

**PRIVATE AND COMMON GROUND:  
THE WORK OF LING SHUHUA AND VIRGINIA  
WOOLF IN THE LATE 1930S**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

Note: I am in the process of obtaining permission to publish and cite sources studied at the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library. These sources are indicated in the works cited list and marked with the note “permissions pending”. These sources are specifically the unpublished letters of Ling Shuhua, Vanessa Bell, as well as Ling Shuhua’s unpublished manuscript.



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Lim Wan Hui Eva  
3 August 2016

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis takes as its starting point the correspondence between modernist women writers Virginia Woolf and Ling Shuhua in the late 1930s. Woolf's informal literary mentorship nourished Ling's only work written in English. Studying Ling's *Ancient Melodies* (1953) and Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), works embarked on during their correspondence, I show how these texts demonstrate their belief in English Literature as "common ground" and their refusal to subject their art to political and social demands. Unlike their contemporaries, Ling and Woolf refused to turn to their art as a patriotic or political response to war. Their texts register a shared resistance to literary trends brought about by national crises in China and England during the 1930s. Unlike Chinese women writers who examined their experience in the public sphere in their autobiographies and writers who wrote politicized work during the war years, Ling focused on how gender ideology and social norms structured the polygamous household in which she grew up. Unlike writers in England who turned to their poetry with social missions in mind, Woolf resisted the notion that art can and should serve as a tool for social transformation. *Between the Acts* responds to these writers who she believed had committed their creative writing to pedagogic and didactic ends and suggests that it is delimiting and dangerous for writers to use art in service of an explicit social mission. Studying the reception of Ling's work in England during the 1950s, I also reveal a troubling situation of misreading which indicates that the common ground was not as capacious as both writers had hoped. Examining historical and social circumstances unique to England, I show how the presence of national barriers on the ground of English Literature

nonetheless impedes common understanding and influences how texts are read. This thesis examines materials from the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AM</i>	<i>Ancient Melodies</i>
<i>BTA</i>	<i>Between the Acts</i>
<i>Lighthouse</i>	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>Room</i>	<i>A Room of One's Own</i>
<i>TG</i>	<i>Three Guineas</i>
<i>TY</i>	<i>The Years</i>

## INTRODUCTION

I have not read any of your writing, but Julian often wrote to me about it, and meant to show me some of it. He said too that you had lived a most interesting life; indeed, we had discussed – I think in letters – the chance that you try to write an account of your life in English. This is what I would suggest now. Your English is quite good enough to give the impression you wish to make; and I could change anything difficult to understand.

Will you make a beginning, and put down exactly what you remember? As no one in England knows you, the book could be more free than usual. Then I would see if it could not be printed. But please think of this: not merely a distraction, but a work that would be of great value to other people too. (*Letters* 6: 221).

— Virginia Woolf, Letter to Ling Shuhua, 5 April 1938

### **Journeys and Liaisons**

On 5 April 1938, Virginia Woolf, by now established as a pioneer writer of British modernism and the Bloomsbury Group, penned her first letter to Ling Shuhua, a Chinese painter and modernist writer whose short stories earned her the label of “Chinese Katherine Mansfield” in literary circles. Key to this unlikely communication was the romance between Ling and Julian Bell, Woolf’s nephew, during his stint as a visiting English Literature professor at the National Wuhan University in China from October 1935 to February 1937 (Stansky and Abrahams 189-234). Ling was married to Chen Yuan, the dean of the School of Arts and Letters at the university and well-known intellectual who spent many years in England (Laurence 17; Welland 145). Woolf’s letter to Ling, written a little under a year after Bell’s death in the Spanish Civil War, marked the beginning of a correspondence and an informal literary mentorship that nourished Ling’s only work written in English, an autobiography titled *Ancient Melodies* (1953). Ling sent chapters for critique



and with hopes of publication by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press. My study of the unpublished letters from Ling to Woolf and Woolf's published letters reveals that they communicated from April 1938 to July 1939. However, undated and missing letters result in a necessary indeterminacy. The turmoil of the late 1930s affected the two women in different ways. Writing from China, Ling expressed her distress about the on-going Second Sino-Japanese War and her attempts to survive. Ling informed Woolf about her arrival in Szechuan with university staff in order to escape Japanese bombing (24 July 1938). She also lamented the fact that the war "seem[ed] to last longer and longer" (12 Dec. 1938) with no end in sight. As the war unfolded, Ling was increasingly consumed by anguish as she noticed the disastrous impact of military violence on civilian life and understood that the on-going conflict had been wrongly justified as a "holy [war]" (11 Jan. 1939) In England, Woolf grew uneasy as World War II approached. She saw the signs that foreshadow war: "all the time aeroplanes are crossing the house and every day we hear of some unfortunate refugee who asks for help" (*Letters* 6: 328). Work was their solace during these national crises. In a letter to Woolf, Ling described her project as the only thing that "gives [her] fire and strength to linger upon life" (12 Dec. 1938). Woolf expressed her belief that "the only relief is to work" (*Letters* 6:290). At that juncture, Woolf was revising *Three Guineas* (1938) and working on *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), the progress of which she mentions in letters to Ling. She began writing *Pointz Hall*, the working title for *BTA*, in April 1938 (*Diary* 5: 135).

The Second Sino-Japanese War, World War II, and Woolf's death in 1941 very likely derailed the publication of *AM*. Ling's relocation to England

in 1947 after both wars enmeshed her in Bloomsbury networks again (Hong 246). Besides being a source of support as they grieved Julian Bell's death, Vanessa Bell introduced Ling to Arthur Waley, a prominent translator of Tang poetry (Letter to Ling Shuhua [2 Feb. 1947]) and Marjorie Strachey, who later became Ling's English tutor (24 March n.y.). These social ties were not entirely productive. In a letter to her daughter, Angelica Garnett on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1947, Vanessa Bell reveals that that Arthur Waley "evidently did not take to Ling" (*Letters* 512). She notes that some members of the Bloomsbury Group, such as Clive Bell and Duncan Grant, got along with Ling but did not go as far as to allow her entry into their intellectual circle (*Letters* 512). In her draft for a project titled *Memoir of Virginia Woolf*, Ling reveals that she was interested in a column titled "In Your Garden" that Vita Sackville-West wrote for *The Observer* (3). She reached out to Sackville-West after reading an article she wrote about plants in China. After meeting Ling and discovering her association with Woolf, Sackville-West urged Ling to complete her autobiography and presumably placed her in contact with Leonard Woolf (*Memoir* 3-4) Vanessa Bell supported all of Ling's literary endeavours, from encouraging her to continue writing *AM*, and reading her stories when they were published in English magazines, to getting critics to notice Ling's work. Having lost her manuscript during the war, Ling was grateful to find out through Leonard Woolf that Virginia Woolf had preserved it (Laurence 287). Woolf's decision might have been the crucial factor that ultimately allowed *AM* to be published by Hogarth Press in 1953 after being read by C. Day Lewis (*Memoir* 5).

## Literature Review

The interactions between Ling and members of the Bloomsbury Group have received little attention. In the few studies on this topic, critics focus on the complexity of these transnational social networks, which extend across national boundaries. Shih Shu-mei's *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China 1917-1937* (2001) examines their correspondence through the lens of orientalism. For Shih, the exchange between Ling and Woolf is a microcosm of a Sino-British convergence premised on asymmetrical power relations. Shih proposes that Woolf's mentorship required Ling to meet British Orientalist desire in her work: "*Ancient Melodies* had to embody the exotic, antiquated Orient whose strangeness would provide charm and delight to the Western reader secure in his/her own culture of familiarity and modernity" (218). In a similar vein, Jeesoon Hong's "The Chinese Gentlewoman in the Public Gaze: Ling Shuhua in Twentieth-century China and Britain" (2007) argues that the publication of Ling's work cannot be celebrated as an entirely fruitful transnational encounter because it demanded the downplaying of Ling's professional achievement as a Chinese modernist writer for an emphasis on gentlewomanly amateurism. Hong acknowledges Rey Chow's pioneering English-language study on Ling's Chinese-language short stories, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua" (1988), which examines how the term *guixiu*, a social label that refers to a woman of excellent breeding and social standing like Ling, trivializes women's writing about domestic life and romance. Hong explores how Ling capitalizes on this image of genteel femininity in her navigation of Bloomsbury and publishing circles.

In their 2008 article “The New Modernist Studies”, Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz sketch the key developments in the field over the recent decades. They identify a “transnational turn” in existing scholarship which pays increased attention to “the interrelation of cultural, political, and economic transactions”, and “emphasizes a variety of affiliations within and across national spaces” (739). However, Woolf studies have thus far neglected her friendship with Ling, the first Chinese writer she interacted with extensively. The fact that this correspondence occurred during a period of worldwide instability provides an interesting point from which to consider Woolf’s stance on subjects such as war, women’s writing, and nationalist ideology and its impact on literature, all issues that preoccupied her throughout her literary career. In “Virginia Woolf and Ling Shuhua: Writing and Practicing Transnational Feminism” (2008), Hua Jiang suggests that the correspondence between these writers reveals a “transnational feminist coalition-building” (232) which is closely associated with Woolf’s call in *TG* for women to stand in solidarity against wars between men. Patricia Laurence highlights this relationship as one among many engagements between British and Chinese literati and artists during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These individuals include Vanessa Bell, E.M. Forster, Xiao Qian, Ling, and Xu Zhimo. Laurence’s *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (2003) focuses on two intellectual and literary collectives, China’s Crescent Moon Society and England’s Bloomsbury Group, to illuminate points of influence and cross-fertilization.

Ling and Woolf share several similarities. They were established writers in their home countries. At the point of their correspondence, Ling had

already published three short story collections, *Temple of Flowers* (1928), *Women* (1930), and *Two Little Brothers* (1935). Her craft in depicting domestic life, childhood, and female psychological experience earned her the comparison to Mansfield. Woolf had produced an impressive oeuvre by the late 1930s, including eight novels and two volumes of short stories. Both writers were “daughters of educated men” (Woolf, *TG* 10). Born in 1900, Ling was the child of Ling Fu Peng, a scholar and political official who held positions equivalent to that of the mayor of Beijing and the governor of the Hebei province, and Li Rulan, his third concubine (Hong 235; Shih 215). Woolf was born in 1882 to a Victorian family with strong connections to literary circles. Her father Leslie Stephen was a prominent English intellectual and author (Ronchetti 3). Ling and Woolf shared a commitment to artistic creation and rejected the notion that it should be subject to political and social demands. In this thesis, I expand on existing scholarship on the relationship between Ling and Woolf. I draw a strong connection between these writers based on their similar responses to their unique historical circumstances. Taking this relationship as a starting point, I propose that the works they wrote during the time of their correspondence in the late 1930s register a shared resistance to contemporary literary trends brought about by national crises in China and England. It offers a contribution to the fields of British and Chinese early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature which have thus far neglected the parallels between Ling and Woolf.

### **On “Private” and “Common” Ground: Ling and Woolf in the late 1930s**

The title of my thesis is inspired by the conclusion of “The Leaning Tower”, a lecture Woolf delivered to the Workers’ Educational Association in May

1940. Addressing a largely working-class audience, Woolf encouraged a group that might be perceived as ill-equipped to undertake literary endeavours to evaluate the work they read, to assume the role of critics, and to “write daily; write freely” (*The Moment*, “The Leaning Tower” 124). In her conclusion, Woolf expressed her belief that literature is not circumscribed by national boundaries:

Literature is no one’s private ground; literature is common ground. It is not cut up into nations; there are no wars there. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our way for ourselves. It is thus that English literature will survive this war and cross this gulf — if commoners and outsiders like ourselves make that country our country, if we teach ourselves how to read and to write, how to preserve, and how to create. (“The Leaning Tower” 125)

At a historical moment of worldwide conflict, Woolf’s statement about literature being “common ground” for all individuals is especially striking. The terms “private” and “common” ground used by Woolf offer a useful structuring framework to examine the forces driving her and Ling’s friendship as well as their literary projects at that juncture. Broadly considered, the barriers erected on the common ground of English literature — which cause said ground to be privately owned by particular entities and used only for their purposes — can refer to national, linguistic, race, class, or gender boundaries, among other categories of identity. This project studies Ling’s *Ancient Melodies* (1953) and Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941), both of which were written during their correspondence. While the texts were not published during

the same period — Ling neglected *AM* during the later war years in China and *BTA* was published shortly after Woolf's death, long before *AM* was published — they register how both writers went against the grain of dominant literary trends in their countries during the late 1930s. Although the social instability of England and China at that juncture compelled many writers to turn to literature as a patriotic or political response to war, Ling and Woolf both wrote distinctively different works in terms of style and content.

