Storming the Toolshed

[More than most essays in this collection, this one bears the marks of its origin and its author's anger. What it records most significantly is a moment of male resistance to feminist theory in 1982, as well as my own suspicion of academic cooptation of the feminist movement.]

Feminist Scholars and Literary Theory

Sections 2 and 3 of this article reflect their occasions. “Lupine Criticism” was given as a talk at the MLA meeting in San Francisco in 1979. Florence Howe chaired the session with panelists Mary Helen Washington, Sidney Janet Kaplan, Suzanne Juhasz, and Tillie Olsen. There was a large and enthusiastic audience, and the session was remarkable historically for discussion of race, class, and sexual identity, particularly lesbianism, and for vocal criticism and participation from the audience. The sparse audience for feminist sessions the following year in Houston, the current debate in the National Women’s Studies Association over the primacy of the issues of racism and lesbian identity, and the concurrent minimization of differences in feminist literary criticism itself by Annette Kolodny and others in recent issues of Feminist Studies, make it imperative that we reexamine our history. It was, after all, a playful but serious prediction made in “Lupine Criticism” that aggressive, historical feminist scholarship on Virginia Woolf might cease if the practitioners became absorbed into the academy and stopped combining political activism and the position of “outsidership” with their scholarly work.

In “Dancing through the Minefield,” Kolodny’s liberal relaxation of the tensions among us and the tensions between feminists and the academy reflects a similar relaxation on the part of historians and political activists. What this does is to isolate Marxist feminists, les-
bians, and blacks on the barricades while "good girl" feminists fold their tents and slip quietly into the establishment. There is a battlefield (race, class, and sexual identity) within each one of us, another battlefield where we wage these wars with our own feminist colleagues (as in Signs), and a third battlefield where we defend ourselves from male onslaughts both on our work and on the laws that govern our lives as women in society. It is far too early to tear down the barricades. Dancing shoes will not do. We still need our heavy boots and mine detectors.

The most serious issue facing feminist critics today is that which divides the profession as a whole, the division between theory and practice. Leaning on the Greeks, our culture still posits philosophy, music, and mathematics as the highest forms of intellectual endeavor. They have been the fields most zealously guarded against female incursion, the fields where it has been most difficult for women to gain training. The English composer Dame Ethel Smyth defended herself from criticism of her battles for status and position among women musicians: she could not withdraw from the world to compose, to act the artist who simply cultivates her own garden, she said, when someone had locked up all the tools. Literary theory is a branch of philosophy. Its most vigorous practitioners in the United States have been male. It is no historical accident that the hegemony of the theoreticians and the valorization of theory itself parallels the rise of feminist criticism. While we have been doing literary housekeeping, they have been gazing at the stars. They refuse to bear the burden of the sins of their literary fathers or to make amends for centuries of critical abuse of women writers involving the loss, destruction, bowdlerization, or misevaluation of women's texts, diaries, letters, and biographies.

When feminist critics first forced open the toolshed, they polished and sharpened the rusty spades and hoes and rakes men long since had discarded. They learned history, textual criticism, biography, the recovery of manuscripts. They began to search for and reprint women's works and to study the image of woman in Western art. Many moved into linguistics to get at the origins of oppression in language, while others worked to find the writing of women of color. We were all
forced to become historians and biographers and to train ourselves in those disciplines. We devoured theories of female psychology, anthropology, and myth to broaden our grasp of the work of women artists. The more materialist and particular the labor of feminist critics became, the more abstract and antimaterialist became the work of the men (they left in Europe the Marxist origins of structuralism and deconstruction). The more we spoke in moral indignation and anger, the more Parnassian were the whispers of male theorists. If the last conference of the School of Criticism and Theory is any model to go by, soon they will have retreated so far from life and literature that they will be analyzing the songs of birds in the garden of Paradise (Adamic only).

Geoffrey Hartman claims for the theorists that literary criticism is in the wilderness. While one may grant that Hartman's manner is a distinct imitation of John the Baptist, it must be pointed out that the theorists are not in the wilderness at all but in a labyrinthine garden with high hedges that they have constructed themselves. The arrogance of the metaphor indicates the cause of their isolation. If there is one true word in literary criticism, and they are the precursors of their master's voice, the profession is lost. But historians of our difficult era will have little doubt about the social origins of the idea of born-again literary critics. I am reminded of the words of the Victorian aesthetician, Vernon Lee, in a letter to Ethel Smyth. It was bad enough to be a voice crying in the wilderness, she said, but a female philosopher was a "vox clamans" in the closet.

