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## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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### Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Question of Feminism

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# Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Question of Feminism

*Janet Montefiore*

## Abstract

Sylvia Townsend Warner was a self-supporting writer who attacked the subordination of women, celebrated energy and freedom in women, and lived openly in a lesbian marriage. Yet she has not become a feminist heroine: perhaps because her activism was left-wing rather than feminist, perhaps because of her hostility to bossy, entitled women. She loved her father who educated her informally, and her links with his former male pupils at Harrow were important during the 1920s in establishing her as a literary presence. She attacked patriarchal oppression in her fiction, from her first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, to her last, *The Flint Anchor*. Of her few essays directly addressing gender politics, the most important is 'Women as Writers' (1959), written in unspoken dialogue with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which Warner praises women for outwitting the conventions meant to silence them and for the 'immediacy' of their writing.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; feminism; emancipation; activism; domesticity; Woolf; gender; immediacy.

Sylvia Townsend Warner loved female energy and freedom. From the beginning her fiction addressed women's lives and attacked the subjection of women to family pieties, and she lived openly in a lesbian marriage with Valentine Ackland in an era when this was largely deplored or forbidden. Yet she has not, as one might expect, become a celebrated feminist classic like Virginia Woolf. Why is this?

In the first place, Warner's relation to feminism was complex and sometimes ambivalent, as shown in the following three quotations. First, from a letter congratulating her friend Paul Nordoff on the birth of his daughter in 1949:

I hope she will be very, very happy; and I hope she will be without fear. I am quite sure that to be fearless is the first requisite for a woman; everything else that is good will grow naturally out of that, as a tree has leaves and fruit and grows tall and full provided its roots have good hold of the ground. Bring her up to be fearless and unintimidated by frowns, hints, and conventions, and then she will be full of mercy and grace and generosity. It is fear that turns women sour, sly and harsh to their neighbours. It was Shakespeare's Constance who said she was 'a woman, naturally born to fears'. Not naturally, I think, but hereditarily; and so to be guarded against fear before all else.<sup>1</sup>

Second, from a 1927 review in the magazine *Time and Tide* of six titles in a biographical series of 'Representative Women':

I spent a long wet day alone with these six ladies; and when I had finished with them I cast about for a phrase with which I could express to myself the impression they had left upon me. It came: the outcry of a small boy who woke out of a nightmare exclaiming that his bedroom had been invaded by 'a lioness beating on a tin basin with a teaspoon.' For with one exception all these are lionesses of the most nightmare authenticity, savage carnivora, ruthless and untiring, rampant monsters of egotism; and whether their prey be pleasure and easy living, as was Elizabeth Chudleigh's, or power and the fatigues of office, as was Sarah Churchill's; whether they hunt with impassive slow cunning, as did Bianca Capello, or with incessant gnashing, as did Sarah; whether they stalk solitary through the desert like Lady Hester Stanhope or lash their tails at public meetings like Mrs Besant, they are united in one common and appalling passion: to get what they want; united in one common and appalling conviction: that they are right.<sup>2</sup>

Third, from Warner's diary for 1954:

Colette is dead. I feel abandoned and unprotected [...] while she was alive I never lost the assurance that came on me thirty years

ago and more, walking miserably in the Queen's Road, Bayswater, on a wet winter evening, when I suddenly declared in my heart, I could go and tell Colette. What? Youth, unused love, the look of the chemist's window on the wet pavement, the *rustic* feel of the rain on my bare hands: the condition of being alive ... I read and was enclosed by her. There is nothing material, from the colour of a hollyhock to the colour of a pigeon's guts that she has not illuminated and established in my mental senses. Lady of Good Counsel, Notre Dame des Bêtes, farewell!<sup>3</sup>

These passages, all taken from little-known texts, demonstrate two difficulties in defining Sylvia Townsend Warner's take on gender politics: her own ambivalence and the sheer variety of the scattered and sometimes fragmentary evidence of her opinions, thrown off in desultory remarks and musings through letters and diaries, two or three essays and, more indirectly, in her fiction. There is nothing in her many books of comparable weight to Virginia Woolf thinking through the effects of gender division in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Outside *Lolly Willowses*, where she came nearest to identifying with her heroine, the detached, frequently ironic surface of Warner's fiction gives away few of her own opinions, which readers often need to work out.

Ambivalence is obvious in the quotations above, even in the letter to Nordoff which looks, at first glance, unequivocally feminist in its praise of fearless self-confidence as the prerequisite for women's happiness and health. Certainly, Warner shows an impressive grasp of what would now be called the social construction of femininity in her statement that women are born to fear 'not naturally ... but hereditarily', and she is well aware that her advice goes against the grain of social expectations expressed in the 'frowns, hints, and conventions' which trap so many women into becoming warped by fear of disapproval. But she sees such women less as victims than as people to avoid. 'Sour, sly and harsh to their neighbours' sums up the qualities in women that Warner most disliked.

Or perhaps I should say, the qualities Warner disliked in some women, for the 'lionesses' mocked in her *Time and Tide* review are anything but timid or conformist. Since all except Annie Besant were aristocrats, or at least aspired to become so,<sup>4</sup> Warner's revulsion at their sense of entitlement is plainly driven by her hatred of the assumptions of class privilege, as with her later mockery of the 'county hags' she worked with in the Dorchester WVS office in 1941.<sup>5</sup> That said, the review remains a disconcerting read for her feminist admirers, which is perhaps why,

although reprinted in the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Newsletter* in 2013, it has not attracted notice or commentary.

The passage about Colette in Warner's 1954 diary (incidentally demonstrating her lifelong love of French literature) is by contrast a moving tribute by one woman writer to another in the deep connection she records between her own memories and perceptions and Colette's sensuously perceptive writing. And, Colette's bisexuality may well have been a source of support and identification both to the young and middle-aged Warner (Colette's 'Claudine' novels having been published from the turn of the century). Virginia Woolf famously wrote that 'We think back through our mothers if we are women',<sup>6</sup> and this prose elegy shows Warner doing just that. She was always alert to the ways in which women are constrained by gender roles, and not only in the novels *Lolly Willowes* and *The Flint Anchor* (which I discuss below), and *Summer Will Show*, whose heroine muses at the start, 'it was boring being a woman, nothing that one did had any meat in it'.<sup>7</sup> Her 1941 letter to Bea Howe in which she snipes at the county ladies and their 'high-bred passions' goes on to express pity for the ATS women she lectured to: 'they were living in such horrid chilly hencoops, and it was melancholy to hear them leaping to their feet as their officers walked in, their two hundred odd uncomfortable Heavy Oxfords thundering as one – all the disadvantages of being soldiers and none of the fun'.<sup>8</sup>

Do these perceptions make Warner a feminist? Certainly not an active one, although she was not averse to political engagement. Wendy Mulford has shown in detail how dedicated and many-sided was Warner's work for the Communist Party and the Popular Front during the 1930s. She undertook grassroots tasks such as organising book loans of Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and 'proletarian novels' to labourer comrades, helping set up a local branch of the Left Book Club and organising a large peace march as Secretary of Dorchester's Peace Council. She also engaged in high-profile activities such as joining the editorial boards of *The Left Review* and, later, *Our Time* and writing for both periodicals, working for the Association of Writers for Intellectual Liberty and directing a large London meeting 'In Defence of Freedom' in July 1938 – not to mention writing poems and essays supporting the embattled Spanish Republic, which she visited in 1937 and again in 1938 as one of the British delegates to the Madrid Congress of Writers.<sup>9</sup> But unlike Virginia Woolf, she never supported or even took an interest in any push for women's rights, although the suffrage campaign was at its height when she came of age. When the second-wave women's

movement prompted a revival of her novels in her old age, she wrote to David Garnett that 'I spend a good deal of time writing to feminist presses (Virago and so forth) that I shall be delighted. About one thing I ... really am delighted. *After the Death of Don Juan* is to be reissued.'<sup>10</sup> Clearly it was the republication of her books that gave her pleasure; her acknowledgement of the feminism prompting the publishers 'Virago and so forth' to republish her work sounds more like a formality.