The beginning of 1930s saw the British economy crippled by the Great Depression. Due to the sustained economic depression that lasted till the outbreak of World War II, Europe became increasingly politically and socially unstable (Wood 4-5). Rob Mengham describes the 1930s as “a period deeply marked by the misery of large-scale unemployment, by the rise of Fascism in Europe, and by the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), a conflict that effectively [politicized] a whole generation and saw the loss in combat of many of its members” (359). This instability influenced how writers approached their work: “Having a political position, and writing from it, was not just a common desideratum; for much of the decade it was felt to be an urgent necessity” (Mengham 359). For example, the pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* published in 1937 showed an overwhelming majority of writers voicing support for the Spanish Republican side with few writers taking a neutral position (Mengham 359). Alice Wood argues that the Spanish Civil War politicized writers in Britain:

Depicted in the British press as a war between democracy on the left, represented by the Spanish Republican government, and tyranny on the right, represented by General Franco's

Nationalist forces and the Fascist Italian and Nazi German troops that supported them, the war engaged the attention of many leftist British writers, artists and intellectuals, some of whom even volunteered to assist the Republican cause. (5)

Expressing his desire to combat fascism in letters to Ling, Julian Bell served as an ambulance driver in Spain. With World War II approaching, writers in England leaned strongly towards the left and their work registered to some degree their political responses to war. Samuel Hynes classifies Auden and his contemporaries including Cecil Day-Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender, all English middle-class writers born between 1900 and World War II, as the “Auden Generation”, a literary generation whose consciousness and work were colored by war. Hynes characterizes the 1930s as “a time of crises” where “the most important writing of the period is best seen as a series of efforts to respond to crisis” (12). He suggests that Auden and his contemporaries conceived of writing as a “[mode of] action in the public world” and themselves responsible for enlightening society (13). Auden’s “To A Writer On His Birthday”, dedicated to Isherwood, reflects this social commitment held by these left-wing poets in England:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,  
What better than your strict and adult pen  
Can warn us from the colours and the consolations,  
The showy arid works, reveal  
The squalid shadow of academy and garden,  
Make action urgent and its nature clear? (9)



Woolf criticized Auden and his contemporaries for their socially-committed poetry which she believed was premised on middle-class privilege: “Discomfort; pity for themselves; anger against society. And yet — here is another tendency — how can you altogether abuse a society that is giving you, after all, a very fine view and some sort of security?” (“The Leaning Tower” 115). For Woolf, the fact that these poets craft their work around political consciousness results in “oratory, not poetry” (“The Leaning Tower” 119).

However, it is inaccurate to say that Woolf is an apolitical writer. Her novels throughout her career thematize social and political issues. Her non-fictional work, for example, *Room* and *TG*, more overtly reveals her stance on feminism, nationalism, and war. Woolf often mixes devices associated with fiction and non-fiction in her writing. Laura Marcus states that “a strict line [cannot] be drawn between her overtly feminist, ‘polemical’ works and her fiction” because “[Woolf’s] novels take up the images and imaginings of her pamphlets and essays”, whereas her non-fictional writing “uses strategies more often associated with fictional narrative” (150). Although Woolf felt little constraint from generic expectations about narrative strategies, she believed that it was only appropriate to take a polemical stance and engage in explicit social critique in a text presented to the reader as “non-fiction”. Her criticism of Auden and his contemporaries is not directed towards their political and social commitments per se, but rather towards their turning to poetry instead of non-fiction to express these commitments. While she might not have expected her non-fictional writing to be socially transformative, she was fairly comfortable using it as a tool to enlighten her audience with the intent to persuade them to share her views or at least see the value of her

argument. For Woolf, creative writing, specifically fiction and poetry, should not and cannot serve pedagogic and didactic purposes. It is possible that Woolf took issue with the way Auden and his contemporaries used poetry as tools for social action:

[T]hey feel compelled to preach, if not by their living, at least by their writing, the creation of society in which every one is equal and every one is free. It explains the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud speaker that dominates their poetry. They must teach; they must preach. (“The Leaning Tower” 118)

Concluding, Woolf expresses her hope for “a stronger, more varied literature in a classless and towerless society” (123). In the context of her lecture, Woolf’s statement about English literature indicates her desire to see more writers and critics from all sectors of society, beyond the middle-class leaning tower generation. Her belief in Literature as “common ground” explains her interest in encouraging Ling, a non-native speaker of English, to undertake an autobiography that is far removed from contemporary politics and England. While the “classless” society that Woolf wished for is not different from the “society in which every one is equal” which 1930s left-wing writing advocated, Woolf clearly believed that English Literature cannot and should not be employed as a tool for radical social transformation. In *BTA*, Woolf responds to those writers whom she criticizes for approaching literature for pedagogic and didactic purposes. Written at a time of war, *BTA* reveals Woolf’s meditation on the role that art should play in society and the dangers writers in England possibly incur when turning to their work with social missions in mind.

Similarly, the war decades in China affected the literary landscape. Before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, China faced a long civil war between the Nationalists and Communists (Hsu 504). Beginning in April 1927, this conflict lasted through the Second Sino-Japanese War and ended in May 1950 (Hsu 504). Jing M. Wang traces the rise of a highly politicized literature in China beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s which aimed to “serve as an instrument of proletarian rebellion against imperialist oppression and to support national salvation” (43). Identifying Lu Xun and Mao Dun as leaders of these changes, Wang notes the turn from preoccupation with the self to a more pressing social reality among creative writers (31-2). The formation of the League of Left Wing Writers in 1930 demonstrates the push for literature to be socially-committed (Wang 31). In the late 1930s, some writers put their work in full service to the nation:

With the founding of the All-China Association of Literary Resistance in 1938 and corresponding organization in other fields of culture and art, many writers began to produce propaganda literature of all genres preoccupied with the theme of national defence and resistance. (Wang 43)

Wang proposes that the genre of women’s autobiography “emerged at the very historical juncture when preoccupation with the individualistic was least encouraged” (11). At a point where personal stories seemed less important than social issues, a wave of women fiction writers wrote book-length autobiographies and first-time women writers attempted the short autobiographical work (Wang 11-3). The term “autobiography” refers to “a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment and

subsequently became definitive for life writing in the West”, in other words, a form that thrived in the Anglo-European sphere (Smith and Watson 2). Sidonie Smith’s definition of autobiography as “the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission” (45) serves my discussion best because it highlights one’s self and life being constituted through writing.

For Wang, this rise of Chinese women’s autobiographies as a literary phenomenon was made possible by rising nationalism. These autobiographies are characterized by women foregrounding their place in the public sphere:

As women’s roles became increasingly intertwined with and defined by social and patriotic participation, they turned away from their personal matters to public issues . . . . Through autobiography, they redefined and renegotiated the personal to mean not their role in the domestic setting, but their involvement with issues of gender, writing, nation, and the masses. (39-40)

Examples include Lu Yin’s *Autobiography of Lu Yin* (1934), Bai Wei’s *Tragic Life* (1936), and Xie Bingying’s *Autobiography of a Female Soldier* (1936). Far from being focused on the self, this kind of autobiography is deeply preoccupied with the nation. Authors connected their personal development to social and political issues. Ng suggests that the autobiographical impulse among writers, both men and women, was to a degree enabled by the conception of *xiao wo* (micro-self) and *da wo* (macro-self) popular among the proponents of China’s May Fourth, a period beginning in 1919 defined by the

campaign for social change, literary reform, and political liberation (viii, 18). This notion of the individual positions writers as subordinate to the interests of the collective and their writing as meaningful social and political participation. The period when Ling corresponded with Woolf was an unique juncture where the genre was promoted to men as key to the national building project but was employed by many women writers, among them many first time writers, who wrote to assert their place in the nation. In 1937, Hu Shi, a prominent intellectual, wrote an autobiography and encouraged accomplished men in various fields to do the same with the hopes that “the works of these important men would, first, establish a legacy of greatness, and then serve as both inspiration to, and historical documents of, China’s modernization” (Ng 95). During this period, intellectuals Lin Yutang and his contemporaries translated and introduced theories of life-writing from the Anglophone world and autobiographies such as W.H. Davies’s *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, John Middleton Murry’s *Between Two Worlds: An Autobiography*, and Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* (Wang 58-62). They also encouraged readers to write and submit their personal stories. While this call was not specifically directed to any group, it resulted in numerous responses from female readers (Wang 78). Selections from this overwhelmingly enthusiastic response were published in several journals and anthologies. These women, most of them first-time writers, attempted autobiographical vignettes (Wang 58). As with the established women writers, they “by no means played the traditional roles of chaste wives and devoted mothers portrayed by men in the public and private biographies of women in the past; rather, they were revolutionaries, rebels, teachers, writers, bread winners, celibates, working mothers, and

modern stay-home wives” (Wang 79). As compared to book-length autobiographies, short autobiographical sketches might have been more efficient means for disseminating one’s literary work during wartime.

Ling’s turn to the Anglophone world in the late 1930s demonstrates her belief in literature as “common ground”. Like Woolf, who rejected contemporary literary trends, Ling rejected the wartime politicization of literature and conventions associated with women’s autobiographies at that juncture. Crossing linguistic barriers, Ling focused instead on her experience growing up in an elite polygamous household. Prominent men in China were encouraged in the late 1930s to write autobiographies to document and inspire social progress, but Ling’s exploration of social and gender norms within the home reveals less celebrated aspects of history, specifically the structural inequalities entrenched in Chinese society. Also, while many women writers charted their experience as professionals in the public sphere during wartime in their autobiographies, Ling went against the grain. She adopts the child’s perspective to underscore the stifling conditions suffered by women and children in the domestic realm. *AM* devotes attention to the circumscribed roles of wives and mothers, roles that other women writers in China took care to deemphasize in their autobiographies.

### **Outline of Chapters**

Ling’s writing in a foreign tongue and about subject matter that differed from that of her contemporaries in China testifies to her perceiving English Literature as common ground. In Chapter One, I examine the specificities of this endeavour. Ling’s drawing from and modifying of aspects of Mansfield’s fiction is one striking way by which she transverses the common ground. Ling

reworks situations and images from Mansfield's "Prelude" in her exploration of social dynamics and gender relations within her childhood home. Ling's autobiography and Mansfield's short story demonstrate how gender ideology and social norms structure the lived experience of women and children as well as highlight how these conditions are not entirely grasped by those afflicted. Reworking aspects of Mansfield's fiction to strategically highlight a process by which a child perceives but does not fully understand the workings of a gendered world, Ling demonstrates her belief in a literary common ground where aspects of one text can inform and shape another. Studying Ling's and Mansfield's presentations of the patriarch, I demonstrate one key difference between their critiques.

In Chapter Two, I examine Ling's endeavour to impress upon a foreign audience the stifling conditions engendered by social and gender norms in China from 1900 to the 1920s and show that the ground of literature was not as capacious as she had hoped. Examining how historical and social circumstances unique to England influenced these readings, I show that national barriers on the ground of literature impeded common ground and shaped the reception of *AM*. Studying correspondence between Ling and the Bloomsbury Group, the introduction to *AM*, and published reviews, I demonstrate that critics troublingly dismiss or fail to recognize instances of oppression and suffering. I also illuminate how these instances are mistakenly perceived as charming and comedic. Considering how post-war sexism and the beliefs held by the Bloomsbury Group about art influenced intellectual culture in England during the 1950s, I situate these readings within a historical

context that will illuminate why these reviewers fail to understand *AM* as a critique of Chinese society and the polygamous family unit.

In Chapter Three, I show how Woolf, like Ling, rejected contemporary literary trends. I argue that Woolf's *BTA* responds to English writers in the late 1930s, whom she criticized for employing literature for pedagogic and didactic purposes. By showing the myriad and sometimes comic ways individuals create, engage with, and resist being changed by art, I show how *BTA* suggests that art does not often bring about social transformation. Written during a period of social instability, *BTA* reflects Woolf's meditation on English Literature's place in society and suggests that the onus is not on art to account for turmoil or provide a remedy. Despite Woolf's belief that English Literature is common ground, *BTA* highlights the dangers of programmatic social unification and suggests that it is delimiting for writers to put their poetry or fiction at the service of any social cause. I also show how *BTA* contemplates some of the organizing ideas of the modernist project.



## CHAPTER ONE

### “The Chinese Katherine Mansfield”: The Reworking of Mansfield’s

#### Fiction in Ling’s *Ancient Melodies*

I am sending you two little books, one is the [Mrs Gaskell] life of Charlotte Brontë, the other Lamb’s Essays. I think Lamb wrote very good English prose — but do not bother to read it as an exercise; only for pleasure — The life of Charlotte Brontë will perhaps give you a feeling for the lives of women writers in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century — their difficulties, and how she overcome them. And it is a very interesting life in other ways. But I will send other books from time to time, on condition that you do not think you must thank me for them. And certainly you must never think of paying for them (*Letters* 6: 259; brackets in original).

— Virginia Woolf, Letter to Ling Shuhua, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1938

Sending Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë along with her letter, Woolf had perhaps believed Ling might find the gendered constraints faced by Brontë illuminating. Writing in a different decade and locale, Ling faced difficulties that were vastly different from Brontë’s — but similar in being burdens experienced by women writers. One can only guess what Ling found fruitful, because the parcel sent by Woolf was lost in the turbulence of the Second Sino-Japanese War (Letter to Virginia Woolf [11 Jan. 1939]). Suspecting that her parcels would never reach Ling, Woolf did not attempt to send any more books after that mishap (*Letters* 6: 347).