There are some feminist theorists of note, among whom one may cite especially the work of Gayatri Spivak in literature and Julia Lesage in film criticism. Lesage and her colleagues on the film journal *Jump-Cut* have, in fact, made the most revolutionary breakthrough in feminist theory and practice by trying to effect a rapprochement between the left and lesbians. The lesbian-feminist special issue of *Jump-Cut* is a tour de force of brilliant and ground-breaking essays and includes an editorial in which the male editors attempt to deal with what we may call "reparations" for the long battles of the sexes. The writing and publication of these essays is a hopeful sign, but not a victory until
feminist critics who are neither left nor lesbian read and debate these issues and bring them into the classroom.

There were no feminist critics speaking at the first meeting of the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University in the spring of 1981, though the intelligent response of Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, to one of the more reactionary papers, was the highlight of the conference. Protest at the omission of feminists was met by the response that there are no feminist theorists, at least none whom the men find "interesting." If there is as yet no feminist critical theory that men find interesting, there is no reason to suppose that it is not at this very moment being written; nor is there any reason to suppose that men will ever be as interested as we are in developments in our own field. Recent critical books attacking the hegemony of the theorists ignore both feminists and Marxists or give them a light cuff, while the heavy blows are aimed at theorists of their own sex. We are excluded from their discourse (theorizing is a male activity); consequently, no intellectual intercourse can take place. Even a Marxist critic like Frederic Jameson is loyal to the old boys.

Just as Virginia Woolf predicted both the birth of Shakespeare's sister and our work for her arrival, so one may predict the birth of the feminist critic of genius. She must reject with Virginia Woolf the patriarchal view of literature as a competition with prizes of ornamental pots from the headmaster. The feminist critic is always at odds with the headmaster. She is, as Adrienne Rich argues, "disloyal" to civilization. She must refuse the ornamental pot, even if it is very fashionable and made in France. She must break the measuring rod, even if it is finely calibrated in the literary laboratories at Yale. We shall have a theory of our own when our practice develops it. Though I have quoted this many times, it bears repeating: "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." Woolf was discussing Shakespeare as the product of history. But her socialist analysis can be extended to criticism as well. By her analysis one can imagine that there were many little Geoffrey Hartmans before there was one big
Geoffrey Hartman, as in literature there were many little Shakespeares before the master himself.

We have already produced feminist critics to match their male counterparts: Annette Kolodny's work on American literature, Lillian Robinson's _Sex, Class and Culture_. Mary Ellmann, Kate Millett, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar can outdo Harold Bloom at his own game; Gayatri Spivak speaks as an equal among the French deconstructionists; Julia Lesage challenges film theory. Many lesser-known feminists have worked steadily for new readings and new values in their fields. But even if we were to construct the feminist supercritic from the collective voice of all of them, it is doubtful that the self-appointed priesthood would find her analysis interesting. I suspect that this literary amazon is even now slouching toward Ephesus to be born—the critic who will deliver us from slavery to the canon, from racist, sexist, and classist misreadings. But one can be sure that, welcome as she will be among us, the chosen critics will see her as a false messiah.

I do not think we should surrender easily. It is they and their fathers who excluded and oppressed us and our mothers, they who decided to exclude women writers from what was taught, women students from who was taught. Our historical losses at their hands are incalculable. It is not up to us to beg them to find our work interesting. It is up to them to make reparations: to establish secure women's studies departments, black studies departments, chairs of feminist literary criticism and women's history, to read the work of women and black writers, and to teach it.

If "Lupine Criticism" is an example of a battle within a small area of literary criticism, fought among one's peers, "One Cheer for Democracy, or Talking Back to Quentin Bell" is a direct confrontation with Virginia Woolf’s nephew, official biographer, and owner of her literary estate. In his essay "Bloomsbury and the Vulgar Passions," given on a lecture tour of the United States and published in _Critical Inquiry_. Bell once again mocks Virginia Woolf's _Three Guineas_ for its feminism and pacifism. He minimizes her contribution to political thought by
STORMING THE TOOLSHE

