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### Author

Park, Sowon S

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Sowon S. Park

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# Apostolic Minds and the Spinning House: Jane Ellen Harrison and Virginia Woolf's Discourse of Alterity

JANE Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) are two of the most iconic figures in British feminist history whose enduring influence has helped create and sustain a multitude of feminist discourses. Interestingly, both produced their landmark studies in Cambridge when it was, arguably, the most aggressively anti-feminist institution in Britain at that time. As a Classics tutor at Newnham between 1898 and 1922, Harrison pioneered comparative anthropological analysis of religion, which not only revolutionized the field of Ancient Greek studies but resulted in transforming her into ‘the most famous female classicist in history’, inhabiting cultural locations far beyond the realms of academia.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, what began as a talk Woolf gave to Newnham and Girton students has undergone numerous transformations to become today’s global feminist primer, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928). This article examines the socio-historical context and the reactionary intellectual politics of Cambridge against which the feminist theories of Harrison and Woolf were produced to identify some of the methods with which they negotiated masculine orthodoxy and structured their feminist discourse of alterity.

\* \* \*

1 Mary Beard, “‘Pausanias in Petticoats’, or The Blue Jane’, in Susan E. Alcock, John F. Cherry and Jas Elsner (eds), *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 224–46 (p. 237).

2 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1928], London: Penguin, 2004, p. 10.

3 Contrary to prevalent belief that Virginia Woolf was self-educated, Christine Kenyon Jones and Anna Snaith have recently shown that Woolf received formal education at King's College London between 1897 and 1901. She took courses in History (Continental and English), Greek (intermediate and advanced), Latin, German, Italian, Architecture and Art. See Christine Kenyon Jones and Anna Snaith, "Tilting at Universities": Woolf at King's College London', *Woolf Studies Annual* 16, 2010, pp. 1-44.

4 For a comparative history of Oxford and Cambridge, see Christopher Brooke and Roger Highfield, *Oxford and Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. See also, Arthur Engel, *From Clergyman to Don: The Rise of the Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

5 The Cambridge Apostles is a private intellectual society founded in 1820 to which women gained

In October 1928, Virginia Woolf claimed that 'the University ... seemed a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand'.<sup>2</sup> To this, one might interject that, actually, the pavement of the Strand had been peaceably accommodating the undergraduates of King's College London since 1831, except that the university to which Woolf was referring was not universities in general, but Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> Cantab, as both metonym and metaphor, features widely in Woolf's writing, and the idea of Cambridge as a sanctuary or a cloistral refuge was a theme she frequently revisited, but, of course, it is not restricted to her writing. By common consent, this was a fair description of Cambridge and Oxford in the early twentieth century, their origins reaching far back to their ecclesiastical inception in the thirteenth century when most of the scholars of the universities were clergymen or in holy orders of some sort. Woolf conflates Oxford and Cambridge into Oxbridge, as is commonly done, and while it is true that the two are interchangeable in many instances, Harrison and Woolf drew on a particular aspect of Cambridge that is very distinct from Oxford, and it is this particularity and its effects that I shall focus on in this article.

The main divide between the two institutions was most powerfully expressed during the English Civil War (1642) when they took up opposing political positions: the Cambridge Puritans, or the 'Roundheads', versus the Oxford Cavaliers. This political difference reflected a broader intellectual disagreement, which, over the centuries, produced the opposition of the Cambridge Whigs and the Oxford Jacobites; the evangelical puritanism of Cambridge and the High Church Oxford movement; the insular 'high and dry' climate of Cambridge and the cosmopolitan, worldly and romantic Oxford.<sup>4</sup> When the young men who were to form the Bloomsbury group were being educated from, say, 1885 to 1905, Cambridge, unlike Oxford, was imbued with a puritan ethos which became fundamental to their later convictions, values and beliefs. It was this specificity of Cambridge that laid the ground for, on the one hand, Bloomsbury's moral puritanism and, on the other, the unrelenting attack on religion. And the intellectual attitudes of the Apostles, in particular, owe much to the puritan integrity stressed by the upper-middle-class group of reforming Cambridge evangelicals, of which Woolf's great-grandfather was an active member.<sup>5</sup> As S.P. Rosenbaum has forcefully argued: 'the significance of Cambridge in the ... history [of Bloomsbury] is difficult to overemphasise'.<sup>6</sup>

The intellectual tradition of puritanism in Cambridge affected another important issue: the 'woman question'. Cambridge fought harder and longer to block women's admission than any other university in Britain.