That said, feminist activism is not the same thing as feminist perception and Warner's clear understanding and lifelong detestation of conventional social and religious constraints on women is obvious in (to give the clearest example) *Summer Will Show*. So are her liking and admiration for the female strength and energy of the novel's two heroines Sophia and Minna, and for Minna's art of storytelling. Also memorable are Warner's tough, lively little girls: for instance, the briefly glimpsed 'elfish decisiveness' of little Armandine who 'in the voice of a business-like bird ... detailed the dead and wounded: the butcher's boy, the pastrycook, the sweep, the wine-merchant's two nephews' when the workers of Paris are defending their barricades in the 'July days' of 1848, not to mention Minna recalling herself as a child rejoicing over the river in springtime 'sweeping away its fetters, tossing its free neck under the ruined yoke' of ice, 'lord[ing] it over the other children', telling them 'stories of freedom and the overthrowing of tyrants' and trying to avenge the death of her family in the pogrom when she 'ran across the bloodied snow to kill the Christians'.<sup>11</sup> The sparky little Fernanda in *After the Death of Don Juan* enlivens school with the game of 'lions and christians', singing 'O lions, you should be contrite. It is a great sin to chew up christians, it is also bad behaviour and against good manners to tear my petticoat' in an astonishingly 'loud and passionate voice'. Fernanda is heard again near the end of the novel when she warns her mother and other women, screaming, 'They're coming, they're coming! The men! A hundred men, and all the same man', giving them just enough time to take refuge with their children in the village church from the approaching soldiers come to shoot down the rising against the Castle.<sup>12</sup> Warner's fiction often satirises men: think of Laura's pompous, financially incompetent brother Henry or her nephew Titus appropriating her territory with 'a possessive and masculine love ... curled up in a green lap and purring over the landscape' in *Lolly Willowes*,<sup>13</sup> or Sophia Willoughby's smugly limited husband Frederick in *Summer Will Show*, or the domestic tyrant John Barnard in *The Flint Anchor*, or again the needy, parasitic husband Aston Ridpath in her later story 'But at the Stroke of Midnight'. In all these,

Warner's fictional skewerings of masculine arrogance and entitlement are accomplished with detached irony. Her portrayal of domineering, entitled women (like Aston's detestable sister Vere, 'one of those people who are obeyed – on the fallacious hypothesis that it tends to keep them quiet')<sup>14</sup> seems to have a more personal edge, as if she herself had suffered from such women's self-righteous bossiness.

## **'My intellect was man-made': Warner's own life**

Recording the death of her friend and correspondent Leonard Bacon, Warner wrote sadly in her diary: 'I miss his masculinity, deeply. My intellect was man-made, is still preponderantly masculine – and that part of me has lost a comrade.'<sup>15</sup>

As this musing indicates, Warner was very much her father's child. From earliest childhood, her relationship with George Townsend Warner was harmonious and loving, not least because he admired and enjoyed her intelligence. A teacher of genius and a senior master of history at Harrow, a leading public school, he profoundly influenced his daughter's intellectual development by giving her an informal but top-notch education. Her biographer Claire Harman writes:

It was George ... who was most completely responsible for the shaping of Sylvia's intellect; he 'made' her. 'To receive from him a private lesson in history or literature', wrote a pupil, 'was an illuminating privilege, long to be remembered.' All Sylvia's lessons were private lessons, and being unconstrained by timetable, examinations or schoolroom discipline, allowed full scope for George's imaginative and fanciful side. It was a conversation rather than a lecture which took place between 'Ruzzie' and Sylvia in the drawing-room, over the breakfast table, on a walk or working together on one of his meticulous maps intended for the classroom ... By the age of seventeen or so, Sylvia's erudition was both phenomenal and perfectly natural.<sup>16</sup>

This erudition, lightly worn but pervasive throughout Warner's work, ought to leave none of her readers thinking her intellectually disadvantaged. She herself does not seem to have minded not having gone to school; when her friend and editor William Maxwell wrote that his daughter, then aged four, was to enter kindergarten, she responded:



I am sorry that Kate is leaving Eden. I went to a Kindergarten myself for a year, after which I was expelled as a bad influence ... That was the end of my formal education, after that I went to classes from time to time, and had a governess who taught me masses & masses of Wordsworth. But in those calm days the state did not require female children to be educated, we grew up like flowers of the field, playing duets & speaking a very little French, and occasionally hounded through the Church Catechism for the Confirmation Stakes.

It is my belief that no one really and rationally enjoys school. The unanimity, the rhythmical tum ti tum of mass action & mass endurance, may beguile the young into thinking they are engaged on something they like, & then there is the thought of every day bringing one nearer the end of term; but I doubt if it goes further than that. It is a conscript experience. No one would naturally go to school. (Perhaps a few Sadists might, for the joys of baiting their teachers & torturing their juniors.) At Harrow there were those awful school songs, about what a splendid rollick it all was, or else about how regretfully you'd look back on those old days afterwards. Balder and Dash, those two old Saxon deities.<sup>17</sup>

Frances Bingham has argued in her biography of Valentine Ackland that both Warner and Ackland were handicapped by being privately and haphazardly educated.<sup>18</sup> This was certainly true of Ackland, but not of Warner, who flourished intellectually and was only too glad to have escaped regimentation by growing up like the 'flowers of the field'. Not that her own education was in fact confined to learning poetry, 'a little French' and some music; she knew a great deal of literature and history, practised the piano in her teens from 7 o'clock every morning, her French was excellent enough to translate Proust, and she knew Latin well enough to make the delirious Ralph Kello in *The Corner That Held Them* recite reams of Virgil's *Georgics* in the original.

Nor, unlike Virginia Woolf, does Warner seem to have minded missing out on higher education. It is instructive to compare her description of visiting King's College, Cambridge, in 1930 with her then lover Percy Buck with the famous passage in *A Room of One's Own* where the narrator 'Mary Seton', wishing to consult the manuscript of Milton's poem 'Lycidas' in the library of a (barely disguised) Trinity College, is waved away from the entrance by a 'silvery, kindly gentleman' who informs her that ladies unaccompanied by a Fellow are not admitted

to the library without special permission.<sup>19</sup> Whereas Mary Seton is not mollified by the excellent meal served later at a college luncheon party, Warner (accompanied of course) is enchanted as she listens to Buck and Boris Ord playing the organ in King's College Chapel at night.

In that terrific tunnel of dark masonry with its one useless shaft of light piercing the upper dark, it was like a Donne poem and a funeral ... It was beyond all my dreams, to be listening to music so, in the dark of that ancient and bare building ... and all the day was heavenly: walking on the court lawns, drinking port, listening to the bells.<sup>20</sup>

The next day begins with

choir breakfast in the combination room. When I saw that vast table extending between the portraits of Henry VI and Richard III, glittering with silver, and grapes, and cherries, and all the thousands of admirable young men ... and myself on the right hand of the Vice Provost and Teague opposite, I felt myself anonymously in heaven.

