

Q.D. Leavis: Women and Education under Scrutiny

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In September 1938, *Scrutiny* published Q.D. Leavis's often vituperative review of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*. Critics have considered 'Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!' in the context of anti-Bloomsbury sentiments emanating from *Scrutiny* throughout the 1930s. Anna Snaith has recently pointed out that Leavis 'situates herself as an "outsider" to the text',¹ noting that she condemns *Three Guineas* for being little more than 'a conversation between [Woolf] and her friends' (VII 2 [1938], p. 203).² This would seem to support Noel Annan's contention that the *Scrutiny* group, and the Leavises in particular, viewed Bloomsbury as 'a corrupt clique [which] had captured the intellectual establishment [and] whose tentacles . . . stretched over all the important organs of British intellectual life'.³ Snaith also argues that by not acknowledging Woolf's 'consciousness of the limitations of her own class position'⁴ Leavis coarsens what is in fact a delicately nuanced argument. However, Eleanor McNees has suggested that the 'disparity in class and education' between the Leavises and Woolf can account, at least in part, not only for their condemnation of Woolf as 'highbrow' but also for an 'alternately defensive and condescending attitude' towards Q.D. Leavis in particular, in Woolf's letters and diaries.⁵

In this article, I will consider Leavis's attack on *Three Guineas* in the light of other writings on women and education she produced throughout the 1930s. Viewed in this context, the review is not merely a further broadside on Woolf, but an expression of Leavis's strongly held opinions on educational reform. Many of the numerous book reviews that Leavis wrote for *Scrutiny* display a concern for how university education in particular was

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represented in fictional writing; she also tackled the question of education more directly in a group of articles written in the 1940s, which focused on figures who played key roles in university reform in the late nineteenth century. These display the beliefs that Francis Mulhern identifies in *Scrutiny* as a whole: 'education, a potentially "humanizing" activity, was at present complicit with the "economic process" . . . it should be reformed as a centre of opposition to the latter, and . . . in this effort, the role of literary training was paramount'.⁶ Leavis rarely considers the specific history of the education of women. Where she does deal with this most directly, in an essay from 1947, she chooses to focus not on Emily Davies's struggle to establish Girton College (where Leavis herself studied) but on the particular efforts of Henry Sidgwick, emphasising that Davies's battle would never have been won without the assistance of both Sidgwick and other men within Cambridge. A large part of what makes *Three Guineas* unpalatable to Leavis is its suggestion that women need a different kind of education than men. Leavis herself advocated the measuring of female academic achievement by the existing high (albeit male-determined) standards. This means that she tends to bypass the specifically female, or feminist, aspects of texts such as Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927) and Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935), both of which she discussed in reviews for *Scrutiny*. As well as showing what types of readings Leavis produces of these novels, I will also explore here the ways in which her minor writings contribute to the wider project of both *Fiction and the Reading Public* and *Scrutiny* in their assertion of the absolute necessity for public understanding of the methods and purposes of university education.

I

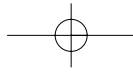
In May 1928, Woolf made two visits to Cambridge and delivered the paper 'Women and Fiction' (which became *A Room of One's Own* [1929]), firstly to the Newnham Arts Society, and then to a Girton society called Odtaa. (This slang expression, a contraction of 'One damn thing after another', came into use after the publication of a novel of the same name by John Masfield in 1926.) Among the members of Odtaa was Queenie Roth, soon to become Mrs Leavis, then in her fourth year as an undergraduate. Unlike the Newnham society, Odtaa was not an official college organisation and accounts of its activities are therefore scanty.⁷ Only anecdotal evidence exists of any direct contact between Roth and her future adversary. Gwendolen Freeman, another undergraduate, wrote to her mother that Woolf 'was very impressed by Queenie & is to send her a pamphlet of some kind' but Freeman was not present at the talk and does not give a source for this information. There are some reports of how the talks were received more generally. Elsie Phare, who was at Newnham, later recalled: 'I think I thought VW's line in the paper rather over-protective of our sex . . . Mrs Woolf I think tried

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hard to make us talk [afterwards] but I don't think that the occasion was a comfortable one'.⁸ Muriel Bradbrook, remembering the Girton talk in 1989 remarked, 'She had not got our wavelength, she saw us as painfully deprived creatures from the midlands preparing to teach those with the same background . . . We admired Mrs Woolf but we didn't feel attracted'.⁹ Phare also notes that after hearing that *A Room of One's Own* contained a description of the meal Woolf shared at Newnham, she was relieved to find that the account was obviously fictionalised.

Woolf's contrasting of the lavish lunch she enjoys at the men's college with the meagre dinner at the women's college 'Fernham' is not meant to poke fun at her hosts. It spurs the reflection that 'it was only after a long struggle and with the utmost difficulty' that funds for a women's college were gathered¹⁰. This in turn exposes the lack of opportunities for women to make any money to leave to such a foundation. Woolf does not acknowledge, at this point, the danger of setting up the standard of living at, and by implication the values of, the men's college as an aspirational model.¹¹ At the root of such seemingly domestic considerations as the quality of the food or the comfortableness of the beds was the issue of parity that had exercised Emily Davies and Anne Clough in the founding of Girton and Newnham respectively. Davies was determined that women should be subject to the same courses of study and tests of competence as the men; Clough, however, under the influence of Henry Sidgwick, saw that the struggle for acceptance of female undergraduates could be combined with moves to reform academic provision in general. (The abolition of compulsory Greek and the phasing out of the Pass degree were particular goals of Sidgwick's.) Between the publication of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf elaborates her argument about the effects of gendered social and political opportunities on women, culminating in the suggestion that educating women in the way that men have traditionally been educated is to educate them towards war. Leavis, on the other hand, from *Fiction and the Reading Public* onwards, promotes a process of continuing educational reform that she believes will result in the amelioration of culture as a whole, without this specific foregrounding of gender issues.¹²

