English Studies in Africa

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reia20

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To cite this article: Jade Munslow Ong (2022) 'Too Uncompromising a Figure to be So Disposed of': Virginia Woolf and/on Olive Schreiner, English Studies in Africa, 65:1, 31-45, DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2022.2055855

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2022.2055855

Published online: 28 Apr 2022.

‘Too Uncompromising a Figure to be So Disposed of’: Virginia Woolf and/on Olive Schreiner

Jade Munslow Ong

In her 1925 review of an edited collection of Olive Schreiner’s letters, Virginia Woolf described Schreiner as ‘too uncompromising a figure to be so disposed of’. Prompted by this intriguing comment, this article brings Woolf’s late-1920s writings into conversation with Schreiner’s novels and letters in order to trace personal and textual connections between the two authors. Comparative analysis of Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928) reveals similarities and confluences in their novelistic structures, experimental temporalities, allegorical representations, use of natural imagery, and in the central and unifying linear motifs that are used to hold together the novel forms. Additional modernist aesthetic and political links are provided by depictions of sex- and gender-crossing characters in *Orlando*, *The Story of an African Farm* and Schreiner’s *From Man to Man* (1926), as well as by the feminist arguments and role of ‘Shakespeare’s sister’ in *From Man to Man* and Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). The article concludes by arguing that ‘Woolf and/on Schreiner’ provides evidence towards a claim for South Africa as a pioneering site of modernist innovation, and thereby contributes to new understandings of the development of global modernisms.

Keywords: Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf, modernism, gender, *To The Lighthouse*, South Africa, *Orlando*, *From Man to Man*, *The Story of an African Farm*

‘Too uncompromising a figure to be so disposed of’

On 18 March 1925, *The New Republic* published Virginia Woolf’s review of *The Letters of Olive Schreiner 1876–1920*. Olive Schreiner had died just over four years earlier, and the collection was one among a number of posthumously published works edited by Schreiner’s husband,

DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2022.2055855
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Samuel Cron Cronwright-Schreiner. In Woolf's review of the collection, Schreiner's letters, fiction and character are appraised in turn, and Woolf's comments are striking for their vacillations between criticism and praise. The opening statement, 'Olive Schreiner was neither a born letter-writer nor did she choose to make herself become one,' sets the tone, then slightly softened by the remark that Schreiner's 'carelessness' still 'has its charm' (103). A similarly mixed response is evoked by Schreiner's most famous publication, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), so that Woolf initially compares it to 'the Brontë novels,' and describes it as a 'remarkable novel' having 'brilliance and power … we feel ourselves in the presence of a powerful nature which can make us see what it saw, and feel what it felt with astounding vividness' (103). This expression of admiration is then sharply undercut by the claim that *The Story of an African Farm* is still hampered by 'limitations,' as:

> The writer's interests are local, her passions personal, and we cannot help suspecting that she has neither the width nor the strength to enter with sympathy into the experiences of minds differing from her own, or to debate questions calmly and reasonably. (103)

Even Woolf's admiration for Schreiner's 'passion, insight and force' in discussing 'questions affecting women,' is tempered by the suggestion that Schreiner ultimately failed to become a great writer because 'it was into debate and politics, and not into thought and literature that she was propelled' (103). Woolf's equivocation carries through to the evocative closing line of the review: 'Olive Schreiner was one half of a great writer; a diamond marred by a flaw' (103). This metaphor captures Woolf's view of Schreiner as a skilled writer, who, due to deficiencies in character, and uncompromising political commitment, produced literary outputs limited in concept, form and number.

While the periods and places of Schreiner and Woolf's lives, networks and contacts overlapped, the two women never met.[1] The sparse written records that do place them in each other's company, or as readers of each other's work, are highly unreliable due to the editorial additions, elisions and errors that falsely suggest, or erase, possible connections. A key example of this can be found in the first volume of Woolf's letters, as editors Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann misidentify the 'Miss Schreiner' in two of Woolf's 1909 letters to Violet Dickinson as Olive Schreiner, and so incorrectly indicate that it was Olive who 'played Brahms or Schumann to us' (*Letters 1* 394) whilst Woolf and Dickinson sat on a sofa 'in the empire drawing room with all the objects' (*Letters 1* 412). Aside from one short trip to Europe in 1897, Olive Schreiner lived in South Africa between 1889–1913, so a 1909 London meeting with Woolf is impossible. The mysterious 'Miss Schreiner' of the letters, then, is more likely Julia Fairchild Schreiner, the female companion of the American heiress, suffragette and Theosophist, Mary Melissa Hoadley Dodge, as according to the letters a 'Miss Dodge' (*Letters 1* 392) serves as the temporary hostess of a convalescing Dickinson in April of that year.