It was only in 1948 that women were allowed full membership of the university, as opposed to 1921 in Oxford, and Magdalene, the last of the all-male colleges to desegregate, did not do so until 1988. Out of the extensive and vigorous efforts to preserve Cambridge as a male institution, one might look at 1897 when there was a call to vote on whether women should be allowed to be examined for degrees—when Jane Ellen Harrison would have just returned to Newnham College after 20 years. *The Times* printed train timetables from London to Cambridge to maximize the attendance of alumni, who were evidently thought of as being against the idea.

Cambridge, undoubtedly the last bastion of the male ‘sanctuary’ in Britain, was a very powerful one to boot. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the university had taken on various powers that now seem inordinate—the power to elect its own Member of Parliament with alumni votes, for example, or the vice chancellor’s powers to overrule the local jurisdiction. All Woolfians are familiar with the chained-down books in Cambridge libraries and the many rules regarding access to turfs. Less well known, but much more alarming, was the university’s power to incarcerate women who were judged to be compromising the morals of the undergraduates.

As the three ‘Committals Books’ (1823–94) in the University Archives of Cambridge attest, hundreds of girls—allegedly lewd and some as young as 13—were locked in cells 19 feet square, with up to 17 occupants per room, with no heating or toilet facilities, in a penitentiary called the Spinning House (1631–1894).<sup>7</sup> So called because the inmates were given wool to spin, the Spinning House had its basis in the legal authority of the university, which declared:

1<sup>st</sup>. That the University by virtue of their Charter sanctioned by Act of Parliament, have an undoubted right to cause the Public Street to be inspected, and loose and disorderly women to be taken up and sent to the Spinning House or the house of correction.

2<sup>nd</sup>. That it appears from ancient and immemorial usage that the Proctors for the time being are officers deputed by the University to make this Inspection and to take up and carry the above-mentioned women before the Vice Chancellor for examination.

3<sup>rd</sup>. That it is therefore the duty of the Proctors to continue to act accordingly to this ancient and immemorial usage, and to be diligent in frequently inspecting the streets and in endeavoring to remove such nuisances as are now complained of; And lastly that a contumacious and willful omission of so important a duty is highly culpable in itself, disgraceful to any Proctor who is guilty of it, and injurious to the common morals and discipline of the University.<sup>8</sup>

admission in the 1970s. See Peter Allen, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

6 S.P. Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, London: Macmillan, 1987, p. 109.

7 ‘Committals Book’, vol. 1 (1823–36), vol. 2 (1836–50), vol. 3 (1849–94), Records relating to the interaction of the Town and University of Cambridge, T.VIII 1–3, University Archives of Cambridge.

8 Cam Collection Papers 179, 7 February 1793, CUR 44.1, MS Orders of the Vice Chancellor and Heads, University Archives of Cambridge.