comparing it unfavorably to a pamphlet by his father, Clive Bell, as well as to E. M. Forster's "Two Cheers for Democracy" and A Passage to India. I admire Bell's Bloomsbury and am grateful, as are other Woolf scholars, for the painstaking work of his biography and for the publication of the letters and diaries. Because we are dependent on the estate for permission to quote Virginia Woolf, it has been difficult for Woolf scholars to take issue with his analysis without jeopardizing their careers. The year 1982 is the centenary of Virginia Woolf's birth. In the thirties she predicted that in fifty years men would allow women writers free speech. Could she have imagined this deadlock in criticism, this "separate but equal" free speech as it now exists in literary criticism, where feminist critics are excluded from discourse with male theorists? She suffered from these same exclusions herself, was chastised for her feminism all her life, and continues to be chastised after her death. She died, I believe, in an ethical torment over her pacifism in a terrible war. It seems only natural to take up her weapons. Our first target is the shed where the power tools of literary theory have been kept. There is no doubt that in the hands of feminist critics they will transform the study of literature.

Lupine Criticism

It is amusing to imagine what Virginia Woolf would think of an MLA meeting. We know that she despised lectures and did not believe that literature should be taught to middle-class students. She herself lectured only to women and working-class people. She gave lectures to women students and fellow professional women, to the Workers' Education League, and to the Working Women's Co-operative Guild. She refused offers to lecture to men, to men's colleges and universities, and to male-dominated institutions. While she was in Italy, studying Musso- lini's fascism firsthand, she refused, with a simple and defiant No, her government's offer of a Companion of Honour, wanting no companionship whatever with the concerns of the British Empire. She refused a degree from Manchester University and, much to the horror of the editor of her letters, Nigel Nicolson, she even refused quite proudly to
give the prestigious Clark Lectures at Cambridge, despite the fact that she was the first woman invited to do so. Her editor feels that this act “only weakened the cause of women in general” and confesses he cannot understand why the only prize she ever accepted was a woman’s prize, the Femina vie Heureuse prize for *To the Lighthouse.*

We all know why she did it, and why, if she were here today, she would accept the Florence Howe Award for her essays on women writers and refuse any other honors. Lecturing, she wrote, “incites the most debased of human passions—vanity, ostentation, self-assertion, and the desire to convert.” We confess all these sins and more; feminist literary criticism seems to demand them at the moment just for defense. “Why not create a new form of society founded on poverty and equality?” Woolf asked.

Why not bring together people so that they can talk, without mounting platforms or reading papers or wearing expensive clothes or eating expensive food? Would not such a society be worth, even as a form of education, all the papers on art and literature that have ever been read since the world began? Why not abolish prigs and prophets? Why not invent human intercourse?

In the last decade, the Commission on Women and the Women’s Caucus of the MLA, with Florence Howe at the helm, and also a vast community of women scholars working together, have undertaken the enormous task of re-evaluating women’s work, uncovering forgotten lives and books, reprinting our own literature. Virginia Woolf is our model for this task. We—I say ostentatiously, self-assertively, with some vanity, and a veritable passion to make converts—in this very room are inventing “human intercourse.”

Writers like Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich have inspired us not only with their creative work but also with their theoretical and historical essays. They continue the work in which Virginia Woolf as a feminist literary critic was engaged, the historical process of thinking back through our mothers. Woolf would take a particular delight in what Mary Helen Washington and her colleagues are doing on black and
third world women writers. She would applaud with Suzanne Juhasz the women poets who tell the truth. Loving Katherine Mansfield as she did, and Elizabeth Robins, the forgotten feminist who influenced both Mansfield and Woolf herself, she would rub her hands with glee that Sydney Kaplan and her feminist colleagues are delivering Mansfield’s ghost from the hands of the lugubrious Middleton Murry.

We in a new generation of feminist Virginia Woolf criticism have also had the advantage of collective and collaborative work, and we have sustained each other in many trials. Whenever two or three of us are gathered together sharing notes on manuscripts and letters, we feel what Virginia Woolf described in her meetings with her Greek teacher, Janet Case, and with Margaret Llewelyn Davies of the Working Women’s Co-operative Guild: we are at “the heart of the women’s republic.” It is an open secret that Virginia Woolf’s literary estate is hostile to feminist critics. There are two taboo subjects: on the one hand her lesbian identity, woman-centered life, and feminist work, and on the other her socialist politics. If you wish to discover the truth regarding these issues, you will have a long, hard struggle. In that struggle you will find the sisterhood of feminist Woolf scholarship.