A second intriguing example in which one editor introduces, and then others elide, a possible connection between Schreiner and Woolf can be traced to the subject of Woolf's review, *The Letters of Olive Schreiner 1876–1920.* One of the last letters in the collection is addressed to Schreiner's lifelong friend, sexologist Henry Havelock-Ellis, and appears as follows:

> *To* HAVELOCK ELLIS LONDON, *late* 1919
>
> I've been reading a new book they say is like Jane Austen [*Night and Day*, by Virginia Woolf]. It's no more like Jane Austen than —. All that glorious simplicity and directness

> of language and effect, which is in all great works of art, seem always wanting in twentieth century art. (363)

The bracketed text that identifies Schreiner's reading matter as Woolf's *Night and Day* was added by Cronwright-Schreiner. However, as the editors of the now-definitive Olive Schreiner Letters Online (OSLO) explain, Cronwright-Schreiner was notoriously heavy-handed in his editorial practices, and destroyed many of Schreiner's original letters after he had incorporated reworked versions into his collection. For these reasons, the relationship between Cronwright-Schreiner's versions and 'Schreiner's actual letters cannot now be gauged,' and when 'Schreiner letters can be compared with his versions, his have omissions, distortions and bowdlerisations' (OSLO 2021). The OSLO team therefore publish the letter on their website 'for sake of completeness,' but minimize Cronwright-Schreiner's authority in the epistolarium by removing the bracketed text from their version, without providing an explanatory footnote.[2] While this strategy acknowledges that the original letter cannot now be traced or verified, it also, as consequence, elides the only hint and possibility that Schreiner read Woolf.

Though the accuracy of Schreiner's 1919 letter to Havelock-Ellis must remain in question, its presence in the book is still important for situating Schreiner and Woolf in each other's orbits, and as participants in global modernist networks. Schreiner's note that 'I've been reading a new book they say is like Jane Austen' is likely a reference to a review of *Night and Day* that was published in the *Athenaeum* in November 1919 by New Zealand writer and prominent modernist, Katherine Mansfield. The comment therefore provides an intriguing point of connection between female British and colonial modernists, as Schreiner's response to Woolf's novel is clearly coloured by Mansfield's interpretation. In the review, Mansfield describes *Night and Day* as 'Miss Austen up-to-date … . But whereas Miss Austen's spell is as strong upon us as ever when the novel is finished and laid by, Mrs. Woolf's loses something of its potency' (1227). Woolf's pride was deeply hurt by this comment, and she noted in her diary that 'K.M. wrote a review which irritated me – I thought I saw spite in it. A decorous elderly dullard she describes me; Jane Austen up to date' (*Diary 1* 314). Woolf's discomfort was exacerbated by the fact that she considered Mansfield both 'rival' and friend, with 'something in common which I shall never find in anyone else'; and following Mansfield's death in 1923, Woolf would describe her as author of 'the only writing I have ever been jealous of' (*Diary 2* 226, 227). So, in finding Woolf 'wanting' in comparison to Austen, Schreiner's letter recalls both the unnerving effects of Mansfield's review, whilst acting as a potentially upsetting reminder for Woolf of the death one of her most important interlocutors, whom she would continue to 'think of … at intervals all through life' (*Diary 2* 227). Indeed, it is all-too-tempting to use these connections as partial explanation for the more acerbic elements of Woolf's review of the collection, as the letter to Havelock-Ellis appears only seven pages before the end, and may still have been fresh in Woolf's mind as she began to write.[3]

While published accounts of personal and textual connections between Schreiner and Woolf appear only in Woolf's review, or in the forms of editorial mistakes, additions and elisions, critics continue to comment on affinities between the writers. Early and glancing references of this kind can be found in Joseph Bristow's introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Story of an African Farm*, in which he writes that Woolf's '*Three Guineas* follows in the pacifist tradition of [Schreiner's] *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897)' (xxviii); Gerd Bjørhovde's question, 'Surely it is significant that this part of *The Story of an African Farm* ["Times and Seasons"] bears a striking resemblance to the crucial middle part of Virginia Woolf's *To the*

Lighthouse (1927) which is called "Time Passes"?' (52); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that 'in *From Man to Man* … [Schreiner] followed the Victorian writer William Black in outlining a story about a female Shakespeare comparable to the one that Virginia Woolf constructs in *A Room of One's Own*' (76). Robert Green offers a slightly more detailed and illuminating comparison of the Preface to *The Story of an African Farm* and Woolf's 'Modern Fiction,' in which he argues that 'Woolf and Schreiner were indeed at one in arguing that fiction's business was to reject an artificial, superficial orderliness in favour of a rendering of life's real disconnections and fracturings' (160). Other, albeit still brief, examinations of the two writers in terms of their shared feminism and pacifism appear in published conference papers by Maria Antonietta Saracino and Christine Haskill, and in recent books by Mary Jean Corbett and S. Brooke Cameron; Schreiner and Woolf are also discussed separately in various book-length studies on female and/or modernist writers, such as those by Jed Esty, Lyndall Gordon and Robin Hackett.

