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The significance of spinster figures in Woolf's work: how successfully does *she* manage to write against cultural stereotype?

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Let us talk about sex, for it is crucial in understanding much of what Woolf has to say about the spinster. The sexual life of Victorian women, and subsequently women in the early twentieth century, was, all things considered, fairly key to their social role. Men pursued careers, whilst women pursued husbands and bore them many children with strong, English names such as Harry, or Edward, who would, in turn, preserve the 'Great' British tradition of patriarchy. The spinster then is a direct affront to this tradition, refusing her prescribed 'role of wife and mother.[1]' So, what *other* roles did society have to offer? Spinsters were variously conceived as abstinent, undesirable, masculine, lesbian or victims – a bewildering breadth of generally reductive, prescriptive parts to play.

Woolf's interest in the spinster is undeniably, at least in part, on the basis of genuine sympathies for their political convictions. The polemic put forward in *A Room of One's Own* is one that defiantly declares 'there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone.[2]' But, perhaps more so, Woolf's interest in the spinster is primarily a reflection of her broader interest in artistic issues of representation. Noted Victorian sexologist Ellis suggested that 'Marriage in the social sense, is a sexual relationship entered into with the intention of making it permanent.[3]' Thus the spinster figure is a rejection of unalterable 'truth' in the nature of our sexual and social identity and relationships – against the prescription of one state at the exclusion of others. Spinsters are marginalized figures that occupy the uncomfortable boundaries beyond that which is acceptable. Woolf's spinsters offer alternative, often forgotten, narratives and flirt coyly with the social boundaries of gender and sexuality. I intend to explore the various representations of spinsters in key works and also consider where, if anywhere, Woolf's writing meets in dialogue with, or against, the prevailing cultural stereotypes.

Woolf's spinsters are often androgynous; they become the women incarnate of *AROO*, who cannot exist 'as a man or woman pure and simple.[4]' They also reflect her own interest in androgyny; particularly during her involvement with Vita Sackville-West, Woolf teased gender boundaries and was known to cross dress.[5] The spinster figures are far more transient in identity than the 'socially-respectable' married women, but equally the identity of married women comes under interrogation through the examination of the preferred nomenclature, 'Mrs.' One might consider Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Swithin in contrast to 'Betty Whatsername,' whose identity exists only in as much as 'she would make a good wife

[1] Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880 – 1930 (London: Pandora Press, 1987), p.175.
[2] Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (London: Penguin, 2000), p.112. Further reference to the text will be to AROO.
[3] Havelock Ellis, The Psychology of Sex (London: Heinemann Medical Books, 1933), p.220.
[4] AROO, p.102.
[5] Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf (London: Vintage, 1997), p.489.

at thirty.[6]' Of course, it is pertinent that in marriage the woman takes on her husband's name, thus reflecting her identity only in conjunction with the male line. Woolf captures, if not satirises, the 'traditional' viewpoint of 'women as persons whose destiny it is to be married', but through her spinsters also writes against it.[7] Indeed, the identity of Woolf's spinsters often becomes curiously aligned with that of the patriarchal figures of the novels. Both Miss Kilman and Miss La Trobe become on various occassions simply Kilman and La Trobe.[8] Their surname (and social identity) becomes independent of any gender marker and asserts a woman's right to recognition and individual identity beyond her role as a woman.

Nor do Woolf's spinster figures prescribe to 'socially normative' conceptions of female sexuality. Again, there are clearly some obvious sympathies with the author; even aside moments of (debatable) lesbianism, Woolf's relationship was at the very least 'unconventional.[9]' That is to say, one might reasonably presume that Virginia felt, at least on occasion, the same impulses and emotions – even if she was unable to ultimately or definitively act on them. Of course, there is much artistically too in the sexual ambiguity that Woolf captures through the spinster. It is a rebuttal of the reductive categories that men attempted to use to contain their perceived threat, but it is more widely a refusal to erect borders and boundaries.

