be enabled the better to capture the *elusive male*' (TY 578, my emphasis).

The picture is more complicated than it at first appears. As Martin Pugh points out, 'assumptions that large numbers of women would be denied the chance of a married life receive little corroboration from the statistics' (1992, 15). He goes so far as to argue that

the indelible impression caused by writers such as Vera Brittain about a whole generation of women suddenly deprived of husbands is a gross distortion of the facts. In fact the rate of marriage among women, which had been declining a little before 1914, was only slightly reduced during the 1920s.

(1992, 222)

For women in their late teens and twenties the marriage rate was actually *higher* than before 1914:

from 1930 a greater proportion of all women began to marry, and the trend was particularly marked in the second half of the decade. One can now see that the 1930s marked the start of a significant long-term trend towards marriage.

(1992, 222)

Around a third of women who were not married by their late twenties did not marry during their reproductive years (Lewis, 1984, 4). On the other hand, over 60 per cent of women did marry and 'marriage remained the normative expectation of women of all classes' (Lewis, 1984, 3). The nature of marriage, however, was changing from 'the master-servant relationship of most nineteenth century marriages' to 'companionship between equals' (Brittain, 1953, 170). The problem was not so much that women were less likely to marry but that it was perceived to be far more important that they did marry. The exaggerated reports of the man 'shortage' became a powerful myth which generated an extraordinary amount of anxiety in women, who were thus encouraged to regard other women as rivals in the marriage market.

Anxiety over the 'surplus woman' reached hysteria level again in 1927, when the debate over the 'flapper vote' resurfaced. 'Flapper' was 'the popular press catchword for an adult woman worker aged 21 to 30, when it is a question of giving her a vote under the same conditions as men of the same age' (Graves and Hodge, 1941, 44). The *Mail* declared:

The proposal to add some 4,500,000 new voters - many of them quite irresponsible persons - to the enormous total of persons already franchised is thoroughly unpopular in the country and worthy of Bedlam. All the attempts to make a sex issue out of it have failed



because most sensible women are entirely satisfied with present conditions, under which they have the vote at 30.

(Thursday, 31 March 1927, 10)

The supposedly flattering division between 'sensible' women and the 'irresponsible' flapper yet again encourages divisions among women. As the event became more imminent, the *Mail* ran a leader about the 'Flapper Revolution' which asserted:

The most extraordinary fact about this revolution is that practically no one wanted it [...] The women themselves never asked for it, and many of them have said that it was scarcely fair, at a time when the ranks of manhood are depleted by the terrific sacrifices of war, to make such a far reaching change.

(Saturday, 16 June 1928, 10)

In other words, 'irresponsible' and non-combatant women should not profit by the greater sacrifice of men. Under a week later the *Mail* launched a beauty competition for 'Pretty girls' with prizes totalling £3,600 (Friday, 22 June 1928, 11) - a perfect example of the media deflecting women's attention from competition with men for political power, and encouraging them in rivalry with each other.

After the 1928 Equal Franchise Act gave women over 18 the vote, the debate over gender roles shifted onto new ground. By the 1930s the population imbalance had started to even out, but the decline in the birth rate was causing increasing concern. It reached its lowest point in 1933, coinciding with the year of highest unemployment (Branson and Heinemann, 1971, 162). As what Jane Lewis calls the inter-war 'ideology of maternalism' (1984, 32) intensified, the spinster was vilified not as an irresponsible 'flapper' but as a sexually frustrated danger to society.

The spinster novels of the 1920s discussed by Maroula Joannou (1995, Chapter Three) are closely linked to the anxiety over the 'surplus woman'. Joannou argues that 'the meaning of spinsterhood became a site of contestation between those who wished to objectify the spinster and others who saw her as a person with needs, desires and potential of her own' (1995, 78). Some texts, like May Sinclair's *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), F.M. Mayor's *The Third Miss Symons* (1913) or Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' (1922) detail the frustration, waste and loneliness of the spinster's life. Others, like Mayor's *The Rector's Daughter* (1924) or Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924), assert the value of her life. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, possibly the most famous of the inter-war 'surplus women', makes inspired use of the stereotypes which allow her abilities to pass

undetected by others, as does Dorothy L. Sayers's Miss Climpson in *Unnatural Death* (1927). The spinster heroine of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowses* (1926) finds her vocation and her freedom as a witch.

The popularity of the female-male-female triangle plot in both the 1920s and 1930s can also be attributed partly to the population imbalance. A comparison with the nineteenth-century novel of female adultery written almost exclusively by men examined by Bill Overton in *The Novel of Female Adultery* (1996) is useful here. The plot examined by Overton, which again comes out of specific historical and cultural contexts, is one where, 'a married woman from the middle or upper classes is seduced by an unmarried man and comes to grief' (1997, vi). In contrast, there are few inter-war novels by women about female adultery - E.M. Delafield's *The Way Things Are* (1927), Margaret Kennedy's *The Ladies of Lyndon* (1923), and F. Tennyson Jesse's Madame Bovary-esque *A Pin to See the Peepshow* (1934) are rare examples. The female-centred triangle novel, on the other hand, is extremely common. Indeed, the spinster novels Joannou discusses often use a triangle plot - their protagonists are unmarried because the relevant man marries someone else.

Dr Leslie's assumption that the population imbalance led to affairs between married men and unmarried girls, although unsubstantiated, is interesting here since the affair or potential affair with a married man, as in Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), is a common plot. E. Arnot Robertson's *Four Frightened People* (1931) is a self-conscious version of what is referred to in the text as the 'triangle drama' (1982, 22) of popular fiction, a comment which suggests its ubiquitousness. Several novelists - Rebecca West, Vera Brittain, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Ellen Wilkinson, Rose Macauley - had important relationships with married men which are fictionalised in various ways in their novels. A particularly intriguing example is E.H. Young, who lived for many years with her married lover and his wife.

Many texts deal with the affair that never quite happens. Loyalty to a sister prevents adultery with a brother-in-law in both Elizabeth Bowen's *Friends and Relations* (1931) and Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* (1934). In the latter, as in Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935), the man in the triangle commits suicide. Indeed, death or illness frequently intervene to prevent consummation of adulterous loves. In Margaret

Kennedy's *The Constant Nymph* (1924) the 'nymph' Tessa dies before she and Lewis spend their first night together, neatly evading both underage sex and adultery. In Rose Macauley's *Told by an Idiot* (1923) Mr Jayne, whose wife refuses to divorce him, is stabbed just as Rome is about to tell him whether she will elope with him. Similarly, Carne's heart attack in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) prevents Sarah Burton from sleeping with him.

A widower or divorced man during this period was three times as likely as his female counterpart to remarry 'due to both the "surplus" of women and conventions regarding the marriageability of older women' (Lewis, 1984, 4). The 'second wife novel', such as Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921) or Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), can be read as a reflection of women's fears that they could only achieve marriage at the expense (possibly death) of another woman. West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) is a version of this theme. E.H. Young's novel, *Miss Mole* (1930), wonderfully subverts it by setting up what appears to be a classic *Jane Eyre* plot where the housekeeper, Miss Mole, will marry her widowed rector employer, but then marrying her to the delightfully unromantic Mr Blenkinsop. Yet another variation on the plot deals with the feelings of a wife whose husband takes a mistress, as in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*, H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live* (written in 1927 but not published until 1960), or Katherine Mansfield's 'Bliss' (1920).

## ii. The 'Great' War

The war exacerbated the 'shortage' of men and accelerated the destabilisation of gender roles:

Skirts grew shorter and shorter, clothes grew more and more simple and convenient, and hair, that "crowning glory of a woman", was cut short. With one bound the young women of 1919 burst out from the hampering conventions, and with their cigarettes, their motor-cars, their latch-keys, and their athletics they astonished and scandalised their elders.

(Strachey, 1978, 389)

Nostalgia for the lost Edwardian way of life and a more 'feminine' woman informs many inter-war texts. Here I want to pick out three specific points. Firstly, the war's reinforcement of separate male and female spheres. Secondly, that the war constructed women as 'sisters' not to other women but to the men at the front. Thirdly, what Sharon

Ouditt has identified as the undermining of romance by 'the absence of its primary structuring force - the right man' (1994, 116).

As Claire Tylee shows in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (1990), the war reinforced the notion of separate male and female spheres and valorised the male soldier at the expense of women. It 'emphasised an essential difference between men and women. Women were not combatants. And they were not allowed near the firing line' (Tylee, 1990, 253). War became the ultimate signifier of gender difference. While men were fighting for their country, women's work was to 'fill subordinate roles in the Army auxiliary services or hurriedly raise sons to young husbands whose drastically shortened expectation of life left little opportunity for begetting children' (HE 347), entrenching further the 'ideology of maternalism'. This was crucial to war propaganda because

the fighters needed a concrete image of what they were fighting *for*. The propaganda industry provided paintings, posters and postcards, many of which pictured images of England and of loyal, waiting women.

(Ouditt 1994, 48)

However, it was this sense that women were encouraging men to fight which produced the misogyny of texts like Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) or Siegfried Sassoon's bitter poem 'The Glory of Women' (Silkin, 1981, 132).

For the women left at home there was a 'humiliated sense of their own inferiority at being non-combatant burdens on the male part of the population' (Tylee, 1990, 253-54). In Rose Macauley's *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916), Alix Sandomir's lameness symbolises her non-combatant status. The resentment against non-combatant women felt by the 'Fighting Forces' was intensified when returning soldiers found themselves unemployed because their jobs had been taken by 'a woman, or a man who had escaped conscription' (Graves and Hodge, 1941, 27).

Folklore suggests that the war immediately provided women with greater employment and freedom. The picture is, however, more complex. Many middle-class girls found their war work was limited to knitting socks like the 'sister' in Macauley's poem 'Many Sisters to Many Brothers' (*Poems of Today*, 1931, 23), making swabs like Joan Ogden in *The Unlit Lamp*, or 'dusting round carefully disinfected convalescents at the local hospitals' like Muriel in *The Crowded Street* (CS, 127). For the sheltered middle-class girl who became a nurse, ambulance driver or Land Girl, there was a radical liberation. Woolf commented wryly that in 1914 'the daughters of educated men [...]

rushed into hospitals, some still attended by their maids, drove lorries, worked in fields and munition factories.' (1986, 45-46). They would, Woolf argues, 'undertake any task however menial, exercise any fascination however fatal that enabled [them] to escape' the education of the private house (1986, 46). The almost erotic excitement felt by women who believed that they were at last participating in 'real' life is conveyed in Sinclair's *The Romantic* (1920), which sets out to prove that women could do war work as well as if not better than some men. As Winifred Holtby commented:

One of the few good features of the war of 1914 was that it gave an opportunity for women to prove their individual capacity. Running hospitals, conducting operations, holding high positions in the Civil Service, working as farmers, engineers and bus conductors, driving lorries, making shells, cleaning windows, and finally replacing soldiers at the base in Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps, they threw down a challenge to those who had hitherto relegated them to kitchen, nursery or drawing room.

(Berry and Bishop, 1985, 94-95)

This, however, elides class differences. Women working in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VADs) were recruited from middle-class women, who volunteered for patriotic reasons. In *Not So Quiet* (1930), Helen Zenna Smith's ambulance driver protagonist writes:

It astounds me why the powers-that-be at the London headquarters stipulate that refined women of decent education are essential for this ambulance work. Why should they want this class to do the work of strong navvies, in addition to the work of scullery maids under conditions no professional scullery-maid would tolerate for a day?

(1988, 50)

While the middle-class girls were 'doing their bit' for their country, 'the greater percentage' of the lower-class girls working as WAACS (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) 'enlisted because of the pay' (Smith, 1988, 220).

This class division is confirmed by Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield's comprehensive *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (1987):

The majority [of wartime workers] were young and working class, but there were significant numbers of older married women, and a smaller number of wealthier volunteers [...] only about nine per cent of munition workers were upper- or middle-class volunteers [...] The proportion was much higher amongst VADs, the Land Army and the police volunteers.

(1987, 74-75)

For the first year of the war women's employment actually *fell*. It was only after the establishment of the Ministry of Munitions and the Munitions Act of 1915 that women's employment started to rise and they were encouraged into 'men's jobs' in industry, commerce, transport, ship building and mining. After January 1916 their efforts made it possible for the government to introduce conscription for men. The figures are impressive:

In July 1914, there were 3,276,000 women in industry (not including many homeworkers or those in small workshops), plus about 1,600,000 domestic servants. By April 1918, the total stood at 4,808,000. This meant there had been an increase of about 1½ million women in the industrial labour force.

(Braybon and Summerfield, 1987, 38-39)

Many of these women came from domestic service which lost 400,000 workers during the war (Braybon and Summerfield, 1987, 39). The typical woman war worker, then, was a working-class ex-domestic worker who went into a factory.

After the war public opinion swung against women war workers and 'Official state policy coerced women back into the home - their own or somebody else's' (Beddoe, 1989, 50). They were called 'parasites, blacklegs and limpets' (Strachey, 1978, 371), and 'represented as vampires who deprived men of their rightful jobs' (Graves and Hodge, 1941, 44). Both Beddoe and Braybon and Summerfield provide evidence of working-class women's unwillingness to go into domestic service because of its low status, poor conditions and low pay compared to factory work, but they risked losing their unemployment benefit if they refused a job. By 1919 there were half-a-million women unemployed, and by 1921 domestic service was again the largest employer of women (Pugh, 1992, 82-83). Women's rate of employment in 1921 and 1931 was actually *lower* than it had been in 1911 (Beddoe, 1989, 4).

To talk of women as emancipated by the war, then, is misrepresentative and erases class differences. It is debatable whether it was their war work that gained women the vote in 1918. Certainly Sylvia Pankhurst attributed it to male fears of resumed suffragette activity (Pankhurst, 1977, 607), while it was the young women who had made the greatest contribution to the war effort who were excluded (Pugh, 1992, 41).

The sense of 'sisterhood' between women, developed by the suffrage campaigners and conveyed, for instance, in Elizabeth Robins's *The Convert* (1907), is lost at this point, as women constructed themselves instead as 'sisters' to their soldier

'brothers'. The need to defend Britain took precedence over the fight for the vote (although Anne Wiltsher estimates that half of the women in the movement opposed the war (1985, 1)) and the political alliances formed to fight for suffrage - the Women's Political and Social Union (WSPU), and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) - were broken up.

Although the majority of women spent their day-to-day lives with other women, their hopes, energies and dreams were focused on the absent men. Two autobiographies particularly demonstrate this male-identification in women who worked as VAD nurses - Enid Bagnold's *A Diary Without Dates* (1918) and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933). Bagnold's *Diary* combines admiration for the British Tommy with 'an equally sincere contempt for women' (Tylee, 1990, 192). When a wounded soldier mistakenly addresses her as 'Sister', Bagnold thrills: 'How wonderful to be called Sister! Every time the uncommon name is used towards me I feel the glow of an implied relationship' (1978, 4). The word 'Sister' is valued not as indicating Bagnold's place in a 'sisterhood' of nurses but as 'sister' to the soldier.

Similarly, Brittain records little interest in or respect for women until she meets Holtby. In *Testament of Youth* Brittain set out to write the 'epic of the women who went to war' (1953, 188) but she was also creating a memorial to the men who were killed, including her fiancé, Roland Leighton, and her brother, Edward. The tension between these two aims produces a text which valorises the men at the expense of women. At one point she even remarks that 'most women annoy me' (TY 85). Brittain nursed because it was the 'next best thing' to being a man (TY 213-14). But, as her capitalisation of references to Leighton as 'Him' in her diary after his death (Brittain, 1981, 301-4 and 308) indicates, in the hierarchy of suffering nothing she, or any other woman, did could put them on a level with the soldiers.

This valorisation of the soldiers led women to internalise not only their own inferiority but that of other women, particularly those of a lower social class. Class differences were particularly obvious in hospitals where the middle-class VADs worked alongside lower-class professional nurses. *Testament of Youth* 'directly reproduces some of the less palatable ideologies that helped to make the VAD institution successful' (Ouditt, 1994, 3). Brittain disparages the professional nurses who were, she claims, driven 'almost frantic with jealousy and suspicion' (TY 309) by the VAD nurses they

perceived as threatening their jobs. Such divisions enforce Britain's sense of identification with the men of her own class. The lack of gender solidarity here is particularly surprising in a text written by a self-proclaimed feminist to publicise women's war work.

Macauley's *Non-Combatants and Others* offers a more acute analysis of both how the war encouraged a male desire for traditional, comforting 'femininity', and how it altered women's loyalties to each other. The war-damaged Basil finds Alix 'too nervy', and wants instead a 'placid, indifferent, healthy sort of girl' (Macauley, 1986, 73). The girl he turns to, appropriately named Evie, is a 'type' Basil would previously have resented and 'called [...] names, such as Woman' (1986, 98). Similarly, in H.D.'s *Bid Me to Live*, Rafe seeks comfort in 'WOMAN' as an 'abstraction' (1984, 103). Alix acts uncharacteristically when she deliberately destroys Evie's interest in Basil. 'It's the war [...] I shouldn't have done that before the war,' she thinks, 'I suppose I might do anything now' (1986, 128).

This contradicts Ouditt's contention that during the war 'Comradeship was a crucial element in women's new order of experience [...] A number developed close female friends and a concomitant sense of bonding and belonging' (1994, 31-32). This was true for some women, but it is not reflected in most accounts of the war which are characterised by a sense of divisions between women.

Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet* does document comradeship between women - Nell Smith's closest relationships are with her co-worker, Tosh, and her younger sister, Trix. But, despite this, the most scathing attacks in the book are not on male generals or politicians but on other women. Nell's anger is directed at the patriotic mothers who 'give' their children to the cause, women like the 'Little Mother' whose letter in *The Morning Post* attested her willingness to 'pass on the human ammunition of "only sons" to fill up the gaps' (Graves, 1960, 189). Nell fantasises about revealing the real horrors of the war to them:

Look closely, Mother and Mrs Evans-Mawnington [...] These trays each contain something that was once a whole man [...] the heroes who have done their bit for King and country [...] Shut your eyes [...] lest their groans and heart-rending cries linger as long in your memory as in the memory of the daughter you sent out to help win the War.

(1988, 90-91)



The few men in *Not So Quiet* are vulnerable victims in contrast to the portrayals of 'Mrs Bitch' who runs the ambulance corps, of cook - 'a fat, common, lazy, impertinent slut' (1988, 50), or of ward sisters who are 'Bitches - no other word' (199). *Not So Quiet*, like *Testament of Youth*, bears witness to women's internalisation of their inferiority as non-combatants and the projection of that internalisation onto other women of a different generation or class.

Finally, I want to turn to Sharon Ouditt's comment that after the war, 'The currency of romance [...] remained dominant, but it was undermined by the absence of its primary structuring force - the right man' (1994, 116). The myth that, as Brittain writes, 'the first-rate were gone from a whole generation' (TY 260) was one of the most enduring legacies of the war and powerfully affected women in two ways. Firstly, by stressing that the best of a generation had died in the trenches it reinforced women's sense of inferiority. Not only had they not died for their country but they could not replace the men who had. Secondly, many women felt they had been denied the men who should have been their husbands and lovers. This is especially true of Vera Brittain and Rosamond Lehmann. Indeed, Brittain, who remarked that her post-war suitors 'hadn't the brains of an earwig' and 'simply provided one proof after another that the best of their sex had disappeared from a whole generation' (TY 608), was, as Pugh noted, partially responsible for perpetuating this idea.

Anxiety about the changing role of women was fed by fears about masculinity. Men damaged physically or psychologically by the war are a recurring motif in inter-war novels right through into the 1930s - the amnesiac Chris Baldry in West's *The Return of the Soldier*, Septimus in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the partially-paralysed Gerry Blain in Ellen Wilkinson's *Clash*, Sayers's shell-shocked Peter Wimsey, and the impotent William Gary in Storm Jameson's *Love in Winter* (1935). If the 'right man' is not killed he is often already tied to an emotionally dead marriage or engagement, or so damaged that he turns either away from women or to women who embody uncomplicated femininity. The triangle plot is a double expression of anxiety about the lack of the 'right man' as well as the 'excess' of women.

### iii. Freud and the sexologists

By situating the cultural dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of the sexologists within their historical context we can see them as theorisations of gender which answered a particular historical need. I will examine Freud's work in more detail in Chapter Two but here I want to examine its impact, together with that of the sexologists. By setting out an ideal of what women *ought* to be, Freud and the sexologists offered a means of controlling them. Their construction of both lesbian and spinster as dangerously 'unnatural' and their pathologisation of female friendship forced another wedge between women.

When Virginia Woolf famously remarked that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed' (1966-67, Vol. I, 320) it was largely, as her initial drafts show (Faulkner, 1977, 35), the impact of Freud's work she had in mind. Selections of Freud's work were first published in Britain in 1909 and the first translation of a complete work, *Three Contributions to a Theory of Sex*, appeared in 1910. This was also the year in which Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, banned in Britain in 1897 and printed in America in 1901, was finally published in Britain in its entirety. This work brought sex out of the Victorian closet and into the public domain, a liberation indicated by Woolf in an incident probably in 1909:

[Lytton Strachey] pointed his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress.

'Semen?' he said

Can one really say it? I thought and we burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. [...] We discussed copulation with the same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good.

(Woolf, 1976a, 173-74)

It is the opening up of a new discourse, the excitement of being able to say the previously unsayable, which is important here. Talking about sex became fashionable - 'the late war-intellectuals gabbled of Oedipus across the tea-cups or Soho cafe tables' (H.D., 1984, 8). Such talk reflects the need to define and fix worryingly fluid gender identities.

The key ideas of psychoanalysis - the unconscious, sublimation, repression, sexuality, and the 'Oedipus complex' - rapidly became common currency. Graves and Hodge comment that the 'Freudian gospel as it filtered down into people's minds, through translations, interpretations, glosses, popularisations, and general loose

discussion' was that 'The first requirement for mental health is an uninhibited sex-life. To be well and happy, one must obey one's sexual urge' (1941, 103). This chimed with Ellis's emphasis on women's right to a fulfilled sex life.

As feminist theorists, particularly Sheila Jeffreys (1985) and Margaret Jackson (1994), have shown, it is not enough to regard this period simply as one of sexual liberation. The acknowledgement of female sexuality ran hand-in-hand with an attempt to control it. Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-95), as Elaine Showalter says, 'seemed to lay the ground work for a culturally aware therapy that took women's words and women's lives seriously, that respected the aspirations of New Women, and that allowed women to have a say in the management of hysterical symptoms' (1987, 158). As such, it attracted the interest of women both as writers, including May Sinclair and Rebecca West, and as psychoanalysts.

But, as Showalter also shows, Freud became increasingly rigid in his treatment of hysteria. In 'Female Sexuality' (1931) and 'Femininity' (1932), the links between women's confined, frustrating lives and neurosis have been lost and his descriptions have become prescriptions. By the 1930s psychoanalysis had hardened into an attempt to establish and enforce a notion of 'normal femininity'. Similarly, the work of the sexologists reinforced the patriarchal model of female sexuality as 'natural', giving it 'scientific' validity (Jackson, 1994, 2-3).

This paradoxical mixture of liberation and control is reflected in the work of Marie Stopes. Her *Married Love* (1918), the first marriage manual, was heavily indebted to Ellis's work, and helped to disseminate it. The effect of her book on women's lives was practical and tangible, not least through her birth control clinics. Naomi Mitchison records the 'marked increase in happiness' in her married life after she and her husband read the book (1986, 69-70). But Stopes advocated not female sexual autonomy but female sexual health in the interests of the 'State'. 'I am convinced,' she wrote in *Enduring Passion* (1928), 'that the more *happy*, child-bearing and *enduringly* passionate marriages there are in a State, the more firmly established is that State' (1934, xii-xiii, original emphasis).

Not only was contraception only to be available to married women, it was mainly middle-class women who benefited. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of middle-class people using birth control went up from nine per cent to forty per cent, while the number

of working-class people went up from one per cent to twenty-eight per cent (Lewis, 1984, 18). In *Clash* a striking miner's wife bitterly castigates the vicar's wife: 'Your class keep us women in ignorance and then you treat us as though we had committed a crime when we have another baby that you won't tell us how to prevent' (1989, 247).

The new discourse endorsed women's 'natural' role as heterosexual (and sexually active) wife and mother, but condemned as 'unnatural' behaviour (such as lesbianism or celibacy) which removed women from the control of men. By the 1930s chastity for women had become, Holtby remarked, a 'far worse crime than promiscuity' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 91).

The lesbian was even more heavily stigmatised as 'unnatural' and dangerous to other women. Both Freud and Ellis theorised lesbianism in terms of masculinity. Freud's 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman' (1920) argues that his patient, who is (tellingly) 'in fact a feminist', has a 'masculinity complex' (Freud, 1991, 397). Freud is unable to conceptualise female desire for another woman except as masculinity: '*it is only as a man that the female homosexual can desire a woman who reminds her of a man*' (Irigaray, 1985, 194, original emphasis). Similarly, Ellis argued that 'The chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity' (1901a, 140). Among the 'masculine' tendencies he notes are a liking for male attire (1901a, 141), cigarettes, and athletics (144), and the ability to whistle (177). The congenital female invert is attracted to 'more clinging feminine persons' (1901a, 167), again enforcing a concept of homosexuality based on heterosexual models. While Freud's model of homosexuality is developmental, Ellis saw sexual inversion as 'a phenomenon which is based on congenital conditions' (1901a, 181). The implication of Ellis's distinction between 'congenital' and 'acquired' inversion was that heterosexual women could be 'seduced' into lesbianism by 'true' lesbians. Ellis classified as 'homosexual' 'precisely those forms of behaviour for which spinster feminists, the "New Women" of the 1890s, were criticised by anti-feminists' (Jeffreys, 1985, 100).

Both Lillian Faderman and Sheila Jeffreys pin-point the end of the First World War as the moment when 'openly expressed love between women ceased to be possible' (Faderman, 1985, 20). Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* has been much criticised for her contention that pre-1900 'romantic friendships' were non-sexual (for example, Donoghue, 1993). What Faderman does pin-point is the political and economic

implications of the change in the way that such relationships were *perceived*. It was not, she argues, simply that men condemned a female sexuality that they had only just discovered, 'It was rather that love between women, coupled with their emerging freedom, might conceivably bring about the overthrow of heterosexuality' (1985, 411). Lesbianism practised by women who had a vote, economic independence, and a name for what they were doing was a definite threat. Hence, Faderman argues, women 'were taught to see women *only as rivals* and men as their only possible love objects, or they were compelled to view themselves as "lesbian", which meant "twisted" either morally or emotionally' (1985, 412, my emphasis). Accusations of lesbianism, like the emphasis on the man shortage, were used to whip women back into the home.

An attempt to make lesbianism illegal in the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill failed only because MPs were afraid that 'severe punishment would publicise lesbianism and thereby give dangerous enlightenment to women presently ignorant of the very idea' (Pugh, 1992, 79). The scandalous trial and banning of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928, a text which, as Jean Radford (1986) has shown, uses the theories of both Ellis and Freud, provided exactly the kind of publicity MPs had tried to avoid. James Douglas, Editor of the *Sunday Express*, declared 'I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body but a moral poison kills the soul' (Brittain, 1968, 16). The trial was a defining moment, after which social stigma increased dramatically. Anxiety about the issue can be traced in assertions during the 1930s that lesbianism among women was rising rapidly, a rise attributed by Graves and Hodge to the lack of men (1941, 101), and by the Jungian psychologist, M. Esther Harding, to the increased number of women who, having pursued careers, found at the age of 30 or 35 'all the men of their age already married' (1933, 132). Again, the issue here seems to be one of visibility, coupled with an anxiety about the incursion of 'surplus women' into the job market.

In *Between Men* Sedgwick argues that the continuum between homosocial and homosexual is less radically disrupted for women in our society than it is for men (1985, 2). However, I would argue that it is precisely during this period, most explicitly during the *Well* trial, that we can see a radical disruption between the two being established and policed. This disruption is reflected in contemporaneous fiction: 'What we see in 1920s novels is a process by which passionate friendship between women, which was still being

written about as unexceptional in the early 1920s, is transformed by the intrusion of the lesbian stereotype' (Jeffreys, 1985, 121). Not only did twentieth-century lesbian literature by heterosexuals usually show love between women as a disease, but 'women who were professedly lesbian generally internalised these views. This was reflected in their own literature, which was full of self-doubts and self-loathing until the 1960s' (Faderman, 1985, 20). This view, however, does not allow for the fact that women could and did use the concept of the invert, as Hall did in *The Well of Loneliness*, as a political identity for their own ends.

The stereotypical predatory, vampirish lesbian is a recurrent figure in inter-war literature and frequently comes to a nasty end. The 'congenital invert' of Ellis's theory, she represents the danger that heterosexual women would be seduced into lesbianism. One version of the triangle plot presents the 'true', and therefore 'unnatural', lesbian and a man as rivals for the 'feminine' woman. D.H. Lawrence's 'The Fox' (1922) is a particularly misogynous version where Bancroft is killed by Henry so that he can marry March, who despite her 'masculine' breeches and tunic, is the 'feminine' woman. In M.J. Farrell's *Devoted Ladies* (1934) the vampirish Jessica is again killed so that her friend, Jane, can marry. In Dorothy L. Sayers's *Unnatural Death* (1927), the 'unnatural' Mary Whittaker who plans to set up a chicken farm with another woman turns out to be the murderer.

When Hall's Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness* forces the woman she loves to marry a man it is a gesture of self-sacrifice which attempts to negate this stereotype of the predatory lesbian. Ironically, Stephen's gesture is the canonical one of exchange 'between men', where Stephen takes the place of one of the men and the feminine Mary is an object of exchange. Hall's use of this narrative pattern parallels her use of Ellis/Freud-inspired heterosexual models for the lesbian relationship. The 'masculine' Stephen desires Mary 'as a man' (Irigaray, 1985, 194, original emphasis) would desire her.

Hall's earlier novel *The Unlit Lamp* far more skilfully destabilises the opposition of 'natural' and 'unnatural'. The rivals here are Joan's mother and her friend and former governess Elizabeth, while the man, Richard, is almost irrelevant. It is the mother here who, disappointed in her marriage, is 'almost loverlike' (1981, 66) to her daughter, draining Joan's youth and energy like an octopus. In contrast, the relationship between

Joan and Elizabeth offers Joan a healthy 'natural' life. The predatory lesbian is frequently an older, more experienced woman as in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Hotel* (1927), Edith Olivier's *Love Child* (1927), Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women* (1917), and Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927) which I will discuss in Chapter Seven.

Emma Donoghue in *Passions Between Women* suggests that eighteenth-century women writers 'often used a heterosexual plot as a framework for a safe discussion of women's love for each other; if at least one of the heroines ended up married, the writer could not be accused of being misogynist or anti-social' (1993, 138). After the First World War the close sentimental friendships Donoghue discusses become suspect even within the romance plot. Instead, I would suggest that the strength of female bonding in the inter-war period is frequently expressed and explored, paradoxically, through female rivalry within the triangle plot. This becomes more understandable if we bear in mind Girard's point that the relationship between two same-sex rivals can be more determining than that between either rival and the beloved. Several inter-war triangle novels, although apparently heterosexual romance plots, actually explore the strength of women's bonds. *Summer Will Show*, *Rebecca*, or Mansfield's 'Bliss', although ostensibly about the rivalry between wife and mistress, can be read as tracking lesbian desire. (See Hanscombe (1991) for a lesbian reading of 'Bliss', for instance.) In these novels the romance plot structure and the presence of the man act as a kind of alibi, under cover of which women writers can explore bonds between women, in the same way that the woman functions 'between men' in Sedgwick's paradigm. Desire for the other woman is mediated or displaced through the body of the man.

Bonds between sisters, like those between mothers and daughters (as shown by Heather Ingman, 1995), are a recurrent theme in inter-war fiction and are another way of exploring (socially sanctioned) bonds between women. The rival sisters plot is used in Sinclair's *The Three Sisters* (1914), Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove* (1953), E. Arnot Robertson's *Ordinary Families* (1933), Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-room* (1934) and Elizabeth Bowen's *Friends and Relations* (1931). The aunt and niece relationship in E.H. Young's *The Misses Mallett* (1922) is another version of this.

Finally, four texts based on Vita Sackville-West's elopement with Violet Trefusis illustrate another way of writing lesbian desire in this period - by camouflaging it as heterosexual. In Sackville-West's *Challenge* (1924) and Trefusis's *Broderie Anglaise*

(1986; published in France in 1935) the Sackville-West character is fictionalised as a man. In both books the subject of same-sex female desire surfaces in coded ways. In *Challenge* the affair between Julian and Eve is coded as incestuous (they are cousins), reflecting Sackville-West's fear of what she called her 'perverted nature' (Nicolson, 1973, 36). In *Broderie Anglaise* the primacy of woman-to-woman relationships surfaces through the movement of Alexa and Anne from the position of rivals over the man to that of 'colleagues, both on the same side' (1992, 95). In *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973) Sackville-West's autobiographical account of her affair with Trefusis is edited by her son, Nigel Nicolson, into the 'portrait of a marriage' - 'the story of two people [Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson] who married for love and whose love deepened with every passing year' (1973, 3). Only Woolf in her gender-bending *Orlando* (1928), actually manages to write about female desire without using the heterosexual models Hall, Sackville-West and Trefusis all, in different ways, endorse.

#### iv. Education

Volume One of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* included an appendix on 'The School-friendships of Girls', an investigation into the phenomenon of the 'flame' in Italian schoolgirls, which indicates a growing anxiety about female education. Ellis himself advocated co-education, arguing that single sex schools encouraged homosexuality (1901a, 194). This anxiety over single sex girls' schools should be placed in the context of the long battle fought by Victorian and Edwardian feminists for university education for women, as well as the expansion of secondary schooling for girls. Throughout the period there were endless debates about what kind of education was suitable for women, whether they should be given an education similar to boys, which might de-sex them, or whether they should be educated for marriage and motherhood. This anxiety about women's education is reflected in 'gynaeceum novels' (Frith, 1988, Chapter Five, Part Three) like *Regiment of Women*, *Dusty Answer*, Brittain's *The Dark Tide* (1923), Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935) and 'Olivia's' *Olivia* (1949), which have a school or university setting, and in which rivalry between women is a central theme.

These years saw the emergence of the university-educated female novelist together with the birth of the educated woman as a character in fiction. By 1914 women



could take their degrees at the universities of London, Wales, Scotland, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool, while Oxford awarded degrees to women in 1920 and Cambridge in 1948. Out of my five central novelists, three were university educated: Lehmann went to Girton College, Cambridge, while Holtby and Brittain went to Somerville College, Oxford. The other 'Somerville novelists' numbered in an article by Brittain included Rose Macauley, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margaret Kennedy, Hilda Reid, Muriel Jaeger and Sylvia Thompson (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 320-25), while Storm Jameson went to Leeds and London.

University education provided these women with the skills and confidence to pursue careers and to write. Yet this confidence was hard-won. The education system of the inter-war years was not only 'shot through with class differences' (Beddoe, 1989, 34), but also highly divided according to gender. The Education Act of 1870 had established elementary schools for both sexes, thus increasing jobs for women teachers. In 1902 local authorities began setting up high schools for girls. The Education ('Fisher') Act of 1918 then raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14, providing elementary education for all children up to the age of 14, but this was followed in 1922 by cuts of £6.5 million in education spending (Thorpe, 1994, 51). All secondary education was fee-paying, particularly after the Government Circular 1421 came into effect in 1933 enforcing fees, and thus 'eliminating the "free secondary schools" which had grown up in many parts of the country' (Thorpe, 1994, 52). Only 14 per cent of children went on to secondary education, half of those on scholarships (Beddoe, 1989, 34). For working-class children of both sexes the chances of going to university were very slim indeed. Moreover, senior elementary education for girls was heavily biased towards domestic subjects, aiming to turn out competent wives and mothers.

The belief that since girls were destined for marriage their education was not a priority and might even be a disadvantage also affected middle-class girls. The educated woman in inter-war fiction is accompanied by her shadow, the woman denied that education. Poignant examples include Muriel in *The Crowded Street*, who is told by her headmistress that astronomy is 'not one of those things necessary for a girl to learn. "How will it help you, dear, when you, in your future life, have, as I hope, a house to look after"' (CS, 29), and Joan Ogden in *The Unlit Lamp*, whose mother will not allow her to go to university.

The inter-war period did see a huge increase in the numbers of girls attending secondary school, from 185,000 in 1920 to 500,000 in 1936, although this was far outstripped by the number of boys (Beddoe, 1989, 40). Girls attending the single sex public and grant maintained county secondary schools followed a curriculum based on that of boys' education, and which reflected 'the victory of the Victorian women educators to achieve for girls a near-identical academic curriculum, in which the emphasis was put on hard work and intellectual achievement' (Beddoe, 1989, 40).

Girls' schools provided a space which validated female identity, rewarded intelligence and independence, and within which female friendships could flourish. Beddoe comments: 'What singled out girls' secondary schools, and to a certain extent women's colleges, was that they were autonomous women's worlds. Nowhere else did women have as much power' (1989, 43). This autonomy came under increasing attack during the inter-war period. Having enforced domestic subjects for girls in elementary schools as preparation for wife and motherhood, as well as domestic service, the Board of Education made a concerted effort to impose different curricula for boys and girls in secondary schools as well. They failed only because of lack of evidence that girls and boys were psychologically different (Beddoe, 1989, 41).

Particularly damaging were the attacks which used the discourses of 'perverse' sexuality made available by Ellis and Freud in order to stigmatise spinster teachers as 'embittered, thwarted, sexually frustrated or deviant women' (Oram, 1989, 99). The marriage bar, introduced in 1922 and only lifted by the London Council in 1935, forced women teachers to give up their jobs on marriage. Female teachers were therefore, of necessity, single. They were attacked, Alison Oram suggests, not only 'as sexually independent spinsters and as feminists, but also as economically powerful women who challenged men's authority by demanding equal opportunities in the profession' (1989, 107). Women teachers were not only vocal in demanding equal pay with male teachers - they were paid four-fifths of the male rate (Beddoe, 1989, 80) - they also had a 'high profile in feminist campaigns generally' (Oram, 1989, 108). The widening awareness of lesbianism provided a discourse which could be used to control such women by threatening them with the stigma of perversion.

The impact of these discourses can be traced in the schoolgirl story as written by Angela Brazil, Elsie Oxenham and Elinor Brent-Dyer. Rosemary Auchmuty argues that

such stories are 'fundamentally about female strength and bonding' (1989, 120). While Oxenham's early texts explore 'women's struggle to relate to each other in a mature, loving and non-possessive way' (Auchmuty, 1989, 128), her later texts shift from friendship to heterosexual love and marriage.

In fact, the anxiety over friendships between girls seems to have been less acute than concern over the potential influence of the spinster teacher. Oram quotes a newspaper report of an educational conference where a Dr Williams castigated spinster teachers, declaring: 'The women who have the responsibility of teaching these girls are, many of them themselves embittered, sexless, or homosexual hoydens who try to mould the girls into their own pattern' (1989, 105). The single sex girls' school was increasingly seen as 'unnatural' but, also, conversely, as encouraging women's 'natural' tendency to be rivalrous and catty. Winifred Holtby records a man commenting about the girls' school, Roedean: 'Awful [...] Imagine a place like that. All those women, cooped up together, scratching each other's eyes out. Women weren't intended for that sort of thing' (1934, 1). Girls' schools were seen as sexual hothouses, forcing illicit, unhealthy emotions between women. Deprived of more 'normal' objects for their desire, their 'natural' rivalry was supposedly channelled into competition for other women, specifically teachers, rather than 'healthy' competition over men.

Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women* directly replicates such contemporaneous fears and 'signal[s] the destructive impact of the sexologists' (Frith 1988, 285). The overcrowded warren-like girls' school is seen as breeding 'unnatural' passions between women, in direct contrast with the co-educational school with its 'sunlight and fresh air and space' (Dane, 1995, 220). Clare Hartill is a text-book vampire lesbian who preys on her younger colleague, Alwynne Durand, and causes the death of one of their pupils, Louise Denny. The novel uses the three-women triangle formation, and the rivalry or 'duel' (1995, 70) is between Clare and Alwynne's aunt, Elspeth, who has brought up the motherless Alwynne. However, Elspeth cedes her corner of the triangle to Roger, who woos Alwynne into the 'healthy' heterosexuality of marriage. The thesis of the book is clearly articulated by Elspeth when she tells Clare:

'After all, feminine friendship is all very well, very delightful [...] but when it is a question of Marriage - Oh, Miss Hartill, surely you see what I mean? [...] We both know that an unmated woman - she's a failure - she's unfulfilled.'

(1995, 334-35)

As Alison Hennegan notes in her introduction, *Regiment of Women* 'established a pattern and a cast of characters which would exert a powerful influence over lesbian fiction for the next half-century' (Dane, 1995, xiii), including Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*. Winifred Holtby's Sarah Burton in *South Riding* is a important and conscious corrective to it.

It was girls from the public and county secondary schools who might be expected to go on to university but this was by no means an accepted move. While her brother was expected to go to university, Brittain details the long battle to get her parents to allow her to go, and records 'one lugubrious lady' asking her mother: 'How *can* you send your daughter to college, Mrs Brittain! [...] Don't you want her ever to get *married*' (TY 73, original emphasis). Under a quarter of English university students in the mid-1920s were women (Stevenson, 1990, 257-58). They faced, as Susan Leonardi documents in *Dangerous by Degrees* (1989), hostility from the male undergraduates and from the authorities. Women were mocked for their appearance, their diligence, and even for the spartan existence they lived, so memorably noted in Woolf's descriptions of a meagre dinner at 'Fernham' and a sumptuous lunch at a male college in *A Room of One's Own*.

Brittain gives an account of watching the first women to receive degrees at Oxford in 1920, which conveys the ambivalent position of the university-educated woman:

Even the unchanging passivity of Oxford beneath the hand of the centuries must surely, I thought, be a little stirred by the sight of the women's gowns and caps - those soft, black pseudo-mortar-boards with their deplorable habit of slipping over one eye - which were nevertheless the visible signs of a profound revolution.

(TY 508)

Those 'pseudo-mortar-boards' epitomise the paradox of the educated woman, never quite equal to men and marked by her internalisation of the view that education equalled loss of femininity.

This anxiety is clear in Margaret Kennedy's best-selling *The Constant Nymph* (1924). As in *Regiment of Women*, an opposition is set up between the 'natural' woman, in this case the 'nymph', Tessa, and the 'unnatural' woman, her older cousin and guardian, Florence. While Florence is presented as corrupted by her school, Cleeve, which is, her father suspects, full of 'earnest cultivated women who read Robert

Browning and wanted degrees. A dreadful type!’ (Kennedy, 1924, 235), Tessa is linked to a pre-war Edenic Europe where, we assume, women were not educated. Tessa’s attraction for Lewis Dodd, the composer husband of Florence, and, undoubtedly, for the inter-war male reader, lies in nostalgia for her youth, uneducated ‘innocence’ and her status as an object for male use. Florence’s father reflects that Tessa ‘seemed almost like Lewis’s belonging’ (1924, 238). Florence is castigated for her sexual jealousy and, indeed, for desiring Lewis at all.

Reading this as an expression of anxiety about the educated woman, we can see how this anxiety was deflected into sexual rivalry between women. Lewis’s comment that ‘I feel that the worst thing I’ve done is that somehow I’ve put you and Tessa against each other. Because you ought to love each other’ (1924, 288) indicates how the presence of the male constructs the two women as sexual rivals and cancels out any friendship between them. Claud Cockburn in *Bestseller: The Books that Everyone Read 1900-1939* argues that ‘The bestsellers really are a mirror of “the mind and face” of an age’ (1972, 7). That is, they reflect the prevailing ideology. *The Constant Nymph* not only reflects the dominant ideology, but has an almost schizophrenic feel as if Kennedy, herself educated at Cheltenham and Somerville, is not quite in control of her material because of her own anxiety.

Dorothy L. Sayers offers a far more conscious analysis of the divisive nature of this anxiety in her detective novel, *Gaudy Night*, which, despite its status as ‘popular fiction’, contests rather than reinforces the dominant ideology. Returning to her Oxford college to try to identify the writer of a series of poison pen letters, Harriet Vane finds herself accepting the stereotypes which suggest that the writer must be one of the celibate, and therefore ‘repressed’ female dons:

The warped and repressed mind is apt enough to turn and wound itself. ‘Soured virginity’ - ‘unnatural life’ - ‘semi-demented spinsters’ - ‘starved appetite and suppressed impulses’ - ‘unwholesome atmosphere’ - [Harriet] could think of whole sets of epithets, ready minted for circulation.

(Sayers, 1981, 74)

It’s a piece of bad scholarship on Harriet’s part to accept as ‘truth’ what her own experience should show her are easy stereotypes. In fact, the poison pen writer turns out to be the married scout, Annie, acting out the ‘usual masculine spite against academic woman’ (1981, 99). This spite can be traced to the male fear that independent women

threatened male jobs and power - Annie's husband lost his job and degree after Miss Hillyard, one of the dons, reported his academic malpractice.

Sayers's Shrewsbury College is a 'kind of female utopia' (Leonardi, 1989, 106). Yet the force of the dominant ideology is such that the dons themselves begin to suspect one another, nearly destroying their own community. As the Dean worries:

'I suppose it might even be one of ourselves. That's what's so horrible. Yes, I know - elderly virgins, and all that [...] Do you think the poor creature knows that she does it herself? I've been waking up with nightmares, wondering whether I didn't perhaps prowl around in my sleep, spitting at people.'

(1981, 76)

Their community is joyfully vindicated when, in *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), Harriet is married from college with the dons as 'bridesmaids' and the Head to give her away. This is one of the very few inter-war novels where a woman keeps both a man and her female friends. *Gaudy Night* is also one of the strongest fictional affirmations in this period of women's equal right to the world of academic excellence.

#### v. 'Feminism Divided'

In an era characterised by divisions between women it is not surprising that there were divisions in the feminist movement itself. As Holtby asked: 'Why, in 1934, are women themselves often the first to repudiate the movements of the past hundred and fifty years, which have gained for them at least the foundations of political, economic, educational and moral equality?' (1934, 96). One explanation was that after the 1928 Equal Franchise Act gave the vote to women over 21, there was a sense that the battle had been won.

It is now that the first histories of the women's movements begin to appear: Ray Strachey's *The Cause* (1928), Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* (1931), and Winifred Holtby's *Women* (1934), as well as many newspaper and journal articles. In fiction women consciously attempted to write a female history of the years of 'transition' - Rose Macauley's *Told by an Idiot* (1923), Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1936) and Woolf's *The Years* (1937) and, later, Rebecca West's *Cousin Rosamund* trilogy (1957-85). What these novels have in common is their construction of female political history within the context of family life, especially connections between women.

However, the generation gap between the old campaigners and their post-war successors was itself a problem. As Beddoe comments, to the younger women, veteran feminists like Mrs Despard, who attended her 86th birthday celebrations in 1930 wearing a long dress and a Victorian style bonnet, 'must have looked antediluvian' (1989, 137). Moreover, the elders felt that younger women 'seemed to be mistaking the meaning of their freedom, and to be using it only for excess of excitement', a phenomenon Strachey felt was 'more a sign of the reaction after the war strain than of anything to do with the Women's Movement' (1978, 390). With hindsight, two influences are important here. First, that of the media campaign against the flapper as too irresponsible to deserve a vote. Second, the younger generation's reaction against an older generation whom they saw as responsible for the war.

Added to this was a change in sexual morality which meant that the older feminists found themselves regarded by younger women as 'interfering, strait-laced and priggish older women, keen to deny to younger generations the heterosexual pleasures they themselves had never had' (Pugh, 1992, 75). Whereas the older generation of feminists were often unmarried (63 per cent of WSPU members in 1913 were single (Jeffreys, 1985, 89)), younger feminists like Vera Brittain, Mary Stott, Dora Russell, or Naomi Mitchison combined marriage and career. The divisions within feminism mirrored those divisions in society at large - age, marital status and class - and were not just endemic to the movement.

The struggle for the vote had been, as Brittain noted, a 'clear-cut issue, which was popular in the sense that it was easily understood' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 101), and which all classes could combine to fight for. In contrast, post-war feminism was fighting for 'half a dozen things' which could only be summed up as an 'equal humanity', not a slogan Brittain thought would appeal to 'the present-day youngest women, with their horror of anything that sounds heavy or "pious"' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 101). The move from 'women' to 'humanity' is illustrated by the transformation of the NUWSS in 1919 into the 'National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship' (NUSEC).

The breadth of the issues tackled by the inter-war movement is reflected in the name of the 'Six Point Group' launched in 1921 by Lady Rhondda with members which included Brittain, Holtby and West. Its aims were:

1. Satisfactory legislation on Child Assault.
2. Satisfactory legislation for the Widowed Mother.

3. Satisfactory legislation for the Unmarried Mother and her Child.
4. Equal rights for guardianship for Married Parents.
5. Equal pay for Teachers.
6. Equal opportunities for Men and Women in the Civil Services.

(Spender, 1984, 175)

*Time and Tide*, the journal founded by Lady Rhondda to act as a voice for the Group, published writing by some of the best women writers of the period including Holtby and West, both on its board of directors.