As this critical background indicates, Schreiner's works cannot be clearly identified as source or origin when interpreting Woolf's texts, yet lingering impressions of kinship between the writers remain. Susan Stanford Friedman endeavours to capture this in her description of Schreiner and Woolf's shared feminist tropes via a 'mushroom analogy,' in which 'stories can … spring up disconnected like mushrooms, with no known routes for us readers to follow' (23). Whilst, as Friedman indicates, the roots and routes of Woolf's aesthetics and politics as they relate to Schreiner are neither plentiful nor immediately obvious, the analogy falters as almost all fungi and plants are, in fact, in contact over vast distances via mycorrhizal networks. I suggest that like mushrooms, then, Schreiner and Woolf's ideas and images *are* in communication, if not directly, then in their resonating forms and arguments, and as part of global modernist ecologies. So, although Schreiner's novels cannot be established as stable 'mother' texts, Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers' (73) still provides the impetus to trace correlations and convergences in their thinking and writing. It is telling that Woolf's tergiversations in her discussion of Schreiner's character, letters, politics and literature include one further disclosure, in which Woolf writes: 'She remains even now, when the vigour of her books is spent, and her personal sway, evidently of the most powerful, is a memory limited to those who knew her, too uncompromising a figure to be so disposed of' (103). This tantalizing statement lends weight to a reading of Schreiner as significant appurtenance, antecedent and node when considering (amongst other things) representations of time, nature, art, religion and gender in Woolf's writings of the late-1920s.

'Time Passes'

At a structural level, *The Story of African Farm* and *To the Lighthouse* follow remarkably similar patterns. Schreiner's novel moves from an account of life on a colonial South African farm to a central section, titled 'Times and Seasons,' and then returns to the homestead; and Woolf's novel relates the events of a single day in the lives of the Ramsay family and friends at a holiday home on the Isle of Skye, proceeds to a central section, 'Time Passes,' and closes with key characters returning to the house. Although tripartite in form, Schreiner and Woolf's novels do not abide by the causal and linear chronologies of the triple-decker dominant in the 1870s–1890s, instead presenting radical experiments with time.[4] The most temporally innovative part of Schreiner's novel is 'Times and Seasons,' which comprises a short introduction followed by seven vignettes spanning three years. Schreiner explains this mode of representation as follows:

> the soul's life has seasons of its own; periods not found in any calendar, times that years and months will not scan … but each looking back at the little track his consciousness illuminates, sees it cut into distinct portions, whose boundaries are at the termination of mental states. (101)

As a description of the operations of modernist time, this quote might equally be applied to canonical works by writers such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson. It also resonates most particularly with Woolf, as in the following passage from *Orlando*: 'An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the time-piece of the mind by one second' (68). In both of their fictions then, Schreiner and Woolf eschew the realist structures and representations of the Victorian novel in order to reveal the experience of time passing as a psychological phenomenon not regulated by clocks, calendars or linear chronologies. Each of Schreiner's vignettes unites past, present and future within discrete and distinct dimensions of inner consciousness. These take on psychological permanence when viewed from a post-religious perspective, as although 'three years had passed' since Waldo 'prayed and howled to his God in the fuel-house' (101), his already-revealed future loss of faith is expressed and explained in 'Times and Seasons' via a series of memories recalled in the present tense. Unique insights incorporating past longing, present emotion and anticipation of the future also appear in *To the Lighthouse*, so that James Ramsay's excitement at the prospect of visiting the lighthouse is felt as 'extraordinary joy, as if it were settled the expedition were bound to take place, and the wonder to which he had looked forward, for years and years it seemed, was, after a night's darkness and a day's sail, within touch' (1). In this way, Woolf and Schreiner create identifiably modernist senses of textual imminence and psychological realism by abandoning conventional novelistic methods for measuring and representing the passing of time, and by revealing the simultaneities of past, present and future in individual experience.

