Art and Anger: Elizabeth Robins and Virginia Woolf

Fie on the falsehood of men, whose minds go oft a madding, and whose tongues can not so soon be wagging, but straight they fall a railing. . . .
Oh Paul's steeple and Charing Cross! A halter hold all such persons! Let the streams of the channels in London streets run so swiftly as they may be able alone to carry them from that sanctuary! Let the stones be as ice, the soles of their shoes as glass, the ways steep like Etna and every blast a whirlwind puffed out of Boreas his long throat, that these may hasten their passage to the Devil's haven!
. . . and shall not Anger stretch the veins of her brains, the strings of her fingers, and the lists of her modesty to answer their surfeitings?

—Jane Anger, 1589

Anger and righteous indignation are the two emotions that provoke the most hostility from the powerful when expressed by the powerless. When men are angry and indignant, they are godlike, imitating Jehovah. The Bible tells us that it is better to dwell in the wilderness than with an angry woman. The scold’s chair, bridle, and gag remind us of our ancestors’ remedies for outspoken women. Art is even more judgmental. An angry artist is a polemicist. Her writing is judged in a special category, as if writing inspired by anger were not worthy of the name of art. I want to explore the techniques through which
women have disguised their anger and expressed it. We will examine Elizabeth Robins' bitter anonymous last book, *Ancilla's Share*, along with Virginia Woolf's growth into an angry old woman, from *A Room of One's Own* to *Three Guineas*.²

Jane Anger's curse is remarkable for its directness. There are few enough examples of the female's wrath surviving British patriarchal culture. One thinks of Mary Wollstonecraft, the Brontës, Olive Schreiner, Sylvia Pankhurst. Most women writers have learned to disguise their anger. But their protest never died. Whining and nagging, those peculiar forms of protest which we are taught to associate with the powerless—women, slaves, children, and servants—are testimony to the danger of the powerless and its survival in the form of indirect discourse.

Anger and righteous indignation are the emotions of patriarchs in the state and in the family. These emotions are justified as imitations of Jehovah, god of retribution and justice. Hell is the source of woman's wrath, we are told; the anger of the victim comes from the devil, while the fury of a general or a prime minister is heroic and godlike. Women are not supposed to raise their voices, shake their fists, or point their fingers in accusation. That so many women actually have seems miraculous.

Photographs of suffragettes lying bloody, hair disheveled, hats askew, roused public anger toward the women, not their assailants. They were unladylike; they provoked the authorities. Demonstrations by students and blacks arouse similar responses. The justice of a cause is enhanced by the nonviolence of its adherents. But the response of the powerful when pressed for action has been such that only anger and violence have won change in the law or in government policy. Similar contradictions and a double standard have characterized atti-
attitudes toward anger itself. While for the people, anger has been denounced as one of the seven deadly sins, divines and churchmen have always defended it as a necessary attribute of the leader. “Anger is one of the sinews of the soul” wrote Thomas Fuller. “He that wants it hath a maimed mind.” “Anger has its proper use,” declared Cardinal Manning. “Anger is the executive power of justice.” Anger signifies strength in the strong, weakness in the weak. An angry mother is out of control; an angry father is exercising his authority. Our culture’s ambivalence about anger reflects its defense of the status quo; the terrible swift sword is for fathers and kings, not daughters and subjects. The story of Judith and the story of Antigone have not been part of the education of daughters, as both Elizabeth Robins and Virginia Woolf point out, unless men have revised and rewritten them. It is hardly possible to read the poetry of Sappho, they both assure us, separate from centuries of scholarly calumny.

One of the particular ways men have dealt with defiance or insolence in women (aside from treating it as mental illness deserving treatment in an asylum, sin deserving excommunication or penance, or political crime deserving ostracism or prison) is to assert that female anger is the result of sexual frustration or sexual jealousy—a tactic of ridicule to obscure the justice of women’s claims. “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord. “And mine,” say the prime ministers, patriarchs, fathers, assuming divine right. “And mine,” says the woman who demands education, recognition, equal pay. Yet her demand is regarded as reasonable, blasphemous, unladylike or, at present, unreasonable.

But Freud has argued that anger is not associated with libido and is not a result of sexual frustration. Anger is a form of primary narcissism, a result of the ego’s first struggle to maintain itself, to find an identity separate from the mother. Self-preservation is the source of anger. Love and hate are not opposites; hate and anger come first as the ego learns to defend itself. The narcissism of the artist has often seemed a frail and fragile vessel for carrying the weight of society’s anger and rebellion, our dreams and wishes for both freedom and peace. Yet we have generally regarded the artist’s narcissism as healthy. Even in exaggerated form it has seemed necessary for the deepest forms of self-expression.
But the narcissistic female artist is a rarity. It still takes our breath away to read in The Diary of Marie Bashkirtseff, "I am my own heroine!" Even the admiring Shaw felt it necessary to declare that "woman artist" was a contradiction in terms and would require inventing a "third or Bashkirtseff sex" to accommodate her ego. Such ego strength as it takes to be a great artist, such fearlessness and ferocity he felt to be unnatural and unwomanly. We accept women's narcissism as a fact, but we note its deflection over centuries to a vanity of body and dress. When not deflected, as in the case of Mme. de Staël or George Sand, for example, the artist can express herself both in anger and joy.

Both Elizabeth Robins and Virginia Woolf, as artists, analyzed their own anger, tried to capture its energy for their art, and yet were in certain ways victims of the need to sublimate some of that anger in order to survive. Elizabeth Robins (1862–1952) was an American who spent most of her life in England. She came to London in the nineties having worked with Booth and O'Neill in America, and is best known for producing, directing, and playing the leading roles in the first English productions of Ibsen's plays. She appears to have been an actress of extraordinary talent, England's first "intellectual" actress, and she won much acclaim. But her struggle to get Ibsen's plays staged, at first simply a hungry actress's response to meaty roles for women, became a larger struggle against the actor-manager system and a working woman's struggle as a feminist, socialist, and pacifist for social justice. She left the stage to become a novelist and playwright; she helped to organize the Women Writers' Suffrage League and the Actresses' Franchise League and became a well-known speaker and writer for the feminist cause, a champion of the Pankhursts' militancy. She wrote the most successful propaganda play for women's suffrage, Votes for Women! (1907) and a novel on the same subject, The Convert (1907), with a barely fictionalized Christabel Pankhurst as its heroine. Her fiction, while fascinating and full of intellectual and dramatic power, is not as great as Virginia Woolf's primarily because of its use of traditional Victorian forms. If a revolutionary artist is revolutionary in form—as Christopher Caudwell tells us—then
Woolf was doubly revolutionary, in form and in content. Robins' real genius was in her voice and power as an actress, a power she used on platforms all over Edwardian England to convert women to the cause of feminism.  

Elizabeth Robins was one of those "mothers" of fiction we think back through. She and hundreds of other unknown women writers prepared the literary soil for the eventual creation of the woman of genius, the Shakespeare's sister. "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."  