It all began with Ellen Hawkes’s review, “The Virgin in the Bell Biography.” She was duly denounced from the pulpit of the English Institute but, despite excommunication, has had a great influence. A group of feminist Woolf scholars protested her expulsion and organized a conference at Santa Cruz. Here Madeline Moore brought together many feminists—Sara Ruddick, Tillie Olsen, and Florence Howe among them. Madeline Moore published many of the papers from the conference in a 1977 special issue of Women’s Studies.

The MLA Woolf Seminar has been notably feminist in its papers during the last five years. At one meeting, for example, Margaret Comstock chaired a session on Between the Acts with papers by Judy Little and Diane Gillespie, later published in Women and Literature. Feminists, including Kate Ellis and Ellen Hawkes, spoke at the Princeton Woolf Conference organized by Joanna Lipking. And at the Bucknell Woolf Conference in 1977, Carolyn Heilbrun, Eve Merriam, and the late Ellen Moers spoke. (Here let me note that Ellen Moer’s death
diminishes us all; *Literary Women* has provided us with tools and structures for building feminist literary criticism.) These conferences and seminars cemented scholarly friendships and set new directions for Woolf studies.

The publications of Woolf’s letters and diaries has greatly facilitated our work. Yet the manuscripts of the novels retain the utmost fascination. We organized a special issue of the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* with papers from the MLA Woolf Seminar on *The Years*, including Grace Radin’s rendering of “two enormous chunks” of material removed from the galleys just before the novel went to press, Sallie Sear’s essay on sexuality, and Margaret Comstock’s “The Loudspeaker and the Human Voice,” on the politics of the novel. Woolf’s “Professions for Women” turned out to be three times longer and much more forceful than the version published by Leonard Woolf in *Collected Essays*. It has been reprinted by the New York Public Library in Mitchell Leaska’s edition of *The Pargiters*.22

The original speech “Professions for Women” was delivered in January 1931 to a group of professional women. Preceding Virginia Woolf on the platform was Dame Ethel Smyth, the great English lesbian-feminist composer. Virginia Woolf’s pacifism always receded when she spoke as a feminist. Her violent feelings came pouring out in her description of Ethel Smyth: “She is of the race of the pioneers: She is among the icebreakers, the window-smashers, the indomitable and irresistible armoured tanks who climbed the rough ground; went first; drew the enemy’s fire and left a pathway for those who came after her. I never knew whether to be angry that such heroic pertinacity was called for, or glad that it had the chance of showing itself.”*23

In our field the icebreakers and window-smashers have been Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, Florence Howe, Ellen Moers, Carolyn Heilbrun. Our work has been made possible because they drew the enemy’s fire. Like Virginia Woolf, we acknowledge our debt, half in anger that such belligerence is necessary, half in gladness that they have fought so well. For the last five years much feminist work on Woolf has appeared in *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, edited, among others, by the indomitable J. J. Wilson at Sonoma State University. The Fall 1979
issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* contains splendid and important work by feminists: Ellen Hawkes’s edition of Woolf’s early utopian feminist fantasy, “Friendships Gallery,” written for Violet Dickinson; Susan Squier and Louise DeSalvo’s edition of an early forty-four-page unpublished story about a woman historian; Madeline Moore’s edition of the *Orlando* manuscripts; and Brenda Silver’s edition of two very important late manuscripts called “Anon” and “The Reader.”

Doubtless I have left out much new work, but this list itself is an impressive example of the comradeship and collective effort of feminist Woolf scholarship. You will note that all this work is American. We have escaped the domination of the Leavises’ point of view that still prevents many British readers from seeing Woolf as anything but elitist and mad. The exception is Michele Barrett’s edition of Woolf’s *Women and Writing.*

Quentin Bell has announced that the “bottom of the barrel” has been reached in Woolf manuscripts, but we are not finished yet. There is a great deal of literary housekeeping to be done. Virginia Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth about her struggle for recognition as a composer, “Somehow the big apples come to the top of the basket. But of course I realize that the musicians’ apple lies longest at the bottom and has the hardest struggle to rise.” I find these “Granny Smyth” apples to be tart and tasty indeed and am editing Dame Ethel’s letters to Woolf.

