

Chapter 16
**‘Nothing is Impracticable for a Single,
Middle-Aged Woman with an Income of her
Own’: The Spinster in Women’s Fiction of
the 1920s**

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In Katherine Mansfield’s short story, ‘Miss Brill’ (1922), an ageing spinster assumes a practised air of *joie de vivre*. The shabby fox-fur fondly paraded by Miss Brill in all weathers is a totem belying the reality of its owner’s poverty and loneliness. The truth is brought home by a courting couple overheard in the park. The boy resents the ‘silly old mug’ of the ‘stupid old thing’ and the girl callously mocks the fur that to her looks ‘exactly like a fried whiting’. The story ends pointedly. Miss Brill carefully returns her cherished fur to its box, ‘but when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying’.¹

The disparity between how the spinster sees herself and how she seems to others is the essence of this short story, and of much imaginative writing on spinsterhood published in the 1920s. Women writers had long been concerned with the plight of the spinster, a concern reaching back to Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1851) and resurfacing with Mona Caird’s *The Morality of Marriage* (1897), Cicely Hamilton’s *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), and Elizabeth Robins’ *Way Stations* (1913), as well as F.M. Mayor’s *The Third Miss Symons* of the same year. But the topic of spinsterhood recurs in the 1920s with a frequency and insistence that can only be understood in its historical specificity. With unmarried women of marriageable age far outnumbering men of the same age group the meaning of spinsterhood became a site of contestation between those who wished to objectify the spinster and others who saw her as a person with needs, desires, and potential of her own.

If much that was written in the 1920s was unashamedly hostile to the spinster, there was also a strong drive towards self-assertion on the part of spinsters, to which the texts to which I shall refer bear powerful witness. But the writings of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Radclyffe Hall, Winifred Holtby, Katherine Mansfield, F.M. Mayor, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Sylvia Townsend-Warner are diverse, and cannot, without gross distortion, be assimilated to any common label. There was not, nor could there have been, sufficient consensus, aesthetic or political, among women writers to make a uniform approach to spinsterhood possible. Nevertheless, common interests, for example in the wider options that should be open to the increasing numbers of women whose minds did not travel along the smooth road to matrimony, are explored across a wide spectrum of literary texts. And a number of oppositions are frequently invoked: movement or stasis& duty to self or to others& freedom or imprisonment&

For most of the inter-war period about a third of all women who had not married by the age of 29 did not marry during their reproductive years.² As Billie Melman has pointed out, social observers of the day frequently made use of a corrupted Darwinist vocabulary, and the socio-demographic imbalance was widely 'interpreted as a sign of universal disequilibrium—a fall, as it were, from a "natural" state of harmony between males and females'.³ After the Census disclosures in the late summer of 1921 speculation on the future prospects of two million 'superfluous women' became a national pastime. The *New Statesman* highlighted the difference between its own attitudes and those of other publications in this unsigned editorial piece on 24 September:

Hence we think it absurd on the part of the Press to talk so much of the two thousand [sic] 'superfluous women', or 'thwarted women', as though 'superfluous', 'thwarted', and 'unmarried' were convertible terms. We have known a considerable number of married women who were at least as superfluous as St. Teresa, and there are married men of our acquaintance who live thwarted lives in comparison with William Pitt. Who, indeed, is to decide what is a thwarted life? Was Swift's a thwarted life? Or Ruskin's? If so, it seems clear that thwarting may be merely a means to complete fulfilment.⁴

The tone in which the public debate was conducted was not to every woman writer's taste. Some, including May Sinclair, whose novels *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922) are concerned with the effects of sublimation and repression on the life of the spinster, pointedly refused to participate. When Sinclair, who was living in genteel poverty with her mother at the time, was asked to write for the newspapers she answered: 'I'm not interested in the Superfluous 2,000,000! If they are superfluous, let them emigrate. But they don't and won't'.⁵

The notion of the state-directed emigration of women to the colonies was perhaps the most authoritarian of many 'solutions' to the demographic imbalance. But when *The Times* of August 1921 advised women to travel to the colonies to find a husband, as Adela Quested does in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), Vera Brittain wrote to Winifred Holtby ('one "superfluous" woman to another') making her feelings clear:

Personally I haven't the least objection to being superfluous...though I shall be delighted for any work I may do to take me abroad, it will not be because I shall thereby be enabled the better to capture the elusive male.⁶

However, in practice the life of the spinster in the family home was still often one of unrelieved domestic servitude. Radclyffe Hall, visiting a Devon resort in 1921, was distressed by the sight of an old lady waited upon by her ageing daughter: 'ghastly to see these unmarried daughters who are just unpaid servants', and the old people 'sucking the life out of them like octopi'.⁷ Hall later discarded her first title for *The Unlit Lamp*, 'Octopi', but retained the metaphor of strangulation from which the novel's

social satire derives much of its strength. The inter-war novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, who had experienced psychic subjugation at the hands of her widowed mother, are peopled with insupportable autocrats of the breakfast table. Domestic tyranny exercised over their young by matriarchs—the egocentric, Sophia Stace in *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), the sharp-tongued Harriet Haslam in *Men and Wives* (1931)—is a commonplace.