After lunch in 'Eric's rooms',<sup>21</sup> with him and Buck, the three share 'a long wail about women's colleges, and women in general, during which I found myself obliged to do something for my sex, although the best I could do was to try and keep up an end of an argument'.<sup>22</sup> Warner doesn't say exactly what the men complained about, but it's a fair bet that they were bewailing the dowdiness of the women's colleges (also noted by Woolf's Mary Seton), compared with the splendours of King's College. She clearly feels outnumbered and snubbed by the two older, authoritative men putting down 'women in general', and her defence of 'my sex' sounds fairly muted compared with Woolf's conclusion that 'the safety and prosperity of one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other' was the central fact of Cambridge.<sup>23</sup>

Warner's vivid account of enjoying her temporary status as the guest of an all-male Cambridge institution parallels her entry as a youngish woman into London's literary networks in the 1920s when she moved from musicology into full-time writing. This was partly enabled by her connection with Harrow School, through her friendships with young men who had been taught by and loved her father. The most important of these was Stephen ('Tommy') Tomlin, eight years her junior, who was for several years a close friend and occasional

sex partner, until they quarrelled for good in 1927.<sup>24</sup> ‘Tommy’ seems to have been instrumental in putting Warner in touch with literary networks; he brought her to Dorset and introduced her to Theodore (T. F.) Powys, who along with his wife Violet became lifelong friends, and through him she also got to know David Garnett, with whom her close friendship was also lifelong (notwithstanding a long interruption from 1933 to 1955).<sup>25</sup> The influence of Garnett, a member in good standing of the Bloomsbury circle and Director of the Nonesuch Press, was crucial to establishing her as a writer. Having read and admired Warner’s poems, Garnett showed them to Charles Prentice, a director of the publishing firm Chatto & Windus; Prentice, even more impressed, persuaded his firm to publish them in *The Espalier* (1925), and the firm went on to publish almost all of her many books, up to and including *Kingdoms of Elfin* in 1977, a year before she died. Of course it was Warner’s own brilliance which made her a literary success, but these men’s recognition of her genius was instrumental in establishing her as a self-supporting writer.

Warner, herself more widely and deeply read than most graduates, and with her self-confidence enhanced by the excellent if unorthodox education she had received from her father, in turn regarded these influential men as her intellectual equals. Self-assurance shines from her advice to Garnett in 1927 that, much though she admired his latest novel, it was marred stylistically by falling into the ‘pseudo-Gallicism’ of George Moore, and in her much later reproof to him for having ignored her advice to include his own letters in the correspondence with T. H. White which he was preparing for publication: ‘Do please treat yourself with more respect. For that matter, treat me with more respect. I haven’t been sitting idle and just being witty since we first met.’<sup>26</sup> There is no hint anywhere in Warner’s writings that she felt her gender made her a second-class citizen intellectually.

Warner’s relation to her mother, described by Claire Harman as ‘an exciting but intimidating woman’, was far more difficult. Looking back in 1961, Warner described Nora Townsend Warner to her friend George Plank as

a considerable tigress ... brilliantly witty, autocratic, mocking, with several areas of her heart as hard as a stone. I wrote cold, and amended it to hard. *Nothing* about her was cold. She was intensely, savagely loyal, very hard-working, with a hand that could turn to anything.<sup>27</sup>

During Warner's childhood she and her mother got on well, but from her adolescence onwards her mother was displeased and disappointed with her plain, unmarriedable, intensely musical daughter and let her know it. Warner later wrote to Maxwell how, after her father's untimely death in 1916, 'my mother exclaimed, Now you are all I've got left – a cry of angry desolation. What on earth did she want in a daughter that I didn't have, you ask. A son.'<sup>28</sup> Claire Harman writes that 'What Sylvia later identified as Nora's "devouring femaleness" and her iron will were almost overpowering and Sylvia lived in fear of them.'<sup>29</sup> Their relationship would later improve ('after I had left off being afraid of her, I was able to feel love, and great esteem');<sup>30</sup> but most likely it was her memories, still fairly recent in 1927, of living with Nora the tigress which prompted her open revulsion from self-willed 'lionesses' determined to 'get what they want' and convinced 'that they are right'.<sup>31</sup>

Warner herself was, even as a young woman, unusually self-confident and independent. Having worked in a munitions factory, in 1916 she published an article in *Blackwood's Magazine* about her work; when a newspaper asked her to write an unpaid follow-up article about workers' conditions, 'I replied that it would not better the condition of any workers to write commissioned articles for nothing. They saw the force of this, and paid.'<sup>32</sup> A year later, she left home to work as a professional musicologist for the Carnegie Trust on the great edition of *Tudor Church Music* (1923–9), resurrecting such then neglected composers as Thomas Tallis, William Byrd and Thomas Tomkins.<sup>33</sup> She lived alone and frugally in London (on just half the £500 a year that Woolf would stipulate as the minimum for a woman writer), following her own tastes, cultivating whatever friends she liked, continuing the affair she had begun in 1913 with the much older musician and composer Percy Buck and occasionally having sex with other friends.<sup>34</sup> After the success of *Lolly Willowes* (1926) she was able to abandon musicology in the late 1920s, supporting herself thereafter as a freelance writer. From 1930, when she and Valentine Ackland fell in love, she lived openly in a lesbian marriage, two or three generations before same-sex marriages were recognised and legalised by the state.

It is an impressive record of independence and self-determination, made possible not only by Warner's own energy, courage and talent but also by her family background. Before she became a self-supporting writer, her salary from the Carnegie Trust (1917–27) was only £150 a year, so to live independently in London, she needed her annual allowance of £100 from her mother. It seems to have been the intervention of her uncle Robert that secured her salary from the Carnegie Trust. An article

by Judith Stinton in the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society's *Newsletter* explains how Robert Townsend Warner wrote to the Carnegie UK Trust on 21 June 1917 in connection with the Tudor and Elizabethan Church Music publication:

My niece (Miss Sylvia Warner of Grove Hill Harrow) is devoting a great part of her time under Dr Terry to this work, for which she gets no pay. I understand what she does is not merely transcription of MSS but also adaptation of notation etc, & that the work requires considerable musical knowledge & is of no little value, & it seems to me not unreasonable that she should be paid something for it ... She hesitates about asking for anything herself, so I have taken it on myself to write to you for her, as her father died last year. I should be very much obliged if you would consider whether your Trust could pay her for the services which she is rendering to the project – if the labourer is worthy of her hire I am sure the Trust does not want to take her time for nothing.

Yrs sincerely  
R. T. Warner.

The Trust responded that Warner had 'become a valuable help rather than an interested pupil', and that it was always their intention to 'offer suitable honoraria after the work was finished'. Stinton reports that 'the upshot was that Warner was offered, through Dr Terry, a contract paying £150 annually with expenses, to be his assistant, which she formally accepted in writing'.<sup>35</sup> This action, while much to the credit of Uncle Robert, also shows how much Warner needed her own family, just as she needed to access the male-dominated networks of literary London to embark on her career as an emancipated woman writer.

