Bullied Young Women, Virginia Woolf’s Sex Japes, and Modernist Sociability in the Time of #MeToo

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Over the last decade, #MeToo and the work of activists like Tarana Burke have brought attention to tacitly permitted sexual exploitation on university campuses and in work environments both on and off the clock. As #MeToo transformed the world around me, rumors I had come across in my scholarship regarding a poet laureate from nearly two centuries ago took on new significance. The rumors hinted at coercion and violation experienced by young women who found themselves in the company of Alfred Tennyson and had inspired satirical scenes in Virginia Woolf’s play (https://archive.org/details/freshwatercomedy00wool/mode/2up)Freshwater (https://archive.org/details/freshwatercomedy00wool/mode/2up), allowing me to present a rather triumphant vision of feminist modernism (https://modernismmodernity.org/current-print-issue/volume-28-number-3-september-2021) the article I produced on the topic (https://modernismmodernity.org/current-print-issue/volume-28-number-3-september-2021) published in Modernism/modernity in Fall 2021.[1]

Certainly, there was Woolf’s triumph in Freshwater—a finely tuned, comical takedown of literary celebrity and its abettors that likely corrected salacious rumormongering about Tennyson while empowering the to-be-famous young woman character, stage actor Ellen Terry, as well as the young woman who performed Terry, Woolf’s niece Angelica Bell. What #MeToo made me reckon with as I considered Woolf’s revisions to the play and its performance, however, were the compromises that came with this triumph, and how they might be imbricated with modernism writ large. In other words, after finalizing my article’s commentary on Woolf’s Freshwater and its whisperings about Tennyson, I came to reflect on how the daring, progressive efforts of 20th century modernists to overturn harmful customs of sociability of earlier times had also worked to invigorate them.
Salacious Rumors

Woolf’s *Freshwater* in draft form was a densely referential pastiche of Julia Margaret Cameron’s photography, and it took me about fifteen years to work out matters of love, medium, and representation suggested by the many sources I had been studying. I presented the rumors about the bullying poet laureate at several professional conferences over the time it took to develop and complete the project, rumors such as those intimated by Woolf’s cousin Laura Gurney, Lady Troubridge, in her 1925 memoir.[2] In describing a time from her early adulthood when Tennyson touched her on the neck, Gurney carefully notes that it was merely to demonstrate their coldness from exposure during a walk, and incidentally remarks “and another thing [Tennyson] told me when we were talking of romance, was that he had never kissed a woman, in love, except for his wife” (30). Gurney’s qualification of a “kiss, in love” was presumably as opposed to a kiss as social courtesy, a qualification that was meant to imply good conduct but that also carved a loophole for touching women’s bodies as a matter of custom, conduct now and at long last censured as plain violation and power grab.

Robert Bernard Martin, writing in a 1977 biography, likewise gives substance to suspicion in the effort of defending the idealistic Tennyson’s innocence. He described a “succession of girls or young women to whom [Tennyson] was devoted, walking with them, lecturing with them benignly on poetry, flirting ponderously, sometimes demanding attention in a way that approached bullying,” and “ask[ing] an innocent kiss from the young women” as “reward for his companionship.”[3] To Martin, Tennyson’s kisses were “innocent” and “paternal” because at most taken with “an unconscious, sublimated touch of sexual attraction,” explaining but not justifying rumors “that his interest in [young women] was far from avuncular.” These notes on “privileged girl guests” (as Hugh I’Anson Fausset’s 1923 biography put it) documented a sexist sociability in Tennyson that was understood as customary yet remarkable enough to incite rumors of sexual exploitativeness, a sociability today shown out as immediately exploitative and inequitable—and thriving in the shadows of public life.[4]

It was a different biographical note that elicited gasps from audiences at conferences over the years. Andrew Lang’s 1901 biography describes Alfred Tennyson as an admixture—an approval-seeking celebrity who was also intensely awkward and shy—and quotes the accomplished publisher Francis Turner Palgrave to say “I have known [Tennyson] silenced, almost frozen, before the eager unintentional eyes of a girl of fifteen. And under the stress of this nervous impulse compelled to contradict his inner self,” and act with “cold unsympathy.”[5] Palgrave’s recollection was meant to explain gruff, impolite behavior, Tennyson’s extreme “terror of leonisation” (209) even when encountered in young readers, but it also suggests that earnest teenage girls had a special effect, triggering a shutdown of conversation.
The biographical note was disturbing to conference audiences, it seemed to me, not merely because of the youth of the woman who brings on such nerves, but more significantly because of the moment it captures of social disciplining, the freezing out mid-conversation. This description outlines a distinctive treatment of young women as disordered interlocutors, necessarily treated to a silence that would have inevitably corrected—chastened and even demeaned—women’s behavior. Social power lay soundly in the hands of the pitifully awkward poet laureate even when Palgrave and Lang would lay it in the “unintentional” eyes of a young woman. Though not pointing to sexual misconduct even by today’s changing norms, the 150-year-old quotation does show how courtesy can cover for manipulation and how interpersonal chill as much as attention can work for coercion. The old quotation also demonstrates how intellectual competence in a young woman can be construed as disarming, leaving a man supposedly powerless to his impulse.