The loosening in the 1920s of sexual taboos extended only to nonmarital heterosexual activity.⁸ It was of little benefit to the many unmarried women with neither the desire nor the opportunity to form sexual relationships with men, or whose sexual orientation was to women. Indeed, the revolutionary feminist historian, Sheila Jeffreys, has claimed that the hostile attitudes to the spinster were deliberately aggravated by sex reformers who stressed women's right to experience sexual pleasure in marriage, reviling earlier feminists as prudes and puritans.⁹ This claim should, however, be viewed with caution.¹⁰

The taboos on homosexual activity, exemplified in the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*, intensified considerably during the decade, doing much to break the patterns of emotional dependency between women in the 1914 war. Moreover, a woman attempting to escape from the traditional limitations of domestic obligations might well find herself thrust into them again by the authority of the psychologist. Winifred Holtby noted with dismay that women everywhere were being told to 'enjoy the full cycle of sex-experience, or they would become riddled with complexes like a rotting fruit'.¹¹

In particular, there was a vogue for psychoanalytic ideas after more of Freud's works, available since 1913, came to be translated in the 1920s. Katherine Mansfield rebelled openly against the sexualization of literary sensibility: 'I shall *never* see sex in trees, sex in the running brooks, sex in stones and sex in everything'.¹² But for many women writers the confusion and conflict stirred by the cross-set of taboos and new modes of analysis was deeply distressing, and, as Winifred Holtby commented 'the wonder is that any woman continued to write novels at all'.¹³

Hostility to the spinster was at its most vitriolic in the Catholic social theorist, A.M. Ludovici. Ludovici combined his onslaughts upon 'thousands of bitter or sub-normal women' who had 'thwarted or deficient passions'¹⁴ with contradictory attacks on 'Feminist propaganda in favour of sterile Free Love, Restricted Fertility and Birth Control'.¹⁵ In *Woman: A Vindication* he had uttered this stern warning:

Since the spinsters of any country represent a body of human beings who are not leading natural lives, and whose fundamental instincts are able to find no normal expression or satisfaction, it follows... that the influence of this body of spinsters on the life of the nation to which they belong, must be abnormal, and therefore contrary to the normal needs and the natural development of that nation.¹⁶

'Natural Lives', 'normal expression', 'abnormal' influence and 'natural development'—the play on the idea of 'the natural' in this litany of deviance reveals an obsessive interest in exorcising difference. In a labyrinth of connection, interrelation, and extension, the spinster is transformed into an agent of perverse subversion, a fifth columnist, an enemy of the state. Ludovici's views on spinsterhood are clearly extreme, but even so repay careful attention as symptomatic of the opinions expressed commonly, if less virulently, at the time. As late as 1935 Dorothy Sayers' detective, Harriet Vane, investigating a spate of poison-pen letters in an Oxford college, 'could think of whole sets of epithets, ready-minted for circulation' for their author, among them ' "soured virginity"... "unnatural life"... "semi-demented spinsters"... "starved appetites and suppressed impulses" '.¹⁷

But ironically those like Ludovici who labelled the spinster deviant and malignant conferred an authoritative right to speak upon the woman thus travestied. This accelerated the process whereby the derogatory image of the spinster came to be contested, and in the end transformed, largely through the objections voiced by spinsters themselves. The spinster, according to Ludovici, is defined by 'want' or 'lack'. The spinster must have some 'wants' but is denied others. The spinster must 'want' a husband. This 'want' is confidently refuted in *Lolly Willowes*, in Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street*, in *The Unlit Lamp*, in *Surplus*, and in Sheila Kaye-Smith's *Joanna Godden*. It is beautifully subverted by E.H. Young's *soi-disant* spinster, Hannah Mole in *Miss Mole* (1931), jauntily sailing under spinsterhood as a flag of convenience, and wondering why so much importance was attached to the chastity of women.

Although there is always a ricochet between lived experience and literary experience, the literary and lived experience of women in the 1920s reveals a particularly intense interchange. In *Time and Tide*, the journalist Rosaline Masson characterized the plight which commonly befell the dispossessed daughter in an arresting image:

Much of the home-life of our country is built up on a substratum of obscure martyrdoms...until the family home is broken up by death. And then the luxurious, hospitable family home belches forth dismayed spinsters into an unsympathetic world, to wander about as aimlessly, and seek cover as nervously, as do the wood-lice when the flower-pot is lifted.¹⁸