'Emancipation' – meaning the condition of being set free<sup>36</sup> – is such an unfamiliar term in connection with women in twenty-first-century Britain, now that gender equality is considered not only desirable but largely achieved, that readers may ask: emancipation from what? The answer is: freedom from the family duties that dominated so many women's lives, from the pressure to marry and, above all, from the unmarried daughter's conventional economic and social dependence on her parents, described by so many women novelists from Radclyffe Hall in *The Unlit Lamp* (1924) and E. M. Delafield in *Thank Heaven Fasting* (1932) to Elizabeth Jane Howard in the *Cazalet Chronicles* (1991–2013). In the early to middle years of the twentieth century, an emancipated

woman was one able to ignore (though not necessarily to defy) the conventional constraints imposed on her sex. Freed intellectually from the pieties she detested, and financially from economic dependence on her mother, Warner was a quintessentially emancipated woman. She was also aware of her own luck and how fragile it might be. In 1944 she wrote angrily to Nancy Cunard, equally emancipated (and in some respects even more so, in her embrace of Black and anti-imperial politics and her promiscuous sex life), that she was in danger of being drafted for 'work of national importance',

which means they will try to put me into a laundry [...] Being kept by a husband is of national importance enough. But to be femme sole, and self-supporting, that hands you over, no more claim to consideration than a biscuit. The great civil war, Nancy, that will come and must come before the world can begin to grow up, will be fought out on this terrain of man and woman, and we must storm and hold Cape Turk before we talk of social justice.<sup>37</sup>

This passage is quoted approvingly as a feminist rallying cry against male domination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar at the outset of *The War of the Words*, the first volume of their literary history *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>38</sup> Yet it was one thing for Warner to write to a like-minded friend about storming 'Cape Turk' in the 'civil war that will come and must come' between the sexes, quite another to make this ambition public, let alone to act on it. Her own relation to feminist activism was, and remained, ambivalent.

## Warner on gender division, in and out of fiction

Warner's fiction is a huge subject. Lacking space to examine the treatment of gender issues throughout her *oeuvre*, I will look here at her first and last novels, in both of which feminine domesticity is represented as a prison. Laura, the heroine of *Lolly Willowes* (1926), having passed her youth in the country with a beloved, adoring father, following her own interests and evading would-be suitors, dwindles into a spinster aunt in London, bossed around and made use of by her brother and her controlling sister-in-law until she asserts herself to live independently in Great Mop. There, after a few months, she discovers her own freedom from the family tyrants:

There was no question of forgiving them. She had not, in any case, a forgiving nature; and the injury they had done her was not done by them. If she were to start forgiving she must needs forgive Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great aunt Salome and her prayer-book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen other useful props of civilisation.<sup>39</sup>

Laura's list of the oppressive 'props of civilisation', with its not-so-implicit accusation of social tyranny, anticipates Woolf's Mary Seton picking up a newspaper in *A Room of One's Own* two years later:

A ribbon of very large letters ran across the page. Somebody had made a big score in South Africa. Lesser ribbons announced that Sir Austen Chamberlain was in Geneva. A meat axe with human hair on it had been found in a cellar. Mr Justice — commented in the Divorce Court on the Shamelessness of Women ... A film actress had been lowered from a peak in California and suspended in mid-air. The weather is going to be foggy. The most transient visitor to this planet, I thought, who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware, even from this scattered testimony, that England is under the rule of a patriarchy.<sup>40</sup>

Woolf follows up her list of headlines with a political and psychological argument that the patriarchal male, 'the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor ... the Foreign Secretary and the Judge' who 'seemed to control everything' except the weather, requires the subordination of women to magnify his own fragile selfhood: 'How is he to go on giving judgment, civilising natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself ... at least twice the size he really is?'<sup>41</sup> Laura, however, is uninterested in the psychology of the men who control 'civilisation' and does not desire to analyse its 'useful props' that have oppressed her, feeling that 'all she could do was to go on forgetting them'. The novel, however, shows clearly that the tyranny of patriarchal civilisation will not forget her. Laura finds that its rule is not so easily exorcised when her nephew Titus pays a visit to her refuge Great Mop and decides to take it over – without, of course, knowing that he is doing so. Like his uncle and aunt he takes his 'Aunt Lolly' for granted, and for Laura he personifies the tyranny of the family:

And she was the same old Aunt Lolly, so useful and obliging and negligible ... She stood at bay, trembling before them, shaken and sick with the grinding anger of the slave. They were come out to recapture her, they had tracked her down and closed her in. They had let her run a little way – that was all – for they knew they could get her back when they chose. Her delusion of freedom had amused them.<sup>42</sup>

It is now that the novel really takes off into fantasy and self-determination. Laura's desperate cry 'Is there *no* help?' brings a silent but tangible 'pledge'<sup>43</sup> of support – from, it turns out, the Devil – and she becomes a witch. After she has called up a series of nuisances which irritate Titus but fail to put him off Great Mop, Satan afflicts him with a swarm of angry wasps, earning Laura's heartfelt gratitude and allegiance for saving her when 'Custom, public opinion, law, church and state – all would have shaken their massive heads against her plea, and sent her back to bondage.'<sup>44</sup> It is telling that only witchcraft can give Laura what she passionately defines to her master Satan as 'a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others ... so many ounces of stale bread a day'.<sup>45</sup>

No such supernatural aid comes to the children of the Evangelical patriarch John Barnard in Warner's realist novel *The Flint Anchor* (1954). All except Mary, his favourite, are cramped and thwarted by his pious tyranny, but the boys have far better possibilities of escape than their sisters. Of the two of Barnard's five sons to survive his educational regime of 'censure and ostracism'<sup>46</sup> (three die wretchedly in childhood), the older, in not-too-serious trouble at his Cambridge college but terrified of his father's anger, takes refuge in life in the West Indies. The younger, less intimidated thanks to the protective affection of his older sister Euphemia, defends himself by a cold-hearted detachment which enables him to desert the family firm and become a professional mathematician. The only possible escape route for the girls (two of whom also die young) is through matrimony, which only the nastiest of them achieves. Ellen, made spiteful by being disqualified for marriage by a 'large port-wine stain'<sup>47</sup> on her face, is a mischief-maker with a penchant for blurting out other people's secrets at the most damaging possible moments. Mary, blue-eyed and blonde-haired, is the indulged object of her father's uncritical doting. Made miserable by anxiety for her health and her well-being, 'he allowed no one to know that Mary was more to him than any other of his children'; but the pretence is transparent, as Mrs Barnard's



best friend perceives: “Anyone might suppose that she is his firstborn, and he gave birth to her himself – out of his hat”, commented Robina, who had come to Anchor House for the christening of her namesake’ (the baby dies shortly afterwards).<sup>48</sup> Spoilt rotten, ‘Papa’s dear open-hearted child’ Mary<sup>49</sup> grows up to be a monster of complacent egotism (she is, I think, a reworking of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*) and succeeds in manipulating the man she wants into reluctantly marrying her. After he disappears and is presumed dead, she marries a clerical oaf; the happy couple subdue the once formidable head of the family into an obedient old man, whose wishes they readily ignore. The oldest daughter Euphemia, strong, loving and uninterested in creature comforts (she has inherited her father’s puritan streak), has a brief, illicit romance with her brother Joe’s college friend Marmaduke – illicit, because Marmaduke has, to John Barnard’s fury, aided Joe’s escape to the West Indies. The slightly comic fancy names Marmaduke and Euphemia hint that the two are an unlikely couple, but ‘Goody Jog-Trot’, his affectionate nickname for her, suggests that they might well have been happy together. Her jealous sister Ellen betrays them to John Barnard: ‘Mr. Debenham’s Goody Jog-Trot. That’s who you are!’<sup>50</sup> which puts a stop to the romance.