Such a wide field of action brought dispersal of energies and dissension over both aims and tactics. Other feminist groups included the Women's Freedom League (which had survived the war), the National Council of Women, the London and National Society for Women's Service (which became the Fawcett Society), while single issue groups, such as the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, the Housewives League, and the Married Women's Association were also set up. Women were increasingly active in the unions, especially the teaching unions. The Women's Co-operative Guild (founded in 1883) and the Women's Institute (founded in 1915) expanded rapidly. Although both campaigned to improve women's lot they did so within the ideology of maternalism and domesticity. This fragmentation meant that 'there was no clear feminist voice and no powerful united feminist lobby' and the diverse groups often did not co-operate (Beddoe, 1989, 140). Although 36 women became MPs during this period (Pugh, 1992, 154), two of whom became Cabinet members - Margaret Bondfield as Minister for Labour and Ellen Wilkinson as Minister for Education - they were divided along party lines.

What is most striking about the period is a self-conscious division between 'Old Feminists' such as Lady Rhondda and Winifred Holtby, and 'New Feminists' such as Eleanor Rathbone, who became President of the NUSEC in 1919. The 'Old Feminists' emphasised equal rights and opposed any protective legislation based on women's 'special' needs. The 'New Feminists' argued that the majority of women were wives and mothers and that feminists should lobby for legislation which offered women protection in those roles. Dora Russell articulated the 'New Feminist' position when she criticised the 'Old Feminists' for ignoring 'the fact that woman had *bodies*, that they produced children and had a range of special needs which as *equal* members of society they had every right to demand should be met' (Spender, 1984, 42). In *The Disinherited Family* (1924) Rathbone argued strongly against the family wage system advocated by the trade



unions and advocated a 'family allowance' paid directly to the mother. As Holtby, herself 'an Old Feminist, with the motto Equality First', put it in an article entitled 'Feminism Divided': 'The New Feminism emphasises the importance of "women's point of view", the Old Feminism believes in the primary importance of the human being' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 47-48). When in 1927 the NUSEC passed an amendment declaring their support for protective legislation, eleven members of the executive council resigned, and several went on to join the Six Point Group.

Again, this division reflects those of class, marital status and sexuality which I have already noted as endemic to the era. While middle-class women saw the assertion of their 'right' to work as liberating and favoured 'Old Feminism', working-class women regarded the economic necessity to work as part of their oppression, and stood to gain from the protective legislation advocated by 'New Feminists'. This irreconcilable division is the key to much of the dissension. Carol Dyhouse argues that during this period 'feminists were ever more prone to attack each other on account of their class allegiances, real or otherwise' (1989, 193). Naomi Mitchison's criticism of Holtby's *Women* on the grounds that Holtby was writing 'too exclusively from the standpoint of the professional, middle-class woman' (1934, 93) is a case in point. Class loyalties were frequently stronger than gender loyalties, especially for socialist women such as Margaret Bondfield.

'New Feminism' both reflected and reinforced the dominant ideology of maternalism. It 'only rarely questioned men's power in marriage and heterosexuality and did not generally include any positive vision of the spinster's role in feminist action' (Oram, 1989, 112). Indeed, an extraordinary number of feminists - Vera Brittain, Dora Russell, Dora Marsden (editor of *The Freewoman*), Ellen Wilkinson - attacked the spinster in terms which replicated those of the sexologists. Both the demand for access to birth control and the fight to allow teachers to marry involved many feminists in rhetoric which valued the 'wider' experience of the married or sexually active heterosexual woman at the expense of reinforcing the stereotype of the 'frustrated' spinster.

Although the 1920s was a very productive period in terms of legislation for women the 1930s saw a tailing off (see Appendix ii). This was partly because many aims had been achieved and partly because women were channelling their energy into unemployment or into fighting Fascism. But it was also the result of 'a society

increasingly intolerant of any female aspirations except the purely domestic' (Pugh, 1992, 235). The 'cult of domesticity' Pugh identifies was particularly overt in the new magazines for women launched in the 1930s - *Woman's Own* (1932) and *Woman* (1936). The emphasis on female rivalry takes on a new flavour here as the wife is warned against 'flirtatious girls referred to as "vamps"' (Pugh, 1992, 213). For instance, Pugh cites a piece in *Woman's Own*, 3 February, 1934 which advises wives:

there is no reason why married women should not be able to hold their  
own against these vamps [...] you can vamp your own husband  
throughout your life if only you will take the trouble to understand him.  
(1992, 214)

The man-hunting 'flapper' of the 1920s has undergone a change of name but in her new incarnation as the 'vamp' she is still presented as a rival to other women. Certainly this was not a climate that encouraged women to form political alliances. Holtby presciently links this idealising of domesticity to the rise of Fascism in 1930s Europe - the ideology of 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' (1934, 154) in Germany and the 'cult of the cradle' (166) in Italy. Virginia Woolf was to draw similar conclusions in *Three Guineas*. In 1939, as in 1918, the feminist movement was again subsumed by world war.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORISING FEMALE RIVALRY

In this chapter I want to map out four models of female rivalry. Firstly, Freud's Oedipal triangle and his emphasis on the necessity for rivalry between the mother and daughter. Secondly, Luce Irigaray's theorisation of female rivalry as manufactured within patriarchal society. Thirdly, in contrast to the mother-daughter paradigm which has dominated work on female friendship, I want to consider relations between blood sisters as offering a model which can encompass a complex tension between friendship *and* rivalry. Finally, Mikhail Bakhtin's work offers a model of subjectivity as constructed through dialogue which can encompass both reciprocity and rivalry within the same relationship.

#### **i. The Freudian Triangle**

The theory of female development which Freud formulated before and during the inter-war period culminating in two key essays - 'Female Sexuality' (1931) and 'Femininity' (1932) - legitimates and normalises rivalry between mother and daughter as an essential stage on the route to 'normal femininity'.

As Girard acknowledges, from the Freudian point of view the 'original triangle of desire is, of course, the Oedipal triangle' (1976, 186). The male-identified erotic triangle can be read in terms of the boy's desire for his mother and rivalry with his father, particularly if the male rival is older. The female Oedipal complex, however, is complicated by the girl's initial, pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, the problem which haunts Freud's essays. He presents it in 'Female Sexuality' as a radical discovery: 'Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus phase in girls came to us as a surprise, like the discovery in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilisation behind the civilisation of Greece' (1977, 372). This phase is 'grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify' (Freud, 1977, 373).

The central problem in 'Female Sexuality' is that if the primary attachment in the pre-Oedipal stage for both sexes is to the mother, then the little girl is faced with the task of transferring her attachment: 'at the end of her development, her father - a man - should have become her new love-object' (1977, 375). Freud's model of development is both linear and prescriptive - the little girl '*should*' transfer her attachment to the father.

But he has trouble accounting for the motivation for this transferral, offering as possible motives:

that [the mother] failed to provide the little girl with the only proper genital, that she did not feed her sufficiently, that she compelled her to share her mother's love with others, that she never fulfilled all the girl's expectations of love, and, finally, that she first aroused her sexual activity and then forbade it.

(1977, 381-82)

Admitting that these factors seem 'insufficient to justify the girl's final hostility', Freud falls back on suggesting that the attachment to the mother has to cease 'precisely because it was the first and was so intense' (1977, 382). However, he still stresses that 'The turning-way from her mother is an extremely important step in the course of the little girl's development' (1977, 387).

In 'Femininity' Freud pin-points the 'castration complex' as the 'specific factor' (1973, 158) which accounts for the little girl's transfer to the father: 'The wish with which the girl turns to her father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her' (1973, 162). But 'the attachment to the mother ends in hate' (1973, 155) and the hostility which the little girl already feels towards the mother who failed to give her enough milk/love 'is now greatly intensified for *she becomes the girl's rival*, who receives from her father everything that she desires from him' (1973, 163, my emphasis). With the discovery of her 'castration' there are three possible developmental routes open to the girl: 'sexual inhibition or [...] neurosis', a 'masculinity complex', or 'normal femininity' (1973, 160). (In fact, there is an interesting slippage as Freud's account of inhibition and neurosis slides almost imperceptibly into the account of 'normal femininity'.)

My point here is that Freud sees rivalry with the mother as a necessary and desirable stage in the route to 'normal femininity', while bonding between women, especially lesbianism, is theorised as evidence of immaturity, as a 'masculinity complex'. Moreover, the discovery that the 'phallic' mother in fact lacks a penis leads to women being 'debased in value for girls just as they are for boys and later perhaps for men' (1973, 160-61). Psychoanalysis also normalises an internalisation of female inferiority.

The female attachment to the mother which Freud found so problematic has proved suggestive for feminist theorists. Nancy Chodorow's object relations theory of female identity in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) has been very influential. The

crux of her argument is that, because women mother, women's primary bonds are with women rather than men. There is, therefore, a marked difference in their sense of self:

growing girls come to define themselves and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine self is separate.

(1978, 169)

Men look for a return to the mother through adult heterosexual relationships, but because men 'cannot provide the kind of return to oneness that women can' (1978, 194) women recreate the primary mother-child relationship by having children themselves - 'reproducing' motherhood. Thus 'women's heterosexuality is triangular and requires a third person - a child - for its structural and emotional completion' (1978, 207).

As Adrienne Rich writes, 'on the basis of her own findings, Chodorow leads us implicitly to conclude that heterosexuality is *not* a "preference" for women' (1980, 636, original emphasis). To account for the transference of women's attachments to men, Chodorow resorts to the sweeping statement that 'most women are heterosexual' (1978, 200), and the bleak assertion that 'women's economic dependence on men pushes them anyway into heterosexual marriage' (1978, 208). In contrast, Rich's provocative essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' uncovers the male power structures (from physical force to consciousness-control) which enforce the 'lie of compulsory heterosexuality' (1980, 657).

The assertion that women's primary bonds are with women is an important corrective to Freud's insistence on rivalry as 'normal'. However, Judith Kegan Gardiner points out that both Chodorow and Rich 'describe gender difference in terms that imply that women are *nicer* than men' (1990, 134, my emphasis). Tess Cosslett notes the parallels between Chodorow's *descriptions* of women's friendships and the '*prescriptions* in Victorian conduct books' where the elements Chodorow presents as 'psychological characteristics of women' are 'part of a programme of socialisation, based on ideological assumptions as to what men and women are and should be like' (1988, 10). The idea that, if uncoerced by patriarchy, women are too 'nice' to indulge in rivalry is, in fact, remarkably close to traditional stereotypes of 'femininity'.

Chodorow's emphasis on women's 'flexible ego boundaries' has led to an idealisation of 'merging' between women. Elizabeth Abel's '(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women' focuses on women's desire to merge with a similar other and theorises female friendship as a 'mode of relational self-definition' (1981, 414): 'Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self' (1981, 416). My main argument with Abel's essay is that in four of the five texts she examines one of the 'friends' is either already dead, absent or dies. The other woman has to be negated (as in Freud's paradigm) before the process of self-identification can be completed. Abel recognises this when she writes that: 'Because the identification process can engulf as well as shape identity, its course is smoothest when the object of identification is remembered or imagined rather than physically present' (1981, 426). As Judith Gardiner comments, in these novels

a living process of interaction between women, with its exhilarating fusions and frightening threats to autonomy, often yields to a safer relationship with an absent other who can be recreated in imagination and memory.

(1981, 441)

The fluid ego boundaries which Abel, like Chodorow and Rich, endorses have been seen as a weakness by other critics, including Jessica Benjamin (1988) and, as I will discuss later, Luce Irigaray. Finally, Abel treats fictional characters as if they were psychoanalytical case studies, failing to consider the importance of narrative structure. It is because of this that I want to examine the 'living process of interaction' between Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain.

The relationship between writers is of special interest to literary critics and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use Freud's 'Female Sexuality' to theorise a 'female affiliation complex' (1988, Chapter Four). Faced with a choice of matrilineal and patrilineal literary inheritances, they argue, women writers can either turn to the father-daughter paradigm (Freud's 'nomal femininity'), relinquish creativity altogether (the rejection of sexuality), or retain their attachment to the mother (the 'masculinity complex'). This use of Freud's model is not entirely successful because it is virtually impossible to shake off the values Freud gives to each outcome.

What it does usefully suggest is women writers' ambivalence towards their literary predecessors, a potent mixture of 'exploration, rivalry and affiliation' (1988, 198). Given the erasure of their literary matrilineage from the canon, they suggest, women writers have to actively seek out and choose their precursors. Rather than the 'anxiety of influence' male writers struggle with according to Harold Bloom (1973), female writers have to overcome first an 'anxiety of authorship' and then the problems associated with the affiliation complex (1988, 200). The choice of an appropriate matrilineage (literary foremothers who are 'serious' not 'silly', but who will not engulf their followers) involves a process of *looking at* and *for* those earlier writers. In the early twentieth century this process can be traced in 'the creation of parodic and allusive texts' (1988, 208). The inter-war rewritings of *Jane Eyre*, and critical essays and books on the Brontës and Gaskell, as well as on suffrage leaders such as Mrs Pankhurst and Mrs Fawcett, can be seen in this context. Gilbert and Gubar's model allows for a tension between rivalry and affiliation but, as a mother-daughter model, it offers no way of thinking about relations between writers who are contemporaries, such as Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby.

A Freudian reading of the female-identified triangle text can theorise rivalry between women in terms of Oedipal mother-daughter rivalry. In Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), a revision of *Jane Eyre*, the unnamed protagonist marries an obvious father-figure in the older, richer Maxim, while his dead first wife, Rebecca, fills the place of the mother. The protagonist's move from idealisation of Rebecca to a rejection of her corresponds to the little girl's move from attachment to the mother to rejection of her. She attains maturity ('normal femininity') when she finally takes Rebecca's place as 'Mrs de Winter'. Maxim, psychically 'castrated' by the loss of his house and position, becomes the protagonist's 'child'. As Freud suggested in 'Femininity': 'Even a marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as a mother to him' (1973, 168).

To complicate this reading, *Rebecca* derives much of its power, as both Alison Light (1984) and Tania Modleski (1988) in her reading of the Hitchcock film version indicate, from the protagonist's unacknowledged desire for Rebecca - the 'shadowy' pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother. In a sexually charged scene the protagonist, encouraged by Mrs Danvers, takes Rebecca's nightdress out of its case and touches it to

her face, smelling Rebecca's perfume, an unmistakable image of female desire. Indeed, it is the protagonist's desire to *be* Rebecca - 'Mrs de Winter' - which initiates her desire for Maxim. Although this accords with Girard's argument that the desire for the love-object is initiated by the protagonist's relation to the rival, this triangle has been upended so that its *subject* is a woman who desires another woman, and uses a man as a mediator in that desire.

The attachment to the 'mother' empowers the protagonist to take the place of the phallic mother. But it also threatens her life. In three scenes - when she imagines being Rebecca on the telephone, when she wears Rebecca's ball costume, and in the bedroom scene - the protagonist almost merges with Rebecca. Modleski argues that in the film scene where Mrs Danvers tries to persuade the protagonist to commit suicide both the protagonist and the spectator 'are made to experience a kind of annihilation of the self, of individual identity, through a merger with another woman' (1988, 49). To avoid this loss of self the protagonist has to assert her difference from Rebecca, a rejection and 'killing' of the 'mother'.

Rivalry here is an assertion of difference and, in Abel's term, a 'vehicle of self-definition'. The protagonist's identity is constructed in terms of her *difference* from Rebecca. At first Rebecca is an ideal the protagonist cannot live up to (she imagines everyone saying 'She's so different from Rebecca' (1975, 129)). But finally the protagonist's identity is ratified by Maxim's choice of her as different from Rebecca, who is 'vicious, damnable, rotten through and through' (1975, 283). In becoming 'Mrs de Winter' (taking the 'Name of the Father') her separate identity is lost but this merger with Maxim is socially sanctioned. It is the man who can provide a secure identity for the woman. This brings us, though by a different route, back to the Freudian necessity for the woman to reject the 'mother' in order to establish an adult identity.

Such psychoanalytic readings are inherently ahistorical. As Luce Irigaray remarks:

The problem is that [Freud] fails to investigate the historical factors governing the data with which he is dealing. And [...] that he takes female sexuality as he sees it and accepts it as a *norm*. That he interprets women's sufferings, their symptoms, their dissatisfactions, in terms of their individual histories, without questioning the relationship of their 'pathology' to a certain state of society, of culture.

(1985, 70, original emphasis)



Gilbert and Gubar have suggested that Freud's theories are 'themselves reaction-formations against the cultural instability generated by the existence of women for whom female anatomy did not necessarily imply an intellectually impoverished destiny' (1988, 180). In the historical context of rapidly changing gender roles in both Vienna and England, psychoanalysis can be understood as a controlling mechanism generated in response to the threat of women's increasing independence.

Biographical details substantiate this view. Freud translated John Stuart Mill's *The Emancipation of Women*, but commented negatively on it in a letter to his wife-to-be, Martha: 'Am I to think of my delicate sweet girl as a competitor? [...] the position of women cannot be other than what it is: to be an adored sweetheart in youth, and a beloved wife in maturity' (cited in Appignanesi and Forrester, 1992, 421-22). His work gave 'scientific' veracity to a notion of 'normal femininity' which reinforced that patriarchal ideal of woman as 'adored sweetheart' and 'beloved wife'. Not only was Freud unable to conceptualise any role for women other than marriage, but his case histories frequently end with the marriage of the patient, suggesting that even his 'science' is infected by the ideology of the romance plot.

His comment about seeing his wife as a 'competitor' raises other key issues. Firstly, the traditional stereotype of the 'normal' woman regards her as too 'nice' for the dirty 'competition' of the work place, which is thus secured for men. With this in mind, we should be wary of any feminist theory which posits a view of women as 'nicer' than men. Secondly, Freud's point is that women should not compete with men for work, not that they should not compete with other women for men.

We need not only to distinguish between different types of rivalry and competition, but to consider the possibility that some types, for instance in the job market, might have benefits for women. Rivalry between women cannot simply be accounted for by the Freudian model as an inevitable stage in the universal psychic development towards 'normal femininity'. Instead, we need a model which can be historicised and for this I want to turn to Luce Irigaray.

## ii. Luce Irigaray - women as rival commodities

The central project of Luce Irigaray's work is an attempt (to paraphrase the title of one of her books) to 'think the difference' between the sexes. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) she contends that:

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through.  
(1993a, 5)

This 'thinking it through' has two main components in Irigaray's oeuvre. The first is what Margaret Whitford describes as a 'psychoanalysis' of Western culture itself (1991, 33). Irigaray deconstructs the major male thinkers of Western culture, including Freud, to show how their discourse has been based on an objectification of woman as 'Other', thus leaving women and their relations with each other 'unsymbolised', with no access to representation in the symbolic order. As Irigaray puts it in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977):

I am trying [...] to go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting point and at the same time, to (re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary.  
(1985, 164)

This indicates the second strand of her work - a utopian attempt to find a space for a female subjectivity and a means by which women can relate to each other as equal subjects. As she puts it (in a somewhat transhistorical mode):

Whatever inequalities may exist among women, they all undergo, even without clearly realising it, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire.

That is why it is very important for women to be able to join together and to join together 'among themselves' [...] In order to love each other, even though men have organised a *de facto* rivalry among women. [...] The first issue facing liberation movements is that of making each woman 'conscious' of the fact that what she has felt in her personal experience is a condition shared by all women, thus *allowing that experience to be politicised*.

(1985, 164, original emphasis)

Two major ideas in her work can be used to generate a model of rivalry which can encompass both gendered power relations and the issue of history. The first is her rethinking of the mother-daughter relationship and her insistence that women should not

reject the mother. The second is her theorisation of women's position as rival commodities in a male-controlled economy. My interpretation of Irigaray's work is indebted to Margaret Whitford's *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (1991) and her introductions in *The Irigaray Reader* (1991).

Irigaray's use in *This Sex Which is Not One* of the image of the 'two lips' which make woman '*neither one nor two*' (1985, 26, original emphasis) has led to her being seen as an 'essentialist' (see for instance, Weedon, 1987). Naomi Schor (1989), however, argues that Irigaray's so-called 'essentialism' is a 'strategy' for overcoming the 'othering' of women in society, while Whitford has suggested that 'One cannot get "beyond" essentialism at this point without passing through essentialism' (1991, 103). Elizabeth Grosz argues that this image is not a 'true' description of women: 'Its function is not referential but combative: it is an image to contest and counter dominant phallomorphic representations' (1989, 116). Irigaray's concern is with representations rather than 'reality'. Her writing 'always refers to other texts or discourses, not to a non-discursive or 'real' corporeality, experience or pleasure' (Grosz, 1989, 117). This makes her work of particular interest to the literary critic.

To start with the unrepresented/unsymbolised relationship with the mother, in 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother' Irigaray, echoing Freud, calls this the "'dark continent" par excellence' (1991, 35) which underpins our society. The 'cornerstone' of Irigaray's work, according to Whitford, is the idea that 'western culture is founded not on parricide (as Freud hypothesised in *Totem and Taboo*) but on matricide' (Irigaray, 1991, 25). Irigaray argues that behind Freud's Oedipal myth is that of Clytemnestra's murder by her son, Orestes, the 'more archaic murder, that of the mother' (1991, 36), whereby the father takes on the role of creator. In 'Woman-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order' Irigaray clarifies this further: 'the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man-god-father killed the mother in order to take power' (1991, 47). As the site on which language/representation is erected, woman herself is excluded from representation and the symbolic order except as a lack - the 'hole' of her womb. The 'castration' of the Oedipus myth conceals an earlier loss: the severing of the umbilical cord, the link to the mother. It is the desire for 'the bodily encounter with the mother' (1991, 39) which is forbidden by the law of the father (36).

Irigaray stresses that women must retain and value their attachment to the mother: 'Neither little girl nor woman must give up love for their mother. Doing so uproots them from their identity, their subjectivity' (1991, 44). Moreover, they must reclaim their mother's history as subjects rather than mothers:

It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. [...] Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity.

(1991, 44)

The concept of a 'female' or 'maternal genealogy', a network of vertical and horizontal connections, offers a more fluid way of looking at the connections between women writers than the Freudian model used by Gilbert and Gubar. It also allows for the political need for women to 'situate' themselves within such a genealogy.

Irigaray sees women's fluid ego boundaries as a problematic state resulting directly from women's unrepresented state outside the symbolic order. 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' (1981) is a dramatisation of a suffocating mother-daughter merger. Within patriarchal culture woman is always 'Trapped in a single function - mothering' (1981, 66). Lacking an identity herself, the mother cannot offer her daughter a place in the symbolic order and becomes an engulfing figure. By turning to the father, however, the daughter is buying into a symbolic order which will allow her in her turn only the identity of 'mother'. The result is a vicious circle whereby the two women become rivals for the single place of mother available to them: 'When the one of us comes into the world the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies' (1981, 67). Whitford glosses Irigaray's thinking thus: 'Every woman then has to take the place of the mother in an aggressive rivalry that allows no possibility of the *with*. In this economy women are forced into substitution and hate for the mother' (1991, 182, original emphasis). The mother-daughter rivalry which Freud regarded as universal and 'normal' is thus exposed as the specific result of a patriarchal culture. Instead, Irigaray attempts to generate a utopian solution through an image of mother and daughter 'play[ing] together at being the same and different. You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors' (1981, 61). It's an image which encompasses both difference and similarity, connection and separateness.

To return to *Rebecca*, we can interpret the protagonist's near suicide as a version of this suffocating merging. Her rivalry with Rebecca can be read in terms of this rivalry

for the single 'place' of the 'mother' allowed within patriarchy. Maxim's murder of Rebecca is a re-enactment of the 'archaic murder of the mother'. Here a comparison with an earlier novel, Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921), another rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, is illuminating. In *Vera* the orphaned Lucy marries the widower, Everard Wemyss, and becomes fascinated by the figure of Wemyss's first wife Vera, who killed herself by leaping from a window. Looking into Vera's mirror she fears a loss of identity through merger: 'Now what shall I do if when I look into this I don't see myself but Vera?' (von Arnim, 1983, 179). However, it is not Vera who threatens Lucy's identity but Wemyss. As he increasingly tyrannises Lucy she seeks refuge and explanation in Vera's room: 'She would go to Vera's room, get as close to her mind as she could, - search, find something, some clue....' (1983, 189). Like Bluebeard's locked room, the secret Vera's room holds is that of male violence towards women and Lucy becomes aware that, whether or not he actually pushed her, Wemyss killed his wife.

Reading *Vera* against *Rebecca* foregrounds the fact that du Maurier's protagonist's empowerment is achieved through conniving at the literal murder of the other woman - she has become an 'accomplice [...] in the murder of the mother' (Irigaray, 1991, 44). In contrast, *Vera* affirms the attachment to the mother, as represented not only by Vera, but by Lucy's Aunt Dot. When Aunt Dot attempts to protect Lucy, Wemyss throws her out of the house, a physical separation of the 'mother' and 'daughter' which enforces the psychic separation Freud insisted on.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Irigaray maps out the conditions for female subjectivity and distinguishes between two modes of relation between women:

This world of female ethics would continue to have two vertical and horizontal dimensions:

- daughter-to-mother, mother-to-daughter;
- among women, or among 'sisters.'

(1993a, 108)

The two axes are different but interdependent: 'without a vertical dimension [...] a loving ethical order cannot take place among women' (1993a, 108). The currently unsymbolised mother-daughter relationship must be represented in the symbolic order before women can relate to each other as 'sisters' on the horizontal axis. Love between women, on both axes, is imperative if women's objectification within patriarchy is to be overcome: 'This love is necessary if we are not to remain the servants of the phallic cult, objects to be used and exchanged between men, rival objects on the market' (1991, 44-45)

Irigaray's analysis of women's position as 'rival objects on the market' offers a useful way of understanding the inter-war media emphasis on women's rivalry over men when what was actually causing concern was women's entry into the job market. Women, Irigaray argues, 'as the stakes of private property [...] have always been put in a position of mutual rivalry' (1985, 160). Indeed, 'men have organised a *de facto* rivalry among women' (1985, 164).

In 'Women on the Market' Irigaray engages with Lévi-Strauss's concept of kinship as based on an exchange of women in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949):

The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo.

(1985, 170)

As Sedgwick noted, women are always conduits in the relationship, never partners. The key questions posed by Irigaray - 'Why exchange women?' (1985, 170) and 'Why are men not objects of exchange among women?' (171) - are left unanswered by Lévi-Strauss, or even by Gayle Rubin (1975), who uses his concepts to theorise gender and female oppression as socially rather biologically constructed.

Irigaray argues that it is precisely the fact that it is women who are exchanged which both reflects and ensures the continuation of patriarchy:

The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)osexuality [...] Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)osexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, or relations among men.

(1985, 172)

'Hom(m)osexual' puns on 'homme' (man) and 'homo' (the same) to indicate that is the male love of 'the Same' which structures patriarchy (Moi, 1988, 135). It is this analysis which Sedgwick uses for her theorisation of the erotic triangle, although she attempts to retain the element of male *sexual* desire in the 'homosocial' which, she argues, Irigaray elides (1985, 26). Sedgwick takes the 'alibi' function of the woman's body to its logical extreme as a 'cover' for male homosexual desire.

'Woman,' Simone de Beauvoir suggested, 'is defined exclusively in her relation to men' (1983, 174). Irigaray elaborates this idea to argue that there are three 'roles' imposed on women in Western culture: '*mother, virgin, prostitute*' (1985, 186, original emphasis), all defined by their exchange value for and in relation to men. A woman's value as a commodity is measured in relation to 'a third term that remains external to her' (the man) which 'makes it possible to compare her with another woman' (1985, 176). That is, female relations are triangular, mediated through their relation to a man. In the romance plot the two women are defined as opposites on the virgin/whore scale according to their relation with the man. In *Rebecca* the protagonist's 'value' is determined by her difference from Rebecca, but only in relation to Maxim. The protagonist's move from 'virgin' to 'mother' (of Maxim), is defined through opposition to Rebecca as whore or 'prostitute'.

Woman's position as man's 'Other' means that women cannot function as 'other' for themselves: '*for the commodity, there is no mirror which copies it so that it may be at once itself and its 'own' reflection*'. One commodity cannot be mirrored in another, as man is mirrored in his fellow men' (1985, 176, original emphasis). This image becomes clearer if it is compared to Woolf's famous comment that 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (1977a, 35). Because women can only be 'a mirror of value of and for man' (1985, 177), Irigaray contends, they can 'no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men's desire' (1985, 188). They cannot relate as equal subjects.

Women's commodification on the Edwardian marriage market is explored in Margaret Kennedy's *The Ladies of Lyndon* (1923) in terms that confirm Irigaray's view. John regards his wife Agatha as a possession: "I don't deny that having *decent things* about the place," he glanced over his *perfect lawns* and then at *his wife* [...] "...does make a difference to me'" (1981, 82, my emphasis). Gerald, a Marxist in love with Agatha, recognises that women like her are 'symbols of an assured, unearned income' (1981, 83). The lack of connection between the women in this book (it is the women who ostracise Agatha when she elopes with John) is due to their commodification. Moreover, it is women who perpetuate their own commodification, as mothers orchestrate marriage proposals for their daughters. This trade in daughters confirms

Irigaray's hypothesis in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987) that if women are not allowed other forms of exchange 'the commodities that women *are forced to exchange would be their children* [...] in exchange for market status *for themselves*' (1993b, 84, original emphasis). Kennedy's book charts the last gasp of the Edwardian marriage market, but inter-war women's novels are still full of unfulfilled women who treat their daughters as objects of exchange.

The final question in 'Women on the market' - what would happen if women 'took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges?' (1985, 191) - informs 'Commodities among Themselves' where Irigaray asks: '*how can relationships among women be accounted for in this ['hom(m)osexual'] system of exchange*' (1985, 194, original emphasis). Female desire is unthinkable precisely because women's commodification constructs women as rivals:

Commodities can only enter into relationships under the watchful eyes of their 'guardians'. It is out of the question for them to go to 'market' on their own [...] *the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals.*

(1985, 196, my emphasis)

It was precisely when women began to move into the job market after the war and to use that economic independence to choose relationships with other women - 'to go to "market" on their own' - that taboos against lesbianism were strengthened. However, Irigaray offers the possibility of another, submerged, female economy:

*But what if these 'commodities' refused to go to 'market'? What if they maintained 'another' kind of commerce, among themselves? [...] Utopia? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning [...]*

(1985, 196-7, original emphasis)

This 'refusal' can be illustrated through one of Freud's case studies - 'Dora' in 'Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria' (1905). Dora's hysteria is initiated by a kiss from Herr K., with whose wife her father is having an affair. Freud reports that Dora was 'overcome by the idea that she had been handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife' (Freud, 1990, 66). Freud hints at the truth of this on an unconscious level: 'The two men had of course never made a *formal agreement* in which she was treated as an object for barter' (1990, 66, my emphasis). Dora's hysteria is her 'refusal' to be treated as an object of exchange. Her termination of the analysis is also her refusal to take part in the 'market' of



psychoanalysis, the exchange between Freud and her father. Moreover, Dora's love for Frau K., whose 'adorable white body' Dora praises 'in accents more appropriate to a lover than to a *defeated rival*' (1990, 96-97, my emphasis) hints at 'another kind of commerce', an 'exchange' between women, which 'undermines' the male-controlled economy.

Diana Fuss has argued that Irigaray's work elides male homosexuals who simultaneously occupy different places in the economy (as both powerful and powerless):

What [Irigaray's] theory of a phallically organised economy does not recognise is that there is more than one market, that there are as many systems of commodification and exchange as there are sets of social relations. A subject can be located in several economies, in competing and perhaps even incompatible social orders, at the same time.

(1989, 49)

In fact, I think that Irigaray is as aware as Fuss that there are many systems of exchange - her point is that it is the phallically organised one which is *dominant*. However, I want to suggest that women, positioned as commodities within a 'male hom(m)osexual economy', can also operate within a 'female economy', within which men can be commodified and 'exchanged'.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936) explores the co-existence of these two 'economies'. Set against the 1848 Paris Revolution, this novel initially opposes two women - the English upper-class Sophia Willoughby, estranged wife of Frederick, and Frederick's Bohemian Jewish mistress, Minna. Again, Sophia becomes obsessed with Minna as the 'Other woman', her opposite and rival. But Warner then destabilises the opposition 'wife'/'mistress' to expose the women's shared condition as commodities. When Sophia becomes friends with Minna, Frederick deprives her of money, making it clear that her status, and her 'difference' from Minna, depend on her position as his 'wife' and are thus under his control. The diversion of female energy into rivalry is in male interests: 'What easier,' Sophia realises, than for Frederick to 'retire behind those petticoats, stroll off politely and leave the two women to fight it out and dry each other's tears' (1987, 144).

Yet the two women's desire for each other overcomes that positioning as rivals and subverts their commodification. Minna becomes not Sophia's 'Other' but a second self, symbolised in a scene where Sophia, looking in a mirror, sees not herself but Minna

(1987, 301). The two women 'mirror' each other, rather than 'reflecting' Frederick who is erased from the novel. Terry Castle uses *Summer Will Show* to argue that:

Female bonding, at least hypothetically, destabilises the 'canonical' triangular arrangement of male desire, is an affront to it, and ultimately - in the radical form of lesbian bonding - displaces it entirely [...] the male-female-male erotic triangle remains stable only as long as its single female term is unrelated to any other female term. Once two female terms are conjoined in space, however, an alternative structure comes into being, a female-male-female triangle in which one of the male terms from the original triangle now occupies the 'in between' or subjugated position of the mediator.

(1992, 132-33)

In *Summer Will Show* the 'two female terms indeed merge and the male term drops out' (1992, 133). She goes on to argue that, 'In so far as it documents a world in which men are "between women" rather than vice versa, [the archetypal lesbian fiction] is an insult to the conventional geometries of fictional eros' and 'As a consequence it often looks odd, fantastical, implausible' (1992, 146-47). Warner's novel is certainly 'odd', corkscrewing away from traditional narrative conventions (it ends with Sophia reading the Communist Manifesto) and, by leaving Minna's death unconfirmed, refusing the reader the satisfaction of closure.

However, Castle's essay does not address the fact that the female-male-female triangle is a staple plot in women's heterosexual romance fiction. My own contention is that the female-identified triangle is a pattern which can be characteristic of *women's* fiction (not just lesbian fiction) in the same way that the male-female-male pattern is central to fiction by men. Women's novels can subvert, revise or upend the triangle plot in various ways - by erasing or 'killing' the man, or using him as a mediator or conduit between the women - suggesting that, at least within the novel, women can and do 'exchange' men.

### iii. Women as sisters - sibling rivalry

In comparison to the mother-daughter bond, relations between sisters have been comparatively neglected. Several theorists have suggested that we need to rethink our notions of 'sisterhood'. bell hooks (1984) and Maria C. Lugones (1995) both argue that feminist notions of 'sisterhood' mask differences of race and class. Virginia Blain objects to the sororal metaphor for a female literary tradition because it has been 'romanticised'

by feminists and 'Differences in position are too readily masked or suppressed by a sisterly model' (1990, 228). Notions of 'sisterhood' are also subject to change over time:

The meaning of "sisterhood" has continually been linked with specific understandings of what a woman *is* and *should* be; while apparently "all-embracing", the dominant concept of sisterhood has at different times in fact privileged women of a specific race, class, marital status, or sexual orientation

(Frith, 1988, 17-18, original emphasis)

The nineteenth-century idealisation of female friendship, as both Frith and Tess Cosslett (1988) show, actively supported a specific ideology of femininity.

A linguistic slippage between biological and non-biological 'sisterhood' identified by Amy K. Levin is the key issue here. As Levin notes, the silence around this allows critics to ignore the experience of friction between biological sisters which is so much at odds with the feminist ideal (1992, 16). Attention to the sibling rivalry which is central to that friction, I would argue, actually *reveals* rather than 'masks' issues of 'difference' and power. So here I want to explore the complexity of lived blood sister relationships.

One of Freud's earliest case histories indicates the possible damage when sister love conflicts with the need for sexual fulfilment. Fraulein Elisabeth von R. had developed hysterical pains in her legs which Freud traced to her repressed love for the husband of her much-loved sister. At her sister's deathbed Elisabeth had been horrified to discover herself thinking: 'Now he is free again and I can be his wife' (Freud and Breuer, 1991, 226). This conflict - between the primary nature of sister bonds and women's position as rival commodities - is central to women writers' treatment of the triangle plot.

Although Freud has little to say about siblings, Alfred Adler in *What Life Should Mean to You* (1932) argued that birth order is a key issue in identity formation:

The position in the family leaves an indelible stamp upon the style of life. Every difficulty of development is caused by rivalry and lack of co-operation in the family. If we look around at our social life and ask why rivalry and competition is its most obvious aspect - indeed, not only at our social life but at our whole world - then we must recognise that people are everywhere pursuing the goal of being conqueror, of overcoming and surpassing others. This goal is the result of training in early life, of the rivalries and competitive striving of children who have not felt themselves an equal part of their whole family.

(1962, 115)

Sibling rivalry thus becomes the model for later rivalry. Adler also acknowledges the issue of gender, pointing out that boys are more valued in our society than girls.

May Sinclair, who knew Adler's early work, writes perceptively about the intersection of birth order and gender. In *Mary Olivier* (1919) Mary is, like Sinclair herself, the only girl and youngest child and suffers because her mother always favours her sons. In *Arnold Waterlow* (1924), however, Arnold's privileged gender status in relation to his sister Charlotte is over-ridden by her position as older sister. Competition between siblings, then, takes place in different competing 'economies' - gender, birth order and parental attitudes.

M. Esther Harding's *The Way of All Women* (1933) noted sisters' special difficulty in establishing separate identities since they may not only look but act alike: 'Their psychological condition approaches complete identity, even in ways which are ordinarily considered to be determined by chance. They may seem to share a similar *fate*' (1933, 304, original emphasis), even, she suggests, to the extent of falling in love with the same man. One method of dealing with this is for each sister to take on a clearly defined role - the 'pretty one', the 'domestic one', the 'clever one' and so on.

Harding's contentions are supported by more recent studies of sisters, Elizabeth Fishel's *Sisters: Shared Histories, Lifelong Ties* (1979) and Brigid McConville's *Sisters: Love and Conflict Within the Lifelong Bond* (1985), as well as by Toni McNaron's more personally based introduction to the collection of essays, *The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection* (1985). All three show that the 'sister knot' (Fishel, 1994, 78) or 'dialectical dance' (Bank and Kahn, 1982, cited in McConville, 1985, 12) of sisterhood is not only a primary factor in identity formation - 'Our sisters do fundamentally shape the kind of person we become,' (McConville, 1985, 33) - but a 'lifelong' bond. Sisters function as models to be rejected or followed: 'From birth to death, sisters model and pattern their scripts on each other's' (Fishel 1994, 93). McNaron argues that a sister is 'someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves - a special kind of double' (1985, 7). The key question in identity formation is one of similarity/difference: 'Will I be like her - or different?' (McConville, 1985, 33). The tensions and the strengths of the sister relationship come out of this sense of being 'utterly like and utterly unlike' (Fishel, 1994, 4). Rivalry is a way of dealing with the fluidity of ego boundaries between sisters which can lead to "enmeshed" boundaries'

(Fishel, 1994, 192). Fishel, McConville and McNaron all agree with Harding that sisters develop strategies for dealing with this undesirable merging by emphasising difference, especially by assigning each other specific 'roles'.

Although the rival sisters plot is common in literature, in reality rivalry over the same man was seen as 'taboo' (Fishel, 1994, 192). McConville contends that the 'spectre of sisterly jealousy over men' is 'little more than a spectre' but it is 'aided and abetted by a male-run media and much pulp fiction which glories in the image of women scrapping over a male' (1985, 123). Several of Fishel and McConville's interviewees said their bonds with their sisters were *stronger* than with male partners. Both suggest that sister relationships are often repeated or mirrored in other relationships and a woman may look for a male lover or husband who is like her sister.

McNaron suggests that the primary nature of the sister bond

may have as much to do with later feelings of competition and jealousy as any culturally instilled messages about women's fighting over the same man. Indeed, our heterosexual myopia may have led us to overlook the possibility that sisters, when they are jealous over a parent, may well be jealous over their mother.

(1985, 6)

Similarly, Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum suggest that sometimes female competition is for another woman's attention in an attempt to recreate the primary mother-child attachment (1994, 98-99). In this pattern the man figures as a mother-surrogate, or as a badge of social success worn to win the mother's approval.

It is not surprising, then, that notions of 'sisterhood' should be caught between an ideal of primary closeness and a stereotype of rivalry over men. In her discussion of the 'sororal model' of nineteenth-century female friendship Carol Lasser shows how women used the language of an idealised blood sisterhood, positioning their female friends as 'fictive kin' (1988, 164), but also notes examples where the idealised relationship with a 'fictive' sister co-existed alongside a less than ideal relationship with blood sisters. The 'sororal' model sometimes extended to a public level as women 'became "sisters" by working together in the great social movements of the nineteenth century' (1988, 165).

This disjunction between idealised 'sisterhood' and the reality of sibling rivalry can be found in the suffrage movement itself. Ray Strachey's *The Cause* offers an idealised picture of sisters working together in a conversation between the young Emily

Davies and the two Garratt sisters, Elizabeth (later Garratt Anderson, the first British woman doctor) and Millicent (later Fawcett, the leader of the NUWSS):

Emily summed the matter up. 'Well Elizabeth,' she said, 'it's quite clear what has to be done. I must devote myself to securing higher education, while you open the medical profession to women. After these things are done,' she added, 'we must see about getting the vote.' And then she turned to the little girl [...] and said, 'You are younger than we are, Millie, so you must attend to that.'

(1978, 101)

Sisterhood is again literally at the centre of the WSPU, with its kernel of Pankhursts - Emmeline, and her daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela. But Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* is dominated by the rivalry between her and Christabel, 'our mother's favourite' (Pankhurst, 1977, 99).

The political differences between the socialist Sylvia, and what she described as Christabel's 'incipient Toryism' (1977, 221), are entangled with their ambivalence towards each other. Sylvia writes: 'I often considered her policy mistaken [...] but her speaking always delighted me [...] I admired her, and took pleasure in her, as I had done when we were children' (1977, 221). This almost erotic admiration seems to have met with repeated rejection from the elder sister, while Mrs Pankhurst preferred Christabel, both as daughter and as comrade-in-arms. While estranged from her mother and undergoing forcible feeding in prison, Sylvia wrote to Mrs Pankhurst: 'I am fighting, fighting, fighting. I have four, five and six wardresses every day, as well as two doctors [...] I resist all the time' (1977, 447). Sylvia's biographer, Patricia Romero, comments: 'Was it to win the vote that Sylvia put herself through such torture? Or were her motivations mixed, including especially at this time, the need to top Christabel in her mother's affections?' (1990, 79). This volatile conjunction of biological and political sisterhood demonstrates two points. Firstly, that rivalry between sisters/women can be over the mother. Secondly, that rivalry can, although emotionally destructive, paradoxically be a considerable spur to achievement.

After the war the feminist notion of sisterhood disappears, submerged by the divisions between 'Old' and 'New' Feminists. The threat of being labelled 'lesbian' makes political alliance between women too dangerous to discuss even through the metaphor of sisterhood. Within the fiction of the period, however, blood sisters as rivals are a common theme.

One further biographical example is useful here. The 'lifelong' bond between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, discussed in Jane Dunn's *A Very Close Conspiracy: Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf* (1990), was primary, formative and, at least in Woolf's letters, erotic. The tension between likeness/unlikeness, closeness/ separation seems to have been particularly pronounced. Dunn notes that Woolf frequently emphasised their merged identity, writing to Bell: 'Do you think we have the same pair of eyes, only different spectacles? I rather think I'm more nearly attached to you than sisters should be' (Dunn, 1991, 4). Early sibling rivalry was dealt with by each sister claiming a different role. Vanessa took 'painting [...] sexuality and motherhood', Virginia 'writing [...] intellectuality and imagination' (1991, 1).

One illuminating incident is the flirtation between Virginia and Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell, after Vanessa's marriage. The object of Virginia's desire was not, in fact, Clive but Vanessa: 'Virginia responded to her loneliness, fright and sense of abandonment by wooing her sister through Clive' (Dunn, 1991, 115). Clive's role as conduit is demonstrated by one of Virginia's letters to him which requests 'Kiss her [Vanessa], most passionately, in all my private places - neck - and arm, and eye, and eyeball, and tell her - what new thing is there to tell her? how fond I am of her husband?' (quoted in Dunn, 1991, 115). 'My private places' stakes Virginia's prior physical and emotional claim to her sister, but it is Clive with a husband's access to Vanessa's body who can act out Virginia's desire. Dunn suggests Clive's actions might have been motivated by 'a desire to moderate the passionate intimacy that bound these two sisters [...] How better to weaken their solidarity than to woo both and set up a sexual rivalry, albeit covert, one sister against the other?' (Dunn, 1991, 114). This demonstrates not only the primary nature of the sister bond, but the threat it offers to male power.

I want to suggest that there is a disjunction between literary scripts - especially the 'cultural stereotype' that 'if two sisters are represented in a novel, then a man is almost bound to come between them' (Blain, 1990, 232) - and 'real life'. Mythic sister plots, such as fairy tales (Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast), Greek myth (Psyche) and *King Lear*, Levin notes, traditionally present sisters, usually three sisters, who are rivals for the father's affection. The sisters are polarised as opposites, their difference ratified by the men who choose them as wife/favoured daughter. The plot movement is away

from sister-identification towards assimilation into heterosexual marriage. These mythic patterns fit Freud's Oedipal paradigm. By emphasising rivalry they negate women's own bonds (the mother is frequently absent) and serve male interests.

Both the reality of sister relationships and their representation in texts by women are more complex. Jane Austen's juvenilia includes a 'novel' entitled 'The Three Sisters' (1792), which shows that on the marriage market sisters may be regarded as interchangeable commodities, both by their suitors and their parents, which enforces their fear of merging. The three sisters are courted by Mr Watts who maintains 'it is equally the same to me which I marry of the three' (Austen, 1975, 64). To the sisters, however, it is a matter of huge importance. Catching a husband is the only way they can establish a separate identity. The twist in Austen's tale is that the two younger sisters scheme not to marry Mr Watts but to persuade Mary to marry him so that they do not have to. The women do have a relative autonomy in the marriage market and the suitor is himself commodified - Mary regards him as little more than the means to a chocolate-coloured carriage and various bits of jewellery. The bonds between sisters enable them to disrupt and manipulate the running of the male economy.

That the conflict between sisters' primary bonds and their positioning as rival commodities was especially pronounced in a period when men were in short supply is painfully clear in F.M. Mayor's *The Third Miss Symons* (1913). The third daughter and fifth child of her parents, Henrietta Symons loses her chance of marriage when her elder sister, Louie, entices her suitor away, because she does not want Henrietta 'settled' (1980, 23) before her, but then refuses his proposal. Henrietta's closest relationship is with her younger sister, Evelyn, and the highest point in her life is a conversation they have which is a mere 'crumb' (1980, 142) of love, left over from Evelyn's richer life.

Two decades later E. Arnot Robertson's *Ordinary Families* (1933) charts a world where women still marry rather than working. Although post-war, Robertson's novel echoes Martin's comment in Woolf's *The Years* (1937): 'It was an abominable system [...] family life' (Woolf, 1968, 180). Lallie, the third of the four Rush children, is acutely aware of 'the cross-currents' (Robertson, 1962, 118) under the surface of family life, including her ambivalent relationship with Margaret, the youngest and most beautiful child:

my feeling for Margaret, who remained enchanting to me however often, trying to get in touch with that rare something which I believed



must lie behind such loveliness, I came up against the blank wall of an alien mind.

(1962, 119)

Enchantment is mixed with jealousy because Margaret's beauty ensured her superior appeal to adults and then men.

As Fishel and McConville indicate, sexuality is a key issue in sisters' construction of identity in relation to each other. Lallie's awakening sexuality is contrasted with Margaret's earlier, more casual experiences and the final moment of the novel records Lallie's devastation over a fleeting moment of attraction between her husband Gordon and Margaret: 'Even this she must have: all I really had' (1962, 288). The adult Lallie is marked by her experience of sibling rivalry, her attempt to carve out a place in the 'abominable system' of family life. There is no dialogue between the sisters and Margaret's 'otherness' is never penetrated in the text.

While Robertson's novel presents this as the difficulties of a specific and individual family, Woolf's *The Years* through an analysis of Victorian family life provides an historical context through which we can reinterpret this silence between the sisters as a residue of the earlier system. The 'cross-currents' in the Pargiter family - Delia and Milly's competition over their father's attention, Milly's jealousy over Eleanor's affection for Morris - are the result of a family system which values the male above the female. This is clearer in Woolf's first draft, *The Pargiters*. Here she remarks explicitly that the repression of female sexuality 'aroused a certain hostility' between the sisters: 'Delia felt that Milly, Milly that Delia, was a rival who would intercept this excitement, this stimulus' (Woolf, 1978, 35). The *silencing* of female desire intensifies this rivalry. Lying to their parents about what they do, Milly and Delia also lie to each other about what they feel when they look at a young man (1978, 38).