The alternate temporalities of *The Story of an African Farm* and *To the Lighthouse* have aesthetic as well as critical purposes, enabling in both cases, the jettisoning of the certainties of human-centred chronologies and faith in a Christian God. This is immediately evident in *To the Lighthouse* in the presentation of intersecting consciousnesses and shifting perspectives revealed over the course of one day; and it *becomes* evident in *The Story of an African Farm* as the omniscient narration typical of the Victorian realist novel gives way in 'Times and Seasons' to a new and inclusive narrative voice, 'we', which is allied to Waldo's psychological development. By deserting the omniscient narrator, Woolf and Schreiner call into question the authority and existence of an omniscient God. This is made explicit in the seventh and final vignette of 'Times and Seasons,' as the realizations that '[t]here is no justice. The ox dies in his yoke, beneath his master's whip' and '[t]he black man is shot like a dog, and it goes well with the shooter' (113) lead to a loss of faith, expressed in the repeated: 'Now we have no God' and 'there is no God' (114). Echoing these thoughts, Mrs Ramsay also becomes 'annoyed with herself' for saying 'We are in the hands of the Lord' (70):

> The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. She returned to her knitting again. How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death and the poor. (71)

The sense that cruelty in the world and a benevolent God cannot co-exist is shared by Mrs Ramsay and Waldo, and both texts reject Christianity and belief in godly omniscience by moving beyond individual perspectives and turning instead to nature.

Woolf describes 'Time Passes' in her diary as 'the most difficult abstract piece of writing – I have to give an empty house no people's characters, the passage of time, all eyeless & featureless with nothing to cling to' (*Diary 3* 76). The passing of ten years is accordingly conveyed in ten vignettes, relayed from the perspectives of wind, water, light and 'certain airs' (138):

> The long night seemed to have set in; the trifling airs, nibbling, the clammy breaths, fumbling, seemed to have triumphed. The saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed. Toads had nosed their way in. Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro. A thistle thrust itself between the tiles in the larder. The swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw; the plaster fell in shovelfuls; rafters were laid bare; rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots.' (149–50)

The passages are composed of fragments – vignettes and short sentences – whilst inorganic processes, animals and plants act as agents of fragmentation that return the decaying house to straw, wood and dust. Other interrupting fragments are used to reveal the deaths of family members in brief bracketed sentences: '[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more.]' and '[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]' (144–45). Yet, even in these deaths and in the decline of the building, a sense of shared experience and commitment to wholeness and continuity is created by the natural processes and organisms that move in and through the home. The question Schreiner poses in 'Times and Seasons' – 'Was it possible for us in an instant to see Nature as she is – the flowing vestment of an unchanging reality?' (114) – therefore finds an affirmative answer in *To the Lighthouse* in Woolf's representations of ongoing interactions of organic and inorganic beings and activities, the deterioration and restoration of the house, and the persistence of nature amidst and despite the loss and trauma of death and war.

Both 'Times and Seasons' and 'Time Passes' abandon God- and human-centred experiences and epistemologies by experimenting with time and perspective to create a sense of nature as perpetual and fluid. Understanding and empathy are reached through recognition, repetition and co-creation rather than religious faith. This is exemplified in *To the Lighthouse* in moments when characters communicate without words, as when Mr Ramsay and Mrs Ramsay's 'eyes met for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless to go from him to her' (129); and when Mr Carmichael stands next to Lily at the end of the novel and says '"They will have landed," and she felt that she had been right. They had no need to speak. They had been thinking the same thing and he had answered her without her asking him anything' (225). In *The Story of an African Farm*, the idea that post-religious understanding emerges from empathy is conveyed as expansive vision encompassing animals, plants and minerals. As a result, the rejection of Christianity expressed in 'Times and Seasons' is followed by a series of observations about the rocks, flora and fauna of the Karoo area of South Africa. These combine to create an interconnected natural-spiritual world in which interactions, repeated patterns, and mutual-constitutions of fossils, skeletons, sand, ants, flowers, flies, spiders, ducks and lambs, and the blood vessels of a dissected gander that resemble silhouetted branches, antlers, rivers and marbling

in stone, lead to the revelation that 'we walk in the great hall of life, looking up and round reverentially' so that 'all is part of a whole, whose beginning and end we know not. The life that throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension, not too small' (118). Whilst in isolation, the fragmented animal body parts, shadows, trickles and sediments have no greater meaning, their repetition and connection combine in the passage to create a totalizing and unified cosmology, enabling the final revelation: 'we begin to live again' (118).[5] In this way, 'we' come to terms with a loss of faith that gives rise to a vision of the natural world in fragments. This vision, which is echoed in Woolf's 'Time Passes,' expresses a connected, post-religious perspective based on a flowing and unifying relationship between humans, animals, plants, minerals, and inorganic processes.