Under such authority, the university exercised institutionalized disciplinary control of women with uncommon ferocity and contempt. The university had powers far exceeding those of the police, while the girls who were charged with being 'loose and disorderly' had no rights at all: no legal representation and no chance of appeal. The most frequent accusation against a girl was 'street walking', but the court was not required to prove she had been soliciting since the sentencing was done privately in the offices of the vice chancellor. Walking with or talking to a member of the university in public was, for the unprotected, a criminal offence. The following example is representative of the abuse of power perpetrated on the young girls: seven young milliners and dressmakers—Rosetta Aves (17), Harriet Bell (22), Emma Coxall (19), Sarah Ebbon (20), Charlotte Fuller (18), Emily Kemp (22) and her sister, Louisa Kemp (14)—were on their way to a dance in a nearby village, with two undergraduates. Their omnibus was flagged down in St Andrew's street (in the city centre of Cambridge), and a proctor, who had presumably been informed, arrested the girls and kept them in a cell overnight in the Spinning House. The following morning they were taken to the Vice Chancellor Latimer Neville's court, where they received sentences ranging from 7 to 14 days' imprisonment.<sup>9</sup> The undergraduates were privately chastised by their college tutor but, as always, were not subject to the vice chancellor's chambers or, of course, the penitentiary. This incident was typical enough, except that it was picked up by the *Daily Telegraph*, which then aroused both national and local indignation. But a memorial signed by 360 members of the university ensured that the Spinning House proceeded as before.<sup>10</sup>

In the three 'Committals Books' there are listed 1,820 names of those incarcerated, as well as a substantial number of arrests. Considering that there were only about 1,500 undergraduates at Cambridge in the nineteenth century, the numbers of women corrupting the undergraduates seem disproportionately large. The fact that a great many of the young girls were servants in undergraduate lodging houses and that the Spinning House was mostly unoccupied during the long vacation makes it clear that it functioned as a constitutive part of the university system which enabled and sanctioned disciplinary control of women.

Against the background of the culture encapsulated by the Spinning House, women academics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were making tremendous efforts to bring about intellectual equality. And though the spinner and the woman student occupied mutually exclusive spaces, they were nevertheless held on the margins of the power structure which penalized both. Among the pioneering women academics, Jane Ellen Harrison was one of the most influential. Her work

9 *Daily Telegraph*, 2 February 1860.

10 I am indebted to Margot Holbrook's 'The Spinning-House', *Cambridge Local Women's History Society Review* 8, 1999, pp. 3–25.

was better known in Bloomsbury than that of any other Cambridge classicist or anthropologist, including James Frazer.<sup>11</sup> Providing a rare appraisal of Harrison that is not gendered, Leonard Woolf wrote that Harrison was '[o]ne of the most civilized persons [he had] ever known'.<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, too, had an unwavering respect for Harrison: she is held up as the leading example of the immense advance in intellectual power among women in the essay 'The Intellectual Status of Women' (1920), and there is the famous tribute in *A Room of One's Own* where Harrison provides the living proof that women have contributed in areas outside the novel.<sup>13</sup> However, gender-specific acclaim often meant male-defined honor: her name was preceded by the not only gendered, but, to a few, antiphrastic epithet, 'cleverest woman in England'. Asquith's view was that there was 'no more distinguished woman scholar found anywhere today', and Roger Fry thought she had a 'really Apostolic mind'—the ultimate tribute that bolsters the intellectual hegemony of patriarchy with supercilious praise.<sup>14</sup>

The Apostle, the most esteemed, rare type of all in the 'sanctuary' of Cambridge, represents the other extreme to that represented by the Spinning House. There could not be a bigger gap between the two, separated as they are by town and gown, rich and poor, the educated and the deprived, men and women. But both are symptomatic of the university that Woolf more famously railed against in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (1938), representing as they do the unjust and unchecked power of the institution on the one hand, and the exclusive and androcentric intellectual culture on the other. Harrison, like Woolf, negotiated with both the woman question and the intellectual climate that bred the Apostles, and her work shows important traces of both.