The character of Miss Kilman represents, perhaps, the most sexually threatening of Woolf's spinster figures. Her very name, originally of German descent, in English is rendered as a composite of the words 'kill' and 'man.' She has a voracious physical appetite, 'eating with intensity, then looking, again and again, at a plate of sugared cakes.[10]' Yet although Kilman *is* highly physical and has these appetites of the flesh, she laments 'it is the flesh she must control.[11]' Kilman is both desirous of control and abstinence, but also implicit in the very need for this suppression is her sexual appetite and desire to dominate. Woolf enacts the often popular feminist viewpoint of 'the desirability of self-control', but is equally unafraid to challenge the complicated impulses one might simultaneously feel, often far beyond the remit of any political consciousness.[12] On this level, Kilman is written outside both patriarchal and feminist traditions. It is a viewpoint that departs from the traditional feminist defence of spinsters, but also refutes the comfortable patriarchal dismissal of spinsters as celibate.

Albeit cautiously conscious of the potential for sensationalism and scandal, one ought to acknowledge that Woolf's female characters, and her spinster figures in particular, are very much erotically charged. Woolf makes no attempt to simplify the relationships between women and the lines and distinctions are often blurred. Key to Woolf's interrogation of what eroticism might mean in the context of same sex relations are spinsters; as Jeffreys notes 'women's right to be lesbian depends upon our right to exist outside sexual relationships with men.[13]' *Mrs Dalloway* is ambitious in its attempts to capture the complexity of female relationships. Kilman is certainly sexualised in heterosexual terms, but she has strong sexual chemistry in her attitudes to other women. The eroticism displayed at the tea house is hugely suggestive to Elizabeth in lieu of any masculine target, her large 'gooseberry coloured eyes' suggesting the tenderness and seeds of a fertile fruit, and she sees Clarissa as though through masculine eyes, taking in 'her delicate body' and noting 'an overmastering desire to

[6] Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (London: Grafton Books, 1989), p.65.
[7] Cicely Hamilton, Marriage As A Trade (London: The Women's Press, 1981), p.22.
[8] In this essay for brevity, reference may be made to Kilman and La Trobe. This is done without political agenda or significance.
[9] Lyndall Gordon, Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life (London: W. W. Norton, 2001), p.8.
[10] Mrs. Dalloway, p.116.
[11] p.114.
[12] Jeffreys, p.97.
[13] Jeffreys, p.100.

overcome her.[14]' Miss Kilman's sexuality is an alternative, but equally complex, means of exploring love, longing and sex in a novel with predominately powerful heterosexual couples.

Clarissa Dalloway, being part of such a couple, finds Miss Kilman unsettling and offers all manner of justifications for her distaste. The reality is however, that the spinster is in this circumstance more important as a vehicle to engage with and evoke the previously hidden in other characters, than with her own sexuality. The erotic tension between the two is *not* the responsibility of just one party, but relies on the sexual imaginations of both women. After all, Kilman's dirty mackintosh is not inherently sexual, it is only the imaginative capability of Clarissa that makes it so and somehow sees, if not expects, Miss Kilman to unbutton her Mackintosh and reveal herself in a moment of erotic triumph. Kilman's 'lesbianism' is a threat only because it threatens to expose the here-to hidden and repressed sexual impulses of Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa concedes 'she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman…she did undoubtedly feel what men felt.[15]' The revelation affects her sexually, leaving her 'swollen with some astonishing significance' that then 'gushed and poured.[16]' Similarly, a youthful Sally Seton leaves Clarissa in awe as she removes the heads off 'flowers that have never been seen together before.[17]' The beheading is itself suggestive of an assault on phallic dominance, and these strange and exotic pairings underpin the sexual awakening of the friendship. This is in contrast to the later Mrs. Dalloway and Sally Seton who, of course, 'had done great things', which transpire to be the revelation 'I have five sons![18]' Why is Kilman a threat? As a lesbian spinster she is somehow acceptable, although an outsider, in cultural stereotypes.[19] Woolf however damages such stereotypes in making Clarissa complicit; the threat becomes the hidden impulses of married, 'respectable' women, and what spinsters might awaken within wives, mothers and daughters. Miss Kilman is thus a mirror, and her existence reflects the unfulfilled desires of other women who have become complicit in patriarchal heterosexuality through the institution of marriage and children.