Rita McWilliams-Tullberg points out that during the 1920s women became firmly established at Cambridge: 'Since 1923, women had been assured of their place in the University and since 1926 were involved in the University's main functions of teaching, examining and research'.¹³ However, Cambridge lagged behind Oxford, not allowing women to take full degrees until 1948, and up until the 1960s a quota was in place on the number of female students. Entering the university under these conditions was evidently a sacrifice Leavis was prepared to make in the pursuit of educational excellence; in a memoir, Gwendolen Freeman portrays her fellow undergraduate as a semi-detached figure: 'Near college we passed Queenie erect and alone, strolling along the path. . . . She was reading as she walked



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... It could not have been easy to read as one walked along that country path, and presumably she had been reading all the two-and-a-half miles from Cambridge'.¹⁴ Leavis's own recollection, set down in the early 1970s, gives a clearer indication of why she might have been less than whole-hearted in her involvement in the non-academic side of college life:

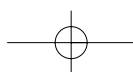
[A]fter following through school [the co-educational Latymer's] closely on my brother, a mathematical genius and like so many gifted men an intellectual highflier all round, I followed him to Cambridge, where I enjoyed the society of his mathematician friends of like intellectual calibre. I must add that I was deeply disappointed in the co-educational Girton College provided for me (girls from the best public schools for the most part) . . . The higher education that I acquired from my brother and his friends quite as much as that from schoolteachers and dons has been continued for the last forty-four years by my husband.¹⁵

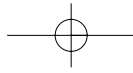
The suggestion that the products of girls' schools are unlikely to be as intelligent and hard working as their male counterparts is also highlighted in the review of *Three Guineas*, when Leavis cites 'the regular complaint of outstanding women students: that there is a dearth of congenial intellectual company to be found in college – whereas men can always find such company' (p. 212). For Leavis, 'To say that this is because women have not had the educational advantages of men . . . only puts the difficulty further back,' and is an argument in favour of co-education at school level. This would ensure that girls had 'the chance to start fair with their brothers' and would be an improvement on sending them to 'conventional establishments where they never come up against masculine standards' (pp. 213–14). What is not in doubt here, for Leavis, is that women and men should be measured by the same standards and that those standards should be the existing masculine ones, a desire for more general educational reform notwithstanding.

Evidently, a biographical explanation for this attitude is not hard to find; and this belief also informs the deep concern which Leavis later evidences over the representation of university life in *Dusty Answer* and *Gaudy Night*. It is interesting, however, to place Leavis's brief account of the male influences on her educational development besides Virginia Woolf's 'Old Bloomsbury' (1922). Here Woolf recalls how she and her sister Vanessa were able to speak as equals with their brother Thoby's friends from Cambridge:

Never have I listened so intently to each step and half-step in an argument. Never have I been at such pains to sharpen and launch my own little dart. And then what joy it was when one's contribution was accepted. . . . From such discussion Vanessa and I got probably much the same pleasure that undergraduates get when they meet friends of their own for the first time.¹⁶

But Woolf recognises before too long that this sense of equality is illusory. The apparent lack of sexual tension within the group is partly a result of the





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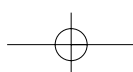
fact that many of the men are homosexual; and a prediction of Vanessa's, regarding marriage, is another sign of unperceived undercurrents to the group's discussions:

“Of course, I can see that we shall all marry. It's bound to happen” – and as she said it I could feel a horrible necessity impending over us; a fate would descend and snatch us apart just as we had achieved freedom and happiness.¹⁷

Marriage, representing a particular gendered division of labour, damages the illusion of intellectual equality that the discussions have fostered. Elsewhere Woolf displayed a more explicit consciousness of the disparity between her own and her brothers' and step-brothers' education, seeing it as symptomatic of her class.¹⁸ Leavis would later use Woolf's lack of direct experience of the university system as a means of undermining Woolf's suggestions about reform, and in this regard her critique of *Three Guineas* is tied to earlier attacks on what she saw as nostalgic, and anti-academic, models of university life.

Leavis's focus on the issue of personal experience and background in 'Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!' has its roots in the approach to literature that she develops in her writings of the 1930s. Her concern with the sociological and anthropological aspects of literature means that her analyses tend to be rooted in historical and biographical contexts,¹⁹ and what emerges is a view of the novel that prioritises observation and insight above stylistic innovation.²⁰ Discussing the treatment of the contemporary novel in *Scrutiny*, Mulhern discerns 'a shared belief in the potential of the novel as a means of social-moral exploration and judgment, and a correspondingly explicit concern with the ideological issues raised by the novels under discussion'.²¹ Leavis's reviews for *Scrutiny* give short shrift to novels that, in her view, present too crude an analysis of current social and political concerns; there is a continuity here with *Fiction and the Reading Public*, in which Leavis attempts to 'explain a literature that "criticism" could not, in either sense of the word, recognize'.²² The review 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders' (1935), which also contains one of Leavis's less antagonistic encounters with Woolf, is a good example of how these concerns converge. Ostensibly a consideration of Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (1935), the piece also discusses Amabel Williams-Ellis's *To Tell the Truth* (1933), and *Life as We Have Known It* (1931) edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies. Leavis takes the opportunity to criticise the 'elementary social conscience' (IV 2 [1935], p. 113) of bourgeois writers such as Mitchison who attempt to portray the working classes. Leavis does not believe that either Mitchison or Williams-Ellis has any real insight into the lives and dilemmas of working-class people, and because of this their work rings false.