So that is the end, she thought, entering *Raisins, 2 lbs* in the ledger. ‘We shall soon need more vinegar, Miss,’ the cook said. She made a note to order more vinegar, and began to weigh out the oatmeal for tomorrow’s porridge. If I were to marry, she thought, I should still be doing this sort of thing. There is really no escape.<sup>51</sup>

As the young woman has just lost her last hope of a kind and loving marriage, her despairing resignation is presumably sour grapes. Yet Euphemia is right to think that marriage to Marmaduke, however sweetened by his warmth and humour, would offer no escape from domestic economy. Her talents would equip her far better for entering a profession, as her father recognises: ‘if it were not for her sex, he would certainly have made her a partner in [his] business’.<sup>52</sup> She is respected for her practical charity in visiting the poor and sick of the town, one of whom leaves her a small but life-changing legacy because ‘she thought the world of your kindness’.<sup>53</sup> Born 50 years later, Euphemia might have flourished as a feared and respected headmistress of a girls’ school, or as a pioneering woman doctor, or in efficient charge of a charitable foundation. None of these, however, are options for the daughter of a prosperous merchant in provincial Norfolk in the 1840s, however

capable and intelligent – and not just because her bullying father would doubtless forbid them. The training and opportunities for bourgeois girls to enter a profession do not yet exist. So Euphemia, the only warm-hearted Barnard child, joins the Herrnhut community in Austria, which she had previously visited with her father, to become a sort of Protestant nun in a religious enclosure which she has at least chosen for herself. The constraints on women from a bourgeois patriarchal family could hardly be made clearer.

Surprisingly perhaps, Warner's non-fiction has less to say about gender politics than her novels or stories. She did, however, write at least three essays which directly address questions of gender: 'Man's Moral Law' (1932), 'Spain's Living Daughters' (1938) and 20 years later, 'Women as Writers' (1959). 'Man's Moral Law', first published in the feminist essay collection *Man, Proud Man* edited by Mabel Ulrich (1932), was reprinted in the 2017(1) volume of *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*. The Editor's preface remarks that in contrast to Warner's essay 'Women as Writers' (1959), which has been much cited by feminist critics, 'this essay [...] on questions of gender in relation to morality has received almost no critical attention'<sup>54</sup> (he might have added that, unlike the latter, it was not reprinted by Peter Tolhurst in his 2013 selection of Warner's essays *With the Hunted*). But the neglect of this essay is, to my mind, neither surprising nor shocking, for it is rather lightweight, not doing much more than mocking the easy target of men laying down the law. Thus Warner describes how, as when the sky darkens before a thunderstorm, 'certain physical aspects of man, an appearance of slight inflation, a special tense quality in his silences, prelude the manifestations, more or less devastating but always impressive, of his Moral Law'. In John Barnard, the anti-hero of *The Flint Anchor*, such a tense silence is terrifying, since 'a stalking of the game had often been part of his method',<sup>55</sup> but in the 1932 essay it is simply mocked, like the masculine phrases of disapproval derived from games, 'Playing the game ... It's not cricket' and the dismissive exclamation 'That's all skittles.'<sup>56</sup> For men, says Warner, it is axiomatic that 'In any law there is a quality of goodness; or to put it more simply, Laws are good in themselves.' Reverence for games such as cricket shows how men love rules and 'Where else among male activities ... shall we find the arbitrary nature of law in such a pure state as in the highly organized games?' Women can never feel a similar reverence, so 'with women overcoming them in countless contests of endurance and skill, men can still say – do say, with unshaken certainty – that women will never be any good at

games.' Having shown men resenting competition even more than they do contradiction, Warner concludes with heavy irony that 'Man claims, no doubt rightly, that it is by possession of a Moral Law that he is eminent among created things, and while following its dictates, infallible in judgment and conduct.'<sup>57</sup>

Because 'Man's Moral Law' appeared in a feminist essay collection, it is useful to situate its arguments about gender difference in relation to those put forward by Warner's contemporaries Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1928) and Rebecca West (who herself contributed the chapter on 'Man and Religion' to Ulrich's collection) in her magnum opus *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942). Warner's airily ironic style has something in common with Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* caricaturing the red-faced, jowly 'Professor von X engaged in writing his monumental work *The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*' and the assertion of male superiority, imaged as a phallic 'straight dark bar something like the letter I' falling across the page, which bores and irritates her in male novelists.<sup>58</sup> But the similarity is only a matter of style; whereas Woolf gives a wide-ranging analytic account of male privilege and its destructive effects, Warner limits herself to mockery of masculine pretensions. Likewise, her posited opposition between men's 'mystical' respect for rules and women's indifference to them has a certain resemblance to Rebecca West's distinction between two gendered kinds of tunnel vision: the female 'idiocy' of seeing nothing outside one's own private life *versus* the masculine 'lunacy' of obsession with 'public principles' which oversimplify everything into abstract generalities.<sup>59</sup> But whereas Rebecca West was writing as a historian, addressing the continuum of human experience to show how 'private lives are not invaded by public events; they belong to the same world ... as kings or popes' in a historical sweep that very definitely includes the historic subjection of women,<sup>60</sup> Warner, by assuming the stance of an emancipated woman, intellectually the superior of the conventional men she mocks and with no need to respect conventions nor even to pretend to do so, aims little higher than a *jeu d'esprit*. The argument of 'Man's Moral Law' is thus intellectually limited by the writer's assumption of privilege as an outsider unaffected by what she observes, and also by her class limitation, since the men she mocks are as uniformly upper-middle-class as herself ('It's not cricket' is hardly a working-class phrase). Perhaps Warner felt that she did not need to mention the oppression of women in a contribution to an explicitly feminist essay collection, whose title was taken from a Shakespeare heroine famously condemning 'Man,

proud man/ Dressed in a little brief authority/, Most ignorant of what he's most assured'.<sup>61</sup> But at least to me, her mockery in 'Man's Moral Law' of masculine idioms and the gendered language of advertisements, untampered by any hint of how the masculine 'fetichism' (*sic*)<sup>62</sup> of morality disadvantages women, looks at once laboured and flippant.

Very different, and not remotely frivolous, is Warner's article 'Spain's Living Daughters' (March 1938), in which she speaks eloquently of the oppression and immiseration of peasant women who have never worn shoes or seen a bar of soap, who work 'behind the stilts of a wooden plough or between the shafts', digging, reaping and carrying 'enormous loads', and who commonly bear ten or more children, of whom only a few survive. Some well-to-do women may enter a convent, but most bourgeois Spanish women have been doomed to a dreary life of married idleness. 'To the tyranny of husband is added the weight of social opinion; and social opinion prescribes that a woman who is not obliged to work must stay home and do nothing.' Women of all classes have lived in the 'icy shadow' of the Catholic church 'which had much use, but no regard for them'. Released from their miseries by the Spanish Republic, they have responded with enthusiasm, 'in such numbers, and with such passion, [bringing] their powers to the aid of a government pledged to their social liberation'.<sup>63</sup>

Unlike Warner's earlier essay, 'Spain's Living Daughters' does offer an analysis of women's oppression – of a very definitely Communist kind. For all her passionate and detailed denunciation of the forms of oppression to which poor and well-off Spanish women have been differently subjected, Warner's article is essentially propaganda (in the most honourable sense) for Republican Spain, concluding that

The Spanish woman today claims liberty not for herself in a man-made world, but for mankind against the tyranny of Fascism. Such phrases as 'a man-made world' would fall on uncomprehending ears if spoken to her. She sees only a world ill made, and worse menaced, and the need to rescue and remake it.<sup>64</sup>

