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It Mocked My Love: The Influence of Olive Schreiner on Vera Brittain's Experience of the Great War

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Introduction

During the First World War, British government propaganda encouraged women of all classes to do their share of work for their country. Among the many women thus mobilised was Vera Brittain (1893-1970), who would later become a prolific writer, and active feminist and pacifist. In the summer of 1915, after experiencing war work at a local hospital, Brittain interrupted her studies at Somerville College, Oxford to become a fulltime VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment). A few months later, she signed up to work at a military hospital.

Her diary records that she decided to take up nursing upon reading an appeal in the papers for women to offer their services (3 April 1915; *Chronicle* 176). But for Brittain, war work was also a means of expressing her love for Roland Leighton, her lover who was already in the battlefield. She confesses in her diary of the next day that "[t]he more I have to do the better I shall be able to endure life, especially if I am able to do work directly useful in the War" (4 April 1915; *Chronicle* 177). In an entry nine days later, she exclaims emotionally that the difficulty to endure "must somehow be overcome—by very love itself—shall!"(13 April 1915;

Chronicle 180).

She found hospital work to be unpleasant, and her love for Leighton was what compensated for its hardships. She told him that she would not go back to Oxford until the end of the war. She kept her word and continued nursing even after his death in December, 1915. The war had tested her love, and though at the expense of her education, it would seem as if she had passed with flying colours. Years later, however, in *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (1933), her bestselling memoir of the war, she reflects bitterly that it had "mocked my love" (290). As we shall see Brittain's love for Leighton was based on a philosophy introduced by the feminist, Olive Schreiner (1855-1920).[1] In this paper some suggestions will be made as to how warfare came between their love, and conclude that during wartime, women had experienced a standstill in the history of their advancement.

Separate Spheres

Brittain and Leighton met in April, 1914, less than four months before Britain declared war against Germany. He was a friend of Brittain's brother and had come to stay with the Brittains for the Easter holidays. He had won a scholarship to Merton College, Oxford and was to enrol the coming August. His mother was a well-known author of popular fiction on whose earnings along with his father's, the family's living expenses and Leighton's education had depended. Leighton professed to be a feminist because of this. Only a week after they met, he sent Brittain a gift of a copy of Olive Schreiner's novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Its protagonist, Lyndall, is often regarded to be the first perfect model of the turn-of-the-century "New Woman." In the letter he enclosed with the novel, Leighton remarked that there was a resemblance between Brittain and Lyndall and hinted that he hoped she would agree with him (22 April 1914,

Bishop and Bostridge 14). The war would, however, make him change his mind.

Brittain was fascinated with the book. "During the next few weeks," she recalls, "I spent a good many troubled, speculative, exciting hours with the little volume clasped in my hands" (*Testament* 84). She continues by quoting Lyndall concerning her view on the nature of love between the two sexes:

> "It is for love's sake yet more than for any other," I [Brittain] read with sudden amazed understanding, "that we [women] look for that new time. . . . Then when that time comes . . . when love is no more bought or sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman's life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found." (84)

Here Lyndall is protesting against conventional marriage in which men go out to work and women are expected to remain passively in the house. "[T]he world makes men and women," she says in a different part of the novel, and exclaims powerfully that "[t]o you [men] it says—*Work!* and to us [women] it says—*Seem!*" (italics original; *Story* 188). Conventional love is merchandise that promises shelter for one and submission for the other. True love can only be obtained when women are given equal opportunities in the workforce.

The Story of an African Farm was not the first Schreiner book that Brittain had read. She had been introduced to Schreiner's advocate for equal labour opportunities, *Woman and Labour*, by one of the two principals at the school she attended, briefly after its publication in 1911. Her encounter with the words "*We take all labour for our province!*"[2] in

Schreiner's later book had induced the young school girl to prepare herself for college education and an independent life (italics original; *Testament* 41). In *Woman and Labour* Schreiner repeatedly protests against women having continuously been deprived of their fields of labour, and men valuing them only for their sexuality. As a result, women become "sex parasites." She accepts that in the past, the field of labour was divided, for practical reasons, according to the physical difference of the sexes. She, however, believes that there is not in fact enough scientific evidence to allow the difference to interfere with an individual's choice of labour, especially in the field of intellectual labour (*Woman* 57-64). Brittain made a connection between the two texts. She got the impression that *Woman and Labour* was "very much an expanded version of Lyndall's remarks on the position of women" ("To Roland Leighton," 3 May 1914).