**Sexy but Safe Satire**

Certainly, Woolf’s *Freshwater* did its job to ridicule the customary control of young women’s behavior and bodies, satirizing the self-love of high-toned Victorian men like Tennyson (and G.F. Watts) and the self-diminishing love enacted by one woman who assisted these men, Julia Cameron. In draft, the high-toned Tennyson is sexually exploitative—pulling Ellen Terry onto his knee, asking her to imagine his naked thighs, and intimating an erection. The nearly silent Terry complies and kisses him in thanks for his romantic advice. In contrast, in the finished version of the play, the “kissing” Tennyson is more clownish in his nudie-talk, exposing an arm for inspection and characterizing the scene as “wet” dream, and Terry is more vocal and far less polite, announcing an orgasmic “I come! I come!” in lieu of a returned kiss.[6] In other words, the finished play caricatures overt sexual flirtation as a mutual sex act rather than as one-sided exploitation, and is lighter in content even while more explicit, more appropriate to adult party entertainment than had been the draft. As I argued in my article, the lightening up on exploitation that came with empowering the young woman in flirtation may have afforded a therapeutic reworking of Woolf’s personal memory of violation and coercion by her stepbrothers. It arguably reflects Woolf’s feminism: critics Andrea Adolph and Penny Farfan suggest we see in the empowered representation of Terry a tactic for empowering women generally.[7]

However, as I revised the manuscript for production over a couple of eventful #MeToo years, I had many thoughts that did not appear in the article. Most disturbingly, I came to think that the lightening up on what could or should be read as exploitation may have been a rather elitist effort to refine public knowledge about the poet laureate that speaks more to professional anxieties than social-mindedness and is certainly narrowly middle-class in feminist truth-telling. Woolf was scrupulous in her writing about past writers, sensitive to the vicissitudes of literary afterlife and how she herself would fare. Elsewhere in her writings Woolf punched hard at Tennyson for being a literary celebrity whose egotism was so excessive that his poetry was ruined. In contrast, Woolf's
finished *Freshwater* relatively improves Tennyson’s image on the note of exploitativeness, developing him from miscreant ridiculous poet in pursuit of self-gratification to all-round buffoon in a frolic.

Perhaps Woolf had aimed to correct the rumormongers of the day and salvage the person from a reputation for “bullying,” working to deal a fair hand to another writer whom she here and elsewhere took down for literary offenses. Or, of course, perhaps the first draft was simply and merely a blunt, blurry first draft that happened to also be conspicuously informed and stuffed with detailed trivia. It may have been that polishing Tennyson’s moral character was incidental to tightening up, as well as lightening up, the play. In either case, the easing up on representations of sexual exploitation was likely accurate to Woolf’s deep but limited knowledge of Tennyson and reflected a safely secured, privileged innocence. Her knowledge was circumscribed by the classed perspective of her well-resourced family, a family established in the ranks of both English lettered men and colonial administration, and relatedly, circumscribed by the ignorance of adult sexuality that the family would have wanted to preserve in their daughter, perhaps especially ignorance of adult sexuality’s more severe impact on women who lived and worked in the margins of their world.

As Janine Utell suggests in her framing for the “Orientations” forum, being more critical and less idealizing of modernist women writers like Woolf is crucial to our work as feminist scholars. Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* enjoined women who wanted to become good writers to “think back” through their mothers, and not, notably, to listen to them. Certainly, Woolf’s oeuvre is imaginative and transformative—thinking back, against, and outside “our” mothers—but an archive based in her own family’s lore sets limits that need to be factored into scholars’ understanding of her imagination.