The correspondence between the two writers discusses a fascinating array of texts and authors. Woolf recommended books for Ling to study and read for pleasure. According to Woolf, “the English in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century wrote in the best way for a foreigner to learn from”, hence her choices of Jane Austen as well as the letters of William Cowper and Horace Walpole (*Letters* 6: 221-2). She also suggested Walter Scott’s novels, specifically *Rob Roy*, and

George Moore's fiction because "they are simply written" (*Letters* 6:222). Upon receiving Woolf's recommendations, Ling replied that she had already read all of Austen's novels (25 May 1938). She also expressed admiration of *The Years* and Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*, novels by key British and European modernist writers (24 July 1938). Ling expressed her dislike of Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* published in 1931, a novel centred on life in rural China at the turn of the century, declaring it a text crafted with little semblance of truth "to satisfy the reader" (Letter to Virginia Woolf [24 July 1938]). It is worth noting that Ling first wrote to Woolf after having read the seminal feminist text *A Room of One's Own* (*Memoir* 2). In process of writing her autobiography, she also read autobiographies of Mark Twain, Lincoln Steffens, and H.G. Wells. She found them un compelling and summarized them as "things written by successful men" (Letter to Virginia Woolf [11 Jan. 1939]).

Dubbed the "Chinese Katherine Mansfield" by Chinese-language literary critics, Ling is best known for her portrayals of domesticity, childhood, and female psychological experience. Bell quickly learned of this label upon his arrival at Wuhan University and wrote to Vanessa Bell: "I gather she's sometimes called the Chinese Katherine Mansfield, but I fancy there's more to her really, though she's very quiet and gentle" (qtd. in Welland 245). Ling had definitely encountered Katherine Mansfield's fiction. Ling herself was one of the first translators of Mansfield's fiction in China during the late 1920s. Recent scholarship such as *Katherine Mansfield and Translation* (2015) edited by Claire Davidson, Gerri Kimber, and Todd Martin, Gerri Kimber's *Katherine Mansfield: The View From France* (2008),

and Joanna Wood's *Katerina: The Russian World of Katherine Mansfield* (2001), and Shifen Gong's *A Fine Pen: The Chinese View of Katherine Mansfield* (2001) have demonstrated the global circulation of Mansfield's work via translations. The interest in Mansfield in China began after her death in 1923 and was sparked by Ling's literary friend, the poet Xu Zhimo. Xu's stint at Cambridge University during the 1920s saw him meeting numerous English writers and intellectuals, including Goldsworthy Dickinson and E.M. Forster (Lee 130-2). None of these encounters, however, were quite as emotional as his meeting with Mansfield in August 1922, which he reverently deemed "twenty immortal minutes" ("Mansfield" 118) in an account published in the prominent *Short Story Magazine*. Xu and Ling's husband Chen Yuan were key translators and critics of Mansfield's work. They even gave lectures on Mansfield at local universities (Gong, "Introduction" 14). Stories translated in the 1920-1930s include "The Garden Party", "Bliss", "An Ideal Family", "Sun and Moon", "The Doll's House", "The Lady's Maid" as well as excerpts from "Prelude" and "At the Bay", many of them published in *Short Story Magazine* and *Crescent Moon*, the journal tied to the modernist literary group Crescent Moon Society which Ling was associated with (Gong, "Introduction" 14-15).

Chinese translators and critics constructed a mythical image of Mansfield. Xu introduced Mansfield to readers by distinguishing her as a paragon of femininity among Anglophone women writers and artists:

I had presumed her to be a literary woman in the style of Rose Macaulay, Virginia Woolf, Roma Wilson, Mrs Lucas and Vanessa Bell. Male writers and artists have always had a

reputation for eccentricity. Today, women writers strive to be even more eccentric . . . It is certainly entertaining to spend time with these ‘intelligence-above-all’ females, who are determined to act against God’s will . . . As a man, I feel an intense antipathy towards them.

Although I never expected Mansfield to be futuristic, I had certainly never imagined her as an ideal of femininity.  
(“Mansfield” 121)

Besides being valued for her craft, Mansfield was placed on a pedestal due to her presumed embodiment of ideal feminine virtue. This portrait was enhanced by Xu’s romanticization of Mansfield’s struggle with tuberculosis. The misleading and sentimental portrait crafted by Mansfield’s literary executor John Middleton Murry likely influenced Xu. Unsurprisingly, work on Mansfield in China during the 1920s and 1930s often described her work as beautiful and exquisite, an extension of the author herself. In a commentary attached to his translation of “Late At Night” in 1925, Xu declares:

We cannot tell the form from the substance when we read Mansfield’s stories. All we have from reading her is the impression of truth and beauty. Reading her is like watching the reflection of plum blossoms in crystal clear water . . . refreshing, marvellous and beautiful. (“Extract” 113)

Yang Jialuo’s commentary in 1938 is slightly more insightful. Highlighting Mansfield’s incisive portrayals of female psychology as evidence of creative genius (489; translation mine), he lists “Prelude” and “At the Bay” as

masterpieces and concludes with praise for a “truly sensitive female” (492; translation mine).

Ling’s label, “Chinese Mansfield”, crafted by literati in the 1930s, undoubtedly inspired studies on parallels between the writers. Ling comments on a comparison made between her story and Mansfield’s “The Lady’s Maid” in an interview:

I recall the day when “Writing A Letter” was published. Xu Zhimo came by early to congratulate me and even declared that I was the Chinese Mansfield. I was deeply indignant and thus resentfully said “You have wasted your words! I do not know her at all!” In retrospect, this is hilarious! A recent Master’s candidate in Japan wrote a dissertation comparing my work to Mansfield’s and sent it to me. I am done arguing. I suppose, with scholarship, it is inevitable that one would find similarities! (Ling, “Interview” 960; translation mine)

Despite Ling’s protests, she did know Mansfield when Xu made that comment in 1937. Gong’s research on Mansfield translations between the 1920 – 1930s indicates Ling as having translated Mansfield’s “The Little Girl” in 1926 (Gong 159). Scholars have noticed Ling and Mansfield’s inclination towards similar subject matter. Some critics working in Chinese such as Yang Hui and Yang Mei have noted how Ling’s subject matter and narrative techniques bear Mansfield’s influence. However, others consider them unintentional similarities. While Ling does not mention having read Mansfield, I suggest that she was influenced by her work.

In this chapter, I propose that Ling's reworking of aspects of Mansfield's fiction is one way she demonstrated a belief in literature as common ground. Studies on the similarities between Mansfield and Ling have thus far considered only Ling's Chinese-language fiction and are written in Chinese. In Chapter One, I contribute to and expand the scope of existing scholarship by studying Ling's work in English. Despite the differences in form and setting, Ling's *AM* reveals striking parallels to Mansfield's "Prelude". Both texts demonstrate how manifestations of gender ideology structure the lived experience of women at different stages of life — from childhood to wifhood and motherhood — and show how these conditions are not entirely grasped by those afflicted. Adopting the child's perspective, Ling creates situations of dramatic irony where the reader grasps events young Ling perceives but does not understand; this scenario is similar to that employed in "Prelude", where it is the reader, not Kezia, who recognizes the predicament afflicting women in the Burnell household. I argue that *AM* demonstrates Ling's reworking of situations and images found in "Prelude" to highlight a child's process of coming to terms with a gendered world, specifically the acculturation into gender roles and the circumscribed position of women. Like "Prelude", *AM* is strategically geared to show how a child perceives the workings of a gendered and class-based society but does not recognize them immediately and entirely, if at all. While Ling and Mansfield similarly criticize patriarchal culture, they encourage differing reader responses to the patriarch. Ling, far more than Mansfield, presents the patriarch as utterly self-serving. Although the reader is encouraged to notice the roles both father

figures play in creating the crisis at home, Mansfield offers opportunities for the reader to see Stanley as a less threatening and sinister figure.

### **Perception, Recognition, and the World**

The households depicted in “Prelude” and *AM* both have a single patriarch with several adult women who attend to his various needs and rely on him for economic support. Both families also have a surfeit of daughters. *AM* examines the polygamous family unit where various concubines superfluously perform the duties of a wife. Ling states plainly that she is the fourth and youngest daughter of the fourth wife to the mayor of Peking in the 1900s – 1920s (11). While there is clearly a deficit of sons, the number of household members remains a mystery. Even after decades, Ling “failed to find out exactly how many people lived in [her home], because the births and deaths of [her] half-sisters and brothers and the number of new and old servants were never certain” (11). “Prelude” opens with the Burnell family moving from town into “unknown country” (57). Mrs. Fairfield and Beryl, Linda’s mother and sister, make the move with Stanley, Linda, and their children. These three women collectively fulfil the prescribed role of the “angel in the house”, the Victorian ideological construction of the ideal woman. Linda provides sex and emotional support for her husband Stanley. Mrs. Fairfield attains her place in the household by undertaking the tasks of homemaking and childcare, which her daughter does not do. Beryl is expected to help around the house too.

Despite different configurations in family structures, one key similarity is that women sacrifice the fulfilment of personal desires in exchange for economic security and material comfort. The demands placed on women are a necessary consequence of being members of a privileged household. In

“Prelude”, the seamless functioning of the Burnell household is ensured by services provided by the women. Yet, unlike arrangements made with the hired help like Pat and Alice, these trade-offs are not discussed and are disguised by notions of duty. Linda and Beryl are deeply unsatisfied but never express unhappiness. For Linda, the social expectations that come with the circumscribed position of wife and mother are tremendous burdens. Linda’s gestures craft a façade of marital bliss. She validates Stanley with her presence and words, “hear[ing] every word” (62) of his monologue about his choice purchase of the new home and gently assuring him “for the hundredth time” that “[he will] never be fat” (65). Only the reader is privy to Linda’s conflicting mix of affection and hatred towards Stanley:

There were all her feelings for him, sharp and defined, one as true as the other. And there was this other, this hatred, just as real as the rest. She could have done her feelings up in little packets and given them to Stanley. She longed to hand that last one, for a surprise. (91)

The text hints that sex and childbearing, duties socially expected of a wife, are the reasons for Linda’s ambivalence. Her thoughts about this matter are expressed euphemistically. Stanley is referred to as her “Newfoundland dog” which is she “so fond of in the daytime” (90) but fears at night. She hints at his sexual aggression: “If only he wouldn’t jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes. He was too strong for her; she had always hated things that rush at her” (91). Given that the burden of reproduction is imposed upon her, it is unsurprising that Linda is not fond of her children. At the beginning of “Prelude”, she leaves for the new residence



in the buggy filled with “absolute necessities” (51) but leaves Lottie and Kezia behind. Her curious glee about “[having] to cast them off” (51) reveals her desire to be rid of children.

The veneer of normalcy in the family is maintained as long as Stanley’s needs are met, no matter who fulfils them. Only Mrs. Fairfield notices Linda’s indifference towards Linda’s children: “I wish you would go into the garden and give an eye to your children; but that I know you will not do” (70). While Mrs. Fairfield expresses no discontentment, the same cannot be said for Beryl. Unmarried and financially dependent, staying with Linda’s family is a comfortable option which comes at the expense of her social life. Stanley’s displeasure with Beryl — “By Jove, if she can’t do a hand’s turn of work occasionally without shouting about it in return for . . .” (60) — indicates that she is expected to help around the house without complaint in exchange for his support. The move to the country is dreadful because it dashes her hopes of meeting eligible men. Beryl’s cryptic remark that Linda does not care that the house is too far away for visitors is illuminated when the reader becomes privy to her fantasy:

A young man, immensely rich, has just arrived from England.  
He meets her quite by chance . . . . The new governor is  
unmarried . . . . There is a ball at Government House . . . Who  
is that exquisite create in *eau de mil* satin? Beryl Fairfield . . . .  
(62)

Beryl’s longing to be the object of sexual and romantic desire, like her sister’s wish to be free from childbearing, is never articulated to the family and “not even put into words for herself” (70). The romance she desires is what her

lifestyle provided by Stanley has necessarily denied her and the only thing that will extricate her from her circumscribed position. It is ironic that Beryl is painfully unaware that these fantasies, once materialized, will only lead to the same disempowerment Linda experiences. Beryl underscores Linda's emotional isolation to her friend Nan: "What Linda thinks about the whole affair [of moving to the country], per usual, I haven't the slight idea" (93). Indeed, while Linda and Beryl face the pressures of marriage and singlehood, they do not recognize each other's suffering, much less see their situations as two facets of the predicament faced by women.

Similarly, Kezia is ignorant of her mother's and aunt's plights. However, she sees glimpses of gender ideology at work when interacting with boys and men. Although Kezia is distressed by her experience of male violence and dominance, she does not recognize it as being tied to the dynamics between her parents. At the table with the Samuel Josephs, Kezia and Lottie are teased and mistreated by the boys who are not reprimanded for their actions. Moses "gave her a nip as she sat down" (53). Stanley mockingly offers Kezia the choice between "strawberries and cream or bread and dripping" (53). The family praises his tricking of Kezia when she chooses the more luxurious option: "How they all laughed and beat the table with their tea spoons. Wasn't that a take in now!" (53). Mrs. Samuel Josephs "could not help smiling" (53) at this sight. While Kezia understands that this aggression is gendered — "She did hate boys" (53) — she refuses to express sorrow and catches her teardrop "with a neat little whisk of her tongue and ate it before any of them had seen" (55). The fact that Stanley's mother merely smiles at her son's behaviour exemplifies how male aggression is dismissed as harmless

fun. It is no accident that Stanley Samuel Josephs shares the same first name as Stanley Burnell, who is introduced soon after. The family's failure to criticize the boys and Kezia's learning to conceal her feelings offer a disturbing glimpse of how gender relations might play out years later and in Kezia's own family. Besides experiencing mistreatment herself, Kezia sees animals being the victims of male aggression. She watches Pip Trout tie a handkerchief around his dog Snooker's head to "train his ears to grow more close to his head" (81) like a fighting dog, causing the animal to "[shiver] with misery" (81).