Brittain, it can be assumed, felt a sensation in reading Lyndall's philosophy on love because it planted in her the idea that love could be the ultimate reason for her to pursue her studies and career. Like Lyndall, she longed for a "sympathetic companionship" and what Lyndall described as "something [perfect enough] to worship" (*Testament* 85). Yet, Brittain did not need to wait for long, for she had found in Leighton a potential partner. She was to become his Lyndall.

Thus, it was as Leighton's equal that Brittain abandoned her studies to become a VAD. Nursing was accordingly in Brittain's words, "another division of the same strife that you [Leighton] are in now" (26 May 1915, Bishop and Bostridge 113). Brittain abandons her studies and devotes herself to physical labour as a means of getting closer to Leighton, who had grown a sudden contempt for academic work compared with war work. It had become nothing but "scholastic vegetation" to him ("To Vera Brittain," 29 Sept. 1914). Many letters later Brittain agrees with him and exclaims that she wants "physical endurance" and "bodily toil." College

had become for her, "too soft a job" (25 April 1915, Bishop and Bostridge 88).

Brittain's emphasis on the physicality of her labour is important in that she is not agreeing with Schreiner concerning her ideas on the value of women's labour during wartime. For Schreiner, it is not through nursing and endurance that women can do their equal share of physical labour during wartime. They can do it through giving birth to men, "the primal munition of war," as they have done so in past times (*Woman* 64). Thus, by insisting to Roland that she was enduring physical toil, Brittain was perhaps trying to let him know that she was enduring the limit of her strength, the way he was in the battlefields. Thus, she wanted to believe that she was in a different division of the same battlefield and was fighting with him.[3]

Leighton did not appreciate Brittain's efforts as much as she wished him to. His failure to acknowledge what a big step it was for Brittain to be transferred to a military hospital upset her. He offended her deeply by wrongly assuming that she was "in a world of long wards and silent footed nurses and bitter, clean smells and an appalling whiteness in everything" ("To Vera Brittain," 3 Nov. 1915, Bishop and Bostridge 182). Brittain was consoled by a letter asking for forgiveness from Leighton. His death, however, created a gulf between them. Leighton was shot in the moonlight, only a few days before his upcoming leave. He had exposed himself to the enemy in order to inspect the barbed wire in front of the trench. When she was informed of Leighton's death, Brittain hoped earnestly that he had left a message for her before he took his final breath. However, the further she inquired, the smaller the possibility became of the message left. In *Testament of Youth* she sadly writes that "in his last hour I had been quite forgotten" (244). He had completely detached her from the battlefield, and there would never be a letter to connect her with it once more.

In a letter to her brother which she wrote immediately after

Leighton's death, Brittain attributes the lack of a letter to Leighton's unawareness of his critical condition: "[I]t seems more than probable he went out of life without knowing it. He would almost certainly have sent some message had he known" ("To Edward Brittain," 10 Jan. 1916, Bishop and Bostridge 209). At this point she has not yet accepted the idea that he had deliberately not written to her. In the same letter she curiously envisions Leighton as Lyndall: "I always think of those words describing Lyndall's death—'The old strong soul gathered itself together for the last time; it knew where it stood'—picture the ideal, conscious passing of a Splendid Soul." As her soul mate, Leighton was the very embodiment of Lyndall, the fictional being they both looked up to.