**A Dickish Liberation**

Worrying over whether the finished *Freshwater* erases trace memory of misconduct against young Victorian women or (or instead, or also) corrects the exaggerations of “penny-a-liner lies” (to use the words of Tennyson’s son Hallam) is perhaps futile given any writer’s limited and likely privileged point of view on what lurked in the shadows a generation before.[10] Less futile is worrying over the play’s “message” to the future, those additional to the character Cameron’s “message” to “fix your lens out of focus” (*Freshwater* 51). Certainly, again, the finished and progressive-minded play ridicules the manipulation of young women and raucously, finally, celebrates Terry’s breaking of social convention for modern love. However, the most daring idea in the revised romantic comedy, in my opinion, was muffled by performance: Woolf had hoped that the 1935 performance of Ellen Terry would capture the “clumsy directness, the hard fact of the Stephen girls” that Woolf “relish[ed]”; the Julia Cameron character indeed wonders if Terry is a “fact” (*Freshwater* 51). Woolf’s
niece Angelica Bell in her performance of Ellen Terry was, however, sophisticated in manner for a
teen (“ravishing,” “too grown up for my taste,” implicitly “Bloomsbury” as Woolf remarked) and
likely hit a more mature key in scenes of romance and flirtation.[11] I come! I come! In hoping to
figure orgasm in “clumsy & large” girls (Diary 4: 274), Woolf had hoped to represent a sexual
positivity for adolescents that we still only read about in the most forward-thinking of health
textbooks today.

Such theatrical derring-do risks harm, and Woolf’s wish for the Terry character certainly risked
sexualizing girls’ bodies for others rather than asserting the “fact” of their bodies, themselves.
(Word play intended.[12]) Vanessa Bell’s photograph of her daughter costumed for the role (see Fig.
1) captures both Woolf’s progressive intention as well as its problematic appeal.
Fig. 1. Photograph of Angelica Bell posing, in costume, as the actress Ellen Terry from Virginia Woolf’s play ‘Freshwater,’ January 1935. Vanessa Bell. © Tate, Photo: Tate.
In both the 1923 and 1935 typescripts of *Freshwater*, Ellen Terry was to wear checked trousers in the final scene to mark her liberation from marriage to Watts and through love with the serviceable Craig, but the costuming direction was cut for the 1935 performance, apparently, at the last minute. [13] The substitute garment—a white linen gown, complete with voluminous skirts and sleeves—suggests a powerful blossoming of femininity that tips traditional and organ-reproductive rather than, as might have a two-legged garment, counter-traditional and genital-orgasmic. The costume’s white bowler hat, a feminine styling of what was typically men’s garb, recalls the intended trousers, certainly. Cross-gendering and archly placed, the hat feature of the costuming captures how the character’s maturity was ambiguously inflected in the script and performance: cutely boyish and sexy girlish, a young woman, on one hand, germinating an astonishing worklife and fierce independence from normative gender roles, and on the other hand, still playing dress up while coylly feminine and mature. A message to the future about the transformative possibilities of sexuality, gender, and representation comes with the final costuming of Angelica as Ellen Terry, but a message that is almost immediately exposed as naive to contexts of performance and spectatorship. When asked in 1975 to write a recollection for the publication of both versions of the play, Angelica Bell Garnett “decided she has really nothing to say”: the statement uncannily suggests a sophisticated young woman’s thoughts on a birthday party for her that had doubled as naughty entertainment for parents’ friends (and originated as naughtier Christmas “skit”—might we joke Christmas panto?), and, to my mind, is a note on performance that underscores the Terry character’s regressive potentiality.[14]

One might contend that all this worrying misses the point of bawdy comedy. Speculating over the silencing of whisperers or rumormongers is not only futile but also insensitive to genre. We allow play and freedom to comedy so that it might test the definitions and necessity of very serious values and principles. The finished *Freshwater* doesn’t breach that license, so I really shouldn’t make too much of why it improves Tennyson’s conduct with redrafting, and how it was supposed to do so through asserting adolescent sexual pleasure, and how it disappointingly carried out that intention in performance. Woolf, incidentally, removed an ableist jape with the produced version—Queen Victoria in a wheelchair figuring *regina ex machina*; it was cleverly revised for a 1983 production with Queen Victoria riding a toy horse.[15]

Seriously: so zany-sexy is *Freshwater* that Woolf elaborates the actual Ellen Terry’s very own dick joke in the naming of romantic Craig, the Scottish Gaelic word for rock. Terry, the story goes, decided on a surname for her children on seeing Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde. On the one hand, it seems the rock may have suggested to Terry beauty and independence, given the name was taken as her daughter Edith’s stage name, but on the other hand, it also seems “Craig” was the
only public indication Terry decided to make of her children’s paternity.[16] Elvira Anne Phipps, Victorian travel writer, described Ailsa Craig as “a very singular conical rock” and captured its forthright character in (aptly) lithograph (Phipps, 23; see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Elvira Anna Phipps’s lithograph illustration of Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde from Memorials of Clutha; Or Pencilings on the Clyde (1842). The “very singular conical rock” (Phipps 23), encountered by Ellen Terry on a boating trip, inspired her choice of stage name and surname for her children and, apparently, Woolf’s choice of the gallant’s name in Freshwater. See fn. 15.

