

**“CHARLES LAMB IS DEAD”: ARNOLD BENNETT’S  
JOURNALISM FOR WOMEN AND A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN**

Approximately two-thirds of the way through Arnold Bennett’s *Journalism for Women*, one discovers the following caution to would-be female essayists:

Let us see this fact clear: editors have no use for views (except their own). To gain acceptance essays must be extremely well done, and emphatically they are not stuff for beginners to tackle. Apparently the easiest form of composition in the world, the essay is in truth one of the most difficult. Not much experience is needed to prove this. Yet every woman who aspires to journalism must needs employ her clumsy pen upon essays. “From my Window” is a favourite title with the rank beginner. Charles Lamb might conceivably have written an essay called “From my Window” which would have been a masterpiece—and there is a remote chance that some editor might have accepted it. But then Charles Lamb is dead, and his secret died with him. (*JFW* 62)

Readers of *A Room of One’s Own* will be immediately put in mind of a moment early in that text. Here the narrator, having been interrupted in her thoughts and summarily waved off the Oxbridge turf by an overeager Beadle, also finds herself reflecting on Charles Lamb. Her chance recollection of an essay in which Lamb describes a holiday visit to the university many years before, sets the narrator thinking about essay-writing, as well as about the connections among authors, and what may or may not be transferred from one to another:

As chance would have it, some stray memory of some old essay about visiting Oxbridge in the long vacation brought Charles Lamb to mind—Saint Charles, said Thackeray, putting a letter of Lamb’s to his forehead. Indeed, among all the dead (I give you my thoughts as they came to me), Lamb is one of the most congenial; one to whom one would have liked to say, Tell me then how you wrote your essays? For his essays are superior even to Max Beerbohm’s, I thought, with all their perfection, because of that wild flash of imagination, that lightning crack of genius in the middle of them which leaves them flawed and imperfect, but starred with poetry. (*AROO* 6-7)

That Woolf is here responding directly, and with a certain mischievousness, to Bennett seems clear to me. (One might point for further evidence to the key scenes in this work that involve the narrator looking out a window as she formulates her ideas—toward the close of the first chapter, and at the openings of the second and final chapters.) The implications of this particular exchange are provocative, to say the least. Woolf answers Bennett’s discouraging if pragmatic advice with the implicit claim that it is not an acceptance of limitations that will aid the young author in her pursuits, but a more open and receptive attitude toward predecessors and contemporaries alike. Bennett views Lamb as a caution to beginning writers, one who has taken his secret with him to the grave, and who is, by definition, inimitable. Woolf, in stark contrast, finds Lamb’s writing to be suggestive and welcoming. He is “one of the most congenial” of the dead, a figure to whom aspiring writers may look for encouragement, if not for explicit guidance.

Woolf’s willingness to open conversation with Bennett in this brief flight of fancy highlights her sense that the Edwardians, and Arnold Bennett in

particular, are a constant and useful challenge to her thinking. Far from being a mere straw man for her own literary theories, Bennett allows Woolf to define herself and the questions that matter to her in ways that would not otherwise be possible. With the help of Bennett’s *Practical Guide*, Woolf transforms the rank beginner’s “From my Window” into the sophistication of *A Room of One’s Own*.

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**YOUNG ROSE PARGITER’S EMINENTLY VICTORIAN  
ADVENTURE**

In the ‘1880’ chapter of *The Years* (1937), little Rose Pargiter secretly leaves the family home for Lamley’s toy shop, playfully imagining herself as the heroic protagonist of an exotic military adventure:

‘I am Pargiter of Pargiter’s Horse,’ she said, flourishing her hand, ‘riding to the rescue!’ She was riding by night on a desperate mission to a besieged garrison, she told herself. She had a secret message—she clenched her fist on her purse—to deliver to the General in person. All their lives depended upon it. The British flag was still flying on the central tower—Lamley’s shop was the central tower; the General was standing on the roof of Lamley’s shop with his telescope to his eye. All their lives depended upon her riding to them through the enemy’s country. Here she was galloping across the desert. She began to trot. It was growing dark. [...] She had only to cross the desert, to ford the river, and she was safe. Flourishing the arm that held the pistol, she clapped spurs to her horse and galloped down Melrose Avenue. (27f)

At this point, the girl’s fantasy is interrupted by a real-life exhibitionist, who turns her excursion into a profoundly disturbing ordeal. As such, the episode has attracted considerable critical attention—not least in connection with the author’s own documented childhood abuse.<sup>1</sup> Only very rarely, however, has this attention extended to the details of Rose’s imaginings.