What feminist scholars have found in the apples at the bottom of the barrel is a taste of the two taboo subjects, Woolf’s socialist politics and her love of women. When the fifth volume of her letters was published, reviewers rushed to reassure readers that Woolf did not really mean it when she wrote to Ethel Smyth, “Women alone stir my imagination.” Nigel Nicolson insisted to me that Woolf was only joking. While Quentin Bell is ready to admit privately that *Letter to a Young Poet* and “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” are “more Marxist than the Marxists,” his public lecture, “Bloomsbury and the Vulgar Passions,” dismisses *Three Guineas* as silly and unimportant.

Quentin Bell is not amused by feminist criticism of Virginia Woolf. He has invented a name for us. He calls us “lupines.” There is a particular variety of flower, the lupine, that grows in the American
West, covering the rocky slopes of the Big Horns, the Tetons, and the Wind River Mountains in July. It is electric blue, startlingly erect, and extremely hardy. Perhaps we feminist Woolf critics can survive the patronizing label of British cultural imperialism by appropriating it ourselves. During the struggle for woman suffrage, a patronizing journalist called the most militant of the activists “Suffragettes.” After a few weeks of smoldering rage at the insult, the women simply pinned that badge to their own breasts and wore it proudly.

In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf suggests that women might wear a tuft of horsehair on the left shoulder to indicate motherhood as a response to male military decorations. Lupine criticism is obviously here to stay. We might as well accept the label and wear it proudly. If the proliferation and hardiness of the flower is any indication of our tenacity, we have a great future. We have not yet ceased to be “prigs and prophetesses,” but we have made a start at inventing human intercourse.

Yet achievement and even struggle in common do not come easily. The first of our two volumes of feminist criticism on Virginia Woolf was finished in 1977, but we were unable to find an American publisher. The essays have circulated among feminist critics and have been cited in books and articles in print for years. Because the University of Nebraska Press bought the book from Macmillan/London, the price in America is very high. These incontrovertible economic facts are not lost on young scholars. Virginia Woolf founded the Hogarth Press in order to publish what she wanted to write. Feminists often feel forced by economic realities to choose other methodologies and structures that will ensure sympathetic readings from university presses. We may be as middle class as Virginia Woolf, but few of us have the economic security her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen’s legacy gave her. The samizdat circulation among networks of feminist critics works only in a system where repression is equal. If all the members are unemployed or underemployed, unpublished or unrecognized, sisterhood flourishes, and sharing is a source of strength. When we all compete for one job or when one lupine grows bigger and bluer than her sisters with unnatural fertilizers from the establishment, the ranks thin out. Times are hard and getting harder.
Being an outsider is a lonely life. Virginia Woolf proposed a “Society of Outsiders.” Lupine criticism, I think, will only flourish in the collective and in the wild. In captivity, in the rarefied hothouse atmosphere of current academic criticism, it may wither and die. From my last climbing trip in the Wind Rivers, I brought back some wild lupines and carefully transplanted them. My mother warned me that Chicago clay would stifle them, and she was right. Garden lupines are very pretty, and doubtless our colleagues would find us less offensive in the cultivated state. The British label was meant as an insult, and it might be an adjective as well as a noun. If we are going to wear it, sister lupines, let us wear it with wild Woolfian abandon.

One Cheer for Democracy, or Talking Back to Quentin Bell

Quentin Bell, largely responsible for making the Bloomsbury bed, now refuses to lie in it. In his book on Bloomsbury and his biography of his aunt, he provided readers with the materials for what he now calls “false generalizations.”30 “Bloomsbury and the Vulgar Passions” is a deliberately mystifying title that does not clarify the politics of the period, but muddies the waters even more.

Virginia Woolf’s clear understanding of the role of the intellectual in relation to the revolution is evident in her title Three Guineas. She wants women and the working class to unite against the war, but she does not presume to speak for any but her own class and sex. In “The Leaning Tower” and Letter to a Young Poet31 she insists on organization in one’s own class and has faith that the working class can produce its own leaders. Her title, a deliberate play on Brecht’s Threepenny Opera, exposes the economic origins of the social problems she discusses. Neither pence nor pounds can accurately describe the contributions expected of a woman in her position. Over the years American academics have shared her frustrating experience, signing petitions and writing checks to help in the civil rights movement and the movement to stop the war in Vietnam. Like her, they sought to relieve social ills by imagining free universities like the one Woolf
describes in *Three Guineas*. Current feminism grew out of women's efforts to find a place in movements for social change that assumed that race and class and the present war were more important than sex grievances. Woolf was the first to identify the enemy openly as “patriarchy.”