A male-genital reference with the word “craig” is emphasized in Freshwater by the couple’s (impossibly) meeting in the play on another “rock in the middle of the sea,” one of the jagged Needles off of Wight, and enlivened by the risqué question posed by Terry herself in the 1923 draft, “But who’s Craig?,” a joke on the social mystery that was Terry’s children’s paternity (Freshwater 70). With the soon-to-be-iconic theater professional donning boldly-patterned trousers in the typescripts and partnering off in all versions with an obliging craig unknown to polite society, the “burlesque” Freshwater celebrates doing love, sexuality, and reproduction in Terry’s variant way.[17]

The craig joke of both the draft and finished versions of the play is gutsy, reflecting Ellen Terry’s plain disregard of the social mores of her time and vividly capturing “Bloomsbury Group” sexual frankness. To my mind, it also demeans persons possessed of the figured member and dismisses paternity as mere physiological circumstance. It is also unfeeling as written for Angelica Bell’s performance, even with the 1923 draft’s “Who’s Craig?” line having been cut. A couple of years after the Freshwater performance she would be told her biological father was not Clive Bell, and likely close friends of the Bells in the audience (including Bunny Garnett) grasped the obscure paternity signaled by Craig and the Needles as an inside-inside joke. Really nothing to say: silence
as reproof, I say, to liberated Bloomsbury’s callous treatment of her as a young woman laid bare in
this instance, liberated Bloomsbury’s mirthful play on her ignorance of adult sexuality as expressed
in her own family and as would be preserved well into adulthood. So, I offer the craig joke as
funny/not-funny, with that statement of sincere ambiguity special to our time.[18]

Modernist Sociability (at Work)

For centuries western dramatic comedy has operated through give-and-take, shifts in the balance
of power between characters that imaginatively right the truly wrong. Moving a few pebbles in the
balance of power from Tennyson to Terry is plausibly progressive and simply amusing, effective as
satire. However, because I studied the play’s revision in the time of #MeToo, I bristled nonetheless,
to use the keyword offered by Erica Delsandro in her piece for this forum. Leaving in view an
egotistical user of young women who, in turn, made use of him, Woolf leaves us to imagine
operators all round, a space of artistic sociability structured by economy of libido and ego-
gratification. Courtesy of Freud and the Freudians, such a sex romp was a progressive vision, a way
of better understanding destructive human impulses and how they might be channeled into social
and civilized purposes.

Take, for instance, Joan Riviere’s 1929 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade.” When I taught it to
undergraduates in 2018, I was struck by the wholly noxious work environment she describes. In the
essay, “intellectual” women who have chosen to pursue professional occupations are “intermediate
types” who puzzlingly possess masculinity and manage resulting anxiety through a masquerade of
femininity; in the featured case, the masquerade amounted to flirtatiousness with men at
professional social events—“attempting to obtain sexual advances” by “ogling and coquetting”—a
compulsion which offset the analysand’s anxiety about her masculinity, and was a “problem” only
insofar as it was incongruous with her work-day “impersonal and objective attitude.”[19] Riviere’s
innovative essay assisted feminist scholars in the later twentieth century to theorize women’s
spectatorship and gender performance, but it compelled this 21st-century feminist instructor to
make a public service announcement as part of lecture: the sexualized professional environment
that is presented in the essay as merely available and personal to the analysand is in fact
objectionable and unethical for everyone, however much any one person might be compensating
for their own psychosexual development at work.[20] Aply, the biographer’s explanation of
Tennyson’s “innocent” bullying quoted at the start of this piece clearly speaks a Freudian mentality:
“sublimated” sexual desire presented in 1977 as obviously and wholly harmless today, to me,
simply reeks of rationalization on behalf of celebrity.