Yet, over the years, she realises that the "Splendid Soul" had become a slave to the war. In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain looks back on the time she was waiting in vain for Leighton to send her an enthusiastic comment on her transfer to a military hospital and remembers feeling that a wall was beginning to be built between herself and her beloved:

> The War, I began to feel, was dividing us as I had so long feared that it would, making real values seem unreal, and causing the qualities which mattered most to appear unimportant. Was it, I wondered, because Roland had lost interest in me that this anguish of drifting apart had begun—or was the explanation to be found in that terrible barrier of knowledge by which War cut off the men who possessed it from the women who, in spite of the love that they gave and received, remained in ignorance?
>
> It is one of the many things that I shall never know.
>
> (underlines added; 215)

She tried to break down the wall by pretending that she understood the

physical horror of war:

> Lonely as I was, and rather bewildered, I found the cold dignity of reciprocal silence impossible to maintain. So I tried to explain that I, too, understood just a little the inevitable barrier—the almost physical barrier of horror and dreadful experience—which had grown up between us. (underline added; 215)

Her comment on not ever knowing in the first quotation is probably directed to the letter that Leighton never wrote to her. Her pretence in the second quotation expresses her wish to be Leighton's colleague at work. Her decisive remark earlier quoted in this paper, that Leighton had erased her from his memory in his last moments, however, implies that she came to believe that the "physical barrier" that the war had built between them had been impermeable. As she admits in the first quotation here, it was the men who possessed the war. It would only be a matter of time before the war would possess the men.

Victoria Stewart suggests that the lack of a final message "denied [Brittain] any final assurance of his love" (43). One optimistic conclusion Brittain comes up with for the reason why Leighton did not think of her when he was dying was that he was under strong medication (*Testament* 243). Leighton might, however, deserve a more honourable explanation. His indifference to Brittain's war work is suggestive that he desired war to be a masculine affair. The realities of the battlefields were too violent for him to want to share with her. He had, thus, become a conventional gentleman, and Brittain was his conventional lover whom he wanted to protect. He was no longer the young man who claimed to be a feminist. The physical horrors of war had changed his ideas on the relation between men and women. If he had chosen to forget Brittain on his deathbed, it was perhaps

because he did not want to take her with him on his journey to death, which was to be his fate as a soldier. The war had deprived Brittain of her lover first physically, then spiritually, and finally fatally, but never emotionally.

Nevertheless, the war had changed the nature of what she had shared with Leighton. Despite her reluctance to admit it, Brittain was aware that in a time of war, women "remained in ignorance" "in spite of the love that they gave and received," as quoted and indicated by an underline in the above. Love, in this case is a conventional love. Therefore, it was not only Leighton, but also Brittain who eventually accepted their conventional roles. His love for her was protective, while her love for him was subordinate. Although she and Leighton were fighting in the same war, they were fighting in separate spheres. War work had at best become a means for her to serve him. In a sense, Brittain had been reduced to parasitism.

A War for Whom

At the beginning of the war, Brittain expressed her apprehension towards the morality of it to Leighton: "It is awful to think that the very progress of civilization has made this war what it is—particularly intellectual progress, without a corresponding moral progress" ("To Roland Leighton," 25 April 1915, Bishop and Bostridge 90). Her reference to "intellectual progress" is probably an allusion to Schreiner's argument in *Woman and Labour*. Now that machinery had taken over most of the physical labour of past times, labour was mainly intellectual.

Brittain had found reason to justify one's involvement in it by regarding it as self-defence: "[It] seems to me," she writes to Leighton "that to refrain from fighting in a cause like this because you do not approve of warfare would be about as sensible as refusing to defend yourself against the attacks of a madman because you did not consider lunacy[4] an enlightened or desirable condition" (6 Sept. 1914, Bishop and Bostridge 29).

However, in later years in *Testament of Youth*, she describes VADs like herself as "white angels which fight so naïvely on the side of destruction" (370). To express nursing as a means to destroy is at first surprising, even more so because she once passionately wrote to Leighton that by nursing she was relieving "the sufferings of this unhappy stricken world" (26 May 1915, Bishop and Bostridge 113). Her irony may imply that the cause she had defended at the beginning of the war had become unworthy of defence compared to the destructive nature of warfare.

Through the words of one of the main characters in her first novel, *The Dark Tide* (1923), Brittain identifies the makers of war to be the leading intellects of the world: "politicians."[5] Brittan depicts in Raymond Sylvester, the very embodiment of these politicians. Through an examination of his relation with three women, Daphne Lethbridge, Virginia Dennison, and Lucia Farretti, we shall see how for Brittain, the exclusion of women from the field of intellectual labour resulted in war.

