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Margaret Sullivan

Marshall University, sullivanm@marshall.edu

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Special Issue on Virginia Woolf and Spirituality

Edited by

Amy C. Smith and Isabel M^a Andrés Cuevas



“Let There Be Rose Leaves”: Lesbian Subjectivity and Religious Discourse in *The Waves*

This essay analyzes the religious argument that Virginia Woolf, through the paired characters of Rhoda and the lady at Elvedon, develops in *The Waves*. Specifically, I make a three-tiered claim. First, although both Rhoda and the lady are responses to a Judeo-Christian orthodoxy that, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf says quieted generations of prophetesses (146), the two differ in their relationship to one fundamental story: Genesis and the Garden of Eden. The lady is trapped in Elvedon, a quasi-Edenic space. Rhoda, on the other hand, lesbianizes the Garden, centering it around her beloved Miss Lambert. Second, Rhoda’s final soliloquy radically transforms her relationship to the Garden story, effectively articulating a religious narrative outside inherited, patrilineal constructs. “Let there be rose leaves; let there be vine leaves” (204), Rhoda says, explicitly appropriating the “authority” of God-the-Father’s creative voice. Third, when Rhoda dies after her God-like utterance, Woolf makes the point that challenges to the authority of the garden, to the first, foundational, hetero text, simply will not succeed. The garden, as the original story of heterosexual desire, refuses to be appropriated by the non-normative sexual subject. Eden, quite simply, cannot be queered.

A fruitful starting place for an analysis of Woolf’s religious argument is the lady of Elvedon, a figure clearly connected to Judeo-Christian narrative tradition. As both Joseph Allen Boone and Louise A. Poresky demonstrate, Elvedon is marked by significant biblical inversions. Rather than the abundant foliage of Eden—“every plant yielding seed,” “every tree with seed in its fruit,”” (*New Revised Standard Version* [NRSV] Gen. 1.29)—Elvedon evidences degeneration: “some primeval fir cone falling to rot” (17). Additionally, both gardens contain apples, yet while Eden’s apples are “pleasant to the sight and good for food,” (Gen. 2.9), Elvedon’s are not as enticing: these apples are “rotten” and “age[d]” (17). The scriptural garden is a “good” and peaceful land, moreover, but Elvedon is marked by fear. Bernard and the others remark repeatedly on the danger in Elvedon: “Run! [. . .] We shall be shot[.] [. . .] We are in a hostile country. We must escape to the beech wood” (17).

The lady writing at Elvedon appears amid such scriptural distortions. Situated at the center of this inverted Eden—“over the wall [. . .] between two long windows, writing”—the lady is an archetypal author, a creator. She “creates the very characters who are watching her” (245),

as Briggs astutely puts it.¹ As a creative force within a quasi-Edenic land, the lady continues Woolf’s refiguration of inherited religious texts. In particular, she reworks the Judeo-Christian creation story in which an implicitly male God-the-Father speaks the world into being. By substituting a woman who writes creation for the God who spoke it, Woolf installs the feminine in a story that was previously without female figuration.

Much about the lady, however, indicates that she is unable to recreate originating religious texts. The lady is unnamed, for instance, and receives virtually no physical description. With both of these rhetorical choices, Woolf indicates that the lady, if left in a patriarchal narrative structure, will be denied representation. Additionally, the lady’s activity of writing continues to mark her throughout the text. She reappears several times, yet subsequent designations repeat, almost verbatim, the original citation: “a woman sat at a table writing” (124), “the lady sat writing” (240). Thus there is a refusal of progress in the lady’s narrative. The effect is to suggest that she is engaged in a cultural *struggle* with foundational Judeo-Christian figurations. Unsuccessful in her attempt at inversion of the male-identified creator God, the lady is trapped in her Garden.

Only a few pages forward in the novel—when the characters first leave the lady’s garden—Woolf uses the lesbian, mystical Rhoda to move outside Eden as a structuring principle. Rhoda narrates a new “private” garden built around the object of her desire, Miss Lambert (45). Rhoda therefore shares with the lady the impulse to rewrite Eden. The two differ, however, in what generates their attempted restructurings: while the lady attempts to reverse the Garden’s gendered positionings, Rhoda, in contrast, challenges Eden’s implicitly heterosexual orientation: she sets herself to, as she puts it, “changing” the Eden that was humanity’s first, and foundational, hetero story (“male and female he created them,” as Genesis 1 puts it).