Interestingly, Harrison is remarkably circumspect about voicing the kind of difficulty that she encountered in her autobiographical writing. There is not a trace of the way she was marginalized by operations of power in her autobiography *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (1925), published by Woolf. The narrative told here is a continuous upwards and onwards one, with a clear trajectory and very many successes. At Cambridge, she writes, 'great men and women began to come into my life'.<sup>15</sup> And it is a veritable roll-call of the eminent and the brilliant. Here she meets George Eliot, there Turgenev, and then it is Gladstone, Browning, Herbert Spencer, Walter Pater, Henry James and, rather unexpectedly, the Crown Prince of Japan. The 'glamorous, self-glamorizing, charismatic, and ambitious' persona of Harrison was undoubtedly of her own making.<sup>16</sup> She allowed no bitterness or protest or critique as part of her self-presentation, preferring to define herself as 'fatally fluent'.<sup>17</sup>

11 Rosenbaum, *Victorian Bloomsbury*, p. 121.

12 Quoted in Mary Paley Marshall, *What I Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947, pp. 20–1.

13 The friendship between Harrison and Woolf began in 1904 and ended with Harrison's death in 1928.

14 Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*, London: Hogarth, 1940, p. 92.

15 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student's Life*, London: Hogarth, 1925, p. 44.

16 Beard, 'Pausanias in Petticoats', p. 232. Also see Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

17 Beard, 'Pausanias in Petticoats', p. 232.

- 18 See Shelley Arlen, 'For the Love of an Idea: Jane Ellen Harrison, Heretic and Humanist', *Women's History Review* 5:2, 1996, pp. 165–90. Arlen examines the criticisms of Harrison's works by William Ridgeway and Montague Rhodes James, and argues that Harrison's scholarship was ridiculed and denounced by those 'steeped in the traditions of androcentric positivism' (p. 172). Mary Beard has examined the textual history of Harrison's most famous work 'The Blue Jane' and has discussed the bias of some of the male reviewers towards female scholarship. See Mary Beard, 'Pausanias in Petticoats', pp. 224–39.
- 19 Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Moments of Being*, London: Grafton Books, 1989, pp. 72–173 (p. 164).
- 20 See, in particular, Laura Marcus, 'Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf', in Sue Roe and Susan Sellars (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, Cambridge:
- However, behind the veneer of effortless triumph lie caustic analyses of the institution.<sup>18</sup> Harrison's attacks were mostly oblique, in ways similar to those of Woolf, who acknowledged that the polite and 'sidelong approach' ascribed to the game of Victorian society allowed her 'to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud'.<sup>19</sup> Woolf's feminist expressions have long been the object of scrutiny and analysis, including her indebtedness to Harrison, whose feminist politics have attracted far fewer studies as yet.<sup>20</sup> Before examining their interventions, it is worth noting that the influence extended both ways. Harrison told Woolf in 1923: 'Alas . . . you and your sister and perhaps Lytton Strachey are the only ones of the younger generation I can respect. You alone carry on the traditions of our day'.<sup>21</sup> She also claimed that reading 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' converted her to a favorable view of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'I read "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" and Mrs Woolf made me see that these Georgian characters which I had thought were so unreal and even teasing were real with an intimacy and spirituality before unattempted'.<sup>22</sup> Their mutual admiration was based on a shared intellectual and social background. Both had a very Victorian education, or 'miscellaneous rubbish' as Harrison puts it, and both freed themselves from the tyranny of the patriarchal culture in which they had grown up. Both were passionate about Dostoevsky and Turgenev and both shared a love of ancient Greek. Both linked the visual arts to their work and aimed to puncture, in Harrison's words, the 'anthropomorphic Gods'. Their thoughts, assumptions and expressions are strikingly similar. And it is extremely difficult to find a single thing on which they disagreed—with the exception of their views on Hope Mirrlees. In their work one regularly finds not only the same point of view but very often views expressed in the same metaphors and phrases.
- Harrison's influence on *Night and Day*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Between the Acts* and *A Room of One's Own* has been investigated by Martha Carpentier, Jane Marcus and Patricia Maika, but there has not yet been a study on how the feminist outlook of Harrison and Woolf was informed by the institution of Cambridge. But it is in this field that they are in strongest agreement. Harrison's feminist position, put forward in her articles '*Scientiae sacra fames*' ('Woman and Knowledge') in 1913 and '*Homo sum*' ('I Am a Human Being') in 1915, exactly mirrors Woolf's. From the alienation felt towards the suffragettes on aesthetic grounds to utopian hopes for the future, from the humanist case for feminism to the strong vindication of women throughout history—in literary history and, in Harrison, classical history—their feminist positions are in tremendous agreement. And it is not only in their politics that their thoughts are strikingly alike but, as I have suggested, in their methods and