Although the rejection of the phrase 'a man-made world' is not Warner's own but attributed by her to 'Spanish women', there is no indication that she thinks them wrong. For all her sympathy with the miseries of labouring women and the dreary lives of married ladies, she was just as much on the side of their husbands, sons and fathers who were fighting

for the Republic – perhaps even more so. Her treatment of aristocratic women in her novel *After the Death of Don Juan*, also published in 1938, is thoroughly unsympathetic; unlike the uneducated but tough and resilient peasant women, the ladies are represented as more passive, circumscribed and stupid than the gentlemen, but just as parasitic; as Maud Ellmann has pointed out, in Warner’s treatment of the nobility ‘class trumps gender: the idea that Doña Ana, with all her wealth and privilege, might also be oppressed by sexist customs and conventions, never punctures the world-view of the novel’.<sup>65</sup>

Outside her fiction, Warner engaged most seriously with questions of gender relations in the paper she gave to the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in February 1959, having been invited to give the Peter le Neve Foster lecture on ‘Women as Writers’. She was delighted with the invitation. ‘I felt pleased, and competent,’ she wrote in her diary, following up her pleasure with an instant rush of ideas:

Agnes Paston, saying in vehement Norfolk What about ME? sprang into my mind. Other emergences were Murasaki & Mme de la Fayette; question of why women aren’t composers germane; Sévigné. Court society servile, at best pug’s parlour. Jane Austen & Flaubert. *J’attends le coït de ces beaux volatiles*. J.A. under no such compulsion ...

Mrs Radclyffe, Mrs Browning, Ctina Rossetti.

Colette. Virginia Woolf.

Womanly qualities: nice calculation, neat stitches, industry. But also a particular freedom and intensity. Julian of Norwich: Colette & the champagne bottle.<sup>66</sup>

Much of this cosmopolitan list of writers appears in the final lecture, though not all the ideas did; ‘Women as Writers’ does not mention the paucity of women composers, nor Jane Austen not feeling obliged like Flaubert to observe the mating of peacocks. What Warner did develop was her perception of the ‘particular freedom and intensity of women’s writing’, an idea she developed in dialogue with one of the writers she had named in her diary, Virginia Woolf. Asked whom she would like to be her chairman, her preference was clear. ‘Whom I would like is Leonard Woolf.’<sup>67</sup> This choice of interlocutor signals an unspoken but visible engagement with Virginia Woolf, confirmed in Warner’s subsequent letter of thanks:

Dear Leonard,

It was very kind of you to preside over me yesterday. It made me feel proud and enabled me to feel confident. I wanted to say at the beginning of the lecture that all women writers owe you a debt of gratitude for what you did for one particular woman writer. But I don't think these things should be said in public; so let me say it now. I have long wanted to.<sup>68</sup>

*A Room of One's Own* is mentioned twice in the first paragraph of 'Women as Writers', and its presence runs through the paper (indeed, Warner defines her own ideas in relation to Woolf's arguments so often that, on the model of her chosen title for her own translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve* (1958), her lecture might plausibly be retitled 'By Way of Virginia Woolf'). The ironic resignation she initially expresses at being defined by the Royal Society of Arts in terms of her gender sounds very like Woolf's Mary Seton encountering gender boundaries:

Women as Writers. *Women* as Writers. Supposing I had been a man, a gentleman novelist, would I have been asked to lecture on Men as Writers? I thought it improbable.

Here was an implication I might or might not resent. Here, at any rate, was an obligation I couldn't dodge.<sup>69</sup>

The obligation is perhaps to Woolf who had shown so eloquently 'how astonishing it is that they [women] should write at all', but more likely represents Warner's polite challenge to the social conventions which had determined the RSA's invitation in the first place. For

when a woman writes a book, the action sets up an extraneous certain vibration. Something happens that must be accounted for. It is the action that does it, not the product ... it appears that the vibration is not set up until a woman seizes her pen. She may invent, but she may not write down.

Even St Teresa of Avila had to justify her work as written in accordance with her confessor's demand. 'True, she immediately added "The Lord himself, I know, has long wished it to be written" ... but the Lord and the woman had to wait for permission.'<sup>70</sup>

Yet, says Warner, women's approach to writing is notable for its directness. 'They dive into writing like ducks into water. One would almost think it came naturally to them – at any rate as naturally as plain sewing.'<sup>71</sup> But having had to transgress social convention by the mere act of writing, women writers are characteristically 'obstinate and sly'.<sup>72</sup> Although slyness in women is one of the attributes Warner had deplored to Nordoff in the letter quoted at the outset of this article ('it is fear that turns women sour, sly and harsh to their neighbours'),<sup>73</sup> in this context, her explicit approval of this seemingly unattractive quality signals that, for her, women writers, though traditionally subordinate, are not so much victims as survivors, using strategies of evasion and persistence ('obstinacy') to outwit the rules against their writing at all. (Here Warner makes them sound very much like the storyteller Minna in *Summer Will Show* recalling her life as a persecuted child in the priest's house, who survived thrashings and threats of a 'special hell for Jews' by sly cunning – 'I stole like an angel' – and a stubborn refusal to 'go under' until, befriended one summer by the strolling performer Corporal Lecoqc who noticed her talent, she learnt, under the pretence of washing and sewing for him, to perform the 'French tragedy speech' by whose spell she silenced the authorities and walked away 'free and unimpeded'. Having enthralled a street audience by this story, Minna, 'her face pale and noble', holds out her bonnet for contributions, explaining later that 'I have always allowed my talent to support me.'<sup>74</sup>) Warner's argument dissents, clearly though silently, from Woolf's contention in *A Room of One's Own* that women writers have been barred from literature, or at best damaged by men's contempt and mockery. The brief history of English women writers sketched by Woolf emphasises the disadvantages that have prevented them: 'A highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled aside by her own conflicting instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity'; even if she survived, her work would have been 'twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination'.<sup>75</sup> Conceding women writers' social disadvantages, Warner by contrast praises their resilience, arguing that their 'obstinacy and slyness' have enabled them to survive and, what is more, to create. For her, their defining quality is the opposite of the uncertainty and self-doubt which for Woolf characterised every woman writer from the Countess of Winchelsea, 'harassed and distracted with hates and grievances', to Charlotte Brontë dying young, 'cramped and thwarted'.<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, for Warner the principal quality of women's writing is the 'immediacy'<sup>77</sup> whereby they make the reader aware only of what is being said, not of who is saying it or how:

When the unequivocal statement matches itself to the pre-determined thought and the creative impulse sets fire to them, the quality we call immediacy results ... where it is present the author becomes absent. The writing is no longer propelled by the writer's anxious hand, the reader is no longer conscious of the writer's chaperoning hand ... Women seem to be remarkably adept at vanishing out of their writing so that the quality of immediacy replaces them.<sup>78</sup>