Rhoda’s narrative of the garden begins as she tells of her beloved Miss Lambert escorting “a clergyman” “though the wicket-gate” into a “private” garden (45). By substituting a porous gate for Elvedon’s impassable wall, Rhoda makes pointed reference to—but departs from—the lady’s garden. Additionally, a “luminous” coloring now replaces the light that was earlier “gloomy” and “fitful” (45, 14), and a “pond” takes the place of the dry land formerly “swept” by the gardeners (17). Even the amphibians of this second garden recall the first, yet with a difference: while at Elvedon “a giant toad [flopped] in the undergrowth” (16), with the resulting suggestion of heaviness, monstrosity, even a state near death, Rhoda’s new garden has a far less ominous “frog” gently perched on a leaf. Even Woolf’s rhetorical choices—specifically her repeated use of the above-referenced term “change”—further emphasize this garden’s purposive newness: by using the term five times in one paragraph, Woolf underscores the idea that Rhoda has tampered with Eden’s shaping story.

A closer look at Rhoda’s second garden demonstrates why it is a sexualized—indeed lesbianized—challenge to Eden as a shaping myth of hetero-normativity. Consider how Miss Lambert, in the phrases that foreground change, is consistently its agent: “everything changes and becomes luminous [. . .] when Miss Lambert passes”; “suppose she saw that daisy, it would change”; “wherever she goes, things are changed under her eyes”; “she sees a frog on a leaf, and that will change”; and “she makes the daisy change” (45). Through such rhetorical formulations Woolf indicates that Rhoda’s garden, centered around the woman she desires, is a place where—*because of its female-centered sexuality*—there has been a “change” from the originating text. Here we are invited to read differently. This sacred garden, it seems, will not be defined by blissful heterosexual union.

What happens next is a startling development. Miss Lambert disappears from the text. Rhoda’s next soliloquy makes reference to “Miss Lambert,

¹ See also Froula, Gilbert and Gubar, and Schwartz.

[. . .] vanishing down the corridor” (56), but after that she disappears from the direct action of the text. In a strange choice, then, Woolf installs a puzzling emptiness in what seemed to be shaping up as a woman’s paradise. If, as Suzanne Raitt argues, other queer modernist writing reconfigured Eden—“[writers] looked to the rural setting for images of an originary, Edenic relationship, [. . .] for a nostalgic golden world, pre-war, Edwardian” (13)—then Woolf’s decision to eliminate Miss Lambert complicates this paradigm. By creating a woman’s retreat, but then backing away from that space, Woolf highlights the impossibility of reshaping the universalizing heterosexism implicit in the garden’s ideology. Thus, the changed second garden’s textual effect is like the Elvedon that the lady could not escape: a figuration entrenched in a long narrative tradition, the garden—even if briefly reimagined—refuses to be appropriated for a non-normative position.

Rhoda’s second garden, like the lady’s failed rewriting of Eden, establishes that chipping away at tradition, if such efforts fail to displace an existing hierarchical framework, reinscribes the power of the originating story. Rhoda’s attempt to “change” the hierarchy in Eden is just reversal: she simply shifts the hetero “beginning” to the homo reconfiguration and thus still operates between two poles. The upshot of Rhoda’s garden, then, is that her operation of change, although admirable in its liberatory potential, does not locate the radically new. Implying consolidation rather than disruption, continuing the hetero paradigm that existed “in the beginning,” this garden is not, in contemporary terms, queer.