their language. In ‘*Scientiae sacra fames*’, Harrison discusses a need for women to own a ‘Home of One’s Own’,<sup>23</sup> anticipating Woolf’s celebrated essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. Though there is no evidence that this phrase was consciously taken up by Woolf, it is one of the examples where their thoughts converged. The article concludes with the lines: ‘To face the facts and the problems of life is characteristic of today. To see them clearly we need the binocular vision of the two sexes’. The ‘binocular vision of the two sexes’ would later be echoed in Woolf’s androgynous mind in the peroration of *A Room of One’s Own*.

Perhaps more interesting is the ‘sidelong approach’ to negotiating the immediate masculine intellectual culture in their work. In ‘“*Homo sum*”: A Letter to an Anti-Suffragist from an Anthropologist’ (1912), first published by the National College Equal Suffrage League and republished in *Alpha and Omega* (1915), there are expressions of deep disquiet that were undisclosed in Harrison’s autobiography. Beginning with an early apology for the ‘egotism of recounting [her] own experience’, she outlines, in an impersonal academic tone, how her anthropological training converted her to pro-suffragism. Harrison’s theoretical and political positions are almost identical to those in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*—male egotism and its effects, the restrictive nature of manly or womanly virtues, and the psychology of sex. What is different is that Harrison does not directly engage with her own society but looks to what she calls the ‘savage’ societies—the South Pacific islands, Australia, Polynesia, Africa and America—in other words, the rest of the non-white world. And though the work is ostensibly about primitive societies, Harrison does not provide any discussion of the ‘Man’s House’ in any of the cultures apart from the perfunctory and sweeping mention of generic tribes in the introduction—the so-called ‘savage’ tribes are, in fact, a rhetorical device that enables her to discuss obliquely her own. She observes that in all cultures of the ‘savage’ tribes, there is always at their core an institution which she calls the ‘Man’s House’: ‘The savage instead of living in a simple domestic life with wife and child lives a double life’, she argues, ‘the domestic life and the civilized life’. The two lives of the ‘savage’ are structured so they remain segregated and hierarchical: the ‘Man’s House’ is ‘his public school, his University, his club, his public house . . . not only his social home but also his church’.<sup>24</sup> Cambridge is not once mentioned, but her argument about the sexual exploitation and the exclusion of women as the foundation upon which public masculine institutions are based directs the reader towards the concealed polemic, and the text reads less as an anthropologist’s analysis of ‘savage societies’ than an excoriation of the ‘Man’s House’ of Cambridge and the culture of demonizing women, who were seen to provoke lust.

Cambridge  
University Press,  
2000, pp. 209–44.

21 Harrison to Woolf, 30 July, 1923, in Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds), *A Change of Perspective: Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, London: Hogarth Press, 1977, p. 58.

22 Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student’s Life*, p. 26.

23 Jane Ellen Harrison, *Alpha and Omega*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915, pp. 116–42.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

When Harrison first went up to Cambridge in 1874, the Spinning House had stood for over two centuries as a powerful symbol. One Enid Porter recalled in the *East Anglia Magazine*, a regional monthly publication, that her mother, like other children brought up in the 1880s, used to be admonished with the words: “‘If you are naughty, you’ll have to go to the Spinning House’”. Passing it on St Andrew’s Street, they would scuttle past fearfully.<sup>25</sup> St Andrew’s Street is surrounded by Emmanuel, Downing and Christ’s, and not far from it is Pembroke and the Backs, with King’s, Trinity and Queens’. More importantly, it joins onto Regent Street, which was the first site for women students and is not far from Newnham. So when Harrison writes, ‘[t]he Man’s House is the centre of a secret society to which woman begs or buys admission and whose last survivals are still precariously entrenched in the precincts of Pall Mall’,<sup>26</sup> it raises the question of what kind of price she regarded herself as having paid to gain admission to the secret society.

