

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Corbett, Mary Jean. [*Behind the Times: Virginia Woolf in Late-Victorian Contexts*](#). Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020. 312 pp.

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<1>A significant contribution to both Victorian and Modernist scholarship, *Behind the Times* offers a new outlook on Virginia Woolf's ambivalent response to the works of late-nineteenth-century women writers, social-purity activists, philanthropists and suffragists, such as Anne Thackeray Ritchie (1837-1919), Sarah Grand (1854-1943), Lucy Clifford (1846-1929), Mary Augusta Ward (1851-1920) or Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1861-1944). As Prof. Corbett convincingly argues, although Virginia Woolf famously encouraged women to enter the professions—in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *Three Guineas* (1938), and “Professions for Women” (1931, pub. 1942)—and achieve financial and intellectual independence by means of their pen, she was nonetheless very critical of some of her immediate female predecessors, who tried to carve a place for themselves in the literary marketplace. Thorough research into Woolf's essays, reviews, letters and autobiographical sketches allows Prof. Corbett to shed light on the family and literary networks connecting Woolf with late-nineteenth-century women writers and to suggest unsuspected continuities between some of her novels—*The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919), *The Years* (1937)—and the works of her older contemporaries. *Behind the Times* thus contributes to a recent trend in Woolf studies which tends to reconsider conventional periodization dividing Victorian from Modernist writing and to re-assess turn-of-the-century literature as “a shaping force in the development of modern[ist] consciousness” (Corbett 5). (1) Drawing on David Scott's reflection on “the *noncontemporaneity* of cotemporal generations” (Scott qtd in Corbett 2), (2) Prof. Corbett argues that, in her “lifelong effort to create new norms for the work of the woman writer” (4) and to define modern literature by a radical break with the Victorian past, Woolf deliberately tended to emphasize the gulf separating her from women writers of her parents' generation. This led her to retrospectively conflate the late-Victorian with the mid-Victorian and to misrepresent turn-of-the-century women writers as “behind the times,” an expression used by Terence Hewet in *The Voyage Out*, presumably about late-Victorian prose writing (Corbett 68).

<2>In the first chapter, “Gender, Greatness, and the ‘Third Generation,’” Prof. Corbett analyses Woolf's specific position as a “third generation” woman writer, born and raised Victorian, whose desire to challenge and measure up to the “great” Victorians of the first generation, such as W.M. Thackeray or Charles Dickens, led her to belittle or bypass second generation women writers, born in the 1840s-1850s. To construct “the modern,” Woolf increased the distance separating the “Georgians” and their “immediate predecessors,” “the Edwardian materialists,” but also “diminished both the male and, more problematically, the female writers whose careers took

shape at the end of the nineteenth century” (31). In the “contest between generations” structuring the literary field (37), her strategy as “a newcomer” was to posit “a wider chronological and cognitive space between herself and her predecessor[s] than actually existed” (Schaffer qtd in Corbett 38).⁽³⁾ Woolf’s tendency in the first decades of her career to discriminate between “great” mid-Victorians and their lesser descendants is exemplified in *Night and Day* by Katharine Hilbery’s “cross-generational attempt” to “think back through (or with) the Victorian grandfather”, Richard Alardyce, “a fictive version of William Thackeray”, and “beyond the women writers of the second generation” (Corbett 42; 44), embodied by Mrs. Hilbery.

<3>In Chapter II (“New Women and Old: Sarah Grand, Social Purity, and *The Voyage Out*”), Prof. Corbett suggests that, despite Woolf’s critical views of late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century social activism and her strong rejection of the naturalism of New Women writing, characterized by “art for man’s sake” (97), Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, resonates with some late-nineteenth-century literary discourse on the sexual education of young women and the role of literature in keeping them informed about sex. She thus draws a parallel between *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), by New Woman activist Sarah Grand, and *The Voyage Out* (1915), arguing that, in her rejection of “the conspiracy of silence” that deliberately kept women in the dark, Sarah Grand was very much ahead of her time and stood as an “avatar of modernity” (97), one generation apart from Woolf.