Love is once again an important theme. The protagonist, Daphne, is reminded of an unforgivable incident every time she sees her son. She explains this to her separated husband, Sylvester, who has come to see the child for the first time:

> "You understand now," she said at last, "why I told you that I didn't think I forgave you. Forgiving always seems to me to imply forgetting—putting a thing entirely out of one's life as if it hadn't happened. But I can't put Jack out of my life, and every time I see him I can't help remembering—that afternoon." (253)

Little Jack is crippled because his father had attacked his mother when she was pregnant with him. He was thus injured in his mother's womb. On "that afternoon," Sylvester told Daphne he never loved her.

Daphne and Sylvesters' union is based on worship on her side and deceit on his. He asks her for her hand only because his pride had been hurt by being refused by Virginia, the woman he professes to truly love. Sylvester coaches Daphne and Virginia on "International Relations" at "Drayton College," Oxford. Madly in love with him, Daphne accepts his hand in marriage. They are married after her graduation. Having accepted an offer of a diplomatic job in a new ministry, the "Ministry of Arbitration," Sylvester leaves his teaching post the same year Daphne graduates.

Daphne's clumsiness annoys him, and she bores him. Despite Sylvester's ingratitude, she tries her best to comfort and please him.[6] One day she accidentally spills tea when they have guests. Pregnant with his child, company had been too much of a strain on Daphne. The party disperses soon after. Greatly annoyed with Daphne, Sylvester leaves her the next day, flinging her aside on his way out. Daphne is thrown to the floor. Both she and the unborn child are left in critical condition.

It would seem as though the full blame for the child's injury should be put on Sylvester. Yet, Daphne blames herself in part. Jack was, in her words, "the embodiment of her failure" (218). This is because of Daphne's philosophy on the principle of love:

> Hadn't someone said once that a great love was creative as well as receptive; that love, if it were only strong enough, could produce love in return? If that was true—and surely, surely, it must be true—then Raymond Sylvester could not fail to love Daphne Lethbridge. It wasn't possible that anyone could care as she cared without some return. (79)

Daphne believes that a genuinely strong love has the power to awaken any uninterested soul. She believes that she has succeeded when Sylvester asks

her to marry her. She is unfortunately wrong.

There is a character in the novel who knows Sylvester better. "[I]t is not often that men such as your husband are satisfied with the women who love them," Lucia, Sylvester's mistress tells Daphne (242-43). If we consult *The Story of an African Farm* we might interpret the meaning of these words. Lyndall once compares a man's love to "a fire of olive-wood" to her cousin Em. She explains that he will burn seductively until a woman shows interest, at which point he will begin to turn into indifferent ash (184). Therefore, the more Daphne shows interest, the more Sylvester will drift away from her.[7]

Lyndall herself experiences love with such a man. She gives birth to his child. It lives for only a few hours. Its short life is perhaps evidence of its parent's short-lived love. Although it is born out of wedlock, Lyndall refuses to marry the father. She sees that his love for her is a childish desire for something that is difficult to obtain. Her own love for the man is born out of awe and fear. Thus, Lyndall understands that their union is based on curiosity and experiment.

Lucia's love for Sylvester is presumably similar to this. This can be suggested because she tells Daphne that she does not desire to marry him: "One day I shall tire of him, just as I expect he will tire of me. I will love as it pleases me, but I will not lose my freedom" (242).

Lucia also tells Daphne that some men will not take the trouble to change their tastes for a woman: "[H]e [Sylvester] will never trouble to learn you enough to love you. He does not know what you are, but he cannot forget something that you are not" (242). Thus, when Sylvester says he never loved Daphne, he means that he could never take the trouble to know her enough to love her. This is because, as we shall see, he could not help comparing her intelligence to Virginia's.