In contrast, it is the love between two sisters which dominates Kate O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* (1934). Set in 1880 in Catholic Ireland, this novel illustrates Levin's contention that the existence of sisters within the triangle generates a tension which provides narrative drive. Loving her brother-in-law, Vincent, Agnes refuses to elope with him, not because it is a sin but because of her love for her sister, Marie-Rose. O'Brien makes it explicit that Vincent in his relations with both Marie-Rose and Agnes is seeking a replacement for his dead mother, while their own mother, dying of cancer, makes her preference for her syphilitic son, to the exclusion of even her husband, painfully obvious.

This chimes with Chodorow's contention that women look for a re-enactment of the mother-child dyad through their children, while men look for it through heterosexual relationships. In both cases the close mother-son relationship prevents the son attaining a separate adulthood. The novel ends with Vincent's suicide, but, tellingly, as he presses the trigger he is thinking of his mother. His death is an attempt to return to a pre-oedipal unity with her.

The bond between the two sisters is the 'only unifying thread' (1988, 9) in Agnes's life. As seen by the men, they appear both 'complementary beauties' (1988, 97) and to move 'almost as one person' (98) - simultaneously the same and different. Agnes, although younger, provides for Marie-Rose the 'mothering' both failed to receive from their mother. Indeed, both Marie-Rose and Vincent turn to Agnes for 'mothering' and he especially resents Marie-Rose's prior claim to Agnes's attention - and to her bed.

In all these novels the mother is either inadequate or dead. Both Henrietta and Lallie are neglected middle siblings in large families. I am not suggesting that all sister relationships, or all woman-to-woman relationships, necessarily echo the mother-daughter dyad. But inadequate mothering appears to be a key element in sisterly rivalry.

Within the triangle the rivalry can flow in (at least) two directions. It can be either between the two sisters for the attention of the man. Or it can be between one sister and the man for the attention of the other sister. *The Ante-Room* plays with the possibilities of both 'economies'. Returning to Castle's argument, *The Ante-Room* provides an example of a novel where the bonds between women, although kinship not sexual desire, work to eliminate the male from the triangle.

However, the female bonds in O'Brien's triangle do not threaten but support the status quo. Agnes's rejection of Vincent reinforces the Catholic taboos against adultery. The Deceased Wife's Sister Act, which forbade a man to marry the sister of his deceased wife on the grounds that this was incest, was repealed in 1907 after a lengthy campaign. This was seen as being done in women's interests, in view of the man 'shortage' - in 1871 one MP remarked that women had special interest in a bill to repeal the Deceased Wife's Sister Act (Lewis, 1987, 72), while a year later Lydia E. Becker cited the bill as a particular example of women's need for a vote to represent their interests in Parliament (Lewis, 1987, 124). However, it is worth bearing in mind, especially in view of what Fishel calls the male fantasy of 'making love to sisters' (1994, 191), that this repeal

might have served *male* interests, not least because it reinforced the idea that a sister was a sexual rival. The debates over the bill undoubtedly brought the issues involved to the public consciousness and this is reflected in fiction.

Finally, I want to return to Irigaray's concept of a 'female' or 'maternal genealogy' (1991, 44). Sisters are connected through sharing a mother. Adrienne Rich's poem 'Sibling Mysteries' conveys this through a mirror image which is remarkably close to Irigaray's 'Living mirrors': 'sister gazed at sister/ reaching through mirrored pupils/ back to the mother' (Rich, 1978, 50). The sisters are denied access to the mother's body - 'her woman's flesh was made taboo to us' (49) - and from being 'brides of the mother' become 'brides of each other/ under a different law' (52). Sisters occupy the point of intersection between the horizontal and vertical axes Irigaray speaks of.

Woolf's *The Years* explores the possibility of an alternative family system, constructed through the shared 'maternal genealogy' of siblings, both brothers and sisters. The novel uses Sophocles' *Antigone* as an intertext to explore this idea. Antigone, as Irigaray has noted (1994, 68), insists on burying her brother because they share a mother. This 'maternal genealogy' allows Woolf to make a distinction between the 'private' and the 'public' brother (Woolf, 1986, 120). The aunt (the mother's sister) has a special place in this genealogy because she connects the horizontal and vertical axes.

As E.H. Young's *The Misses Mallett* (1922) demonstrates, a 'female genealogy' can be established even when the blood relationship goes through the male line. The four 'Misses Mallett', sisters Caroline and Sophia, their stepsister Rose, and niece Henrietta, are related through their father and brother, but make up a female household where it is the sister and aunt/niece bonds which are important. Another rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, the text begins with Rose's rejection of the Rochester-like Francis Sales. Marrying a woman who becomes an invalid after a fall from a horse, Sales then pursues Henrietta. In each of these triangles Young subverts the stereotypes of female rivalry which we expect. Rose, for instance, actively tries to bolster the marriage between Sales and Christobel.

The central aunt-niece relationship between Rose and Henrietta shifts between a sister model - Francis Sales remarks that they 'might be sisters' (Young, 1984, 104) - and a mother-daughter model. Ultimately it is female ties which bind. Rose cares 'more passionately' (1984, 187) for Henrietta than for Francis, and when she finally marries him

it is primarily to save Henrietta from him. Equally, Henrietta's attempts to regard Rose as a 'rival adventurer' (1984, 212) fail, and she comes to recognise that it is Rose's love which she desires: 'if only she and Aunt Rose were friends, what a conspiracy they could enjoy together! [...] How they might play into each other's hands with Francis Sales for the bewildered ball' (1984, 236-37). This image of exchange between women, using the man as an object, reverses the Girard/Sedgwick triangle.

Sister bonds, like those of lesbian desire, introduce the possibility of other kinds of 'exchange' between women. The novels I have discussed here offer a range of such models of 'exchange' where a man may be used as a 'ball', a mediator, or even 'killed'.

#### iv. Women in Dialogue

Finally I want to discuss the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in order to think about a model of subjectivity which can encompass a more fluid notion of interaction between women. (For simplicity's sake, I will use the name 'Bakhtin' to encompass the cluster of work which was also contributed to by Medvedev and Voloshinov.) I am indebted here to Lynne Pearce's appropriation of Bakhtin's dialogic theory for feminist criticism in *Reading Dialogics* (1994). As Pearce points out in a statement which brings together several of my own concerns:

Dialogue is a concept which touches the heart of what it means to be a feminist: a concept evocative of sisterhood, of the perpetual negotiation of sameness and difference, of our dealings with men and patriarchal institutions, of our relationship to a language which simultaneously is, and is not, our own.

(1994, 100)

My interest in dialogue started when I noticed how many key scenes in the novels I was looking at simply showed women talking to each other. Put this bluntly it sounds banal - a point Woolf makes in *The Years*: 'All talk would be nonsense, I suppose, if it were written down,' remarks Rose, adding, 'But it's the only way we have of knowing each other' (1968, 139). In these dialogues female subjectivity is often being reconstructed in relation to an/other woman.

Bakhtin theorises language as a function of interaction between two participants:

*word is a two-sided act.* It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for whom it is meant. As word it is precisely *the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee.* [...] A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge belongs to me, then the other depends on my

addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor...

(Bakhtin, 1994, 58, original emphasis)

Hence '*Any utterance*, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, *is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication*' (Bakhtin, 1994, 59, original emphasis). Meaning is a *process* of interaction which looks both backwards to previous utterances and forwards, anticipating a response. It is always 'dialogic' and therefore open-ended.

Since meaning is always produced within a specific social and historical context the specificity of the addressee is crucial:

*The word is orientated towards an addressee, toward who that addressee might be: a fellow member or not of the same social group, of higher or lower standing [...] someone connected with the speaker by close social ties (father, brother, husband and so on) or not. There can be no such thing as an abstract addressee [...].*

(Bakhtin, 1994, 58, original emphasis)

This power dynamic is inflected by the relations of nationality, class, race, family and education between the interlocutors. Although Bakhtin's work itself is gender-blind it can, as Pearce shows, encompass gender as one of these factors. These factors, I would suggest, are the varying and competing 'economies' within which the subject functions.

In contrast to the Freudian model of universal and linear stages of development, Bakhtin's dialogic offers us a model of human subjectivity as constructed through language and in relation to others. Whereas Chodorow, whose model of subjectivity is also relational, stresses sameness, Bakhtin emphasises difference - a sense of separation from others is necessary for the dialogic relation to exist at all.

One of psychoanalysis's 'most consistent errors,' according to Jane Gallop, 'is to reduce everything to a family paradigm', to the extent that 'Class conflict and revolution are understood as a repetition of parent-child relations' (1982, 144). Bakhtin's work shifts the emphasis away from the tight-knit family circle to place the subject in a web of connections. It's similar to Eleanor's attempt to imagine her 'life' in *The Years*:

Perhaps there's an 'I' at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a centre; and again she saw herself sitting at her table drawing on the blotting paper, digging little holes from which spokes radiated.

[...] My life's been other people's lives, Eleanor thought - my father's, Morris's; my friends' lives; Nicholas's...

(Woolf, 1968, 295)

Gendering Bakhtin's theory allows not only for models of linguistic exchange between men and woman, and between women, but also for a model of exchange which can encompass both reciprocity and rivalry. Readers and critics must, Pearce suggests, go 'beyond an interpretation of the dialogic as a model of amicable exchange and reciprocity, and [...] explore subjectivity in relation to the political/social/ historical constraints and expectations present in Bakhtin's accounts of spoken and written dialogue' (1994, 100). She aims to restore to the dialogic a recognition that a power dynamic, however shifting, is inevitable in any exchange: 'As feminists we can never forget that our dialogues rarely exist between equal partners' (1994, 102). Dialogue can even involve an attempt to silence the other. Indeed, Pearce notes that Dale Bauer has commandeered the dialogic principle as 'a model for the fraught and volatile relationship women (both actual and textual) have with the patriarchal communities which "fail" them' (1994, 102). Pearce wants to 'preserve the notion of "meaning" depending on reciprocity, while acknowledging that the interlocutors on which the "bridge" depends [...] may be multiple, changing and [...] *in competition with each other*' (1994, 207, original emphasis).

Bakhtin suggests that the ruling class will attempt to monologise meaning, refusing to recognise its responsibility as addressee (Bakhtin, 1994, 15). Woolf's *The Years* offers a way of understanding this in gendered terms. Peggy's conversation with an egocentric young poet is peppered with his 'I,I,I,' but he refuses to let her take up the position of subject and address him: 'The fire went out of his face when she said 'I'. That's done it - now he'll go, she thought. He can't be 'you' - he must be 'I' (1968, 290).

Although 'dialogue' implies two people, the 'dialogic' can encompass a multiplicity of voices. Pearce points out that we often manipulate utterances to one person through a mediating other: 'our personal relations are rarely between two people only: there is nearly always someone else's ghost or shadow fracturing our address' (1994, 203). Another conversation in *The Years* between Lady Pargiter and her daughters, Sara and Maggie, which seems to promise dialogic interaction between female subjects, is fractured by the intrusion of Sir Digby (significantly imagined as wearing a sword between his legs). Within a patriarchal society, utterances between women are frequently 'fractured' by the 'shadow' of a man. The triangles I want to look at offer a

way of exploring this point of intersection between male/female and female/female 'economies'.

Irigaray's texts set up dialogues not only with major male thinkers such as Freud, but with her addressees/readers. Several of her texts, for instance, 'Questions' in *This Sex Which is Not One*, are transcriptions of question and answer sessions. 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other' self-consciously derives its effect from the fact it is a 'bridge' flung out but failing to become dialogic because the subject response from the mother which the daughter craves is denied.

'When Our Lips Speak Together' is Irigaray's attempt to imagine "'another" kind of commerce' (1985, 196) among women speaking together as receptive and equal subjects: 'Between us, one is not the 'real' and the other her imitation; one is not the original and the other her copy' (1985, 216). Like Bakhtin, Irigaray insists on the difference between the two participants in the dialogue - they are not the 'Same'. It is their separateness, necessary to avoid the 'confusion of their identities' (1993a, 63) within patriarchy, which enables a dialogic relation. This is not a merger. The figure Irigaray uses for this relation is that of the 'two lips', used for its opposition to the male phallus, and connoting both female sexuality and 'speaking'. The 'two lips' are an image of plurality and of contiguity - neither is privileged above the other, they are '*neither one nor two*' (1985, 26). Hence: 'Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once' (1985, 209).

Ann Herrmann argues that: 'Irigaray offers a mode of perceiving the feminine which is other to the masculine, not as the 'other', not as another 'one', but as the simultaneity of the subject and object in a state of reciprocity' (1989, 24). Irigaray's essay is an attempt to define the feminine not through her relationship to the masculine - as the 'Other of the Same' - but through her relationship to 'An/Other woman' who is 'the other woman as "another" woman in the form of an addressee [...] or woman as both "self" and "other" in the author's construction of her own subjectivity and that of her female fictional subject' (Herrmann 1989, 3).

Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* demonstrates how women can take up a position within the symbolic order as speaking subjects through dialogue with an/other woman. It is through dialogue that Sophia and Minna, a story-teller by

profession, move from being rival 'commodities' - 'wife' and 'mistress' of Frederick - to being mirroring subjects. After Sophia spends a day in 'passionate amity with her husband's mistress' (1987, 156), telling her own story, Frederick is 'felled into taking it for granted that his wife and his mistress should be seated together on the pink sofa, knit into this fathomless intimacy, and turning from it to entertain him with an identical patient politeness' (1987, 157). Again, the arrival of the male fractures the dialogue between the two women. They are later painted seated on the pink sofa in a portrait given two names by its painter: '*Mes Odalisques*' and '*A Conversation between Two Women*'. The two titles sum up the women's movement from their status as '*Commodities [...] a mirror of value of and for man*' (Irigaray, 1985, 177, original emphasis) to interacting speaking subjects - 'living mirrors'.

Turning to the subject of literary production, Bakhtin made a distinction between 'monologic' texts, which subdue all voices in the text to the voice of the author, and 'dialogic' texts, which allow a range of voices to co-exist and refuse to privilege that of the author. Later he modified this view to suggest that all novels are inherently dialogic. Not only do they contain dialogic voices but they are both in dialogue with previous texts and anticipate a response (a reader). Herrmann shows how a woman's text can address either a male reader, conceived as an adversary, or a female reader conceived as an ally (1989, Chapter Two). In fact, it can do both at once. Pearce argues that different levels of positioning may co-exist in a text and that women writers have evolved a distinctive form of 'hidden dialogue' or 'hidden polemic' (1994, 108). Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, for instance, ostensibly addressed to a female audience, is conscious of the male listener behind the curtain (1977a, 78).

I think this offers us an alternative to Gilbert and Gubar's 'affiliation complex' model of female literary tradition. Each of the texts I want to look at is *simultaneously* in dialogue both with the male literary tradition (the dominant discourse) and with preceding texts by women. It is not so much a choice between the male or the female line of descent as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, but a simultaneous engagement with both - a triangular paradigm. For instance, Warner's *Summer Will Show* engages not only with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, but also with Madame de Stael's *Corinne* and Brontë's *Villette* (Montefiore, 1994, 69).



The novels I will be discussing in following chapters enter a dialogue with the stereotypes of female rivalry in the dominant male discourse, sometimes through an explicit engagement with Freud, more often through negotiations with traditional narrative structures, especially the romance plot. They also engage with female-authored texts, especially those by the Brontës, which privilege female bonds.

These texts also engage with contemporaneous texts. I want to complete this section by looking again at the intertextual dialogue between Trefusis's *Broderie Anglaise*, Sackville-West's *Challenge* and Woolf's *Orlando*. This takes a rivalrous form in that it is a literary tussle over meaning - a *competitive* dialogue - as each writer aims to present the 'truth' as she saw it. Woolf portrays Trefusis as the bewitching but faithless Russian princess, Sasha, who abandons Orlando. In *Challenge*, Trefusis appears as Eve, again faithless to Julian. Both texts objectify the Trefusis character, presenting her as a mysterious, feminine 'other', with no voice in the text.

*Broderie Anglaise*, a reply to these texts, is 'hidden polemic', in that its unnamed addressees (Woolf and Sackville-West) can be inferred. It explores that 'othering' process, as well as the power of the writer to recreate their 'rival' or beloved within their text. The discourse of Alexa, a novelist (Woolf) and her lover, John Shorne (Sackville-West), is always 'shadowed' by their imagined image of Anne (Trefusis), Shorne's former lover. At first she is a mysterious feminine 'other', an unattainable ideal like Rebecca or Vera. However, meeting the real Anne, Alexa discovers that not only is Anne not like the myth that she and John have created, but that John himself is 'as much the creation of one as of the other' (1992, 99).

The novel uses two key motifs which chime with Irigaray's work. Firstly, the image of two women 'speaking together'. It is an alliance formed between the two women during a conversation over tea and chocolate eclairs which empowers Alexa and enables her to rewrite the story of her relationship with John. Secondly, two mirror scenes depict the way in which the imagined Anne acts as a mirroring 'other' for Alexa and allows Alexa to reform her own identity. Before meeting Anne Alexa sees herself in relation to Anne as her rival as too thin, lacking hair and colour, not a 'real woman'. After their conversation, she looks again in the mirror: 'Her face no longer wore the look of vagueness and indecision that had made her seem timorous and unnaturally young. What invisible artist had restored her features to their original serenity [...]?' (1992, 108-

9). The 'artist' is Anne, who has herself been revised during the conversation. From the 'other woman' as the 'brilliant, volatile, artificial creature' (1992, 28) Alexa had imagined for her novel, Anne is transformed into an embodiment of femininity 'not necessarily more beautiful or more gifted than her sisters, but more womanly' (1992, 101). Seeing herself in relation to Anne as 'friend' or 'sister' rather than 'rival', Alexa accepts their 'difference'.

Gill Frith argues that such versions of the 'mirror ritual', where the heroine sees her mirrored reflection through the eyes of another woman, are a new development in early twentieth-century women's literature. Such rituals

*question* the apparent fixity of gender boundaries, opening up a space for exploring the possibility of a feminine identity which is *not* unitary. The 'split' is not between 'masculine' and 'feminine' but between two kinds of femininity.

(Frith, 1988, 13, original emphasis)

The 'difference' between 'two kinds of femininity' is what Irigaray is exploring in 'When Our Lips Speak Together', the ideal invoked by her figure of the 'two lips', as well as that of women as 'Living mirrors' for each other rather than for men.

In her study of the friendship and writing of Woolf and Sackville-West Suzanne Raitt argues that 'it is through the forging and exchange of such narratives that intimacies develop. Life stories are endlessly reworked in response to the narratives and the confessions of other woman' (1993, vii). As I will show in Chapters Five and Six the same process is recognisable in the writings of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby. It is in this 'exchange' that an endless process of reconstruction of identity in relation to the other woman is most clearly obvious, a process which takes place, in the case of Holtby and Brittain at least, through a play of rivalry and friendship.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### REWRITING THE VICTORIANS: MAY SINCLAIR'S TRANSITIONAL MODERNISM

Stretching from 1897 to 1927, May Sinclair's publishing career spans an important transitional moment in the move from Victorian/Edwardian realism to modernism. Although she was very much a part of the contemporaneous literary scene - it was Sinclair who, in a review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, introduced the term 'stream of consciousness' (Sinclair, 1918, 58) - her work never became part of the male-dominated modernist canon. Most of her books are still out of print. Although there are at present only two full-length studies of her work (Boll, 1973, and Zegger, 1976), the task of reassessing Sinclair's work has been started, especially by Jean Radford (in her useful introductions to Virago's reprints), Diane Gillespie (1985), and Jane Eldridge Miller (1994), who importantly places Sinclair's work in the context of the innovative Edwardian fiction about women and feminism which, Miller argues, anticipated and initiated modernism.

Located in this transitional moment, Sinclair's work is dialogic in several senses. Firstly, rather than rejecting nineteenth-century literature as male modernists did, Sinclair located herself in a female tradition by engaging in a dialogue with Victorian women's fiction, particularly that of the Brontës. Her work is an important link in a 'female genealogy' which looks back to Victorian women novelists and forward to the modernists. Her 'modernist' experimentation came out of her concern to find formal methods which could represent the 'reality' of female consciousness. One of the first novelists to engage with psychoanalysis, she did so in ways which were informed by her feminist thinking.

Secondly, Sinclair's practice was to take a theme or problem and rework it from different angles in several novels. She noted of *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), for instance, that 'I went with her over the road I had already gone with Mary Olivier [the protagonist of Sinclair's *Mary Olivier* (1919)] and put her to similar tests' (quoted in Boll, 1973, 143). *Arnold Waterlow* (1924) is a rewriting of *Mary Olivier* with a male protagonist, while *History of Anthony Waring* (1927) revises *Harriett Frean*, as well as *Arnold Waterlow*. Sinclair's texts, therefore, are self-consciously in dialogue with each other. This may provide one explanation for her neglect. Hrissey Dimitrakis Zegger

maintains that Sinclair was forgotten because her later novels were 'increasingly poor' due to her need to keep writing for financial reasons, despite a lack of new ideas (1976, 141). In fact, it is only when her novels are read against each other that this intertextual dialogue become obvious, and the later novels seen as part of a body of thinking around the issues of gender, sexuality, consciousness and creativity.

One pattern which Sinclair explored repeatedly throughout her career is the triangle where two women are rivals for a man, sometimes two friends or sisters who love the same man, sometimes a woman in a relationship with a married man. It appears in *The Divine Fire* (1904), *The Creators* (1910), *The Three Sisters* (1914), *The Romantic* (1920), *Mr Waddington of Wyck* (1921), *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, *Arnold Waterlow*, *Far End* (1926) and *History of Anthony Waring*, as well as the short stories 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' (1922) and 'Lena Wrace' (1930), and the long poem *The Dark Night* (1924). Both Tess Cosslett (1988, 3-4) and Gill Frith (1988, 75) draw attention to a pattern in nineteenth-century women's novels whereby when two friends loved the same man, one of the women would 'give' the man to the other woman, renouncing her own desires. Sinclair's texts engage with this pattern and the triangle becomes one of the matrices within which the transition from 'Victorian' to 'modern' is articulated most clearly in her work. This is especially clear in *The Three Sisters* and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, both of which use psychoanalysis to deconstruct Victorian notions of femininity and female sexuality.

Finally, Sinclair makes extensive use of dialogue between characters in her texts, frequently detailing conversations between women. Often it is what is 'not said' (Macherey, 1978, Chapter 15) which is important, the silences of repression and women's divisions from each other.

One of the 'surplus women' of this era, Sinclair's own life was both exemplary and extraordinary. Born in 1863, she was the sixth child and only daughter of William and Amelia Sinclair, who later separated, probably because of William Sinclair's alcoholism. Unlike her brothers, Sinclair was given no formal education, except a brief year at Cheltenham Ladies College when she was 18, but she read widely and taught herself French, German and Greek from her brothers' books. Her father died an alcoholic's death in 1881, and four of her brothers suffered early deaths. Until her mother's death in 1901, Sinclair lived a life of genteel poverty.

Her semi-autobiographical novel *Mary Olivier*, of which Sinclair wrote: 'All this description of the *inner* life is as autobiographically correct as I can make it' (MO, introduction, original emphasis), depicts the battle between Mary and her mother who, adoring her sons, tries to crush her daughter's sense of autonomy and force her into the mould of conventional femininity. Mary tells her brother Mark:

'Ever since I began to grow up I felt there was something about Mamma that would kill me if I let it. I've had to fight for every single thing I've ever wanted.'

(MO 249)

In a rare moment of honesty 'Little Mamma' admits that: 'I was jealous of you, Mary. And I was afraid for my life you'd find out' (MO 325). This suffocating, rivalrous mother-daughter relationship closely matches that depicted by Irigaray in 'And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other'. Mary sacrifices her relationship with the man she loves in order to care for her mother, maintaining that: 'My body'll stay here and take care of her all her life, but my *self* will have got away' (MO 252, original emphasis).

After her mother's death, Sinclair established a successful career as a writer, producing twenty-five novels as well as poetry, short stories and perceptive criticism of writers such as Dorothy Richardson, H.D. and T.S. Eliot. Rebecca West remembered her as being 'extremely kind to young writers and particularly young women writers' (quoted in Boll, 1973, 158-59). A 'web' of connections modelled on that drawn by Scott in *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) but focusing on Sinclair's links with women writers would connect her to West, H.D., Richardson, Mansfield, Woolf, Charlotte Mew (although their friendship allegedly ended when Sinclair rejected Mew's advances (Boll, 1970)), G.B. Stern, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Rose Macauley, Amy Lowell, Clemence Dane, Violet Hunt, as well as Vera Brittain and Rosamond Lehmann - connections which link her to both female modernists and more 'traditional' writers.

Sinclair's recognition of the 'startling "newness"' (Sinclair, 1918, 57) of Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-35) proved a breakthrough for her own writing:

To me these three novels show an art and method and form carried to punctilious perfection.[...] In this series there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. It is Miriam Henderson's stream of consciousness going on and on.

(1918, 58)

Sinclair had started to experiment with form as early as *The Divine Fire*, where she uses parentheses to indicate a character's unconscious thoughts. After reading *Pilgrimage* she

developed the use of stream of consciousness in her own writing. This was not an imitation of Richardson's technique. Tightly controlled, shifting in and out of different characters' minds, and moving from third person 'she' to first person 'I' or second person 'you', Sinclair's 'stream is merely the *imitation* of a stream, not a stream at all' (Kaplan, 1975, 50, original emphasis). Her use of imagery and symbol connects her to the Imagist writers. Sinclair did not, as Richardson did, regard hers as a 'feminine prose' (Richardson, 1979, Vol. I, 12), but used it equally to convey male and female consciousness. Her work anticipates and is often compared to that of D.H. Lawrence. Indeed, Zegger notes the parallels between *The Three Sisters* and Lawrence's 'The Daughters of the Vicar' published two months after Sinclair's novel, as well as *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), and suggests that Lawrence, although 'surly and hostile' (1976, 77) about Sinclair's work, was influenced by it.

Theophilus Boll speculates on the reasons for Sinclair's spinsterhood, recording Rebecca West's assertion that Sinclair had been in love with a man, possibly a friend of her brother's, and might have married him but for "some very obscure grounds of scruple" (Boll, 1973, 120). Obviously, this would provide a biographical explanation for Sinclair's interest in the motif of a woman who sacrifices her love for a man, usually because of another woman's prior claim to him. What is more interesting, however, is to situate her portrayals of unmarried woman within the context of a era when marriage was still practically the only 'career' open to women, but there was perceived to be a 'shortage' of men.

Sinclair's own position as a spinster during a period when attitudes to 'surplus women' moved from pity to downright hostility offers a further explanation for her neglect. Firstly, her books deal with women who have narrow, constricted external lives. Secondly, Sinclair's status as what Arnold Bennett called 'this prim virgin' (quoted in Boll, 1973, 93), undoubtedly militated against her being taken seriously by young male writers such as Lawrence. Richard Aldington's comment that pre-war London was 'a rather prissy milieu of some infernal bunshop full of English spinsters' (quoted in Benstock, 1987, 317), for instance, indicates a supposed opposition between the spinster and literary experimentation. Even Rebecca West summed Sinclair up as 'an anachronistic figure - in spite of her desire to be of the Enlightenment. [...] She was at

once La Princess de Clèves, and the Brontës - and wished to be D.H. Lawrence' (quoted in Boll, 1973, 159)

Both Sinclair's commitment to feminism and her interest in psychoanalysis were formative in her development of a modernist art. A member of the Women's Freedom League, and the Women Writers Suffrage League, she 'used her writing in part to further the cause of women' (Gillespie, 1985, 235). Her support was both active and public. Sylvia Pankhurst recalled Sinclair collecting money for the cause on street corners (1977, 279), while a photograph shows Sinclair outside the suffragist shop in Kensington wearing a placard which reads 'Votes for Women. Victory through Prison' (Boll, 1973).

Her pamphlet *Feminism*, published by the Women Writers Suffrage League in 1912, was in part a reply to a letter in *The Times* from the bacteriologist, Sir Almroth Wright, which denounced militant suffragettes as 'hysterics'. Wright attributed this 'hysteria' to sexual frustration, writing that 'the recruiting field for the militant suffragists is the half million of our excess female population - that half million which had better long ago have gone out to mate with its complement of men beyond the sea' (Wright, 1912, 7). Sinclair's reply neatly deconstructs Wright's 'pseudo-scientific' argument (Sinclair, 1912a, 8). She is especially clear on the 'economic facts' (1912a, 34), and that male hatred of feminism is 'as much a commercial as a sexual fear and hatred' (36). Defending the need and right of women, especially single women, to work, she argues that:

We are dealing less with a psychological portent than with a new sociological factor, the SOLIDARITY OF WOMAN. And there is only one other factor that can be compared with it for importance, and that is the SOLIDARITY OF THE WORKING-MAN.

And these two solidarities are one.

(1912a, 33-34, original emphasis)

Sinclair, then, not only regarded female 'solidarity' as a political issue, but equated feminism with the class struggle.

It is this understanding which Sinclair brought to her use of psychoanalysis. In 1913 Sinclair became a founding member of the new Medico-Psychological Clinic in London, run by Sinclair's fellow suffragist Dr Jessie Margaret Murray (a student of Pierre Janet), and Julia Turner. It was the first clinic in England to use psychoanalytic methods, in combination with diet, exercise and medical treatment. Sinclair's financial support (a donation of £500) demonstrates commitment to a feminist use of

psychoanalysis. Elaine Showalter, who offers a brief resume of the clinic's history in *The Female Malady*, sees its closure after the war as 'a striking illustration of the way that male professionalism could crush the early experimentation of women in psychoanalysis' (1987, 197).

Sinclair's fiction makes direct use of her wide reading in psychoanalysis through dreams, symbols, and the concepts of repression and sublimation. Contemporaneous criticism of Sinclair tended to bewail her use of psychoanalysis. Katherine Mansfield castigated *Mary Olivier* as merely a mass of undifferentiated surface impressions (Mansfield, 1990, 312). More recently, Nicola Beauman concurs that 'occasionally the jargon overtakes the writer of fiction' (1983, 150) and contrasts Sinclair unfavourably with Rosamond Lehmann (159). In fact, Sinclair uses psychoanalysis to analyse the patriarchal family as an institution which by repressing women's desires made them into hysterics. Her essay 'Symbolism and Sublimation' (1916), primarily a favourable review of Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious*, although it also discusses Freud and Adler, lays out her argument for the value of sublimation. Sinclair's belief in sublimation allows her to show female sexual energy being redirected into artistic creation or philosophical thought, rather than necessarily (as Wright assumed) producing neurosis. Work and creativity are for Sinclair, as they would be for Winifred Holtby, satisfying alternatives to sexual fulfilment.

In the last 15 years of Sinclair's life Parkinson's disease left her in a twilight state. This in itself may have had a detrimental effect on her reputation - by her death in 1946 she had already been absent from the literary landscape for nearly two decades. She deserves reassessment, not least for her acute analysis of the way that patriarchal structures by silencing female desire cut off the possibility of dialogue between women. As Rebecca West indicates, Sinclair valued female friendship in her own life, and this is reflected in her texts where gender loyalty is both validated and problematised.

### ***The Three Sisters* (1914)**

It is in *The Three Sisters* that Sinclair's interests in psychoanalysis and feminism come together with her passion for the Brontës to generate a critique of Victorian family and religious structures. She uses a double triangle - 'Three women to one man' (TS 184) - to explore the effect of a repression of female sexuality on women's relations with each



other, and the triple conflict between the claims of sisterhood, the social pressure to get a husband, and the desire for sexual fulfilment.

The novel's title echoes that of Sinclair's critical study, *The Three Brontës* (1912), alerting the reader to the intertextual games she is playing. Between 1907 and 1914 Sinclair also provided introductions to re-issues of the Brontës' novels, as well as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). *The Three Sisters* opens with the three Cartaret sisters - Mary, Gwendolen and Alice - sitting in the dining room of a Yorkshire parsonage waiting for their father, the Vicar of Garth, to read evening prayers, evoking Gaskell's account of the Brontë sisters' evenings in Haworth parsonage (Gaskell, 1908, 97 and 215). *The Three Sisters* is not a fictional biography of the Brontës. Rather, it is in dialogue with the over-romanticised Brontë myth created by Gaskell, problematising it to offer a more realistic picture of the possible relationships between three sisters similar to the Brontës but without their literary talents. While Sinclair's study defended the Brontës from the charges of frustrated spinsterhood, the novel delineates the effects of repression. The difference between the two texts demonstrates 'the contradictory need in early twentieth century feminists for rational analysis of women's psychological disabilities on the one hand and, on the other, for feminist heroines who would rise triumphant above them' (Stoneman, 1996, 70).

Sinclair's most radical move is to use psychoanalysis to expose the libidinous desires which the Brontës could only express obliquely, but she also uses the insights of the Brontës' novels to reread early Freudianism. This two-way dialogic is most obvious in Sinclair's engagement with the nineteenth-century triangle plot where a woman sacrifices her interest in a man for a friend or sister. Here I want to trace a line of genealogy back to Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839), a novel which not only epitomises this plot, but which Charlotte Brontë admired (Gaskell, 1908, 288) and which looks forward to *Jane Eyre* (Figs, 1982, 114-19). *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853) all use variations on a triangle pattern - Jane/Rochester/ Bertha, Caroline/Robert Moore/Shirley and Lucy/Dr John/Paulina. The neglect of *Deerbrook* within the critical canon (it is currently out of print, as is *The Three Sisters*) supports my contention that the subject of a female homosocial bonds actively marks a text as uncanonical.

In *Deerbrook* the doctor, Edward Hope, although in love with Margaret Ibbotson, marries her sister, Hester, because he believes Margaret loves Philip. The focus of the narrative is on the sisters' relationship, especially on Hester's jealousy of Margaret's friendship with Maria Young, a poor governess, and this emotion dominates to the extent that Hester fails to notice that her husband is in love with Margaret. As Virginia Blain notes, the novel 'undercuts the conventional structure of what we might call the "rival sisters romance" by displacing the hero from the apex of the triangle' (1990, 232). Maria, in love with Philip herself, cedes him to Margaret. Gill Frith argues that this moment works to 'transform rivalry into voluntary exchange' (1988, 77), often symbolised by the exchange of a book or gift, and offers a 'fantasised reversion' of the exchange of women discussed by Sedgwick 'in which the sexual contract is transformed into a collusion and exchange between women' (1988, 76). Although such a 'collusion and exchange' can be read as a subversive gesture of gender solidarity, a refusal to be positioned as rivals, it also reinforces the nineteenth-century stereotypes of the ideal woman as self-denying and untouched by sexual desire. What Sinclair does is to use the psychoanalytic understanding of female sexuality to show the psychological cost of this self-sacrifice.

Sinclair had recognised that *Villette* provided 'a new voice in literature [...] the unsealing of the sacred secret springs, the revelation of all that proud, decorous mid-Victorian reticence most sedulously sought to hide' (Brontë, 1909, xiv), that is, a revelation of female sexual desire. In *The Three Brontës* Sinclair analyses in more detail the silencing of such desires:

[Jane Eyre] sinned against the unwritten code that ordains that a woman may lie till she is purple in the face, but she must not, as a piece of gratuitous information, tell a man she loves him; not, that is to say, in as many words. She may declare her passion unmistakably in other ways. She may exhibit every ignominious and sickly sign of it; her eyes may glow like hot coals; she may tremble; she may flush and turn pale; she may do almost anything, provided she does not speak the actual words. In mid-Victorian times an enormous licence was allowed her. She might faint, with perfect propriety, in public; she might become anaemic and send for the doctor, and be ordered iron; [...] Everybody knew what that meant.

(1912b, 117-18)

In this passage are the seeds of *The Three Sisters*. Psychoanalysis provided Sinclair with a theory and a language in which to discuss this repression of female desire and its eruption in the form of 'hysteria'.

The Cartarets first move to Garth because Alice had fallen in love with a man in their original parish and 'let everybody else see' (TS 26). Her father, regarding this as a disgrace reflecting on him, transfers his entire family to a new parish. Isolated in Garth, the sisters meet only one eligible man - the new doctor, Dr Steven Rowcliffe, whose name invokes *Dr John Graham*, *Rochester* and *Heathcliff*, and possibly *Robert Moore*, ironically, because he is an unworthy romantic hero.

The use of three sisters, a common trope in myth and fairy tale, allows Sinclair to break away from the binary opposition between the romance heroine and her rival, or between the 'angelic' blonde woman and the independent, dark woman identified as types in the friendship novels discussed by Tess Cosslett (1988, 20). Using three women allows Sinclair to explore three different kinds of femininity, and two reactions to female rivalry. True to the 'sister knot', the sisters are the same, 'alike in the small broad faces that brooded' (TS 3), yet all different. Mary, the eldest, is 'the one that had the colour' in her red hair and lips (TS 3). Alice, the youngest, 'departed in no way from her sister's type but that her body was slender and small boned, that her face was lightly finished' (TS 4). Gwenda is 'the tallest and the darkest of the three. Her face followed the type obscurely; and vividly and emphatically it left it' (TS 4). These descriptions invoke Branwell's famous portrait of the Brontë sisters, used on the cover of the Virago reprint of the novel.

Jean Radford suggests that Sinclair is using recognisable 'types': 'the steady, womanly elder sister, the independent "tomboy", the frail younger girl (almost the Meg, Jo and Beth-Amy of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*)' (TS ix). This accords with Adler's contention that birth order produces recognisable types. Mary, for instance, as the eldest takes seniority as 'Miss Cartaret', and would expect to marry first. The sisters also represent psychoanalytical types - the 'neurosis', 'masculinity complex' and 'normal femininity' which Freud outlined in 'Femininity' (1932). While this postdates Sinclair's text, these 'types' are implicit in Freud's work earlier and Sinclair's use of them differs substantially from his. She explores them not as a 'norm' and deviations from it, but as three reactions to the silencing of female desire within patriarchal culture.

Although Rowcliffe's coming energises all three sisters - 'life, secret and silent, stirred in their blood and nerves' (TS 9) - the key point is that 'not one spoke a word to the other' (TS 10). The 'unwritten code' of silence about female desire divides them from each other, making them unspoken rivals. Gaby Weiner's introduction to *Deerbrook* draws attention to Martineau's treatment of 'the enforced secrecy of passion which arises from the lack of communication between women' (Martineau, 1983, xii). As Maria tells Margaret: 'Every mother and friend hopes that no one else has suffered as she did - that her particular charge may escape entirely, or get off more easily. Then there is the shame of confession which is involved' (1983, 160-61) and 'There are no bounds to the horror, disgust and astonishment expressed when a woman owns her love to its object unasked' (163). Irigaray's comment that the first issue facing feminism is 'that of making each woman "conscious" of the fact that what she has felt in her personal experience is a condition shared by all women' (1985, 164), is highly relevant here.

Unable to speak their desire, each of the sisters attempts to attract Rowcliffe in ways which accord with their psychoanalytic types: Mary by presenting herself as the 'womanly' woman; Gwenda by walking on the moors; and Alice by making herself ill. It is in her portrayal of Alice that Sinclair draws most obviously on Freud's work. Alice resorts to exactly the kinds of subterfuges Sinclair pin-pointed in her discussion of *Jane Eyre*: 'Alice thought, "I will make myself ill. So ill that they'll *have* to send for him. I shall see him that way"' (TS 10, original emphasis). Her symptoms - she stops eating, becomes tired, anaemic, faints and has hysterical fits - are those of the hysteric as outlined in Freud and Josef Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*.

Although it is impossible to know what Sinclair had read (she recorded first studying psychoanalysis in 1913), *Studies on Hysteria*, translated into English in 1909, was certainly available to her. It is *Studies on Hysteria* which demonstrates most clearly that 'Psychoanalysis is a feminist theory manqué' (Rubin, 1975, 185). It linked hysteria, which included symptoms such as anorexia nervosa, depression, hallucinations, paralysis, fainting and mutism, to daydreaming 'to which needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone' (Freud and Breuer, 1991, 64), to sick nursing, to being in love, and to gifted adolescents, including 'girls who get out of bed at night so as secretly to carry on some study that their parents have forbidden' (321). The patients were often exceptionally intelligent women, and as Elaine Showalter's *The Female*

*Malady* shows, their 'hysteria' can be directly linked to the frustration and boredom of a restricted life, controlled by parents or husband. Sinclair makes explicit Alice's *unconscious* thoughts: 'I will make myself ill.'

Dr Rowcliffe is seen reading Pierre Janet's *Etat mental des hystériques* (1894). (Although the novel seems to be set in a 'timeless mythic, symbolic realm' (Miller, 1994, 200) this indicates its setting is after the Brontës' time.) Rowcliffe's diagnosis of Alice's condition, however, is textbook Freud - hysteria resulting from sexual frustration. Alice 'isn't ill because she's been starving herself. She's been starving herself because she's ill. It's a symptom' (TS 77). Anorexia nervosa, recognised in adolescent girls as early as 1873, was a form of female cultural protest: 'When only the body was regarded as important, anorexic girls paraded physical starvation as a way of drawing attention to the starvation of their mental and moral faculties' (Showalter, 1987, 128). 'Starved' emotionally, Alice reacts by 'starving' herself physically. She would, Rowcliffe argues, 'be as strong as iron if she was married and had children' (TS 181). Mr Cartaret's refusal to accept this diagnosis and his talk of putting Alice 'under restraint' (TS, 181) recall the fate of Brontë's Bertha. Even Rowcliffe, who thinks of specialising in 'gynaecology' or 'nervous diseases' because he is 'interested in women's cases' (TS 152), is contemptuous of Alice as a 'poor parson's hysterical daughter' (TS 80). Like the other experts - Charcot, Janet and Freud - Rowcliffe makes money and a career out of women's illnesses - another trade in women's bodies.

Mr Cartaret deliberately manufactures rivalry between his daughters, telling Alice that Rowcliffe and Gwenda (with whom Rowcliffe is in love) have been walking together on the moors. Gwenda's reaction to Alice's subsequent relapse is the classic self-sacrifice of the nineteenth-century shared lover triangle plot. Told by Rowcliffe that Alice will die or go mad if she is not married, Gwenda leaves Garth in the hope that Rowcliffe will marry Alice, confiding in Mary: 'It's her one chance, Molly. I've got to give it her. How *can* I let her die, poor darling, or go mad? She'll be all right if he marries her' (TS 191, original emphasis). Her gesture is made out of sisterly love. It is at this point that Sinclair disrupts the traditional paradigm of self-sacrifice, exposing it as 'monstrous, absurd, altogether futile' (TS 341), because it leaves the field for Mary. Indeed, Sinclair exposes Gwenda's gesture as unnecessary before she undertakes it. Alice's 'secret and hidden kinship' (TS 193) with Gwenda allows her to understand Gwenda's intention and to

refuse to take advantage of it. The question of why Gwenda goes ahead with her sacrifice is one to which I will return.

Outwardly the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of the 'womanly woman', even her name connotes ideal womanhood, Mary is the strongest of the sisters, the best adapted to patriarchal society. The ideally feminine woman 'is a recurrent figure in Sinclair's fiction, where she is always the villain, for she is the one who holds women back, and makes it impossible for them to forge new identities and narratives for themselves' (Miller, 1994, 193). Through Mary, Sinclair offers a critique of the Victorian 'Angel in the House', which predates Virginia Woolf's analysis in 'Professions for Women' (1931) by nearly two decades. Sinclair links the 'womanly woman' not just to repression but to ruthless manipulation and lack of gender loyalty.

Here Sinclair fuses psychoanalytic theory with Austen's understanding of the economics of the romance novel. Like Mary in Austen's 'Three Sisters', Sinclair's Mary wants Rowcliffe for the status he can give her as a married woman, but represses this desire:

Mary thought, '[...] On Wednesday I will go into the village and see all my sick people. Then I shall see [Rowcliffe]. And he will see me. He will see that I am kind and sweet and womanly.' She thought, 'That is the sort of woman that a man wants.' *But she did not know what she was thinking.*

(TS 10, my emphasis)

The words 'sweet', 'good' and 'womanly' come to signify Mary's duplicity. Rowcliffe reflects that 'sweet and good women were not invariably intelligent. As for honesty, if they were always honest they would not always be sweet and good' (TS 74). Similarly, Woolf recognised that the 'Angel in the House' demanded that women must 'to put it bluntly - tell lies if they are to succeed' (1979, 60).

Irigaray argues that to be a 'normal' woman, that is to exhibit 'what Freud calls "femininity"', a woman has to enter a 'masquerade of femininity', and 'a system of values' that does not belong to women but which answers male desires (1985, 134). Sinclair makes it clear that 'normal femininity' as advocated by psychoanalysis involved repression and was a form of neurosis. She uses parentheses to convey the gap between Mary's conscious and unconscious thoughts, as in Mary's deliberations over asking Rowcliffe to tea:

It would look better if she were not in too great a hurry. (She said to herself it would look better on Ally's account.) The longer he was kept

away (she said to herself, that he was kept away from Ally) the more he would be likely to want to come. Sufficient time must elapse to allow of his forgetting Gwenda. It was not well that he should be thinking all the time of Gwenda when he came. (She said to herself it was not well on Ally's account.)

(TS 213)

Mary then enacts a 'masquerade of femininity' which 'answers' Rowcliffe's desires, displaying herself holding a baby, offering Rowcliffe good food and playing the 'sweet', 'innocent', 'good' (TS 241) woman, deliberately marking her difference from Gwenda.

Gwenda and Mary demonstrate two different reactions to the problem of female rivalry: self-sacrifice or manipulation. Mary's actions deny any kind of 'sisterhood', biological or ideological. As their stepmother, Robina, tells Gwenda, 'You were three women to one man, and Mary was the one without a scruple' (TS 265). Though Gwenda argues that 'if we *were* three, we all had our innings, and he made his choice' (TS 266), Robina responds that 'It was Mary did the choosing' (TS 266, original emphasis).

There is a sense in the novel - evoked especially in the image of the sisters listening to Rowcliffe's trap and 'life' quivering in their blood and nerves 'like a hunting thing held on the leash' (TS 9) - of the women as hunters. We could see the man here as their prey, a commodity. But, as Sinclair's rewriting of the nineteenth-century paradigm makes very clear, Rowcliffe cannot be simply 'exchanged' between Gwenda and Alice. Such an exchange is precisely, to reapply Frith's word, exposed as a '*fantasised*' one, that is, one only possible in the 'fantasy' of women's fiction. With both the economic power and the power to do the 'asking', to voice his desire, Rowcliffe makes his own decision. Even Mary, although she appears to do the 'choosing' can only put her goods on display, remaining an object in the market. It is Rowcliffe who does the ultimate asking - or 'buying'. Although his choice is partly determined by his unconscious sexual desires (ignited by Mary's accidental resemblance to the 'little red-haired nurse' (TS 242) he had an affair with), Rowcliffe's decision to marry Mary is a rejection of the alternative femininity Gwenda offers, in favour of the conventionally 'womanly'.

With both sisters married (Alice's hysteria disappears when she becomes pregnant by and then marries the farmer, Jim Greatorex), Gwenda's isolated spinsterhood, caring for her now invalid father, is made more bitter by Mary's flaunting of her married status and her children. But her second sacrifice, refusing to become Rowcliffe's mistress, is still made out of loyalty to Mary. It's worth noting at this point

that even had Mary died, it would still have been legally impossible for Gwenda to marry Rowcliffe. Sinclair makes this clear early on when Mr Cartaret reads *The Spectator* 'to see what is had to say about the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill' (TS 23) which was not repealed until 1907, and prevented a man from marrying his dead wife's sister. This historical background is only hinted at but it makes the point that Gwenda's sacrifice is irrevocable, and it makes it impossible for Sinclair to manipulate a happy ending by engineering Mary's death.

Here it is worth comparing Gwenda's gesture with Charlotte Brontë's treatment of Caroline Helstone's similar sacrifice when she thinks Robert Moore loves Shirley. Shirley, who values woman-to-woman bonds, does not make a parallel sacrifice, neither does she take advantage of it, instead 'she reasserts the primacy of their female friendship, and attacks the "intrusion" of the male' (Cosslett, 1988, 131). But Brontë ultimately fudges the issue of female rivalry by introducing a convenient brother, Louis Moore, to marry Shirley. It's the narrative equivalent of cutting the man in half - a solution Sinclair refuses to take.

Gwenda's sacrifice is the central problem of *The Three Sisters*. Is it a 'monstrous' waste - as to modern feminist eyes, Jean Radford suggests, 'the ending of *Mary Olivier* may well appear an elaborate rationalisation of - yet again - self-denial' (MO, Introduction)? Or a laudable gesture of the sisterly 'solidarity' Sinclair advocated in *Feminism*? Or something even more complex? In *Life and Death of Harriett Fream*, as I will argue, Sinclair analyses a similar sacrifice as precisely a manifestation of the pressure on women to 'behave beautifully'. However, I would suggest that *The Three Sisters* is ambivalent, probably reflecting Sinclair's own ambivalence. The novel is dialogic in that the contradictory viewpoints it offers are not finally subordinated to a single authorial interpretation.