The continuous association of men and boys with violence against girls, women, and animals culminates in a spectacle of violence: Pat's killing of the duck which will be served for dinner. Pat cheerily invites the Burnell children and the Trout boys to watch him demonstrate "how the kings of Ireland chop the head off a duck" (82). Decapitated, the duck "[begins] to waddle — with only a long spurt of blood where the head had been...towards the steep bank that led to the stream" (84). While most of the children are excited by the gore, Kezia reacts violently and rushes towards Pat. She "[flings] her arms round his legs and [butts] her head as hard as she could against his knees" (84). Kezia yells repeatedly "put head back" (84) but of course to no avail. Kezia is only calmed down after she notices Pat's "little round gold earrings" (84) Kate Fullbrook suggests "Kezia is only recalled from her terror through the evidence of Pat's likeness to woman (75). According to Jane Nardin, Pat's earrings only offer false assurance that there is no significant difference between men and women (298). While Kezia is comforted by that knowledge, the reader can intuit how the slaughtered duck

anticipates bleaker circumstances for her. Nardin suggests that the interlinked images in “Prelude”, despite the paucity of commentary provided by the narrator, makes it possible for the reader to draw several connections and conclusions:

Pat’s casually violent treatment of the duck and the casual sexual behaviour on Stanley’s part that Linda sees as a violent assault; the duck’s headlessness and the Burnell women’s silence; the automatism of the decapitated duck and the automatism with which Linda and Beryl play their assigned roles . . . reveal what is likely to happen to Kezia herself. They also explain why it is so important to Kezia to heal the duck, even though she has not made such connections on a conscious level. (298)

Stanley’s carving of the meat suggests that his presence has disturbing implications for the women whose fate mirrors that of the animal. The offering of the duck meat is however also symbolic of his support of the family. Within this gesture lies the fact that the oppressive conditions experienced by the Burnell women is the darker side of their privileged lifestyle provided by Stanley. Kezia’s absence from the table exemplifies how these truths remain inaccessible to her.

Similarly, the disempowerment of wives in Ling’s family is structured by class privilege. Their status as concubines accords economic security and material comfort denied to the maidservants who serve the household. However, one can ascend social class through marriage. Ling learns this fact upon finding that Third Mother was a slave-girl before being a concubine (76).

The social code of the era, which dictated that “a slave girl [can] only [be] married off as a concubine” (76), allows class privilege to be attained with the entrance into elite households but sustains a wife-concubine hierarchy. However, if social class is attained through marriage, maintaining the favour of men on whose economic and social power women depend becomes especially crucial. The polygamous household however results in constant competition for the mayor’s favour. Unlike in “Prelude” where the adult women split up a wife’s duties in a way that places minimal strain on each of them, a strong undercurrent of rivalry exists between the Chinese women precisely because they each redundantly perform the duties of a wife — sexual intimacy and emotional support — for one patriarch.

Despite this, Eileen Cheng makes a sweeping statement that the “traditional family and women’s seclusion in inner quarters are largely portrayed in a positive and sentimentally nostalgic light” (365). Writing in a foreign tongue, Cheng argues, allows Ling to express appreciation for Chinese culture, including classical literature and feminine crafts such as embroidery, during the May Fourth era which called for a re-evaluation of and departure from the past (364-6). Ng also argues that *AM* demonstrates Ling’s appreciation rather than criticism of oppressive yet nonetheless privileged social circumstances. She claims that *AM* emerged from Ling’s indebtedness to patriarchy and her desire to cater to a foreign audience (“Writing”, 243). She contends that the child’s perspective aligns with that of the presumed English reader because she “assess[es] her environment with a seeming foreigner’s wonder” (238), naively unaware of social conditions as they really were. For Ng, the usage of the child’s perspective to bear witness cannot

sustain a feminist critique: “The pain of women is trivialized as a child’s tantrums or covered over by noisy din of the children’s games” (241). I refute Ng’s claim and propose that Ling’s infantilized narratorial voice offers a covert critique of patriarchy. Cheng’s claim is unconvincing because of the numerous references which hint at the stifling conditions engendered by social and gender norms in China.

In *AM*, the situation where an animal is beheaded and served is reworked into two disparate incidents. Unlike the comparable scene in “Prelude”, these scenes appear in the introduction. Ling’s autobiography begins with a description of a public execution and is followed by a recollection of how her pet hen was killed and served for dinner. In “Prelude”, Pat’s killing of the duck and the serving of it at the family dinner occur only after Linda, Beryl, Alice, and Mrs. Fairfield’s places in the household have been established. Thus it is strategically placed to facilitate a gender-based reading. Towards the end of the story, parallels can be drawn between the violence enacted on the duck and casual male violence towards women, as well as between the decapitated duck and the disempowered adult women. While Ling’s reworked situations and images are not related to issues of gender, they illuminate the necessary lapses that occur when assuming a child’s point of view. The juxtaposition of incidents — one where Ling recognizes the event as it really is and one where she fails to recognize its significance — highlights the manner in which a child only partially perceives the workings of gender ideology. Ling’s adoption of the child perspective creates situations of dramatic irony where the reader comprehends the gravity of events that young Ling does not understand. The partial understanding of

social reality as demonstrated in the introduction anticipates her inability to recognize how gender ideology structures the lives of women and children to their detriment in the later sections of *AM*.

The text begins with Ling recounting her childhood routine of daily walks with a bodyguard Ma Tao. She writes of one particular morning when Ma Tao saw an approaching “Red Demonstration” (12), a procession where a convicted criminal dons a red coat and is taken to the execution grounds. The narrative unfolds in a manner that recalls “Prelude”. Like Pat, Ma Tao assumes that watching a beheading, in this case a criminal’s, is suitable entertainment for children. He leads Ling to watch the man, who sings as he is led to his death. Despite the possession of hindsight, Ling relates the events as they seemed to her at that time. The disjuncture between Ling’s sketch and what the reader can surmise from the written narrative hints at Ling’s omission. Ling’s sketch depicts her being carried by her father’s bodyguard on their stroll outside the residence. This image of gaiety is highly incongruous with the scene described.

Seen through a child’s eyes, public capital punishment is rendered as a perplexing stage-play: “Was the Red-coat Man a good actor? What made him sit in a wagon to sing his song instead of being in a theatre?” (14). The child’s perspective is foregrounded by stage performance metaphors. Ma Tao answers Ling’s queries and exclaims that the criminal should be a “proud actor” (14) considering the enthusiastic audience. The best view of the beheading is deemed “the best seat” (14). Ling states that Ma Tao relayed the next step in the procession, gun-firing, “in the way he often told [her] what would be the next play in the programme at the theatre” (15). Although Ma Tao explains

what an execution entails, young Ling does not grasp that it has a lasting consequence that cannot be undone. Like Kezia, Ling is upset by the beheading and pushes Ma Tao. Her cries, “go home, go home” (16), recall Kezia’s yells of “head back, head back” in “Prelude”. Although she registers fear while gazing at a decapitated body, young Ling fails to recognize the beheading as an act of capital punishment, a fact that the adult reader would surely be aware of. Even the criminal’s singing, which is a customary act of defiance by those facing execution, is unaccounted for. At the end Ling asks, distraught, why the officers “play[ed] such a naughty game to the Red-coat Man” (16). Like Kezia who was falsely assured by Pat’s earrings, young Ling is hushed by Ma Tao, who tells her the man felt no pain.

The Red-coat Man whom Ling describes as having a head “cut off like the chickens” (15-16) leads to an incident where a slaughtered hen is served at the dinner table. The chapter “Moving House” in which this incident occurs is a translation of a Chinese-language short story Ling published in 1929. In the Chinese-language text, Ling writes in the third-person and the drama revolves around her child protagonist Zhi-er. In *AM*, Ling claims this as her personal experience. The chapter, like “Prelude”, begins with the commotion of moving. Young Ling is disallowed from bringing her pet hen to Canton and decides to entrust it to her neighbour Aunt Shih. Adopting the child’s perspective, Ling describes the events as they seemed to her and reveals her inability then to recognize the indications of Aunt Shih’s eventual killing of her pet. While this is suggested in conversations that the child either overhears and or participates in, Ling remains oblivious. She hears her family servant Ah-San’s joking remark which foretells the fate of her pet: “Aunt Shih, now



that you have got plenty of delicious food, I suppose you will invite guests to your house” (45). Ling however remains unsuspecting even when Aunt Shih mentions that she will send some dishes to Ling’s family. She again does not notice the implications of Ah-San’s subtle hint to Aunt Shih: “You know she eats only good rice every day . . . I wonder who will be the lucky person to enjoy such a good chicken” (48). However, upon hearing the maidservant’s cheery words after Aunt Shih left her family two dishes as gifts — “it was generous of her to return the chicken as soon as she could” (49) — Ling realizes that her adult friend whom she trusted has slaughtered her pet. Unlike Kezia, Ling does not witness the beheading of the animal but joins the adults at the dinner table where it is served. Unlike the earlier incident where Ling remains unaware that Ma Tao’s act of taking her to view a beheading was inappropriate, this chapter ends with Ling understanding that Aunt Shih had betrayed her trust.

These situations of dramatic irony in the introduction anticipate subsequent instances where it is the reader and not young Ling who recognizes the unfortunate circumstances of the women and instances of socialization. This is best seen in Ling’s recount of the arrival of her father’s newest concubine. Like “Moving House”, this chapter was previously published as a Chinese-language short story. In *AM*, the chapter opens with six-year-old Ling being dressed for Sixth Mother’s arrival. Ling recalls her half-sisters discussing the celebratory feast and wonders why Fifth Mother should be so upset as to spend the day weeping. At this juncture, the reader can surely discern that Fifth Mother’s sorrow is tied to the new concubine’s

arrival. In Ling's Chinese-language short story, the narrator makes Fifth Mother's displeasure palpable at the very beginning:

Fifth Mother was dressed more beautifully today. Feng Er had no idea what fabric she had on but only felt that she resembled a red peony but with a glister of shimmering silver. Yet, she did not look as lovely as usual. She was bitterly tight-lipped and did not even crack a smile when Mother laughingly tried to coax her into conversation. After breakfast, she returned to her room hastily like a puff of smoke. (*Collected Writings* 1: 415, translation mine)

Translating from Chinese to English, Ling departs from the mode of third-person narration and presents the child's perspective in the first person. Sections of the text are altered to ensure that child's limited perspective is maintained. For example, Fifth Mother's discontentment is only hinted at:

Fifth Mother was crossing the court hastily. Like a puff of wind she walked towards her house. She wore a very pretty dress, though I could not name the colour and the material. But I felt today that she, herself, was as pretty as the apple blossoms, a sort of beauty that arouses one's pity. (*AM* 55)

For young Ling, the concubine's arrival has no bearing on Fifth Mother's emotional state. Aside from the ironic chapter title "A Happy Event", Ling does not comment on the situation even with the benefit of retrospect. The chapter closes on a scene in the women's quarters later that night. In the original, the child wonders about the dream a character has in the play she had just watched, only to be distracted by Fifth Mother's sigh (420). In *AM*, Ling

revises this to amplify her utter ignorance about Fifth Mother's sorrows. Ling persistently questions Fifth Mother about the romance plot in the play, unaware that the pining lover's melodramatic death from heartbreak resonates with her suffering in marriage. While young Ling sees Fifth Mother as disinterested, the narrative indicates that her distress is unrecognized:

I kept asking round and round, which must have bored Fifth Mother, for she said to me: "I hope you will not ask these questions any more. Little children need not bother to understand them." . . .

"Why do you sigh?" I looked at her.

"Thinking about something you can't understand." She closed her eyes (62).

The height of dramatic irony is reached when young Fifth Mother's crying confuses Ling. In the original, the story ends with Fifth Mother asking Feng Er if she would mourn her death, to which the child naively asked where her grave would be, only to be greeted with the perplexing sight of Fifth Mother sobbing (421). In *AM*, Ling revises the scene to highlight her inability to recognize what has provoked these feelings:

"You will not die. You wouldn't like to forget Mother, and me, and Father? . . ." [. . .]

"I can't forget your mother, she is very good to me, but . . ." She covered her face with her hands. I saw her fingers trembling. Her breast heaved slightly.

"I want to know who has been naughty to you. Tell me, tell me [. . .]" (63).

Throughout *AM*, Ling is exposed to incomprehensible adult behaviour. Ling's veil of naivety advances a covert critique of patriarchy. By showing Fifth Mother's restraint in articulating the reason for her distress and young Ling's inability to grasp the situation, Ling depicts a conspiracy of silence, a strong feature of "Prelude" as well, which prevents women from communicating their oppressive conditions and girls from comprehending the predicament they might face in adulthood.