Llewelyn Davies's volume is cited as a counter-example. This is a collection of autobiographical accounts by working-women, many of whom

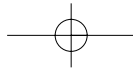


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attest to the positive effects on their lives of their involvement with the Co-operative Women's Guild. According to Leavis, 'Raw facts are invariably more moving than when similar situations are worked up into fictions,' (p. 125) but this is not to deny the role of imagination in literature, only to reinforce that knowledge has to be its foundation. The volume was provided with a preface by Virginia Woolf, who had found it difficult to give any evaluation of the literary qualities of the memoirs, and, both within the text itself, and in correspondence with Llewelyn Davies, expressed the feeling that she was unsuited to the task.²³ For Leavis, it is important that, while not denying that their material circumstances need improving, Woolf recognises that the working classes can function as a repository of cultural knowledge. 'Thanks to such disruptive forces as the loud-speaker, the cinema and the Press, that culture is threatened with extinction,' (p. 129) Leavis warns. Implied here is the notion, familiar from *Fiction and the Reading Public*, of the widening gap between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow', and the concomitant devaluation of the 'cultural heritage' of 'English workers' (p. 129). A further concern for Leavis at this period, however, were the cultural values of those who could be considered her peer group and here once again issues of realism were to the forefront.

II

Although her article 'Dustier and Dustier' is principally a review of Rosamund Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), Leavis does not lose the opportunity to express her views of Lehmann's first novel *Dusty Answer*, 'best-seller of 1927,' (V 2 [1936], p. 183) which she sees as characteristic of the author's work. 'Miss Lehmann is the pseudo-sophisticated would-be cynical actually sentimental emotionally vulgarising middlebrow novelist who goes down so well nowadays with the educated public' (p. 185). *Dusty Answer* is, according to Leavis, a 'quite undistinguished adolescent daydream,' (p. 183) whilst the portrayal of the heroine Judith's time at Cambridge also, unsurprisingly, fails to satisfy: 'Life at Girton has never within living memory borne any relation to Miss Lehmann's account of it' (p. 183). Lehmann's novel, in Leavis's analysis, is in the tradition of Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* (1914), an 'adolescent's novel of adolescence' (p. 183). This brief comparison with Mackenzie's novel, best known for its description of Michael Fane's time at Oxford, is worth elucidating, as it will help to expose more fully some of the reasons, apart from its apparent emotional vacuity, for Leavis's objection to *Dusty Answer*. Although both *Dusty Answer* and *Sinister Street* are novels treating education in its widest sense, rather than simply in a scholastic or academic context, their respective treatments of university life clearly form a key point of comparison for Leavis. Mortimer Proctor suggested, in an early study of the university novel, that *Sinister Street* was largely responsible for consolidating



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the cult of Oxford, dedicated to a belief in the efficacy of the university atmosphere itself as an educating force. Simply to submerge oneself in the traditions, the dignified culture, and the stimulating friendships of university life was to get the best out of an Oxford that had more important things to give its students than were to be found in books.²⁴

However, Michael Fane gets the best of both worlds, as he not only spends three years acquiring this informal education but also manages, finally, to settle down to some work and comes away with a first class degree in history:

Michael managed to secure his fourth year, and . . . it seemed to him that he began to love Oxford for the first time with a truly intense passion and that a little learning was the least tribute he could offer in esteem. It was strange how suddenly history became charged with magic.²⁵

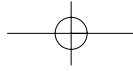
To an extent, Lehmann's portrayal of Cambridge is also, as Leavis suggests, in this tradition. Lehmann conjures the 'spirit of the place' in a similar way to Mackenzie, and friendships and love affairs are clearly as, if not more, important to Judith than any other aspect of her experience at University. Early on in the novel she is asked about her decision to study English: "I want to learn everything about literature – English literature anyway, from the very beginning," she said earnestly.²⁶ Before too long, however, this earnestness has been replaced by a pleasurable indolence: "The weeks drifted on. College became a pleasant habit. Lecturers ceased to be oracles. Work ceased to be important. Young men stared in lecture rooms and streets."²⁷ Like Michael Fane, she shows an interest in her work only sporadically:

What did it all mean? . . . Anybody could write down strings of quotations – but a student of English literature was expected to deal in theories . . . some sort of truth, some answer to the question: what is poetry? . . . No it was no good. But it had been very enjoyable, writing things down like that and repeating them to yourself.²⁸

As in Fane's case, there is little sense that Judith's degree will be of any practical use to her in later life. In both these examples, however, the account of time spent at university is part of a narrative dealing with earlier and later experiences which are in their own ways educational. What appears particularly galling to Leavis is the downgrading of the formally educative aspects of university life in favour of introspection and personal development of a purely narcissistic kind, creating a narrow and ultimately retrogressive image of the university.

Leavis is justified in attacking the promotion of a particular kind of timeless and authentic upper-middleclass, and specifically Oxbridge, Englishness in these novels, but she does tend, in Lehmann's case in particular, to suggest that the reader is invited to identify whole-heartedly with the protagonists'





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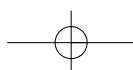
attitudes. However, the description quoted above of Judith's lackadaisical preparation for her exams, exposes and ironises her naïveté. Moreover, Leavis does not acknowledge that Judith finally becomes disillusioned with Cambridge, her idealised image of both the place and its effect on her being shattered when she makes an unsuccessful return visit:

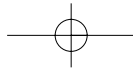
Farewell to Cambridge to whom she was less than nothing. She had been deluded into imagining that it bore her some affection. Under its politeness, it had disliked and distrusted her and all other females; and now it ignored her. It took its mists about it, folding within them Roddy and Tony and all the other young men; and let her go.²⁹

Judith's reflections seem to indicate the difficulty, for a woman, of being at ease in this environment. *Dusty Answer* could never really be a rewriting of *Sinister Street* in a contemporary setting and from a female perspective, not least because of the attitude towards women expressed in the Oxford section of Mackenzie's novel. When his mother and sister are up for a visit during May Week, Fane expresses his disquiet at the number of women in the city: 'the whole point of Oxford is that there are no girls . . . women in Oxford are quite wrong'.³⁰ Female students are mentioned only once, 'perspiring and bedraggled women candidates' being enumerated along with the 'monotony of scratching pens'³¹ among the more irksome features of the exam season.