At this point I want to examine the character of Mr Cartaret as a representative of the Victorian family and religious structures which controlled women and manufactured rivalry between them. A highly sensual man, who has had three wives, Mr Cartaret's main problem is the frustration of enforced celibacy. His first wife, mother of his three daughters, died giving birth to Alice. Gwenda states baldly, 'He killed Mother [...] He was told that Mother would die or go mad if she had another baby. And he let her have Ally' (TS 27-28). The second wife 'turned into a nervous invalid [...] before



she died of that obscure internal trouble which he had so wisely and patiently ignored' (TS 20). The third wife, Robina, runs away from Mr Cartaret after five years. Mr Cartaret has an 'unacknowledged vision' of her in a divorce court explaining that

she ran away from her husband because she was afraid of him. He could hear the question, 'Why were you afraid?' and Robina's answer - but at that point he always reminded himself that it was as a churchman that he objected to divorce.

(TS 21)

His profession has 'committed him to a pose' (or a masquerade) until he has 'become unconscious of his real thoughts, his real motives, his real likings and dislikings' (TS 21). Sinclair's depiction of the workings of the vicar's unconscious is particularly good, laying bare the hypocrisy of his repression of his own and his daughters' sexual desire.

The fates of Mr Cartaret's wives can be related to Breuer's comment that hysteria could be caused by 'perverse demands made by the husband, unnatural practices etc' (Freud and Breuer, 1991, 328). Noting that the relevant case histories have had to be omitted from *Studies on Hysteria* (an interesting admission in itself), Breuer goes so far as to argue that '*the great majority of severe neuroses in women have their origin in the marriage bed*' (1974, 328, original emphasis). In *Feminism* Sinclair counters Wright's diagnosis of suffrage 'hysteria' as resulting from sexual frustration by drawing attention to 'hysteria and neurosis' in women which was the result not of sexual frustration, but of women's 'martyrdom' to the "'physiological emergencies" [a phrase used by Wright] of *men*' (Sinclair 1912a, 13, my emphasis). More plainly, women's vulnerability to the sexual demands made on them by men. In a footnote Sinclair singles out especially what women suffer from violent and drunken men (1912a, 14). Her analysis here is a radical one, far in advance of that offered by Freud, although Breuer moves some way toward it. Certainly, the marriage bed has proved literally lethal for two of Mr Cartaret's wives.

Mr Cartaret's 'killing' of his wives amounts to what Irigaray calls the 'murder [...] of the mother' (1991, 36), which leaves women without a sense of a 'female genealogy' (44). The three sisters are motherless, and thus have no model of women-to-woman relationships. Alice has, as Gwenda remarks, no mother 'to sneak and scheme *for* her' (TS 27, original emphasis) in getting a husband. A comparison with the potentially rivalrous situation in Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), where there is again one man to four sisters, is interesting here. Alcott situates her sisters in a matriarchal community,

ruled by the benevolent Marmee, where sisterhood is valued. In contrast, the Cartaret sisters' rivalry can be traced to the fact that their sense of identity is constructed within a patriarchal environment, which constructs them as 'rival commodities', most obviously through Mr Cartaret's manipulations. They are divided from each other by the code of silence.

One further scene illustrates the radical nature of Sinclair's analysis of male sexuality. Alice is surprised by her father as she tries on a dress in front of his bedroom mirror (the sisters are forbidden to use this other than 'twice in every two years' (TS 89) - a neat metaphorical comment on his control over their identities):

His face, seen in the looking glass, was awful. And besides being awful it was evil [...] the look on her father's face was awful because it was mysterious [...] There was cruelty in it, and besides cruelty, some quality nameless and unrecognisable, subtle and secret, and yet crude somehow and vivid.

(TS 89)

The 'mysterious' look on the vicar's face is lust. Here Sinclair's text indicates the father's desire for his daughters, a possibility which is evident in *Studies on Hysteria* but from which Freud later distanced himself. In two cases, those of 'Katharina' and 'Fraulien Rosalia H.', the original text of *Studies on Hysteria* attributes hysteria to an attempted rape by an 'uncle'. In both cases Freud added footnotes in 1924 admitting that it was the girls' fathers who were responsible (1991, 201 and 242). These cases are especially interesting in the light of Freud's modification of his initial theory that hysteria was due to child abuse in favour of the theory that such incidents were fantasised (Masson, 1984). Sinclair's text offers an analysis which is in line with the evidence in *Studies on Hysteria*, evidence which Freud himself later obscured.

To return to Gwenda and her self-sacrifice. Firstly, seen in this context I have outlined, her action is a positive affirmation of sister-love, and a subversion of male-manufactured female rivalry. Sinclair's other texts affirm gender loyalty. Lucia in *The Divine Fire* is horrified by Rickman's love sonnets to her, reminding him of his engagement to Flossie. In *The Creators* Jane refuses to have an affair with Tanquerary out of loyalty to his wife, while Nina represses her love for both Tanquerary (out of loyalty to Jane) and Prothero (out of loyalty to Laura). In *Arnold Waterlow* Effie literally dies so that Rosalind's prior claim to Arnold can be honoured.

However, a more complex reading is possible in view of Sinclair's advocacy of the option of sublimation. Freud suggested in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) that in sublimation which enabled 'excessively strong excitations arising from particular sources of sexuality to find an outlet and use in other fields [...] we have one of the origins of artistic activity' (1977, 163). With this in mind, the single woman, particularly the single woman writer, can be seen not as merely sexually frustrated but as having made a positive choice to maximise her potential for creative endeavour. In 'Symbolism and Sublimation' Sinclair would endorse the value of sublimation:

The psycho-analysts, Freud and Jung and their followers, have been abused like pickpockets, as if they offered us no alternative but licence or repression; as if the indestructible libido must either ramp outrageously in the open or burrow beneath us and undermine our sanity; as if Sublimation, the solution that they do offer, were not staring us in the face.

(1916a, 120)

In the later *A Defence of Idealism* Sinclair defined sublimation as 'a turning or passing of desire from a less worthy or less fitting object to fix it on one more worthy and more fitting' (Sinclair, 1917, 9). However, in *The Three Sisters* she is more ambivalent.

Gwenda's unflinching self-knowledge and strength of character are clear in, for instance, her reaction to Rowcliffe's appearance:

'I will go out on to the moor again. [...] He will see me when he drives back and he will wonder who is that wild, strong girl who walks by herself on the moor at night and isn't afraid.[...]' She thought (*for she knew what she was thinking*), 'I shall do nothing of the sort. I don't care whether he sees me or not.'

(TS 10, my emphasis)

Having sacrificed the possibility of sexual fulfilment, she sublimates her desire into the study of philosophy and a semi-mystical feeling for the moors: 'Her woman's passion, forced inward, sustained her with an inward peace, and inward exaltation. And in this peace, this exaltation, it became one with her passion for the place' (TS 339). However, the ending of the novel with its bleak image of Gwenda 'mortally wounded' and trapped in a village which resembles hell with its houses 'naked and blackened as if fire had passed over them' (TS 387) suggests sterility. At this point Sinclair seems herself ambivalent about Gwenda's sacrifice and unable fully to endorse sublimation.

There is a further possibility - that Gwenda's 'sacrifice' is, at a deeply unconscious level (possibly unconscious also to Sinclair?), as much an attempt to

preserve her own integrity as to save Alice. Rowcliffe is not a 'worthy' object for Gwenda's desire. In a key scene he fails to propose to Gwenda because he finds 'something inimical' in 'her absorption, her estranging ecstasy' (TS 157) in the moors and the moon, a symbol which links her to Artemis, the virgin huntress (TS 40). In this scene, which recalls Jane Eyre's vision of the moon as Mother (Brontë, 1967, 344), Gwenda watches the moon: "Oh, look at the moon!" she cried. "[...] Something's calling her across the sky, but the mist holds her and the wind beats her back - look how she staggers and charges head-downward. She's fighting the wind" (TS, 159). The moon, pulled between mist and wind, symbolises Gwenda herself, torn between her desire for Rowcliffe and her need to maintain an independence and integrity which would be lost in marriage with him.

Gwenda, like Nina Lempriere in *The Creators*, is modelled partly on what Sinclair saw as Emily Brontë's 'virginal nature' (1912b, 169) and 'passionate pantheism' (171). Nina believes that 'if any woman is to do anything stupendous it means virginity' (1910, 104):

virginity was the law, the indispensable condition. Virginity - [Nina] had always seen it, not as a fragile, frustrate thing but as a joyous, triumphing energy, the cold, wild sister of mountain winds and leaping waters, subservient only to her genius, guarding the flame in its secret unsundered heart.

(1910, 313)

'Virginity' here is used, as it is used in Irigaray's *Je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, to figure 'physical and moral integrity' (1993c, 86), that is, a female identity which is not subject to male control or defined through relation to the male. Since marriage could mean literal death for women, as the fate of Gwenda's mother demonstrates, celibacy can be seen as a positive and even subversive alternative.

*Mary Olivier* is a more sustained and positive study of sublimation. Having sublimated her sexual desire, Mary gains a knowledge of 'reality' which is the 'ultimate passion' (MO, 379). Sinclair implies that, given the choice between this and Richard, Mary would not be able to give it up because it would mean 'losing, absolutely and for ever, my real self' (379). The integrity of self which comes from sublimation is placed above sexual fulfilment. The key difference between Gwenda and Mary Olivier, Nina Lempriere or Emily Brontë herself, however, is the capacity for creativity. Gwenda does nothing with her 'sublimated' energies.

If the triangle plot dramatises the tension between women's loyalty to their primary bonds with their sisters and their need for sexual fulfilment, *The Three Sisters* articulates the moment of transition when the knowledge of the price paid for repressing sexual desire made it impossible for women to accept the repression demanded by the sacrifice of the nineteenth-century shared lover plot.

### ***Life and Death of Harriett Frean (1922)***

In *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* Sinclair reworks the self-sacrifice theme of *The Three Sisters* as an explicit study of repression. I want to suggest that this is a monologic novel in the sense that it does away with the uncertainties of *The Three Sisters* and subordinates them to a single viewpoint, producing a kind of parable or allegory on the theme of self-sacrifice. Technically, the novel is an advance on the earlier text. Sinclair's encounter with Richardson's work proved the catalyst she needed to develop a highly economical style, combining stream of consciousness with traditional omniscient narration. In contrast to Richardson's lengthy *Pilgrimage*, Sinclair's deceptively simple text is structured through a tightly controlled series of repeated and paralleled symbols and incidents.

*Harriett Frean* has much in common with Mayor's *The Third Miss Symons*, but whereas Henrietta Symons's problem is that she is not lovable because she has never been loved, Harriett is the only child of parents who love her too much. She is taught to repress her own desires in order that she should always 'behave beautifully' (HF 23). The ideal of self-denying femininity she is to aim for is that delineated in Woolf's portrait of the 'Angel in the House':

She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others.

(Woolf, 1979, 59)

Taught this kind of sacrificial behaviour, Harriett never develops a mind or a wish of her own. At a children's party, for instance, her self-denial in going without food is approved by her mother: 'Well, I'm glad my little girl didn't snatch and push. It's better to go without than to take from other people. That's ugly' (HF 14-15). A succession of 'Angel in the House' type 'sacrifices' made by Harriett to please her mother - having plain rather

than breaded cutlets, living in Hampstead rather than Sidmouth - are pre-empted by her mother's parallel sacrifices for her daughter's sake. The result of Harriett's attempts to second-guess her mother's wishes is that each inadvertently deprives the other of her real preference.

As in *The Three Sisters*, Harriett's sacrifice of the man she loves provides the crux of the novel, but here her decision is an example of the renunciation of self expected of the Victorian ideal of femininity. When Robin, the fiancé of her friend, Priscilla, falls in love with her, Harriett convinces him that they must give each other up, because 'we've no right to get our happiness out of [Priscilla's] suffering' (HF 61). Her parents approve her action as 'the right thing', telling her 'you couldn't do anything else' (HF 62). She has, once again, 'behaved beautifully'. The thought of this supreme self-sacrifice gives meaning to her spinsterhood: 'At her worst she could still think with pleasure of the beauty of the act which had given Robin to Priscilla' (HF 116).

Sinclair delineates with chilling precision the psychological effects of Harriett's self-sacrifice on herself and the others involved, and the neuroses which result from this repression. Priscilla develops a mysterious paralysis which is, Harriett learns later, 'pure hysteria' developed 'to get a hold on' Robin because she knows he doesn't love her (HF 133). Nursing Priscilla turns Robin into a neurotic and selfish invalid (an interesting reversal of Freud's case histories where hysteria in women is linked to sickbed nursing), who, after Priscilla's death, marries and exploits his nurse, Beatrice.

The triangle motif is repeated in the next generation when Robin's niece, Mona Floyd, tells Harriett that she is about to marry a man who had been engaged to her friend. The representative of a generation no longer in thrall to the Victorian ideologies of female self-sacrifice, Mona justifies her action in a phrase which echoes Harriett's father's comment: 'We can't do anything else' (HF 144). The judgement of this new Freudian-influenced generation, as voiced by Mona, is that Harriett's earlier sacrifice simply made four people unhappy - Harriett, Robin, Priscilla and Beatrice. While Harriett's defence invokes the Victorian ideal of self-sacrifice - she did it because she 'was brought up not to think of myself before other people' (HF 145), Mona pin-points a deeper selfishness behind the sacrifice. Harriett, she argues, had not thought of other people but of 'herself. Of her own moral beauty' (HF 144). Moreover, Mona points out that 'it wasn't even your own idea. You sacrificed him to somebody else's' (HF 145).

This is the key difference between Harriett and Gwenda. Harriett's sacrifice is the result of an internalisation of her parents' Victorian concepts of duty and self-sacrifice. Like *The Three Sisters* the novel offers a critique of repressive Victorian family structures. Jean Radford suggests that 'the Freaan ideal of family life, which suffocates and sterilises their only child, can be read as symbolic of the bankruptcy and future extinction of this type of family' (HF Introduction). In 'Symbolism and Sublimation' Sinclair approved Jung's assertion of the need for conflict between mother and child:

That conflict begins in childhood and is waged most fiercely on the threshold of adolescence. It must be fought to a finish, and the child must win it or remain forever immature. If the parent wins ten to one the child becomes neurotic. The dramas of our family life show us such cases every day. (I have known more than one mother who at least *tried* to mutilate and swallow up her son - for his good.)

(Sinclair, 1916b, 144, original emphasis)

*Mary Olivier* is a dramatisation of that conflict, where the child wins the fight. Similarly, Gwenda resists her father's attempts to control her. Her 'sacrifice' is a rejection of his father's values. In *Harriett Freaan*, however, there is no 'conflict' because Harriett regards her parents as 'so beautiful. So good. So wise' (HF 24).

Harriett's 'passion' for her parents retards her development to the extent that she never develops a separate self. She remains 'forever immature' and eventually becomes 'neurotic'. The doll which Harriett 'buries' in a drawer after her mother makes her give it to her friend to play with symbolises Harriett's repressed self, 'buried' in deference to her parents' wishes, and festering until it emerges as the cancer that kills her.

After the death of her parents it becomes obvious that Harriett has no self apart from them: 'Through her absorption in her mother, some large, essential part of herself had gone' (HF 108). In old age she retreats into a second childhood, mothered by her servant, Maggie, who sublimates her own maternal feelings into caring for Harriett. Finally, Harriett's identification with her mother culminates in her discovery that she has the same kind of cancer that her mother died from: 'She was raised to her mother's eminence in pain. With every stab she would live again in her mother' (HF 178). The final scenes in hospital bring her life full circle. The release of all that she has repressed in an anaesthetic-induced torrent which seems to resemble semiotic babble signals her return to childhood, and she greets her friend Connie with 'a sudden ecstatic wonder and recognition' as 'Mamma' (HF 184). Harriett's parents and the Victorian family life they

represent are exposed as both sterile and damaging like the blue egg (a Jungian symbol of fertility), which is not only hollow but contains scissors and a stiletto.

Harriett's inability to read serious literature is a telling indicator that she has repressed rather than sublimated her sexual energy. For several of Sinclair's characters - Gwenda, Mary Olivier, Arnold Waterlow - books, particularly those disapproved of by their parents, are a way of establishing a separate sense of self. They sublimate their sexual energy into their reading, and as compensation for their renunciation, they have moments of heightened awareness. Harriett, because she has never established a separate self, is incapable of sublimation. Again, Sinclair makes it clear that spinsterhood does not necessitate neurosis - Harriett's friend, Lizzie Pierce, although also a spinster, retains an active interest in literature.

Harriett's absorption in her parents prevents her from establishing relationships not only with men but also with her female friends, whom she almost resents because they 'broke something, something secret and precious between her and her father and mother' (HF 49). The silence between women on the subject of their desire which I noted in *The Three Sisters* is even more noticeable here. Lynne Pearce has suggested that in the 'dialogic model of sisterhood/subjecthood it is silence and not difference that is the great enemy' and that 'If we deny the other - by refusing to enter into dialogue with her - we also deny our own self' (1994, 171).

Harriett not only 'refuses' to initiate a dialogue with Priscilla, but forms a conspiracy with Robin, which both excludes Priscilla and denies her adult subjecthood. It is an 'insult' to Priscilla, as Mona says, '*handing her over* to a man who couldn't love her even with his body' (HF 146, my emphasis). In this exchange Harriett and Robin treat Priscilla like an object or a child. Harriett's sacrifice, so far from testifying to a bond between her and Priscilla, a 'collusion and exchange between women' (Frith, 1988, 76), is a 'collusion and exchange' with the man, which actually enables her to feel *superior and different* to Priscilla:

When she thought of Robin and how she had given him up she felt a thrill of pleasure in her beautiful behaviour, *and a thrill of pride in remembering that he had loved her more than Priscilla.*  
(HF 67, my emphasis)



Harriett's 'secret, unacknowledged satisfaction' (HF 73) when Priscilla is paralysed, and the 'secret pleasure and satisfaction' (HF 131) she gets from her pity for Robin's second wife are both in direct contrast to Gwenda's sacrifice.

Sinclair's treatment of Harriett's failure to separate from her mother offers an important corrective to Nancy Chodorow's theorisation of women's sense of self as connected to others. It makes explicit the connection between the Victorian prescriptions for ideal and self-sacrificing femininity and their demand that women sub/merge their sense of self in order to identify with the desires of others. Harriett merges herself so fully with her mother that she can no longer either separate herself from her mother or fully recognise her own desires. Rather than being replicated in her friendships with other women, this merger actively prevents such friendships developing.

The fiction of this period tends to advocate a model of female identity which depends on separation and autonomy rather than connection - a Jungian rather than Chodorowian model. Penny Brown has argued that many women writers in this period felt that

significant and enduring self-development was seen to be not always compatible with a strong or permanent commitment to another person. Though a number of writers [...] felt that a close relationship with another woman might be less threatening to the self, ultimately the demands made by any close relationship are seen to work against the development of individual freedom and autonomy.

(1992, 223)

Certainly this is the conclusion of *Mary Olivier*: 'If you looked back on any perfect happiness you saw that it had not come from the people or the things you thought it had come from, but from somewhere inside yourself' (MO 378).

Ironically, for Sinclair's *male* characters, fulfilment and a full development of identity can come through connection to others, a reversal of Chodorow's theorisation. In *Arnold Waterlow*, for instance, Arnold attains a similar fulfilment and philosophical insight to Mary Olivier's through the love he feels for Effie, rather than a separate autonomy. In contrast to Nina's 'virginity' in *The Creators*, Sinclair's male artists - Rickman in *The Divine Fire*, Tanqueray in *The Creators* and Christopher Vivart in *Far End* - all benefit from their relationships with women, which are necessary for their art to develop. Relationships, though potentially fulfilling for men, are an impediment to fulfilment for women.

Finally, two other texts in Sinclair's intertextual dialogue offer commentaries on *Harriett Frean*. Sinclair's last novel, *History of Anthony Waring*, rewrites the *Harriett Frean* self-sacrifice theme with a male protagonist. Like Harriett, Tony gives up Jenny, the woman he loves, out of loyalty to her husband and to his own wife, Ellen. Despite his marriage and a fulfilling job, Tony's life is almost (although never quite) as barren as Harriett's. Here Sinclair analyses a certain type of masculinity as demanding its own repressions: 'A stern upright stroke was marked at each corner of his mouth, as if he had worn a bit, witness to his habit of holding himself in' (1927, 174). Both 'masculinity' and 'femininity', Sinclair's work suggests, are damaging constructions.

In a short story published in the same year as *Harriett Frean*, 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched', which has a protagonist called 'Harriott Leigh' (an obvious echo), Sinclair questions the notion that sexual relations in themselves are enough to prevent neurosis. Harriott has a purely sexual affair with a married man 'Oscar Wade' (perhaps a name intended to convey licentiousness), a relationship which gives her no 'spiritual' satisfaction. After her death Harriott is condemned to a 'hell' which consists of the repetition of their affair *ad infinitum*. Harriott's 'sin' is not having had an affair with a married man, nor even the disloyalty to another woman this involved, since his wife is a negligible figure, but having had a sexual affair with a man she neither loved nor respected. The implication is that a single, and celibate, life would have been preferable because, like Mary Olivier's, it would have preserved the integrity of the self.

Sinclair's focus on the shared lover triangle places the tension between women's need for sexual fulfilment and their primary bonds with other women at the centre of her work, and thus of a transitional moment in literary history. Her practice of 'rewriting' this plot not only places her in dialogue with nineteenth-century women writers but also produces an internal dialogue which makes possible a variety of careful moral distinctions, balancing the needs of self and others. An important influence, both through her work and as an example of a professional woman writer, she was especially influential for Rebecca West and Rosamond Lehmann.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REBECCA WEST'S 'DIFFERENCE OF VIEW'

Rebecca West's life was shadowed by her own role in a triangle drama. Her position as mistress of the married H.G. Wells not only dominated her life during the decade-long affair, necessitating tortuous cover-ups which included bringing up her son to call her 'Auntie Panther', but became an identity from which she was never able fully to escape. Indeed, 'Rebecca West', the pseudonym which the nineteen-year-old Cicily Fairfield borrowed from the New Woman heroine of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, who loves the married Rosmer, now seems uncannily prescient. As Sinclair's literary identity was dominated by the label 'spinster', West's was shadowed by those of 'mistress' and 'unmarried mother'.

West, although an important contributor to and commentator on modernism, has not become a part of the modernist canon. Much criticism of her work has focused on its relationship to that of Wells (Ray, 1974; Hammond, 1991), which obscures not only West's modernism but her connections with women writers and her interest in relations between women. As Bonnie Kime Scott notes, there is a distinct gender division in criticism of West's work, with 'women critics embracing the early West that seemed less essential to male critics' (1987, 268-69). The criticism of Gordon Ray and J.R. Hammond, as well as that of Peter Wolfe (1971), Motley F. Deakin (1980), Harold Orel (1986) and even Samuel Hynes (West, 1978, introduction), demonstrates, to borrow from Woolf, the tendency for a male critic to be 'genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values' in a woman's writing and to see not 'a difference of view but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental' (Woolf, 1966-67, Vol. II, 146). Woolf herself used West as an exemplary modern woman writer in *A Room of One's Own*:

Z, most humane, most modest of men, taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed: 'The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!'

(Woolf, 1977a, 35)

West's writing, Woolf recognises, is a mirror where he sees himself, not reflected at 'twice [his] natural size' (1977a, 35) but as 'other'. West understood that 'The woman who is acting the principal part in her own ambitious play is unlikely to weep because she is not playing the principal part in some man's no more ambitious play' (West, 1982, 84-85), and her ambitious books give the 'principal parts' to women.

Bonnie Kime Scott (1987, 1990, and 1995) and Jane Marcus (1984) have begun the process of reassessing West. Marcus's editing of West's witty and iconoclastic early journalism in *The Young Rebecca* (1982) made available a valuable historical record of this 'transitional' period. Scott's *Refiguring Modernism* (1995) places West, along with Woolf and Djuna Barnes, at the centre of a 'second flourishing of modernism' in 1928 (Scott, 1995, Vol. 2, xv).

West provides an important connection between the 'modernist' writers of the period, such as Sinclair and Woolf, and more 'traditional' writers, such as Holtby and Brittain, not just on a personal level but as professional writers with a common commitment to feminism. West, like Holtby and Brittain, contributed to *Time and Tide*, and knew them on a social level - it was at Brittain's house that West met her future husband, Henry Andrews. Brittain saw West as 'a personal symbol of the feminist cause [...] the twentieth-century successor of Mary Wollstonecraft and Olive Schreiner' (TY 588). West also knew Rosamond Lehmann, to whom Woolf wrote that West is 'a very nice woman [...] She is rather fierce, and I expect has some bone she gnaws in secret, perhaps about having a child by Wells. But I couldn't ask her. Perhaps you know her' (Woolf, 1975-80, Vol. VI, 521), a comment which indicates how the identity of 'unmarried mother' stood as a barrier between West and other women.

At first glance West's writing seems primarily concerned with relations between the sexes. Scott remarks: 'Where West's women do bond, it is usually in the presence of, or for the sake of a man. [...] Perhaps echoing West's experience, heterosexual relationships often make female friendships inaccessible' (1987, 277). Isabelle in *The Thinking Reed* (1936), a revision of Henry James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881), for instance, reflects on her lack of friends: 'Perhaps men, and the social structures which men have made, saw to it that women were worked till they dropped, so that there should be no force in them that was not expended in the service of their men' (1984a, 133). But what West offers in her first two novels - *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and *The Judge* (1922) - is precisely an exploration of relations between women which are 'for the sake of' a man. Her analysis of how women's commodification within Western culture isolates women, allowing them to relate to each other only in relation to that 'third term', a man, anticipates Irigaray.

West's fascination with binary oppositions, especially Manichaeism, has led to her being seen as an essentialist/individualist, who, in Moira Ferguson's words, 'views the actions of individual men and women in terms of psychological tragedy rather than segments of a historical drama' (1980, 59). That this is a misreading of West's work is clear from her early journalism, which is concerned precisely with the collective (feminism and socialism), or from her book on Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), which 'makes the well-being (or not) of women the main touchstone of how successful or fortunate a culture is' (Montefiore, 1996, 188).

In fact, West's *oeuvre* can be read as an extended meditation on gender, an attempt to 'think the difference' between the sexes. Just as Irigaray sees sexual difference as 'one of the major philosophical issues, if not *the* issue of our age' (1993a, 5), so West's Isabelle fears that 'the difference between men and women is the rock on which civilisation will split before it can reach any goal that could justify its expenditure of effort' (1984a, 431). This 'difference' is defined in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* where, noting that the word 'idiocy' comes from a Greek root meaning 'private person', West writes:

Idiocy is the female defect: intent on their private lives women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy: they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outline of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.

(1942, Vol. I, 3)

Asked if these were innate defects, West replied 'Oh, I really can't tell you that. [...] You can't imagine what maleness and femaleness would be if you got back to them in pure laboratory state, can you?' (Warner, 1988, 267). This is not an essentialist view of gender, but a critique of the crippling effects of separating the sexes into public and private spheres.

West's interrogation of binary oppositions, especially her gendering of what she called the 'unending see-saw between the will to live and the will to die' (1928, 308), can be seen as a strategy for (borrowing Whitford's description of Irigaray) 'passing through essentialism' (Whitford, 1991, 103) in order to get beyond it. Like Irigaray, West is concerned to destabilise gender roles, at the same time as maintaining that we must 'symbolise' the feminine to counteract the overwhelming masculinity of Western

thought. Thus she debunks the stereotype of the 'womanly woman', as in her description of 'a dear old lady in rustling black silk and a widow's bonnet' who, meeting the teenage West and her sister selling *Votes for Women*, 'raised her umbrella and brought it down on my sister's head, remarking: "Thank God I am a womanly woman!"' (1982a, 162). In 'Parthenhope' (1959) what is at first tolerated by the husbands of six of the seven sisters in this story because they see it as so-called 'feminine' 'silliness' is literally 'madness', the inability to function outside the 'private' sphere.

West often assigns 'masculine' qualities to her female characters and 'feminine' qualities to men. In the review of his novel, *Marriage*, which first attracted H.G. Wells's attention, West characterised him as 'the old maid among novelists' (West, 1982a, 64). 'Spinsterhood', she had asserted earlier, is 'the limitation of experience to one's own sex, and consequently the regard of the other sex from an idealist point of view' (1982a, 48). She applied the term to both men and women, citing Sinclair as an example of a woman who, 'though an unmarried woman, is not [a spinster]' (1982a, 48).

Shifting the focus onto West's interest in relations between women reveals her concern with the 'difference of view' between women, between different kinds of femininity, which destabilises the binary opposition male/female. Here I want to examine West's own experience as one of three sisters cared for by their mother after their father abandoned them, and how West writes this experience in her posthumously-published autobiographical *Family Memories* (1987), and in the *Cousin Rosamund* trilogy of novels (*The Fountain Overflows* (1957), *This Real Night* (1984) and *Cousin Rosamund* (1985)). These texts explore how family life structures identity, within the context of a matriarchal family structure. They centre on what West calls 'sibship', a Scottish word, she writes, which 'comes from the same root as "sibling" and signifies the bond between brothers and sisters, and so suggests emotions deeper and more variable than those implied by the term "kinship"' (1992, 54). In the trilogy West uses these bonds to structure a female-centred version of history.

*Family Memories* imaginatively reconstructs West's own 'maternal genealogy' and is dominated by portraits of women: West's widowed grandmother, Janet Mackenzie, and her sister Isabella; Janet's daughter, Isabella Fairfield (West's mother); and West's sisters, Letitia and Winifred. What is extraordinary about this text is, as Faith Evans notes in her introduction, 'the startling hostility to her elder sister Lettie' (West,

1992, 10). And West's vituperations are startling - illogical and unanalysed, they are surprising in so perceptive and analytical a writer. Letitia is presented as a tyrannical elder sister who 'never ceased to convey to me that I was a revolting intruder in her home' (1992, 201), and who regarded West as 'grotesquely ugly, badly behaved and stupid, as abnormal as an epileptic or a Mongolian idiot' (202). West imaginatively reconstructs this sibling rivalry as the result of the humiliation suffered by Letitia, a stunningly pretty child who initially entranced their father, when Winifred, equally pretty, was born. Letitia's rivalrous attitude, as depicted by West, continued throughout their lives. West records a telephone call from Letitia after West was made a Dame which was 'a cry of undying hate' (1992, 202). Evans notes that this call probably never took place (1992, 251). In contrast, Winifred is presented as an idealised protector, a surrogate parent, who 'would recite poetry to me for hours, she was glad to hold my hand and walk out with me, which was not the way of my eldest sister, the odious Lettie' (1992, 206).

It is, of course, impossible to know the 'truth' of these relationships. Letitia Fairfield had a distinguished career as a doctor, and it was she who introduced West to feminism and socialism. West's biographer, Carl Rollyson, reports not only the affection with which the rest of the family held Lettie (1995, 353), but that her dying words to West were 'I have always loved you' (356). Conversely, during an illness Winifred 'looked at Rebecca with intense hatred' and said "Oh yes, I am Anne Brontë" (Rollyson, 1995, 259), using the Brontë myth to convey her own resentment of her sisters' success. Victoria Glendinning describes having lunch with West, then in her 80s, and Letitia, then in her 90s, and feeling caught in the 'crossfire' between the sisters: 'The elder sister does not defer or refer - why should she, perhaps? - to the personal fame or professional achievement of the younger one, who is falling ever deeper into the well-rehearsed role of recalcitrant little sister' (Glendinning, 1988, 5). What is clear is the enduring nature of the 'roles' sisters occupy in relation to each other.

Both Fishel and McConville argue that sister relationships provide a model for later relationships and here I want to think about how West's depictions of 'Lettie' and 'Winnie' act as models for her women characters. (Interestingly, she herself noted the importance of Branwell Brontë as the model for the Brontës' 'Byronic' male characters (West, 1954, 260).) The *Cousin Rosamund* trilogy offers versions of three different

'types' of women which recur throughout West's fiction, and which are clearly modelled on her family. Scott identifies two types - Rose Aubrey, the narrator, is one of West's 'perceiving women' (Scott, 1987, 283). The second type, Rose's mother, Clare Aubrey, who holds the family together and nurtures her daughters' musical gifts, is the 'restorative woman' (Scott, 1987, 280) based on West's mother 'Isabella Fairfield' in *Family Memories*. A third type is the destructive, life-denying woman - represented by Cordelia in the trilogy and corresponding to West's version of 'Lettie'. The splitting of the ambivalence in the 'sister knot' is as important in defining these types as the splitting between good/bad mother. This difference between (at least) three types of women is one method West uses to destabilise the binary equation of male with evil/darkness and female with good/light.

The trilogy explores the bonds of family history as the matrix within which identity is formed. The Aubrey family is 'fused' (1987, 162). Rose's relationships with her elder sister, Cordelia, and her twin, Mary, dramatise the tension of the 'sister knot' by splitting it and projecting different emotions onto different sisters. Rose and Mary, connected by their musical ability, are similar to the point of fusion. Rose explains: 'I could not exactly love Mary, she was my twin and we were both pianists, we were nearly the same person' (1987, 24). Their relationship encompasses difference within similarity - the knowledge that Mary is the better musician does not create sibling competitiveness. The trilogy is, West said, about 'the difficulty of leading the artist's life' (1984b, viii) and its narrative structure is driven not by the romance plot, but by Rose and Mary's quest to fulfil their identity as artists.

Their rejection of Cordelia, the bossy elder sister, is a 'complicated problem' (1984, 66), but in part to do with the fact that she is a false artist. While her family see themselves as a 'fused' unit, Cordelia's competitiveness is driven by her need to separate from them, the motivation for her violin playing. 'If I am not to be a famous violinist, how am I ever to get away from you all?' (1984b, 382), she cries despairingly. Rose is later able to recognise Cordelia's insecurity and the need to 'stop defending ourselves against her' (1987, 192), but the final volume reiterates Rose's distance from Cordelia, always a 'stranger' (1988, 261).

Ultimately, Rose, through her marriage, also has to separate from Mary, a move conveyed in a scene which epitomises the tension between separation/fusion in the 'sister



knot'. Their friend, Mr Morpurgo, points out that each sister is wearing a dress that would look better on the other, a long-standing habit according to their servant Kate: 'it was as if they were so close together that they mistook each other' (1988, 276). The two sisters act as mirrors for each other but the image they get is misleading. Changing the dresses enacts their separation - 'I was separate from my sister indeed' (1988, 278). Yet it is also an image of sameness - despite their physical differences they take the same size dress.

West's use of Rose as an unreliable narrator does allow for an interpretation of the rejection of Cordelia as the result of Rose's resentment of their father's preference for Cordelia. Yet it is the link with her father which indicates Cordelia's positioning on the side of darkness/evil. Clare Aubery, cousin Rosamund and her mother, Constance, are 'restorative women' associated with the 'will to life', particularly Rosamund. Rosamund, 'the Rose of the World' (1987, 241), is 'what music is about', that is, 'life' (1984b, 390). Rose feels that Rosamund is 'more truly our sister than Cordelia' (1988, 53) - 'sibship' here crosses the boundaries of 'kinship'.

In contrast, Piers Aubery and Cousin Jock (husband of Constance) represent the 'will to death', particularly Jock's links with the supernatural. This is not a simple gender divide, however, as male characters also nurture. The most important character here is the girls' adored younger brother, Richard Quin, the 'nicest of us four children' (1984b, 2), who has a 'quick, pliant social gift' (228) which enables him to make people happy. Clare Aubery, Rosamund and Richard Quin are all 'by nature parents' (1988, 89). They are 'eternal [...] part of what keeps the stars from rushing away from each other' (1988, 92), that is, they represent the nurturing 'will to life'. Gender here crosses the Manichaeian evil/good, dark/light binaries, rather than being simply mapped onto them.

Ultimately, the reader has to accept that Cordelia is intrinsically linked to the forces of darkness and evil, which is difficult in view of the identification of her with Letitia Fairfield. Letitia was, understandably, hurt by her portrayal as Cordelia and West denied the connection to her, although she admitted it in *Family Memories* (1992, 201). Glendinning records a note written by West which read: 'I know I have largely invented my sister Lettie' (1988, 54). What is worth noting here is the *power* of the writer as West, like Woolf and Trefusis, recreates her 'rival' in her texts for her own ends.

This consideration of West's depictions of the problematic nature of maternal and sister relations helps to shift the focus away from her relations with men, especially Wells, and enables a rereading of her two earliest novels which recognises the centrality of their explorations of relations between women.

### ***The Return of the Soldier* (1918)**

One of the earliest women's novels about the war, *The Return of the Soldier* is a study of its enhancement of the male-public/female-private binary. It is a detailed analysis of the role of class in the production of 'femininity' and in the differentiation of women as 'rival commodities', exploring the process whereby a woman's 'value' as a commodity is measured in relation to 'a third term external [...] to herself' (a man) which 'makes it possible to compare her with another woman' (Irigaray, 1985, 176). Chris Baldry, as Glendinning remarks, is 'not an interesting character' (RS Introduction) and it is the interaction between the three different women who love him - his wife, Kitty, his cousin, Jenny, and his youthful love, Margaret - mediated by this 'third term', the 'shadow' across their discourse, which is the focus of the book.

Deakin's comment that '*The Return of the Soldier* does not give us any authentic sense of what the war is about' (1980, 132) misses West's centralisation of *women's* experience of the war. Her interest is in the suspended animation of the waiting women whose lives are dominated by the absent men: 'like most Englishwomen of my time' the narrator, Jenny, explains 'I was wishing for the return of a soldier' (RS 13). West's concern with women's experience is evident in her review of May Sinclair's *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), which was, West thought, 'one of the few books of permanent value produced by the war' (1982a, 305), conveying especially Sinclair's humiliation at her non-combatant status.

Claire Tylee locates a 'hatred' between women in *Return of the Soldier*, as well as in *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Well of Loneliness*:

What I myself find disturbing in these novels is that they all express very strong hatred between women. [...] The hatred is between a cold, beautiful ladylike figure, and the sensuous woman who is branded a slut, an ugly monster, a freak: Kitty and Margaret, Mrs Dalloway and Miss Kilman, her mother and Stephen Gordon.

(1990, 182)

She concludes that after the war 'men were left divided by generation; women by class' (1990, 183). Although I think that Tylee's comments here are over-simplified, she does indicate the role of class in the war-induced antagonism between women. In contrast to Tylee's reading of *The Return of the Soldier* as failing to question social inequality, marriage or the war and as 'even present[ing] a justification for the parasite woman of Kitty's class' (1990, 146), my reading is precisely in terms of its questioning of these issues and its critique of the 'parasite woman'.

West's work is clearly in dialogue with both previous women's texts and the dominant male literary tradition. She produced perceptive criticism of Jane Austen, in *The Strange Necessity* (1928), and of Charlotte Brontë (1932; in West, 1978). The attention to economics and country house setting of *The Return of the Soldier* recall *Mansfield Park* (1814), while there is an echo of *Jane Eyre* in the return of Margaret as Chris's first love, 'monstrous' because she is poor and ugly, as well as 'sexual'. West is also interested in dialogue between women, and its failures. The narrator of 'There is no Conversation' (in *The Harsh Voice* (1935)) contends that: 'There is no such thing as conversation. [...] There are intersecting monologues, that is all' (1982b, 63). Her 'conversation' with Nancy Sarle is fractured by the 'shadow' of Etienne de Sevenac and by the narrator's silence on the crucial fact that he is her own former husband.

*The Return of the Soldier* is dialogue not only with psychoanalysis, but with the stereotypes of women in two novels by influential male writers which West had reviewed earlier - H.G. Wells's *Marriage* (1912) and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915) - and to which West offers a corrective female-centred vision.

Wells's *Marriage* is an Edwardian 'marriage problem' novel (Miller, 1994, 175), which depicts the 'New Woman' but fails to give her a new narrative. It takes a young married couple, Trafford and Marjorie, to the wilderness of Labrador to reinforce essentialist notions of gender. Women are, Marjorie decides, 'half savages, half pets, unemployed things of greed and desire' (Wells, 1912, 508). On their return to London Marjorie will take up exactly the life as Trafford's helpmeet which bored her before, but which will supposedly now be sustained by her new understanding. What attracted West's scorn was Wells's treatment of Marjorie's rampant consumerism. Wells, she wrote, 'sees that Marjorie is a thorough scoundrel' but 'The horror of [the book] is that, confused by her clear eyes and copper hair, he accepts her scoundrelism as the normal

condition of women' (1982a, 65-66). Marjorie is an example of what West calls the 'parasitic woman' (1982a, 65). West refuses to accept Marjorie's 'worthlessness' as 'the basis of a generalisation as to the worthlessness of all women' (1982a, 67), and instead calls for women to have 'a chance of being sifted clean through the sieve of work' (1982a, 69).

The 'parasite woman' is a recurring topic in West's early journalism. Such women are decorative commodities - 'the most expensive luxury the world has indulged in' (West, 1982a, 130) - and their function as signifiers of their husband's wealth ensures the 'slavery of the working classes' (114). Rather than generalising about 'all women', West distinguishes between the rich woman, 'the most idle human being that has ever secured the privilege of existence' and the poor woman, made 'ugly and clumsy' by hard work (1982a, 130), and analyses the effects of this division on relations between women. In 'The Quiet Women of the Country' (1913) she recalls seeing some MPs' womenfolk and three Jewish prostitutes watching, with enjoyment, while police brutally assaulted a suffragette. Both sets of women, West asserts, were 'hurtful parasites' (1982a, 153), lacking gender loyalty. It is these analyses which inform *The Return of the Soldier*.

Formally and thematically, West's novel has similarities with Ford's *The Good Soldier*, suggesting that her text was a revision of his. West recognised its importance as a modernist text in her review, noting its use of 'the device [...] of presenting the story not as it appeared to a divine and omnipresent intelligence, but as it was observed by some intervener not too intimately concerned in the plot' (1982, 300). Both novels use an unreliable narrator to explore unconscious desires. West's Chris Baldry is, like Ford's Edward Ashburnham, 'a large, fair person of the governing class' with a country house and 'a fatal touch of imagination' (West, 1982a, 299). Both men are loved by three women but while Ford's women (Leonora, Edward's frigid wife, Nancy, the innocent girl, Florence, the egotistical American) are stereotypes, West's (Kitty, Jenny and Margaret) are fully realised. Ford's Edward is a 'good soldier' whose ironised heroism lies in his steadfast resistance of his desire for Nancy, and thus his 'resistance' of the feminine. The narrator depicts Leonora and Nancy's joint victimisation of Edward:

Those two women pursued that poor devil and flayed the skin off him as if they had done it with whips [...] I seem to see him stand, naked to the waist, his forearms shielding his eyes, and flesh hanging from him in rags. [...] It was as if Leonora and Nancy banded themselves together

to do execution, for the sake of humanity, upon the body of a man who was at their disposal.

(1972, 215)

The assumptions driving Wells's and Ford's texts are that *all* women are like this, are 'other'.

By making her narrator a woman West shifts the focus, making women the subject and man the 'other'. By exploring difference between three kinds of femininity she destabilises the binary 'masculine'/'feminine'. The three women in her novel accord with the three 'types' I have outlined. Jenny is a 'perceiving' or 'thinking' woman similar to Isabelle, while Kitty is the destructive or 'parasite' woman, and Margaret, a 'restorative woman'. By using an unreliable narrator, West engages the reader in a process of 'psychoanalysing' Jenny, reading into the text what Jenny never acknowledges - her repressed desire for Chris. The assumption that Jenny articulates West's viewpoint, as well as the identification of Kitty with Wells's wife, Jane (Ray, Hammond, Deakin and Rollyson all rely on this point), have led to simplistic, biographical readings of this text.

Sharon Ouditt has suggested that it is Jenny who learns most, as her relationship with Margaret 'forces her to re-negotiate her own identity' (1994, 116). Female subjectivity is reconstructed through dialogue with another woman. West's text analyses the 'extremely anxious production of endless discriminations' (Light, 1991, 13) which produce female middle-class identity. The initial status of Jenny and Kitty as '[upper] middle class' depends on their difference from Margaret as 'working class', specifically delineated through their material appearance. The woman's body itself becomes a class signifier. Both Kitty and Jenny are 'parasite women', decorative objects within the house they have 'made a fine place for Chris, one little part of the world that was, so far as *surfaces* could make it so, good enough for his amazing goodness' (RS 16, my emphasis). Initially Jenny is as much a 'parasite' as Kitty, financially dependent on Chris. The nymph in the bowl in the hall is, Jenny believes,

a little image of Chris's conception of women. Exquisite we were according to our equipment; unflushed by appetite or passion, even noble passion; our small white heads bent intently on the white flowers of luxury floating on the black waters of life; and he had known none other than us.

(RS 118)

Kitty and Jenny watch the flowers on the surface of 'the black waters of life' rather than plunging in. Their 'whole truth' is in their 'material seeming' (RS 137), but their 'femininity' necessitates a rejection of bodily 'passion'.

Kitty is almost pure commodity - 'so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large "7d" somewhere attached to her person' (RS 11). West deconstructs this 'angel in the house' to expose her as 'the falsest thing on earth' (RS 181). Jenny understands Kitty's *unconscious* conception of her function as a commodity to be 'bought' by men:

Beautiful women of [Kitty's] type lose, in this matter of admiration alone, their otherwise tremendous sense of class distinction; they are obscurely aware that it is their civilising mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth to buy it, and thus be seduced by a present appetite to a tilling of the earth that serves the future. There is, you know, really room for all of us; we each have our peculiar use.

(RS 154)

Tylee reads this last sentence as West's justification of the parasite woman. Placing it in the context of West's journalism, however, I think that we have to read it as bitter irony on Jenny's part.

It is precisely Margaret's bodily drabness, 'repulsively furred with neglect and poverty' (RS 25), as a signifier of her lower-class status which initially make Jenny and Kitty certain that Chris could never have loved her: 'With such a mental habit a man could not help but wince at Margaret' (RS 118). If Kitty and Jenny with their tasteful clothes, soft skin and manicured nails represent 'femininity', then Margaret, with her cheap raincoat, her deplorable umbrella and seamed, red hands, is barely a 'woman' at all - 'not so much a person as an implication of dreary poverty' (RS 141). The vocabulary of physical disgust Jenny uses to describe her conveys deep-seated class-hatred: 'I [...] hated her as the rich hate the poor, as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies that are their decent home, and introduce ugliness to the light of day' (RS 32).

To even admit that Margaret might be a 'rival' for Chris's love threatens Kitty and Jenny's sense of superior identity because it makes it clear that their class status is contingent on the male. Chris is the 'third term' external to the woman which 'makes it possible to compare her with another woman' (Irigaray, 1985, 176). Like the MPs' womenfolk, Kitty and Jenny's status depends on maintaining their difference from the 'unfeminine' woman, from the working-class woman and the suffragette whose work or

political protest take them into the masculine 'public' world. To admit their similarity, their shared oppressed status, with the suffragette or the working-class woman, would be to relinquish the power and protection they gain from their class status as 'ladies'.

Connected only by their love of Chris, Kitty and Jenny dislike each other, as Jenny realises: 'A sharp movement of Kitty's body confirmed my deep, old suspicion that she hated me' (RS 167). To Kitty, who regards all woman as rivals, Jenny, a 'surplus' woman, is even more of a threat than Gwenda is to Mary because she is Chris's cousin rather than Kitty's sister.

Yet there is more than one system of commodification here and Chris is himself commodified by the women - to the point of death. His primary function is to provide for them and the 'mob of female relatives who were all useless either in the old way with antimacassars or in the new way with golf clubs' (RS 20-21). In return they 'compensate him for his lack of free adventure by arranging him a gracious life' (RS 21). But although the house is designed as a setting for him, and his labour maintains it, his bodily presence is not necessary. Though Jenny wishes for his return, Kitty is barely disturbed because they have not heard from him for a fortnight. Chris is as trapped within the social structures as the two women who live like 'parasites' off him. Kitty's possessive 'our Chris' - 'If he could send that telegram he isn't *ours* any longer' (RS 39, my emphasis) - clearly indicates ownership. Baldry Court is not a symbol of his happiness but a 'prison' (RS 55). The 'flowers of luxury' float on the 'the black waters of life', as the conscious social self floats on the surface of the unconscious.

*The Return of the Soldier* was one of the earliest novels about shell-shock (Macauley's *Non-Combatants and Others* preceded it). Dr Gilbert Anderson, the Freudian doctor, may initially appear no more than a fashionable plot device - a kind of modernist *deus ex machina* - but it is in her treatment of Chris's war-induced amnesia or 'hysterical fugue' that West is most radical, using it to destabilise concepts of 'sanity', normality and gender.

Elaine Showalter suggests in *The Female Malady* that West 'goes well beyond' even the pioneering doctor W.H.R. Rivers in 'grasping the connections between male hysteria and a whole range of male social obligations' (1987, 191). Shell-shock undermined the categories of sexual difference which constructed 'hysteria' as a 'female malady'. Conscription and trench warfare, as Showalter has shown, imposed on men a

powerlessness and passivity which paralleled that of the Victorian woman hysteric and produced similar symptoms. The story which haunts Jenny of the soldiers unable to help each other because they lack arms and legs (RS 14) takes this passivity to an extreme, a kind of embryo state. Shell-shock 'feminised' men in the sense that it made them victims of irrational emotion, undermining the ideals of the 'masculine' and 'heroic' as emotionally controlled - the 'stiff upper lip' of the 'good soldier'.