However, this is not to say that the child's perspective trivializes suffering. Ling uses it strategically, as Mansfield does in "Prelude", to highlight how children are acculturated into perceiving restrictive social conditions as normative. Her refusal to explicitly claim these incidents as instances of socialization facilitates a critique of gender ideology. Ling reveals how gendered social rules are learnt through a process of imitation or by instruction, to the extent that the oppressive conditions underlying them are glossed over. Chang Ma instructs Ling to "do what [her] mother or the other mothers tell [her] during the proceedings (52)." The children speculate about gifts from their father only to have Third Mother interrupt to instruct her daughters: "Silly little creatures, you should ask your father to give you, each one of you, a golden dollar instead of a silver one. You know when he's happy he gives you everything you want" (54). Fourth Sister's repeated urging of her father to give the elder children more money, a detail not found in the Chinese-language short story, might be a calculated addition to highlight effective socialization. Ling's description of the family's clamouring for money emphasises acculturation at work. While young Ling is surprised to see her mothers kneeling to greet her father, she expresses admiration when she

sees Third Mother teasingly prodding him for money. She is pleased with Third Mother's witty remark: "Why should one feel ashamed? [. . .] A tip is money, money is everything" (60). Ling's veil of innocence when recounting how the women clamour for money despite their discontent highlights their financial and emotional vulnerability. While young Ling is ignorant about the rivalry arising in a polygamous marriage and economic insecurity which prevents them from rebelling against the patriarch, surely the reader is privy to this fact.

Kezia has some insight about how one is acculturated into class and gender roles. "Prelude" demonstrates how notions of femininity and masculinity are reinforced and gender roles are learned through seemingly innocuous games. Rags believes it is "shameful" (80) for boys to play with dolls. Isabel attempts to organize a game of play-pretend, either "hospitals" or "ladies" (81). She assigns the role of doctor and father to Pip and relegates herself and her sisters to the roles of nurses, patients, and mothers. Meanwhile, the boys' mistreatment of girls and animals during gameplay are disguised as reasonable acts. Pip squeezes juice from a mandarin peel down Lottie's throat and abuses Snooker. Such acts prefigure the causal violence men exercise in marriage. While Kezia's objection — "I hate playing ladies . . . You always make us go to church hand in hand and come home and go to bed" (81) — suggests her dislike of banal repetition involved in these games, she does not realize that such rules mirror the social norms for adult women.

Reworking this situation of child's play, Ling hints at the parallels between gendered games and the adult world. She recounts a childhood incident where Peach Flower, Third Mother's maidservant, ruins a game she

was playing with her sister and the gardener's daughter. It is crucial to recall that Third Mother is not Ling's biological mother. The girls imaginatively perform a story of a mooncake stall's opening day complete with props. Peach Flower smashes their handmade cakes and tears down their makeshift shop. Third Mother joins her maidservant in ridiculing the girls when they approach her for help. Peach Flower mocks the children for being upset about their ruined cakes when they will "get as many cakes as [they] want" in the future (75). While Peach Flower's remark is valid — considering the social code of the era where a woman receive cakes from the family she marries into — this statement becomes means for Third Mother to taunt Ling about her mother's inability to bear a son: "Your mother will have thousands and thousands of good cakes to eat in the future; she will have more than she can eat, I am sure of that" (75). While Ling is often perplexed by adult behaviour, she here understands the complexity of this situation and understands that Third's Mother remark is in fact an insult. She recognizes the devastating demands tied to reproduction placed on women in the household as well as her value in the family as a female. Her mother later attempts to use the incident to reinforce the differing societal value of boys and girls and "know[ing] one's own position" (76) to Ling. Ling's determined refusal — "when I grow up, I will not get cakes for you" (76) — highlights a desire to be removed from the transaction of marriage. While Ling does not completely recognize the suffering of women in her family, she does intuit their circumscribed position and rejects her likely fate.

## **Gender Roles and Reader Responses**

While supposedly creating affective bonds, the institution of marriage reinforces structural conditions that contribute to female disempowerment. Mansfield and Ling present enforced childbearing within marriage as a burden that afflicts women in different ways. Having to meet demands for sex and children complicates Linda's feelings towards Stanley. As with her fear of Stanley's sexual aggression, Linda expresses her revulsion towards childbirth euphemistically. She describes her feelings towards the matter as "the most coarse, hateful things" (91) and underscores her anxiety about health instead. While Stanley imagines a place for a son at the dinner table, Linda imagines herself speaking to him angrily about her inability to endure another pregnancy because of health concerns: "You know I'm very delicate. You know as well as I do that my heart is affected, and the doctor has told you I may die any moment. I have had three great lumps of children already . . ." (91).

The differing ways in which the aloe in the Burnell garden is perceived illuminate how childbearing is understood. Mrs. Fairfield spots what she thinks are buds and expresses her belief that "it is going to flower this year" (90). Having enjoyed motherhood, Mrs. Fairfield sees the flowering of the aloe in a positive way. Linda comments on the aloe's rare flowering, "[o]nce every hundred years" (73), her cryptic smile suggesting a desire for such infertility. She imagines the aloe riding upon the bank "like a ship with the oars lifted" (90) and herself escaping on it; a fantasy in which she removes herself from the household where she is continually forced to flower. Linda rejoices at the sight of the "long sharp thorns that edged the aloe leaves",

which she thinks will fend away her “Newfoundland dog” Stanley (90). Kezia, however, is perplexed by the sight of a partially withered plant with thorns, a tall stem, and leaves “so old that they curled up in the air no longer” (72). The fact that Kezia notices the aloe’s decay and does not even know its name is suggestive of her inability to recognize her mother’s wasting away from the pressures at home. Towards the end, Linda resigns herself to the way gendered roles operate within the household: “I shall go on having children and Stanley will go on making money and the children and the gardens will grow bigger and bigger with whole fleets of aloes in them for me to choose from” (91). The anticipation of the single aloe growing into fleets indicates the very inescapability of childbearing.

Childbearing contributes to the suffering of the wives in the Ling’s family. The desire for sons in a household with an abundance of daughters creates a situation where childbearing becomes the means by which wives claim status. Ling explains that she was “naturally neglected” (67) by virtue of being the tenth daughter of the family. While this is an undesirable situation, it allows Ling to be privy to happenings at home when she sits unnoticed listening to conversations between women. Eavesdropping on conversations between her mother’s maidservant Chang Ma and her sisters, Ling imaginatively recreates the happenings related to her undesired birth. These events show that the pressures tied to fertility structure the women’s lives. Chang Ma gives voice to the suffering of Ling’s mother by recounting her instructions to keep the birth private: “Don’t tell people about the baby coming, that will only make them say she’s got one more . . .” (68). The despair brought about by Ling’s birth shows the valuing sons under patriarchy.



Ling's mother suffers, like Linda, from not having borne a son. Chang Ma offers sympathy simply because she thinks it is unjust that "wicked [women]" have the "good luck" (68) of sons, while Ling's mother suffers from perpetual bad luck with a string of daughters. The gender preference contributes to conditions where suffering is hardly acknowledged, much less addressed. According to Ling, her father failed to notice when her mother miscarried a son. He and Third Mother ignored Ling's mother her thwarted attempt to be validated as a wife and "neglect[ed] her in her grief" (69). The preference for sons creates an dilemma — the inability to bear sons translates to a woman's diminished worth in the household; however, bearing sons ensures that patriarchal culture is perpetuated.

Ling and Mansfield show how women help reproduce the conditions of their disempowerment by remaining within circumstances that offer them economic security and material comfort. They also point out how the financial and emotional vulnerability maintained in these marriages ensures that only limited opportunities will be available to women who wish for change. *AM* closes with Ling's mother choosing to avoid the patriarch as much as possible and Third Mother leaving for her adult son's residence — perhaps the only ways the women could cope with their circumstances without impoverishing themselves. Childless and disregarded, Fifth Mother's only option is to leave for a nunnery. However, while both authors criticize the way roles in a marriage constrain women, they encourage differing reader responses to the patriarch.

"Prelude" resists presenting the patriarch as entirely self-serving and selfish. There are moments where Stanley seems more comedic and unstable

than Ling's father who is more self-assured in his power and more sinister in how he wields it. By allowing the reader access to Stanley's point of view, Mansfield shows that men are subject to the pressures of patriarchy as well as women. Satisfied with his economic achievement, Stanley takes delight in purchasing the estate "dirt cheap" (62). The narrator mockingly points at the pride Stanley takes in providing for the family — "Is this the first of the home products?" he asked, knowing perfectly well that it was" (87). His delight is often undercut by episodes that show him close to hysterics. He plans "his Saturday afternoons and his Sundays" (74) extensively on his way home, deciding which family member should partake in particular activities. Yet, this meticulousness does not translate to a sense of control: "A sort of panic overtook Burnell whenever he approached near home" (75). Later, as foretold by the narrator, Stanley ritualistically shouts "Is everything all right?" (75) and is calmed after Linda perfunctorily greets him. Led to see the children, Stanley is overwhelmed with emotion at a seemingly idyllic picture of domestic bliss:

The lamp was lighted on the nursery table. Mrs Fairfield was cutting and spreading bread and butter. The three little girls sat up to table wearing large bibs embroidered with their names. They wiped their mouths as their father came in ready to be kissed . . . He tightened his arm around Linda's shoulder. By God, he was a perfect fool to feel as happy as this! (76)

Holding Linda later, he declares that he is "so confoundedly happy" (76). Stanley's sharp emotional shifts — anxiety, relief, and happiness — are tied to the functioning of the household. Although Stanley sets in place the

unsatisfactory conditions experienced by the Burnell women and remains ignorant of their unhappiness, he is also dedicated to his family.

Contrastingly, *AM* presents the patriarch as a generally absent figure who is emotionally detached from the household but thoroughly exploitative. Although Ling declares that her father “seemed to [the family] a very good tempered person” (66) and never explicitly criticizes him, the reader is given enough reason to doubt that he is a man of good character. Unlike in “Prelude”, the narrator does not go into the perspective of the patriarch. Additionally, Ling’s adoption of the child’s perspective allows her to covertly highlight her father’s thoughtlessness and the pressures of living within the household as a wife, which she did not recognize as a child. However, this means that inferences about the women’s feelings have to be made on the basis of indirect evidence. In one incident, Ling finds her father in her private bedroom studio practicing calligraphy and avoiding the violent conflict between Fifth Mother and the newest concubine. She wonders why he “looked so very much at ease” (96). However, the patriarch’s indifference would not be lost on the reader. Ling’s father retires to his study and orders Ling to ask for her mother to “help him with the smoking [of opium]” (98) only to be rejected. Ling recounts her distress at having “been stupid enough to tell Father the true state of affairs” (99) when she let slip that her mother was not ill but rather did not wish to assist out of bitterness. Evidently, while tension can arise between the wives, it is clear that they must appear compliant to the patriarch despite harbouring resentment. Although his trivialization of the women’s sorrows and anger as a “trifling thing” (100) might have comforted Ling then, the assumption of the child’s perspective demonstrates how their

suffering was dismissed. Thus, Ling offers an oblique critique of her father's emotional distance from the family and shows the reader how the causal mistreatment of women is normalized. In another instance, Ling recounts her mother declaring to Fifth Mother that it is pointless to quarrel over the patriarch's unequal affections, using an idiomatic expression: "I cannot understand why people quarrel so often since every man can only eat two bowls of rice at one meal; at night he can occupy only one bed" (115). Although Fifth Mother envies Ling's mother for her presumed indifference towards the circumstances at home, it should be clear that to the reader that these living conditions are far from satisfactory. Although Ling refrains from explicitly criticizing her father's behaviour, she covertly highlights how the devastating social dynamics at home are perceived as reasonable. While the polygamous family structure benefits none of the women, the father enjoys this system with obvious disregard for those who are made emotionally vulnerable by his self-serving choices. The increase of concubines in the household occurs for his benefit. Unlike Mansfield, Ling presents a main male character that is self-serving and selfish by showing the ways he ignores the suffering of his family members and wields power over them. Mansfield resists portraying the patriarch as entirely unredeemable. While Mansfield highlights Stanley's role in creating the difficult circumstances faced by the Burnell women, she does not demonize him and depicts him as having a more complex set of attributes than those of Ling's father. Rather than attributing blame to the patriarch, Mansfield suggests that socially prescribed task of economic endeavour assigned on the basis of gender places too much responsibility on men and prevents Stanley from being perfectly blissful.

I discussed in this chapter how Mansfield was a transnational influence for Ling by showing the parallels between *AM* and “Prelude” in terms of images, ideas, and situations. While both texts demonstrate how gender ideology structures women’s experience, Ling reworks elements drawn from Mansfield to highlight a child’s coming to terms with the workings of a gendered society. Ling’s writing of her inability to fully recognize the complexity of what she perceived as a child demonstrates the acculturation into gender roles and advances a covert feminist critique. Although both authors criticize the circumscribed social roles available to women, they encourage differing reader responses to the patriarch. Ling paints a dark portrait of the patriarch in a covert manner. Although She severely criticizes her father, her less explicit way of underscoring suffering and injustice witnessed in the family may be a strategy that renders visible how personal expression is subjected to constraints, a fact of life for the women in her life. In the next chapter, I study the way *AM* was read in England and assess whether Ling’s hopes that she might impress upon a foreign audience the social conditions of her childhood were actualized.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Writing, Reading, and Misreading *Ancient Melodies*

I am presumptuously writing to ask if you would be so generous as to accept me as a student . . . There are far too few women writers in China and that is precisely why the thoughts and lives of Chinese women have been never made known to the world. It is perhaps irresponsible not to offer this contribution (qtd. in Zhou, 606-7; translation mine).