III

If an aversion to Lehmann's stylistic traits can account for a lack of fuller engagement with her work on Leavis's part, it is perhaps more surprising that Leavis fails to explore the issues of specifically female education in her review of two novels by Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), the former of which is her main focus. Although *Gaudy Night* contains explicit discussions of these issues, and also gives a more complete treatment of the strictly academic side of university life, it nevertheless fails to win favour with Leavis. She focuses on particular aspects of the production and reception the novel as well as her personal reaction to its treatment of its subject matter. The fact that Sayers is herself a graduate of Oxford is therefore a feature of Leavis's critique of her work. According to Leavis, 'Miss Sayers belongs with Naomi Mitchison and Rosamund Lehmann . . . and some others who are representative of the new kind of best-seller, the *educated* popular novelist'. (VI 3 [1937], p. 334) An '*educated*' writer should, after all, know better than to produce merely popular works. Leavis also identifies Sayers's probable readers: 'Miss Sayers . . . is canonized as a stylist by English lecturers already . . . But doesn't it raise some awkward questions? What is the value of this scholarly life Miss Sayers hymns if it doesn't refine the perceptions of those leading it?' (p. 339). This comment





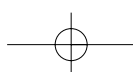
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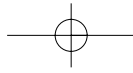
towards the end of the review indicates the approach which Leavis takes to the novel throughout. It is, essentially, used as a pretext for the criticism of the literary sensibilities of those who enjoy reading such work, especially when they profess to be concerned with the promotion of academic excellence. University education should, if anything, educate you away from thinking that a novel like *Gaudy Night* has any merit as literature. Sayers is also deemed to be

offering the general public a peepshow of the senior academic world . . . It is a vicious presentation because it is popular and romantic while pretending to realism . . . Unfortunately for Miss Sayers' thesis the universities are not the spiritually admirable places she alleges. People in the academic world who earn their livings by scholarly specialities are not as a general thing wiser, better, finer, decenter or in any way more estimable than those of the same social class outside (p. 337).

(Bearing in mind the infighting which surrounded the development of the English School at Cambridge, the cynicism expressed here is not surprising.) Most damning of all, for Leavis, is Sayers's portrayal of scholarly activity in the figure of Miss Lydgate. The manuscript of her history of English prosody falls prey to the college servant, Annie, whose disruptive activities are the mystery under investigation in the narrative. The choice of such a project as the epitome of scholarship is telling for Leavis, as it elevates a kind of academic work that 'never gears in with life'. (p. 340)

It is not difficult to produce a counter-argument here. In the context of the novel, the impact of the destruction of Miss Lydgate's work is increased because of pains she has taken over it: 'Miss Lydgate had perfected, or was in the process of perfecting . . . an entirely new prosodic theory, demanding a novel and complicated system of notation which involved the use of twelve different varieties of type'.³² Sayers does also depict academics with less arcane specialisms, such as Miss Barton, who expresses an interest in 'the sociological aspects of crime'³³ and whose book *The Position of Women in the Modern State* is destroyed by Annie. Equally, Leavis's narrow focus on 'literariness' bypasses any consideration of the other reasons why readers might enjoy reading Sayers, or other detective fiction. But Leavis's principle concern is not with *Gaudy Night* as an example of the detective novel, but in its failure as a representation of university life. Although she notes that the detective plot of the novel is supplemented by an attempt to 'answer the question whether academic life produces abnormality in women,' (p. 335) for Leavis this, like the use of extracts from seventeenth-century texts as chapter epigraphs, simply gives a surface appearance of literariness to the text. One might indeed question the ease with which Harriet Vane slips, during the course of the investigation, between writing a detective novel and 'gathering material, in a leisurely way, for a study of Lefanu',³⁴ but Leavis nevertheless

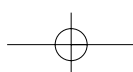


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underestimates the extent to which the discussion of women and academic life in fact informs the progress of the plot.

Ultimately, Miss De Vine's exposure of an academic fraud perpetrated by Annie's husband is found to be at the root of Annie's reign of terror, and this revelation contributes to the debate, which recurs throughout the novel, about whether the values of academic and personal life can be separated. The solution to the mystery is only discovered when Lord Peter Wimsey arrives to take charge. Leavis dismisses Wimsey as the worst kind of romantic stereotype, and indeed his ongoing romance with Harriet Vane culminates in her accepting his offer of marriage while under the spell of the beauty of an Oxford evening at the climax of the novel. However, this conclusion does not completely smooth over the broader implications of his intervention. Harriet has been focusing on finding the perpetrator within the college, by obtaining alibis and searching for material evidence such as footprints; her reasoning is that the cause of the disturbances is 'sexual jealousy', a notion that Wimsey dismisses as 'entirely erroneous,' and blames for obscuring the real issue 'in a quite fantastic manner.'³⁵ His solution is arrived at by tracing the disturbances to a cause external to the college, Miss De Vine's exposure of Annie's husband having taken place at a different university. Wimsey's investigation consists of tracing this man, through various changes of name and occupation, until his suicide; his explanation therefore has its own internal logic, whilst Harriet's is based on more nebulous notions about female sexuality. Annie's hatred of academic women, expressed through her destructive actions, is seen to have its own particular kind of logic, although it of course ignores her husband's own initial wrongdoing. Harriet's line of enquiry is skewed by a mistaken focus on gender, but although Wimsey's conclusions at least seem to prove that none of the residents of Shrewsbury College have been driven mad by their sequestration, it nevertheless remains that Harriet, under the influence of her experience of college life, is blinded to a more logical explanation for most of the action. This results in an ultimate sense of ambivalence at the novel's conclusion: Harriet will be able to benefit from her future husband's clear sighted logic and has also been rescued from the temptations of a further sojourn among the academics. What Leavis sees as pseudo-academic window-dressing is therefore integral to the novel's progress.