Warner illustrates her argument with a one-page account of women writing, from Madame de La Fayette in *La Princesse de Clèves* to Murasaki's *Tale of Genji*, from Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights* to Christina Rossetti in 'Goblin Market' and Colette in *La Chatte*, with a tribute to Shakespeare's appearance in Woolf's *Orlando* as he 'gazed and mused ... and wrote half a dozen lines – and no more need be said'.<sup>79</sup> This last move is ingenious and unexpected, since in 1959 Woolf was famous not for vanishing out of her work but for her style and her modernist experimentation (her reputation as a great feminist writer arose later). And although Warner herself was capable of writing simply, her own style is often witty and fantastical, so that, according to her biographer, 'the expression of her ideas was so unusual and stimulating that it often proved more memorable than the ideas themselves ... Sylvia was still thwarted by her own manner of writing, which was essentially surprising and diverting'.<sup>80</sup> She herself was well aware of the danger of being effaced by her own wit, writing in her diary in 1963 'I must study to be plain' and reminding herself when she began her late story 'A Love Match', that it must be 'as flat as flat and dry as dry – WITH NO FRISKS OR QUIPS, my old girl'.<sup>81</sup> Her insistence on the directness of women's writing therefore looks very like a riposte to Woolf's argument that women's writing had been 'deformed and twisted'. Moreover, she counters Woolf's famous tragic parable of Shakespeare's sister, the Judith Shakespeare whose genius, potentially as great as her brother's, was so thwarted that in despair and frustration she 'killed herself one winter night and lies buried at some cross-road',<sup>82</sup> with a more cheerful story of women finding their own way, against the rules, into the house of literature:

Suppose ... that there was a palace, which you could only know from outside. Sometimes you heard music playing within, and the corks popping, and sometimes splendid figures came to an open window and spoke a few words in a solemn chanting voice; and



from time to time you met someone who had actually been inside, and was carrying away under his arm – it was always a man – a lute or a casket or a leg of turkey. And then one day you discovered that you could climb into this palace by the pantry window. In the excitement of the moment you wouldn't wait; you wouldn't go home to smooth your hair or borrow your grandmother's garnets or read the Book of Etiquette. Even at the risk of being turned out by the butler, rebuked by the chaplain, laughed at by the rightful guests, you'd climb in.

In something of the same way, women have entered literature breathless, unequipped, and with nothing but their wits to trust to. A few minutes ago, or a few centuries ago, they were writing a letter about an apoplexy, or a recipe for custard. Now they are inside the palace writing with great clearness what they have a mind to say – for that is all they know about it, no one has groomed them for a literary career – writing on the kitchen table, like Emily Brontë, or on the washstand, like Christina Rossetti, writing in the attic, like George Sand, or in the family parlour, protected by a squeaking door from being discovered at it, like Jane Austen – writing away for all they are worth, and seldom blotting a line.<sup>83</sup>

In case her listeners miss the implications of 'seldom blotting a line', Warner spells these out:

Do you see what we are coming to? – I have put in several quotations to prepare you for it.<sup>84</sup> We are coming to those other writers who have got into literature by the pantry window, and who have left the most illustrious footprints on the windowsill. It is a dizzying conclusion, but it must be faced. Women, entering literature, entered it on the same footing as William Shakespeare . . . Women writers have shared his advantage of starting with no literary advantages.<sup>85</sup>

Admitting the fact of gender disadvantage and the traditional exclusion of women from literature (she doesn't mention education), Warner silently disputes Woolf's contention that women's circumstances have disabled them from using their own talent. Where Woolf had written that 'it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for a woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare',<sup>86</sup> Warner argues, contrariwise, that women writers not only come in 'on

the same footing as Shakespeare' but share with him 'other qualities, also deriving from ... the circumstance of entering literature by the pantry window': strong female characters, an 'ease and appreciativeness in low company' and an ear for 'turns of phrase used by carpenters, gardeners, sailors ... old nurses and that oldest nurse of all, ballad and folklore'. All these 'technical assets', unrelated to talent, result from 'the advantage of starting with no literary advantages, like Bunyan, Keats, and John Clare'.<sup>87</sup> At once echoing and altering Woolf's final prophecy that through women living, thinking and writing on their own terms 'the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down' and will 'find it possible to live and write her poetry',<sup>88</sup> Warner imagines the woman writer coming into her own not as a distant prospect but immediately. Perhaps 'at this moment, a Joan Milton or François Rabelais may have left the washing unironed or the stew uncared for because she can't wait to begin'.<sup>89</sup>

## Note on contributor

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the reviewers during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner to Paul Nordoff, 4 February 1949, in Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 108.
- 2 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Horrid Females', *Time and Tide*, 23 December 1927, reprinted in the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter* 25 (Summer 2013), n.p.: <http://townsendwarner.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/STW-Society-Newsletter-No.-25.pdf> (accessed 11 December 2024).
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 4 August 1954, pp. 209–10. The ellipsis in square brackets is Harman's. 'Andrew' has not been identified.
- 4 Warner, 'Horrid Females' (1927). Warner makes one exception for 'modest Aphra Behn ... thanks to her residence in Grub Street ... a tolerable human being'.
- 5 Warner to Bea Howe, 4 December 1941, in Warner, *Letters*, p. 75. The WVS was the Women's Voluntary Service.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928) (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1978), p. 76.
- 7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (1936) (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2020), p. 40.
- 8 Warner, *Letters*, p. 75 (see also n. 5). The ATS was the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women's branch of the British Army during the Second World War. 'Heavy Oxfords' were thick lace-up shoes.
- 9 Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, letters and politics, 1930–1951* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), pp. 80–94.
- 10 Warner to Garnett, 3 February 1978, in *Sylvia & David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett letters*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 237. The ellipsis is Richard Garnett's. The other feminist press Warner corresponded with must have been The Women's Press, which reprinted *Lolly Willowes* in 1977.
- 11 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (1936) (London: Penguin, 2020), pp. 285, 94, 97–9, 105.
- 12 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *After the Death of Don Juan* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1938), pp. 134–5, 288–90.
- 13 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2020), pp. 107–8.
- 14 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'But At The Stroke of Midnight' (1970), in *Selected Stories*, eds. Susanna Pinney and William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 151.
- 15 Warner, *Diaries*, 7 January 1954, p. 205.
- 16 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 20. In Harman's statement, 'George was responsible for the shaping of Sylvia's intellect; he "made" her', the word 'made', in quotation marks, though not referenced, is probably based on Warner's musing 'My intellect was man-made' in the diary entry on 7 January 1954 cited above (see note 15). When Harman was writing her biography she had certainly read Warner's diaries, but had not yet edited them for publication: *Diaries* appeared in 1994.
- 17 Michael Steinmann, ed., *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of William Maxwell and Sylvia Townsend Warner* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), pp. 73–4. The Harrow school song 'Forty Years On' is exactly as described by Warner.
- 18 Frances Bingham, *Valentine Ackland: A transgressive life* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2021). For Ackland's schooling, see pp. 74–5. Contradicting Harman's