Harrison’s veiled polemic is absorbed, perfected and extended by Woolf, who was freer from considerations about academic interpretive communities and disciplinary frameworks. The link between elite patriarchal institutions and the sexualization and degradation of women is also one of Woolf’s chief concerns, which she explored in a wide range of genres and styles<sup>27</sup> but, with the exception of *Three Guineas*, rarely explicitly. In her essay, ‘On Not Knowing Greek’ (1925), Woolf praises the Socratic method of teaching and it is only by implication that she criticizes what she perceived to be the pedagogic method of Cambridge:

Truth, it seems, is various. Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties ... It is not to the cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude that we are to turn, but to the well-sunned nature, the man who practices the art of living.<sup>28</sup>

Twelve years later, the ‘cloistered disciplinarian mortifying himself in solitude’ would figure again in Edward Pargiter, whose day, in the 1880 section of *The Years* (1937), was ‘parcelled out on the advice of his tutor into hours and half-hours’ devoted to studying Greek in his ‘cell’.<sup>29</sup> When his friends come by in the evening, ‘Damn awkward’ is his reaction because he can talk about hunting with Gibbs and books with Ashley but the three of them can only talk about girls together. When he is done with this ordeal and is relieved that they have left, Ashley comes back. Edward deals with this situation by turning the key and refusing to acknowledge his friend’s presence outside the door, turning his attention instead to *Antigone*. Compare this to the scene depicted in Woolf’s short story ‘A Woman’s College from the Outside’ (1926). Several girls are playing cards on the bed; others stroll in casually, one yawning, all effortlessly picking

25 Enid Porter, ‘For Unruly and Stubborn Rogues’, *East Anglia Magazine* 18, 1958–9, pp. 72–7 (p. 72).

26 Harrison, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 109.

27 From the ‘women of Piccadilly’ in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), to Colonel Pargiter and his mistress, Mira, in her penultimate novel, *The Years*, Woolf makes a series of oblique links between male elitist public institutions and the private subjugation of women.

28 Virginia Woolf, ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, in *The Common Reader*, vol. 1, London: Hogarth Press, 1925, p. 33.

29 Virginia Woolf, *The Years* [1937], London: Vintage, 1992, p. 41.

up on the conversation, continually laughing, some occasionally dozing off. ‘Their laughter . . . was a laughter of mind and body floating away rules, hours, discipline, immensely fertilizing, yet formless, chaotic, trailing and straying and tufting the rose bushes with shreds of vapour.’<sup>30</sup> Male scholarship is depicted as constrained, self-conscious, hermetic and fundamentally unfree, as opposed to the women undergraduates who are seen to pursue truth with all their faculties.

Another example where the single-minded pursuit of intellectual goals is disparaged and explained as an effect of puritanical repression is ‘A Society’, a short story published in *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), possibly inspired by Arnold Bennett’s piece in *Our Women* on the intellectual inferiority of women in September 1920.<sup>31</sup> The story lampoons, through a group of young female characters, the pomposity of male achievements while at the same time outlining the sophisticated operations of masculine achievements: government and business. One vignette involves Castalia, one of the protagonists, who disguises herself as a charwoman at Oxbridge to get an idea of what exactly it is that dons do. Breaking into Professor Hobkin’s study, she examines his life work: ‘The defence of Sappho’s chastity’. ‘I can’t think how they do it. It is all so queer’, she reports back to her friends. ‘These Professors . . . live in large houses built round grass plots each in a kind of cell by himself.’<sup>32</sup> She learns nothing of value but is reminded of ugly, squat, bristly little plants, each in a separate pot.