— Ling Shuhua, Letter to Zhou Zouren, 1 September 1923

If my book could give English readers some pictures of real Chinese lives . . . some truth of life and sex which your people never have a chance to see but . . . seen by a child in the East, I shall be contented.

— Ling Shuhua, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 24 July 1938

Ling's search for a literary mentor began at university. Writing to Zhou Zouren, prominent critic and younger brother of the equally influential Lu Xun, during his appointment as associate professor at Yanjing University's Department of Chinese, Ling expressed her admiration for the accomplished multi-lingual writer and requested for mentorship. With Zhou's assistance, she made her literary debut in 1924 with a short story published in prominent journal *Morning Post Supplementary* in Beijing (Zhang 589). It is very likely that the political conflict between Ling's husband and Zhou eventually wore the relationship down. Raphael Zhang suggests that another reason was the clashing beliefs about women's emancipation held by Zhou and Ling. While Zhou strongly advocated female empowerment and women's writing, he saw them as means to drive the nationalist cause (Zhang 589-590). This idea of writing to serve a male-centered nationalist project may not have sat well with Ling who wished to write the reality of women's lives in China. Years later, now established as a short story writer, Ling mentions to Woolf the same desire to articulate the lived experience of Chinese society. Although Ling

does not mention her interest in women's experience, as she did when she first wrote to Zhou, *AM* reveals the stifling conditions engendered by social and gender norms in China from the 1900s through the 1920s.

In Chapter One, I demonstrated how Ling, an avid reader of Anglophone literature, reworks situations and images found in Mansfield's "Prelude" in her autobiography. As a non-native writer of English, Ling's turn to the Anglophone world in the late 1930s — both literature and the British print market — and her refusal to contribute to the wave of patriotic women's autobiographies that came into being in wartime China demonstrates a belief in literature as "common ground" at its very finest. Unlike other Chinese women writers in who were compelled by political strife to evaluate their professional roles and on-going national changes, Ling did not put her adult life under scrutiny in *AM*. In this chapter, I consider the reception of Ling's autobiography in England during the 1950s. While Ling freely crossed barriers on the ground of English Literature, one wonders how much of her aspiration to impress "some truth of life and sex" (24 July 1938) was actualized. Studying correspondence between Ling and the Bloomsbury group, published reviews, and Vita-Sackville West's introduction to *AM*, I show how critics fail to register Ling's autobiography as a serious critique that articulates the unhappiness and injustice of Chinese family life despite glaring evidence. I also reveal a severe misreading where critics perceive depicted instances of suffering as charming and comedic. By demonstrating how oppression is either dismissed or hardly recognized, I argue that Ling's endeavour to impress upon a foreign audience her experience of unsatisfactory social conditions engendered by a polygamous family structure is troublingly

misread by reviewers. Considering how post-war sexism and the beliefs held by the Bloomsbury Group about art influenced intellectual culture in England during the 1950s, I situate these readings within a historical context which might illuminate why reviewers fail to register *AM* as a critique of Chinese society and the polygamous family unit but by no means excuses them for their myopia. Given that circumstances unique to England shape the reception of Ling's autobiography, it is evident that national barriers transect on the ground of literature. If Ling hoped for some common ground to be forged through her work, the readings of the autobiography demonstrate little common understanding between her and the foreign audience in England.

### **Misreading Gendered Oppression**

From uncompleted draft to published work, critics and reviewers of the book considered Ling's autobiography charming. Woolf was the first to note the text's "charm" upon receiving a draft chapter and mentions it again in other letters. Although the attached document is not locatable, Woolf's response indicates that it includes an episode involving the concubines of Ling's household. Her reading of the text's charm is premised upon its presumed foreignness:

Now I write to say that I like it very much. I think it has a great charm. It is also of course difficult for an English person, at first, there is some incoherence, and one does not understand the different wives; who they are; which is speaking. But this becomes clear after a time; and then I feel a charm in the very unlikeness. I find the similes strange and poetical. (*Letters* 6: 289-290)



Etymologically tied to the Old French noun *charme* and the Latin noun *carmen*, as in “song, verse, oracular response, incantation”, the word “charm” as used in these instances refers to “[a]ny quality, attribute, trait, feature, etc., which exerts a fascinating or attractive influence, exciting love or admiration” or simply “a fascinating quality” (“charm, n.1”). For Woolf, the textual strangeness seen in Ling’s language and subject matter would be appealing to a foreign audience. Ling’s polygamous household might have been fascinating simply because it was so different from anything in 1930s England. Her rendering of Chinese idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms in English, often in literal word-for-word translation, may also have caused them to appear odd. Woolf’s advice for Ling after reading that particular chapter calls for her to preserve such a quality:

Please go on; write freely; do not mind how directly you translate the Chinese into the English. In fact I would advise you to come as close to the Chinese both in style and meaning as you can. Give as many natural details of the life, of the house, of the furniture as you like. And always do it as you would were you writing for the Chinese. Then if it were to some extent made easy grammatically by someone English I think it might be possible to keep the Chinese flavour and make it both understandable yet strange for the English. (*Letters* 6: 290)

In a letter sent six months later, Woolf expresses her belief that “the whole feeling of the book would be very much spoilt if some English were to put what you write into formal English prose” yet “it is difficult for English

readers to get at [Ling's] full meaning" (*Letters* 6: 327). Again, she reiterates her perception of the text's appeal, stating that she "[has] seen enough to be interested and charmed" (*Letters* 6: 327).

While one can only speculate about the specificities of the chapter Ling sent to Woolf, her completed autobiography does strike a balance between linguistic accessibility and oddity, a quality Woolf encouraged. In his review of *AM* published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1954, Harold Acton notes Ling's occasional linguistic oddness: "Her images are vivid without being strained; when a little strange ("My blue sky Lord", for instance) this is due to literal translation which preserves the Chinese flavour" (55) Like Woolf, Acton brings up the notion of a "Chinese flavour". However, Ling does not intentionally amplify what readers deem "flavour", namely the Chinese colloquialisms, idioms, and translations present in the text.

At some points, Chinese idiomatic expressions find their way into Ling's text. They are sometimes literally translated and come accompanied with footnotes which clarify their meaning. This is best seen in the chapter where Ling recounts a violent dispute between Third Mother and Sixth Mother. Sixth Mother mocks Third Mother for "breaking [her] vinegar jar" (93); the footnote clarifies that she is mocking her for "display[ing] [her] jealousy" (93). However, phrases such as "a woman of cheap bone" (90) and "a born cheap bone" (94), which the women direct to each other, are merely inserted into the text. Readers without Chinese proficiency necessarily have to approximate the meaning of these expressions based on the context in which they are used. In this instance, they refer to lax sexual mores. Ling transcribes Chinese characters into roman alphabets, in a manner similar to what

contemporary readers of the Chinese language would recognize as *hanyu pinyin*, for words that could be easily translated. For example, Ling's insertions of words like "puh-tao" (44), meaning "grapes", and "huang-pee" (44), meaning "yellow skin", would be perplexing for the non-native speaker of Chinese.

In *AM*, the various ways by which this "Chinese flavour" is made visible in linguistic choices is due to inconsistency rather than intention. However, the unusual aspects of the text have been seen as demonstrative of Ling's pandering to a foreign audience. Shih Shu-mei claims that Woolf's emphasis on "charm" and "unlikeness" in her assessment of Ling's draft demonstrates "[her] unfamiliarity with China on the one hand, her desire to remain unfamiliar as the necessary condition of appreciation on the other, for the value of Ling's work lay in its strangeness and unlikeness" (218). She predictably sketches asymmetrical power relations which ensure that Ling must meet Woolf's and a foreign audience's Orientalist desire to consume a thoroughly Other China in order to facilitate publication:

Woolf was calling for Ling to exoticize herself in the gaze of the West (embodied by Woolf herself and the future Western readers of the autobiography), to present herself as the Other to the West . . . *Ancient Melodies* is naturally filled with aestheticized depictions of "ancient" Chinese customs and habits (although the narrative is set in the twentieth century), with ample explanations for these strange customs, rituals, clothes, etc. for the legibility and curiosity of the Western audience.

In terms of cultural content, then, *Ancient Melodies* had to embody the exotic, antiquated Orient whose strangeness would provide charm and delight to the Western reader secure in his/her own culture of familiarity and modernity. (218-9)

It is true that Woolf's and a foreign audience's interest in Ling's work could stem from a fascination about China. However, Shih's claim that the publication of *AM* entailed "an overt emphasis on historical and cultural specificity of Chinese lives to the point of exoticism" (216) is overstated. Explanations offered in disruptive parentheses do recur in the text — "in those days unmarried girls often wore trousers" (31), "This ceremony is for the benefit of the midwife, because those who attend to see the baby's bath have to throw money into the basin, and this money goes to the midwife" (67-8), "[the ma-go] is a short coat worn on the top of the robe" (143) — to account for the customs, clothes, and events that Ling describes. However, Ling's laborious offering of context decreases exoticism as *AM* progresses. This use of explanations is perhaps strategically necessary to cater to a foreign audience who might otherwise find her observations incomprehensible or historically irrelevant.

Published in 1953, after Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China in 1949, Ling's autobiography dwells strongly on a social structure that had been abolished in recent reform. China's Marriage Law outlawed polygamy in support for the monogamous heterosexual family unit in 1950 (Pan 35). The intimate access to private lives in a polygamous household, a family structure unheard of in England, could be one appeal of Ling's work. Again, these readings draw attention to *AM's* ability to charm

with these descriptions. In the introduction to *AM*, Sackville-West comments on how the text captures China of the past:

I had already heard of these delightful sketches of a vanished way of life on the other side of the world, to which she now pays me the compliment of asking me to write an introduction. I do most gladly, feeling confident that her readers will be charmed, even as Virginia Woolf was charmed and so I also have been *charmed*. (8-9; emphasis added)

In a partially undated letter to Ling, Vanessa Bell writes:

...how much I have enjoyed it and how *charming* I think it is. I have a much clearer idea now than I have ever had before of life in a Chinese household and of course the fact that it is depicted by an artist makes it so much more vivid to me – I do hope it will have the success it deserves. Vita has written such a good introduction that I think it should have. (25 Nov. n.y.; emphasis added)

Critic H.H notes this similar quality in a 1954 review published in *The Spectator*:

Others have introduced us to the pattern and moral foundations of the social fabric; Su Hua provides pictures of a more personal, intimate nature. Her disconnected chapters on “The Red-coat Man,” “The Visit to the Fair with the Old Gardener,” “The Arrival of Sixth Mother” have a captivating *charm*. (218; emphasis added)

While readers commend Ling’s work for shedding light on the dynamics

within a polygamous elite household, they did not grasp the complexity of such an experience. This surfaces in the way these critics perceive inequitable social conditions as reasonable and normative, the very situation that Ling's assumption of the child's perspective exposes. It is very likely that these writers would not have missed the distortions created by adopting a child's perspective in an English novel. While Sackville-West suggests that the act of reading *AM* occurs at "so wide a remove" (10) — the historical and social circumstances Ling writing about being vastly different from Britain past and present — these reviewers demonstrate their sharing of the blindness and sexism of Chinese society that Ling criticizes.

This myopia demonstrated by critics might be due to the influence of post-war sexism on the intellectual culture in England. Attempts to re-establish gender norms, which were drastically changed during wartime, were at their height in the 1950s (Ward 50). Paul Ward identifies "a move back to peacetime normality to overcome the upsets about gender in wartime, seeking to settle gender tensions thrown up by women's wartime mobility" (Ward 50). While the championing of "separate spheres" where women and men focus on the domestic and public realm respectively is not a uniquely 1950s phenomenon, the interest in supporting motherhood and the family unit is driven by changes caused by World War II (M. Bell 5). Post-war public policies "focused on rebuilding the family, assumed fractured by six years of war during which time women as well as men had been conscripted, many children evacuated, and the single-parent family headed by the mother had, for many, become the norm" (M. Bell 5). This did not however translate to immediate social change but was complicated by single mothers remaining in

or entering the work force for better living standards (Kent 322). Thus, “the very ideology that urged them to remain at home acted to send them out in order to adhere to it. Bread-winning women, though unacknowledged in official pronouncements or the popular press, comprised a central element of the success of the postwar economy” (Kent 322). I recognize that the polygamous household described in *AM* is different in some respects from the family model that post-war Britain was trying to reinstate. While the household Ling grew up in was based on one patriarch and a surfeit of women who fulfilled his desires, the concept of matrimony advocated in 1950s Britain involved men and women having “different and complementary roles”, embodying the “separate and equal” principle in gendered duties (M. Bell 6). However, both family structures share a key similarity in that they involve demarcated gendered spheres where men and women deal exclusively with professional endeavour and domestic duties. The positive view of clearly demarcated gender relations, especially premised upon this ideology of the separate spheres, could lead to a less clear-eyed apprehension of the unsatisfactory social conditions presented in *AM*.