Dr Anderson himself acknowledges the truth of Margaret's comment that 'You can't cure [Chris]. All you can do is make him ordinary' (RS 168). Within the parameters of the novel Chris's amnesia is 'saner than sanity' (RS 133). It is the war itself which is insane, a manifestation of male 'lunacy' - the 'will to death'. The dreadful irony of the final sentence of the book - Kitty's 'He's cured' (RS 188) - is that Chris's return to 'sanity' ensures his return to the insanity of the war and

to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying  
death than clouds, to that No Man's Land where bullets fall like rain on  
the rotting faces of the dead....

(RS 187)

The final ellipsis suggests the nothingness to which Chris himself will come.

Both Jenny and Margaret acquiesce in the need to bring back Chris's memory because without it 'He would not be quite a man' (RS 183). In order to be a 'man' - husband, landowner, 'good soldier' - the wishes of Chris's 'essential self' have had to be suppressed by his 'superficial self' (RS 164). His loss of memory is the resurfacing of his repressed 'feminine' side, including the sexuality he has only ever been able to express in his youthful love for Margaret.

The 'will to life' is represented by the maternal sensuality of Margaret, a reversal of Ford's association of female sexuality with destruction. But this is not a simple male/female binary. The 'will to death' represented by the war is also embodied in Kitty - 'cold as moonlight, as virginity' (RS 56). Significantly, as West's 1916 account of a visit to a munitions factory notes, 'kitty' was the name given to the mixture of beeswax, resin and tallow poured on top of the lyddite in the making of a shell (1982a, 388).

West's use of the shabby lower-class woman to represent a different, spiritual kind of femininity (it is Margaret's 'bleak habit [...] to champion the soul against the body' (RS 135)) challenges class-based stereotypes of femininity. It 'reverses the trend in contemporary ideology that assumes upper-class custody of refined sensitivity and



rational thinking' (Ouditt, 1994, 115). When Jenny finds Margaret sitting protectively next to the sleeping Chris in the woods, she sees this as

the loveliest attitude in the world. It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know that there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us.

(RS 143-44)

Glendinning suggests that West is celebrating here 'the creative, life-giving goodness which is independent of intellect, or of art as it is usually understood' (RS Introduction). Like Cousin Rosamund, Margaret stands for what art is about - 'life' - and therefore needs no surface decoration.

However, West comes perilously close to making Margaret another stereotype of femininity, a nurturing mother figure divorced from intellect and the public sphere. Ultimately, *The Return of the Soldier* offers Chris a choice between two kinds of 'death' which correspond to the division between male 'lunacy' and female 'idiocy'. Either a return to the insanity of No Man's Land, or a regression to infancy, to a pre-oedipal semiotic - a failure to separate from the mother.

The hope of the book lies in Jenny, the 'thinking' woman, who moves from the status of decorative commodity which aligns her with Kitty to an alliance with Margaret. There are two sets of mediation going on in the text. Margaret is an 'intercessory' (RS 158), used by Jenny as a conduit to Chris: 'The only occasion when I could safely let the sense of him saturate him as it used to was when I met Margaret in the hall as she came or went' (RS 131). But in narrative terms Chris is the catalyst which brings Margaret and Jenny together: 'We kissed, not as women, but as lovers do; I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love' (RS 184). Ouditt suggests that this gesture 'has implications for a female solidarity which offers hope for the deconstruction of the male order' (1994, 116).

However, the novel's ending is ambiguous. It's as if at this point (perhaps inevitably in 1918) West could see no clear answer to the irreconcilability of 'masculine' and 'feminine', the unending seesaw between the 'will to death' and the 'will to life'. The solution advocated in her pre-war review of *Marriage* - that women should be allowed the 'chance of being sifted clean through the sieve of work' (1982a, 69) - is not explicit

in the novel. But West's journalism tells another story of women's war experience. The courage and diligence of the (working-class) women workers in munitions factories is detailed in three 1916 pieces entitled 'Hands That War' (West, 1982a, 380-90). These stress the appallingly volatile nature of the explosives - the women 'face more danger every day than any soldier on home defence has seen since the beginning of the war' (1982, 383). These women are

among the comfortingly significant features to emerge from the purposeless welter of war. They are assets to England, they introduce reason and sympathy into the snarling colloquy of labour and capital; and they mark that industry has at last recognised that women have brains as well as hands.

(1982a, 386)

In contrast to Kitty and Jenny, here rivalry is not over men but channelled into 'an orgy of competitive industry' (1982, 382) which produces a huge increase in output. This not only enforces West's argument that the middle-class woman can only escape her 'parasite' status through work, but also suggests that the entry of women into the workplace (on terms which recognise their 'brains as well as hands') offers the possibility of introducing 'reason and sympathy into the snarling colloquy of labour and capital', as well as a positive rivalry.

### ***The Judge* (1922)**

One reason for the critical neglect of *The Judge*, a powerful and perceptive novel, may be the centrality it gives not just to homosocial relations between women but to a specific relationship, the rivalry of mother and daughter-in-law, which is more usually treated as a joke than as a subject for canonical literature. The flame-haired suffragette heroine, Ellen Melville, dislikes 'becoming so nearly the subject of a comic song as a women who hates her mother-in-law' (J 201), but she and her potential mother-in-law, Marion Yaverland, thrown together by their love for Marion's illegitimate son, Richard, almost inevitably become the 'rivals' of the traditional mother-in-law joke. With the exception of the Biblical Ruth and Naomi, there are few serious treatments of this subject. (See Cotterill (1994) for a rare sociological study of this relationship.)

West uses it to 'think the difference' between the sexes and between women using a series of binary parallels. This theme is figured in Ellen's final thoughts as she

waits to conceive Richard's child before Richard is hanged for the murder of his half-brother, Roger:

though life at its beginning was lovely as a corn of wheat, it was ground down to flour that must make bitter bread between two human tendencies: the insane sexual caprice of men, the not less mad excessive steadfastness of women. Roger had died, Richard was about to die, because of the grinding together of these male and female faults - Harry and Marion...Poppy and her sailor...her own father and mother....  
(J 429)

Through Ellen's probable re-enactment of Marion's unmarried motherhood, despite their differences (of age, class, nationality and politics), West dramatises the fact that women 'all undergo [...] the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire' (Irigaray, 1985, 164). West's text both explores and enacts through its structure a dialogue between the two women as equal subjects.

Early critical responses to the novel demonstrate the failure to recognise West's 'difference of view'. H.G. Wells disliked the novel. It was, he reported, initially to be about a judge who collapses in a brothel with a woman whose husband he sentenced for murder years before. But West set the beginning of the book before husband and wife had met and 'never got to the Judge':

At the end of an immense mass of unequal but often gorgeous writing, she had reached no further than the murder, and there she wound up the book, still keeping the title of *The Judge*, because that had been announced by her publisher for two years.

(Wells, 1984, 101)

The impression (perpetuated by Glendinning (1988), who relies on Wells's account) is of a disaster of a book, arbitrary in form, character, theme and title.

Wells's judgement is partly due to the difference between the modernist and the Edwardian, but it is also a failure to recognise that the book is consciously female-centred, that it is the *mother* who is the 'judge' (Scott, 1995, vol. 2, 131). *The Judge* fills in the lacunae in Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909) by detailing the social rejection faced by unmarried mothers - as a pregnant, unmarried girl Marion is stoned down Roothing High Street. It must have confronted Wells not only with the pain of West's unmarried motherhood, but that of Amber Reeves (the original of Ann Veronica), who married after finding herself pregnant by Wells, and of Dorothy Richardson, who miscarried Wells's child.

*The Judge* has been damned for its structure (Wolfe sees it as 'poor in drama' (1971, 41), while Orel calls Book II 'profoundly dissatisfying and incomplete' (1986, 131)); for its use of Freud (Orel calls it 'the glummiest type of thesis novel' (1986, 130)); and for its style (Hammond remarks that 'The rather overelaborated prose has a florid texture, as if one is reading Lawrence heavily laced with James's' (1991, 126)). The influences these critics cite include St Augustine, Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, Wells, Calvin, and Samuel Richardson.

To take the issue of style first. West's long, complex, fluid sentences reflect her belief, expounded in *The Strange Necessity*, that the sentence (not the word as Joyce argued) was the foundation of language and unconscious thought (West, 1928, 32-36). Her own sentences build up, clause by clause, following the thought process as it connects idea to idea, image to image, in order to convey the consciousness of a character. Stylistically, as Scott has noted, West is often remarkably close to Woolf (1987, 276). The narrative of *The Judge* is always focalised through the consciousness of one of the characters - most extensively through Ellen and Marion, whose consciousness is conveyed especially through the almost physical weight of her memories.

Secondly, *The Judge* is profoundly revisionist in its use of psychoanalysis. One of the first writers to engage with Freud, West later called him 'a great enemy of women' (quoted in Spender, 1983, 643). Compared to Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Judge* can be seen not as a text-book case-history of male Oedipal desire, but as giving a voice to the mother - to Mrs Morel, or Jocasta herself. As Christiane Olivier (1989) has shown, the mother's desire for her son and its effect on him is a subject which is rarely touched on. West broke radical new ground in exploring this. Marion's name, linking her to Christ's mother, also pregnant outside wedlock, signals her mythic mother status. It is a name she shares with Joyce's Molly Bloom, who represents a phase of the 'Universal Mother' (1928, 40), according to West.

*The Judge* blatantly invites a Freudian reading. The passionately incestuous relationship between Richard (the modern Oedipus or Hamlet) and Marion is heavily foregrounded in the text. Richard's murder of his half-brother, Roger, could be read as the 'killing' of the father by proxy - Roger represents both Harry's sin in abandoning Marion, and Peacey, whose marital rape of Marion produced Roger. Richard's

anticipated hanging is the ultimate castration for his contravening of the Law of the Father.

This Freudian reading, however, falsifies the novel. Firstly, it makes the man its subject, whereas West's revision of the Oedipal paradigm explores the desire between mother and son from the mother's point of view, conveying the sensual pleasure Marion feels in feeding her son. Using him as a substitute for her faithless lover, she projects all her love onto him, despite knowing that it is 'too heavy a cloak for one child' (J 286). She experiences them as 'fused' (J 285), and cannot endure the thought of being 'quite separate from him' (J 285). To maintain that 'unity' she attempts to make herself 'the most alluring mother that ever lived' (J 286). Her flirtatious relationship with Richard, which prevents him developing a mature relationship with Ellen, is a way of maintaining that fusion into adulthood. This contradicts Chodorow's view that women experience themselves as less separate from their daughters than their sons. The lack of separation between Marion and Richard is pronounced, while Ellen and her mother, though they have a close, loving relationship, are distinct and separate. West makes the Oedipal story (which Freud posited as universal) specific, the result of Richard's illegitimate birth, and the social rejection which focuses all his mother's attention on him and gives him reason to hate his father.

Secondly, the Freudian reading ignores the first half of the novel, which shows Ellen as a suffragette in Edinburgh. Jane Marcus notes the Brontëan nature of West's novel (J Introduction) and I want to consider the parallels with *Wuthering Heights* in terms of structure. This is a move which locates West in a female genealogy and in 'dialogue' with nineteenth-century women's fiction. In both novels a complex, polyphonic narrative, looping backwards and forwards in time and including embedded narratives, is structured by parallel sets of binary oppositions. In *The Judge* these include the opposite sex couples - Harry/Marion, Mrs Melville/Mr Meville, Ellen/Richard, Poppy/Roger, as well as same-sex parallels - Ellen/Marion, Mrs Melville/Marion, Richard/Roger, Harry/Mr Melville, Harry/Richard. Both novels fall into two halves with a 'daughter' reliving/rewriting her mother's story - Cathy and Catherine, Marion and Ellen. Ellen replicates not only Marion's fate but also her own mother's. Hence the novel's epigraph - 'Every mother is a judge who sentences the children for the sins of the father.'

Both novels use two contrasted locations - Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, Scotland and Essex. West uses place as a projection of female psychology. Richard sees the Pentland Hills (echoing Brontë's Yorkshire moorlands) as embodying Ellen's mind: 'Surely this country was not real, but an imagination of Ellen's mind' (J 106). Similarly, Ellen sees the Essex landscape, with its 'shining mud-flats and the vast sky' (J230), 'its own strange scenery [...] its undulations and its fissures' (J 231), as 'curiously like Marion' (J 232).

There are other echoes. The opening of *The Judge* with Ellen gazing out of the window at a rainy Edinburgh echoes Cathy imprisoned in the Heights on a rainy Sunday, while Ellen's name links her to Nelly (Ellen) Dean. Richard is Heathcliff-like in his 'illegitimate' origins and his fortune made in foreign lands, which also recalls Rochester. But his mother-obsession undercuts his status as Byronic romantic hero - Ellen finds it painful to watch him 'dangling after' (J 361) his mother. His work with cordite links him to the armament business and, like Kitty, to the 'will to death' embodied in the coming war.

Placing *The Judge* against *Wuthering Heights* like this allows us to see it as carefully constructed and tragic in the Greek sense. West read *Wuthering Heights* as a 'new myth' in which

the goddess who is the most potent embodiment of good [...] consorts with the embodiments of evil, loving it, for love does not disdain the evil. But evil cannot put an end to good, which has its own title to existence that cannot be invalidated. Miraculously, from the slain goddess there springs a new goddess, who is invulnerable, who cannot be slain but who slays evil without a weapon and releases all its victims from their chains.

(West, 1954, 266)

This female-centred 'myth' underlies *The Judge* and offers a hope for the future which is not immediately obvious in the ending of West's novel.

Situating the novel historically, rather than as a purely psychological or mythical drama, is useful here. Written in 1922, its setting is both pre-war and pre-vote. The 1922 reader would know that the vote Ellen craves will be won in 1918 and this re-enforces the possibility that Ellen as the 'new goddess', a politicised suffragette, can rewrite the impending tragedy. The Oedipal tragedy is neither as universal nor as inevitable as Freud suggests. It is the direct result of the material specificity of Marion's historical position

within a patriarchal society. This political reading also avoids positing either Marion or Ellen as representing an essential feminine psychology.

West gives her story two equal but different female subjects. This readjustment of the Oedipal triangle allows her to explore female subjectivity and rivalry from two sides of the triangle - 'mother' and 'daughter'. Dedicated to West's own mother, who died in 1921, the novel can be read as an attempt to re-establish a broken 'female genealogy'. The separation of Marion and Ellen's stories into the two 'Books' of the novel enacts the separation of mother and daughter within patriarchal society. Read in traditional Freudian terms as the rivalry between 'mother' and 'daughter' over the 'father', Marion's death could be seen as the 'killing' of the mother so that the daughter can attain adult female sexuality. If, as Irigaray suggests, there is only one 'place' for women in this paradigm - the 'place of the mother' - Ellen can only occupy that place once Marion has been 'killed'. The two women, in Freudian theory, cannot co-exist.

But West's use of binary oppositions suggests a more complex reading, through a dramatisation of the ambivalence in the mother-child relationship by splitting it into separate, parallel characters. Marion's love for Richard is paralleled by her hatred for Roger. When both boys have to be punished Marion's pain while she beats Richard, followed by their reconciliation - again an image of fusion as they 'almost melted into each other' (J 301) - is contrasted with her enjoyment in hitting Roger and her horrified realisation that her 'profounder self' (J 303) wants him dead. Not only the Marion-Richard relationship (as Hammond suggests), but the 'forgery of an emotion' (J383) in the Marion-Roger relationship might be based on that between West and Anthony, the latter on West's unconscious negative feelings.

Ellen's comparisons of Mrs Melville and Marion suggest that they are embodiments of the 'good' and 'bad' mother. Mrs Melville is, Ellen thinks, 'how a mother ought to be, little, sweet, and moderate' (J 393) - the ideal, nurturing, self-sacrificing mother, who encourages Ellen's marriage and separation from her. Their primary connection is conveyed through an unspoken dialogue conducted through their linked hands as Mrs Melville is dying:

The mother's flesh, touching the daughter's, remembered a faint pulse felt long ago and marvelled at this splendid sequel, and lost fear. [...] The daughter's flesh, touching the mother's, remembered life in the womb, that loving organ that by night and day does not cease to

embrace its beloved, and was the stronger for tasting again that first  
best draught of love that the spirit has not yet excelled.

(J 185)

Scott suggests that in this scene: 'In keeping with the theory of the semiotic chora advanced by Julia Kristeva, the figure of the mother becomes the basic signifying space for the regenerative cycle' (Scott, 1995, vol. 2, 133).

In contrast, Marion is the powerful phallic mother, who fails to separate from her son and enters into direct sexual competition with her 'daughter-in-law'. Feeling an 'insane regret that being [Richard's] mother she could not also be his wife' (J 256), she recognises the possibility that she might find herself hating Ellen, an 'irrational hatred' which would be 'especially base, a hunchback among the emotions' (J 258). At the same time, she sees Ellen's qualities better than Richard does, grieving when Richard proposes to give Ellen jewels rather than a 'really good dictionary of economic terms' (J 344). Marion's own analysis of the situation is Freudian: '[Richard] cannot love Ellen because he loves me too much! He has nothing left to love her with!' (J 346). The incestuous overtones of the scenes where Richard comforts his sleepless mother by embracing and kissing her in bed convey not a universal desire but the specific inappropriateness of her encouraging him to protect her in his father's place.

Marion's suicide is a self-sacrificing attempt, like those in *The Three Sisters* and *Harriett Frean*, to 'exchange' Richard, handing him over to Ellen, as her final scribblings reveal: 'This is the end. I must die. Give him to Ellen' (J 423). She has already tried to do this by destroying Richard's feelings for her by telling him of her love for his father, and by accepting Ellen as a 'daughter', who 'must suffice instead of the other child' (J 350), the second boy she should have had with Harry. This gesture was also a handing over of Richard to Ellen - 'From now onwards he's yours not mine' (J 353). In contrast to *Sons and Lovers*, where the son kills the mother in order to live, here it is the 'mother' who commits suicide for the 'daughter's' sake.

The ultimate failure of this transaction suggests that women cannot, in this society, carry out such economic activity. The book illustrates Irigaray's thesis that if women are not allowed other forms of exchange 'the commodities women *are forced to exchange would be their children* [...] in exchange for a market status *for themselves*' (1993b, 84, original emphasis). Marion has attempted to use Richard in this way, living vicariously through his triumphs. Similarly, Ellen's mother, abandoned by her husband,



has treated Ellen as the 'man of the house' (J 44). This produces a more complex reading of the epigraph - the mothers both 'sentence' their children for the 'sins of the fathers', because they have no other form of power within the male economy.

My interpretation of this text so far has been along the psychoanalytic lines which the text invites, but a dialogic reading offers a more complex understanding. The achievement of West's novel is that she presents us with *two* fully-realised and sympathetic female consciousnesses - two female voices which engage in a dialogue within the structure of the book, which they never manage in the plot. The reader is presented with two women who are constructed as rivals - the mother-in-law 'joke'. But West's text *forces* the reader to engage with both women and to hold their (equal) claims to our sympathy in some kind of equilibrium. They are not 'rivals' for the place of heroine in the novel but equal subjects.

The motif of conversation between women is important here but, again, it is what is 'not-said' which is crucial. Richard's 'shadow' always 'fractures' the discourse between Ellen and Marion, especially during their first meeting from which he is strangely absent. Ellen hints at their failure to engage as equal subjects rather than as 'Richard's mother' and 'Richard's wife', when she comments: 'We're awful reactionary, letting our whole lives revolve around a man' (J 238). But 'their common love for Richard' (J 256) does not bring intimacy, partly because Marion's suffering as an unmarried mother has made her 'evasive' (J 213). Marion thinks through the similarities and differences between her and Ellen:

I can see that you, my dear, are going to break the spell that, so much against my will, I've thrown over my son.[...] You have all the qualities that he loves in me, but they are put together in such a different mode from mine that *there cannot possibly be any question of competition between us.*

(J 215, my emphasis)

But the important point is that Marion never *speaks* this to Ellen, and so fails to neutralise the possibility of competition. This silence contrasts with the loving dialogue carried out through touch between Ellen and Mrs Melville.

Intimidated by the older woman's silence, Ellen sees Marion as an 'economic parasite' (J 209), but her youthfully naive endorsement of suffragette theory is problematised by Marion, who is not, as Richard bitterly remarks '*the* unmarried mother [but] my mother, who was not married to my father' (J 177, original emphasis).

Although gentle fun is poked at Ellen's enthusiastic suffragism, the text endorses her values, while retaining sympathy for Marion.

This tension is symbolised in the way Marion and Ellen 'mirror' each other. In one scene Marion watches Ellen's mirrored face while she is brushing Ellen's hair, and connects Ellen's vulnerability while selling of *Votes for Women* in the streets, to the public stoning she herself underwent. In their final encounter, just before Marion commits suicide, Ellen looking through a glass door into the night, suddenly finds herself looking 'through the glass into Marion's eyes' (J 399). It is the memory of this reflected look which brings her final understanding of Marion's suicide and inspires her final 'passion for Marion' (J 424).

*The Judge* is dialogic in that it offers two narrative voices, two different view points, which are reconciled not in the plot but in the mind of the reader. This is, I think, why West presents us with Ellen's story first, out of the chronological sequence. Our sympathies are thus engaged by her before we shift to Marion's story, which might otherwise overshadow Ellen's. Scott notes that her students regularly 'resist' this striking narrative shift, being 'at this point committed to Ellen Melville' (Scott, 1995, vol. 2, 134). The duality which structures the novel becomes in Irigaray's terms an attempt to think the difference between women. Like 'When Our Lips Speak Together' the text does this by setting up a dialogue within 'Sameness', and eschewing male models of subjectivity where 'the other [is] the image of the one. Only an image' (Irigaray, 1985, 207). Only when the structure of the novel is taken into consideration is this fully apparent.

West offers the possibility that through this exploration of the difference between women we can move beyond male-female dualities, the grinding together of male and female faults which make such 'bitter bread' (J 429). The hope of the text lies in the possibility that Ellen is the 'new goddess' who can move beyond these damaging binaries. This is expressed in the landscape itself, the mud of the estuary where the child will be conceived is 'neither earth nor water [...] neither land nor sea' (J 231), but the 'primeval ooze from which life first stirred' (J 232). The hut in which the conception will take place 're-creates a Christian manger scene' (Scott, 1995, vol. 2, 138), another indication that Ellen may achieve her 'victory' (J 430).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A 'SHARED WORKING EXISTENCE' : VERA BRITTAİN AND WINIFRED HOLTBY

The friendship between Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain offers an example, not so much of a rare friendship between women, but of one which has been unusually fully documented. Part of a new generation of professional, university-educated writers, their sixteen-year long friendship was based on the fact that each encouraged and enabled the other's work. Meeting at Somerville College, Oxford, they shared a flat while they established themselves as writers in London, and then, after Brittain's marriage to George Gordon Catlin, the three shared a house in an unconventional, triangular *ménage à trois* until Holtby's death.

As Jean Kennard says in *Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby: A Working Partnership*, their writing can be read as 'an ongoing dialogue' (1989, 17), where both rewrite the other's texts. Kennard takes Chodorow's theorisation of mother-daughter relationships and Abel's definition of friendship as a 'vehicle of self-definition' (1981, 416) as starting points in order to argue that 'The friend as a second self provides a way of separating from the mother without rejecting the female self-image she represented, for the friend is after all a similar image' (1989, 15). The phrase 'second self' echoes Brittain's assurances to Holtby that: 'Gordon will never be *quite* the same; never quite my second self in exactly the same and dependable way' (quoted in Kennard, 1989, xiv, original emphasis). The aim of their dialogue, Kennard argues, is 'to resolve differences because what is valued is thinking alike; strength is drawn from the image of sameness. They both empower and rewrite each other in an attempt to reach consensus' (1989, 17). That consensus, Kennard suggests, was reached through the reconciliation with the 'mother' in Holtby's final novel, *South Riding* (1936), and Brittain's *Honourable Estate* (1936).

I want to offer a rather different and less idealised interpretation of the relationship by reading their intertextual dialogue as a *competitive* dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. While this retains the notion of reciprocity, it allows for the constantly shifting power dynamics between the two women, as well as attempts to silence the other. I want to look especially at the struggle over the meaning of their friendship, and female friendship generally, in their texts. That struggle is clearest in *Testament of*

*Friendship* (1940), Brittain's biography of Holtby. Published after Holtby's death, it is the text in which Brittain takes final control of the representation of the relationship. Kennard does not, surprisingly, offer a reading of this problematic text in her study.

Brittain's phrase 'second self' needs closer interrogation. 'Second', as de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* indicates, implies a *secondary* placing - something which is lesser, additional or inferior in importance or rank to the first. A copy rather than an original. That rivalry can also be a 'vehicle of self-definition' is reflected in Brittain's concern to establish, rather than resolve, difference between herself and Holtby by presenting Holtby as 'second' in the sense of lesser/inferior. This is especially obvious in the contrast between Brittain's status as a married woman and Holtby's as a spinster, a difference which was especially divisive during this period.

Rather than reading their relationship as a linear development towards a point of consensus I want to consider it as an ongoing process of interaction in which the self is continually reconstructed through a dialogue with the other. Whereas Kennard depends on a mother-daughter model of female friendship, I want to look at how Brittain and Holtby make use of a range of different discourses and positions - not only mother and daughter, or sisters, but also opposite-sex models, especially brother and sister.

This indicates in part the lack of a language within which to think about female friendship. But it also suggests the lack of a language within which to think about rivalry between women - unless that rivalry is over a man. The romance plot which has so dominated women's fiction also shapes textual representations of women's rivalry. Reading Brittain's fiction against her non-fiction texts reveals how, in the process of transmuting fact into fiction, academic and professional rivalry between the two women is transformed, through the use of the triangle rivals plot, into romantic rivalry. The romance plot shapes not only Brittain's fiction but her autobiography and even her biography of Holtby. Holtby's fiction, in contrast, is concerned to overturn the triangle plot by killing off the man and re-establishing connections between women.

As the relationship between Brittain and Holtby shows, rivalry and friendship are not mutually exclusive, they can co-exist in the same relationship, and within the same linguistic exchange. Moreover, their professional rivalry had a beneficial effect, since it spurred each on to greater achievement. It can, ironically, be seen as a part of their enabling of each other's work. However, Brittain erases this rivalry in *Testament of*

*Friendship*. A further erasure has taken place in feminist commentary on the relationship, which has become something of a icon of ideal female friendship. The jacket blurb for the Virago reprint of *Testament of Friendship* iconises it as 'a perfect friendship', while Muriel Mellown calls the book a 'glowing tribute to Holtby' (1983, 327). Carolyn Heilbrun cites *Testament of Friendship* an 'ideal, rare counterexample' (1989, 99) of female friendship based on shared work in the public sphere, which offers an alternative to the romance plot in the project of 'writing a woman's life'.

The political need to valorise female friendships and to dispute what Brittain called the 'fiction of women's jealous inability to love and respect one another' (TF 118) has led to an idealisation, indeed, a sentimentalisation, of the friendship which obscures its actual complexity. Brittain was, as the much-quoted prologue to *Testament of Friendship* indicates, aware of the political importance of friendships between women, and presented the friendship as exemplary:

From the days of Homer the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women, in spite of Ruth and Naomi, have usually been not merely unsung but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted. I hope that Winifred's story may do something to destroy these tarnished interpretations, and show its readers that loyalty and affection between women is a noble relationship which, far from impoverishing, actually enhances the love of a girl for her lover, of a wife for her husband, of a mother for her children.

(TF 2)

In *Testament of Friendship* and in her editing of the published correspondence (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960), Brittain, as Marion Shaw has shown, smoothes away the stresses of the relationship and obscures the fact that it was 'intense, hungry and anxious in ways that Brittain did not want, or could not bring herself, to acknowledge' (Shaw, n.d., 38).

One of the stresses in the relationship is what Brittain refers to as the possibility of it being 'falsely interpreted', that is, as a lesbian relationship. To avoid this she carefully positions female friendship within the context of heterosexuality. It *enhances* heterosexual love - it is not an alternative. Even the example she gives, that of Ruth and Naomi, is one which is socially sanctioned because it is mediated by the man to whom they are mother and wife. Brittain returns to the theme later:

Other sceptics are roused by any record of affection between women to suspicions habitual among the over-sophisticated.

‘Too, too Chelsea!’ Winifred would comment amiably in after years when some zealous friend related the newest legend current about us in the neighbourhood.

(TF 118, original emphasis)

This defends female friendship while distancing it from anything sexual. Paul Berry quotes a note Brittain pencilled when she was dying which again makes a careful distinction between heterosexual and homosocial love: ‘I loved Winifred but I was not in love with her’ (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 13).

Brittain’s defensiveness is understandable in the context of the inter-war years when, as I have argued, the continuum between homosocial and homosexual was being radically disrupted, especially following the 1921 attempt to make lesbianism illegal and the 1928 trial of *The Well of Loneliness*. Indeed, it is precisely Brittain’s careful distinction between ‘friendship’ and what is represented by a silence in the text (the word ‘lesbian’ is noticeably ‘not said’), which offers the most telling evidence of this disruption and of the anxieties it caused. Brittain had reviewed *The Well of Loneliness* on its first appearance, ‘critically, but on the whole favourably’ (Brittain, 1968, 10), and like Virginia Woolf, was a potential witness at the trial. Her book *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (1968) is a clear summary of the issues, but it has the tone of an outsider, sympathetic and tolerant towards ‘the biologically abnormal woman’ (Brittain, 1968, 48), but not intimately engaged.

Despite Brittain’s denials (or because of them), the relationship has been the subject of speculation ever since. It has become a contested site, the subject of a kind of rivalry between those who claim it as an ideal heterosexual friendship, and those who see it as a repressed or camouflaged lesbian relationship. Rosalind Delmar in her Afterword to *Testament of Friendship* comes down squarely behind Brittain, remarking on the ‘tenacity’ with which such friendships are ‘attributed to hidden lesbianism’ (TF 446). Likewise Paul Berry refers to the lesbian ‘myth’ and writes that ‘to understand fully the friendship between Vera and Winifred it is nonetheless necessary to understand that it was not a lesbian one’ (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 13). On the other hand, Lillian Faderman asks what contemporary reader, faced with the evidence, could ‘not conclude that the two women had a lesbian relationship?’ (1985, 310). More cautiously, Pam Johnson suggests that is it tempting to see *Testament of Friendship*, despite the lack of

evidence of an erotic physical relationship, as 'a clever cover-up of a long-term lesbian relationship' (1989, 156).

The definition of 'lesbian' is itself, however, a contested site. Adrienne Rich's concept of the 'lesbian continuum' (1980) suggests that 'lesbianism' can include relationships which depend on primary emotional intensity rather than physical contact. In this sense Kennard concludes that: 'It is impossible to deny that the partnership between Holtby and Brittain was one of primary intensity, *whether or not one is willing to call it lesbian*' (1989, 8, my emphasis). The point, surely, is that Brittain herself was strongly antagonistic to the word 'lesbian'.

As Brittain's struggle to fix the meaning of the relationship indicates the anxieties of the historical period she was writing in, so the contemporary debate tells us as much about our own needs and anxieties as it does about Brittain's or Holtby's. While the need to reclaim their relationship as lesbian indicates the political need for such relationships to be made visible as a part of a suppressed women's history, the insistence on its impeccable heterosexuality indicates the strength of the taboos which are still in force. However, the insistence on either label can ultimately obscure the emotional complexity of their relationship, and in both cases lead to an elision of its rivalry.

Both writers made extensive use of their own experience in their writing. Indeed, Brittain's reputation rests on her autobiographical *Testament of Youth* (1933), a best-seller which epitomises the myth of the 'lost generation'. What I am interested in here is not a straight biographical reading of their fiction but the disjunctions between the texts, especially those which indicate the strains when biographical material is transmuted into fiction.

The two women, who met in 1919 at Somerville where they shared a history tutorial, did not, Brittain admits, 'to begin with, like each other at all' (TF 92). Both were returning to Oxford after war service and both wanted to be writers. While Brittain, the daughter of a Staffordshire paper-manufacturer, had had to struggle to persuade her parents to let her go to university, Holtby, four years younger and the daughter of a farming family in Yorkshire, wrote that: 'I am one of the very few women I know who went to Oxford because my mother wished it' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 273). Alice Holtby was a strong-willed matriarch who became the first woman alderman in the East Riding, while Edith Brittain was a conventional woman who admitted to the young

Brittain that she 'would much rather have an ordinary daughter - living and sleeping and dying and leaving no impress behind!' (Brittain, 1981, 51).

Brittain's war experience had been one of devastating personal losses - the deaths of her fiancé, Roland Leighton, her brother, Edward, and their two close friends, Victor and Geoffrey. When she returned to Oxford she was close to a nervous breakdown. In contrast, Holtby's time as a WAAC in France was a time of gain when she became friends with Jean McWilliam. While Brittain saw herself as irretrievably damaged by her war experience, Holtby saw herself as one who owed a 'debt to life' (TF 113).

After graduating they shared a flat in London while they combined teaching, and lecturing for the League of Nations Union, with journalism for a range of papers and journals, including *Time and Tide* (of which Holtby became a director), and attempted to establish themselves as novelists. Holtby was the first to publish her first novel, *Anderby Wold* (1923), which was followed by Brittain's *The Dark Tide* (1923), and then by Holtby's second novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924). This 'shared working existence' (TF 101) was disrupted when Brittain married and went to America with her husband, but re-established when she returned to England after a year, having failed to establish a career over there. Brittain and Catlin embarked on what she called a 'semi-detached marriage', where Brittain lived in London with Holtby, and later her children, John and Shirley, and Catlin spent half of each year with them and half in America. This continued until Holtby died of Bright's disease in 1935 at the tragically early age of 37.

In the version of Holtby's life presented by Brittain in *Testament of Friendship*, Holtby's spinsterhood was not chosen but was the result of the failure of her relationship with Harry Pearson. Pearson, according to Brittain, was 'deeply, irretrievably wounded' (TF 54) when the eighteen-year-old Holtby tactlessly rejected his proffered love poems, and treated her with a 'casual indifference' (54) thereafter. After the war Pearson failed to settle to a job and flitted in and out of Holtby's life, often accepting her help, but only proposing marriage when she was dying, an incident to which I will return in the next chapter.

There is no doubt that Brittain and Holtby enabled each other as writers. Holtby attributed her feminism to Brittain, writing in the copy of *Women* she gave to Brittain: 'For Vera, who taught me to be a feminist' (TF 133). Some of her last words to Brittain were: 'remember that I love you dearly... I'm intensely grateful to you - you're the



person who's made me' (Brittain, 1986, 210). Brittain also saw their friendship as crucial to her own work and *Testament of Friendship* was her tribute to 'the best friend whom life has given me' (TF 4). In a 1926 unpublished letter to Holtby she wrote: 'You are more necessary to me than [Catlin] is, because you further my work' (quoted in Kennard, 1989, 8).

But this enabling was the product of an ongoing process of negotiation over the roles and boundaries in the relationship. Brittain, four years older than Holtby, initially saw herself as the leader. The publication of Holtby's *Anderby Wold* involved extensive renegotiation. Brittain's competitiveness can be traced back to her relationship with her younger brother, Edward. While Fisher and McConville argue that sister relationships are often repeated or mirrored in other relationships, here it is a brother-sister relationship which is mirrored in a later female friendship.

The intersection of the different economies of birth order and gender is very clear in Brittain's relationship with Edward. Although it is suppressed in *Testament of Youth* where Edward is idealised, Brittain's diary records a sibling rivalry co-existing with her obvious regard and love for her brother. She had a strong sense of her intellectual superiority to Edward and records a revealing conversation with her father:

I asked if it were not equally important that I should have a career. He answered very decidedly 'No, Edward was the one who must be given an occupation and the means to provide for himself.' The secondary sex again! It made me very angry that I, the more intellectual of the two, should be regarded in this light because I happen not to be a man. But I will show them.

(Brittain, 1981, 287)

This frustration at being the 'secondary sex' was at the root of Brittain's feminism.

Hilary Bailey, in her biography of Brittain, argues that: 'An intelligent child who sees her little brother taken more seriously than she is but who knows that in the real business of life she is his superior [...] may well become very ambitious' (1987, 11). Certainly this seems to have been true in Brittain's case.

The sibling model offers one alternative to Kennard's mother-daughter model. Brittain not only treated Holtby as a younger sibling, but actively identified her with Edward, writing that Holtby represented in her life 'the same element of tender, undistressing permanence that Edward represented' (TY 658). Sadly, neither offered 'permanence'. Brittain writes that Holtby 'identified herself so closely in imagination

with Edward and Roland that they almost seemed to be her dead as well as my own' (TY 521). She records Holtby listening to a concerto which Edward had often performed when 'the words "I am his deputy" came into her head' (TF 312). Holtby included these words in a poem addressed to Edward, which articulates a sense of the non-combatant's inadequacy in terms of her inability to 'hear as well as other men', as well as in a sense of her trespassing on 'loveliness [which] was never planned for me' (TF 313). This cross-gender identification with Edward seems to re-enforce her sense of her own inadequacy - she can only be a 'deputy', never fully take his place. However, it seems to have allowed her to take a male role in relation to Brittain which was protective and companionable but not sexually threatening.

This identification is also significant in light of the fact that Brittain identified more with Edward and his friends than with other women. Her first diary entry records her gratification at always having male partners at a dance where there 'were too many girls' (1981, 26). Later she writes:

I suppose it will be my lot to see Edward and his friends, who are as much or more to me than my own (as I really can't stand girls) going off to university, while I, having failed my exam, am left here once more to toil on drearily alone.

(1981, 81)

Yet she also passionately desired a female friend. Anticipating university, she writes: 'Surely now [...] I may begin to *live* and to find at least *one* human creature among my own sex whose spirit can have intercourse with mine' (1981, 16, original emphasis). It is striking, especially in view of its use in the nineteenth century, that she uses a sister metaphor for her relations with Holtby in only one letter:

The only person who could possibly have meant the same to me would have been a sister whom I loved as I loved Edward. As for a daughter, it would take at least 25 years from now before I could be as fond of her as I am of you!

(Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 74)

She does, however, favour a sibling rather than mother-daughter model here. Holtby's own experience of biological sisterhood with her elder sister, Grace, was problematic. Although more intellectually gifted, and possibly her mother's favourite, Holtby was always cast as the plain one in comparison to her pretty sister, whose 'real objective in life was marriage and a family' (TF 99). This was re-enforced by their childhood recitation of a poem which ended 'One is for use, the other for show' during which

Holtby always had to take the role of the one for 'use' (White, 1938, 29). When Grace was dying, Holtby recorded that, 'ironically true to our relationship, I irritated her even by going into the room, and her last words to me were [...] "Don't stare. You make me tired"' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 168). The friendship, then, repeats two established sibling patterns - Brittain's rivalry with Edward, and Holtby's positioning as the plain one in contrast to Grace.

The Brittain and Holtby dialogue offers a valuable record of how their academic and professional rivalry was negotiated within the friendship. The damaging nature of competition between academic women today has been explored by Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen Moglen (1987). They suggest problems frequently arise from the perceived necessity for avoiding competition as threatening sisterly bonding (1987, 507), and from the attempt to use mother-daughter or sister models of female relations which are inappropriate in a professional context (510). The problem seems to be that women have no scripts for the negotiation of rivalry in a professional (rather than romantic) context, and this is evident in the Holtby-Brittain relationship.

In *Testament of Youth* Brittain recorded her feelings of jealousy when Holtby's *Anderby Wold* was published, phrased in the tones of an elder sibling overtaken by her junior:

To me [...] this event was something of a psychological crisis; Winifred was considerably my junior, at Oxford she had followed modestly in my wake, and it had simply never occurred to me that her work could be preferred and published before my own.

(TY 597)

Kennard sees it as 'characteristic of the dynamics of their partnership' that Brittain, after this initial reaction, should move 'almost immediately to a reconciliation' and write a 'generous and celebratory letter' (1989, 30). In fact, I think that this incident involved an almost total restructuring of the dynamics of their relationship.

Previously it had been Brittain offering advice, introducing Holtby to useful publishing contacts and so on. Now the power balance in the relationship had changed, as Brittain noted in a comment omitted here but included in the *Selected Letters*: 'Almost I think of you as if you were a stranger; we are not equals any more' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 20). A few months later Brittain was still trying to renegotiate their relationship, writing to Holtby in rather aggressively bitter tones:

As Vera Brittain, lecturer and speaker for the League of Nations, etc  
 [...] I feel quite able to hold my own with Winifred Holtby - and to tell  
 you the honest truth, I don't care a damn if I can't; I don't really care  
 for anything but writing, and making up my mind to stop  
 doing it would never prevent me from going on...

(TY 598)

Their relationship is constructed as a competition in which Brittain must 'hold her own', which she can only do by shifting the parameters of the competition to include lecturing. Significantly, it is not her affection for Holtby that enables her to say that she doesn't care a 'damn' but her own determined ambition.

These letters contrast with Holtby's generous reply to Brittain's first letter, which attempts to neutralise the competition by reasserting Brittain's superior position: 'You are perfectly right in saying that we are not equals. We never were and never will be. I have always known how much keener and clearer and finer your mind is than mine' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 20). While Holtby's generosity undoubtedly played a huge part in the renegotiations, Brittain obviously worked hard at overcoming her insecurities.

Brittain's sense of superiority also led to attempts to direct Holtby's writing, recalled by Holtby in a 1925 unpublished letter to Catlin:

When I first saw Vera she tried to do to me what you try to do to her. Knowing my very great faults as a writer, she tried to cure them by analysing and criticising my ideas before they became books; by suggesting how and what and why I should write. It really drove me crazy until I had to set a complete taboo upon her discussion of my work save after it was done.

(quoted in Kennard, 1989, 12)

This struggle for textual control is rather different from the idealised image of their relationship as a supportive dialogue. Brittain's attempts to shape Holtby's writing are attempts to make Holtby into her 'second self' in the sense of a lesser copy of Brittain herself. It is in the context of this competitive struggle for control of representation that I want to read the dialogue between Brittain's *The Dark Tide* and Holtby's *The Crowded Street*, both of which use a triangle plot which positions women as rivals over a man.

### ***The Dark Tide* (1923)**

Brittain started planning *The Dark Tide* during her unhappy 1919 autumn term at Oxford, while the 'middle chapters' of the book were drafted in 1921 (TY 536), after the

friendship with Holtby, which began in the Easter term of 1920, had become well established. In 1920 Brittain came close to a nervous breakdown:

no one, least of all myself, realised how near I had drifted to the borderland of craziness. I was ashamed, to the point of agony, of the sinister transformation which seemed, every time I looked in the glass, to be impending in my face, and I could not bring myself to mention it even to Winifred, who would probably have dispelled the illusion by the sane reassurance that I was neither developing a beard nor turning into a witch.

(TY 496-97)

The five large mirrors in her room became an especial torment: 'I pressed my hands desperately against my eyes lest five identical witches' faces should suddenly stare at me from the cold, remorseless mirrors' (TY 500).

To someone as conscious as Brittain of her own 'chocolate-box prettiness' (TY 211) this fear of mirrors is particularly significant. The key factor seems to be the loss of her sense of identity as an attractive, marriageable woman, which triggers the fear that she is becoming either a man or a witch. Brittain's brief, abortive engagement during this time is mentioned in passing as an illustration of the 'follies' 'some of us' were driven into by the 'biological needs of that tense, turbulent year' (TY 499). It seems to have been Holtby's support which enabled her to end it. The following day Brittain wrote the bitter poem 'The Superfluous Woman', which asks 'But who will give me my children?' (TY 534). Brittain was trying to rebuild her sense of self in the light of the fact that she had, she believed at this point, lost forever the chance of marriage and children.

Holtby's 'eager and patient understanding' (TY 500) was largely responsible for Brittain's recovery. Holtby offered a (single) mirror in which Brittain could see herself reflected as a whole and attractive person. Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that, in contrast to the less 'feminine' Holtby, Brittain could see herself as small, elegant and attractive. As Brittain acknowledges, the building of their friendship was Holtby's achievement not Brittain's. Yet Brittain desired Holtby's friendship with, she writes, the 'starving need of an individual whose earlier loves had been prematurely and violently shattered' (TF 119).

*The Dark Tide* has to be read with an awareness of the nature of this identity crisis, and her resentment of her own emotional dependence on Holtby. Yet on the surface *The Dark Tide* contains none of this need. Instead, it gives us a cruel caricature of Holtby as the gauche, naive Daphne Lethbridge. Physically, the two main characters

resemble Holtby and Brittain. Daphne, like Holtby, is tall, golden-haired, blue-eyed, and favours clothes in clashing primary colours. Virginia Dennison, like Vera, is small, dark and pretty, and immaculately dressed, usually in black or blue.

The first sections of *The Dark Tide* are a barely fictionalised account of Brittain's and Holtby's meeting at Oxford, which appears in both *Testament of Youth* and *Testament of Friendship*, but with interesting differences in presentation. In the novel they are told, as is most of the novel, from Daphne's point of view. Daphne's competitive nature causes her immediate envy of Patricia O'Neill, the history don, and then Virginia, presented by Patricia as a possible friend because of their shared war experience but whom Daphne sees as a 'possible rival' (DT 25) because of her foreign service and authorship of a satiric novel.

Their first meeting is, as Holtby and Brittain's was, in their history tutorial, where Virginia has (like Brittain) done all the preliminary reading, while Daphne (like Holtby) has done none. Brittain sets up a physical contrast between the two women, which is inflected by class difference. Virginia, 'small and dark-eyed and pale' (DT 31), makes Daphne feel 'so clumsy and so common' (DT 32), like a 'vulgar barmaid in her Sunday best' (DT 32). Daphne tries to reassert her own superiority by reminding herself that Virginia's father was 'only "Dennison's China"' (DT 32). The two women are also contrasted in terms of academic ability. Virginia produces 'monotonously excellent' (DT 42) essays, while Daphne is told that her style is 'laborious, her sentences involved, her subject matter confused, and her spelling abominable' (DT 42) - comments which were made about Holtby's work.

Kennard argues that in *The Dark Tide* Brittain redresses the power balance between herself and Holtby by rewriting it to 'give all the maturity and control to Virginia Dennison, the character most resembling Brittain' (1989, 45). To Daphne 'Brittain has ascribed the vices she purged from Virginia, her own mean-spiritedness [...] and competitiveness' (1989, 46). Brittain also gives Daphne Brittain's own desire for heterosexual success and class insecurity.

Despite their physical appearances the two characters both represent sides of Brittain herself. Virginia is a wish fulfilment portrait of Brittain, while Daphne is Brittain as she feared she might be. This is particularly evident when the early scenes from *The Dark Tide* are compared with Brittain's other accounts. In *Testament of Youth* the

emphasis is on Brittain's post-war loneliness and isolation. Told that Holtby's war experience will form a link with Brittain's, Brittain, like Daphne, is 'Quite sure that it would not' and feels 'unaccountably antagonistic' (TY 486). Her first impressions of Holtby are of 'youth and energy' (TY 487): 'Superbly tall and vigorous as the young Diana with her long straight limbs and her golden hair, her vitality smote with the effect of a blow upon my jaded nerves' (TY 487). Brittain is the one who feels old, insecure and envious here - and then 'triumphant' (TY 487) because her essays are preferred to Holtby's.

In *Testament of Friendship* Brittain shifts the emphasis to foreground 'the unique bond of our war service' (TF 84), presenting it as a link not a cause for rivalry. The reader already knows that the two women will become friends so when Brittain writes 'We did not, to begin with, like each other at all' (TF 92) the statement has already moved forward to their later liking. The emphasis is on Holtby's 'splendid height and majestic proportions', which Brittain compares to a 'radiant goddess' (TF 92). Her clashing clothes 'exaggerate both her impressive size and her glowing animation' (TF 93), rather than connoting class difference as they do in the novel. It is the 'contrast' between Holtby's 'gay stimulating popularity' and Brittain's 'isolated depression' which, Brittain writes, 'provoked me to barely concealed hostility' (TF 93). Again, it is Brittain who is insecure, isolated, competitive - and seeking the reader's sympathy.

The second incident drawn from life is the debate which Daphne sets up 'to persuade Virginia Dennison to make a fool of herself' (DT 43), based on one organised by Holtby. Virginia, as Brittain had done, argues that 'a life of travel is a better education than a life of academic experience' (DT 44). Daphne turns the debate into a personal attack and concludes, as Holtby had done, with Rosalind's words from *As You Like It*, 'I had rather have a fool to make me merry than experience to make me sad; and to travel for it too!' (DT 48).

The account of the debate in *Testament of Youth* is prefaced by the comment that Brittain has 'already given a substantially correct version' (TY 488) in *The Dark Tide*, thus endorsing that version. Brittain softens this by presenting it as an example of 'the many possibilities of acute misunderstanding which embittered the relations of the War generation and its immediate juniors' (TY 488). It was 'rooted in the fundamental antagonism' between 'those who suffered deeply from the war' and those who 'escaped

its most violent impacts' (TY 489). Holtby's part in the debate is described as 'witty' and 'trenchant' (TY 489) - a backward view informed by Holtby's later success as a lecturer. Perhaps most telling is Britain's comment that 'For years I believed that [the debate] had been deliberately planned with a view to my humiliation' (TY 488).