Line, Post, Trunk, Feather

In a 1927 letter to Roger Fry, Woolf explains the tripartite structure of *To the Lighthouse* as follows: 'I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together' (*Letters 3* 385). Though dryly alluding to the spine that binds the pages of a book, Woolf did in fact imagine the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, 'Time Passes,' as the central line across a H-shape. This is drawn in her 1924–1925 notebook, in which she also describes the novel as 'Two blocks joined by a corridor'.[6] The 'central line' also appears in symbolic forms, first as the lighthouse itself, which acts as a focal point for characters' desires, as well as in Lily's final brushstroke that completes both her painting and the novel: 'There it was – her picture … . With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished' (154).

Artworks with linear forms also appear to serve similar functions in *The Story of an African Farm* and *Orlando*, tethering together distinct parts of the novel, and the past and present. For example, Waldo carves a wooden post that is introduced in the chapter immediately following 'Times and Seasons,' and so stands at the centre or spine of *The Story of an African Farm*. Interestingly too, in an early version of Lily's painting, the central line was going to take a different form, as a 'tree further in the middle' (92), and Woolf revives this image as Orlando's poem, *The Oak Tree*, which provides a running thread through the novel as it takes Orlando a 300-year lifetime to complete. The poem is finally left to 'lie unburied and dishevelled on the ground' at the base of an oak tree as 'tribute' to its inspiration (225). Lily's painting is likewise described as a 'tribute' (59), though to the deceased mother-figure and original subject of the painting, Mrs Ramsay; and Waldo's post also has a memorializing function, as Waldo's father, Otto, dies in Part One of the novel, and the totem is created in Part Two to stand at the head of Otto's grave. The autobiographical significance of these tributes provides additional parallels, as Mrs Ramsay was loosely based on Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen; *Orlando* was conceived as a mock-biography of Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West; and Schreiner's father, Gottlob Schreiner, provided the model for Otto. Accordingly, Woolf's description of the linking line or corridor in *To the Lighthouse* might equally be used to interpret *Orlando* and *The Story of an African Farm*, as the carving, canvas and poem all rely upon, or represent, a central line, pole or trunk. These stand for, and memorialize, real and fictional individuals, and bridge past, present and future by holding together the forms of the novels through commemoration and connection. Functioning as artistic realization and tribute, these linear motifs take on further significance by representing the 'I' of individual subjectivity that emerges after the loss of loved ones and loss of religious

faith. For Waldo 'it strikes us, Who are we? This *I,* what is it? We try to look in upon ourself, and ourself beats back upon ourself … . We never quite lose that feeling of *self* again' (103). And as Lily paints the final brushstroke, the novel ends with the line: 'Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision' (154). The 'I' that is realized as linear artform – stroke, post and trunk – is thus made possible by the experiences of death, trauma, and intense periods of psychological development and maturation.

When a passing stranger encounters Waldo and his 'large wooden post, covered in carvings' (119), he is inspired to tell him the story of a hunter, who seeks 'a vast white bird' whose 'name is Truth' (124, 125). Here, Schreiner reworks John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as an allegory of freethought, so that the hunter's pursuit of the bird involves relinquishing colonial Christian beliefs, and his final reward is 'a feather. He died holding it' (133). Like Lily's 'vision,' this story is received by Waldo as revelation: '"How did you know it?" the boy whispered at last. "It is not written there – not on that wood. How did you know it?" (133). Waldo is able to grasp the meaning of his artwork as the importance of striving for truth, even as it runs counter to social and cultural conventions, and is destined to remain only partially attainable or comprehensible. Rather remarkably, tropes of white birds, feathers, and allegorical representations of truth, are also used in both the middle transformation and final revelation scenes in Woolf's *Orlando*. Woolf adopts a different approach to Schreiner, however, in choosing to satirize, rather than retain the seriousness of, conventions of Christian allegories of progress and salvation. Personified virtues such as the 'Lady of Purity … in whose hand reposes the white quill of a virgin goose,' 'Lady of Chastity' and 'Lady of Modesty' (95) therefore appear as parodied figures of established gendered norms and values, who are then ousted by the 'Truth' of Orlando's transformation:

> Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one black, Truth! And again they cry Truth! And sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth! …
>
> The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast –
>
> 'THE TRUTH!'
> at which Orlando woke.
>
> He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman. (95, 97)

Whereas Schreiner rewrites Bunyan's allegory as a quest for Truth beyond colonial Christian epistemologies, Woolf satirizes older allegorical forms to throw into sharp relief the artificiality of gender differences, and mock the idea that the 'truth' of a person is located in the sexed body. So, although Orlando's transformation is ironically presented as the revelation of truth, Woolf states that gendered pronouns are only used 'for convention's sake,' and 'in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been' (98). Importantly then, Orlando's transformation is not presented as the realization or 'truth' of individual subjectivity, rather as the emergence of one among the 'great variety of selves' (213) that comprise Orlando's multiple and multi-sexed identity.