Another key spinster for Woolf, Miss La Trobe, also has a healthy sexual appetite. Almost from her very first introduction the reader learns 'she had a passion for getting things up', which, coupled with the emblematic whip, may be read as a fairly explicit statement of intent[20]. Her sexuality is subtly aligned with the base, be it 'maggots [descending] through the waters', or her position hidden within the bushes, soiled with mud[21]. This *is* threatening sexually, capturing much of the revulsion of patriarchal society at unfettered sexual dominance, yet La Trobe is *largely* made sexual by other characters rather than her own conduct. It is not La Trobe who offers to 'get anything up', but an unknown narrative voice, and to a degree the interpretation of a sexually minded (and on this occasion male) reader! Amongst other characters, the Colonel is delineated as both empire (through the army) and patriarchy. He watches, voyeuristically, the actors undressing and Miss La Trobe in a state of undress. He sees her, 'too short, for her legs were stout,' and his voice is that of male narratives that denigrates women as 'old or young, married or unmarried, red-nosed or hump-backed' but rarely as the individual, and certainly not the artist[22]. Yet tellingly, he is kept at a distance by a pool of water, a reflective surface, though the water, and by inference his reflection, is muddied literally *and* figuratively. That he is somehow controlled and determined by reflections, recalls Stopes suggestion that men all too often see not a woman's

[14] Mrs. Dalloway, p.111.
[15] p.30.
[16] p.30.
[17] p.31.
[18] p.165.
[19] Jeffreys, p.166.
[20] Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts (London: Penguin, 1992), p.37.
[21] p.119.
[22] AROO, p.29.

sexuality, but rather 'they find only their own mirror.[23]' Woolf exposes the hypocrisy of male dismissal of unmarried women as undesirable, 'unfit for use, unsuitable' in the sexual agitation La Trobe clearly provokes[24]. The spinster becomes *all the more* sexually enticing through being somehow unattainable, unreliant on heterosexual intercourse and separated by an insurmountable metaphorical mirror.

A curious bedfellow no doubt for a discussion of sexuality and spinsters, but spirituality is also hugely significant in Woolf's presentation of her spinster figures. In many ways, Christianity is held as part of the same systems of control that preserve patriarchy. Thus, the conflation of the spinster as both sexualised and spiritual is in itself a bold statement to make, both capturing an elegant duality of seemingly opposition forces and, rebutting the notion of spinsters as this or that, celibate or sex-fiend. Miss La Trobe is a prophet of sorts; her attempt to write a narrative of English history *is* thwarted, but instead what intercedes is an older history, 'another play…behind the play she had just written.[25]' She is Jesus on the cross, as 'blood seemed to pour from her shoes…[and] unable to lift her hand,' facing the audience, and of course, 'audiences were the devil.[26]' In her inability to communicate, she is the prophet denied and left, metaphorically, crucified. It is no coincidence that the worst interpretation of her play is that of the Rector, an agent of religion, patriarchy and the very institution that dominates marriage. Yet, nor is La Trobe merely part of a Christian tradition but her sole voice from the bush becomes 'those voices from the bushes…Oracles?[27]' La Trobe is dissolved into a multitude of voices (and notably traditionally female voices) of narratives and prophets of ancient past. A bizarre interjection attempts to distinguish Christianity, but finds only the choice of footwear, comically blurring the boundaries and distinctions of traditional theology. Her final descent is to pre-history itself, as 'coarse words descending like maggots through waters' reflecting a somewhat primeval, base of history[28]. Her attempt to communicate becomes maggots that simultaneously signify both life and death. This narrative thread is crucial to the overall novel; it represents Woolf's attempt to capture and preserve the narrative of the marginalized figure, much like the story she is *unable* to tell of Judith Shakespeare in *AROO*. In La Trobe's alternative narrative it is also an attempt to write beyond limitations that Woolf herself felt acutely, that is to 'have the feelings of a woman but…only the language of men.[29]' She embodies the concerns, if not the stereotypes, of the socialist Craig as to unmarried women as educators, risking the status quo by undermining traditional narratives.[30] But Woolf also subverts this; La Trobe is written into part of a narrative tradition that surpasses Craig or his peers, that extends beyond society, culture or gender and, consequently, locates the lives of spinsters (and women) as part of something far greater than a single socio-historical context.