Why does Bell choose Keynes's elitist phrase for an essay calculated to reduce the political power of *Three Guineas* to an entirely personal cause? If *Three Guineas* is merely an aunt's elegy for a dead nephew, as Bell argues, is not such ferocious grief a “vulgar passion,” too? The phrase is not Bell's; it is the phrase of a man he admires, Maynard Keynes. It is a Victorian upper-class phrase. Few members of Margaret Llewelyn Davies' Working Women's Co-operative Guild would have known what it meant. The phrase itself is heavy with ambiguity, and it is used by Bell in both positive and negative ways. Curiously, it works to the disadvantage of Virginia Woolf either way. It is men like his father, Keynes, and Forster who remain intellectually above the vulgar passions when Bell considers it correct to be so, and men again who are responsive to the vulgar passions of a nation at war, when this is the attitude he admires.

There is a famous point in Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf when the reader, swept along by the swift flow of prose, brisk and cool like an English trout stream in spring, is suddenly thrown into white water. Bell bursts into capital letters. The reader is on the rocks.

But were we then to scuttle like frightened spinsters before the Fascist thugs? She belonged, inescapably, to the Victorian world of Empire, Class and Privilege. Her gift was for the pursuit of shadows, for the ghostly whispers of the mind and for Pythian incomprehensibility, when what was needed was the swift and lucid phrase that could reach the ears of unemployed working men or Trades Union officials.

To the generation of Thirties intellectuals (John Lehmann was one, and Woolf wrote her scathing *Letter to a Young Poet* to him), Virginia Woolf was “a fragile middle-aged poetess, a sexless Sappho,” and “a distressed gentlewoman caught in a tempest.” Bell recalls his “despair”
as he urged the Rodmell Labour Party to adopt a resolution supporting the united front, when Virginia, who was the local party secretary, turned the debate from the question. He does not call her a skilled politician for manipulating the meeting, on pacifist principle, away from patriotic militarism. He says, indeed, that she was closer to the feeling of “the masses” than he was. “I wanted to talk politics, the masses wanted to talk about the vicar’s wife.”

But, I venture, it was precisely her “swift and lucid phrases” that annoyed him, for she spoke to the Workers’ Education Association, and she wrote in the Daily Worker of a different kind of united front: while the capitalist, imperialist patriarchs were waging their wars, workers should join women in an assault on culture. “Trespass,” she urged them on the sacred precincts of home front institutions while the warriors are in the field. She was arguing for total subversion of the world of empire, class, and privilege. And among the shadows she pursued most vigorously were young, upper-class male “missionaries to the masses.” Take off those “pro-proletarian spectacles,” she urged the generation of Auden, Spender, Lehmann, and Bell; if you really want to make the revolution, you must empty your pockets of your fathers’ money, you must convert the men of your own class.

Virginia Woolf took as hard a line on the role of the intellectual in the class struggle as did Lenin or Trotsky. Its ethical imperative is even improved by the addition of feminism to the socialist-pacifist position. Quentin Bell’s objections are honest ones, and there were many who agreed with him. He is infuriated by her feminism and enraged by her pacifism, and he fights back like a man.

It is dirty fighting, to be sure. She is dead, and cannot respond like the Lapland witch Gerald Brenan says she was. E. M. Forster was a dirty fighter, too. He said in his Rede Lecture that Woolf was not a great writer because she had no great cause at heart. But we have already put A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas on the shelf next to Milton, Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Swift, and where is Forster’s “Two Cheers for Democracy”? It is an embarrassment. Forster said he would give up his country before he would give up his friend. But that was not at issue. Nobody was asking him to give up his friend.
And *Three Guineas* has some antifascist feminist thuggery of its own. One thing it does not have is “Pythian incomprehensibility.” It is a Cassandra cry in the crowd of thirties political pamphlets. No spinsterish whispers either—the loudspeaker blares for all to hear, a withering revolutionary feminist analysis of fascism. The Hitlers and Mussolinis have no monopoly on fascism, she says. The origin of fascism is the patriarchal family. And the daughters of educated men had better root it out of the hearts of their English brothers before the latter rush off to fight foreign fascism.