Elizabeth Robins lived to be ninety; she and Virginia Woolf were friends and neighbors in Sussex. Leonard and Virginia Woolf published Robins' Ibsen and the Actress and her autobiographical Raymond and I. Robins left Backsettown Farm, her home, as a rest home for professional women. In her later years she supported many women medical students. One of them, Dr. Octavia Wilberforce, became her close friend and companion. Dr. Wilberforce was also Virginia Woolf's last doctor. Woolf considered writing Wilberforce's biography, fascinated by a family tradition close to the Stephens in Clapham Sect social reform. Dr. Wilberforce wanted to write Elizabeth Robins' biography, but died before she could do so.  

Leonard Woolf tells us in his autobiography that Elizabeth Robins' energy wore him out, but he did his best to sort out her papers and execute her will. Octavia Wilberforce's letters to Elizabeth Robins describing the last illness and death of Virginia Woolf survive. When they are published, I think they will tell us a great deal about Woolf's supposed madness from a source we can trust.  

Elizabeth Robins published Ancilla's Share: An Indictment of Sex Antagonism anonymously in 1924. She need hardly have bothered with anonymity, for the world had ceased to remember her. The sisterhood for whom she had written and worked hard had disappeared. She had even less of an audience than Virginia Woolf had four years later when she published A Room of One's Own. The anger in Ancilla's Share alternates with bitter disappointment, and the "indictment" of
male sex antagonism loses some of its force as she counts women's losses and licks her veteran feminist's wounds. Bitterly she surveys the wreckage around her, realizing that women's suffrage was granted not as a reward for war work but because "the services women had rendered in the Great War constituted a ground which the men in the street could understand." With the gain of the vote came the loss of the power to work. She devastatingly counts and quotes Labour's fierce fight to exclude female workers in factories, the closing of the great teaching hospitals to female medical students, the exclusion of married female professionals and workers from all the jobs they had done during the war. Class hatred between women was being stirred up, and the new generation would have to fight all the old battles over again.

As an artist she was appalled at the depth of oblivion that overshadowed the reputation of the women of her generation. She and Mrs. Humphry Ward had been archenemies over the suffrage question. Mrs. Ward, as the leader of the Anti-Suffrage movement, had made her home a conservative salon, and she had stood for the patriarchal values of the politicians, intellectuals, and writers whom she had encouraged. Dead, she was not mourned by any of them, least of all by Elizabeth Robins' old friend, Henry James, who had taken Mary Ward's favors and laughed at her literary efforts behind her back. The same is true of Edith Wharton; Robins saw that a lifetime of friendship had only inspired in James "a certain worried desire to do this duty." And Shaw had just written a play about Catherine the Great, leaving out her politics, which Robins thought should have been called "Kitten of the Adelphi" or "Puss in Boots" for "in cheapening Catherine he cheapens his own talent." James and Shaw had been Elizabeth Robins' champions when she was the champion of Ibsen. When she herself began to write they were silent. But James and Shaw were unconscious sexists; the conscious woman-haters H. G. Wells, Wyndham Lewis, and Aldous Huxley she called "this brace of Minotaurs." Calmly, Robins went on to explain the source of active woman-hating in modern writers as "a need to protect something which has been assailed or is believed to be threatened."
You do not protect yourself from the helpless. You may deliberately insult your peer and get what is called satisfaction by giving him the privilege of shooting at you. You do not insult a slave. You merely revile and ill-treat him. As to his “answering back,” whether with tongue or bullet or blade, that is for his superiors. When the slave comes to a place where it is possible deliberately to insult him, he is no longer the helpless thing he was. Woman, having ceased in some measure to be helpless, had become, in the polite phrase of Mr. Henry James, “impeachable.” Stated bluntly, men despised her at their ease for her helplessness. From no manifestation of hers do the majority of the opposite sex recoil so sharply as from signs of her ceasing to be helpless.

Elizabeth Robins had been brought up with an ideal of service to art and to social progress. Even in the heyday of her success as Hedda Gabler, she justified her personal desire for glory by her belief that her talent served to bring to the public Ibsen’s poetic and political genius. Her genius was to play the role of ancilla well. The source of this role was not religious, for her father was as firmly antireligious as Virginia Woolf’s. She would not be handmaiden to the Lord, but handmaiden to history, ancilla to an age that, in her view, would see women free and socialism in power. At sixty-two she saw that ancilla’s share in the patriarchal pie was nonexistent, that “ancillary” meant secondary, and that servants and women held no honorable places in history books except when they were sexually related to famous men. “Where is woman’s inventiveness, her humour, her intellectual passion, her vision, her poetry?” she asked. “Dorothy Wordsworth’s is in her brother William’s. Mary Lamb’s is in her brother’s. Henrietta Renan’s is in her brother’s. Mary Shelley’s is in her husband’s. Louise Colet’s in *Madame Bovary.*”

It was too late in 1924 for Robins to develop the narcissism necessary to write a great novel. She had seen writing as a way to earn her living; social ideas and moral power animate her prose, but art for art’s sake or even the artist’s sake were notions utterly foreign to her. Virginia Woolf had class, tradition, and money to free her for the
struggle between art, moral and political ideas, and her own ego. *A Writer’s Diary* is testimony that the political and moral concerns died hard. She concentrated her energies on breaking old forms and forging new ones. But first she had to kill the “angel in the house,” the desire bred in women to play the role of ancilla. Elizabeth Robins, like many Victorian women novelists, did not kill the angel but directed the angel’s energies into service to a cause. It was often easier to see oneself as a vessel of historical consciousness than to deal with the guilt aroused by declaring oneself an artist. Self-expression was a social sin. As the voice of the oppressed, she was not a sinner but a saint. Robins preaches and teaches; Woolf condemned self-appointed missionaries to the masses, and she feared those feelings in herself. Robins chose writing to keep her self-respect. She had no time for formal experimentation. In the theater as director and actress she could have forged her own art form. The only way she could have secured a theater of her own and plays as appealing to women as Ibsen’s was to sell her body, as generations of actresses had done before her. When she refused a villa in St. John’s Wood, she gave up not only her future as an actress of genius, but her achievements, invisible now to the world. To Shaw goes praise for distilling the quintessence of Ibsenism, although Elizabeth Robins’ acting was the cup he drank it from.

While the *Times Literary Supplement* could eventually label Virginia Woolf “the most brilliant pamphleteer in England,” a reviewer in its back pages attacked *Ancilla’s Share* as a “long series of illusions and special pleadings,” and lambasted Robins for a “clumsy and confused style,” for her “captious suspicion of everything man does,” and asserted that women went back to their “natural” functions after the war. The review granted praise only to Robins’ remark that women leaders had failed to cooperate with one another. The reviewer complained of women’s antagonism to men, of which “the book itself is indeed a conspicuous manifestation.”