<4>Chapter III (“‘Ashamed of the Inkpot’: Woolf and the Literary Marketplace”) looks at Woolf’s critical response to late-Victorian professional women writers and her resistance to the commodification of literature, “marketplace tactics” (118) and model of “professional authorship” (127) provided by such writers as Lucy Clifford and Mrs. Humphry Ward. Prof. Corbett’s study proves most illuminating when she traces not only differences but also continuities, unsuspected lines of descent that probably went unnoticed by Woolf herself. For instance, when she suggests that Mary Augusta Ward’s essay “A Morning in the Bodleian” (1872), in which she reflects on “those unwritten books—‘the withered buds,’ ‘the seed that takes no root’—” but that nonetheless contribute to the writing of great books (Ward qtd in Corbett 142),⁽⁴⁾ might have anticipated some of Woolf’s meditations in *A Room of One’s Own*, about women’s “thinking in common” throughout the ages, “the collective effort” behind “the single voice” that makes the writing of masterpieces possible (Corbett 142).

<5>Chapter IV (“‘To Serve and Bless’: Julia Stephen, Isabel Somerset, and Late-Victorian Women’s Politics”) discusses Woolf’s hostility to “what she perceived as the politics of philanthropy among her late-Victorian foremothers” (151). Prof. Corbett argues that Woolf tended to associate her mother and aunts’ desire to extend their sphere of influence outside the home, in refuges, workhouses or hospitals, to “rule, organize and moralize,” with what Barbara N. Ramusack has named “maternal imperialism” (qtd in Corbett 152),⁽⁵⁾ the domestic equivalent of their husbands’ promotion of imperial domination abroad, a form of coercion that Woolf repeatedly denounced throughout her life. By having Mrs. Ramsay stand against a portrait of Queen Victoria in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf suggested continuities between her social mission and such a coercive impetus, conveying both her “subjection to and complicity with the patriarchal colonial arrangements on which the empire depended at home and abroad” (Corbett 162).

<6>In the last chapter (“‘A Different Ideal’: Representing the Public Woman”), Prof. Corbett looks at Woolf’s position on late-Victorian political activism and the suffrage, analysing her relationship with Margaret Llewelyn Davies and Janet Case. Although she encouraged women’s quest for social advancement, Woolf resisted some aspects of political activism, more specifically its “tendency to reproduce rather than transform existing structures of domination” (Corbett 192). Prof. Corbett traces the evolution of Woolf’s position over two decades, from *Night and Day* (1919) to *The Years* (1937), arguing that her resistance to “public preaching” remained unchanged, but that her point of view on the philanthropic and political work undertaken by “public women” evolved over time and that she came to value the commitment of some of her younger contemporaries, such as Ray Strachey, to ideals different from her own, whose validity she acknowledged.

<7>*Behind the Times* is a great work of scholarship, based on thorough research into the memoirs, letters, essays and novels of late-Victorian women writers. It sets Woolf’s reflection on women and writing in its complex historical and literary context and thus contributes to revaluing the lives and works of women whom Woolf allegedly “did *not* think back through” (Corbett 8), from whose positions she often diverged, but who helped to create “the available paradigms for doing the work Woolf wanted to do” (Corbett 4).

Notes

(1) See for instance Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007); Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr, ed., *Late Victorian into Modern* (Oxford: OUP, 2016); Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer and Christine Reynier, ed., *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017); Anne Besnault and Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, ed., *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018). (△)

(2) David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45.2 (2014): 163. (△)

(3) Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000, 193. (△)

(4) Mary Augusta Ward, “A Morning in the Bodleian Library,” *Every Saturday* vol.1, n°8, 24 Feb. 1872, 204-6. (△)

(5) Barbara N. Ramusack, “Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945,” *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, ed., Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, 119-36. (△)