Men on the left were horrified. But the argument that elements of fascism lurk behind patriarchal power struggles is still too radical for people. It was the subject of Lina Wertmüller’s shattering feminist film *Seven Beauties*, and all the Bettelheims came out with their battering rams and big guns to remind us of how long it will be before men will tolerate free speech in women.

During the period covered by the fifth volume of Woolf’s letters (1932–35), the political and personal insults that she had received from men were creating the deep sense of grievance that finally burst out in *The Years* and *Three Guineas*. *The Years* itself is the most brilliant indictment in modern literature of the world of empire, class, and privilege, of capitalism and patriarchy. Structurally it is exciting, too, in its portrait of the artist as charwoman of the world. *The Years* was planned as a new form of her opera for the oppressed, alternating chapters of fact and fiction. The documentary chapters have been reprinted in *The Pargiters*. It is too bad that Leonard talked her out of it. He was fearful of mixing fact and fiction. Her fearlessness went into the writing of both books. But she was justifiably terrified of what the male critics would say.

It is doubtful that she would have predicted her nephew’s continuing hostility to *Three Guineas*. I believe there is a direct line in English history from the Clapham Sect to Bloomsbury. The anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* who called Virginia Woolf “the best pamphleteer in England” was (consciously or unconsciously) echoing the very words applied to the antislavery pamphlets of her great-grandfather, James Stephen. That Virginia Woolf should
have added feminism to the Stephen family causes is the most natural
development in the world.42 Her pacifism was not a “temporary”
phenomenon but a firmly held principle of a tripartite political
philosophy. It was largely derived from the important and neglected
influence of her Quaker aunt, Caroline Emelia Stephen, described by
Quaker historians as almost single-handedly responsible for the revival
of the practically moribund English Society of Friends in the late
nineteenth century.43 It is true, as Bell says, that Woolf modified her
position at the last, actually wanted to join the fire wardens, and
appears to have been willing to defend her beleaguered country in
“Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid.” I have described these changes
of attitude elsewhere.44

Bell’s essay is written in response to yet another season of bad
press for Bloomsbury. Virginia Woolf wrote to him during an earlier
one, stating “Bloomsbury is having a very bad press at the moment;
so please take up your hammer and chisel and sculpt a great flaming
Goddess to put them all to shame.”45 There was certainly a family
precedent. When Fitzjames Stephen was hounded out of office for
prejudicing the jury in the Maybrick case after a lifetime of legal
bullying and misogyny as the “Giant Grim,” Leslie Stephen took up
his hammer and chisel and sculpted a genial friendly giant in his
biography of his brother. Virginia Stephen herself had participated in
Maitland’s biography of her father, largely to offset the influence of
her aunt Caroline, who had mountains of evidence that the great man
had a terrible temper.46

Did Bell perhaps agree with Mirsky’s dismissal of Bloomsbury and
Virginia Woolf in The Intelligentsia of Great Britain,47 the “bad press”
referred to? He took up his hammer and chisel, but produced no “great
flaming Goddess” but a “sexless Sappho,” a “distressed gentlewoman
cought in a tempest.” I suspect in the end we will all come to see
Bell’s “sexless Sappho” as a true portrait of the artist who equated
chastity with creativity. But she will not do as a portrait of the socialist/
pacifist/feminist, the “outsider” who “spat out” Three Guineas as an
original contribution to an analysis of the origins of fascism in the
patriarchal family. If she began the book as an elegy for Bell’s brother,
Julian, there is nothing unusual in her method in that, for all her work is elegy. Even *A Room of One’s Own* is a female elegy written in a college courtyard for the female writers of the past. The narrator has been denied access to the library which contains the manuscripts of the two great male elegies in poetry and prose, Milton’s *Lycidas* and Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond*, and so she is driven to invent the female elegy. If grieving for Julian Bell’s death in Spain forced her to the conclusion that she must speak directly to women of her class, to the mothers, sisters, and wives of the war makers, the public effect of a private sorrow is impressive.

But *Three Guineas* is a stubbornly feminist elegy, singing the sorrows of women under patriarchy, relentlessly repeating itself as history has repeated itself, trying to establish a feminist ethics. To my mind, and to the minds of other feminists, *Three Guineas* is the pure historical product of the Clapham Sect reform movement. It owes much to the “rational mysticism” of Caroline Emelia Stephen’s *The Light Arising*. But if the historian can free himself of sex bias, he will see *Three Guineas* in relation to Bertrand Russell’s philosophy and to G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*. In fact it might be seen as “Principia Ethica Feminina,” volume 1.