As well as her study of Lefanu, Harriet Vane is working on a detective novel in the course of *Gaudy Night*. What a more contemporary (and more forgiving) critic might see as playful self-referentiality on Sayers's part (an Oxford educated female detective novelist writing a novel about the difficulties faced by an Oxford educated female detective novelist writing a novel . . .) Leavis sees as an opportunity to identify the author completely with her protagonist: 'Miss Sayers is after all a product of Shrewsbury College as well as its producer'. (p. 338) This, along with the fact that, according to Leavis's own observations, many academics approve of Sayers's writing, is simply



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another indication of a decline in academic standards. The replication of the Shrewsbury dons' positive reactions to Harriet in actual dons' reactions to Sayers is for Leavis an indication that 'the higher education of women is in a sadder way than any feminist could bear to contemplate'. (p. 339) Leavis does not take the opportunity to pursue this issue any further here, preferring instead to take a final opportunity to critique current regimes in the study of English instead. However, her suggestion in this review that Sayers appeals to a 'female smoking room' (p. 339) bears comparison with Leavis's attitude towards the social influence of the group of writers she discusses in 'The Background to Twentieth Century Letters'. Published in *Scrutiny* in 1939, this review deals with works by Sir Edward Marsh, Logan Pearsall Smith, Cyril Connolly and Louis MacNeice and treats these writers as representative of a particular literary coterie. The 'Georgian Boyhood' section of *Enemies of Promise*, for example, is seen as a valuable exposé of 'the relation between knowing the right people and getting accepted in advance of production as a literary value,' as well as a more explicit analysis of 'the multiplying effects of an exclusively classical education conducted in an exclusively upper-class and male environment'. (VIII 1 [1939], p. 73) This is a more traditional, more deeply ingrained, and probably more damaging facet of English social life than Sayers's 'female smoking room'. Notably, Leavis here critiques not merely classical, but single-sex *and* single-class education, but because these characteristics go hand in hand, the gender aspect is simply of a part with the others. Again, what is advocated is nothing less than a thorough-going overhaul of the entire system.³⁶

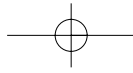
IV

Both the review of *Gaudy Night* and 'The Background to Twentieth Century Letters' therefore contribute to Leavis's critique not just of particular styles of writing, but of particular educational systems and social milieux. When Leavis does find a contemporary novel to praise, then, it is not surprising that it should be a realistic account of a school in a depressed area. Ruth Adam's *I'm Not Complaining* (1938), written in semi-documentary style and concerned with issues of self-improvement, receives praise for its verisimilitude but Leavis also, with uncharacteristic hyperbole, expresses pleasure at finding a novel by a contemporary female writer which can measure against the achievements of Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot. In one of her few explicit engagements with feminism, Leavis here distinguishes between two distinct varieties. One of these she associates with the 'Feminist movement', which in her analysis, has 'set up an ideal, an ideal of the brilliant emancipated woman of wit, intellect and literary genius. No doubt it was inspired by George Meredith's novels'. ('Femina Vie Heureuse' Please Note', VII, 1 [1938], p. 81) Charlotte Brontë, however, is representative of a different kind of a feminism, expressed through the outlook of 'the author's mouthpiece,

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Lucy Snowe or Jane Eyre'. (p. 82) The distinction here is partly a class based one. Rebecca West – '(not Ibsen's)' – is given as an example of the former style, which has echoes of the 'smartness' which was so deplored in Sayers. The fact that this ideal derives from a male writer seems for Leavis to be secondary to its lack of authenticity, and its implied subservience of character to ideas. The feminist aspect of Adam's novel comes not merely from that fact that she 'conveys powerfully an impression that a man is generally a pitiful object' (p. 82) but also, more importantly, from her portrayal of believable female characters. The main protagonist in the novel is credited with making 'feminism respectable if not interesting. Her character is of high calibre, like Jane Eyre's'. (p. 84) By these criteria, a feminist writer is simply one who portrays female characters with honesty, attention to detail, and a lack of pretentiousness. Ultimately, then, despite taking special note of the fact that this is a novel by a female writer and contextualising it alongside *Jane Eyre*, Leavis admires *I'm Not Complaining* for reasons which are not dependent on considerations of gender. The novel is a success principally because it deals with social issues of a pressing kind with immediacy.³⁷

If Leavis veers away from feminism even after introducing it as an explicit topic in a piece of writing, it is perhaps not surprising that her attack on *Three Guineas* should also refocus itself towards education and social issues. Leavis's concern with realism and her belief in the need for authors to root their work in experience also means that she has little time for some of the more oblique imagery that Woolf employs. Interestingly, however, Leavis also explicitly counters Woolf's arguments with examples from her own experience, seemingly supporting Woolf's judgement that the review was, 'all personal – about Queenie's own grievances and retorts to my snubs'.³⁸ Leavis's critique of *Three Guineas* is worth examining for this very reason, even if it is a partial and at times unsophisticated analysis of Woolf's argument. Leavis, for example, does not acknowledge the structuring of the essay as three letters written in reply to requests for money from different organisations and also dismisses at an early stage the fact that Woolf is ultimately dealing with the prevention of war, with education comprising only one facet of her argument. The unconventional use of narrative voice and the fact that much of Woolf's supporting evidence is embedded in footnotes also goes unacknowledged. Alex Zwerdling sees these methods of controlling the narrative voice as a way for Woolf to mask her 'fear of letting the book demonstrate any of the characteristics men have traditionally claimed to find in women: that they are illogical, hysterical, ignorant and subjective rather than clear-sighted'.³⁹ These techniques are an attempt to find a middle way between traditionally male rationalism and traditionally female emotion. Woolf is calling not just for social reforms but for a change in sensibility. The society that Woolf proposes towards the end of the essay is one example of this:



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It would have no office, no committee, no secretary; it would call no meetings; it would hold no conferences. If name it must have, it could be called the Outsiders' Society . . . it would consist of educated men's daughters working in their own class – how indeed could they work in any other?⁴⁰

The practical step of forming a society is here divested of the usual bureaucratic paraphernalia and becomes instead a state of mind, unifying women with a specific background in pursuit of a common goal.⁴¹

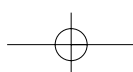
However, Woolf's use of such imagery, and her attempt to counter the usual methods of political pamphleteering are dismissed by Leavis, who asserts that: 'the method is a deliberate avoidance of any argument – its unity is emotional' (p. 204). Unable to class herself as one of Woolf's peers, Leavis nevertheless asserts that

Mrs Woolf's latest effort is a let-down for our sex . . . the only chance of [women] getting accepted as intellectual equals by intelligent men . . . is by living down their sex's reputation for having in general minds as ill-regulated as Mrs Woolf's is seen here to be. (p. 205–6)

As I have already shown, Leavis refuses to be shaken from the belief that existing male academic standards are a worthwhile goal for women. Woolf's suggestions for a reformed female college might in some respects seem amenable to Leavis:

The aim of the new college . . . should be not to segregate and specialize but to combine. . . . The teachers would be drawn from the good livers as well as from the good thinkers. . . . There would be none of the barriers of wealth and ceremony, of advertisement and competition which now make the old and rich universities such uneasy dwelling-places.⁴²

However, Leavis believes that these suggestions ignore the need for a university to 'inculcate the critical attitude and . . . develop in its students the ability to discriminate, judge and reject, along with the practice of responsible thinking and conduct'. (p. 208) What she ignores is the fact that these suggestions of Woolf's are framed as a draft of a response to her correspondent's request for funds, and that Woolf ultimately admits, albeit with reluctance, that in order to have opportunities for employment, women must be able to gain recognised degrees and certificates. For Leavis such comments are simply further evidence of Woolf's impractical approach to educational matters, stemming from the fact that 'Mrs Woolf can have no first-hand knowledge having, according to *Who's Who*, been educated at home' (p. 206). This can be read as little more than a sarcastic jibe at Woolf's apparently privileged upbringing (and Woolf herself, as I have noted, was very much aware of the limitations of her own education). However in view of the emphasis on direct knowledge and experience, which is



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characteristic of Leavis's approach to literature, such a comment is an integral part of her critique of Woolf's project and methods.

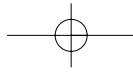
This is not the only aspect of Woolf's argument at which Leavis feels direct experience to be lacking. In the section of the essay dealing specifically with the issue of women's education, Woolf warns her imagined correspondent that efforts to raise funds for the construction of a college must not take second place to reflection on the question of what relation the new college should have to the existing 'procession of educated men'.⁴³ Anticipating the excuse that campaigning will leave no time for thinking, Woolf responds, 'As you know from your own experience . . . the daughters of educated men have always done their thinking from hand to mouth; not under green lamps at study tables in the cloisters of secluded colleges. They have thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle'.⁴⁴ Leavis's objection to the use of this image is that Woolf is apparently condemning such domestic activities as beneath contempt when she can have no direct experience of them. 'There is every reason to suppose Mrs Woolf would hardly know which end of the cradle to stir'.(p. 210) Leavis contends, on the other hand:

I myself . . . have generally had to produce contributions for this review with one hand while actually stirring the pot . . . with the other. . . . The activities Mrs Woolf wishes to free educated women from as wasteful not only provide a valuable discipline, they serve as a sieve for determining which values are important and genuine and which are conventional and contemptible. (p. 210–11)⁴⁵

This defence of the humanising effects of housework is not simply a further tactic by which to emphasise Woolf's apparent detachment from everyday life. It serves to underline Leavis's dissatisfaction with the apparently narrow class focus of Woolf's essay. As Mackillop suggests, Leavis

took exception not precisely to Woolf's feminism but to a quality of "femininity" in her conviction that women (or thinking women) were irrevocably impoverished by marital and household life . . . She detected in Bloomsbury an ideology of somewhat willowy feminism that excluded or degraded her familiar life-activities and values.⁴⁶

Taking into account the ambivalent responses to Woolf's Cambridge talks by some of Leavis's fellow undergraduates, Leavis's objections also evidence the backlash against an earlier generation of feminists described by Elaine Showalter: 'Feminists in the 1930s were already beginning to seem absurdly intense . . . Feminist protest seemed anachronistic . . . Real differences [were apparent] in the opportunities enjoyed by women of Woolf's generation and [those enjoyed by] women born in the twentieth century'.⁴⁷ For Leavis, Woolf's attack on the universities is an attack on a system, that, however imperfect, enabled a generation of women to participate in academic debate



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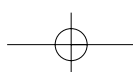
at the highest level. Although Leavis does return to the specific issue of women's education in the conclusion of her review, this is mainly in order to assert that Woolf ought to be arguing for co-education across schools of all kinds and at all levels, and 'a change in the social structure which will allow the daughters of *any* men to enter upon the highest course of studies they are fitted for' (p. 214). (Access to university for students from a range of backgrounds must of course never, in Leavis's view, be subordinated to academic ability.) To a present day reader, Leavis's belief that the battle for equal consideration of men and women has been won might well seem over-optimistic, but her intemperate response to Woolf is at least founded in beliefs about education and society as strong as those expressed by Woolf herself. 'Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!' is not merely an example of *Scrutiny* mud-slinging but the culmination of almost a decade of consideration of these issues on Leavis's part.