The oddest thing about these statements is that, though Britain held Holtby as the secretary of the Debating Society 'technically, if not actually responsible' (TY 491) for the debate, she implies that she has still never asked Holtby, now her closest friend, to explain. Even writing *Testament of Youth* in 1933 she only remarks that 'it seems to me *far more probable* that the whole situation developed spontaneously and unintentionally' (TY 488-89, my emphasis) - implying she has still not discussed it with Holtby. Finally, she positions herself and Holtby on opposite sides of the 'antagonism' between those who have suffered in the war and those who have not - despite arguing that their war experience drew them together. In *Testament of Friendship* the debate is treated even more briefly, merely noted as being 'at Winifred's instigation' (TF 93).

This textual manoeuvring seems to me to be typical of much of Britain's writing about their relationship, which continually positions Holtby as the same but lesser, and textually silences her. Although we get three versions from Britain, the only hint she gives of Holtby's side is in *Testament of Youth* where Britain records Holtby telling her 'long afterwards' that their history tutor "'put her off"' (TY 487) because he looked like a colonel and she expected him to treat her as a WAAC - 'who weren't supposed to be ladies' (TY 487). Britain follows this up by quoting Holtby's good-humoured 'boast' that as a Yorkshire farmer's daughter she had the advantage as a journalist over Britain, who as 'a descendant of the Staffordshire *bourgeoisie*, was merely "genteel"' (TY 487). The class antagonism between Daphne and Virginia has its roots in this bantering, both of which are examples of the discriminations which produce middle-class identity.

In fact, Holtby did put her own side in a 1933 letter to Britain while Britain was writing *Testament of Youth*, explaining that she had thought of the debate as a "'rag" - [...] to rub off what seemed to me something of your superiority towards all my fellow-students who had not been to the War' (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 147-48). She also added that she had seen war experience as such a 'fortunate privilege' that she thought any 'superiority based upon it an intolerable form of snobbery, until I heard your story' (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 148). This appears in neither *Testament*.



*The Dark Tide* is the drama of Brittain's two selves (one having borrowed Holtby's appearance) rather than of her interaction with Holtby as 'other'. Daphne represents Brittain's insecurities about her academic ability, her class background, her popularity, her dependence on male admiration to ratify her identity - and her rivalry with Holtby. While the later texts smooth over these 'misunderstandings', foregrounding the similarity of shared experience, *The Dark Tide* is evidence of its initial bitterness.

In all three texts the central rivalry between the two women is over their academic work, but in the *Dark Tide* Brittain re-writes this academic rivalry as romantic rivalry over Sylvester, the rather unrealistic don with whom Daphne falls in love and who marries her after Virginia has refused him. Traditionally, of course, rivalry between women has been seen in terms of their competition on the marriage market. Academic rivalry between women was a new area both in life and fiction. Although it was not the first (L.T. Meade's college novels were published in the 1890s), Brittain's novel was one of the earliest novels of women's university life, preceding Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*. It is perhaps not surprising Brittain fell back on romance rivalry to provide a narrative structure for the novel.

Susan Leonardi has drawn attention to the way that Brittain's fiction 'repeats and reinforces the romance plot' (1989, 225). *The Dark Tide* articulates her ambivalence towards it, allowing her on one level doubly to reject it for herself, both through Virginia's refusal of Sylvester and her decision to devote herself to altruistic work as a nurse, and through the disaster of Daphne's marriage. After an affair with an opera singer who reminds him of Virginia, Sylvester has a violent quarrel with the pregnant Daphne, and abandons her to premature labour and a crippled child. Through Daphne, Brittain 'punished that part of herself still bound by conventional ideas of a woman's role' (Kennard, 1989, 49). She also rejected the values of her own conventional mother through her portrait of Daphne's mother.

The text articulates the contemporaneous anxieties around the figure of the educated woman. Daphne believes that Sylvester has chosen her because of her difference from Virginia, specifically because she is more 'feminine'. People like Virginia may be good at examinations, he tells Daphne, but 'they were not the sort of women that men wanted to live with' (DT 150). This is the opposition between the educated woman and the 'womanly' woman which underlies *The Constant Nymph*. Ironically, as the

reader knows, Virginia was exactly the woman Sylvester wanted to live with. There is a clear disjunction between the romance clichés within which Daphne tries to interpret Sylvester's behaviour as a romantic lover, and his real motivation. Daphne is, in fact, frightened of Sylvester - his 'passion [...] almost terrified her' (DT 159) on their wedding night - a fear she suppresses.

The text attempts to expose as an illusion Daphne's belief that she is to be privy to 'the great elemental secrets of love and marriage and birth' (DT 152) but ends up endorsing it, through Virginia's words: 'why does this one thing make all one's work and all one's achievement seem dust and ashes, however much worth while it really is?' (DT 204). Brittain does hint at the possibility of combining marriage and career through Patricia's marriage to Stephanoff, and it is this possibility which Brittain returns to in her later fiction and her own life.

Despite Brittain's attempts to debunk the romance plot, the thrust of the text is that heterosexual marriage is the most fulfilling option for a woman. Ouditt's suggestion that in post-war novels romance 'was undermined by the absence of its primary structuring force - the right man' (1994, 116) is the key to *The Dark Tide* - the 'right man' is missing. Brittain's work, like Rosamond Lehmann's, is haunted by the absence of the 'right man'. For Virginia, who still treasures the last letter from her dead fiancé, the 'right man' is dead, while Daphne makes a mis-identification. When the 'right man' does appear - for Patricia - the risk of marriage is worth taking.

The alternative is an almost Victorian ethos of self-sacrifice which is far bleaker than anything explored by Sinclair, since Virginia even renounces an intellectual career. Both Virginia and Patricia endorse a similar self-sacrifice by Daphne when she decides not to ruin her husband's political career by divorcing him. Virginia even encourages Daphne to write in the same spirit. The novel's ending 'reads most easily as a glorification of female self-sacrifice justified in Christian terms' (Kennard, 1989, 52). Neither Daphne nor Virginia has work they enjoy for its own sake - Virginia sublimates her academic desires into her nursing, while Daphne's life centres around her crippled son. Kennard argues that this ending reflects the fact that 'Brittain cannot allow herself [...] complete separation from the traditional view of good womanhood her mother taught her' (1989, 53). But it also reflects a desperate attempt to come to terms with the

fact that, as a 'superfluous woman', Brittain felt she no longer had any choice but to sublimate her energies.

There is, however, a second reason for Brittain's use of the romance plot in this novel. If we read it as an attempt to rectify the power balance between Holtby and Brittain, then shifting the rivalry from the academic sphere to the romantic sphere fulfils this function. Both Brittain and Holtby got Second Class degrees - but it was Holtby who nearly got a First (TY 516). In the novel, Brittain shifts the academic balance to give Virginia a First, while Daphne gets a Third.

The one area where Brittain seems to have been sure of her superiority over Holtby was that of heterosexual attractiveness. Brittain was the one whose fiancé had been killed (and who eventually married). Yet it was also her sense of herself as attractive which was most threatened by her breakdown. By rewriting her rivalry with Holtby as romantic rivalry, Brittain reasserted her sense of her own superior identity through a contrast with Holtby's lesser attractions.

Daphne's appearance (which resembles photographs of Holtby) with the 'slightly masculine element' in her nose and 'strongly moulded chin' (DT 23) and her 'long legs and large, clumsy hands' (DT 24), is described in masculine terms. Daphne is patently not a success with men, while Virginia claims not to like dances but finds them satisfying because 'she was always such a success' (DT 95), echoing Brittain's own feelings. Sylvester's comparison of the two women during the wedding is also significant:

Virginia would have come to him all in white, filmy, soft, delicate, nothing solid about her [...] How Daphne's aggressive gold train caught the sunlight, and seemed to divert it from her face just when he needed her to look her very best!

(DT 154-55)

Reversing Kennedy's schematisation in *The Constant Nymph*, here it is Virginia, despite her 'man's brain' (DT 89), who is truly womanly. Daphne fails both academically and as a woman. The text sets Virginia up as Sylvester's real choice, and therefore superior to Daphne, in a way which is uncomfortably reminiscent of the sense of superiority Harriett Frean gains from knowing that she was Robin's real choice.

By stressing Holtby-Daphne's lack of heterosexual attractiveness, Brittain reasserts her position as the successful one in their relationship. By rewriting their academic rivalry as romantic rivalry, she shifts it out of the sphere where Holtby was currently doing best (academic work and writing) and into the sphere where she felt most

secure (marriageability), and which her text ultimately validates as the most important. Like Daphne's, Brittain's sense of herself as an attractive woman depends upon establishing difference from her 'rival'.

The novel does attempt to validate female friendship through Virginia's support of Daphne after she is abandoned by Sylvester. But this is so obviously second best that it remains unconvincing. There is also a suggestion in the text that the two women are complementary doubles. Stephanoff suggests that they 'counteract' (DT 76) each other, and Patricia thinks that they are 'each able to supply what the other lacked' (DT, 78). Although this confirms the fact that they represent two aspects of Brittain, it is never fully explored in the text.

Holtby's letters show a remarkable generosity towards *The Dark Tide*, considering its unflattering portrait of herself, calling it 'a fine book' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 11). But it is from Holtby's rewriting of it in *The Crowded Street* that we can gauge her response to it. While Brittain uses the triangle plot to establish difference between women, Holtby undoes Brittain's romance plot in favour of a validation of female friendship.

### ***The Crowded Street* (1924)**

One of the spinster novels of the 1920s, *The Crowded Street* is important because it not only rejects the romance plot but offers a valorisation of female friendship and work as an alternative to marriage. Where it moves on from Mayor's *The Third Miss Symons* or *The Rector's Daughter* is that it presents spinsterhood as a positive choice. *The Crowded Street* ends with the traditional marriage proposal of the romance novel, but the protagonist, Muriel Hammond, refuses it because marriage would mean giving up 'every new thing that has made me a person' (CS 270). Where the novel differs from *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* is that this refusal is not a self-sacrifice but an assertion of self and a rejection of her mother's values.

Holtby's rejection of the romance plot is conveyed in Muriel's reflection that:

All books are the same - about beautiful girls who get married or married women who fall in love with their husbands [...] Why doesn't somebody write a book about someone to whom nothing ever happens - like me?

(CS 219)

This is, of course, exactly the book Holtby is writing. But, significantly, she had trouble with its form, tearing up her first draft, and writing to Jean McWilliam: 'It's like a jelly that won't "jell" - cold, flabby, formless' (Holtby, 1937a, 190). Brittain thought the novel was a failure: 'Its joints creak and it moves on pedestrian feet with its negative, colourless heroine' (TF 161). In the Prologue the eleven-year-old Muriel goes to a party, where she commits the 'unforgivable sin' (CS 16) of having no partners and is then caught taking one small sweet from the supper table. Holtby's formal problems can be related to the task of engaging the reader's sympathies for a heroine who finds neither 'the Party' (CS 19) or a partner, and to whom, therefore, in the eyes of the world, 'nothing happens'.

In her portraits of Muriel and Delia Vaughan, the vicar's daughter who becomes her friend, Holtby rewrites the characters of Daphne and Virginia, and thus both herself and Brittain. Brittain thought that Delia was 'a partial and less successful imaginary reconstruction of my war-time self' (TF 160), a comment which distances herself from the character. Muriel was, Holtby admitted to Jean McWilliam, based on herself but 'part of me only - the stupid, frightened part' (Holtby, 1937a, 288). But Muriel is also a portrait of how Brittain might have been had she accepted the provincial ideals of her mother.

In contrast to Brittain's cruel portrayal of Daphne, Holtby sympathetically delineates the social structures which trap Muriel. Jean Kennard calls *The Crowded Street* the 'strongest political statement Holtby was to make in her fiction [...] a cutting indictment of society's oppression of women and of mothers as the primary agents of that oppression' (1989, 59). It is in this novel, Kennard claims, that Holtby 'affirms [...] the need to reject the mother's values' (1989, 59). However, it is the values of Brittain's mother rather than those of Alice Holtby which Holtby is rejecting in her portrait of Muriel's mother.

Mrs Hammond's maiden name, Bennet, recalls Jane Austen's Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, that other great matrimonial schemer. Both illustrate Irigaray's argument that 'the commodities that women are forced to exchange would be their children [...] in exchange for a market status for themselves' (1993b, 84, original emphasis). Mrs Hammond's own marriage to a man from a lower class (for love, ironically) has been 'her one act of spontaneous folly' (CS 260). The following thirty

years are devoted to a minutely calculated 'campaign' (CS 23), the key move of which is her attempt to trade her daughters on the marriage market in exchange for her own increased social status. In Marshington, as Delia tells Muriel, the only thing that counts for a girl is 'sex-success' (CS 88), and such success also enhances the girl's mother's status. Mrs Hammond's antennae for the tiny nuances of class distinction are finely developed and she assesses each man in terms of the status he can give a woman, and each woman in terms of the husband she has or might get. Her sister, Muriel's Aunt Beatrice, is a warning of the very real financial and personal predicament of the spinster. Still parroting the sentiment that 'Marriage is the - crown and joy of woman's life - what we were born for' (CS 223), her only real hope is to 'die before every one gets tired of me' (CS 224).

Like Brittain, Holtby uses the triangle plot but she undercuts the rivalry theme by splitting the rival function between Delia and Clare Duquesne, Muriel's glamorous, half-French schoolfriend. Displacing the romance narrative, Holtby makes Muriel's relationships with both of them more vivid than her feeling for the ostensible object of their rivalry, the local squire, Godfrey Neale. Although he treats Delia as a close friend, Godfrey falls deeply for Clare and is briefly engaged to her. In looks, social position and genuine kindness, Godfrey appears the perfect romantic hero - 'the ideal, the prince, of all that Marshington thought splendid' (CS 268). Muriel's rejection of him is the more courageous because he is a far more realistic and sympathetic character than Brittain's Sylvester.

Holtby, more carefully than Brittain in her treatment of Daphne, maps out the disjunction between what Muriel thinks she ought to feel and what she really does feel. Realising that at some point Godfrey will propose to her simply because she is Clare's friend, she believes she will accept him but shrinks from the thought of 'further intimacy with his bodily perfection and his limited mind' (CS 118). Like Daphne, Muriel tries to fit the facts into the romance narrative:

'I *have* loved him all my life,' said Muriel, and lay, waiting to feel the glow of love warming her coldness.

'This is not as it should be,' she felt. But nothing ever was as it should be in a world where the best conclusion was a compromise.

(CS 119, original emphasis)

The 'glow of [heterosexual] love' never does warm Muriel.

The emotional centre of the novel, unlike that of *The Dark Tide*, lies in Muriel's relationships with women - with Clare, Delia, and her sister, Connie. Through the depiction of Clare, Holtby shows how the rivalry between women organised by men and enforced by women disrupts the potential for 'passionate friendship' between women. Muriel meets Clare at the school where she has been sent to 'cultivate suitable friendships' (CS 27). She desires above all the friendship of Clare, for whom she would 'die' (CS 34). However, the headmistress actively discourages 'passionate friendships' since, 'if carried too far [they] even wrecked all hope of matrimony without offering any satisfaction in return' (CS 41). Clare does wreck Muriel's matrimonial prospects but by enticing away her prospective suitor rather than claiming her emotional loyalty. Mrs Hammond sees Clare not as a potential friend for Muriel but as her rival, sending her away when she realises that Godfrey has fallen for Clare. Muriel's 'fierce desire for Clare to stay' (CS 78) is directly contrasted with her lukewarm feeling for Godfrey: 'Why care whom Godfrey looked at, whom he knew? Why did she feel this silent force of her mother's will coming between her and the most glorious friendship that she could ever know?' (CS 79).

Through the loss of her sister Muriel does experience very real suffering. Connie functions as a warning of the dangers of marrying the wrong man for the sake of marriage. In the Marshington marriage market to 'go forward on one's own', as Connie does, and take what you want - whether it is a sweet or a man - is 'against the rules of the game' (CS 100). Her death demonstrates the 'Marshington way - carried to its logical conclusion' (CS 268). The melodrama of Connie's fate, her marriage to a man she does not love and the death of herself and her unborn child, recalls Daphne, but is again treated with far more sympathy.

It is in her depiction of Delia, however, that Holtby most decisively rewrites *The Dark Tide*. A kinder, more generous version of Brittain than Virginia, she also has those qualities - a determined capacity for hard work, and political commitment - which Brittain shared with Holtby. The motif of Muriel and Delia as alter egos is more carefully worked out than in Brittain's novel and suggests again that both characters share something of both Brittain and Holtby:

It was as though Delia in her London office, looking up from the work which her brilliant, courageous mind directed, might think of Muriel in Marshington, living her drab ineffectual life among tea-parties [...] and might say to herself, 'There, but for the grace of God, goes Delia

Vaughan.' Most successful people, thought Muriel sadly, have a shadow somewhere, a personality sharing their desires and even part of their ability, but without just the one quality that makes success.

(CS 102-3)

While education simply confuses the issue for Brittain's Daphne and, indeed, for Virginia, Holtby validates it through Delia.

What Delia offers Muriel is not an ethic of self-sacrifice and purification through suffering, but a sustaining, practical partnership. The image of the two women sharing a flat in London (as Holtby and Brittain did) is a far more positive valorisation of female friendship than *The Dark Tide*. Like Holtby and Brittain's friendship, it is based on mutual enablement and allows them to use, not suppress, their abilities and intellects. It differs from the Holtby-Brittain friendship in that Muriel's work initially consists of acting as a surrogate wife to Delia. However, there is a hint in her conceptualisation of 'An idea of service - not just vague and sentimental, but translated into quite practical things' (CS 270) that she may move on to work in her own right.

It's interesting that in this text Holtby separates the passionate, emotionally-intense feeling Muriel has for Clare from the practical friendship with Delia. This is obvious if the novel is compared to Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp*, where the enabling friend and the love object are the same person. Although Hall's novel is more radical in its treatment of female desire, Holtby's is radical in its assertion that work can be as fulfilling for women as personal relationships. In fact, although Muriel's love for Clare is the closest Holtby comes to depicting passion between women in her fiction, it is more to do with Clare's glamour and Muriel's loneliness than with sexual desire. In this, as well as its school setting, it is closer to Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* than *The Unlit Lamp*.

Delia does not reject marriage per se but 'marriage as an end of life in itself, as the ultimate goal of the female soul's development' (CS 230). Her choice of a mate, the stocky, untidy but kind and brilliant Martin Elliot, offers her the chance of combining work and marriage as Brittain's Patricia O'Neill does. Yet Holtby removes Martin from the text in an accidental death which is, as Susan Leonardi says, 'gratuitous' (1989, 184). The loss of the 'right man' is not, as it is for Brittain, inevitable, but seems contrived in order to create Delia's need for Muriel.

Holtby's 'romantic' heroes - Robert Carne in *South Riding*, David Rossitur in *Anderby Wold*, Teddy Leigh in *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927) - have a disturbing



tendency to die. The only marriage ending Holtby depicts is that between Jean Stanbury and Maurice Durrant in *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933), problematic not least because Jean has married not the man she is in love with (however tentatively), but his brother. There is a hint that Eleanor will marry Roger Mortimer in *Poor Caroline* (1931) but no certainty of this. For Holtby, marriage frequently brings death or loss of self to women, as in Connie's case. Her novels suggest that 'It is only men's death/ absence which gives women a chance to pursue their own interests' and that the women 'are better off on their own, preferably with one another, and that condition is invested with a sanity and "naturalness" that marriage is not' (Leonardi, 1989, 186). Holtby's rewriting of the triangle plot of Brittain's novel, then, entails a killing off of the male in order to bring the women together.

So it is significant that the only time that Muriel does feel 'love' for Godfrey is when she thinks that he is 'going to his death' (CS 123), and when she thinks he has been wounded and she is 'tortured [...] with his pain' (CS 167). The phrasing of this scene recalls an earlier scene when Muriel, hearing of Martin's death, thinks: 'I would give all I possess to share [Delia's] tears if I could have her memories. I-I am hungry for her pain' (CS 143). It is not Godfrey's love which Muriel desires but any strong emotion. Her real suffering is 'the awfulness of a life where nothing ever happens; the shame of feeling half a woman because no man has loved you' (CS 233).

This echoes feelings that Holtby expressed herself elsewhere and which suggest her own envy of Brittain. Clare Hardisty, in her introduction to *The Crowded Street*, notes that Muriel echoes Holtby's 1920 poem 'The Dead Man', which concludes 'They long for easeful death, but I/ Am hungry for their pain' (TF 82). This has something in common with poems which express the envy of the non-combatant, such as Macauley's 'Many Sisters to Many Brothers', or Sinclair's dedicatory poem in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*. But here it is the pain of the bereaved, not the action of the combatant, which Holtby envies. The title suggests a male persona, the 'dead man', who is 'dead' because he cannot feel, and who envies the men who 'walk wild ways with love' (TF 82). Brittain links this poem to Holtby's unrequited love for Harry Pearson, writing that perhaps Holtby felt that 'even the excruciating love-affairs of her contemporaries were better than one which refused to declare itself a "love-affair" at all' (TF 100).

It connects with Holtby's sense of herself as one who 'can't even love as we usually speak of love' (Holtby, 1937a, 202). In her letters to Jean McWilliam Holtby several times mentions her lack of experience of love, by which she always means heterosexual love. She remarks that she was in love once 'when I was seventeen, with a kind of gentle sentimental retrospect until I was twenty-two' (Holtby, 1937a, 198). This would tally with the Harry Pearson episode. Her main regret, however, seems to be that this lack of love experience will affect her writing:

I really shall be disappointed if I go through life without once being properly in love. As a writer, I feel it is my duty to my work - but they are all so helpless, and such children. How can one feel thrilled?

(Holtby, 1937a, 325)

Here she seems to accept the myth of the necessity of experiencing *heterosexual* passion in order to write well. But there is also an interesting distinction here between 'being *properly* in love' (with a man) and the love Holtby clearly feels and frequently expresses for both Brittain and McWilliam.

Brittain was defined by her role as a woman who had lost her first love in the war, a role which *Testament of Youth* would enhance by presenting Brittain as representative of her war-bereaved generation. Muriel's intense jealousy of Delia because she has had 'The best of both worlds [...] Love to remember and work to do' (CS 233), probably reflects Holtby's own envy of Brittain in this area. An ignoble emotion, as Muriel recognises, but it reflects yet again the internalisation of inferiority by non-combatant women. The crux of *The Crowded Street* is this feeling of never having felt 'real' emotion, of never finding 'the Party'. It is this which Muriel fears has 'cut me off from other women, made me different' (CS 233). But the important point is that Muriel wants to feel sexual passion not for its own sake, but because not having felt it sets her apart from other women.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ‘MY SECOND SELF’: WINIFRED HOLTBY AND VERA BRITTAIN

Vera Brittain's marriage in 1925 required an even greater readjustment in her friendship with Winifred Holtby than that caused by the publication of *Anderby Wold*. Holtby and Brittain epitomise the problematic difference between married and single women during this period, with Holtby declaring her allegiance to the ‘Old Feminists’, who put ‘Equality First’ (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 48), while Brittain's position was closer to the ‘New Feminists’ who focused on women's special needs as wives and mothers. That difference had to be continually negotiated in Brittain and Holtby's friendship and it is at the heart of the dialogue between Holtby's *South Riding* and Brittain's *Honourable Estate*.

In contrast to Kennard's assertion that ‘The movement in their intellectual relationship was [...] toward consensus’ (1989, 11), I believe that these two novels illustrate how different the two women were. While Brittain's novel sets up the ideal of ‘semi-detached marriage’ (the ‘honourable estate’ of matrimony), Holtby's offers a vision of female community based on shared work. The texts are closely in dialogue. Brittain was writing *Honourable Estate* as she corrected the proofs for *South Riding*, commenting: ‘What a strange experience of communion with [Holtby's] spirit this proof-correcting is! In her book, all the time, she says the things that we both thought and said to one another’ (1986, 239). This ‘we’, suggesting that the women think as one, obscures the difference between the books. Competition is still evident, with Brittain reflecting that ‘I shall never do anything to equal this!’ (1986, 228).

Neither novel offers a pair of female friends equivalent to those based on Holtby and Brittain in earlier novels. Instead, the ‘friendship’ between women is centred in the protagonist's connection, mediated in both cases by a man, with an older woman: Sarah Burton and Mrs Beddows, and Ruth Allendyne and her mother-in-law, Janet Rutherston. Because of this Kennard argues that:

Both [novels] have reconciliation as a theme and both provide reconciliation for Holtby and Brittain with mothers or substitute mothers. This [...] also involves [...] a vindication of the mother's life and work.

(1989, 161-62)

Both novels assert the importance of situating the female subject in a 'maternal genealogy', and of acknowledging the mother's identity as a separate subject.

Kennard's model of the female friend as a surrogate mother or daughter is a seductive one. However, I think its linearity is over-schematic, obscuring the endlessly fluid process of interaction in a living relationship. Friendships need ongoing maintenance, particularly during changes in career, marital status or location. What the Brittain-Holtby relationship demonstrates is how friends take up different subject positions in relation to each other. Holtby acts as brother, mother, colleague and/or lover to Brittain in response to Brittain's needs.

In *Honourable Estate* the use of the older woman as surrogate mother seems to be a way of distancing the friendship, and removing it from the possibility of sexual desire. In *South Riding* it is a way of making connections across the differences which divide women - age, marital status, class, politics. These two strategies can be related back to the difference in marital status between Holtby and Brittain themselves.

Here I want to look at how the friendship was renegotiated around the time of Brittain's marriage. Marion Shaw, in an analysis of the letters from summer 1926, has shown how the versions Brittain edited for publication suppressed the more emotional language, as well as 'the way in which Holtby is responding within the terms set up by Brittain' (Shaw, n.d., 38). Brittain removed terms of endearment which included, as well as 'darling', 'sweetieheart' and 'beloved', the terms 'lover', 'spouse' and 'husband' (Kennard, 1989, 7). These suggest an appropriation of a heterosexual model for the friendship, which, once Brittain had a male lover, was no longer available without constructing Holtby as Catlin's rival. Holtby's deferral to Catlin as Brittain's husband and his assumption of 'an accepted heterosexual discourse of love, that Holtby is excluded from and intimidated by' (Shaw, n.d., 41), works to neutralise that rivalry.

Holtby's earlier use of such a heterosexual discourse was one of a range of positions she took up in response to Brittain's needs. Writing in December 1923 after a letter from Catlin, Brittain comments: 'I do hope that, after this lovely period of peace, some devastating male is not going to push into my life and upset it again' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 28). She appeals to Holtby to act as 'a bulwark' (28) and protect her. Addressing Brittain as 'Dear child', Holtby promises: 'I'll be your bulwark for as long as you want me. I regret that I have no Syren charms to entice away embarrassing

suitors' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 30). Taking a protective brotherly attitude towards Brittain, Holtby here constructs herself as sexually unattractive in comparison to Brittain, and, significantly, as Pam Johnson points out, wishes for 'Syren charms' not to tempt men on her own account but to keep them away from Brittain (1989, 155).

A later letter from Holtby appears to be replying to one of Brittain's which Brittain did not include in the *Selected Letters*. Holtby replies: 'do I seem cold to you?' and explains that she is torn between 'the exacting demands of love' and her 'invincible belief that no one person should lay too heavy claims upon another' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 36). This needs 'careful schooling' (36). She follows this with what reads like a love letter:

I believe you know I love you. Do you want me to say I know that you love me? Sweet child, do you think I dream for a moment that you could have endured my limitations all these years if you had not loved me?

(Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 36)

This balancing act is repeated in many of Holtby's letters. Her use of 'child' suggests a maternal attitude, but it also recalls the heterosexual love discourse used by Roland, again younger than Brittain: 'Dear child', he wrote, 'I have always liked this name for you, though I ought not to call you "child" ought I?' (Brittain, 1981, 228). In echoing this name Holtby combines the positions of mother and lover to Brittain.

Holtby's letters hint at her need to suppress the strength of her feeling for Brittain. She writes after Brittain's engagement:

If you must spend yourself completely now upon a personal emotion and I must sublimate an emotion that I may not otherwise expend, do not think that my star rises or yours sets. We have both our ways to take and they will not be similar...

(Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 40-41)

It is not clear exactly what emotion Holtby is being called upon to suppress - her feeling for Brittain, or her own capacity for heterosexual passion.

Holtby's letters to Jean McWilliam provide more insight into how acutely Holtby felt the loss of Brittain. 'My little Vera is going to be married after all' (1937a, 263) she writes, asserting possession of Vera. The impending marriage sparks off a crisis in her own life as she asks 'how shall I live' (1937a, 289). The answer seems to be work: 'I am fierce for work. Without work I am nothing' (1937a, 301). Her letters to Jean become increasingly affectionate, frequently ending with 'I love you', and she seems,

understandably, to be turning to McWilliam to replace Brittain. Her view of the damaging nature of the 'romance of fiction' is clear in her description of Brittain and Catlin's relationship:

This is the most charming love-story that I have yet encountered. When I saw [Catlin] yesterday, slim, charming, brilliant, with his blue eyes ablaze with happiness, and his arm across the shoulders of his little love, I almost believed that the romance of fiction was less perniciously untruthful than I had thought. Even if marriage proves catastrophic, this parting and meeting has at least been lovely.  
(1937a, 345)

Significantly, Holtby's 'little Vera' has become Catlin's 'little love'.

Brittain's own letters hint at disillusion even during the honeymoon. Taking Catlin to visit Edward's grave, she writes to Holtby:

Thus I introduced my husband to all that remains of my dear, dear brother, and whether the future suffers by comparison with the past or vice versa, I am not prepared to say. But someday, perhaps, my husband will help me create another Edward...  
(Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 45)

Brittain identified Catlin, as well as Holtby, with Edward, noting that their first meeting took place on the anniversary of Edward's death (TY 617). Brittain's letter suggests that Catlin, unlike Holtby, proved an inadequate 'deputy' for Edward. Her hopes now centre on the son she would christen 'John Edward'. Also telling is an unpublished letter where Brittain tells Holtby:

Apart from physical love - which in my case is much less vigorous than I thought and much more easily satisfied - I am sure that I love you best, and that your companionship is more adequate.  
(quoted in Kennard, 1989, 7)

Brittain's distinction between 'physical love', that is heterosexual sex, and her love for Holtby, anticipates the distinction she develops in *Testament of Friendship* where non-sexual female friendship 'enhances', but does not threaten, heterosexual love.

In a letter following their brief stay with Holtby in the London flat prior to leaving for America, Brittain wrote, 'I do hate you being miserable [...] what was it really my dear?' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 48) and offering several possibilities, including (juxtaposed with a bad haircut) Holtby's anxiety over Harry Pearson's failure to keep an appointment. Holtby's reply first attributes her crossness to 'H. I think' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 49) and writer's block, but follows this

with an analysis of her feelings for Harry which recalls Muriel's failure to feel desire for Godfrey:

Curious how, though I do not love nor respect as lovers love, I yet feel my personality so strangely linked to him. I do not particularly want to see him, and in his company I am a little bored.

(1960, 49)

The following analysis of her feelings for Brittain, while acknowledging Catlin, contrasts vividly with this lukewarmness:

I like to be with you both - you give me exquisite joy. As for you, do you not realise that I don't care twopence whereabouts in the scale of your loves I come, provided that you love me enough to let me love you, and that you are happy? I love you in a way that part of me has become part of you.

(1960, 50)

Again Holtby balances the need to reassure Brittain of her love and the need to recognise that she is now the outsider in this triangle.

I would suggest that in this exchange Pearson is being used, by both women, as an alibi, a cover for feelings (whether sexual or not) neither of them wants to admit. If Holtby has a lover, however unsatisfactory, he provides a balance to Catlin, transforming an unbalanced triangle into two socially acceptable heterosexual couples, a use he also serves in *Testament of Friendship*.

Brittain's letters from America detail her growing certainty that Holtby, rather than Catlin, enabled her writing because Catlin was unable to 'talk out' (Brittain and Handley-Taylor, 1960, 111) a novel. Kennard suggests that the novel Holtby was then writing, *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927), 'appears to reflect Holtby's otherwise unstated response to Brittain's marriage to Catlin' (1989, 83). Joanna is an idealised version of Holtby herself, a positive reworking of Daphne, who reflects that men 'just won't *do*. Not as friends' (1983, 119, original emphasis). This is another novel where it is the death of the man, in this case Joanna's husband, Teddy, who resembles both Catlin and Pearson, which leaves the protagonist free for work and female friendship.

One of the strategies Holtby used to cope with the strains of their unconventional triangular living arrangement seems to have been to adopt a maternal role to Catlin as well as Brittain. Brittain writes that, 'Thanks to [Catlin's] incorrigible absent-mindedness, Winifred's genuine affection for him had begun to acquire an almost maternal quality' (TF 168). Holtby at times mediated between the two, as in a letter

where she attempted to defuse Catlin's antagonism to *Testament of Youth*, telling him that Vera's sparse literary output during the marriage

has not entirely been unrelated to housekeeping, children and your interests. She has corrected your proofs and typed your articles [...] she has taken complete responsibility for your children. Surely this is a fair *quid pro quo* for your six months in (or out of) America?

(quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 258)

The success of Brittain's marriage may well be attributed to such support from Holtby.

A short story, 'Episode in West Kensington', originally written for *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, offers a dialogue between women which expresses the divisions between married and single women. Jean as a newly married, pregnant woman, wrapped in expensive furs, spends an evening having dinner with her spinster friend, Evelyn, who has 'four pounds a week and a two-roomed flatlet in West Kensington' (Holtby, 1937b, 298). In the street Jean passes:

Girl typists, hurrying home to boil their supper eggs over gas-rings, gazed wistfully at the young mothers pushing prams back from the park; and the young mothers, tired and depressed, gazed wistfully at the smart unburdened typists.

(1937b, 289)

Jean remembers similar scenes in *Mandoa* and the cross-race parallel widens out the understanding reached during their painful, edgy conversation that both single and married state necessitate losses, and that both women, while envying the other, value the friendship. Evelyn refuses to accept an inferior status, telling Jean:

'I'll warm myself at your fires. But I warn you, I shall resent that always. I shall cadge from you, and grumble at you and be jealous of you till I die. Only there's one thing I promise I won't do [...] I won't be meek. I won't be a useful "aunty" to your children [...] When you're tied to your children I'll flaunt my freedom at you.'

(1937b, 309-10)

Holtby was, of course, a 'useful "aunty"' to Brittain's children. Kennard suggests that Evelyn's anger 'is no doubt an exaggeration of one of Holtby's temporary moods' (1989, 122). However, I think this story expresses in miniature precisely the painful processes of their ongoing negotiations, as well as their competitive nature. The story's final, tentative reconciliation is based on the recognition that neither woman should be allowed to feel superior or inferior because of their marital status.

Brittain's diaries of 1932/3, when Holtby was writing *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, record conversations between them and the novelist, Phyllis Bentley about 'sex and sex



experience, my reaction to matrimony and theirs to virginity' (Brittain, 1986, 49), which indicate the friction caused by these issues. While Brittain felt inferior to Bentley as a best-selling author, Bentley felt 'thoroughly inferior' to Brittain because

Vera was beautiful; she had a husband, two children and an Oxford degree; she was admirably dressed, spoke and wrote fluent, pointed, expressive, Oxford English and knew hosts of people in literary London.

(quoted in Brittain, 1986, 18)

As a recipe for female rivalry this cocktail has everything - differentials of beauty, marital status, literary achievement and class. During the inevitable misunderstandings it was Holtby who acted as mediator and peace-maker.

It is impossible not to sympathise with Holtby, when after one quarrel between Brittain and Bentley, she told Brittain 'You've been the most important person in too many people's lives, you little bitch!' (Brittain, 1986, 86). Brittain, one suspects, was a flirt who liked to be surrounded by admirers of both sexes. It would be easy to see Holtby as the victim here, but to be the calm, still centre to which Brittain returned after 'flirtations' with people like Bentley or Storm Jameson and, indeed, her husband, indicates Holtby's strength and her power in the relationship. Moreover, Holtby had a large circle of friends of her own - Lady Rhondda, St John Ervine, Hilda Reid and others - who valued her highly and many of whom resented Brittain's treatment of her. And she was acutely aware, as 'Episode in West Kensington' shows, that the envy between married and single women flowed both ways.

As Holtby's friends confirmed, 'her need to be needed was one of the most conspicuous facets of her personality' (Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 149). Holtby needed to be needed as much as Brittain needed to be loved. It seems to have been Holtby's ability to adapt herself to Brittain's needs, acting as mother, brother, lover, friend or colleague, which enabled the friendship. However, Holtby was the first to pay testament to all that she had gained from Brittain's friendship, not least her feminism. In my discussion of *South Riding* and *Honourable Estate* I want to focus on what was their greatest difference in both personal and political terms - Brittain's advocacy of marriage and Holtby's defence of spinsterhood.

### ***South Riding* (1936)**

In *South Riding* Holtby offers a vision of life as connection: 'we are members one of another' (SR 509). In the central triangle with Sarah Burton at its apex, which is an explicit and ironic rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, Holtby again turns the rivalry of the triangle plot on its head and replaces it with friendship between women, developing even further what Marion Shaw has called her 'work-and-friendship ethic' (1986, 189). In the theorisation of female friendship Holtby's most important contribution is to move away from the familial models of female friendship as sisterhood, or a mother-daughter relationship, to offer a new ideal of professional partnership. In the partnership of Alderman Mrs Beddows and Sarah Burton, Holtby offers a picture of two able women, bonded by their work in the community. Work is not a consolation prize offered to the woman who fails to find a husband, nor friendship based on pity. Instead, shared work can bridge differences between women, connecting women of different ages, classes, marital status, even politics.

*South Riding* situates friendship between women in a political and public context - that of local government, 'the first-line defence thrown up by the community against our common enemies - poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment' (SR 5-6). Holtby shows how women bear the brunt of these 'common enemies' but also how, through their growing political and social presence, they can fight them. Local government, education and the advancement of women, are all part of a web of connection: 'The projected road from Kingsport, the subsequent development of the town, were steps in the education of Lydia Holly' (SR 129).

Sarah is Holtby's most engaging heroine. Brittain claimed that: 'Winifred thought of Sarah Burton as herself, though she made her heroine small and red-haired, with the appearance of Ellen Wilkinson, M.P., whom she had always liked and admired' (TF 421). But Sarah actually merges the best of Holtby and Brittain, especially their political commitment and capacity for work. Like Brittain, Sarah has lost a lover in the war and she has Brittain's heterosexual confidence: 'She had even the successful woman's slight and half-conscious contempt for those less attractive than herself' (SR 67). Despite this, she has chosen to be single - 'I was born to be a spinster and by God, I'm going to spin' (SR 67).

The text centralises Holtby's belief in education for women through Sarah's work as headmistress of Kiplington High School for Girls, a far more powerful position than Jane Eyre's job as governess. Sarah's theories are 'founded on experience' (SR 66):

Sarah believed in action. She believed in fighting. She had unlimited confidence in the power of the human intelligence and will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom. It was her business to equip the young women entrusted to her by a still inadequately enlightened state for their part in that achievement. She wished to prepare their minds, to train their bodies, and to inoculate their spirits with some of her own courage, optimism and unstaled delight.

(SR 66)

This humanism, Marion Shaw suggests, is also that of the Six Point Group, to whom Holtby belonged. Holtby's philosophy is that 'it is what unites human beings that is firstly important and only secondly their differences, including their gender' (Shaw, 1986, 190). Sarah's overriding characteristic is her ability to make connections with people across differences of gender, class and age: Mrs Beddows, the working-class Lydia Holly, the Socialist councillor, Astell, her colleague, Miss Sigglesworthwaite.

Her love for Robert Carne is one of those connections: 'I dislike, I oppose everything he stands for, [Sarah] told herself - feudalism, patronage, chivalry, exploitation' (SR 193). It is part of Holtby's vision of connection and reconciliation that Sarah should love this 'natural and inevitable' (SR 193) enemy, and acknowledge even his political integrity. Heterosexual desire here becomes one of a range of connections, but not the ultimate connection.

The parallels with *Jane Eyre* are made ironically explicit when Carne, mounted on a large black horse, accuses Sarah of trespassing on his land: 'Into Sarah's irreverent and well-educated mind flashed the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester' (SR 138). Carne's wife, Muriel, an aristocrat with 'queer blood' (SR 163) is the antithesis of Sarah, a blacksmith's daughter. Again, men and sex spell death or destruction to women - Muriel goes mad when Carne forces her to conceive a child.

This is, again, a double triangle. The third woman is 72-year-old Alderman Mrs Beddows, a school governor who supports Sarah's appointment as headmistress. Despite her age, Mrs Beddows is in love with Carne, recognising that 'If I were a younger woman I should hate [Muriel]' (SR 144). Radically reversing *Jane Eyre*, the novel ends with Carne dead of a heart attack and an image of connection between Sarah and Mrs Beddows:

Mrs Beddows caught her glance, looked at her, shook her head and smiled. In Mrs Beddows' smile was encouragement, gentle reproof, and a half-teasing affectionate admiration. Sarah, smiling back, felt all her new-found understanding of and love for the South Riding gathered up in her feeling for that small sturdy figure. She knew at last that she had found what she had been seeking.

(SR 510)

Kennard reads this as a reconciliation with the 'mother': 'In *South Riding* Holtby witnesses to her own mother's life as [...] Sarah Burton, comes to appreciate the values of Mrs Beddows, a character based on Alice Holtby' (1989, 162). This is substantiated by Holtby's dedication of the book to her mother and her comment that 'when I described Sarah's vision of [Mrs Beddows] in the final paragraph, it was you upon whom, in that moment, my thoughts were resting' (SR 5).

To develop a psychoanalytic reading further, a comparison with the far more conservative *Rebecca* is interesting. In Holtby's text it is the 'father' who is killed to facilitate a return to the 'mother'. Sarah 'kills' Carne through over-excitement - first in the hotel when he has a heart attack in her bedroom, then in their quarrel before he rides to his death. Yet Carne was, as Mrs Beddows says, 'courageous and kind and honest [...] He knew all about loving' (SR 494). His love for his mad wife which 'asked only the privilege of service' (SR 430), is an echo of Holtby's own conception of love. Carne was also, like Holtby's father, a farmer. It is possible to read *South Riding* as Holtby's reconciliation with both parents. Reconciliation with the mother is achieved through a recognition that both women can love the 'father', that they do not have to be rivals as in the Freudian paradigm. The crucial question here is: is such a reconciliation possible without the death of the father?

Carne's death is necessary for Sarah to be free because he negates her identity, as she recognises in the hotel:

He has forgotten who I am or who he is; he thinks I am a little tart.  
Well? I am Sarah Burton; I have Kiplington High School; he is a  
governor. This may destroy me. [...]  
I will be his little tart; I will comfort him for one night.

(SR 369-70)

To allow herself to be inscribed into the romance narrative Sarah must lose her identity as 'Sarah Burton' headmistress, and become a 'little tart'. However, marriage would also negate Sarah's identity. She has already broken one engagement because, prior to the 1935 lifting of the marriage bar, marriage would have meant the loss of her job. In

contrast to Carne, Mrs Beddows affirms Sarah's identity and her vocation, telling her: 'Now perhaps you are fit to teach a little' (SR 494). Situated in a female genealogy, Sarah's identity is constructed in relation to another woman through their work in the community. This gives them a professional identity which is not based on their relation to a man, and allows them to relate as equal subjects rather than as rivalrous objects.

To read the ending of the novel only as a reconciliation with the 'mother' actually obscures what Holtby is doing. The final image is one of affiliation between women which is precisely *not* based on a familial model, but on shared work in the public sphere. In this sense, the friendship between Sarah and Mrs Beddows resembles Holtby and Brittain's 'shared working existence' (TF 101).

Sarah and Mrs Beddows sit at the centre of a web of connections between women in the novel which cross differences of class, education and marital status. Sarah's position as a teacher allows her to enable her female pupils. But she refuses to be a 'mother' to them. Instead, she gives them the role model of a working woman as a subject in her own right. Again, this is a relationship based on shared work, not on emotional attachment. What Holtby is advocating here is a form of networking as women taking up professional positions help other women.

Sarah's realisation that 'we are members one of another' (SR 509), reflects Holtby's agreement with Woolf's conception of identity as relatedness: 'we dwell in the mirror that lies in the eyes of our friends regarding us' (1932, 135). In Holtby's work it is most often women who find themselves reflected in the eyes of other women, a reflection which Irigaray asserts is impossible for woman as 'commodities'. And it is specifically through work that women can escape their positioning as rival commodities and mirror each other as equal subjects.

In narrative terms Carne functions as a conduit to bring Mrs Beddows and Sarah together in an exchange where each woman is able to give the other something of him. Mrs Beddows gives Sarah a last message from Carne: 'Give her my love. Tell her she's a grand lass. I wouldn't miss quarrelling with her for a great deal' (SR 491). Sarah tells Mrs Beddows of Carne's angina, disabusing her of the fear that Carne committed suicide. As in the kiss between Margaret and Jenny in *The Return of the Soldier*, they make contact through the mediation of the man. But while this exchange takes place in the private sphere in West's novel, in Holtby's the women's affiliation is based on a

respect for each other's public work. In this it has more in common with *Summer Will Show*, where Sophia's contact with Minna is one of the elements which politically radicalises her. Holtby goes further than Warner in suggesting that 'homosocial' relations between women are also strong enough to disrupt women's position as rivals. In contrast to the failed exchanges in *The Three Sisters*, *Harriett Frean* or *The Judge*, this 'exchange' can take place because it does not involve self-sacrifice and both women have a subjectivity which is established in the public world. The novel's epigraph "Take what you want", said God. "Take it - and pay for it" is an encouragement to women to take their place in the mainstream economy and trade in their own right.

So, in narrative terms can a man function as a conduit within the triangle without dying? The texts of this period seem to indicate not. In texts where the male object of rivalry remains alive - *Summer Will Show*, *The Three Sisters*, *The Constant Nymph*, *Vera*, *Rebecca* and *The Weather in the Streets* - connection between women is frustrated, to the extent that one woman is often dead or dies during the novel. It is only when the man dies that connections between women are established. Moreover, in more explicitly lesbian texts where the rivalry is between one woman and the man over another woman - *The Well of Loneliness*, *Regiment of Women*, *The Love Child* - the women are always parted, often as a result of the marriage of one.

It could be argued that in *South Riding* the two women's love for Carne, as well as Mrs Beddows's age and marriage, provide an alibi, proof of their heterosexuality. However, I think that Holtby's point is precisely the fact that it is the connections between women based on work rather than personal relations which offer a way forward. This emphasis on shared work is also to be found in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, but it's interesting that Woolf's insistence that Chloe and Olivia shared a laboratory has been lost in subsequent commentary which focuses on the possibility that they might be lovers. Holtby offers us not only a model for relations between women as workers, but also the possibility of a new narrative by which women 'might assume power over - take control of - their own lives' (Heilbrun, 1989, 17).

It is in this, and in her treatment of the spinster, that Holtby is most radical in this text, and where she moves furthest away from Brittain. The single life chosen by Sarah is more fulfilling than married life as represented by Mrs Beddows, the fatally-pregnant Mrs Holly, or the married women with 'wedding rings embedded deep in the rheumatic flesh'

(SR 509). Holtby offers a validation of the importance of women teachers, particularly spinster teachers, at a time when they were under increasing attack as embittered, sexually frustrated and deviant.

What Dale Spender perceives as the increasing radicalism of Holtby's politics in the 1930s (1983, 626) can be seen as a response to the increasingly vicious attacks on spinsters. Holtby's *Virginia Woolf* (1932), the first critical study of Woolf, and her historical survey, *Women* (1934), as well as *South Riding*, are consciously in dialogue with the ideology which positioned spinsters as frustrated and dangerous. In *Virginia Woolf* Holtby had pointed to the damage done by Freudian views of sexuality, especially to the woman writer:

At the very moment when an artist might have climbed out of the traditional limitations of domestic obligations by claiming to be a human being, she was thrust back into them by the authority of the psychologist. A woman, she was told, must enjoy the full cycle of sex experience, or she would become riddled with complexes like a rotting fruit.

(1932, 29)

This thinking diminishes the common humanity between men and women who become 'separated by the unbridgeable gulf of sex' (1932, 29). It also creates a gulf between married and single women. Holtby calls the 'legend of the Frustrated Spinster' 'one of the most formidable social influences of the modern world' (1934, 125), and links it to Fascist ideology.

Holtby's rejection of this stereotype, one too easily accepted by Britain, is a constant in her writing. Her *Poor Caroline* gave the comic figure of the spinster depth, dignity and purpose. In *South Riding* she works a similar magic with Agnes Sigglesworth, the ineffectual science mistress, who works to support a widowed mother. Thus refuting what Holtby scathingly referred to as the 'happy legend [...] that a woman has no dependants and therefore requires a lower salary than men who have families to keep' (1934, 85), a 'legend' which was used to justify paying women teachers four-fifths of what their male counterparts earned (Beddoe, 1989, 80). The second mistress, Dolores Jameson, secure that her engagement gives her 'a complete alibi in all charges of frustration and virginity' (SR 266), uses it to pull rank, as the matron, Miss Parsons, tells Sarah: 'She seems to think that either we all envy her wretched little fiancé, or that we're all frozen and inhuman and all riddled with complexes' (SR 269). Sarah's

remark that 'There's too much fuss about virginity and its opposite altogether' (SR 269) was a view Holtby strongly endorsed. Sarah illustrates Holtby's argument that 'The spinster may have work which delights her, personal intimacies which comfort her, power which satisfies her' (1934, 131).