I’m sure Robins’ one-sentence paragraphs made the reviewer nervous and jumpy. They were meant to. For *Ancilla’s Share* is an “indictment.” It is written in the form of a legal brief, as if the brilliant
forensic powers of that lawyer who was never allowed to practice, Christabel Pankhurst, were reading it aloud in court. The indictment proceeds in little spurts as if the author is squeezing out bits of long-repressed anger. She has packed the court. "These pages are not addressed to the masculine mind," she begins. And many younger feminine minds are excluded as well, for they have been made to "feel" inferior to men; the judge, of course, is History, since Robins doesn't believe in God and will bow her head to no man. She pleads with a jury of her peers for a kind of justice seldom received by women. The plea is eloquent. As Virginia Woolf said when reviewing The Mills of the Gods, "she writes like a man," meaning that the text is a "fine hard fabric" and the style has "bare brevity" and the mind is "robust." But she is misled "largely by her strong dramatic sense" says Woolf.11

The oratorical prose of Ancilla's Share was meant to be spoken, declaimed in defense of a prisoner in the dock. There the pauses would be dramatically effective. A lawyer's brief may be electrifying in court, yet boring on the printed page. Ancilla's Share is charged with anger; but much of it turns against herself and her generation for accepting "ancilla's share." Certainly it is a literary triumph to demand justice for women in the form of a legal brief from the very system which perpetuated injustice to women.

I am not certain that Ancilla's Share was among the books of Elizabeth Robins which Virginia Woolf read and admired.12 But there seems to be ample evidence that she did. In my view, the germ of the idea for Three Guineas could have come from Robins' remark: "We would like to think we might receive a pound for the fund needed by the Women's Colleges . . . from everyone who, as a girl, had a taste of that rapture of the high places, if not a taste of chastisement for seeking to climb there."13 Robins argued for women's independence of political parties; we must first remove abuses "older than capitalism, older than imperialism," a view Woolf pushed even further in her vision of women as "outsiders." Both writers speak essentially to women, a technique that has infuriated male readers and has reminded women of the psychic displacement necessary for them to read most literature.
“Much as passages of doubtful propriety pass the juvenile reader unnoticed,” Elizabeth Robins asserted, “women of all ages seldom consciously register the judgments slighting or condemnatory meted out wholesale to her sex. Little short of amazement is in store for women who reread their poets and historians with a view to collecting evidence of man’s account of her character and of her place in the scheme of things.” A “separable spite” must be attained by women, an awareness of insult and a refusal to take it. Her evidence was all around her, in the daily papers, in the books on her shelves. She, like Virginia Woolf after her, steeled herself to collect it, to publish it, and to make us take note of it as well. This is obviously the source for the scrapbooks of news clippings and notes Woolf kept all during the thirties, only a fraction of which were used for Three Guineas. A useful experiment for students in women’s studies would be to record every instance of sexism encountered in a day.

One of the most moving passages in Ancilla’s Share concerns Robins’ visit to the British Museum, where she is fascinated by the Egyptian frescoes of “the daughters of the college of Amen-Ra.” Her delight is dashed, her zest for discovery destroyed by the contempt of the Keeper, who fears she will encourage women from the colleges of Newnham and Girton to investigate their ancestresses. Temple prostitutes he says they were, and “college” a little joke on the part of the museum staff. Virginia Woolf has taken a similar scenario in A Room of One’s Own and made it immortal.

While Woolf felt that one must be a pork butcher’s daughter and have inherited a share in a pig factory to have access to the vulgar power of language, she often felt it was necessary to carry the weight of her own rage. She habitually recorded that rage in her diary, to use its energy in the melting-down-of-the-mind process she called “incandescence” so that the anger, when expressed, would have more fire than smoke. Being patronized by patriarchal institutions was more than she could bear with equanimity, however, and she attacked them vigorously—St. Paul’s, Westminster Abbey, Oxford and Cambridge, the Houses of Parliament—in both pamphlet and fiction. Some feminist critics have felt that A Room of One’s Own criticizes Charlotte Brontë
too severely for her anger. But Woolf's argument is more complex; Woolf's anger is directed at Haworth parsonage, not at Brontë. She felt that Brontë was a writer of genius and that she might have been a Shakespeare if she had had some money, travel, and experience. Far more space in that book is filled with analysis of her own anger and men's anger at women. She is sympathetic to Brontë. Her own anger, demonstrated with an uncanny ability to see the economic source of social, personal, and artistic problems, was cooled by a generous amount of money to buy time, privacy, and freedom.

The British Museum is the scene for the dramatization of her anger at the mythical Professor von X, author of the scores of misogynist books that overwhelm her attempt at research:

His expression suggested that he was labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained ... the professor was made to look very angry and very ugly in my sketch, as he wrote his great book upon the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women ... it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top. A very elementary exercise in psychology, not to be dignified by the name of psycho-analysis, showed me, on looking at my notebook, that the sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. Anger had snatched my pencil while I dreamt. But what was anger doing there? Interest, confusion, amusement, boredom—all these emotions I could trace and name as they succeeded each other throughout the morning. Had anger, the black snake, been lurking among them? Yes, said the sketch, anger had. It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon; it was the professor's statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women. My heart had leapt. My cheeks had burnt. I had flushed with anger. There was nothing specially remarkable, however foolish, in that. One does not like to be told that one is naturally
the inferior of a little man—I looked at the student next me—who
breathes hard, wears a ready-made tie, and has not shaved this
fortnight. One has certain foolish vanities. It is only human
nature, I reflected and began drawing cartwheels and circles
over the angry professor’s face till he looked like a burning bush
or a flaming comet—anyhow, an apparition without human
semblance or significance. The professor was nothing now but
a faggot burning on the top of Hampstead Heath. Soon, my
own anger was explained and done with; but curiosity remained.
How explain the anger of the professors? Why were they angry?
For when it came to analysing the impression left by these
books there was always an element of heat. This heat took
many forms; it showed itself in satire, in sentiment, in curiosity,
in reprobation. But there was another element which was often
present and could not immediately be identified. Anger, I called
it. But it was anger that had gone underground and mixed itself
with all kinds of other emotions. To judge from its odd effects,
it was anger disguised and complex, not anger simple and
open.15

As an analysis of the feeling of anger, Virginia Woolf’s paragraph
is hardly “elementary”; we might even call it “rationalization,” except
that the act of writing it down is social and feminist. “Do not blame
yourself; I have felt it too, that ‘black snake’ lurking,” she tells us,
and she shows us that we deflect anger heaped on us from above to
those below. She does not tell us that she felt superior to the ill-kempt
student because she is proud of her class distinction or is a snob. It
is a lesson about how the “foolish vanities” or prejudices are passed
on from top to bottom. Note that she encircles and defaces her drawing
of the professor; he is blotted out by the humble cartwheel. Her essays
join women and the working class as natural allies against the patri­
rarchs and professors, although aware that they are constantly being
divided by pressure from above. She makes the professor into a “burn­
ing bush.” She makes his hatred a “faggot” in the bonfire to provide
a torch for the light of her own imagination. By analyzing the source
of her own anger, and its deflection not directly back at the enemy
but “down” onto the “little man” sitting next to her, Virginia Woolf articulates the “scapegoat” theory of prejudice in a few words. “The pathetic devices of the human imagination” for feeling superior to others include, Woolf says, “a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney.” When she tells us that the great professor, who said that the minds of the best female students were not equal to the worst of the men, went home to bed with a pimply-faced working-class boy, she is expressing neither classism nor hatred of homosexuality nor arousing us to such prejudice, but demonstrating again the process of scapegoating. She can understand anger in the powerless but asks why the powerful were angry:

With the exception of the fog, he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry. I knew he was angry by this token. When I read what he wrote about women I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself. When an arguer argues dispassionately he thinks only of the argument; and the reader cannot help thinking of the argument too. If he had written dispassionately about women, had used indisputable proofs to establish his argument and had shown no trace of wishing that the result should be one thing rather than another, one would not have been angry either. . . . But I had been angry because he was angry. Yet it seemed absurd, I thought, turning over the evening paper, that a man with all this power should be angry. Or is anger, I wondered, somehow, the familiar, the attendant sprite on power? Rich people, for example, are often angry because they suspect that the poor want to seize their wealth. The professors, or patriarchs, as it might be more accurate to call them, might be angry for that reason partly, but partly for one that lies a little less obviously on the surface. Possibly they were not “angry” at all; often, indeed, they were admiring, devoted, exemplary in the relations of private life. Possibly when the professor insisted a little too emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority.16

If women ceased to act as enlarging mirrors of male vanity, Woolf
muses, we might cease to produce Napoleons and Mussolinis. She talks about the power of money to modify her own anger—"What a change of temper a fixed income will bring about." In a few years her own fear and bitterness were replaced by pity and toleration, she tells us. But that was in fact wishful thinking, for ten years later she was in a towering rage, as the distance between herself and the pork butcher's daughter shrank, and she came to write *Three Guineas*.

While Woolf's anger in *Three Guineas* is held in harness by the epistolary form and by as formidable a set of footnotes as ever Professor von X produced for the opposite side, Woolf disobeyed her earlier injunction: "If you stop to curse, you are lost." She did stop to curse, and part of the power of *Three Guineas* is in the incantatory spell of its repetitions of the evils of capitalism, fascism, and imperialism and her declaration that men and only men have produced these systems of oppression. She was so choked with rage, she says, she "spat it out." For someone with so little practice, one must say her aim was good. *Three Guineas* spits in the eye of Professor von X, the patriarchs, generals, and bishops who are to blame for the destruction of civilization. Earlier she had said, "I strike the eye, and elderly gentlemen in particular get annoyed." She strikes again in *Three Guineas*, with its photographs of the patriarchs in their pompous robes and wigs, their decorated uniforms. As Gerald Brenan said, "Wherever Virginia Woolf goes she undoes a knot like a Lapland witch and lets out a war." I like the image of Woolf as a Lapland witch, making war, not love, untying the knots of social convention, encouraging the open expression of hostilities. She killed her own "angel in the house" and out of her ashes came an angel of vengeance, recalling Jane Anger:

Our good counsel is termed nipping injury, in that it accords not with their foolish fancies; our boldness rash, for giving noddies nipping answers, our dispositions naughty, for not agreeing with their vile minds, and our fury dangerous, because it will not bear with their knavish behaviors. If our frowns be so terrible and our anger so deadly, men are too foolish in offering occasions of hatred, which shunned, a terrible death is prevented. There is a continual deadly hatred between the wild boar and tame
hounds. I would there were the like between women and men.\textsuperscript{17}

Woman as wild boar is not exactly a common simile in our literature, but perhaps it is the ancestress of Woolf's pork butcher's daughter. I suspect, however, that her source was Arabella in \textit{fude the Obscure} and that character's easy familiarity with the "pig's pizzle." Woolf must have envied the vulgarity and vitality of Arabella's language. Leslie Stephen's daughter could not be so free with male organs. Nor, did she imagine, would female writers be so free for a long time to come; they would "still be encumbered with that self-consciousness in the presence of 'sin' which is the legacy of our sexual barbarity. She will still wear the shoddy old fetters of class on her feet."\textsuperscript{18} Sexuality and the class struggle—those subjects which most critics have felt Virginia Woolf did not deal with—hence their dismissal of her from the ranks of the great modern novelists. But these were indeed her major concerns in the novels, the essays, the literary criticism.\textsuperscript{19} But the expression of her concern is limited by "highbrow" (to use her own term) language. Those moments in \textit{The Years}—the pervert exposing himself to Rose, Sara's "Wasteland" speech to North about the hair of the Jew in the bath, Peggy shocking Eleanor by remarking that the statue of Nurse Cavell reminds her of an advertisement for sanitary napkins—are remarkable not only because they are unexpected, but because the sexuality of each situation is political and charged with anger. The scenes strike the eye, visual versions of the sexual battlefield of \textit{The Years} just as surely as the photographs in \textit{Three Guineas} refer us to the faces of incipient fascism among us, not to the victims of rampant Spanish fascism abroad.\textsuperscript{20}

There is great violence underneath the polished surface of Woolf's writing. Indeed, the composer Ethel Smyth felt it was this violence which was the major characteristic of her prose style. In his autobiography Leonard Woolf raises the question again in a psychological explanation of their personalities as political pacifists—a great deal of violence and anger was constantly being suppressed. In " 'No More Horses' " I discuss Leonard Woolf's editorial suppression of his wife's anger. In the interest, I'm sure, of protecting her reputation, Leonard Woolf suppressed some of his wife's feminist and socialist writings.
In *Collected Essays* he tells us when an essay originally appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, but not when one appeared originally in *The Daily Worker*. He reprinted an early draft of Woolf’s introduction to Margaret Llewelyn Davies’ *Life As We Have Known It* rather than a later version which she reworked with the help of the working women themselves.\(^{21}\)

The latest instance of such editorial “protection” which has come to my attention is the essay “Professions for Women.” It does not seem to be an accident that this essay exists in the Berg Collection in a version three times as long and as strong as the one Leonard Woolf printed in *The Death of the Moth* and *Collected Essays*.\(^{22}\) Vera Brittain attended the meeting at which Woolf presented this lecture, following Dame Ethel Smyth, the great composer, militant suffragette, and fighter for female musicians. Dame Ethel had once conducted her own “Women’s Marseillaise” from her jail cell with a toothbrush. Vera Brittain had just come from celebrating Beatrice Webb’s seventy-third birthday, and she called Webb, Smyth, and Woolf the three greatest women of their generation. Having written passionately herself about the extreme poverty of the women’s colleges, Vera Brittain was interested “to hear both Dame Ethel and Mrs. Woolf attribute their success largely to a private income, which enabled the one to take up a nonlucrative career, and the other to flout the displeasure of authors and editors by writing honest reviews.”\(^{23}\) After the speeches, Virginia Woolf wrote to Dame Ethel praising her speech and asking to print it at the Hogarth Press. Leonard said it was the best of its kind he had ever heard, that it was done “with supreme skill.” Her own speech she called “clotted up and clogged, partly owing to the rush I was in—no time to comb out.”\(^{24}\) It is that old bugbear anger which does the clotting and the clogging and makes the speech unkempt. It is worth quoting Virginia Woolf at her unkempt best and asking ourselves why she was able to express anger in a speech before the National Society for Women’s Service, a speech whose subject is the courage one needs to kill “the angel in the house.” It is about women’s violence, and its images are angry, military, and murderous. On one issue, and one issue alone, Virginia Woolf was not a pacifist—
the forging of female professional identity. The speech was positively ferocious; the palimpsest of her reading draft with her own corrections reveals she was angrier still in her original expression of her ideas.