Orlando's quest for self-discovery continues in the second half of the novel, and is conceptualized as the pursuit of a wild goose:

> Haunted! Ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea. Up I jumped (she gripped the steering wheel tighter) and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast. I've seen it, here – there – there – England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets …

Orlando only captures meaningless 'sea-weed' or 'an inch of silver – six words – in the bottom of the net' (216), before finally achieving self-realization with his/her deep love for Shelmerdine and maturation as a writer. The stroke of midnight that marks Orlando's self-discovery and the end of the novel therefore occurs at precisely the same moment as the appearance of 'a single wild bird. "It is the goose!" Orlando cried. "The wild goose … "' (228). The manuscript version of *Orlando* given by Woolf to Sackville-West makes the link between the bird and Orlando's sense of fulfilment even more explicit, with the closing lines as follows:

> And as Shelmerdine leapt from the aeroplane & ran to meet her a wild goose with its neck outstretched flew above them.
>
> Shel! Cried Orlando
>
> The [*wild*] goose is –
>
> '[*The secret of life*] is … ' (*Orlando*: An Edition of the Manuscript 339)

So, where Schreiner's hunter dies with a feather, knowing he has failed to capture the white bird Truth but that others 'will climb … by the stairs that I have built' (133), Orlando has his/her annunciatory vision as the white bird flies above Shelmerdine's head at the point that Orlando grasps its meaning, which is the secret of life.

Shakespeare's Sisters

There is no evidence to suggest that Woolf read Schreiner's posthumously published *From Man to Man*. Yet the close publication dates of Woolf's review of Schreiner's letters in 1925, *From Man to Man* in 1926, and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* in 1927, 1928 and 1929 respectively, make the convergences and correlations in their feminist aesthetics and politics all the more remarkable. Indeed, the precedent for Woolf's famous argument – that women need the space (a room) and resources (£500 per year) to be able to write – is in many ways set by Schreiner in *From Man to Man*, in the creation of the character Rebekah. The Prelude to *From Man to Man*, titled 'The Child's Day,' introduces five-year-old Rebekah, who dreams a series of stories-within-stories prompted by the discovery of her stillborn sibling on the dining room table. In the dream, Rebekah finds a baby inside a mimosa pod, and tells it 'a secret':

> I'm a person that makes stories! I write *books*! When I was little I used to scribble them in a copybook with a stick, when I didn't know how to write. But when I grew up I learnt to write; - I wrote real books, a whole room full! I've written a book about birds, and about animals, and about the world; and one day I'm going to write a book something like the

> Bible. If you like to make up stories, I shall never let anyone laugh at *you,* when you walk up and down and talk to yourself. I know you *must.* (20)

As an adult, married, and mother of four boys, Rebekah does indeed carve out a room from 'the end of the children's bedroom … as a study for herself where she could always hear the children call if they needed her at night,' and which is filled with 'books of poetry, science, history and travel' (135). Her desk drawers are full of her own childhood 'verses and short stories and little allegories told in rhyme … one book held a story as long as a novel, and quite finished,' though the 'books filled after marriage' have 'only short scraps: outlines of stories never to be filled in, and short diary notes of a very practical nature: on such date the baby was weaned, or a new servant hired,' as well as coded 'notices' recording her husband's various infidelities (139–40). As these records show, Rebekah is prevented from developing and completing pieces of creative writing by her duties as wife and mother, and she lacks the financial independence that would enable her to pursue this work. In a similar vein, Woolf creates a series of alter-egos in *A Room of One's Own*, including the writer, Mary Carmichael, who lacks 'those desirable things, time, money, and idleness' (71), which are required to produce great literature. Amusingly, there are echoes here of Mansfield's review of *Night and Day*, as Woolf initially suggests that Mary's first novel, *Life's Adventure*, falls short in comparison to Jane Austen. This view is quickly revised, and provides Woolf with the opportunity for an oblique riposte, as she highlights instead the pioneering formal strategies of Mary's work: 'First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. Very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating' (61). Woolf goes on to couple this recognition of aesthetic innovation with feminist argument, using Mary to highlight the role of women writers in representing female relationships and women in work. She concludes the chapter by making the argument: 'give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days,' though acknowledges that it may still take 'another hundred years' before the synecdochally representative 'Mary' will have the economic, social and cultural scope to 'be a poet' (71).