Freshwater’s flirtation reads as light amusement because of the long dramatic tradition of (as it
were) comedic justice and the libidinal-economic view of social relationships that suffused the
modernist world. More speculatively, and more darkly, I’d say the flirtation is supposed to come off
as light amusement because such behavior was understood as characteristic of “bohemian” spaces of sociability, spaces that were being fashioned by modernism writ large as work environments. The “circle,” whether Bloomsbury, Chelsea, Left Bank, or Vicious, came to be idealized as a wellspring of creativity over the modernist period and by significant players because of mixing private with public life, valuing frankly sexual talk and untraditional love relationships, and centering around persons presumed to be genius. Such was the appeal of the Victorian Freshwater set as content for a play, presumably, and especially for a play privately staged for Woolf’s friends and those of Vanessa and Clive Bell. In other words, the finished play works its humor on the topic of sexual flirtation with a liberating ideal of artistic-creative sociability, one that could be easily turned to harm against the less powerful and indeed has been insidiously realized over time, even with nonnormative identities and desires in play, as the broad-reaching #MeToo has shown.

I bristle, and I take courage. #MeToo has revealed how casual or routine objectification, coercion, and even criminal assault can operate through an open secret of self-pleasuring and inequitable decision-making rationalized as interpersonal dynamism. It has put into view a disorienting and destructive undertow that pulls at anyone who has to live with it as practical reality, a force only the strongest bystanders and survivors have been able to call out as wrong. While in the long view a burlesque written by Virginia Woolf—early-last-century white feminist, middle-class and metropolitan Englishwoman, and modernist salonnière of sorts—may be contributing to that undertow, the play also diverts and diminishes that undertow, lobbing more than a few “very singular” rocks at customary sexism, sexual propriety, and socially-expected reproductivity. What we study conditions but does not determine our way. Our work as feminist scholars is to describe modernist imaginaries and sociabilities as multivalent—let’s say, fabulous but marked by failures and degradations—in ways that could help move the world to better.

Notes

[1] Andrea Zemgulys, “Love in the Flesh: Virginia Woolf, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Other Amorous Victorians,” Modernism/modernity 28:3 (September 2021): 447–74. For discussion of contemporary modernist scholarship and another major poet’s afterlife in the context of #MeToo, see the PrintPlus clusters edited by Megan Quigley: https://modernismmodernity.org/search/site/%23metoo?f%5B0%5D=is_uid%3A1189


[3] Robert Bernard Martin, Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 447-448. For further on Tennyson’s famed persona and fanbase, see

Andrew Lang, *Alfred Tennyson* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1901), 209


Virginia Woolf’s familiarity with the poet’s private life was based on the recollections of women in her family as well as her father Leslie Stephen: her mother Julia Prinsep, her aunt Anne Thackeray Ritchie from her father’s side, as well as her great aunt Julia Cameron. In her memoir essay “A Sketch of the Past,” when touching on her mother’s younger days with the Freshwater set, Tennyson seems merely an eccentric feature of the Wight memoriescape, strolling in a large “wideawake” hat. “A Sketch of the Past,” in Ed. Jean Schulkind, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 87.


The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1982), 4:274.

*Our Bodies, Ourselves*, first published by the Boston Women’s Health Collective in 1969, is the landmark forward-thinking health textbook that frankly discusses women’s orgasm and sexual pleasure across generations and continues to be produced in new editions and as a website. https://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/

In the typescript of the 1935 draft held by University of Sussex Library Special Collections, final scene directions for Ellen Terry to appear in trousers and for Watts to point at the trousers are crossed out.

“nothing to say”: letter from Norah Smallwood to John Ferrone describing Angelica Garnett’s decision to not write a recollection for the publication of *Freshwater*. (Unpublished letter held by University of Reading Special Collections; quoted by permission of Penguin Random House.) The first draft of the play was described by Woolf as a “skit upon our great aunts” that “we want to act
for Christmas” in 1923 [The Letters of Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanna Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 3:72]. The produced play was written for a private audience attending a January 1935 party in honor of Angelica Bell’s 16th birthday (25 December 1934); see Ruotolo ed., Freshwater v-vi. Nina Auerbach in Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time (NY: W.W. Norton, 1987) sees a regressiveness in the play itself, using the stricken lines spoken by Watts to argue that Ellen represents a “fallen woman” (109) in Woolf’s oeuvre. However, given that the lines are stricken and Watts’s is a brutally derided point of view in the play, I and most scholars of the play read the finale’s Ellen as heroically modern. [See Adolph, Farfan, Stephen D. Putzel, Virginia Woolf and the Theater (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), and James Moran, Modernists and the Theatre (London: Methuen, 2022.).]