We know from *A Writer's Diary* how often anger was the primary impulse of Woolf's art, but here is proof that she was among that sisterhood of great women writers whose pens were driven by anger—Mary Wollstonecraft, George Sand, Olive Schreiner. She then edited out a good deal of it, combed out a good many furious snarls, but that anger was often the primary source of her power as a writer there is no doubt. Anger transformed into art is what she saw in all the great writers she admired from the Greeks to Jane Austen. That Jane Austen inspired fear in people is a quality she pounces on in her essay. Woolf argued the importance of letting anger out, but she was worried about women's becoming consumed by bitterness at real oppression. When she urges us to fight tooth and nail for power in our professions she also urges us to keep a sense of humor and offers fantasies to make us laugh. Imagine yourself in man's place, she tells us. What a predicament he is in. Like Elizabeth Robins' demands, Woolf's idea of healthy anger is "a separable spite," separable from the attempt to live a joyful life. Perhaps it is not possible. Woolf did inspire fear in people, and her work still does. We have yet to examine as critics just how full of social criticism her work was; preoccupation with its beauty has obscured its terror. But we must finally acknowledge that it was anger that impelled her art, and intellect that combed out the snarls, dissolved the blood clots, and unclogged the drains of that great sewer of the imagination, anger.

The draft of "Professions for Women" begins with Woolf comparing herself to Ethel Smyth as "an idle and frivolous pleasure boat lolling along in the wake of an ironclad."^25

She is of the race of pioneers, of pathmakers. She has gone before and felled trees and blasted rocks and built bridges and thus made a way for those who come after her . . . When I read her books I always feel inclined to burn my own pen and take to music—for if she can toss off a masterpiece in my art without any training why should not I toss off a symphony or two
without knowing a crochet from a quaver?—we honour her not only as a musician and a writer, but also as a blaster of rocks and the maker of bridges. It seems sometimes a pity that a woman who only wished to write music should have been forced also to make bridges, but that was part of her job and she did it.

This a remarkable enough omission from the printed essay, but the cancelled passage it replaces is more remarkable still, calling Ethel Smyth "one of the icebreakers, the gun runners, the window smashers. The armoured tanks, who climbed the rough ground, drew the enemies [sic] fire." Ethel Smyth should be honored, Woolf says, not only for being a musician "but also for being an armoured tank. I never know whether to be angry that such heroism was needed, or glad that such heroism was shown."

The way for women in literature was cut long ago, Woolf points out, owing to "the cheapness of writing materials" by "some mute inglorious Ethel Smyth" who "smashed and broke and toiled" through "hostility and ridicule" to write. This relative ease is economic: "Pianos, models, studios, north lights, masters and mistresses (Berlin, Paris, Vienna and all the rest of it) are not needed." Then comes the brilliant description of "the Angel in the House" as "she was the woman men wished women to be," and the exemption of herself from the category of the "real" angels because she had £500 a year, "and angels never have a penny." It was the ideal angel who plagued her: she had been created for reasons "that have to do with the British Empire, our colonies, Queen Victoria, Lord Tennyson, the growth of the middle class... a real relationship between men and women was then unattainable." Woolf then quotes Tennyson, Rossetti, and Lowell on woman being made for man's delight. "And so they went on paying each other compliments," she writes, "in a style which to me is really disgusting." The word "disgusting" is uncharacteristic, to say the least. The murder of the angel is described as self-defense, for she has more blood on her hands than all the murderers.

Writer after writer, painter after painter and musicians I dare say too she had strangled and killed. One is always meeting their
corpses laid out in biographies. But she has a special hatred for writers and with good reason. Her province, you see, is the House. Painters and musicians—it is one of their chief assets—have very little to do with the house. When Vanessa Bell paints a picture it is as often as not a picture of red apples on a plate. It may be a pity to waste your time painting; but if you must paint paint apples (there is no harm in apples).

Similarly, music has "no nasty meaning" either, so the angel leaves the Ethel Smyths alone. She does get upset when "I did have to say for example that I thought that Mr. Carlyle ought to have had a child and that Mrs. Carlyle ought to have written a novel." She kills the angel in a severe struggle by flinging her inkpot at her.

To illustrate her point that a female critic's point of view is entirely different from a man's, Woolf quotes from a Keynes review in that week's Nation, remarking: "The members of Clare College have spent six thousand pounds upon a history of their college. And that made me angry." The incident and the anger occur in The Years, where Kitty's father is engaged on just such a project at Oxford, and her cousin Edward inherits it from her father. The point is very well made that women's education is neglected even when their families are part of the university. "Had the Editor of the Nation sent it to me," she wrote,

I should have been compelled by that different sense of values to write in a very different strain. Oh you old humbugs, I should have begun. O you have enjoyed for all these centuries comfort and prosperity—O you who profess devotion to the lady of Clare and love for the Sentiment of colleges, would it not be better to spend your £6,000 not upon a book, clothed in the finest dress of paper and buckram, but upon a girl, whose dress allowance is very meagre, and who tries to do her work, as you will read if you turn the very next page in the Nation, in one cold gloomy ground floor bedroom which faces due North and is overrun with mice. (Somerville it seems is very hard up.)

Woolf is referring here to Vera Brittain's remarks on the poverty of
women's colleges. Her review would not have been printed, she assumes, "for I am a woman."

She warns her audience that they too will be brought to loggerheads with the chiefs of their professions when they work to bring these professions "more in touch with human needs." Writing fiction creates different problems. She describes the writer as a "fisherwoman" letting her imagination roam the subconscious on a "thin . . . thread of reason."

. . . Then suddenly this fisherwoman gave a cry of dismay. What had happened? The line had suddenly slackened; her imagination had floated limply and dully and lifelessly upon the surface. The reason hauled the imagination on shore and said What on earth is the matter with you? And the imagination began pulling on its stockings and replied, rather tartly and disagreeably; it's all your fault. You should have given me more experience to go on. I can't do the whole work for myself.

Then the novelist-fisherwoman has a worse experience when the imagination escapes.

The reason has to cry Stop! . . . The novelist has to pull on the line and haul the imagination to the surface. The imagination comes to the top in a state of fury. Good heavens she cries—how dare you interfere with me . . . with your wretched little fishing line? . . . And I—that is the reason—have to reply, My dear you were going altogether too far. Men would be shocked. . . . Calm yourself, I say, as she sits panting on the bank—panting with rage and disappointment. We have only got to wait fifty years or so. In fifty years I shall be able to use all this very queer knowledge that you are ready to bring me. But not now.

Here we are now, fifty years later. Have we come as far as Woolf expected, or do we still chastise our imaginations so as not to upset men?