V

Discussing F.R. and Q.D. Leavis's respective attitudes towards Bloomsbury, MacKillop suggests that although the antagonism has often been characterised as being based solely on the issue of values or morals, other elements were equally, if not more important. In her focus on the sociological or 'anthropologico-literary'⁴⁸ aspects of the work of Chadwick, for example, Q.D. Leavis was, according to MacKillop, essentially defining an alternative world view from that of Bloomsbury. Meanwhile, 'Leavis himself dealt with a more intimate conflict of values. On one reckoning it could be suggested that he took the female part and QDL the male'.⁴⁹ This tentative gendering of the Leavises' approach to this debate seems to be based on the idea of values as personal (and therefore female) and the social systems or world views as public (and therefore male). Muriel Bradbrook, in a more specific assessment of Q.D. Leavis's writing style uses similarly gendered terminology:

Leavis's style . . . was evasive, full of hints, of the oblique thrust and the haughty sniff . . . It claimed to be "urbane" and "poised": Queenie went in for straight tackling in the St Trinian's style, with such vigorous and well-armed thumping and jumping that the enjoyment of her vitality was stronger than the thought of her victim's discomfiture. . . . Queenie was the more masculine, Leavis the more indirect and feminine.⁵⁰

A whiff of contempt underlies the playful imagery here: the implication is that Q.D. Leavis was neither womanly nor 'gentlemanly' in her attacks. The majority of pieces I have been examining here are book reviews, and it is therefore unsurprising that they tend to go for a direct attack rather than anything more elaborate. However, even these occasional pieces provide the opportunity for Leavis to elaborate her attitudes towards what she believes



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to be the pressing issues of the day, in particular education. It could be argued that the 'masculine' characteristics of her writing are symptomatic of a too-easy acceptance of educational standards set largely by men (and Leavis was also in the minority as a woman writing for *Scrutiny*). But in these writings, Leavis asserts that the battles of feminism can only take place in the context of an awareness of the wider need for educational and social reform. If, in an age more sophisticated in its understanding of gender roles, her arguments now seem naïve, they nevertheless continue to carry the force of her convictions, even while reinforcing the sense that she remains, in many respects, an outsider.

Notes

1 Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 114.

2 Citations from articles and reviews from *Scrutiny* will be referenced within the text by volume, issue number and date at the first citation and thereafter by page number.

3 Noel Annan, 'Bloomsbury and the Leavises', in Jane Marcus (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury* (Basingstoke, 1997), p. 28.

4 Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, p. 114.

5 Eleanor McNees, 'Colonizing Virginia Woolf: *Scrutiny* and Contemporary Cultural Values', in Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jean Dubino (eds), *Virginia Woolf and the Essay* (New York, 1997), p. 47. McNees cites Woolf's description of *Scrutiny* as a 'prig's manual' and her description of female academics as 'poor old strumpets' in a letter to Ethel Smyth.

6 Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London, 1981), p. 101.

7 The information and quotations in this paragraph are derived from material from the Girton archives, provided to me by the archivist, Kate Perry. I am very grateful to her for the assistance she gave me in this matter.

8 No text of the talks Woolf gave is extant. The essay 'Women and Fiction' is generally considered to be closest in content, although Elsie Phare remembers Woolf using the image of Shakespeare's sister, which does not appear there. See S.P. Rosenbaum, *Virginia Woolf: Women and Fiction* (Oxford, 1992) for details of the revisions which *A Room of One's Own* underwent before publication.

9 Indeed Bradbrook produced a scathing critique of Woolf's writing for the first issue of *Scrutiny*. There, she comments that Woolf 'has preserved her extraordinary fineness and delicacy of perception at the cost of some cerebral etiolation'. 'Notes on the Style of Mrs Woolf', *Scrutiny*, I 1 (1932), 38.

10 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, ed. Michele Barrett (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 18.

11 In 'Caterpillars of the Commonwealth Unite!' Leavis comments that Woolf 'is indignant that the early students of Girton and Newnham had to make their own beds and suffer plain living – though some responsible educationists now advocate university reform in the direction of obliging even men to conduct their education in the more realistic surroundings provided by the absence of servants'. (p. 210).

12 Although Leavis's major writings aside from *Fiction and the Reading Public* focused largely on women writers (Jane Austen being the principal example), this did not necessarily imply a project of retrieval based solely on the fact of them being women. For example, in her discussion of Margaret Oliphant, she identifies this writer as the missing link between Jane Austen and George Eliot, but only after

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considering Trollope, Disraeli and Dickens as other possible candidates. See 'Introduction' to *Miss Marjoribanks* (London, 1969), pp. 1–24. I will discuss below Leavis's ideas about what constitutes feminist writing.

13 Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge: A Men's University Thought of a Mixed Type* (London, 1975), p. 213.

14 Gwendolen Freeman, 'Queenie at Girton', in Denys Thompson (ed.), *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 5.

15 Q.D. Leavis, 'Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century' in G. Singh (ed.), *Q.D. Leavis Collected Essays Volume III: The Novel of Religious Controversy* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 99.

16 Virginia Woolf 'Old Bloomsbury' in Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1978), p. 168.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

18 In a letter to Ethel Smyth, written on 8 June 1933, Woolf commented, 'I forced myself [in *A Room of One's Own*] to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary. If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact – well theyd have said; she has an axe to grind'. Nigel Nicholson (ed.), *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V 1932–1935* (London, 1979). This comment is in the context of her wish not to resort to explicit autobiographical references on the same theme in *Three Guineas* although it is clear that many of her comments there are applicable to her own situation also.

19 Leavis explains her reasoning for this in the second of her articles on Jane Austen: 'To drag in biography . . . is of course only justifiable in literary criticism when it serves either to illuminate strictly critical problems or when it helps to show how an artist works on raw material, and in this case biography seems to me to do both'. 'A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writngs (II: *Lady Susan* into *Mansfield Park*', *Scrutiny* X 2 (1941). By tracing the roots of *Mansfield Park* in both *Lady Susan* and Austen's letters, Leavis believes that she finds a reason for 'universal dissatisfaction' (p. 133) with the character of Edmund Crawford in the fact that he is drawn not from life but only from literary sources.