After he leaves, Sylvester sends Daphne a letter forbidding her to

make any attempt to "communicate with me" (204). During his abandonment, Virginia and their history tutor, Patricia, encourage Daphne to divorce him. Daphne almost decides to follow their advice. Lucia has in fact visited Daphne to persuade her to reconsider for the sake of Sylvester's career. He is running in an election, and his main appeal to the public is his opposition to a new divorce bill that is soon to be passed. Furthermore, the "Minister of Arbitration" is leading the opposition to the new bill and has decided that he will not allow any divorced men to work under him. Thus, it will cost Sylvester not only his career but also his job if Daphne continues with the procedures. Considering the importance of the position he might someday hold, Daphne decides against divorcing him. "[T]he British Minister of Arbitration holds the peace of the world in his hands," Sylvester explains to her when he comes to see her two days after Lucia's visit (249). When Sylvester sees his child, he is overcome with regret and tells Daphne that she can proceed with the divorce. Daphne, instead, sends him on a mission to become a peacemaker: "I want to see you a great statesman and a great peacemaker. I want your public life to make up for your life with me," she tells him (254).

Daphne's curious proposal not to divorce Sylvester so long as he devotes himself to the making of peace may make sense when we see him as the cause of war and Jack as its result. Thus, Sylvester is the embodiment of many politicians, and Jack is the embodiment of wounded soldiers. When Sylvester sees him, he notices the child's expression of pain: "His tiny pinched face already wore an expression of suffering almost uncanny on such baby features" (254-55). He is perhaps expressing the sufferings of war. In order to specify the identity of Daphne, the reason for Sylvester's dislike for her should be examined.

While in Virginia, Sylvester seeks a companion who will support him in his career, in Daphne he expects a subservient wife. Virginia's intelli-

gence is at the centre of his affection for her: "You stimulated my intellect, and I wanted your mind as well as other things. I loved you for it—I always have, and I do still" (246) he confesses to her when they meet long after the damage has been done. Daphne's intelligence, on the other hand, does not impress him. This is quite evident in the different proposals of marriage he gives them. He asks Virginia to come help him with his new job, whereas he tells Daphne he wants "a home, and a wife to make it for me" (89). Considering that a home to him is "a place where everything would be ordered to suit his own convenience" (87), Daphne would be little more than a servant. Yet, when they quarrel, he tells her that he "meant the woman I married to help my career socially" (196). Thus, in Daphne he expects a housemaid, and at best someone who would support his career socially, if not intellectually.

Sylvester's unjust treatment of the quality of Daphne's intellect is puzzling because she is, after all, a student at Oxford at a time when women who pursued higher education were scarce. Sylvester fails to see the value of it because of his own narrow-mindedness. This is a point made by Daphne's female history tutor, Patricia, after reading a draft of a novel Daphne once wrote. Daphne explains to her that she had lost confidence in her writing because Sylvester had told her that her work was "so bad that he'd scarcely the patience to read them through" (217). To this, Patricia replies, "'It's a crime to neglect promise just because it isn't quite achievement', [. . .]. 'Mr Sylvester was just as capable of seeing the possibilities of raw material as anyone else, if he took the trouble'" (217). The female historian sees promise in Daphne's work which the male politician had failed to.

Thus, Daphne may resemble the many bright women who were forbidden to enter the intellectual field of politics because of their gender. Yet, this alone cannot result in war, or in Daphne's case, the birth of Jack. The

reason for Virginia's rejection of Sylvester may direct us to an answer.

"I couldn't have done it. A first-rate brain, perhaps, but a second-rate mind, and third-rate morals. Not after this—no, not after this. It's good enough for me, the remembrance of you" (86), Virginia whispers as she holds a letter in her hand, after Sylvester's proposal. The sender of the letter is Virginia's lover. It was written only hours before he was fatally wounded. From its content, one can tell that they had shared an inseparable love:

> Somehow I wish it were not my turn to be in the trenches to-night. I don't feel at all warlike; I'm full of affection for the world, and at peace with all mankind. There's a Christmas feeling in the air, and it's very much Christmas outside too—hard dry snow, with the moon shining brilliantly upon it. The road crunches delightfully under your feet as you walk along. I heard Alderson whistling outside; that means it's time for me to go. (underline added; 86)

Her lover has spiritually escaped from the battlefield, and is directing Virginia to a peaceful place where their souls can meet eternally.[8]

Virginia has rejected Sylvester because he is immoral. He is incapable of the kind of mutual worship she shared with her lover. She proves to have foresight, as "cruelty and misconduct" were the grounds on which Daphne was going to divorce Sylvester (249). Immoral intellectual labour by male politicians has then resulted in war.[9] This corresponds with the passage quoted at the beginning of this section in which Brittain questions the morality of the intellectual labour of the past. Virginia, who has experienced war work and lost a lover is perhaps an example of women after the war. She knows better than to accept the hand of political intellectuals of the past.