"You see I go on, trying to calm her," Woolf continues. "I cannot make use of what you tell me—about women's bodies for instance—"
their passions—and so on, because the conventions are still very strong. If I were to overcome the conventions I should need the courage of a hero; and I am not a hero. I doubt that a writer can be a hero.” Then there are several crossed-out trials of a passage in which Woolf explains that when she becomes heroic her imagination shrivels and hardens, and she becomes a preacher. Even Lawrence, she says, “injures his imagination terribly” although it is easier for men to go against convention. “Very well says the imagination, dressing herself up again in her petticoat and skirts, we will wait. We will wait another fifty years. . . . I will wait until men have become so civilized that they are not shocked when a woman speaks the truth about her body. The future of fiction depends very much upon what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women” (emphasis added).

She tells her audience that they will have more difficulty than she did; they must be the Sapphos and Jane Austens of their professions, meeting much ridicule, derision, and opposition. They should not add to their burdens “the burden of bitterness,” and she asks them to put themselves in men’s shoes. It is very much her friend Elizabeth Robins’ argument for a “separable spite.” Then follows a feminist fantasy kindled by the light of laughter and the fire of anger. She asks us to imagine a man returning from a hard day in the city to find that his women servants have taken over the house.

He goes into the library—an august apartment which he is accustomed to have all to himself—and finds the kitchen maid curled up in the arm chair reading Plato. He goes into the kitchen and there is the cook engaged in writing a Mass in B flat. He goes into the billiard room and finds the parlourmaid knocking up a fine break at the table. He goes into the bedroom and there is the housemaid working out a mathematical problem. What is he to do? He has been accustomed for centuries to have that sumptuous mansion all to himself, to be master in his own house. Well of course his first instinct is to dismiss the whole crew. But he reflects that he would have to do the work of the house himself—He can make the most cutting and disagreeable remarks about housemaids playing the piano and scullerymaids...
reading Plato; he can turn them out of the library, lock the billiard room door, and put the key of the cellar in his pocket. 

. . . But there is a spirit in the house (not by any means an angel)—a very queer spirit—I don't know how to define it—it is the sort of spirit that is in Dame Ethel Smyth—you have only got to look at her and you will feel it for yourselves—and this spirit . . . is impossible to lock up or lock out. . . . Suddenly he discovers . . . (that nature—but he did not call it nature—he called it sin—had made them also) doctors, civil servants, meteorologists, dental surgeons, librarians, solicitors' clerks, agricultural workers, analytical chemists, investigators of industrial psychology, barristers at law, makers of scientific models, accountants, hospital dieticians, political organizers, storekeepers, artists, horticultural instructors, publicity managers, architects, insurance representatives, dealers in antiques, bankers, actuaries, managers of house property, court dress makers, aero engineers, history instructors, company directors, organizers of peace crusades, newspaper representatives, technical officers in the royal airships works,—and so on.

The list, often a powerful weapon in the hands of the propagandist, is used here with great skill. By the time she has finished the outraged man in his private house seems to belong to the Dark Ages.

"Naturally he swore they are mutinous, base, ungrateful hussies. They are taking the bread out of my mouth and making it quite unnecessary that I should support them. I am the breadwinner; how am I going to support a wife and family, if my wife and family can support themselves?"

After this fantasy she urges her audience not to be angry but to be patient and amused with men who have had such a "lop-sided education"; there are, she asserts, some men capable of a wider humanity. One is then to direct one's anger at the enemy without letting bitterness spoil the possibility for personal happiness. This speech is an important document, for it shows us Virginia Woolf not in her own room, but in a meeting room with other women, in her element as a public woman, where the sisterhood of her peers makes possible the expres-
sion of both feminist anger and feminist humor. And we should cherish her statement—"The future of fiction depends very much upon what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women."

The source for Woolf’s provocative but correct portraits of the powerful in *Three Guineas* may be derived from Robins’ *Ancilla’s Share*, where she writes of man’s “intensity of self-importance, his love of the sceptre and the big stick, of dressing up and playacting hero, priest or king.” Robins sees the social function of ribbons and rosettes, stripes and hoods and wigs as allaying doubts of one’s personal value. The “rag or ribbon or hieroglyph” is not just snobbery but a symbol of aspiration, an incentive to achievement for the next generation of patriarchs. Robins jokingly comments on “a sober respectable British gentleman content to be officially known as a Rouge Dragon, another as Blue Mantle, or most blessedly nonsensical of all, a Unicorn Pursuivant—.” She laughs, but realizes the social function of the rags and ribbons; “the British government issued four million Great War medals and bedecked the reputed-worthy with eighteen miles of ribbon.”

We know Virginia Woolf’s amused disdain of the public schoolboy view of life as a war of perpetual competition for the prize of a “highly ornamental pot” from the headmaster. Robins before her had been a little less certain whether women should enter this competition themselves, giving prizes to female achievement to encourage the daughters as well as the sons. Fiercely pacifist as Woolf always was, she thought that man would continue to see women’s achievement in sexual terms, and she imagined women wearing a tuft of horsehair on the left shoulder as a symbol of motherhood. Competition, she felt, like the foolish vanity of medals and ribbons, belonged to the childhood of social life in the patriarchy. On this issue Woolf had no doubts at all. From Italy, where she was observing Mussolini’s fascism firsthand, she refused the order of Dame of the British Empire with a simple and defiant “No.” Few, even self-defined “outsiders,” would refuse the honors and awards of the “insiders,” if they would not indeed openly scramble for them. But Woolf, as she says in *Three Guineas* with painful logic, was not about to accept favors from her enemies. She
would then be forced to swallow her anger and stop criticizing the state. Like Antigone, revived as the heroine of *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, she obeyed a higher law and was willing to be buried alive for it, cursing, as the chorus in Sophocles does, "the old men who use big words."

When Woolf rejects the labels "bourgeois" and "capitalist," it is as an independent working middle-class woman. She owns no property and by international law must even accept her husband's country as her own. When she wrote "as a woman I have no country," she lost most of her audience. For if *Three Guineas* is a serious attempt at a tripartite philosophical and political statement of socialism, feminism, and pacifism, she was not, in Britain in 1939, surrounded by a band of likeminded triple thinkers. Her socialist friends were male and like E. M. Forster, openly antifeminist; her one pacifist compatriot, Aldous Huxley, was antifeminist; her feminist friend Ethel Smyth was as pro-British a patriot as most of her fellow suffragettes had been in World War I. If people shared her antifascism, they went to war zealously to prevent its spread. Her insistence that it was more important to kill fascism in the very structure of the British patriarchy annoyed her friends and still seems to many a ridiculous position when even the most internationalist of socialists joined the united front. She believed in the natural alliance between women and workers and urged them both to let the patriarchs and capitalists fight a war which was essentially based on the desire to annex or protect private property. In the meantime women and workers should trespass on all the private property of patriarchal culture at home and build their own new and better state. *Three Guineas* is the work of a moral revolutionary, and it advocates the position that during the war outsiders (women and the working class) should seize the means of the reproduction of culture. But she did not rouse her readers to violence. *Three Guineas* roused a great deal of anger, best seen in Queenie Leavis' review of it in *Scrutiny*, where Mrs. Leavis took up the battle cry of the patriarchal state, "Caterpillars of the Commonwealth, Unite!" Like Mrs. Humphry Ward before her, Queenie Leavis angrily denounced feminism as dangerous and silly, attacked Woolf personally as not being a real
woman because she was not a mother and as incapable of being a true socialist because she was not a member of the working class. Most vigorously she defended Oxford and Cambridge for excluding women, insisting that most women were not bright enough to deserve an education. Patriarchal institutions are adept at finding "exceptional" women like Mrs. Humphry Ward and Queenie Leavis to denounce other members of their sex.