This failure to refigure Eden is the reason Rhoda’s soliloquy before her suicide is crucial to following her as a religious subject. This soliloquy, with its return to imagery of the garden and the creation myth, is full of disruptive potential. “Let there be rose leaves; let there be vine leaves,” Rhoda says, “I covered the whole street, Oxford Street and Piccadilly Circus, with the blaze and ripple of my mind, with rose leaves and vine leaves” (204), Rhoda’s utterance, tellingly, is a direct appropriation of God’s creative voice from Genesis 1. In the biblical creation myth, God creates by repeating, seven times, some version of the phrase “let there be.” “Let there be light,” God says (Gen. 1.3), as well as “let there be a dome in the midst of the waters” and “let there be lights in the dome of the sky” (Gen 1.3, 1.6, 1.14). The creative utterances continue until, finally, they culminate in the pinnacle of creation: God makes man and woman—Adam and Eve—the first, paradigmatic hetero couple, and one that *Gaudium et Spes* names as the “center and crown” of creation (12). God then tells them to produce children—“be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1.28)—and thus begins a long history of hetero church doctrine.² By speaking into creation not the procreative couple man and woman, but rather the roses that, for centuries, have been evocative only of female sexual desire, Rhoda enunciates a lesbianizing space shorn of hetero primacy (see Bennett). Finally speaking *not* from the perspective of a lesbian seeking to “change” (reverse) the hetero paradigm, Rhoda claims a linguistic position that radically displaces the primacy of one of scripture’s most hallowed hetero-narratives.

What, then, is Rhoda’s reward for this brave, creative act? Erasure. Removal. After the above utterance, after she has seized a powerfully creative voice, Rhoda commits suicide.³ While Rhoda’s rapid dismissal is troubling in itself, Woolf’s rhetorical choices make it even more disturbing. Quite simply, Woolf does not write the suicide; she forces the reader to discern it, and gives only Bernard’s later, offhand remark that “[Rhoda] had killed herself” (281). Rhoda, it seems, has chosen to

² See St. Augustine’s idea, in *On the Good of Marriage*, that procreation is the highest good in marriage. St. Augustine is also quoted in the Pope Pius XI’s papal encyclical, *Casti Connubii* (Cap. 24 n. 32). Also see St. Thomas Aquinas’s similar proclamation: “marriage has as its principal end the begetting and rearing of children” (*Summa Theologica*, Suppl. III, Q 65, Art. 1, Ad. 9. [330]).

³ It is puzzling that after her suicide Rhoda appears at Hampton Court. For commentary, see Lyndall Gordon (217n).

end her life, and Woolf, her author, *has erased even her erasure*. This narrative trajectory creates what Annette Oxindine adeptly calls “one of the eeriest suicides in modern fiction” (203).

Rhoda’s suicide has prompted critics to call her mad, or a victim of patriarchy, or a foreshadowing of Woolf’s own suicide. M. Keith Booker, for instance, contends that “Rhoda is still partially determined by fixed stereotypical fantasies—of the mad or hysterical female” (165). Angela Hague uses the idea of madness to offer a biographical reading: “in Rhoda, Woolf faces the fears of personal dissolution and formlessness she associated with madness” (268), and Miranda B. Hickman argues that Rhoda, a victim of patriarchy, “internalizes misogynistic violence” and thus “self-destructs” (176). So far, however, no one has considered Rhoda’s suicide from a narratological perspective. What cannot be ignored about Rhoda’s demise is that it is *not written*. When Woolf, as Rhoda’s author, fails to convey *the* event that climaxes Rhoda’s entire narrative—her death itself—the effect is that the reader, at this juncture of *The Waves*, trusts its author slightly less than earlier. And that is Woolf’s point. When this significant narrative gap is conjoined with *The Waves*’ focus on the authority of inherited religious narratives (the *story* of Eden, Rhoda’s re-told garden, the *story* of creation, the lady who tries to rewrite it), then it seems that Woolf, herself the author of Rhoda’s story, is making a deliberate choice. By removing Rhoda immediately after she has displaced Scripture’s primary authorizing force—the paternal God—Woolf highlights the danger inherent in authorizing power. And, because that authorizing power, in terms of Rhoda’s story, is one of Western Christianity’s foundational texts, the result is that Rhoda’s silent erasure indicts monolithic, “authorizing,” religion.

Thus, the point that finally emerges from Rhoda’s story is a cautionary one. Although Rhoda briefly seizes the authority of biblical heterotexts, she does not survive the experience. This is telling. Ultimately, Rhoda’s narrative demonstrates that Western Christianity’s originating stories refuse to be appropriated by the sexual other. Quite simply, Rhoda cannot get beyond the Garden as the normative text of heterosexual desire.

Margaret Sullivan
Saint Louis University

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