Post-war anxiety about gender roles might explain why English critics hardly criticize Ling’s father’s detachment from the domestic sphere and the impact his behaviour has on the women. As explored earlier, Ling’s assumption of the child’s perspective ensures that the patriarch is never explicitly criticized for his actions but the reader is certainly given enough evidence to recognize his role in the predicament faced by the women. The emphasis on “charm” in reviews indicates the inability of readers to see beyond the veneer of Ling’s understated style. Thus, they unwittingly prove

the justice of her critique. The reviews reveal, for the most part, a failure to register the asymmetrical power relations and pressures of living within such a household. Although Acton comments on Ling's father extensively, he veers away from attributing any undesirable quality to the patriarch despite citing instances in the narrative that would have supported such a claim. The way he describes how Ling's father responds to a quarrel between the concubines is especially telling:

[He] took refuge in the practice of calligraphy. His abstraction from the scene is in the best scholarly tradition. He discusses the scent of wisteria with his puzzled daughter, and proceeds to tell her that "character writing is the highest art . . . [and that] character writing is the best way to make one's heart at peace [. . .]" After which he retires to his study to smoke opium. "To make one's heart at peace" was the mayor's *leit-motif*. (55)

Here, Acton admiringly points out how the patriarch's non-involvement exemplifies his scholarly background. While Ling criticizes her father's lack of emotional investment in the family despite being the cause of his wives' sorrows, Acton celebrates it as scholarly virtue. His reading appears premised on an Orientalist assumption intertwined with sexism: By seeing such male behaviour as a perfectly reasonable aspect of Chinese society, Acton excuses patriarchy as it manifests in the institution of the family. His reading hints that societal mechanisms which reinforce patriarchal dominance are part of the common human ground shared by English and Chinese men.

Ling's description of how the conflict is handled sheds light on the asymmetrical power relations and the degree to which women can rebel. The



patriarch's only involvement in the conflict is to send orders — through a maidservant — for Ling's mother to resolve it. Young Ling recounts how he enters the courtyard to instruct her again: "Go quickly to them, it would be no joke if one of them were killed. Third Mother always wants too much, while Sixth is particularly afraid of losing face" (89). While Ling's father cares about the situation enough to wish it resolved, he demonstrates blindness to his role in the crisis afflicting the women. Although the tension between the concubines stems from competition for his favour, he dismisses the quarrel by criticizing his concubines for being demanding or vain. Interestingly, however, Ling's mother raises the possibility of the patriarch being embarrassed in front of the servants or upset by the events in order to quell the conflict: "Do save our Old Man's face. Don't let people talk and laugh at him. He has been much upset . . . If something happened to him, what excuse could you make in your defence?" (92). The chapter in which this episode appears, "A Scene", draws its title from Ling's mother's desperate urging — "What will the servants think of you? Do forgive each other and stop making a scene" (91). Ling demonstrates how her mother considers the public display of unhappiness unbecoming to a mistress of the household, although these grievances are very much a consequence of how the household is structured. Ling's assumption of the child's view as she recounts her confusion at her father's serenity juxtaposed against the chaotic brawl between the women is strategic:

His eyes were fixed on the paper and his hand was moving the brush, but my mind was flying out to the front court, for all the time I still felt I could hear their abusive words . . . How I

wished Father would tell whether or not he felt sorry about their quarrel. No, he looked as if he had not felt it, his face looked as mild and calm as it always did. (97)

While Acton sees Ling's father as seeking "refuge" (55) from an unpleasant brawl, Ling points out the degree to which the women's resentment, a result of the jealousy rising from their systemic disempowerment, was dismissed. Acton misses the point when he highlights this incident as demonstrative of the patriarch's calm nature. The call for gender relations to be structured upon the ideology of separate spheres might influence why critics do not find fault with Ling's father's detachment from the domestic realm, which bears the impact of his choices. The unequal portioning of male and female duties at home is underscored when Ling recounts a maidservant's comment: "After all, a father is a father; when he has time, he thinks of his children" (*AM* 64). Although Ling makes it clear that actual social relations premised on the demarcated gendered spheres are oppressive, Acton fails to recognize it.

This blindness is similarly seen in the review published in *The Spectator*. Citing the same event as Acton, critic H.H cursorily mentions the patriarch's behaviour: "he occupied himself meanwhile with calligraphy" (218). While his comments reveal a vague understanding of the constraints the women are subject to, he severely understates the unsatisfactory conditions in the household:

Dotted about are the proverbs her mother used to quote in times of stress and sorrow, full of practical wisdom and good-humoured resignation, such as: "Every man can only eat two bowls of rice at one meal; at night he can only occupy one

bed.” A virtuous woman was expected to be broad-minded and to welcome concubines into the household, which did not always work out smoothly. (218)

To embody wifely virtue women must place the patriarch’s needs above their own. In this case, the concubines are socially expected to amicably welcome a new concubine although her entrance spells additional sexual competition. However, *AM* highlights how seeming amicable is often painfully sustained. At one point, Ling imaginatively recreates an incident which foreshadows her unwelcomed birth. Having met with a fortune-teller, Ling’s mother was upset with his prediction that she would have seven daughters, while Third Mother would have two accomplished sons. The grand title of such a fate, “seven stars with a moon” (68), becomes a way for Third Mother to mock Ling’s mother: “How proud one would be if one knew one had been a goddess of the moon in a former life. Do excuse us mortal beings if we have been impolite to you” (68). Ling’s mother’s silence — “she swallowed her tears” (68) — ends the scene which offers a disturbing glimpse of how women can be acculturated into concealing their feelings to maintain a veneer of graciousness.

This is underscored when Ling recounts her confusion about her mother’s behaviour. Following an incident where Third Mother taunts Ling about her mother’s inability to bear a son, Ling’s mother instructs Ling to stop visiting the other concubine’s court so as to “not make any more trouble” (75). Maintaining the child’s view, Ling recounts her bewilderment when awaking later that night and hearing the wives speaking with each other. Ling’s ambiguous account of this incident lends itself to two dissimilar interpretations: either this is a rare moment where the women are in harmony

or it is only an instance where the least combative concubines attempt to make peace with Third Mother:

At midnight I awoke and heard Third Mother's laughter mingling with Mother and Fifth Mother's gentle voices. The whole bedroom was sinking in the pale moonlight . . . I could not understand why Mother had gone to Third Mother's place. How much I wanted to call her back. I did not dare to do so, but thought unceasingly. (77)

Ling's puzzlement is perhaps due to her mother's geniality despite Third Mother's unkindness. Her response betrays an ignorance of the complexities involved in maintaining peaceful relations among the women despite the strong undercurrent of tension and rivalry. Critic H.H. seems equally unaware of these conditions or at least fails to acknowledge them. While he hastily deems Ling's mother's resignation to her plight good-humoured, it is evident that adopting a genial disposition that is not natural to one is a way by which a concubine responds to oppressive conditions. Quoted proverbs and expressions such as, "One must know one's position if one wants to live with dignity" (76), reveals not H.H.'s acknowledgement of the conditions that underpin Ling's mother's guiding principles, but rather an admiration for her obedience to her duties as domestic angel. It is obvious that Ling's mother is the most amicable concubine because she, unlike some of the other wives, has little regard for the patriarch. Powerless and unable to change the circumstances at home, Ling's mother chooses to suppress her anger instead. She tries to be genial and gentle, or at least appear to be so. Dependent entirely on the patriarch for support, Ling's mother does not openly express her

discontent in order to maintain his favour but does not compete with the other women to earn it. However, H.H.'s mention of expectations placed on women almost as an afterthought — after listing the ways Ling's mother reminds herself about her role — suggests a possible societal mechanism that prevents oppression from being acknowledged.

It may be possible that reviewers wished to avoid the charge of ethnocentricity by not highlighting the failings of a Chinese polygamous family structure. However, the decision to minimize the costs of unsatisfactory social conditions to avoid seeming prejudiced is unconvincing when the manner in which reviews dismiss suffering reveals the reviewers' prejudice. This myopia is highlighted when instances of suffering are disturbingly misread as comedic. Ling's description of her stepmothers fighting is most frequently cited among reviewers. However, they gloss over the distressing circumstances in the household indicated by this conflict. Adopting the child's perspective, Ling describe her experience of the violent dispute as it seemed to her at that point in time. She expresses amusement at her servant's futile attempts to end the brawl:

[Third Mother and Sixth Mother] still struggled . . . to get rid of them, but the servants held tighter as if they were prisoners or mad people we saw in the street. I was amused to see this extraordinary behaviour. I thought it was funny when servants were generally so obedient to their mistresses. (91-2)

This veneer of innocence creates a situation of dramatic irony and so critics should comprehend the gravity of events which young Ling only finds entertaining. However, they fail to recognize this. The height of dramatic

irony is reached when young Ling rambles on with childlike fascination about the parallels between her mothers and characters of stage plays:

I thought Third Mother was the woman called Pan Ching Lian, who murders her husband and then fights with her brother-in-law. Sixth Mother was very like the woman who treats her mother-in-law badly in the absence of her husband . . . As I was reminded of these two plays, and felt the two characters more real and more interesting, I watched their quarrel with pleasure.

(92)

Young Ling fails to recognize her stepmothers' dishevelled appearance — “their long black hair spread over their faces and necks”, “powder and rouge had become mixed by tears”, “one could see many scratches from fingernails” (92) — as an indicator of genuine anger and distress. Given that an earlier chapter presents the women's resentment towards the new concubine, this dispute is unsurprising. Ironically, critics see it as comedic. Acton, for example, lists the quarrel as “one of the most amusing episodes” in *AM*, which is “describe[ed] with much of the raciness of the Peking vernacular” (55). He enlightens the reader on Ling's use of literary allusions:

Perhaps the reader should have a little knowledge of Chinese to savour the allusion to P'an Chien-lien, a brazenly voluptuous murderess who plays a prominent role in the novel *Shui Hu Chuan*, translated as *All Men are Brothers* by Mrs. Pearl Buck, and also in *Chin P'ing Mei*, of which there are several translations (55).

While Acton is keen to educate his readers about the Chinese literary references, he fails to grasp the critique embedded in the narrative as far as to imply that the women are laughably lacking in self-control: “While his concubines let loose that periodical hysteria which Confucius and Buddha combined to check, the old mayor sent Mrs. Su Hua’s mother to appease them” (55). In Sackville-West’s introduction to *AM*, she declares that “once one has grown accustomed to the formula [of the numerous wives and their children], the picture turns to high comedy” (9). Sackville-West writes:

It may not have been funny at the time, when Third Mother pulled Six Mother’s hair and was removed kicking and shrieking into her own courtyard . . . but to us, reading at so wide a remove, it gains an Arabian Nights quality which is all the more fascinating because we know it to have been drawn from a contemporary. (9-10)

Sackville-West and Acton’s reading mirrors young Ling’s limited comprehension of the gravity of the situation. Interestingly, Acton’s desire for readers to “savour” (55) the literary allusions in *AM* reveals a mechanism whereby men discount the female perspective. One wonders if he finds men’s suffering when represented in literary work as comic as women’s suffering. Unaware about the gravity of the fight between the women, young Ling compares Third Mother to a popular femme fatale in Chinese literary culture. Indeed, her comparison of her stepmothers to the devious female characters — a murderous wife and an abusive character — is naïve. Earlier, Acton identifies the patriarch’s supposed predicament and is quick to excuse his behaviour. The patriarch’s non-involvement is elevated as “scholarly virtue”

and perceived as a reasonable way to seek “refuge” (55). However, he is far less willing to consider the position of the women suffering in marriage. The fact that Acton did not notice the naïve comparison made by young Ling, but rather sees it as a clever intertextual reference made by the author, demonstrates his unawareness. The pleasure and amusement provoked by instances of suffering show a prejudiced dismissal of female oppression. Ling had hoped that her work would reveal aspects of Chinese society. This arguably includes oppression in the polygamous family unit. However, these reviews demonstrate too well that there is little common understanding between Ling and her foreign audience.

### **Beauty and Testimony**

To be clear, I am not claiming that the reading of literature should rightly enable the reader to gain social awareness or develop empathy. I am suggesting that Ling had hoped that the British audience would, through reading *AM*, gain a better sense of the social conditions and gendered predicament suffered by the women in her household. However, it is evident that the reviewers’ misreadings prove the justice of her critique. Besides post-war anxiety about gender roles, beliefs about art held by the Bloomsbury Group may have influenced these readings.

Formed from intellectual friendships and family ties, the Bloomsbury Group, composed of writers, artists, and literati, was most prominent during the interwar period. Key individuals included Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf (Rosner 2-3). Sackville-West is often associated with the group too. Members of the group were held together by their engagement with ideas about aesthetics,



philosophy, and psychology, drawing from and moving beyond their own respective disciplines (Rosner 2). Despite the absence of a Bloomsbury credo, studies demonstrate the collective's interest in beauty and key works written by associates that fostered such a spirit. Craufurd Goodwin identifies G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) and Roger Fry's "An Essay in Aesthetics" (1909) as seminal texts (69). The value Moore places on aesthetic beauty and physical enjoyment — "the most valuable things, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects" (188) — would be especially influential. Reflecting on Moore's impact on the group, Keynes suggests that his ideas were by no means accepted in full (52). However, he also identifies key interests of the Bloomsbury Group which seem very much in line with Moore's philosophy. Keynes writes:

The appropriate subjects of passionate contemplation and communion were a beloved person, beauty and truth, and one's prime objects in life were love, the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience and the pursuit of the knowledge. (53)

It is clear that beauty has an importance place in Bloomsbury aesthetics. While Sackville West and Vanessa Bell are the only members of the Bloomsbury Group studied in this chapter, reviewers whose work I have been discussing show evidence of a rhetoric that is strikingly similar to the Bloomsburian elevation of aesthetic beauty.