20 This attitude is illustrated in the views expressed by Leavis, and others in *Scrutiny*, towards Woolf, and in particular *To the Lighthouse*, which is valued above Woolf's other novels not least because of a perception that it was rooted in the author's childhood. For example, in 'Leslie Stephen: Cambridge Critic', *Scrutiny* VII 4 (1939), Leavis notes that Stephen's own writings, such as *Some Early Impressions* (1903), have been neglected in favour of *To the Lighthouse* and 'that brilliant study in the Lytton Strachey manner of a slightly ludicrous, slightly bogus, Victorian philosopher'. (p. 405). Similarly, F.R. Leavis, in a review of *Between the Acts*, notes that 'the substance of [*To the Lighthouse*] was provided directly by life. . . . We know enough about Leslie Stephen . . . to know that there is a large measure of direct transcription'. 'After *To the Lighthouse*', X 3 (1942), p. 297. See also W.H. Mellers 'Mrs Woolf and Life', VI 1(1937), ostensibly a review of *The Years*, which discusses *To the Lighthouse* in similar terms.

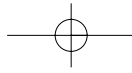
21 Mulhern, *The Moment*, p. 146. Mulhern also notes that contemporary fiction tended to be discussed only in short reviews, whilst earlier writing and contemporary poetry received fuller treatment.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

23 For example, in a letter written after the book's publication she comments: 'I doubt that I was the right person to make people interested in the women's stories because if one is a writer by profession, one can't help being one . . . that gets between and makes a distraction from what is the point of the book'. Nigel Nicholson (ed.), *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume IV 1929–1931* (London, 1978), p. 341.

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- 24 Mortimer Proctor, *The English University Novel* (Berkeley, 1957), p. 154.
- 25 Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister Street* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 552.
- 26 Rosamund Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* (London, 2000), p. 55.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 302.
- 30 Mackenzie, *Sinister Street*, p. 598.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 587. Fane's quest to 'rescue' Lily in the final portion of the novel is equally unenlightened.
- 32 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London, 1970), p. 40.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 413.
- 36 Leavis's description earlier in the review of how the 'Old School Tie' operates in practice is gender specific, but also tainted by an unpleasant homophobia: 'We who are in the habit of asking how such evidently unqualified reviewers as fill the literary weeklies ever got into the profession need ask no longer. They turn out to have been "the most fashionable boy in the school," or to have had a feline charm or a sensual mouth and long eyelashes'. p. 75–6.
- 37 It is also worth noting that although Leavis praised George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, in 'Gissing and the English Novel', a review of his *Stories and Sketches* (which also appeared in *Scrutiny*, VII 1), not least because of its author's direct engagement with his subject, which 'was both inside and outside him' (pp. 75–6), she felt that a short-coming in his portrayal of the miseries of modern life was a lack of interest in 'the remedial aspects of the question'. (p. 78) This interest in the amelioration, as well as the depiction, of social conditions in more adequately displayed, for Leavis, in a novel such as Adam's, which tackles the issues raised by unwanted pregnancy, marital breakdown and domestic violence.
- 38 Angelica Garnett (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume V 1936–1941* (London, 1984), p. 165.
- 39 Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 257.
- 40 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, p. 213.
- 41 Woolf did in fact toy with the idea of formally establishing the Society of Outsiders after receiving positive responses from readers, but this plan was never implemented. Woolf's reference to the daughters of educated men recurs throughout the essay, but as Anna Snaith has pointed out, Woolf received positive responses to *Three Guineas* from women and men with a variety of social backgrounds. See *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*, pp. 118–29.
- 42 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, p. 155.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- 45 In, 'Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century', Leavis remembers breast-feeding her baby daughter in the presence of 'a clever girl student' (p. 113) who expressed some horror at seeing an 'intellectual woman' (p. 113) carrying out such an activity. Leavis saw this as another example of how educated woman under the influence of the feminist movement had been cut off from 'the first-hand sources of . . . sympathetic human experience'. (p. 113) Later in the same piece Leavis comments that 'an immense number of married women with university degrees are complaining of the boredom and frustration entailed in the rearing of their children . . . and that at a time when no one need have a child who doesn't want one, or get married either if it comes to that'. (p. 120) Albeit bluntly expressed, her point here seems principally to be about the importance, specifically for *educated* women, of not losing sight of such ordinary 'human experience'. These comments can also provide



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evidence to support Mulhern's suggestion that, 'proudly a working women intellectual, but just as proudly the wife and mother, [she] suffered conflicts of identity and interest from which her husband was largely exempt, and she knew it'. ('English Reading', in Homi K. Bhaba (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990) p. 258. I would not go so far as Molly Abel Travis, who sees the valorisation of such activities on Leavis's part in a more sinister light: 'Queenie was a "man's woman" and an ideal woman in the fascist mythology – strong, loyal to her man and children, an accomplished cook and housekeeper and a good breeder. . . . As the queen of scones, she found Woolf defective and myopic'. 'Eternal Fascism and its "Home Haunts" in the Leavises' Attacks on Bloomsbury and Woolf', in Merry M. Pawlowski (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictators' Seduction* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 174.

46 MacKillop, *F.R. Leavis*, pp. 228–9. MacKillop also notes that Leavis's involvement with *Scrutiny* 'blocked the development of her own career, despite the enthusiasm with which she helped [her husband]'. p. 132.

47 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (rev.ed., London, 1999), pp. 299–300.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

50 Muriel Bradbrook, 'Queenie Leavis: The Dynamics of Rejection', in *Women and Literature 1779–1982: The Collected Papers of Muriel Bradbrook Volume 2* (Brighton, 1982), p. 127.

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