The novel engages with the fears about 'Schwärmerei' which were dramatised in *Regiment of Women*. Asked how she deals with 'Schwärmerei', Sarah replies: 'I control them all by monopoly and then absorb them. [...] We needs must love the highest when we see it. I take good care to be the highest in my school' (SR 129). The love felt for Sarah by Lydia Holly is shown as a positive emotion which can be utilised by Sarah for the girl's own benefit.

Ultimately, Holtby calls for greater tolerance, a more complex notion of sexuality, and a sense of common humanity which transcends difference. The conclusion of *Women* argues that

the real object behind our demand [for female emancipation] is not to reduce all men and all woman to the same dull pattern. It is rather to release their richness of variety. We are still greatly ignorant of our own natures. We do not know how much of what we usually describe as 'feminine characteristics' are really 'masculine', and how much 'masculinity' is common to both sexes [...] We do not even know [...] whether the 'normal' sexual relationship is homo- or bi- or heterosexual.

(1934, 192)

Marion Shaw has argued that for Holtby, as an 'Old Feminist', 'the threat from the "new" feminist novelists, as from the "new" feminists like Eleanor Rathbone, was that gender would usurp humanity as a primary condition' (1986, 190). In *South Riding* Holtby consciously uses a realist novel to create a sense of that 'richness of variety'. It's a vision which does not erase difference but encompasses it.

### ***Honourable Estate* (1936)**

If Holtby's most mature statement is in *South Riding*, Brittain's response to the novel in *Honourable Estate* makes her difference from Holtby's views most clear. Unlike Sarah, Ruth Allyndene is not a merging of what was best in both Brittain and Holtby, but another idealised self-portrait of Brittain, complete with First Class degree. Ruth's brother, Richard and her lover, the American Captain Eugene Meury (based partly on Roland, but more on Brittain's American publisher, the married George Brett, with



whom she was in love at this time), are killed in the war. Ruth marries Denis Rutherford, an idealised version of Catlin, but it is she who becomes an MP, whereas Catlin's similar ambitions were thwarted. The first section of the novel and the character of Janet Rutherford, a suffragette, were inspired by Catlin's mother and based on her diary.

The only important element of Brittain's life missing is a friend like Holtby. Ruth's friend, Madelaine, is another version of 'Nina' in *Testament of Youth*. The passionate friendship in the book is displaced back a generation and involves Janet and the playwright, Gertrude Ellison Campbell. The acknowledgement of relationships like Janet's with Gertrude, and Richard's with a fellow soldier, is an important theme and Kennard suggests that this is Brittain's response to Holtby's insistence on recognising 'other relationships than those called "normal"' and 'as such it witnesses to their own friendship' (1989, 177).

*Honourable Estate* is for Kennard 'the novel Brittain and Holtby wrote together and the one in which Brittain began to come to terms with her friend's death' (1989, 177). For Hilary Bailey it is 'George Brett's book' (1987, 95). An attempt to come to terms with loss is the dominant note of the book. In the last entry in her 1935 diary, Brittain wrote:

Winifred in dying took with her that second life that she initiated for me just after the War; can I make a third? Can I, once more, begin again? Are children and books enough incentive for living?...Does one make new friends when the thirties are over? Does love, orthodox and unorthodox still abide?

(1986, 235)

Obviously, Holtby's death meant a substantial readjustment of Brittain's life, including her marriage. The silence concerning her husband is noticeable here, while other diary entries suggest friction. Given the fact that Holtby often mediated between husband and wife, it is possible that her death made their relationship more difficult.

Despite this, I want to suggest that *Honourable Estate*, dedicated to Catlin and his mother, is *Catlin's* book. The text is primarily a justification of Brittain's ideal of 'semi-detached' or 'companionate marriage'. In *Testament of Youth* Brittain's own marriage is presented as a political decision, an attempt to discover whether marriage and career could be combined, and she saw it as offering an example for others. In 'Semi-detached marriage' (1928) Brittain advocated a 'semi-detached marriage' where both partners worked. This solved the problem of choosing between work and the 'sacrifice of

marriage, motherhood and all her emotional needs', or marriage and 'intellectual starvation and monotony' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 130). This ideal, Martin Pugh thinks, is Brittain's 'greatest contribution to feminism' (1992, 262). It is, however, an ideal which makes little allowance for the fact that working-class women might see their economic need to work as part of their oppression.

*Honourable Estate*, as the subtitle 'A Novel of Transition' suggests, is an attempt to map women's untold history, and especially what Brittain saw as the change from 'the master-servant relationship of most nineteenth century marriages' to the twentieth-century ideal of 'companionship between equals' (Brittain, 1953, 170). The structure of the book hammers home this point. The first two parts, which tell the stories of Ruth and Denis's parents, Janet and Thomas Rutherston, and Stephen and Jessie Alleyndene, each include three subsections titled 'Husband', 'Wife' and then 'Son'/'Daughter'. The thrust of the text, like a Hegelian dialectic, is to bring together Ruth and Denis in the final section of Part III, called 'Husband and Wife'. Politically and structurally, their marriage is the climax of the book.

Janet and Thomas Rutherston's marriage epitomises the nineteenth-century 'master-servant' model, where Janet, young, uneducated and inexperienced, is forced into motherhood. Believing that 'What was hers was his: a wife had no right to shut her private thoughts away from her husband' (HE 42), Thomas even reads her diary. This is a socially sanctioned merger of husband and wife which entails the loss of the wife's separate identity. In contrast to Chodorow and Abel's idealisation of merging, this shows that women have traditionally been *expected* to merge with others.

Witnessing his mother's struggle makes Denis a fit mate for Ruth, offering her a new type of marriage where he supports her political career. Education here is validated in a way it is not in *The Dark Tide*, making Ruth a better mother and wife, as she tells Denis: 'Don't you see that it is just because I *am* better qualified than your mother and still able to go on with my work, that I care for the twins so much?' (HE 550, original emphasis). However, the sense of its value for the wider community of women, so important in *South Riding*, is lost.

In a passage which anticipates a similarly-worded passage in *Testament of Experience* (1957) where Brittain writes of owing her children to 'G' and that his 'loving-kindness' (1979, 91-92) had laid Roland's ghost, Ruth reflects that:

[Denis] had restored her to life after seven years of war and desolation; through him she had found the work which had brought her within sight of a coveted position of service to the State. He was the father of her beloved children [...] he had recognised the claims of a dead man on her restive spirit.

(HE 603)

Bearing in mind Catlin's distress over Brittain's account of her love for Roland in *Testament of Youth* which he saw, Brittain wrote, 'as evidence that "you cannot love me"' (Brittain, 1979, 92), these passages are Brittain's testament to her gratitude for Catlin. However, in Denis Brittain has re-written Catlin into the kind of husband she wanted, one offering love 'beyond calculation' (HE 522), and prepared to forego his own career to support her - something Catlin did not do. Ruth has no need of a supportive female friend because Denis fulfils that role. Here Brittain has incorporated the support offered by Holtby into the portrait of Catlin - merging the female friend into the more socially acceptable figure of the husband.

Like *South Riding*, *Honourable Estate* ends with a public service, here a memorial for Gertrude Ellison Campbell. Echoing Sarah's exchange of looks with Mrs Beddows, Denis's eyes meet Ruth's across a 'slanting beam of light' (HE 636) and he reflects, 'At least we still have one another; let us work together while there is light' (HE 636). Like *South Riding*, it's an image of shared work and service, but Brittain rewrites Holtby's vision of female community to validate heterosexual marriage.

The book is structured by the connection between Janet and Ruth, which echoes that between Sarah and Mrs Beddows. Ruth's life mirrors but rewrites Janet's, rather as Ellen's does Marion's in *The Judge*. However, the problem with reading their connection as a positive validation of relationships between women is that they never meet. The relationship between mother and daughter-in-law, invoked by Ruth's name which recalls the Biblical Ruth and Naomi, is mediated by a man and contained within the institution of marriage, but Brittain does not, as West does, explore what this means. In contrast to *South Riding*, it is the other woman, Janet, not the man in this triangle, who is dead, leaving the heterosexual couple pre-eminent. In Freudian terms Ruth takes the place of the dead mother and gains an emasculated father, much as the protagonist of *Rebecca* does. At the end of the novel Ruth is isolated from other women, including her mother, rather than connected, as Sarah Burton is, to the wider community.

Brittain's novel resembles two of the novels of female 'friendship' discussed by Elizabeth Abel. In Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* and Christa Wolf's *The Search for Christa T*, the 'relationship' is between a living woman and a dead woman. Abel argues that because the process of identification through merging 'can engulf as well as shape identity, its course is smoothest when the object of identification is remembered or imagined rather than physically present' (1981, 426). This is exactly what happens in *Honourable Estate*, where Ruth identifies with the dead Janet, but remains distant from her living mother and other women.

Brittain's commitment to heterosexual marriage actually undermines any posited acceptance of same sex relationships. The relationship between Janet and Ellison Campbell is a living interaction, but is distanced from Ruth by being placed in the past. This is perhaps necessary because Brittain explicitly portrays this as a 'passionate friendship' (HE 630) - a risky strategy in the inter-war period. Janet records: 'Gertrude told me today that I made her realise what Ruth meant when she said to Naomi, "The Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me"' (HE 627). The Biblical parallel, because it implies connection through a man, is not totally appropriate here. Ruth, reading Janet's diary and letters, tells Denis: 'I believe Ellison Campbell had some kind of complex about your mother' (HE 629), and they conclude that Ellison Campbell was 'in love with [Janet] without realising it' (HE 629).

In the light of the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* just two years before Ruth and Denis have this conversation (the novel ends in 1930), Brittain's emphasis on the greater tolerance of such feelings in the twentieth century is perhaps more founded on hope than reality. Moreover, Brittain's biographers have uncovered evidence that Richard's courting of death in battle to avoid court martial for homosexuality was based on what had happened to Brittain's brother, Edward, something she only discovered in 1934 (Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 130-31). *Honourable Estate* is clearly Brittain's attempt to come to terms with these facts. Since the penalty for sodomy or an act of gross indecency was ten years penal servitude (Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 131), Brittain's anxieties are again understandable.

However, *Honourable Estate* shows not that Brittain's 'position is essentially Holtby's and her portrayal of this female friendship deeply sympathetic' (Kennard, 1989, 182), but rather how little of Holtby's problematising of the "normal" (1934, 192)

Brittain had assimilated. Ruth sees Janet as 'a *normal* woman whose talents had been thwarted, whose natural affections had been starved' (HE 628, my emphasis). Brittain here is drawing on the sexologists' argument that some lesbians were 'true invert' while others were 'normal' but, because of a lack in their lives, could be drawn into lesbianism. Brittain's implication is that the tall, masculine Gertrude is the true lesbian but Janet, under more favourable circumstances, would have been 'normal'. Similarly, Richard's relationship with Valentine is attributed to abnormal conditions in wartime. Brittain's repeated use of the word 'normal' indicates either active disagreement with or a failure to understand Holtby's destabilising of the term.

The text could be seen as Brittain's acknowledgement of, and distancing of herself from, her friend's lesbianism. Or as evidence of a contradictory split in Brittain's own desires, between her need for heterosexual marriage, articulated through Ruth, and her desire for a passionate friendship, articulated through Janet. Or through Gertrude, whose possessive jealousy of Janet resembles Brittain's need for Holtby's exclusive friendship.

More interestingly, it explores the effect of political differences between women. Gertrude and Janet are separated not because of Janet's marriage but because of their political differences. Gertrude, who later becomes president of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, breaks off the friendship when Janet fails to attend the opening of Gertrude's new play because she has collapsed after walking in Emily Wilding Davison's funeral procession. *Honourable Estate* is not only a tribute to the women who fought for the vote - Edith Catlin no less than the Pankhursts and Emily Wilding Davison - but also an attempt to understand women, like Brittain's mother, who opposed the suffragists.

The triangle of Ruth's affair with Eugene, who has a fiancée, Dallas Lowell, in America, has key differences to that in Holtby's book. Ruth's agreement that Eugene cannot break his engagement has all the hallmarks of the Victorian ethos of self-sacrifice which Sinclair depicted in *Harriett Frean*. Moreover, Ruth's exultation that 'I'm the person he loves - I, you understand, not Dallas!' (HE 399, original emphasis), has much in common with Harriett's sense of superiority over Priscilla because she was the one Robin really loved.

The meeting between Ruth and Dallas after Eugene's death does attempt to go beyond this. The scene rewrites and rejects the rivalry between Virginia and Daphne, and echoes the exchange between Mrs Beddows and Sarah. Ruth is able to give Dallas the reassurance that Eugene had a sexual experience based on love before he died. It's less clear what Dallas gives Ruth, other than a lessening of the sense that she has 'wronged' (HE 584) Dallas. Brittain suggests that Ruth has somehow acted as Dallas's deputy in sleeping with Eugene. Sex here is not a matter of female desire but another self-sacrifice - something 'given' by the woman and 'taken' by the man. Ruth's reflection that 'So that's the woman for whom I lost my virginity' (HE 585) even transforms her gesture into a self-sacrifice on behalf of Dallas.

It is not so much that Eugene acts as a mediator between the two women, but that each woman acts as a conduit to Eugene for the other. Dallas is only important to Ruth because of her relation to Eugene and this never becomes a partnership like that of Sarah and Mrs Beddows. Brittain still sees a man, not work, as central to a woman's life. Dallas, 'destined' (HE 580) for Eugene, has never been able to 'switch over to someone else' (HE 579), and her sublimation of her energy in work is presented as a second-best, recalling *The Dark Tide*. A scene at Eugene's grave indicates that a man remains central to Ruth too: 'Henceforth I mustn't think of you as the centre of my life and the only source of all that is dear to me. I have made someone else the axis round which everything I am and do will revolve' (HE 533). This endorses the centrality of the man in a way which contrasts with Holtby's killing of her male characters.

The connections between women which Brittain does set up are based on the specificity of shared physical female experience, which links Ruth to Dallas, Janet, and even her grandmother's cook, Agnes, who, sacked when her pregnancy was discovered, gave birth in a cab and lost her baby. The nightmare of thinking herself pregnant teaches Ruth her 'kinship' (HE 433) with Agnes and other women. This cross-class shared female experience is unusual in Brittain's fiction, where working-class women are given short shrift. The portrayal of the nurse whose suicide inspires Ruth to consummate her love for Eugene, for instance, is shot through with class snobbery, emphasising her 'habitual slovenliness and the shrill whine of her thin Cockney voice' (HE 354).

The problem with Brittain's vision of a shared female experience as the basis of a feminist politics is that it is an experience shared only by heterosexual, sexually active

women, and excludes single women - such as Holtby. Brittain's spinsters are invariably frustrated, such as Ruth's aunt Emily, whose persecution of Ruth is attributed to Emily's 'despised and resented spinsterhood' (HE 263). Ultimately, *Honourable Estate* illustrates Brittain's belief that, as she wrote to Catlin in 1929, 'Today...one happily married wife and mother is worth more to feminism ... than a dozen gifted and eloquent spinsters' (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 235). This negates everything that Holtby stood for and especially the vision of *South Riding*.

### *Testament of Friendship* (1940)

Brittain's prefatory allusions in *Testament of Friendship* to Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and specifically to May Sinclair's introduction, offer a precedent for her project which situates her and Holtby in a female genealogy both as writers and friends, as well as asserting that the biography is unavoidably also an account of Holtby's relations with others. However, it is in *Testament of Friendship* where 'the facts of Holtby's life are largely present but the feelings are Brittain's' (Shaw, n.d., 32) that Brittain takes direct control of the narrative of Holtby's life. Even further, Brittain goes so far as to attribute her own desires to Holtby, specifically in the way that she shapes Holtby's life, as she shaped her own writing, according to the romance narrative. This is as true of Brittain's autobiographies as her fiction. *Testament of Youth* ends with her engagement and a railway reunion with 'G', while *Testament of Experience* ends with their reunion at an airport and the promise of their Silver Wedding anniversary.

Similarly, *Testament of Friendship* culminates with Harry Pearson (called 'Bill') proposing to Holtby on her deathbed. Brittain concludes: 'There was still time for their strange erratic story, constantly broken and as often resumed, to end in as much of contentment as most of us are destined to know' (TF 436). However, Berry and Bostridge's recent biography of Brittain confirms what is hinted at in the strangely polished account of Holtby's death in Brittain's diary, that Pearson's proposal was, in fact, initiated and stage managed by Brittain (Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 325-26). Holtby's reasons for acquiescing can only be guessed at.

Reading back over the text it is clear that Brittain has shaped it, as she shaped *Testament of Youth*, through hindsight. Frequent references to Pearson, often tenuous and rarely in Holtby's words, create a sense of inevitability. Pearson is introduced thus:

The elder shall be known for the purposes of this volume as Bill, since years afterwards, when the long tale of her loyalty and devotion to his charming incorrigible personality was almost ended, Winifred recorded it in the story of Jean Stanbury and Bill Durrant in *Mandoa, Mandoa!*.

(TF 22)

Brittain claims that *Mandoa, Mandoa!* 'explains the secret history of [Holtby's] emotional life' (TF 347) because

In it she reveals the hidden love, the suppressed exasperation, the mingled pity and respect for the man contemptuous of feathering his own nest, aroused in her by the only individual whom, for two tantalising decades, she ever contemplated or desired as a husband.

(TF 347)

This is a version of the 'right man' myth. Pearson, seen like Roland as representative of the generation lost or maimed by the war, is presented as destined for Holtby - the 'only' man she wanted as a husband. As Brittain lost her 'right man' through death, Holtby lost hers because the war made him incapable of sustaining a relationship.

The discrepancy between this and Holtby's own writings has been noted by both Susan Leonardi (1989) and Pam Johnson (1989). Leonardi argues that the account of Pearson's proposal turns Holtby into 'a character in a Brittain romance plot' (1989, 221) and is 'an almost deliberate attempt to deny the centrality to Holtby of her relationship with Brittain' (221). Similarly, Johnson exposes the 'heterosexism' which

makes it more acceptable for [Holtby's] primary emotional attachment to be to a man with whom she had no viable relationship for fifteen years, than to the woman with whom she shared 'sixteen incomparable years' of life and work.

(1989, 157)

There are two probable reasons for Brittain's writing into Holtby's life a man who was never really there. Firstly, as Johnson implies, he provides an alibi against accusations of lesbianism. 'Bill', Brittain writes,

created throughout Winifred's life a situation utterly different from the one imagined by scandalmongers who invented for her a lurid series of homosexual relationships usually associated with Lady Rhondda or myself.

(TF 328)

Brittain had a political and personal stake in her own image as, as she phrased it, a 'markedly heterosexual woman' (Berry and Bishop, 1985, 13). Both Catlin and Holtby, neither of whom felt that the portrayal of themselves in *Testament of Youth* was accurate



(Catlin objected to it as 'that intolerable piece of publicity' (quoted in Berry and Bostridge, 1995, 259)), recognised Brittain's tendency to reconstruct others to fit her text.

In *Testament of Friendship* Pearson fulfils a similar function to that which Sedgwick describes women fulfilling in their role as mediators between men within the erotic triangle. His presence serves to remove the relationship between Brittain and Holtby from the realm of homosexual desire. Especially since Brittain is at such pains in the text to enforce the 'radical disruption' between 'homosocial' friendship which 'enhances' (TF 2) heterosexual love, and 'homosexual' love. This is very different from Holtby's use of the man in her novels as a conduit to bring the women together.

There is a second explanation for Brittain's use of the romance plot in her telling of Holtby's story. There is a tension in *Testament of Friendship* between Brittain's idealisation of Holtby as a 'saint' (TF 440) and her presentation of Holtby as inferior to herself, a presentation which suggests Brittain's still strong competitive streak. Her praise for Holtby's writing is often undercut, as when she refers to Holtby's 'usual facile lyrics' (TF 100). Her estimate of *Mandoo, Mandoo!* as the only novel which approaches *South Riding*'s quality seems to be based on the fact that it holds the 'secret' of Holtby's emotional life, while she badly underrates *The Crowded Street*.

In an extraordinary paragraph in *Testament of Experience* she sums up Holtby's life:

None of her books published in her lifetime had sold remarkably, so she helped mine to sell magnificently. The only man whom she really loved had failed her, so she identified herself with my married happiness [...] When she learned that she must never have children, she shared in the care of ours.

(1979, 133-34)

This is a version of Holtby as Brittain's 'second self' - a lesser, inferior copy of the original. To return to the mirror analogy used by Irigaray and Woolf to figure how women function as men's 'other', I would argue that Brittain uses Holtby as a mirror in a similar way. She records Holtby's comment on being asked to write her autobiography:

'I don't see how I can write an autobiography,' [Holtby] said. 'I never feel I've really had a life of my own. My existence seems to me like a clear stream which has simply reflected other people's stories and problems.'

(TF 1)

The contrast with Brittain who made her name through her autobiographies is unavoidable. It was Brittain who finally wrote Holtby's story and I'd suggest that it was she who saw Holtby as a 'clear stream' or a mirror which reflected Brittain herself.

Irigaray's theorisation of the Western male 'economy of the Same' where there are not two sexes but one is helpful here. Irigaray argues that because woman has always been theorised within male parameters the feminine has been obliterated. True difference is erased and the male subject regards the woman not as an equal but different Other, but as lack of the Same - as a lesser or inadequate copy. Similarly, in her writing Brittain theorises Holtby within her own parameters, obliterating their true difference, and presenting Holtby as a lesser copy of herself. While Holtby was alive and their intertextual dialogue was ongoing, Holtby was able to correct these versions of herself by rewriting them in her own novels. Only after Holtby's death could this image of her as the Same but lesser be fixed in *Testament of Friendship*. Brittain's presentation of Holtby as lesser depends crucially on Holtby's status as a spinster, and therefore incomplete compared to Brittain. In *Testament of Friendship*, as in *The Dark Tide*, it is precisely by positioning the Holtby character (for the Holtby of the biography is no less a creation of Brittain's than Daphne) within the romance plot which was so important to Brittain and which Holtby considered 'perniciously untruthful' (1937a, 345) that Brittain contrives to establish her own superiority.

Writing *Testament of Friendship* gave Brittain the power to recreate the woman who was both her dearest friend and her nearest rival - as Rebecca West recreated her sister in her writing. Suzanne Raitt in her study of the similar intertextual dialogue between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West notes that writing *Orlando* gave Woolf 'a strange and atavistic power over Sackville-West of which she at least was aware' (Raitt, 1993, 36), and allowed Woolf to express her ambivalence about the relationship (18). There is a similar power dynamic in *Testament of Friendship*, as well as an ambivalence between the need to praise and to downgrade. Since Holtby is dead Brittain has absolute power over her and can ensure that her pre-eminent claim to Holtby is recognised, above even that of Holtby's mother, but she can also shape her version of 'Winifred Holtby' according to her own needs.

As in the fiction considered by Abel, Brittain and Holtby 'merge' after Holtby's death, but in the sense that Holtby is engulfed by Brittain. Hence Marion Shaw's

comment that Holtby has been so ‘thoroughly encompassed’ (n.d., 30) by Brittain’s writings that it is difficult to get any sense of her apart from them. Difficult, that is, to get a sense of Holtby as a separate person rather than as Brittain’s ‘*alter ego*’ (Bailey, 1987, 77). While Holtby is alive and the process of friendship is still ongoing, Brittain has to recognise Holtby’s otherness, her differences – political and personal. After her death Brittain smoothes over those differences to produce a portrait of Holtby as a reflection of Brittain herself – her ‘second self’. The very title of the book, *Testament of Friendship*, echoing Brittain’s own autobiography, followed by the subtitle ‘The Story of Winifred Holtby’, indicates that Holtby is taking second place in her own story. As Brittain’s last word in their ‘dialogue’, it is also Brittain’s victory in the struggle over how the friendship should be understood.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE 'RECURRING DREAM' OF ROMANCE: ROSAMOND LEHMANN

The youngest of these five writers, Rosamond Lehmann at first sight seems the most conservative, her work a flight back into the world of the private, the intimate and the subjective which has traditionally been the territory of the 'woman's novelist'. Her focus on the romantic desires of women seems especially out of sync with the political commitment and social realism which marks the writing which we have come to think of as characterising the 1930s - that of the 'Auden generation'. John Atkins, for instance, condemns her 'snobbism' (1977, 128) and her 'contempt' for the lower classes (127). However, more recent assessments, especially the work of Judy Simons, have allowed us to see Lehmann in her view of women's experience as 'an acute social historian, a bitter analyst of the British class system and of its impact on gender and identity' (Simons, 1992, 137), whose major achievement is 'the way in which she explores the response of individuals to the cultural shifts of the age' (2).

The triangle romance plot is, as Gillian Tindall remarks, one of the 'constants' in Lehmann's 'mental landscape' (1985, 120). It is used precisely as Sedgwick suggests, to explore 'relationships of power and meaning' and to 'make graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment' (1985, 27). Lehmann uses the triangle romance within the specificity of historically shifting relationships of gender, class and sexuality to explore the male economic and social power which frustrates women's attempts to negotiate the fulfilment of their desire.

The post-war sense of gender roles in 'flux' is especially pronounced in her work. Dinah's comments in *The Echoing Grove*, which I cited in Chapter One, indicate that this is a profound change in consciousness: 'the difference between our grandmothers and us is far deeper than we realise - much more fundamental than the obvious social economic one' (EG 311-12). The alienation and sexual ambiguity of her characters reflects their inability to reconcile their inner selves with the still limited social roles offered to them - especially the lack of new alternatives to the wife/mistress, virgin/whore divisions.

Lehmann's texts engage with precisely the problem which is never confronted in Brittain's work - the question of *why* the inter-war woman, despite her increased educational and career opportunities, remained in thrall to romance. What Lehmann

explores is the gap between what women desire, and what men give them. Her unhappy endings articulate a nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian, specifically pre-war, romance - which, in fact, never existed. Romance is recognised as a dream but the internalised desire for it is no less determining.

Lehmann acknowledged the autobiographical element in her writing: 'so much of my "life story" has gone, in various intricate disguises, and transmuted almost beyond my own recognition, into my novels, that it would be difficult if not impossible to disentangle "true" from "not true"...' (1982a, 65). Where this differs from Brittain or Holtby is that with Lehmann the fiction frequently *anticipates* her life. *The Weather in the Streets*, with its account of an affair with a married man, was published in 1936, before her affair with the married poet, Cecil Day Lewis, which began in 1941. This suggests the powerful nature of predetermined scripts, especially the romance plot.

Despite her university education, Lehmann records in her autobiographical *The Swan in the Evening* (1967) that she herself was brought up to believe her life would follow the romance script:

Girls should be pretty, modest, cultivated, home-loving, spirited but also docile; they should chasteily await the coming of the right man, and then return his love and marry him and live as faithful, happy wives and mothers, ever after. All this I knew and was by temperament and upbringing fervently disposed towards.

(1982a, 68)

Lehmann's own life - two marriages, and a nine-year affair with Day Lewis - suggests a continually frustrated quest for the 'right man'. She shared with Brittain a sense that the best of a generation of young men had been destroyed:

I had it lodged in my subconscious mind [as a young woman] that the wonderful unknown young man whom I should have married had been killed in France, along with all the other wonderful young men; so that any suitor - and quite a few uprose - would be a secondary substitute, a kind of simulacrum.

(quoted in Tindall, 1985, 32)

Her work is haunted by the 'wonderful young men' - Charlie in *Dusty Answer*, Rollo's brother, Guy, in *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) - who were lost in the war. Their absent presence is marked in the shortage of male partners in *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932). In this buyers' market men, the buyers themselves, have become a particularly scarce 'commodity'. The men left are not only 'simulacrums', but tend to be unattainable because they are married like Rollo, or Ricky in *The Echoing Grove*, or

possibly homosexual like Roddy in *Dusty Answer* and Hugh in *A Note in Music* (1930), or war-damaged like Johnny in *A Sea-Grape Tree* (1976). The romance plot in Lehmann's work is both an economic and emotional necessity and yet inherently flawed because of the lack of the proper object of desire - the 'right' man.

Tindall notes that 'As a background theme, complicity and rivalry, or at any rate tension, between women is ubiquitous in [Lehmann's] novels' (1985, 35). In fact, I would argue that the theme is far more central than Tindall suggests, and that it is traced back to the primary bonds of the family, bonds which are ultimately more determining than even the internalised romance plot. The Demeter and Persephone myth underlies both *The Ballad and the Source* (1944), as Sydney Janet Kaplan (1981) has shown, and *The Swan in the Evening*, which tells of the loss of Lehmann's daughter, Sally, and her certainty of Sally's spiritual survival. Both texts trace 'maternal genealogies', the mother-daughter connections broken by what Sibyl Jardine calls 'the law of cruel men' (1982b, 88), but which, *The Swan in the Evening* seems to assert, can withstand even death. A notable absence in this autobiography is Lehmann's own mother.

The ties of what West called 'sibship' present in the autobiography, are an increasingly important theme in the fiction. As well as her younger brother, John, the writer and editor, Lehmann had two sisters. Helen, the eldest, 'married a cavalry officer, and moved into a different kind of social life - hunting, racing, country house parties' (Watts, 1988, 150). The younger, Beatrix, became a well-known actress. Her picture in Lehmann's *Album* is captioned: 'Beatrix, my youngest sister - our yet unpublished letters to one another show our life-long closeness. I was with her when she died in 1979 and miss her always' (1985, 48). This pattern of closeness to one sister, distance from the other is one I noted in my discussion of West. Like West, Lehmann uses versions of these sisters in her fiction. She saw the 'image' of one in creating a character in *Invitation to the Waltz* and *Weather in the Streets* (WS, Introduction), while she had Beatrix physically in mind when envisaging Dinah, and Helen when envisaging Madelaine in *The Echoing Grove* (Tindall, 1985, 170).

Lehmann's fiction explores how the patterns and identities established in childhood can last a lifetime, and how childhood rivalries intersect with the gendered roles which cast women as rivals. An early incident in *The Swan in the Evening* points to the formative nature of birth order and its intersection with gender in inculcating identity.

In Lehmann's case it was the insecurity of not having a specific role, as she confided in her teacher: 'I don't like being in the middle [...] I'm not the oldest...and I'm not the youngest....' (1982a, 10), and the knowledge that her mother had 'hoped for a son' (Lehmann, 1985, 15). Bel Mooney in a *Times* profile of Lehmann in 1984 noted the difference between the accounts of the Lehmann children's childhood given in *The Swan in the Evening* and in the autobiography of John Lehmann, the much-desired only son. His was a 'fortunate childhood' (Lehmann, J, 1955, 87) which gave him 'the conception of a complete order of things; a full world' (88). Whereas Rosamond Lehmann recalls her sense of isolation and alienation, as well as an early awareness that, as she phrased it in *Dusty Answer*, 'death, lovely death, lay at the heart of enchantment' (DA 106).

Competition between the talented Lehmann children appears to have been a given. John Lehmann refers to 'the inevitable, endless competition between us' (1955, 73), and he concentrated on poetry because 'I felt that Rosamond had established novels as her territory in a way I could never possibly rival' (134). This recalls the division between art and literature worked out by Woolf and Bell and indicates that such divisions are not necessarily gender specific, although especially necessary to children who share a gender. Beatrix Lehmann, however, did publish two novels. Her *Rumour of Heaven* (1934) deals with the children of a mad mother (a theme prefiguring *The Ballad and the Source*), and the plight of the eldest sister, Clare, caught between her responsibility for her siblings, one mentally, the other physically abnormal, and her desire for the man she loves. It is yet another inter-war novel which betrays an obsession with the Brontës. Viola, the younger sister, reads and rereads *Wuthering Heights*. Rosamond Lehmann's reaction to Beatrix's encroachment on her own area is perhaps hinted at in a remark about Dinah in *The Echoing Grove* who writes 'a subdued, not very interesting or well-written novel, semi-fantastic, about a deaf girl and a blind man' (EG 15).

In 1931 Lehmann published *A Letter to A Sister* in the Hogarth Letters series. Its very title (in a series which included Viscount Cecil writing to an MP on disarmament, Leonard Strong to W.B. Yeats, and Virginia Woolf to 'a young poet'), is an assertion that relationships between women, between *sisters*, are important. Lehmann's subject is the question (heard, interestingly, in Woolf's voice) 'What is Life?' (1931, 21), and her assertion of the value of the subjective, domestic and private as a subject for literature. The writer thinks 'Obviously, life is *things that happen* [...] It is reaching the North Pole,

finding the Pharaoh in his tomb, the sunken trireme; it is flying alone to Australia' (1931, 22, original emphasis). But she refuses to accept this, asserting that 'I cannot countenance a system of distribution which would give the bootlegger, the big-game hunter so large a share, and me so little' (1931, 24). It is, of course, the value system which asserts that only some things are 'Life' with-a-capital-L which is at fault.

Lehmann situates this debate within sisterly difference and rivalry. She draws a contrast between her sister, 'an enterprising, courageous character' who has leapt into a flooded river to save a cat, been in a motor smash and set herself on fire (1931, 22), and her own 'pitiful' record - 'One fall out of the apple-tree, one fall into the fishpond; a few bee-stings (no wasps) - this about completes my list of accidents' (22-23). Her refusal to accept that the adventurous life is more important than her own domestic interior life is also a refusal to feel inferior to her sister, and an acceptance of different types of femininity. Lehmann emphasises the 'we' of the sisters, their shared memories which mean that only her sister can fully understand what she is trying to convey.

One image in the pamphlet is worth looking at in particular detail:

Living alone: as in girlhood, before one was broken in upon.... Do you remember that waiting? - that being caged up away from the rest of humankind, the dome of many-coloured glass pressing close all round one? [...] One stared out at the passing procession, hating, fearing, adoring it - crying: 'Nobody knows what I'm like. Nobody's going to stop and listen. In all the crowd no one will wait for me and walk in step....' [...]

Well - Time that let us out, will draw down the shutter once again. Behind the brittle panel we shall sit, quietly now, and look out upon the world. We shall see all, our children and all, through a glass - not too darkly, I hope - just through uncoloured glass. It won't be so bad really as long as we can take our places at about the same time and sit side by side.

(1931, 16-17)

All Lehmann's young women are longing for someone to 'wait for me and walk in step'. It is only when this happens, when they are inserted into the romance plot, that they feel they are part of the procession, part of 'life'.

Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935) expresses something similar in Karen Michaelis's realisation that in her mother's view 'a woman's *real life* only began with marriage, that girlhood amounts to no more than a privileged looking on' (Bowen, 1946, 60, my emphasis). Jane Rule writes that in Bowen's books 'lesbian experience



bracket[s] the heterosexual experience of marriage and children' (1976, 119). Although Rule's identification of Bowen's fiction as lesbian is highly contentious, she makes the important point that relationships between women become central in precisely those stages in a woman's life which are not considered 'real life' - at school, and in the old age Lehmann hopes to share with her sister.

Bowen and Lehmann, who were friends, have much in common as writers who write within the tradition of the 'woman's novel' and a broadly similar pattern can be traced in their novels, which supports Rule's point. Both their first novels - Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* and Bowen's *The Hotel* (also 1927) - deal with a young girl's intense relationship with and betrayal by another woman. Similarly, their penultimate novels, Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove* (her last full-length novel) and Bowen's *The Little Girls* (1964), deal with older women re-visiting relationships with friends/sisters to understand old rivalries and loves, which they come to understand as central to their lives.

Lehmann also situated herself as a 'sister' in the literary line which reaches back through May Sinclair to the novelists of the nineteenth century:

In those days I knew no other female writers, young or old; with the exception of May Sinclair whose novels excited me, I was singularly ill-read in fiction published in the twentieth century. With the Victorians I was well acquainted. I thought of the nineteenth century literary giants as my great ancestresses, revered, loved, and somehow intimately known.

(1982a, 68-69)

Comparing her critical reception with theirs, she found it comforting to feel 'if in no other sense their match, at least sisterly in suffering with such noble souls' (1982a, 69) - a recognition that women novelists have consistently not been given their due. She shared with Sinclair an admiration for Elizabeth Gaskell. Her article on *Wives and Daughters* (1884-86) entitled 'A Neglected Victorian Classic' (1947), attempts to rescue Gaskell from the pejorative category 'a woman's author' by again asserting the validity of the domestic and the personal as a subject for literature. *Wives and Daughters* is, of course, another rival sisters romance where Molly Gibson unconsciously cedes the man she loves to her half-sister, Cynthia.

The awareness that Lehmann was 'in no sense their match', together with their safe chronological distance, obviates the possibility of rivalry with her 'great ancestresses'. With more contemporary writers (as between Brittain and Holtby) the

question of comparison becomes more problematic. Lehmann's assessment of Woolf is interesting in its implied contrast with herself:

It is true that there was much which [Woolf] lacked, much which was outside the scope of her powers. She was not equipped for a broad grasp of humanity, she had not the kind of richness and sanity, the rooted quality which comes from living a completely fulfilled life as a woman and a mother

(Noble, 1989, 81)

Woolf similarly assessed Lehmann against herself:

I am reading R. Lehmann with some interest and admiration.[...] I am as usual appalled by the machinery of fiction: it's much work for little result. Yet I see no other outlet for her gifts. And these books don't matter - they flash a clear light here and there; but I suppose no more. *But she has all the gifts (I suppose) that I lack: can give story & development & character & so on.*

(Woolf, 1977-1984, vol. III, 314-15, my emphasis)

Neither judgement is totally fair. Lehmann's assessment echoes Woolf's own belief that 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved' (Woolf, 1979, 62), but her acceptance of the myth that one must experience heterosexual love and motherhood to write well prevents Lehmann recognising Woolf's exploration of lesbian sexuality. However, one of Lehmann's most important 'gifts' is her ability to evoke the experience of inhabiting a female body - of sexuality, pregnancy, sterility, childbirth and abortion - which is the silent underside of the romance plot.

The modernist techniques developed by Richardson, Sinclair and Woolf - internal monologue, stream of consciousness, free indirect speech, dreams and memory, shifts in chronology - are used by Lehmann to draw the reader into the text, into the subjective consciousness she is exploring, and to encourage an emotional identification between reader and character. In *The Weather in the Street* especially, frequent ellipses mark gaps, the endless 'not-saids' in conversations, which are filled by the reader herself. In *Dusty Answer* the use of the second person 'you' (frequently used by Sinclair) establishes a dialogue which implicates the reader directly in Judith's thoughts. More than any other writer I have discussed here, Lehmann creates an effect of speaking directly to the reader as a woman, of a dialogue, a conversation 'between women', intimate, confessional and private. It is this carefully crafted effect which explains the intense appeal that these books have for some women. Her books are, in a sense, all 'letters to a sister', and her readers frequently responded in letters to Lehmann - 'Oh

Miss Lehmann, this is my story! - how did you know' (quoted in WS, Introduction) - which carry on this dialogue.

### ***Dusty Answer* (1927)**

*Dusty Answer* is not only a critique of the romance plot, as several critics have noted, but specifically of the triangle romance. The text is a chain of interlocked triangles where 'everybody love[s] someone who loves another person' (DA 294) and desire is endlessly deferred. Its overriding mood is a nostalgia for something which has never happened, never existed - a dream of romance, whether it is with a man, a woman or Cambridge itself. It exposes as an illusion that possibility of unity with another human being, of possession of them, which is the *raison d'être* of the romance plot. At the heart of the novel is a paradox: the deconstruction of romance is accompanied by an intense desire for it.

Where Judith Earle, an isolated only child searching for someone who will 'wait for me and walk in step....', differs from her nineteenth-century predecessors or even Sinclair's protagonists, is in her university education. Like *The Dark Tide* (which was practically banned by Somerville), *Dusty Answer* provoked scandalised reactions, partly, Lehmann recalled, because of the 'intimations of lesbianism' (Guppy, 1993, 154) in the intense relationship between Judith and her fellow student, Jennifer. The novel, Lehmann has said, 'shocked people terribly - some really did see it as the ravings of a nymphomaniac' (Watts, 1988, 154). It was published the year before *The Well of Loneliness*, but while it was a *succès de scandale* there was no suggestion of prosecution. This probably had much to do with the fact that whereas Hall uses the theories of the sexologists to make Stephen's homosexuality explicit and to frame a plea for tolerance, Judith's attraction to Jennifer is not only ambiguous, but is paralleled by her relations with the three Fyfe brothers, especially Roddy. Thus her longings could be interpreted as an adolescent 'crush', a rehearsal for the heterosexual romance plot. While Hall's Stephen takes the place of one of the men in a canonical triangle and hands Mary over to another man, Lehmann offers a triangle of three women - Judith, Jennifer and the older, sophisticated Geraldine Manners - which has more in common with the triangle in Hall's earlier *The Unlit Lamp*.

*Dusty Answer* has frequently been read autobiographically - Lehmann recalled that early reviewers said 'This is obviously this young girl's autobiography and she's not likely to write any more' (Watts, 1988, 154). Such readings miss its close relationship with contemporaneous schoolgirl and college fiction, noted by Muriel Bradbrook :

The sensitive, intelligent, deeply introspective Judith is contrasted with a brilliant, sophisticated, volatile friend who absorbs her only to betray, when a dark sinister woman of the world intervenes. But this, surprisingly enough, is precisely the story of *A Sweet Girl Graduate* [written by L.T. Meade and published in the 1890s].

(1984, 113)

*Dusty Answer*, then, draws on established tropes and patterns, including a three-women triangle, from the genre of the school or college story. These offered a female world, controlled by women, where 'women's friendships are seen as positive, not destructive or competitive, and sufficient unto themselves' (Auchmuty, 1992, 7). Dane's earlier *Regiment of Women* also used the three-women triangle, but to articulate anxieties about this female world and specifically about the pupil-teacher relationship as precisely destructive and competitive, in opposition to the healthy heterosexuality of the co-educational school and marriage.

In contrast, *Dusty Answer* depicts a friendship between peers set in a nostalgic, glamorised version of university life. This intense nostalgia, expressed through an evocation of the beauties of Girton and the Cambridge landscape, is, like that of Sayers's *Gaudy Night*, partly to do with a sense of exclusion - a nostalgia for a university which women, even as students, never actually possessed because it belonged to men. When Sayers went up to Somerville in 1912 and Lehmann to Girton in 1919, women were not granted degrees by the universities, nor allowed membership of the university. James Ginden records that Lehmann felt that she had been at Cambridge during a particularly sexist period. She wrote to her mother when women were granted a 'titular degree' which 'seems to me more like a d\_\_\_\_d cheek than a concession' that the women at Newnham College had had to lock themselves in against a protesting mob who 'smashed the lovely memorial gate and did 700 pounds worth of damage - and *that* is the superior sex!!!' (quoted in Ginden, 1992, 95). Far from proffering a 'healthy' alternative to female education, men were more concerned to keep women out of their territory. This sense of exclusion is summed up in Judith's final sighting of Roddy and Tony:

Farewell to Cambridge, to whom she was less than nothing. She had been deluded into imagining that it bore her some affection. Under its

politeness, it had disliked and distrusted her and all other females;  
and now it ignored her. It took its mists about it, folding within them  
Roddy and Tony and all the other young men; and let her go.

(DA 302)

Whereas both Holtby and Sayers validate education - it is what enables Harriet to marry Wimsey on something of an equal footing, as he tells her 'I find that all I have to give you is Oxford - which was yours already' (Sayers, 1981, 437)) - Cambridge ultimately fails Judith, providing neither career, friendship, nor lover.

Initially, Cambridge is presented as an almost pre-oedipal semiotic world of female bonding which echoes that of the girls' school. Removed from parental control, the girls in *Dusty Answer* inhabit a brief Eden-like space, a 'quiet safe pool' where 'time seems to have stood still', before they are 'emptied out' into 'new life' (DA 188), which for some means the drudgery of teaching 'brats algebra' (DA 186), for others being launched on the marriage market. The 'room of one's own', insisted on by Girton's founder, Emily Davies, provided an important 'psychological sense of freedom' (Vicus, 1985, 142), and Jennifer and Judith's rooms are as stamped with their mark as those of Rebecca or Vera: 'How like Jennifer was her room!' (DA 140) Judith thinks. But they are also class signifiers - Judith's room, with its blue, purple and rose colour, is nicer than many others because she has 'more money' (DA 169). These rooms are an important space for female bonding through shared study and cocoa parties.

Within this female world the friendship between Judith and Jennifer is presented as idyllic and natural. Jennifer, connected with beauty, colour and physical sensuality, is contrasted with the awfulness of the other students: 'immature, untidy, all dull, and all alike, commonplace creatures in the mass' (DA 110). The only other student who is given a name is the awful Mabel Fuller with her lank hair, spots, envy of her pretty sister, Freda, and her eventual nervous breakdown. Yet there is a parallel between Mabel's desire for Judith's friendship and Judith's for Jennifer's: 'We'd - we'd better stick it out together,' said Judith with a blush, fearful her suggestion should condemn her to Jennifer - for Mabel had said it and she had felt sick' (DA 119).

Judith responds particularly to Jennifer's physical beauty: "'Glorious, glorious pagan that I adore!'" whispered the voice in Judith that could never speak out' (DA 137), echoing Lord Alfred Douglas's famous phrase 'the love that dare not speak its name'. Jennifer embodies, or calls to, the repressed part of Judith:

She was the part of you which you had never been able to untie and set free, the part that wanted to dance and run and sing, taking strong draughts of wind and sunlight; and was, instead, done up in intricate notes and overcast with shadows.

(DA 137)

Indeed, the emphasis on the physical beauty and femininity of both Judith and Jennifer in contrast to Hall's masculine Stephen is another possible reason for its relatively benign reception.

Gillian Tindall suggests that Lehmann wrote the book 'wrapped in the kind of innocence [...] that today has become impossible' (1985, 40). But, in fact, the text indicates awareness of contemporary debates around repression and lesbianism. Jennifer remarks that she is sure Mabel Fuller has 'sex-repression' and 'makes straight for the pretty ones' when trying to establish friendships with fellow-students (DA 117). Judith writes to Martin that 'curious things are apt to happen to strictly maiden aunts as all we *enlightened moderns* know' (DA 141, my emphasis). Knowledge of Freudian ideas is part of being 'modern' and sophisticated, as Brittain indicated in her jibe at the 'suspicions habitual among the over-sophisticated' (TF 118).

Placed in its historical context the text can be read as expressing a nostalgia for a (non-existent?) time before Freudian ideas became common currency, when passionate friendship between women was unremarkable, as in the girls school story. Geraldine Manners then represents the 'intrusion of the lesbian stereotype' (Jeffreys, 1985, 121) which makes such 'innocent' friendships impossible. She has the physical appearance of one of the vampire lesbians which Faderman sees as specific to this post-war period, although Frith notes that they occur earlier (Frith, 1988, 16). Both masculine and exotic, beautiful and ugly, fascinating and repulsive, Geraldine is intensely modern, yet older than the students, and 'a match for [Jennifer] in all magnificent unfeminine physical ways, as [Judith] had never been' (DA 158):

The hair was black, short, brushed straight back from the forehead, leaving small, beautiful ears exposed. The heavy eyebrows came low and level on the low broad brow; the eyes were long slits, dark-circled, the cheeks were pale, the jaw heavy and masculine. All the meaning of the face was concentrated in the mouth, the strange wide lips laid rather flat on the face, sulky, passionate, weary, eager. She was not a young girl. It was the face of a woman of thirty or more; but in years she might have been younger.

(DA 161)

This sexually ambiguous appearance echoes that of Roddy's friend, Tony Baring, who has 'a sensitive face [...] a wide mouth with beautiful sensuous lips, thick black hair and a broad wide forehead' (DA 95), 'unmasculine hands' (DA 96) and an effeminate manner. Both are intensely jealous, a jealousy which reflects the fact that they too are unsure of their possession of Jennifer and Roddy's affections. However, Geraldine at first fails to recognise Judith as a rival for Jennifer at all, misreading the situation in terms which recall *Regiment of Women*: "' So you've all sent Jennifer to Coventry' [...] ' A female institution is really marvellous. At least it would be if it weren't so nauseating'" (DA 165).

Gill Frith argues that *Dusty Answer* creates space for the idyllically sensuous yet 'healthy' friendship of Judith and Jennifer by playing it against the 'real' lesbian relationship of Geraldine and Jennifer (1988, 301). This is supported by Jennifer's final letter, which admits the strength of her feelings for Judith and constructs herself as 'the most corrupt disreputable I don't know what' (DA 288), in opposition to Judith as 'still an innocent baby' who doesn't understand 'what it really means being in love' (DA 288): 'I couldn't explain to you how I felt [...] You'd have hated it really, wouldn't you? You are pure and ethereal and I am not. Nor was Geraldine' (DA 289). I would suggest, however, that Lehmann's novel is both more complex and more ambivalent, and that it sets up this contrast only to destabilise it further. The conversation between the two rivals, Judith and Geraldine, is another of those key dialogues between women which is shadowed by another person, the absent Jennifer, who is the 'object' of their exchange. But Judith's 'surrender' of Jennifer to Geraldine is an understanding that:

Perhaps after all you [Judith] had been unlucky to Jennifer, committed that crime of trying to possess her separateness, - craved more than even she could give without destroying herself. So in the end she had gone to someone more wholesome for her nature. Perhaps after all the balance had been sorely ill-adjusted: she your creator, you her destroyer. Perhaps she should be surrendered to Geraldine now, ungrudgingly.