Just as La Trobe presents an alternative history, Miss Kilman is also a teacher (and a talented one at that) of history. One might note the shared kinship here (and with La Trobe also) with Woolf herself a teacher, albeit briefly, with a background in classics and history.[31] The sympathetic reader might pity Kilman's adverse circumstances; she is, materially, poor and opportunities in her youth were indeed denied through no fault of her own. Just as Woolf herself inherited from her father, 'the fierceness…which…pits observed truth against established paradigms', Kilman's fall is on account of her refusal to denigrate all Germans as

[23] Marie Stopes, Married Love (London: Gollancz, 1995), p.58.
[24] Hamilton, p.21.
[25] Between the Acts, p.40.
[26] p.107.
[27] p.118.
[28] p.119.
[29] Gordon, p.33.
[30] Jeffreys, p.180.
[31] Lee, p.223.

the enemy in a time of war.[32] Yet although Woolf establishes the foundations for a character of much pathos, she is *not* characterised as a victim figure. Rather as the narrative seems to enact Kilman's viewpoint, the tone is *too* hyperbolic, *too* needy, to be read at face value; 'what with being *so* clumsy and *so* poor.[33]' Can one presume, even with Woolf's privileged background, this to be her sincere conviction? That wealth and poise are somehow the only route to happiness? Instead, Miss Kilman wields pathos as a weapon and thus pity becomes a political statement, drawing attention to the 'safety and prosperity of the one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other.[34]' With 'all her soul-rusted with that grievance sticking in it' she is both a martyr *and* masochist; her grievance is simultaneously the needles of a thorny crown and those of the dominatrix imposing.[35] Rosenfeld, in discussion of other martyr figures in Woolf's work, namely Septimus Smith and Judith Shakespeare, considers messiah figures 'who will rise again when humans embrace the border as a place of possibility.[36]' One might reasonably add both Kilman and La Trobe to this list; although neither die a literal death, both are as much trapped in a society that either rejects them or is unable to understand their message.

Through the spinster, Woolf also draws attention to the connections between all forms of marginalization, including issues of empire and nationalism. La Trobe is identified as 'presumably [not] pure English.[37]' Despite such a term being, arguably, meaningless, its introduction suggests that somehow this *is* a desirable state of being, perhaps much as heterosexual marriage. Spectators suggest she is from the Channel Islands, which, being just between Britain and France, reflects a position that is similar to Bhabha's 'not quite/ not white' dichotomy; she is refused an identity independent of society (or nationality) but not granted a permissible one within either.[38] La Trobe is both conquest and forbidden lands; the context of war in *Between the Acts* only serves to exacerbate the role of the outsider, and distrust. Correspondingly, she is also attack as well as resistance; 'she had the look of a commander pacing his deck. The leaning graceful trees with black bracelets circling the silver bark were distant about a ship's length.[39]' Thus she enacts her own narrative of empire, although rendered against a stylised-feminine conception incorporating nature. In her omission of the army, much to the vexation of Colonel Mayhew, she suggests an alternative, sexualised narrative of empire. The battles are instead interpersonal, and the conquests are bodies, presumably female. The spinsters' struggle to exist outside traditional society reflects Woolf's own struggle for new forms of representation. There are subtle reminders throughout the novel; an off-hand comment concerning La Trobe's play suggests 'the decorations, I suppose are left over from the Coronation.[40]' The very fabric of her narrative and the tools at her disposal (including the language at her disposal) are inherently linked to the systems she seeks to challenge.

In a word, Woolf's work spinster figures represent difference, firstly, through their significance in socio-political terms. Their mere existence affirms the possibility of dissent from dominant modes of society and power, such as patriarchy. Woolf contrasts her spinster characters with other women too, to reclaim a separate female identity, independent of male structures of power. This difference is also important artistically; the spinster's struggle for

[32] Gordon, p.80.
[33] Mrs. Dalloway, p.109.
[34] AROO, p.26.
[35] Mrs. Dalloway, p.12.
[36] Natania Rosenfeld, Outsiders Together: Virginia and Leonard Woolf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.5.
[37] Between the Acts, p.37.
[38] Homi K. Bhabha, 'Sly Civility', in The Location of Culture, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994), p.92.
[39] Between the Acts, p.39.
[40] Between the Acts, p.63.

emancipation from traditional social roles and expectations mirrors Woolf's own struggle for a new form of representation. She also uses the spinster's ambiguity and duality as an affirmation of the fluidity of identity, and support for her refusal to denigrate something definitively this, or that. They represent the ever-changing complexities of existence, and pose questions as to the feasibility (and desirability) of written representation. It is through this complexity that Woolf also liberates the spinster figure from cultural stereotypes, at least to a degree. She simultaneously adopts and subverts persistent Victorian conceptions of the spinster, perhaps including both those expectations of feminist and patriarch. Instead, she renders them as individuals first and foremost, infinitely complex, and independent of the confines of being a martyr or monster, as demanded by any politicised movement.