If we return to the scene in which Sylvester attacks Daphne, we will notice that he attacks her because she was trying to prevent him from leaving. The injury on the child in the womb is, therefore, the consequence of his rejection of her, and thus depicts the exclusion of women's intellect from politics and its consequences. The immorality of Sylvester's act depicts the immorality of war. Daphne has put the career of a peacemaker in her hands. She has made sure that his intellect will be used for a morally correct purpose.[10] Although past studies of *The Dark Tide* tend to interpret Daphne's decision as self-sacrificial and retrogressive, if we read the novel under the influence of Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and *Woman and Labour*, we can see that Daphne has in fact put herself above Sylvester.

Conclusion

Brittain and Leighton had thus shared a love based on Schreiner's belief on the highest form of love that can be achieved between the two sexes. They were to be equally independent workers in the labour of their choice. The war mocked Brittain's love firstly by dividing her and Leighton into separate spheres, and secondly by the fact that war itself was a result of the unequal labour between the two sexes of past centuries. Therefore, Brittain had been working in her feminine sphere in a man-made world. For her, and for all the other women workers, the clock ticking in accordance with their advancement had stopped for the duration of the war.[11]

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Notes

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1 Although Schreiner's influence on Brittain is widely acknowledged, little research is done on Brittain's response to the earlier feminist's work. Alan Bishop examines Brittain's wartime reaction to Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* and *Woman and Labour.* Bishop's view is that Brittain's pacifism influenced by the latter is weakened, on reading a passage promising salvation through suffering, in the former. Consequently, after the war, she comes "to distrust" *The Story of an African Farm* ("With Suffering" 89). A closer look into aspects of love in the book, may enable us to come up with a different perspective.

2 This is only a portion of Brittain's quotation from the text.

3 For Lynne Layton, the inability to take part in the war resulted in a sense of powerlessness for both men and women. Layton suggests that "Brittain attempted to fight her sense of impotence by imitating the conditions under which she imagined that Roland lived" (73), but she does not relate these attempts to the influence that Schreiner had on Brittain.

4 Schreiner also remarks that war is an insanity (*Woman* 65).

5 "[T]he soldier fights and dies to save some foolish politician from the fruit of his mistakes," says Virginia (259).

6 Although she has crossed the threshold of college education whose doors

were not open to many women back then, Daphne is still very much under the influence of her conventional mother. Tennis teas and garden parties where her mother introduces her daughter to prospective husbands, at one time prevent her from studying. She is also obsessed with her appearance, a tendency probably resulting from her mother's education. Therefore it is not surprising that she can easily adjust to conventional subordination.

7 For the same reason, Sylvester's love for Virginia will probably burn out if she begins to show interest.

8 Perhaps if Leighton had written such a letter to Brittain, her feelings would have been consoled. This is a remarkable letter in that the soldier has been careful not to bring his lover into the battlefields.

9 Schreiner explains that women understand the value of life better than men: "[S]he knows the history of human flesh she knows its cost; he does not" (*Woman* 66). For this reason, she believes that war will end when women are finally accepted into the field of politics (68). Brittain echoes Schreiner's remark in her diary: "[N]o man can quite understand what it means to a woman, who knows the trouble & pain the production of an individual costs" (21 August 1915; *Chronicle* 262).

10 Daphne decides to become a novelist. This may seem to suggest that Sylvester did not appreciate her intellect because she was not cut out for politics. However, considering that one of Virginia's accomplishments was a published novel, Sylvester did mistreat Daphne.

11 This is not to deny studies on how women experienced a great sense of freedom during the war, and that many changes were made in their social life.