(DA 170)

The problem here seems to be that Judith has attempted to break down the ego boundaries between her and Jennifer. This merger is not an idyllic state which facilitates self-identification but a destructive possession of the other's 'separateness'. It is, in fact, closer to the suffocating nature of Mrs Ogden's love for her daughter, Joan, in *The Unlit Lamp* than to the friendship between Joan and Elizabeth. In this sense, the 'innocent'

Judith is actually *more* dangerous to Jennifer, more of a vampire even, than the supposedly 'unhealthy' Geraldine. Judith, then, cedes Jennifer to the more 'wholesome' Geraldine, much as Hall's Stephen cedes Mary to Martin - but, in this case, the exchange takes place between women, and it is the 'real' lesbian relationship which is, ironically, seen as more 'healthy'.

One of the difficulties in offering a consistent reading of the novel is that the text itself is unstable and ambiguous. This is, I think, because of the rubbing together of two opposed discourses - the school or college story, which values female friendship and the newly emergent discourse of 'inversion' or deviancy. However, the text blurs the distinction between 'homosocial' and 'homosexual' bonds in a way which was to become impossible after the *Well* trial, when the distinction was increasingly enforced. Tindall suggests that the sexual relationships in *Dusty Answer* are 'almost pre-adolescent in their unfocussed androgynous quality' (1985, 38) and, therefore, a prelude to the 'adult life' which, she argues, is the answer to Judith's final question 'What next' (DA 303). But the ending of the novel can equally well be read as a death of the heart - especially given that most of the sections in the book end with a death - Charlie, Judith's father, Martin.

The temptation is to read *Dusty Answer* either as a gynaeceum novel, which foregrounds the primary bonds of women, or as a heterosexual romance plot, however fractured. The difficulty is to reconcile the two, and yet the two central triangles are directly paralleled in the text. Both Jennifer and Roddy are attractive, glamorous, work-shy, sexually ambiguous and forever elusive. Roddy's friendship with Tony excludes Judith, as does Jennifer's with Geraldine.

Simons points out that Lehmann undermines the romance plot by providing *three* potential lovers for Judith (1992, 51): Roddy, Martin, who offers her marriage, and Julian, who asks her to become his mistress. None of these can answer Judith's desires. Lehmann exposes, as Holtby does in *The Crowded Street*, the perceived *inevitability* of the romance plot as a script for women: 'Someday it would happen: it must. She had always known that the play of Roddy must be written and that she must act in it to the end - the happy end' (DA 51). But what follows the sexual consummation of this desire is not the 'happy end' of marriage, but a painful scene which exposes the incompatibility of female and male needs. What for Judith has been all-encompassingly important, is to



Roddy a matter of giving her 'what you wanted: what you were asking for' (DA 227).

Ultimately, Judith has to realise that:

He had never been for her. He had not once, for a single hour, become a part of real life. He had been a recurring dream, a figure seen always with abnormal clarity and complete distortion. The dream had obsessed her whole life with the problem of its significance, but now she was rid of it.

(DA 301)

The 'dream' of the romance plot is just that - a 'recurring dream'.

The romance plot is fractured further by the fact that the text offers Judith a fourth potential lover - Jennifer - only to expose bonding between women as equally impossible. While other texts of the period which critique the romance plot (like Holtby's) use friendship or love for a woman as an alternative to marriage, the parallel between Roddy and Jennifer makes it clear that a relationship with a woman is not an alternative to a relationship with a man. This is not because of the social sanctions against it, but because both are equally elusive.

Furthermore, Lehmann deconstructs the traditional notion of the romance rival as it is explored by Girard or Sedgwick. First in terms of gender - Judith's rival for Roddy is another man, just as her rival for Jennifer is another woman. But more importantly, the ostensible rival is also exposed as a chimera. There can be no competition for the love object because he or she is never possessable, and thus cannot be 'surrendered' or exchanged. Jennifer leaves Geraldine just as she left Judith. Roddy acknowledges that Tony loves him but never indicates that the feeling is reciprocated. Desire is always frustrated, not because the beloved is taken by another, but because the beloved him/herself is always 'other', always unattainable.

If the romance novel, as Janice Radway (1987) suggests, expresses the female desire to return to the state of oneness with the mother, through a socially approved union with the man, then *Dusty Answer* can be read as an expression of the impossibility of recreating that primary bond - with either a man, or another woman. In psychoanalytic terms the problem here is not that (as in *The Unlit Lamp*) the mother is suffocating, but that she is unattainable. Both Judith and Jennifer have unsatisfactory, distant mothers and Judith's lonely isolation is strongly foregrounded. Jennifer's comment that Judith 'used to look after me and kiss me as if you were my mother' (DA 289) puts that friendship on a level of maternal caring. The recreation of the primary bond with the mother is

impossible, not because it would mean rivalry with the father who forbids it, as in the Freudian paradigm, but because the *mother* is ultimately and always 'other', and that primary bond has itself never existed. This is not a lost Eden, but one we have never in fact possessed. The repetitive nature of romance reading is echoed in *Dusty Answer's* chain of triangles, each offering, then frustrating, fulfilment.

While the ending of *Dusty Answer* resembles that of *Mary Olivier* in its emphasis on the separation of the female self from others - Judith is rid of 'the weakness, the futile obsession of dependence on other people' (DA 303) - it offers no compensation through work or creativity. The reader is left to decide whether Judith's final state of 'emptiness' with 'no-thought and no-feeling' (DA 303) is a positive shedding of illusions preparatory to adulthood, as Tindall suggests, or a death of the heart. But the suggestion of the text is that although the dream of romance is only a dream it is all we have, and that makes any other option - 'find work, write a book, something...' (DA 280) - a 'dusty answer'.

### ***The Weather in the Streets* (1936)**

*The Weather in the Streets* is another rewriting of the *Jane Eyre* romance: a déclassé woman in love with an older, richer man with an invalid wife. By making her protagonist the 'Other Woman' - Olivia Curtis, twenty-seven, separated from her husband, living on the fringes of Bohemian London life - Lehmann is 'writing beyond the ending' of the marriage plot with a vengeance. Judy Simons comments that Lehmann's use of the familiar romance plot

functions as a reassessment of traditional narrative formulae as they apply to women, exposing romance as a protracted form of anguish rather than as a source of fulfilment. [...] the text comprises a savage attack on the patriarchal establishment, complacent and hierarchical, that conspires against vulnerable women.

(1992, 78)

Lehmann's analysis of the economies of class and gender makes it clear that Olivia, despite her status as a modern, sexually liberated woman, is worse off than *Jane Eyre*. As Patsy Stoneman suggests, *Jane Eyre's* love sharpens her sense of identity, while Olivia's erodes hers (1996, 98), as an affair with Carne would have destroyed Sarah's. Rollo's final car accident does not bring him down to Olivia's level, it merely allows him to reinstate his hold over her. Olivia's reading of *Pride and Prejudice* while waiting for the abortion to take effect is the cruellest cut of all. The novel is in dialogue not only with

the discourse of the romance novel but with that of the new women's magazines of the 1930s which, as I noted in Chapter One, repeatedly warned married woman about the dangers of the 'Other Woman', the 'vamp'. As Olivia says:

'Well, it's all worked out like they tell you in *Woman's World*. A husband may stray, but home ties are strongest, and if you hang on he'll come back. It's the Other Woman who gets had for a mug.'  
(WS 336)

What Lehmann's text makes clear through its exploration of Olivia's imaginary construction of Rollo's wife as 'Other' is the continuing commodification of women as rival sexual objects to be used by men.

This, however, is set against a network of female bonds which make it clear how primary such bonds are to women. Olivia's story begins in the earlier *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), when she attends her first dance - a rite of passage which signals her movement into adulthood and the marriage market. The notion of identity as contingent on relations with others which Lehmann develops in these two novels is close to the Bakhtinian concept, as well as Holtby's notion. Again, the images of mirrors and the reflective gaze of others are important. Olivia remarks to Rollo:

'It's all in the eye of the beholder - *We* don't know what we look like. We're not just ourselves - we're a tiny nut of self, and the rest a mass of unknown quantities - according to who's looking at us.'  
(WS 17, original emphasis)

The subject is part of a web of interconnections within which identity is constructed and endlessly reconstructed in relation to others, and in relation to earlier selves.

Olivia's own sense of identity is particularly fluid. The question she asks herself in *The Weather in the Streets* - 'Do I exist? Where is my place?' (WS 78) - is at the heart of *Invitation to the Waltz*, where she is unsure of her 'place' because she is in flux between girlhood and adulthood. In the mirror 'fitfully, rarely a stranger might emerge', a mysterious 'new self' (IW 11), constructed through the romance discourse: 'It was the portrait of a young girl in pink' (IW 12). Remembering the dance, she remarks that she was 'so peculiar that evening - so in a flux....Seeing myself in dozens of distorting mirrors....' (WS 134). These 'mirrors' offer her different versions of herself - Major Skinner, Uncle Oswald and the 'old fogey' (IW 238) Mr Verity, for instance, who make her aware of herself as an object of sexual desire for elderly men.

The most important of the mirroring others in *Invitation to the Waltz*, however, is her elder sister, Kate, in relation to whom Olivia is struggling to construct an appropriately feminine identity. According to McConville, the key question sisters ask is 'Will I be like her - or different?' (1985, 33). For Olivia, the answer at this point seems to be 'different'. While Olivia is awkwardly half way between child and woman, Kate makes the transition easily. Banded together in sisterly conspiracy against their mother, communicating 'without word or glance' (IW 23), it is Kate who tries to help Olivia make the leap into adulthood, choosing the flame-coloured silk for Olivia's dress. Femininity is presented not as 'natural' but as a learned 'masquerade', constructed most obviously through clothes.

The two sisters are clearly 'commodities' packaged ready for the marriage market. Dressed for the dance, they stand together in front of the mirror:

After a bit Kate said:

'Thank heaven, anyway, we don't look alike.'

Olivia ventured:

'We set each other off really rather well, don't you think?' She thought: The younger girl, with her gypsy colouring, afforded a rich foil to her sister's fair beauty.

(IW 134)

This is a version of the 'mirror ritual' Frith has identified, which opens up 'the possibility of a feminine identity which is *not* unitary' but a split 'between two kinds of femininity' (1988, 13, original emphasis). While in nineteenth-century novels the two women look together - and this is 'often a moment of simultaneous identification and separation, defining a difference between "true" and "false" femininity' (1988, 11) - in twentieth-century versions the heroine is more usually alone, but sees her own reflection through the eyes of another woman.

Lehmann's version is slightly different. Kate's relief that they do not look alike is part of the sisterly anxiety about sameness and an assertion of her difference. Olivia, on the other hand, uses the discourse of romantic fiction which constructs the two girls as rival commodities competing for male attention. She sees herself not through Kate's eyes, but through an imaginary anonymous male gaze. This imagined 'third term' transforms the sisters into a triangle within which female identity is constructed in terms of the difference of romance rivalry. Here Lehmann subverts the traditional distinctions

between the virginal romance heroine and her rival, by making Olivia, a 'scarlet woman' in her flame-coloured dress, her heroine.

It's noticeable that other people in the novel see them in terms of this romance rivalry. Miss Robinson tells Olivia 'You'll be cutting your sister out' (IW 59). Even Mrs Curtis measures the two sisters against each other to gauge their 'success' at the dance. Kate's superiority is established when she attracts the notice of Tony Heriot. Yet, again, there is another side to this economy. The unpleasant Podge tells Olivia: 'You're all alike, you girls. Just a lot of scalp-hunters. Sitting around and counting your scalps and bragging' (IW 220-21). Men are also commodified by the marriage market, hunted for their money and the status they confer on a woman.

In *The Weather in the Streets* Olivia's sense of fluid identity is because separation from her husband makes her position 'ambiguous' (WS 11). No longer definable in terms of her relation to a man, she is, like the unmarried Etty, one of the 'superfluous women' (WS 232). Kate, on the other hand, happily married to a doctor and with four children, has clearly moved into the position of 'mother'. Kate is, Olivia suspects other people think, the successful sister: 'the sensible sister...the one who'd avoid getting into trouble: so different from the younger one....' (WS 93-94).

Kate's seniority as the elder sister is enforced by her position as a married woman. As in Holtby's 'An Episode in West Kensington', the dialogue between the two sisters is a negotiation of power differentials, and the reader is again aware that there are advantages and disadvantages to both marriage and independence. Olivia's remark, 'We sex-starved women have cravings you comfortable wives and mothers don't dream of' (WS 36), suggests a superiority to Kate in Olivia's independent openness to experience, but Kate's 'And vice versa' undercuts it.

Despite these tensions, Olivia and Kate, and even Mrs Curtis, have a strong sense of the bonds which connect them as a family unit:

Across the table they began to ply a peaceful shuttle between the three of them, renewing, re-enforcing, patching over rents and frayed places with old serviceable thread. They were tough still; they were a family. That which had chanced to tie them all up together from the start persisted irrevocably, far below consciousness, far beyond the divergences of the present, uniting them in a mysterious reality, independent of reason. As it was in the beginning, is now...

(WS 59 - 60)

This dialogically constructed identity remains a constant presence throughout life. Looking back on her childhood, Olivia feels that 'All that was important: had made an experience of emotion more complex, penetrating and profound, yes, than getting married' (WS 129). The lifelong nature of the sister bond means that Olivia feels she knows Kate better than anyone, even her husband: 'I alone know her, some exaggeration...' (WS 258). It is both 'exaggeration' and truth.

Their relationship echoes those in the earlier generation. Mrs Curtis still misses her sister, May, feeling that Kate's companionship only nearly fills the 'blank' left by May's death which 'ached irremediably, a cruel amputation' (WS 57). Even the dignified Lady Spencer and her sister Blanche playing backgammon together are bonded by shared memories: 'You always were *revolting* at games' (WS 113) the losing Blanche tells her sister. Olivia's friendship with Anna is an idealised version of supportive sisterhood, lacking the tension of sibling rivalry, while Etty is genuinely kind to Olivia, despite her frivolity. By placing these female bonds within the context of the romance plot, Lehmann shows how that plot keeps women apart. Olivia cannot share her love for Rollo with anyone, even Kate, and she finds that she loses her friends because they think of her as 'under a glass case' (WS 316).

In contrast, men fail to either understand or fulfil female needs. When Olivia tells Rollo 'You don't like women really, do you?' he replies, kissing her ear, 'There's one or two things I quite like about them' (WS 161). In other words, he sees them as commodities, using them as objects to meet his sexual needs. He rarely uses Olivia's name, always calling her 'darling or something' (WS 192) and, similarly, usually refers to Nicola as 'my wife'. Both women become anonymous, their identities negated by their position as 'wife' or 'mistress' in relation to the man. The emerald ring he gives Olivia indicates this - it 'said Nicola, Marigold, not Olivia [...] saying only with what degree of luxury he could afford to stamp a woman' (WS 159). Similarly, we can guess that Rob may not know Kate at all, except as 'wife' and 'mother'. In which case Olivia may be the only person 'who *really* knows' Kate.

Olivia's attraction to Rollo is tangled with the class glamour with which his whole family is suffused, especially his sister Marigold, with whom she shared childhood lessons. Olivia is 'in love with the whole lot of them' (WS 281). Like Jennifer, Marigold is sexually ambiguous and tells Olivia, 'I bet if I were like that [i.e. lesbian] I'd make a

pass at you' (WS 106). This oblique pass mirrors Rollo's later move and Marigold's desire that Rollo and Olivia should have an affair (WS 275) suggests that Rollo acts out his sister's desire. Though Olivia feels 'foolish, uneasy' (WS 106) with Marigold's approach, there is again a blurring of homosocial/ homosexual desire. The funnelling of possibly lesbian desire into a heterosexual relationship is one more thread in the pattern which draws Olivia to Rollo.

The relationship with Rollo is the classic erotic triangle - man, wife, mistress - where the identity of both women depends on their relation to the man and to each other. As Rollo's mistress Olivia moves into the role of 'prostitute'. Her refusal to take money or expensive presents from Rollo or to allow him to set her up in her own flat indicates her awareness of this position, and her determination to maintain her integrity. Ironically, when Olivia first goes to dinner at the Spencers' she wears a white dress (borrowed from Kate) which makes her look 'like a young girl and a pretty one' (WS 64). In other words, it reinserts her into the position of 'virgin', as Rollo indicates when he tells her she is 'so *young*. [...] You're like a young girl' (WS 132). Again, femininity is a construct, manufactured by clothes.

Like Judith, Olivia has internalised the romance plot, telling Rollo: 'I always knew I should meet you again' (WS 134). The white dress signals both this belief in the romance plot and her unsuitability as a 'woman of experience' (WS 132) to play the role of the heroine. But it also parallels her with Rollo's wife, Nicola. When Rollo tells Olivia 'I love white. Dark ladies in white dresses' (WS 124) she remembers 'Nicola wore white satin...with her knot of dark polished hair' (WS 125). Nicola's dress connotes not just her virginity but her frigidity, and her class status - it is white satin, expensive and exotic among the pastel coloured debutantes.

Nicola appears directly only once in the two novels. In *Invitation to the Waltz* Olivia sees her coming down the stairs in a classic film scenario:

[Nicola] stood half-way down, looking about her, then catching sight of Rollo, from what seemed an immense distance, raised her hand slowly, summoning him. The pose as she fell into it assumed a static quality like sculpture [...] There was less of appeal than assurance in the deliberate gesture; she knew he would come.

(IW 283-84)

Gillian Tindall has called Nicola the 'archetypal Other Person' (1985, 93). She is, anticipating du Maurier's *Rebecca*, an absent presence, existing as a sign - 'wife' 'rival' -

rather than as a person. She is present in *The Weather in the Streets* only through the repetition of the image of her on the stairs and through the speech and thoughts of the other characters. The nearest we get to her is when Olivia looks into her bedroom and admits: 'she's real, I'm jealous of her' (WS 193). In both *Rebecca* and *Vera*, the first wife's room serves a mediating function, allowing identification between the women. Here it serves to indicate Nicola's otherness, and the fact that no connection, no dialogue, can be established with her.

Yet Nicola's existence as the third corner of the triangle which structures the novel determines Olivia's identity. Within the text she functions as a 'mirror' opposite, reflecting Olivia as 'mistress' in opposition to her 'wife', both in relation to the 'third term' Rollo. Olivia's construction of Nicola as the 'other woman' - her rival - depends on that opposition, within which she can construct herself as different and therefore preferred by Rollo. Nicola is a 'beautiful protected doll [...] not a wife' (WS 164), an 'Upper-class parasite! Hysterical little vampire!' (WS 204), so Olivia prides herself on not making a fuss, never being jealous, not being a crier. Yet she recognises that 'I put her like that, a wax figure immune in a show case, to account for her, to make her harmless...' (WS 158).

Specifically, Olivia constructs herself as the sexual woman in opposition to Nicola's supposed frigidity: 'If she slept with him...But she doesn't, of course - that's what it is...She won't. Poor Rollo....But I comfort him, I always will' (WS 188). As in *The Return of the Soldier* there is an opposition of sexual/non-sexual, lower-class/upper-class woman. As Olivia constructs her, Nicola resembles Kitty - exquisite, well-bred, cold and non-sexual - while Olivia is both lower class and sexual. This sexual division, as Nicola's subsequent pregnancy reveals, is a delusion.

*The Weather in the Streets* exposes the class and economic power differentials on which the classic romance is based. These are evident from Rollo and Olivia's initial meeting on the train when he has a full breakfast while she, having only one and sixpence in her purse, has just a cup of coffee. Despite her Oxford education, Olivia exists in a genteel and specifically feminine poverty. Rollo's wealthy country-gentry background is part of his masculinity and his attraction, part of the glamour attached to his family. He has 'the kind of English appearance and manner that makes waiters and porters press forward wherever he goes, expecting his tips to be liberal and his name quietly



distinguished' (WS 189). Tellingly, he would 'never eat anywhere inferior or female' (WS 162). The title of the novel is taken from an image used to convey Olivia's sense of the time when they were in love:

Beyond the glass casing I was in, was the weather, were the winter streets in rain, wind, fog, in the fine frosty days and nights, the mild, damp grey ones. Pictures of London winter the other side of the glass - not reaching the body; no wet ankles, muddy stockings, blown hair, cold-aching cheeks, fog-smarting eyes, throat, nose...not my usual bus-taking London winter. It was always indoors or in taxis or in his warm car; it was mostly in the safe dark, or in half-light in the deepest corner of the restaurant, as out of sight as possible.

(WS 145)

Here it is the dream of romance which forms a glass case around Olivia. But that her access to this style of comfort and class status is conditional on her relationship with Rollo is indicated by the half-lighted restaurants chosen to conceal them from people of his own class.

Moreover, the text explores the eroticisation of this power differential. In their first meeting Olivia becomes aware that he is 'Fighting, subduing me....What'll happen? He might hit me, kiss me....' (WS 26). Later she wonders, 'What did it mean? I was to be punished, subjugated....He must dominate' (WS 50). And then just before they do kiss, when he grabs her hand in the car, 'Overtaken, caught, punished....' (WS 131). This slippage between the male desire to hit and to kiss is a standard convention in romance fiction. Tania Modleski (1984) suggests that it offers women a way of explaining male brutality by revealing it as the result of love, not contempt. The eroticisation of male domination and female submission in the romance of this period is at its most blatant in E.M. Hull's best-seller, *The Sheik* (1919). In Hull's novel the boyish and independent heroine suffers abduction and repeated rape at the hands of an inscrutable Arab sheik, who tames her, as he breaks his horses, into submissive womanliness. Her reward is not only his final love for her, and the power over him that gives her, but the revelation that he is in fact an English aristocrat.

As Margaret Jackson (1994) has shown, the eroticisation of male domination and female submission as 'natural' in the work of the sexologists, especially Ellis, and the marriage guidance literature of the inter-war period, was an important strategy in the control of female sexuality. *The Weather in the Streets* examines this eroticisation of women's oppression, economic and sexual, and exposes the final power reversal of the

romance novel, whereby the man's desire for the woman renders him vulnerable, as an illusion. Rollo's love for Olivia is never overwhelming, merely 'fun' (WS 383).

Olivia's abortion is the culmination of Lehmann's deconstruction of the power differential of romance plot, an exposure of its silenced underside. Although *The Weather in the Streets* was not the first novel to depict an abortion (both F. Tennyson Jesse's *A Pin To See the Peepshow* (1934) and Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) preceded it), Lehmann's publishers required half a page to be cut from the English version (Tindall, 1985, 76). The economics of the situation are made painfully clear by the abortionist's fingering of the bronze 'female figures, semi-nude' (WS 288) he collects. His trade, like that of Sinclair's Rowcliffe, is in female bodies: 'Whose envelope paid for those? What'll he buy with the next one?' (WS 289), wonders Olivia. It is, significantly, the abortionist's son, not his daughter, who is educated at Harrow on the proceeds of this illegal trafficking. The abortion initiates Olivia into a 'female conspiracy' of women 'all in the same boat' (WS 239), including her cousin Etty, an under class of women at the mercy of the 'physical processes' (WS 238) of their bodies.

Their parallel pregnancies mark both Olivia and Nicola's similarity as women, and their different social and legal status. Both women are commodities used by the male - 'The female, her body used, made fertile' (WS 230) - but Nicola, as the 'precious vessel for the heir' (WS 333), is cosseted and protected. However, Olivia comes to an understanding of Nicola as human, not the other woman as a madwoman in an attic, but as a woman who, like Olivia herself, suffers from loving men. It is the discovery of Nicola's unrequited love for Archie (whom Olivia too fancied as a child) which forces Olivia to realise 'Now one must accept her as real, as human and suffering' (WS 341).

The narrative form of *The Weather in the Streets*, with its sophisticated use of interior monologue, draws the reader into an identification with Olivia. Maroula Joannou suggests that *The Weather in the Streets* 'interpellates the woman reader whose perspective the familiar narrative of seduction has traditionally failed to recognise' (1995, 144). Another way of putting this might be to say that the text itself *seduces* the reader, as does the popular romance, only to break that contract with the abrupt and shocking shift from 'I' to 'She' between parts two and three. The shift signals the end of the dream of romance and the surfacing of its silenced underside - a shift from the supposedly transhistorical notion of romance to the historically specific. It is because of

this identification with Olivia's point of view that Nicola always remains 'other' in the text.

Bearing in mind the importance of dialogue between women both in Lehmann's texts and the others I have discussed, it is striking that the one important conversation Olivia never has is with Nicola. Not only is there is no dialogue between them, but we never even hear Nicola's speech reported by others. We only see her making that mute gesture of command to Rollo. The key conversation Olivia does have is the one with Lady Spencer who, acting on behalf of Nicola (though, we assume, without her knowledge), suggests that Olivia 'sacrifice' (WS 278) her love for Rollo by giving him up in a version of the nineteenth-century self-sacrifice motif. Only in one instance does Olivia imagine talking to Nicola and that is when she attempts to imagine the affair going on into her own old age:

Rollo would die and I'd step forward afterwards and say I loved him too, and Nicola would turn to me for comfort, we'd set up together. I'd look after her....God knows what muck went through my head....  
(WS 196)

Female bonding comes before or after the romance plot but, as in *South Riding*, it seems to be only the death of the man, the object of rivalry, which can bring the two women together. It is in this brief passage that we find the seeds of *The Echoing Grove* where Lehmann combines the figures of the sister and the rival, establishing a reconciliatory dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, Rosamond Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove* (1953) both brings together the themes I have been discussing and offers a retrospective on the inter-war period. The novel's framework is a reconciliatory dialogue between two sisters, Madelaine and Dinah Burkett, set over twenty-four hours in November 1946, but the main action and the reason for their fifteen-year estrangement - Dinah's affair with Madelaine's husband Rickie - takes place in the 1930s. This central triangle revises that in *The Weather in the Streets* and fuses the female rival with the sister to explore the intersection of sibling rivalry and romance rivalry.

Plot and character similarities, as well as a direct reference, suggest that *The Echoing Grove* is also in dialogue with Sinclair's *The Three Sisters*. Sinclair's novel is evoked by Georgie, who functions as a kind of alter ego to Dinah, in a conversation with Rickie, just three days before he dies:

'[...] then you said, was the human condition always frustration then? And I said yes, but could be like *The Three Sisters* or that story *The Dead* - the kind that starts echoes afterwards, backwards and forwards for ever wherever you strike it - one echo picking up another till the whole thing *sounds out* like a fulfilment...'

(EG 231, original emphasis)

As I noted, Lehmann was influenced by her early reading of Sinclair. This, as well as the theme of the novel and faint echoes in the names of characters (Mary/Madelaine, Gwenda/Dinah, Cartaret/Burkett, Rowcliffe/Rickie), make it likely that it is Sinclair's novel rather than Chekhov's *Three Sisters* which Georgie is invoking. (Incidentally, Joyce's 'The Dead' is another text which uses sisters.)

Sinclair's novel could be regarded as the 'strike' which re-echoes, decades later, in Lehmann's novel as she continues Sinclair's project of exploring female desire. The frustrated affair between Dinah and Rickie is the catalyst which starts 'echoes' moving 'backwards and forwards'. The novel's remarkable circular narrative is made up of the 'echoes' of memory, moving from one character's consciousness to another until 'the whole thing sounds out like a fulfilment'. The past is revisited through Madelaine and Dinah's memories but also, as key scenes are told through a memory of one character retelling them to another, through the consciousnesses of others. The meaning of the novel is thus constructed dialogically through a process of remembering previous

utterances, and (because the reader knows the end from the beginning) anticipating future ones.

Where *The Echoing Grove* moves on from *The Three Sisters* is in establishing a dialogue between the two sisters, both through juxtaposing their consciousnesses in the text (as in *The Judge*) and through their conversation. Like West, Lehmann refuses to allow the reader to sympathise with only one woman. Both Madelaine and Dinah occupy the position of 'heroine' and 'the other woman' simultaneously, a subversion of the binary opposites of the romance plot. The book is, to borrow the phrase coined by Breuer's patient, 'Anna O', a 'talking cure' (Freud and Breuer, 1991, 83), but one which, like Irigaray's 'When Our Lips Speak Together', takes place between women. It breaks the silence which is 'the great enemy' (Pearce, 1994, 171), but which can only be broken once the sisters have moved out of the romance stage of their lives, and, as in *South Riding*, after the death of the man. By entering into a reciprocal dialogue the two sisters are reconstructing their identities in relation to each other through an acknowledgement of both self and other as equal subjects.

The initial meeting between the sisters illustrates how the shifting power dynamics of competition can co-exist with the easy banter of a shared family background: 'Unspoken, the challenging testing exchange went on beneath the ripple of superficial commentary and question, the small bursts of laughter that exploded between them like bubbles released under pressure' (EG 11-12). The 'ghost or shadow' fracturing the sisters' conversation is Rickie, whose name is initially a 'not said' in their discourse: 'Now the name was said. Perfectly simple. Now the tension would drop' (EG 11). However, a host of other 'ghosts', including their mother, hover over their discourse.

Dinah's affair with her sister's husband is the ultimate betrayal, transgressing not just sisterly loyalty but also religious and legal taboos, as Madelaine indicates:

'One's own sister...It does seem a bit - out of the ordinary. This letter seems to imply her intention is - or your joint intention is - to break up our marriage. It's rather frowned on, isn't it? - in that list of relations, I mean, in the Prayer Book.'

'Oh yes,' [Rickie] agreed politely. 'That's putting it mildly.'

'Not even *deceased* wife's sister.'

(EG 98-99)

According to the table of kindred and affinity in the Book of Common Prayer, the wife's sister became by marriage a 'sister' to the husband and sexual relations with her incest.

The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill in 1907 made it legal for a man to marry his deceased wife's sister but not the sister of a living wife: Rickie remarks to Madelaine that 'You're not under the delusion, are you, that the law allows me to marry Dinah?' (EG 138). The central question in this text, which Madelaine obliquely asks Dinah in the final pages, is *why? Why* did Dinah have an affair with her sister's husband, when such an affair is so strongly tabooed?

While Sinclair's text is informed by psychoanalysis, Lehmann's characters themselves are *au fait* with psychoanalytical jargon: 'Death wish. Birth trauma. Narcissism, sadism, masochism: the terms of reference were all available' (EG 181). Even Rickie corrects his 'old-fashioned' comment that Madelaine is 'singularly unsuspicious' to 'I mean, she's an escapist' (EG 104). He himself is 'on the schizophrenic side', while Corrigan who betrayed the affair to Madelaine is 'a psychopath, with paranoiac delusions based on guilt' (EG 104). As his flippancy indicates, such labels are inadequate in the face of the complexities of human behaviour.

Psychoanalytic ideas were a releasing force for May Sinclair, but by the 1930s, as Holtby indicated, they had become a straitjacket. Whereas Sinclair's Gwenda sacrifices her desire for her sister's sake, Dinah could be said to sacrifice her sister for her desire in line with the popularised Freudian ideology that modern women should act on their sexual desires, regardless of other loyalties. Madelaine blazes at Rickie: '*She*'ll tell you nothing matters - trust, marriage, children, nothing. Not even *decency*. Experience is the great thing! Taste life to the full! Devil, *devil* - she's done it - ruined my life, she always meant to' (EG 99, original emphasis). As Mrs Burkett sees it, her daughters' generation are 'bent, all of them, on fulfilling themselves with the aid of textbooks' (EG 155). Freudian 'morality' has superseded not only the morality of the Prayer Book, but also the sisterly loyalty of the Victorian novelists. Dinah does indeed at one point suggest that she has attempted to cede Rickie to Madelaine - 'I did, so to speak, deliberately relinquish him and hand him back' (EG 38) - but one of the things the novel makes clear is the impossibility of doing this because of the impossibility of ever possessing another person.

The unspoken question *Why?* is answered in the sisters' final conversation in a way which evokes the labels of psychoanalysis but moves beyond them:

'What happened happened because...' [Dinah] paused. 'I suppose a number of things contributed to it.'

'For instance?'

'Propinquity. Hysteria. Escapism. Sense of failure. Impulse of self-destruction. Me. You. Rickie...' She sniffed again; then sighed. 'Can't think of any more.'

In the darkness Madelaine could be seen to rub her eyes and forehead.

'I suppose,' continued Dinah, 'my jealousy of you had gone on growing. I couldn't compete in your world. And you made it so plain I wasn't really acceptable. I don't mean you particularly - all of you.'

'Oh, nonsense! Anyway, *you* were the one; you despised my friends. At least you behaved as if you did.'

'Yes I did.' Her voice was brisk. 'They didn't like me. I tried so hard too! They couldn't stomach me. Plain, highbrow and intense...'

'You weren't plain. You can't have been. You were always very attractive. Much more attractive than me really - anyway, to men.'

'That's nonsense. Simply more business-like. More determined not to fail. I was bound to feel more competitive, with a handicap like you know who.'

(EG 300)

It is the sibling rivalry between Madelaine and Dinah which has been the determining factor in this triangle. The sister bond is more powerful, long-lasting and determining than the sexual bond between men and women. To put it at its most basic, Dinah has the affair with Rickie *because* he is her elder sister's husband.

Within the patriarchal economy their sibling rivalry is re-enforced by romance rivalry, by competition over who is more attractive to men. This complicates the stereotype that heterosexual relationships override all other loyalties to the extent that women will betray even those closest to them in order to catch a husband. Here, echoing Girard's contention that it is the bond with the rival not that with the beloved which is determining, it is the sister bond which actually determines the betrayal. Rickie is the conduit here, a pawn in their game. Madelaine's comment to him, 'Don't you see this is just another move in the same old game?' (EG 85), assumes that Dinah's actions are determined by this game-playing rather than by her desire for Rickie. Rickie's sense of his position in this 'game' is articulated when, having left Dinah in one taxi, he and Madelaine get into another and for a fleeting moment he thinks it is the same vehicle:

He smelt a rat. Dinah was inside, in ambush, hugging herself with laughter, preparing with Madelaine's connivance to disclose herself. In another moment he would be stripped, raked by their deadly cross-fire. Strident voices would pierce him, claws seize him, drag him to and fro.

(EG 49)

The 'rat' Rickie smells recalls/anticipates the rat which is killed by the sisters in the opening scenes. Rickie himself is killed by the two women, as surely as Carne is killed by Sarah - his first illness, the bursting of his duodenal ulcer, happens when he leaves Madelaine for Dinah. 'I haven't forgotten Rickie,' Dinah tells her mother, 'Or what we did to him' (EG 166). Rickie's position as an object of exchange within their rivalry leads directly to his death.

So, what is the nature of the bond between the sisters and what was their childhood rivalry for exactly? The relationship between the two women as blood sisters is strongly foregrounded and precludes a Freudian interpretation of female rivalry as the daughter's competition with her mother for the attention of the father. The novel explores the competition between two 'economies' - the 'male hom(m)osexual economy' in which women are constructed as rival commodities, and a 'female economy' of primary bonds between women. Romance rivalry maps onto and re-enforces sibling rivalry.

Toni McNaron's suggestion that 'sisters, when they are jealous over a parent, may well be jealous over their mother' (1985, 6) suggests another interpretation. The relationship between the sisters and their mother is certainly problematic, while their father, who never appears directly, favoured Madelaine (EG 127). Mrs Burkett is, like most of Lehmann's Edwardian generation mother figures (Mrs Earle, Mrs Curtis, Mrs Landon) rather distant, especially in comparison to the warm relationship between Mrs Ritchie (a mother of Lehmann's generation) and Jane in the stories in *The Gypsy's Baby* (1946). The conversation between Mrs Burkett and Dinah after Rickie's death, for instance, is conducted in 'the dry tone that was part of the game - the particular type of backhand volley they practised enjoyably together' (EG 158). Game-playing seems endemic to this family. Mrs Burkett relaxes into warmth towards only two objects, both male. The first is Rickie, her 'spirit's son' (EG 155) with whom she is more than a little in love. Dinah tells her 'Of the three of us I think he liked you best. You'd have suited him best, too' (EG 158), which Mrs Burkett does not deny. The second is her male cat, Griswold. Given that Dinah and Madelaine have two brothers, the barely-mentioned Henry and Charles, it would not be surprising if they had had to compete for their mother's attention.



This is never spelt out in the novel. It is one of its strengths that the text resists exactly the kind of analysis which I am trying to generate and refuses to allow us to regard its characters as psychoanalytic types: 'I'm not an *hystérique*,' Dinah tells Rickie (EG 114). 'Steer clear of Freud,' one character tells another in *A Sea Grape Tree* (1976), 'There are more constructive ways of getting to know yourself' (1982c, 63). Another passage in *A Sea Grape Tree* provides a background for the childhood rivalry of Madelaine and Dinah. Rebecca Landon reflects:

Strange but true, families are the cruellest company in these predicaments: forcing you back to the roots, and oh! how the roots tug, threaten, ache; whispering the old competitive comparisons, guilts, atavisms, insecurities. Plain, pretty; clever, stupid; naughty, good; bad marks, top marks; spiteful; selfish; jealous; unfair; unkind; unjust; your fault; my fault; his fault; her fault; best loved, not loved, lonely, lonely, failure, FAILURE...

(1982c, 85)

Family life is the crucible within which identity is formed, and the labels or roles then affixed, like those in the romance plot, work by binary oppositions: pretty/plain, clever/stupid. Rebecca's outburst parallels a similar cry of despair in Woolf's diary:

I am unhappy unhappy! Down - God, I wish I were dead. Pause. But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes; I detect that. Failure failure.

(Woolf, 1977-1984, vol. III, 110)

Like Woolf and Bell, though in different ways, Madelaine and Dinah are polarised into opposites: mother/barren, non-sexual/sexual, wife/mistress, fair/dark, conventional/Bohemian. The divisive and restrictive labels imposed by adults are the 'distorting mirrors' from which we construct our identities. And in a world where women's value is always determined by their relation to a man it is the issue of sexual attractiveness which is the most divisive difference

Yet it is Rickie, the 'third term' against whom their 'value' as wife/mistress is constructed, who understands the similarity between the two women as part of a family unit. He notes 'the similarity of the comments these girls made about each other' (EG 121), reflects that 'Both these sisters were very sarcastic' (EG 102), and comments that 'I also wronged one of those girls rather more than the other' (EG 275). As his reflection that 'There was never any knowing what went on between those sisters' (EG 268) indicates, he acts as a conduit between the two women. When they talk to him the 'ghost or shadow' fracturing their discourse is that of the other sister, to whom their discourse

is in some ways addressed. The strength of their bond, based in the 'roots' of a shared childhood, is indicated by their assertions of their primary knowledge of the other in terms that echo Olivia's feelings about Kate. Madelaine tells Rickie 'I know her better than you do' (EG 85).

It is significant, then, that the sisters, who had faced each other across Rickie's deathbed as rivals (an ironic comment on Olivia's fantasy that she and Nicola could become friends after Rollo's death), begin their reconciliation over their mother's deathbed. The novel's central theme of reconciliation is emblematised by the jade cufflinks with their Maltese crosses (a symbol of forgiveness (Tindall 1985, 181)), which are used to 'link' sections together, and in the Blake quotation which Rickie had intended to have inscribed on a bracelet for Dinah: 'And throughout all Eternity/I forgive you, you forgive me' (EG 256). It is also symbolised by the moon, echoing *The Three Sisters*, and, again, a circular image. During their final conversation Madelaine watches the moon: 'Before the intentness of her stare the globe in the sky divided: twin moons swam in and out of one another' (EG 304). Then: 'She focused carefully; the twin discs slid together like a pair of folding lenses' (EG 304). It is an image of the two women as '*neither one nor two*' (Irigaray, 1985, 26) which almost anticipates Irigaray's 'Living mirrors' (1981, 61).

This image suggests a further interpretation of the text - that the two sisters are not only versions of Lehmann's sisters, but also, as Tindall suggests, 'two aspects of their creator's own personality' (1985, 192). That Lehmann herself denies the latter suggestion and emphasizes Dinah's similarity to Beatrix (Guppy, 1993, 162) does not preclude it being true on an unconscious level. McNaron suggests that between sisters there is often an 'unspoken, probably unconscious, pact that neither sister need develop all her potential. Living as closely as most sisters do, each can see some of herself being acted out by her sibling' (1985, 8). As a writer Lehmann can use fictional characters as 'sisters' to act out different parts of herself, creating a, sometimes competitive, dialogue between them. The woman writer, then, may see not only her literary ancestresses as her 'sisters', but also her characters. Like blood sisters, they are both 'self' and 'other', and thus offer the possibility of a dialogue within which the exchange which Irigaray desires can be enacted: two women 'play[ing] together at being the same and different. You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors' (1981, 61).

However, *The Echoing Grove* goes further than any of the other novels I have discussed in that it gives a voice to the man in the triangle. In the other novels the man remains silent, 'other', even if he is a sympathetic character like Chris in *The Return of the Soldier*. Even in *The Judge* Richard's viewpoint is ultimately subordinated to those of the women. Although Rickie is 'killed' by the sisters he is not erased from the text in the same way as Frederick and Carne, because major sections of the novel are filtered through his consciousness. The text is fully dialogic in the sense that the viewpoints offered are not reconcilable into clear 'right' and 'wrong'. Caught between the two women, Rickie is aware that male identity too is 'transitional and fluctuating' (EG 311), and hazards that 'Sometimes I think a new thing is happening: men aren't any good to women any more' (EG 245). Dinah suspects, rightly, that the key to Rickie's character lies in his class dislocation following the sale of his family estate: 'a whole way of life gone - not just his own personal one: all his racial memories' (EG 163). Masculinity, like femininity, is closely interwoven with class and subject to historical process. Like Roddy in *Dusty Answer* and Hugh in *A Note in Music*, Ricky is also sexually ambiguous, and had 'an intense if shortlived relationship with a gifted undergraduate' (EG 105) at Oxford. Although he insists that 'I'm not a pansy' (EG 262), he is drawn to Dinah's lover, Rob, and, in a scene which recalls Lawrence's *Women in Love*, wrestles naked with his best friend (EG 54). Here it is worth noting the homosexuality of Lehmann's brother, John, as a possible model for Lehmann's sexually ambiguous men.

Rickie's voice comes through most clearly in his blitz-time conversation with Georgie, where she plays the psychoanalyst, encouraging him to talk out his part in the affair in a process which parallels the reconciliation of Madelaine and Dinah. Georgie offers an explanation of the male need to 'keep women in their proper place':

'[...] you start at a disadvantage. It *is* kind of unmanly being carried around the way you are all those nine months. And then having no choice but to submit to all those female processes - being born, fed and all the rest. It must be a big humiliation - confusing too. No wonder you're scared you may be women in disguise.'

(EG 246)

This fear of the feminine, of *being* feminine, is at the root of the irreconcilability of male and female needs which Lehmann dissects, and of the oppression of women. The cufflinks, symbol of reconciliation, will be given in turn by Madelaine to her and Rickie's son, Colin, indicating a hope for the future in the new generation. Within this new

generation, as gender roles resettle, the death of the man will, possibly, be unnecessary...?

To return, finally, to the question of canons. That the novels I have been discussing, even such a technically sophisticated novel as *The Echoing Grove*, have not become part of the canon but remain marginalised as 'women's novels', supports my contention that the subject of women's 'homosocial' bonds actively marks a text as uncanonical. Unlike Terry Castle, I do not see the female-identified triangle as a specifically lesbian form, but rather as one which is especially attractive to women writers because it offers a narrative form within which women's 'own powers, bonds and struggles' (Sedgwick, 1985, 18), including those of rivalry, are foregrounded and can be explored. Within the female-identified triangle the issues of female identity, desire and power are negotiated in relation to both a man and another woman, who can be both (and sometimes simultaneously) an object of desire and a rival. This triangle maps neatly onto the Freudian family romance, and thus can be used to explore the primary nature of bonds between women. However, the Bakhtinian dialogic can also allow us to read it in terms of a society where women are in dialogue simultaneously with the dominant masculine discourse (within which women were constructed as rivals) and with the discourses of various feminine 'others'. Or, to put it in Irigaray's terms, where they exist simultaneously in a dominant 'male hom(m)osexual economy' and an almost submerged 'female economy'. The bonds between sisters such as Dinah and Madelaine, colleagues like Sarah Burton and Mrs Beddows, friends such as Delia and Muriel, as well as lovers such as Sophia and Minna, are all shown as strong enough to disrupt the male economy which constructs woman as rivals.

The answer to Irigaray's question 'Why are men not objects of exchange among women' (1985, 171) is that they are - at least between the covers of women's novels. The texts I have examined track a problematising of the nineteenth-century motif of self-sacrifice and exchange of the man which includes an understanding that men are as much commodities on the marriage market as women. The man in the female-identified triangle may find himself, like Rickie, 'between women'. But Lehmann, in giving Rickie a 'voice' in the novel, suggests that the 'object' in the exchange is never just an object, but also a subject with his or her own autonomy

Rivalry plays an important part in both the bonds between women and their struggles for empowerment. It can be as important and determining a factor as sexual attraction between women. To dismiss rivalry between women as automatically 'a bad thing' buys into patriarchal notions of women as 'nice', non-competitive and self-sacrificing. Harriett Frean's refusal of rivalry is exposed by Sinclair as part of a Victorian ethic of female self-sacrifice which leads ultimately to frustration and neurosis. In contrast, as the writing relationship of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby shows, rivalry between women can (although at some cost) be encompassed within a friendship and, ironically, can even be a productive spur to achievement. There is, however, a disjunction between 'real life' and the plots or scripts available to women. The 'real life' writing rivalry of Brittain and Holtby is transmuted in both the 'fiction' of *The Dark Tide* and the 'fact' of *Testament of Friendship* to romance rivalry. We need a more complex understanding of rivalry between women which takes into account the fact that there are different kinds of rivalry and that these may not necessarily be bad. While rivalry over a man is in these texts destructive to female bonding, the factory girls West watched displayed a rivalry which was not only productive in terms of their work but a form of female bonding as it welded them into teams.

As the work of Keller and Moglen suggests, we lack scripts for positive and friendly rivalry between women in the workplace. The metaphor of sisterhood becomes both more complex and more useful if we can take into account the problematic tensions of the 'sister knot'. An understanding of the reality of blood sister relationships problematises the often sterilised feminist notion of 'sisterhood' and can help us understand other relationships between women. But we need other models for relations between women. It is in Winifred Holtby's depiction of the shared working partnership between Mrs Beddows and Sarah Burton that we can perhaps see a way ahead.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix i

#### Census population of United Kingdom (in thousands)

##### England and Wales

Date	Total	Male	Female
1841	15,914	7,778	8,137
1851	17,928	8,781	9,146
1861	20,066	9,776	10,290
1871	22,712	11,059	11,653
1881	25,974	12,640	13,335
1891	29,003	14,060	14,942
1901	32,528	15,729	16,799
1911	36,070	17,446	18,625
1921	37,887	18,075	19,811
1931	39,952	19,133	20,819
1951	43,758	21,016	22,742

##### Scotland

Date	Total	Male	Female
1841	2,620	1,242	1,378
1851	2,889	1,375	1,513
1861	3,062	1,450	1,612
1871	3,360	1,603	1,757
1881	3,736	1,799	1,936
1891	4,026	1,943	2,083
1901	4,472	2,174	2,298
1911	4,761	2,309	2,452
1921	4,882	2,348	2,535
1931	4,843	2,326	2,517
1951	5,096	2,434	2,662

Source: B.R. Mitchell, 1992, *International Historical Statistics: Europe 1750-1988*, New York: Stockton Press; Basingstoke: Macmillan

## Appendix ii

### Chronology of main legislation relating to women, 1914-1939

- 1918 Representation of the People Act - enfranchised all men over 21, and women over 30 who were Local Government electors or the wives of Local Government electors; also gave local government franchise to all householders  
Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act - allowed women to become MPs  
Maternal and Child Welfare Act - enabled local authorities to provide a grant-aided ante-natal and child welfare clinics  
Midwives Act - made training more rigorous  
Education ('Fisher') Act - raised school-leaving age to 14 and legislated for all people between 14 and 16 to attend compulsory part-time 'continuation schools'
- 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act - made it unlawful to bar women from public office, civil or judicial posts
- 1920 Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act - prohibited night work and limited shift work
- 1922 Married Women (Maintenance) Act - extended Affiliation Orders Act to children of separated wife
- 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act - allowed women as well as men to sue for divorce on grounds of adultery
- 1925 Guardianship of Infants Act - established legal equality between parents in the event of marital breakdown  
Widows, Orphans and Old Age Contributory Act - introduced weekly pension for widows
- 1926 Midwives and Maternity Homes Act - tightened up regulations against unqualified midwives and required nursing homes to be registered
- 1928 Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act - enfranchised all women over 21
- 1929 Infant Life (Preservation) Act - stated that abortion over 28 weeks was infanticide, with perpetrators liable to life imprisonment
- 1933 Government Circular 1421 - made fees for secondary schooling compulsory  
British Nationality and Status of Aliens Bill - made it possible for a women who did not acquire her husband's nationality to retain her own
- 1936 Midwives Act - set up service of salaried midwives and barred unqualified midwives  
Employment of Women and Young Persons Act - relaxed some prohibitions on shift work but retained ban on night work
- 1937 Matrimonial Causes ('Herbert') Act and Divorce (Scotland) Act - made divorce easier to obtain

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