Angry as *Three Guineas* is at male dominance, it remains a primer for protest and an encouragement for women to struggle. She names a litany of female saints and heroines, as she did in *A Room of One's Own*; the female reader who studies the footnotes and the intricate web of reference can educate and arm herself as a feminist. The funny and eccentric Woolf of the beginning of *A Room of One's Own*, the well-fed guest of the men's college, amusingly characterized women as strange outsiders, like the Manx cat, tolerated on the Isle of Man. "What a difference a tail makes," she mused. By the time she had "spat out" *Three Guineas*, the wry, ironic tone is gone, and she warns, a prophetic Cassandra, that when there is no freedom in the private house, there is no freedom in the public world. Creon took Antigone and shut her "not in Holloway or in a concentration camp, but in a tomb. And Creon, we read, brought ruin on his house, and scattered the land with the bodies of the dead . . . things repeat themselves it seems."

Elizabeth Robins wrote that "the most immediately urgent study of womankind is woman," and Woolf later made the same assertion. They both commented on man's fascination with women's chastity, and both, as socialist feminists, wanted to know what it was like to be a working woman in the past; they urged future historians to write "the lives of the obscure." "And there is the girl behind the counter too . . . I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon or seventieth study of Keats and his use of Miltonic inversion which old Professor Z and his like are now inditing." Robins complains that she wants to "hear of Sappho from some Aspasia of an earlier day!" and mourns the loss of the memory of fighting heroines, for man "tended to suppress not only the women
who departed from his rules, but the very record of these departures."

While Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* uses the images of woman as enlarging mirror to make her points, Robins refers to the scold's chair, bridle, and gag as "less a badge of woman's humiliation than of man's fear."

The scold's voice was the voice of all women, to Robins.

It rang with the old courage that so perilously insisted on giving discontent a tongue. The phantom sat there, grotesque, half-throttled, dishevelled, wild, being wrenched and choked into submission. Then the release in a rabble of triumphant men and boys, not voiceless they, nor voiceless those of her own sex needing to win immunity from man's reprisals by joining in the hue and cry. . . . "Did he ever once" she asks the suffering scold "invite you to cleanse your bosom of perilous stuff by so much as blowing a blast on his blessed horn?"

Both Robins and Woolf recognize that the source of women's oppression is economic, and lest they be accused of genteel anticapitalism, I would argue that they wrote for and about their own class out of intellectual commitment, fearing more than anything else the smug satisfactions of missionaries to the masses. In arguing with unenlightened middle-class women, both were doing feminism a great service. Woolf said that men were often very "nice" on a personal level. Robins had said "While they are the blessing of the individual woman's life, 'good' men may be the enemies of progress."

We catch ourselves saying with a happy superiority: "Men have always been very nice to me." As if that touched on the outermost fringe of the question! No one has said men are not human. Naturally there are those who are "nice" to some women. It is sometimes their business to be nice to certain women. It is often their pleasure to be nice. That men are commonly more generous in their private dealings than just in their public acts is undoubtedly a snare to women who have only private dealings with men. Women who sit in the sun of private benevolence have
been soothed to a mean complicity in the misery of the mass. In the eyes of many a woman to whom men have been “very nice” there seems an ungraciousness too raw in pointing out that man’s private attempt to right the public balance by compensatory kindness to individuals, by conferring special immunities and privileges, by all that he has thought of as chivalry, is to offer a dole of bright farthings in lieu of the gold of equal inheritance.

Elizabeth Robins had the wisdom of experience and years of pent-up anger to spark these statements. Well-meant aid that comes too late she compared to the Oriental visionary who put dead fish back into the sea. She felt, I suspect, very like some panting fish exhausted after a lifetime of struggle for the woman’s cause. Men’s politeness seemed futile to a woman who had been an ardent champion of suffragist militancy. Woolf had not been a militant suffragist, but had espoused the cause of adult suffrage, the Independent Labour Party’s policy, which stressed the solidarity of women and workers. She had supported Margaret Llewelyn Davies’ Working Women’s Co-operative Guild in its nonviolent struggle. In the thick of things Robins had abandoned pacifism and defended symbolic violence against the Liberal government as a healthy expression of women’s justified anger with the state. In contrast, Virginia Woolf wrote:

No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged. And when one is challenged, even by a few women in black bonnets, one retaliates, if one has never been challenged before, rather excessively.

But later, in Three Guineas, she saw Mrs. Pankhurst as Antigone, defiantly obedient to a higher law than that of the patriarchal state,
a fit historical mother to her own impassioned statement. Elizabeth Robins had been one of those black-bonneted challengers, and in Ancilla's Share she urged women to “cease to think even of the inimical man as powerful and wicked”:

He is bewildered and helpless... He shows it by his anger, his galled wincing when the sure way is taken to scotch his sex contempt. Clearest of all, when he takes refuge in cruelty, does he show woman his heart of fear...:

He is afraid he will lose his home if he cannot compel a slave class to keep it for him.

He is afraid he will lose his food supply if he cannot find low-paid, low-living labour to cultivate his fields.

He is afraid he will lose his country if he cannot compel conscripted men to... fight conscripted men... we see the closest analogy between the struggle inspired by man’s fear of the moral power of woman and the struggle inspired by man’s fear of the material power of his brother man....

It would seem as though man had long known that when he could no longer successfully obstruct the power of woman, she would take war from him. And if he were deprived of his power to inspire fear, what refuge, then, from that fear in his own soul?\(^{37}\)

Robins argued for “a separable spite” on the part of women, for “the beginnings of civilisation depended on her endurance of man’s yoke. The continuance of civilisation depends on her refusal.”\(^{38}\)

“Separable spite” is exactly what Woolf calls for in Three Guineas. But in A Room of One’s Own ten years earlier she had written: “The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself. An amusing book might be made of it if some young student at Girton or Newnham would collect examples and deduce a theory—but she would need thick gloves on her hands, and bars to protect her of solid gold.”\(^{39}\)

Defining herself as an uneducated woman, she took on the task herself, gloveless and without the economic advantage of a gilded cage. Three
Guineas was not an amusing book. Thus vulnerable to the anger of friends and enemies alike, Woolf, I feel, removed herself from the scene. She claimed madness as an ethical justification for the act.

But here I see another connection with Elizabeth Robins. Woolf published Robins' Ibsen and the Actress at the Hogarth Press. It contains a curious and fascinating reading of Hedda Gabler's suicide as angry and rebellious as well as a work of art. Robins argues that those who are oppressed psychologically or economically have "one sort of power over their own lives, the power to end them." Ibsen shared a peculiar kind of Social Darwinism with the actress who brought his works to England, a view of suicide as an ethical and political act. Woolf's half-brother, Gerald Duckworth, had been a close friend of Elizabeth Robins in the 1890s. He was the treasurer of the subscription series of Ibsen productions which was the only way she could get Ibsen's radical plays staged in a West End dominated by actor-managers and their Victorian melodramas. Quentin Bell has given us details of Virginia Woolf's guilt and anger late in life over her half-brother's sexual assaults. That he introduced her to Ibsen and a method of dramatizing incest guilt is not surprising. Ibsen also dealt with hereditary madness, a subject which would have interested brother and sister because of the incurable madness of their sister and Virginia's own mental instability.