That Woolf took some care over the latter’s composition, is evident from her manuscripts. Rose’s play-world takes different forms in the printed novel and what Mitchell A. Leaska has published as *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of the Years* (1978). Most notably, only the Rose of *The Pargiters* has her head ‘full of her father’s old stories of the Indian Mutiny’ (42). In close correspondence to what such stories looked like in

(continued on page 15)

## YOUNG ROSE PARGITER'S EMINENTLY VICTORIAN ADVENTURE

(continued from page 10)

actual commemorative records of the event, she delivers her message to a 'fortress full of starving English' (ibid.) rather than, like the later Rose, 'to the General in person' of 'a besieged garrison'.<sup>2</sup>

These changes have never been commented on by critics and escaped even the notice of Kathy J. Phillips, whose *Virginia Woolf against Empire* (1994) is one of the very few studies to interpret Rose's play-world at all. Presumably misled by the draft of the 'Novel-Essay,' Phillips reads also the final version of the adventure as directly alluding to the Indian mutiny (see 39f). She thus fails to perceive the shift towards the generic that is implied by Woolf's corrections. For, if Rose's 'mission' in *The Years* actually invoked concrete imperial history, it would be as much the fall of Khartoum as the uprising in India.

More precisely, Woolf draws much of the little girl's fantasy from a particular representation of the colonial debacle in Northern Africa—a representation which, as part of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), was bound to be familiar to most of her early readers. In the following excerpt from it, Strachey depicts General Gordon's last stance against the Mahdi:

Then, alone, he went up to the roof of his high palace, and turned the telescope once more, almost mechanically, towards the north. (284)

Even without Strachey's later references to the local 'desert', 'river', and 'garrison' (on 302f among others), the correspondences to Rose's fantasy should be obvious.

This is not to say, of course, that in the final version of *The Years* the fall of Khartoum simply replaces the Indian mutiny as the little girl's source of inspiration. In 1880, after all, 'Chinese' Gordon was still four years from being despatched to the Sudan and could hardly have left an imprint on Rose's imagination. The allusion is wholly between Woolf and the reader. Like General Gordon's statue in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; 79), Rose's fantasy suggests military Victorianism in general. In this broad generic function, it is further supported not only by her father and uncle's colonialist pasts, but also by the there-and-back structure of her imagined horse ride, which hints at the charge of the Light Brigade as celebrated by Tennyson's much-parodied poem of 1854. Given Woolf's argumentation in *Three Guineas* (1938)—the feminist pamphlet developed from the essay sections of *The Pargiters*—it might be significant that both intertextual connections here are to cases of male imperialists falling victim to the very power structures they helped to defend.

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### Notes

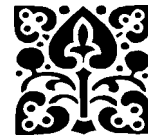
<sup>1</sup> Cf. most criticism in the tradition of Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (1975; 180) and Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End* (1977; 198-201).

<sup>2</sup> 'The English were starving [...] within the crowded and stifling enclosure', it says for instance on p. 334 of Charles Ball's *History of the*

*Indian Mutiny* (1858). Judging by contemporary press reports and popular historiography, the suffering of British civilians (more than of any single military commander) was a typical nineteenth-century association with the Indian rebellion of 1857—especially in view of the subsequent massacres of civilian women and children at Cawnpore.

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### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HYDE PARK GATE NEWS, THE FAMILY NEWSPAPER OF THE STEPHEN CHILDREN.

In an age before television, Playstations or iPods it was not an original or unusual pastime for children of educated families to amuse themselves by producing collaborative newspapers. The sons of Charles Dickens, Charles Dodgson, the daughter of William Morris, the Stracheys, and H. G. Wells all tested their literary mettle by producing apprentice material for family consumption. For five years in the 1890s the little Stephens, Vanessa, Thoby and Virginia, also spent time planning, designing and writing a weekly newspaper.

These newspapers have been studied by scholars for evidence of how Julia and Leslie Stephen's greatly extended family lived and how each character in the drama of their everyday life behaved. In the autumn of 2005 the first edition of these journals will be published by Hesperus Press, London with a Foreword by Hermione Lee. For the first time the common reader will be able to enjoy them. The children satirize themselves as well as commenting on the activities of their elders, including their parents and half-siblings: George, Stella and Gerald Duckworth and Laura Stephen. The journals feature a numerous cast of "extras": minor relations, servants, colleagues and friends.

At a time when good children were expected to be seen but not often heard these newspapers make a risky play for adult attention. They provide a fresh, day-by-day account of events in Kensington, London and, in the