- account of Warner's informal education by her father, Bingham claims that 'like Valentine, Sylvia was almost entirely self-taught ... Sylvia was always anguished by her exclusion from George's intellectual working world' (p. 61).
- 19 Woolf, *Room*, p. 9.
  - 20 Warner, *Diaries*, 28–30 July 1930, pp. 64–5.
  - 21 Eric Milner-White, Dean of King's College, was a former Harrow pupil of her father.
  - 22 Warner, *Diaries*, 28–30 July 1930, pp. 64–5. Combination room: a Senior Common Room in a Cambridge college. The 'thousands of admirable young men' can only have been present in her mind's eye, since Warner and Buck were visiting in the middle of the Long Vacation (July to September) when undergraduates are absent. 'Teague' was her personal nickname for Percy Buck.
  - 23 Woolf, *Room*, p. 26.
  - 24 See Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, pp. 44–5, 66–8. There is an account of Warner's relationship with 'Tommy' in Michael Bloch and Susan Fox, *Bloomsbury Stud: A life of Stephen 'Tommy' Tomlin* (London: Libanus Press, 2020).
  - 25 There is a gap of 23 years between Garnett's letter to Warner admiring 'Some World Far From Ours', 19 October 1932, and Warner's letter thanking him for sending her a copy of his novel *Aspects of Love* in November 1955 (in Garnett, ed., *Sylvia & David*, pp. 53–4 and p. 56 respectively). It is thought that their friendship and correspondence was deep-frozen during this long period because Valentine Ackland objected to it, but once the old friends were back in touch, they continued writing to one another just as affectionately until the end of Sylvia's life. Her last letter to Garnett, dated 3 February 1978, invites him to visit her in July unless she is by then 'among the glorious dead' (p. 237), which, in the event, she was, having died on 1 May.
  - 26 Warner to Garnett, 9 February 1927, p. 33 and 25 August 1965, p. 87, in Garnett, ed., *Sylvia & David*.
  - 27 Warner to Maxwell, 9 April 1971, in Warner, *Letters*, p. 251.
  - 28 Warner to George Plank, 11 May 1961, in Warner, *Letters*, p. 192.
  - 29 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 37.
  - 30 Warner to Plank, in Warner, *Letters* p. 192 (see note 28 above).
  - 31 Warner, 'Horrid Females'.
  - 32 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Way By Which I have Come', *The Countryman* (July 1939), reprinted in Peter Tolhurst, ed., *With the Hunted: Selected writings* (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 15.
  - 33 For a detailed and helpful account of Warner's musicological work in the 1920s, see Chapter 3 'Tudor Church Music' of Lynn Mutti, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A musical life' (PhD thesis, UCL, 2019).
  - 34 David Garnett was in the audience for Warner's lecture 'Women as writers'. Afterwards she noted 'David's proprietary air. I suppose one never loses the sense of a woman possessed' (Warner, *Diaries*, 11 February 1959, p. 254): clear evidence that they had had sex at least one time and maybe more. Other sex partners included 'Tommy' Tomlin (see note 27) and, according to Frances Bingham, Warner's publisher Charles Prentice, 'an erstwhile lover of Sylvia's': Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, p. 90.
  - 35 Judith Stinton, 'A Lily Worthy of Her Hire', *Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter* 25 (Summer 2013), n.p.: <http://townsendwarner.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/STW-Society-Newsletter-No.-25.pdf> (accessed 11 November 2024).
  - 36 'Emancipate: v. trans: (Rom. law) To release (child, wife) from power of *pater familias*; free from legal, social, political, intellectual, or moral restraint': *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 395.
  - 37 Warner to Nancy Cunard, 28 April 1944, in Warner, *Letters*, p. 84.

- 38 An abridged version of Warner's letter, 'The great civil war ... that will come and must come before the world can begin to grow up, will be fought out on this terrain of man and woman, and we must storm and hold Cape Turk before we talk of social justice' appears as the third epigraph to Chapter 2 of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The place of the woman writer in the 20th century. Vol. 1: The War of the Words* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 65.
- 39 Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 98.
- 40 Woolf, *Room*, p. 35.
- 41 Woolf, *Room*, pp. 35, 37–8.
- 42 Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 108.
- 43 Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 109.
- 44 Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 144.
- 45 Warner, *Lolly Willowses*, p. 156.
- 46 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Flint Anchor* (1954) (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2020), p. 21.
- 47 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 15.
- 48 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 25.
- 49 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 23.
- 50 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 23.
- 51 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 89.
- 52 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 248.
- 53 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 253.
- 54 Peter Swaab, 'Editorial', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 17, no. 1 (2017), p. x.
- 55 Warner, *The Flint Anchor*, p. 256.
- 56 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Man's Moral Law', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 17, no. 1 (2017), pp. 11–12.
- 57 Warner, 'Man's Moral Law', pp. 15, 19.
- 58 Woolf, *Room*, pp. 32, 98.
- 59 Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (London: Macmillan, 1942), vol. 1, p. 3. See also her statement that at the sight of a war memorial 'I became filled with feminist rage' (p. 50).
- 60 Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 187, 190.
- 61 Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act 2 Scene 2, 325–8.
- 62 Warner, 'Man's Moral Law' p. 16.
- 63 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Spain's Living Daughters' (*The Fight*, March 1938), *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 22, no. 1 (2023), pp. 32, 34.
- 64 Warner, 'Spain's Living Daughters', p. 36.
- 65 Maud Ellmann, 'After the Death of Don Juan: Warner's Spanish novel', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 17, no. 2 (2017), p. 15.
- 66 Warner, *Diaries*, 5 September 1958, p. 250. The French quotation is from Flaubert's letter to Georges Charpentier, 3 February 1880, presumably written from memory; the sentence in full is 'J'attends même un couple de paons pour étudier le coït de ces beaux volatiles' ('I am even waiting for a couple of peacocks to study the mating of these beautiful birds'). *Correspondence de Gustave Flaubert, Tome 8–9*, p. 1944: <https://frsource.org> (accessed 29 July 2024). The allusion to Colette and the champagne bottle has eluded me.
- 67 Warner to Ian Parsons, 18 November 1958, Warner, *Letters*, p. 169, asking his advice in case Leonard 'might say yes out of duty, & kindness, & then have to spend a whole afternoon doing something that he would rather not'.
- 68 Warner to Leonard Woolf, 12 March 1959, Warner, *Letters*, p. 172.

- 69 Warner, 'Women as Writers' (1959), reprinted in Peter Tolhurst, ed., *With the Hunted: Selected writings* (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 231.
- 70 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 231.
- 71 Warner, 'Women as Writers', pp. 231–2.
- 72 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 234.
- 73 Warner to Nordoff, in Warner, *Letters*, p. 108.
- 74 Warner, *Summer Will Show*, pp. 176–81.
- 75 Woolf, *Room*, p. 51.
- 76 Woolf, *Room*, pp. 60, 70.
- 77 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 235.
- 78 Warner, 'Women as Writers', pp. 235–6.
- 79 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 236.
- 80 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 218.
- 81 Warner, *Diaries*, 21 October 1963, p. 288; Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 281, quoting Warner's unpublished diary.
- 82 Woolf, *Room*, p. 50.
- 83 Warner, 'Women as Writers' p. 238.
- 84 'Seldom blotting a line': Ben Jonson famously remarked that 'Whatsoever he [Shakespeare] penned, he never blotted a line. My answer hath been, Would he had blotted a thousand.' (Jonson, *Timber, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter*, p. 164, cited in [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com).) The Shakespearean quotations and allusions before this sentence are, apropos of women vanishing out of their writing, 'even quite mediocre women writers will wear this precious jewel in their heads': c.f. 'As the toad, ugly and venomous/ Wears yet a precious jewel in his head' (*As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 1); and 'It is easier for women to make herself air and vanish off her pages': c.f. 'These our actors ... Are melted into air, into thin air' (*The Tempest*, Act 4 Scene 1); and perhaps with 'when a gust of wind extinguishes the solitary taper and Mrs Radcliffe's heroine is left in the darkness, it is a darkness that can be felt', Warner is recalling 'So out went the candle, and we were left darkling' (*King Lear*, Act 1 Scene 4). All in Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 237.
- 85 Warner, 'Women as Writers', pp. 238–9.
- 86 Woolf, *Room*, p. 48.
- 87 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 239.
- 88 Woolf, *Room*, p. 112.
- 89 Warner, 'Women as Writers', p. 241.

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