When Robins published her novel The Open Question in 1898, she worked out similar nineteenth-century themes. The incestuous hero and heroine, before their own "ethical" suicide because they fear the birth of an "unhealthy" child, have organized in Paris a group who suggest to the oppressed, the prostitutes and destitute workers, that they might find personal dignity in suicide. The youthful Woolf was strongly influenced by Ibsen and Wagner, both of them in some senses Social Darwinists who made suicide into an ethical imperative. In fact, this is why Shaw regarded Tristan und Isolde as much more dangerous and revolutionary than Marx. I would here simply like to suggest that Woolf's suicide may have been the result of an ethical imperative rather than the result of "madness" or despair. Gerald Duckworth wrote to Elizabeth Robins praising The Open Question as one of the
greatest books ever written. He was not alone in his opinion, as the reviews testify. Woolf says in a letter of 1905 that she had been arguing the ethics of suicide with her sister all morning. Her letters in the thirties to Dame Ethel Smyth beg for an ethical defense of suicide. She was not "mad" when she wrote those letters exonerating Leonard Woolf from any guilt about her death. She was angry: at Leonard, at the Germans bombing England, and at men for making war. Yet she was helplessly hampered from expressing that anger by a pacifism as deep-seated as other people's religions. Between the Acts, the book she wrote before she died, shows us how fully she saw the source of the violence of war in the violence of human sexuality. Woolf did not die violently by her own hand, nor was she a masochist. In a dignified and deliberate way she filled her pockets with stones and returned to "mother water."

The "influence" of Robins on Woolf as here demonstrated is both an instance of "thinking back through our mothers" and a demonstration of Woolf's own proposition that art improves with the generations. When they can lean on the accumulated history of their own accomplishments, women and the working class will produce "great" literature. Even Woolf's idea of the collective historical effort behind each individual work of art can be found in Ancilla's Share, where Robins declares that works of art are collaborations with the ghosts of dead women. Both women felt that they voiced woman's collective historical anger.

The burden of their effort is continually being carried forward by feminist artists. In "The Phenomenology of Anger," Adrienne Rich writes:

The only real love I have ever felt
was for children and other women.
Everything else was lust, pity,
self-hatred, pity, lust.
This is a woman's confession.

The central image of Rich's poem is fire; the burning rage produces a kind of angry truth-telling, fulfilling, one feels, Woolf's demand that
women *tell the truth*. That "the truth" is synonymous with anger is testimony to its power and the history of its suppression. Few women poets have dared Rich's angry confession. The twentieth-century disguise is not pseudonymity nor anonymity but another form of indirect discourse which Hortense Calisher calls "mental hysterectomy," the kind of nonthreatening female art which is "beautifully mandarin or minor." She sees for herself "the feminism that comes straight from the belly, from the bed and from the childbed," but rejects anger as a source of female artistic energy. "Humor is a better answer to that. And anger should be directed against the rules."

Elizabeth Robins was almost eighty when E. M. Forster gave the Rede Lecture on Virginia Woolf after her death. She made a typescript of her notes and wrote furiously about his sexist remarks. Robins quotes an introductory remark of his which does not appear in the reprint of the lecture: "She'd probably mock . . . and why if you want to discuss my books must you first disguise yourself in a cap and gown?" Robins underlines Forster's remark: "Improving the world she would not consider, on the ground that the world is man made, and that she, a woman, had no responsibility for the mess. This last argument is a curious one." Here Robins put three exclamation marks and wrote "scalpel-like 'curious' cuts F(eminism) open wide." Three more exclamation points mark Forster's remark about Woolf's "peculiar" feminism, which he found "responsible for the worst of her books—the cantankerous *Three Guineas*, and for the less successful streaks in *Orlando*." Forster always sees feminism as a kind of social disease in "spots" or "streaks" in her work. Here Robins writes, "Feminism not responsible for *Orlando*. I must look at *O.* again and see if my old first impression that an effort toward Antifeminism wasn't the true motive-power. That effort expended itself; it had by her geography no Continuing City. She was too aware of the world's need."

Did Elizabeth Robins sit in the audience while Virginia Woolf's "friend" E. M. Forster explained that Woolf was not a great writer because she "had no great cause at heart," that she despised the working class, and that she was "a lady?" Robins asked herself in the margin whether being an American, despite slaveholding grandparents on both sides,
had saved her from seeing “the lady” as a problem.

She underlined his remark on Woolf that “women must not condone the tragic male-made mess or accept the crumbs of power which men throw occasionally from their hideous feast. Like Lysistrata she withdrew. Now there is to me something old-fashioned in this feminism. . . . In the 1940’s I think she had not much to complain of and kept on grumbling from habit.” Across this Robins has written “Oh God!” Imagine her emotions as he went on in his public-schoolboy way to award Woolf “a row of little silver cups” for her novels, as if fiction were a competition. Woolf had mocked this view of life in *A Room of One’s Own* as part of the childhood of patriarchal civilization. But it still prevailed in 1941, and its defenders had their revenge. It may be a long time before men are educated to tolerate free speech in women; Woolf herself was not deceived about Forster. She confessed to Ethel Smyth that she had once been influenced by him, but now found him the “most inflexible of men” and his books “shrivelled and immature.”

Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Robins ended their lives as angry old women, as cursing Antigones, as Lapland witches. But both hoped for a new generation of angry young women who would tell the truth about themselves and about men. Think, Virginia Woolf says, not altogether ironically, of all we have learned from the Strindbergs and Tolstoys, and what men may hope to learn from the Lapland witches and Jane Angers. Up with spite—separable, yes, from the pursuit of personal happiness, but also as a collective historical act so that every generation of female artists need not fight the same battles but may begin where their mothers left off, inheriting as long as necessary the gloves and golden bars of self-defense.

Anger is not anathema in art; it is a primary source of creative energy. Rage and savage indignation sear the hearts of female poets and female critics. Why not spit it out, as Woolf said, blow the blessed horn, as Robins said? Why wait until old age, as they did, waiting long to let out their full quota of anger? Out with it. No more burying our wrath, turning it against ourselves. No more ethical suicides, no more literary pacifism. We must make the literary profession safe for
women as well as ladies. It is our historical responsibility. When the
fires of our rage have burnt out, think how clear the air will be for
our daughters. They will write in joy and freedom only after we have
written in anger. It is up to us to see that the academy gives its little
silver cups to those who deserve them. We must ourselves forge a
great big golden bowl in honor of Virginia Woolf, inscribing on it her
words: “The future of fiction depends very much upon what extent
men can be educated to stand free speech in women.”
WRITING PRACTICE

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The Lupine Critic
Writes a (Biased) History
of Virginia Woolf Scholarship