Schreiner's point that Rebekah lacks the space and resources to conduct meaningful work is undergirded by another dream in which Rebekah transforms into a man. As Rebekah composes the lengthy journal entry that comprises most of the longest chapter in the book, she is constantly interrupted by her children's demands, so that finally, exhausted, she falls asleep at her desk, and dreams:

> How nice it would be to be a man. She fancied she was one till she felt her very body grow strong and hard and shaped like a man's. She felt the great freedom opened to her, no place shut off from her, the long chain broken, all work possible for her, no law to say this and this is for woman, you are woman; she drew a long breath and smiled an expansive smile. … (She was him now; not herself any more.) (187–88)

Rebekah's transition is also prefigured in *The Story of an African Farm*, in the gender-crossing character Gregory Rose. Gregory fashions his 'womanhood' (232) by adopting feminine clothes and behaviours, observing himself as he does so in 'a little sixpenny looking-glass,' in which he sees 'a face surrounded by a frilled cap, white as a woman's, with a little mouth, a very short upper lip, and a receding chin' (238). There is a comparable mirror scene in *Orlando*, as

Orlando transforms then 'look[s] himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure' (98). As such, both Orlando and Gregory continue to recognize themselves in their new womanly guises, and both are able to move across sexes/genders because, as Woolf points out in *Orlando*: 'often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above' (133).

In all three cases, Rebekah, Gregory and Orlando's transformations enable new ethics of care. For Rebekah it is 'beautiful to be a man and be able to take care of and defend all the creatures weaker and smaller than you are' (187); Gregory becomes a woman in order to nurse the dying Lyndall; and Orlando, in Jessica Berman's words, 'bring[s] the claims of ethical intimacy, or the obligation towards being-otherwise, into the shared dimensions of our lived, embodied experiences' (62). All three examples connect mixed-sex/mixed-gender characters to political and ethical imperatives, and those who are able to move across these boundaries are presented as uniquely advanced in their insights and interactions with others. A parallel argument also appears in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, in which she uses Coleridge's claim that 'a great mind is androgynous' to argue that 'when this fusion' of man and woman 'takes place … the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties,' going on to state that '[h]e meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided' (74). For Woolf, as for Schreiner, those who combine 'man-womanly' and 'woman-manly' qualities (74), are pioneering empaths, carers, creators and leaders;[7] and taken together, Schreiner and Woolf's writings on this topic form a modernist continuum of ethical and politicized gendered expressions.

Using 'Shakespeare's mind' as a pre-eminent example of the genius 'type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind' (74), Woolf wonders 'what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say' (36). She concludes that Judith's genius would have been constrained by a lack of education and training, domestic duties, marriage, physical abuse and sexual exploitation, so that she would be driven eventually to '[kill] herself one winter's night' (37). While Shakespeare's sister remains one of Woolf's most famous feminist creations, she was not the first to bring her to life in fictional form. Both Anna Snaith and Stanford Friedman identify Schreiner's *From Man to Man* as a forerunner text in this regard, along with Cicely Hamilton's 1909 polemic, *Marriage as a Trade* (Introduction to *A Room of One's Own* xviii), and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which Dilly functions 'as Stephen/Shakespeare's sister' (Friedman 10–11). The uncanny repetition that appears across Schreiner and Woolf's texts is not shared with these others, however, and pushes hard at the principle established earlier in this article, that Schreiner's novels cannot be taken as origin texts or direct inspiration for Woolf's writings of the 1920s. Thus Schreiner asks:

> We have a Shakespeare; but what of possible Shakespeares we might have had, who passed their life from youth upward brewing currant wine and making pastries for fat country squires to eat, with no glimpse of the freedom of life and action, necessary even to poach on deer in the green forests, stifled out without one line written, simply because, being of the weaker sex, life gave no room for action and grasp on life? (181)

And Woolf writes:

> Shakespeare himself went, very probably, – his mother was an heiress – to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin – Ovid, Virgil and Horace – and the elements of

> grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighbourhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right … . Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. (36)

Both Schreiner and Woolf allude to the discredited myth, first recorded in the early 18th century, that Shakespeare was caught poaching deer in Charlecote Park, and this may have led to time in prison, or otherwise influenced his decision to pursue his fortunes in London. Though a fairly well-known legend, it is nevertheless arresting that both Schreiner and Woolf pick up on this same piece of Shakespearean lore in introducing his fictional sister. This sister, meanwhile, is prevented from learning how to write, and taught instead to mend, brew and stew, ending her days 'stifled out' (*From Man to Man* 181) and 'buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle' (*A Room of One's Own* 85). Both Schreiner and Woolf thus use Shakespeare's sister to show how creativity and genius are hampered by the limitations placed upon women. Yet, in the examples of their descendants, Mary and Rebekah, and in others yet to come, Woolf and Schreiner express their feminist arguments for the rights, freedoms and support required for women to write. Shakespeare's sister is not really dead therefore, but 'lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed,' writes Woolf, 'for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk amongst us in the flesh' (85–86).