If Woolf later, in “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” admitted woman’s complicity in war and concluded that “we must compensate the man for his gun,” she did not suggest how. Bell thinks she has come close to the vulgar passions (which are now positive) in this essay, and he is disposed to grant her some credit. I thought so too in 1976. But I am now disposed to think that “Thoughts on Peace in Air Raid” is just what the title suggests, a defensive position taken under extreme pressure. The militant feminism of *Three Guineas*, its equally militant pacifism, socialism, and antifascism, are “saddening” and “exasperating” to Bell. Many European and American feminist historians are studying the forms of Italian and German fascism and their relation to the patriarchal family, marriage, and the treatment of women and children, and they have found Woolf’s pamphlet a strikingly original and eerily correct analysis. I believe Bell labors under the misconception that feminism is not political—a major mistake—as
well as under minor misconceptions that pacifism in World War II was not a respectable political stance (it was certainly not popular) and that Virginia Woolf could not have been much of a socialist because she did not work in Labour Party committees or associate with the working classes. Even when Bell imagines a committee meeting, he sees only Mr. A, Mr. B, Mr. C, Mr. D, and the chairman. I seem to recall that the committee meeting which caused his admirable prose style to flood the gates was chaired by his aunt, Mrs. W, and she prevented him from passing his resolution. It is a long time to hold a grudge.

It is a failure of the imagination to suppose that all pacifists were, like Clive Bell, ad hoc peaceniks for a particular war. Quakers, like Caroline Stephen and Violet Dickinson, Virginia’s early mentors, were opposed to all wars.

It seems oddly un-English and more like an American pragmatist or utilitarian argument to judge the quality of a pamphlet by its contemporaneous effectiveness. James Stephen turned out antislavery pamphlets that failed to stop the slavers. It was not until he had been dead many years that his son finally got an antislavery bill through Parliament. How much immediate effect did Mill’s *Subjection of Women* have? Women did not get the vote until 1928, and the conditions of women are still not by any means satisfactory. *Three Guineas* is still read (and this might be a better measure of “effectiveness”) by those who hunger for its message, who feel as guilty as Woolf did about fighting for feminism when atrocities and wars demand one’s attention. Seeking for the deepest cause of imperialist and capitalist war, she found it in male aggression. She was saddened, but urged women to stop encouraging aggression. I wish she had been more successful.

If effectiveness is the criterion of a pamphlet’s success, is there any way of measuring the success of *Three Guineas* in keeping America out of the war when it was published in the *Atlantic* as “Women Must Weep or Unite against the War”? I suppose it is just as possible to imagine that her pamphlet had that power as to assert that Forster’s *A Passage to India* had an immense influence in dissuading Britons from their imperialist passions.\(^5\) I do not share Bell’s enthusiasm for
A Passage to India. It seems so pale and liberal compared to the radical anti-imperialism and anticapitalism of Mrs. Dalloway or The Years. Virginia Woolf once described Mrs. Humphry Ward’s novels as hanging in the lumber room of literature like the mantles of our aunts, covered with beads and bugles. Well, there is something about E. M. Forster’s novels reminiscent of our unmarried uncles’ silk pajamas, something elegant, but rather effete. They have not worn well. And Woolf’s novels get harder and tougher year by year, ethically unyielding and morally challenging.

Any member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom or the Women's Co-operative Guild, as well as many left-wing feminists and many socialists, would have seen Virginia Woolf’s ideology as more powerful than the liberalism of Keynes or Forster. For those readers, Three Guineas is not forced or unsatisfactory. It was not at the time, as Bell implies, nor is it now, a political irrelevance. It is hard to believe that the world is as neatly divided into hawks and doves as Bell would have us believe, and that one changes feathers over every war. Some of us imagine Virginia Woolf as a great blue heron anyway, and she describes herself as a misfit, an outsider. As for her ability to feel the vulgar passions, to hear the demotic voice, let Bell read the song of the caretaker’s children in The Years. It is the voice of the colonial chickens come home to roost. The full measure of Three Guineas’ effect is yet to be weighed, for it deals with older, more universal, and more deeply rooted social ills than the Spanish fascism that prompted it. Her intent reminds me of a surrealist poem by Laura Riding:

She opens the heads of her brothers
And lets out the aeroplanes
"Now," she says, "you will be able to think better."