If these pieces were ‘sidelong’, her extended and plain-spoken polemic *Three Guineas* constructs ‘daughters of educated men’ as a class. The usage of ‘educated’ in this instance is synonymous with ‘Oxbridge-educated’, as in the previous case where Woolf used ‘the University’ for Cambridge—not an uncommon practice in the early twentieth century. More specifically, it is the idea of a puritan Cambridge against which her feminist arguments are positioned: part of ‘the crippling effect of Cambridge and its one-sided education’ was male egotism, according to Woolf, whose defining feminist principle might be summed up as ‘anti-egotist’ and whose literary experimentations are embodiments of that principle.<sup>33</sup>

However much Harrison and Woolf were the producers of a political discourse that would undermine Cambridge, as symbolized by Apostolic minds and the Spinning House, they were also products of it. Their typical position towards Cambridge was one of deep ambivalence, which went beyond stylistic strategies. The paradoxical combination of disdain and respect is reflected in Woolf’s pronouncement about Cambridge intellectuals:

30 Virginia Woolf, ‘A Woman’s College from the Outside’ [1926], in Mary Lyon (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: Books and Portraits*, London: Triad Grafton, 1977, p. 146.

31 Arnold Bennett, *Our Women*, London: Cassell, 1920.

32 Virginia Woolf, ‘A Society’, in *Monday or Tuesday* [1921], London: Hesperus Press, 2003, p. 12.

33 Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, p. 160.

Talking of the very type, or mould of so many Cambridge intellectuals ... is like a steel engraving, without colour, or warmth or body; but with an infinity of precise clear lines ... I say to myself, I admire them. I go on: I respect them, I say; I admire their honesty, their integrity, their intellect. If I am in the same room with other types ... I have my Cambridge intellectual yard measure handy; and say silently: How terribly you fall short. How you miss the mark, here and here and here.<sup>34</sup>

The 'honesty', 'integrity' and 'intellect' of Cambridge intellectuals may seem to exist in an uneasy relation of incompatibility with the monstrous egotism of Professor Von X but, in the words of James Ramsay when he is finally on his way to the lighthouse: 'nothing was simply one thing'.<sup>35</sup> Woolf's piercing self-verdict typifies her position on this issue: 'Much though I hate Cambridge, and bitterly though I've suffered from it, I still respect it. I suppose that even without education ... I am ... of that narrow, ascetic, puritanical breed.'<sup>36</sup>

\* \* \*

The role of the female intellectual in the twenty-first century is no longer vehemently contested, at least in the western world, and where once the Spinning House stood, there is now Nelson Mandela House. A cell door, the only material remnant of the penitentiary, is an exhibit at the Cambridge Folk Museum; the current vice chancellor of Cambridge is a woman and the student gender ratio is roughly 50–50. The 'self-neutralizing aesthetic and voice-dropping narrative practice' and concealed polemics have all but disappeared from Cambridge sexual politics.<sup>37</sup>

The feminist philosophy of Jane Ellen Harrison and Virginia Woolf was first formed partly as a reaction to the intellectual puritanism of Cambridge. But their 'sidelong' negotiations with patriarchal intellectual hegemony are still relevant, as their enduring influence attests, for they offer a model of how to confront the ever present dangers to which subjugated groups are exposed if they attempt to gain entry into the establishment on its own terms, while at the same time trying to subvert it. At the same time, their example demonstrates that if the process of subversion includes a degree of assimilation and integration that a simpler oppositional model of the struggle for power cannot accommodate, it also shows up the reified force with which their feminist theories are sometimes received.

34 Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', pp. 120–1.

35 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* [1925], London: Penguin, 1992, p. 202.

36 Woolf to Ethel Smyth, 6 April 1930, in Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann Banks (eds), *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1929–1931*, vol. 4, London: Hogarth Press, 1978, p. 155.

37 See Tuzyline Jita Allen, 'A Voice of One's Own: Implications of Impersonality in the Essays of Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker', in Ruth- Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman (eds), *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 131–47 (p. 132).