Conclusion

Woolf and/on Schreiner reveals a range of confluences, similarities and resonances in their writing and thinking. While the published, archival and epistolary records of personal links between the authors remain obfuscating and error-laden, and prevent the identification of Schreiner as direct influence on Woolf, there are numerous examples in their writings in which the two nevertheless appear to make contact. The examples mentioned here include the tripartite novel structures of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Story of an African Farm*, which are used to facilitate post-religious understanding through nature-based representations of the passing of time; the sex- and gender-crossing characters, and motifs of white feathers and birds in association with allegorical representations of 'Truth' in *The Story of an African Farm* and *Orlando*; and experiments with temporality, and recurring use of connecting lines – in the forms of paint stroke, post and tree trunk – in all three novels. The feminist arguments and example of Shakespeare's sister used by both Schreiner in *From Man to Man* (1926) and Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), provide yet more evidence of views and images held in common. Whilst these convergences in Schreiner and Woolf's aesthetics and politics are remarkable in and of themselves, they are also important for recognizing the role of South African writers and

writing in the context of the development of global modernisms. As I have argued elsewhere using the example of Schreiner, South African modernism emerged prior to, and developed independently from, European canonical modernist forms. Schreiner and Woolf's resonating modernist expressions are striking therefore, because Schreiner arrived at their shared ideas and images as early as the 1870s, over a decade before Woolf was even born; and Schreiner had finished working on her novels long before her death in 1920, which marked the start of the decade in which Woolf published her review of Schreiner's letters, *To the Lighthouse, Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf and/on Schreiner therefore challenges European modernism's long-held claim to novelty, as Schreiner's writings figure as dynamic and important nodes in a multiply connected network of global feminist and modernist discourses.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding this research (grant reference AH/T008733/1). Thanks are also due to Sarah Baxter at The Society of Authors for permissions, and Matthew Whittle, Gemma Moss, Dan Wylie and Michael Durrant for reading and commenting on drafts.

Notes

1 Olive Schreiner lived in the same area of South Kensington as the Stephen family for a period (*Behind the Times* 19-20), and Schreiner met Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, whilst on holiday in the Swiss Alps. Schreiner's first impressions were not entirely favourable, as she wrote to Henry Havelock Ellis (21 January 1887): 'Leslie Stephen came today. He's a tall thin ugly man, looks nice though, of course not a touch of genius'. https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view = collections&colid = 137&letterid = 210 Accessed on 2 June 2021. According to Stephen's biographer Noel Annan, Stephen's opinion of Schreiner was no better. Though initially Stephen was pleased to meet 'the wonderful Miss Schreiner', he revised view this two days later, describing her as 'clever, but, I should guess, hard and conceited', and after a fortnight felt that 'she disapproves of marriage and thinks that everybody should be free to drop everyone else – I should drop *her* like a hot potato' (in Noel 110).

2 Olive Schreiner to Henry Havelock Ellis 1919. The Olive Schreiner Letters Online. https://oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=137&letterid=579 Accessed on 21 May 2021.

3 Though Woolf's writing notebook of 1924–1925 contains only a single page of notes on Schreiner's letters relating to pages 33–74 of the collection, I consider it likely that she did find the reference to *Night and Day,* as she includes a quote from p. 361 in the review, and the letter bearing her name appears on p.363. See Monk's House Papers, University of Sussex Library: *Bloomsbury Archive Monks House Papers/* SxMs-18/2/B/2/O. Entry 12: 'African Farm. & Letters'.

4 This period relates to the novels under discussion as Schreiner wrote *The Story of an African Farm* in the 1870s and published it in 1883; and Woolf holidayed at Talland House near St Ives, which served as key inspiration for *To The Lighthouse,* between 1882–1895.

5 I have discussed this section of the novel at greater length elsewhere (*Olive Schreiner and African Modernism* 89–91).
6 *To the Lighthouse* Notes for Writing, Gallery, Berg Collection, New York Public Library http://woolfonline.com/?node = content/image/gallery&project = 1&parent = 6&taxa = 16&content = 732&pos = 4. Accessed 2 June 2021.
7 As before, I have discussed Schreiner's view of the 'intermediate sex' in terms of evolutionary advancement in an earlier publication (*Olive Schreiner and African Modernism* 101–42).

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