The title of Ling's autobiography is borrowed from Arthur Waley's "The Old Lute", a translation of the Tang poem "Feiqin" by Bai Juyi. Bai's poem laments that the *guqin*, a traditional Chinese seven-string zither, no

longer appeals to the public. In Bai's poem, the *guqin*, an instrument once "the most honoured of Chinese instruments" (Fletcher 347) and associated with the cultural elite during the Han dynasty (Fletcher 347-8), is described as having lost its symbolic value. Noting how jade loses its shine, Bai describes how the strings of the *guqin*, despite its historical legacy, are now dusty from neglect ("玉徽光彩灭，朱弦尘土生"; Bai 164). Bai suggests tunes played on this instrument find no audience because the *qiangdi* and *qinzheng* have replaced it in popularity ("不辞为君弹，纵弹人不听。 / 何物使之然，羌笛与秦筝"; Bai 164). While the poem's title is best translated to "The Abandoned Zither" or "The Useless Zither", Waley chooses "The Old Lute" instead and emphasizes the continuity of historical tradition. Writing to Ling, Sackville-West recommended that she "give [her] book this title and then publish some further lines of the poem on the first sheet, to explain where the title came from" (qtd. in Hong 247). This might explain why the opening line of Waley's translation served as an epigraph: "Of cord and cassia-wood is the lute compounded; / Within it lie ancient melodies" (Waley 126; *AM* 1). Ironically, Sackville-West suggests a poem about how tastes change for Ling's narrative which she presumed would be appreciated by virtue of its portrait of a Chinese society that is static and unchanging. Sackville-West emphasises this appeal in her introduction where she declares her belief that "the work remains as the author wrote it, as authentically Chinese as the illustrations from the same pen" (10). For Sackville-West, Ling's autobiography "will not meet with the fate prophesied for the old harp in the poem, but . . . an English audience will be only too willing to listen" (10).

However, one wonders what exactly the English audience discerned

from Ling's autobiography. Stressing "beauty", these readers and critics disregard a more complex and troubling portrait of Chinese society. Sackville-West, for example, introduces Ling with a hyperbolic statement: "Every letter she writes contains some phrase reflecting her thirst for beauty; it slips out quite naturally and unaffectedly with a certain wistfulness" (9). Another striking instance of elevating aesthetic quality at the expense of social issues appears in K. John's review in *The New Statesman and Nation* published in 1954. At first glance, this review articulates what most commentators have failed to register: an acknowledgement of unsatisfactory circumstances in Ling's home and the mayor's lack of emotional investment. However, his claim that the patriarch suffers due to the disharmony at home understates the fact that asymmetrical power relations within the household strongly privileges Ling's father whose actions creates discord in the first place:

[In] the family of Little Tenth – though there were only four Mothers at once, each with her private court and her own servants – no Blakelike harmony prevailed. When Third and Sixth Mother fell out, there was not even decency . . . Old Man, as lord and master, had the privilege of unconcern; he could endure the set-up by ignoring it. (76)

However, just as John comes close to embarking on a serious examination of gender relations in Chinese society, he quickly retreats and studies the text as an object of aesthetic beauty instead. He swiftly invalidates the gender critique embedded in *AM*:

But this is not a study of the household – which is revealed to us by glimpses, only half explained, just as it then was to the

little girl. If it had pride of place, the title *Ancient Melodies* would be ironic. But in reality there is no focal theme, only a flitting, patchwork evocation of delight and beauty. (76)

For John, Ling's assumption of the child's perspective translates to a lack of thematic focus and undermines any attempt to shed light on the predicament afflicting the women in the polygamous household. Ling's subject matter is evidently unpleasant. As such, the title *Ancient Melodies*, which suggests that Ling's representation of the past is positive and cherished, is most certainly ironic. No irony is lost in John's reading of the unhappiness and suffering that emerged from oppressive conditions as delightful and beautiful. The valuation of *AM* as a piece of art embodying beauty dangerously overshadows what it more evidently is — an act of testimony. Like John, other reviewers find Ling's mode of narration noteworthy but fail to notice how *AM* charts the oppressive circumstances in the mayor's residence. *The Sphere*, for example, mentions Ling's simplicity and "startling objectivity" but romanticizes her work as "a special brand of Chinese magic" (n.p, book jacket, 1988). *Time and Tide* proclaims Ling's "childlike purity of vision" — a rather sentimental description for an author who they believe "accepts what is good in old and new without sentimentalizing" (n.p, book jacket, 1988). Acton even claims that Ling "enjoys evoking the scenes of her childhood and she makes us enjoy her enjoyment" (55). The reviewers prize beauty and so they problematically misjudge the force of her testimony and the social conditions of her childhood. John's review appears to recognize her mother's predicament but considers Ling to be unaffected by it. More disturbingly, young Ling's observations of the landscape are prized as the more noteworthy memories than the

undoubtedly more unpleasant ones involving complications in the household:

For although Little Tenth was a superfluous, neglected child, she had a wonderfully happy time. And this was largely due to the tradition that despised her sex and made her mother wretched; for it was also truly graceful, valuing beauty and a delicate awareness as the crown of life. None of the child's dramatic memories can equal the description of her waking on a winter's day, rejoicing in the gale outside, gazing at the Forbidden City the and western hills (76).

Ling sketches a far grimmer and complex picture of aired grievance and silencing. Two episodes from different life stages highlight societal mechanisms that prevent injustice or suffering from being acknowledged as well as young Ling's gradual awareness of these very mechanisms. The first episode involves Ling's description of a court trial that occurred in her household with her and the concubines watching. Her father served as the judge of final appeals. This episode was first published as a short story "Childhood in China" in *The Spectator* in 1950. In *AM*, Ling describes herself and the adult women voyeuristically "peep[ing] behind the wooden screen" (18) to catch a glimpse of the female prisoner. Convicted of murdering her mother-in-law, the prisoner states her case:

"My mother-in-law actually had tried to kill me many times before I killed her. Any one of our neighbourhood could be my witness, all of them have seen how miserable I have been in my house . . ." (19)

Her appeal was rejected. The prisoner's suffering within marriage and the social institution of the family provokes no sympathy from the women who suffer from oppressive circumstances entrenched at home. Fifth Mother, for example, was jealous that the patriarch openly acknowledged the prisoner's beauty. Without delving into explicit details, Ling summarizes the concubine's display of resentment: "[She] said something to hurt Father's pride" (19). Angered by this, Ling's father threw a cup of hot tea to ruin her new dress. Ling understatedly states that Fifth Mother attempted suicide later due to the patriarch's actions: "She ate some opium that night . . . fortunately she was saved by a good doctor" (19). Ling's mother's speculation that Fifth Mother's behaviour was one of the reasons that Father thought of having another new mistress" (19) demonstrates how the patriarch seeks to silence dissent. As the authority figure who metes out punishment, Ling's father sentences the prisoner and later Fifth Mother for their transgressions. Fifth Mother is punished for displaying behaviour contrary to that expected of a virtuous concubine. Her airing of grievance is swiftly silenced by the mayor's spiteful decision to obtain a new concubine, a decision that has implications for the already brewing rivalry among the women in the household. Adopting the child's perspective, Ling euphemistically reveals what she learns from the aftermath — "waves [have] been rising in our family" (19). However, it should be clear to the reader that Ling as a child then recognized these events as a warning that deters women from articulating their dissatisfaction.

Ling's recollection of another event that occurred when she was an older child reveals a deeper understanding about how personal expression and retaliation against oppressive circumstances is subject to constraints. While

playing outside the residence near a graveyard, Ling sees a policeman arresting an old, dishevelled working-class woman for stealing from coffins. The confrontation between the two reveals to young Ling an issue of injustice which provokes a deep sense of helplessness. The old woman justifies her theft by saying that the law remains blind to her family's financial disempowerment and her pressing need to save them. The officer ignores her desperate lament and drags her away. After hearing about this event, Ling's mother sends her maidservant to pawn some jewellery so that she can send money to the family. Ling recalls the conversation she had with her mother and her maidservant later that night. Besides telling Ling that one of the children and the ailing daughter-in-law had passed away earlier that day, the servant raises a rhetorical question:

[W]ho could have been so wicked as to tell your father the story of the old woman and how we had helped her daughter-in-law. . . [Another servant] told me that we must be careful about what we do, because she had heard that Sixth Mistress criticized what we were doing. (228)

Upon hearing this, Ling's mother instructs her to not go to the graveyard any more and the chapter closes on Ling averting her gaze and silently reflecting on the incident: "I did not dare to look at her face, for I felt sure that she was already broken-hearted; her voice was trembling. I began to think there was something in the world more important than death" (229). Unlike an earlier incident where Ling shows her ignorance as a child about Fifth Mother's sorrows and her father's role in the situation, Ling here identifies them as key to the pressures her own mother faces. The ambiguous "something" that

young Ling believes to “more important than death” (229) is perhaps the unspoken demands her mother has to meet in order to live peaceably in the household. Comparing these two incidents, Ling shows how she as a child was increasingly subject to silencing as she aged and came to understand the consequences of airing grievances. *AM* creates enough opportunity for a reader to register the oppressive social conditions that Ling experienced. The absence of this acknowledgement in the reviews demonstrates misreading at its finest. Indeed, when Acton celebrates *AM* for “linger[ing] *delightfully* when louder strains have vanished” (55; emphasis added), one indeed wonders about his choice of descriptor. While Ling envisioned *AM* as a platform to articulate the lived experience of gendered oppression, her grievances, like those aired by characters in her autobiography, ultimately lead to little social change.

In this chapter, I studied a situation of misreading as demonstrated in published reviews of Ling’s *AM* in the 1950s, Sackville-West’s introduction to the text, and letters from the Bloomsbury Group. Considering post-war sexism and Bloomsbury aesthetics, I illuminated the influences on intellectual culture in Britain which shaped these readings. If the “curious correspondence [that] travel[ed] backwards and forwards between China and Bloomsbury” (7), as Sackville-West puts it, is to be regarded as a fruitful transnational encounter, it is crucial to recognize its limits. The troubling inability of reviews to recognize suffering and oppression as they are presented in Ling’s text shows how audiences may respond to a literary work in ways not intended by the author. While Ling’s writing of *AM* indicates a belief that creative work should not be directed by the demands of the nation and society, the way her work was misread in England demonstrates how the ground of English



Literature might not have been as common as Ling had hoped. In Chapter Three, I suggest that Woolf, like Ling, believed that literature should not be subject to political and social demands. Studying Woolf's oeuvre with specific focus on her last novel *BTA*, I suggest that Woolf did not accept the claim that literature can and should be a force for social transformation and resistance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Virginia Woolf and Art in *Between The Acts*

As sketched in the introduction, the social instability of the 1930s in England and China compelled writers to turn towards literature as a response to political strife. In differing ways, Ling and Woolf resisted the literary trends in their countries. While other women writers in wartime China used the autobiographical form to write their experience in the public sphere, Ling specifically employed a child's perspective in her autobiography to illuminate older women's experiences of gender as well as her own increasing awareness of it as she entered adolescence. Observing how anxieties about the approaching war had influenced English Literature, specifically poetry, in the late 1930s, Woolf criticized the Auden Generation for letting explicit political commentary colour their work. Throughout much of the 1930s, Woolf was preoccupied with socially-committed projects which eventually led to the novel *TY* (1937) as well as the feminist anti-war tract *TG* (1938). Mitchell Leaksa identifies both texts as growing out of "a speech Woolf gave on 21 January 1931 to the London branch of the National Society for Women's Service (Bradshaw and Blyth xii) What Woolf intended as an essay evolved into an "Essay-Novel" (*Diary* 4:129) which she tentatively named *The Pargiters* (Bradshaw and Blyth xiv). Woolf initially envisioned a text that would alternate between fictional chapters that chronicled the lives of the Pargiter family from 1800 to the "Present Day" (presumably the 1930s) and critical essays that delved into issues presented in that fiction. By February 1932, Woolf had completed a draft that "interleaved five chapters of a novel with factual, documented discussions of some of the main themes of *Three*

*Guineas*: the impact on women of paternal power, lack of economic independence, limited education, and the threat of aggressive male sexuality” (Black 61). Woolf noticed that the two genres of fiction and non-fiction might not be compatible with each other when combined as one literary project:

I find myself infinitely delighting in facts for a change, & in possession of quantities beyond counting: though I feel now & then the tug to vision, but resist it. (*Diary* 4:129)

In the following year, she decided to “[leave] out the interchapters – compacting them in the text” (*Diary* 4: 146). Wood suggests that

Woolf’s decision to drop the essay section was motivated not by a desire to omit her analysis of the cultural values, sexual politics and social and economic conditions impacting on the lives of her fictional characters but by a wish to integrate this exploration in her story-telling. (53)

The aim was to “[fuse] fact and fiction” (53) in the text that would eventually become *TY*.

What Woolf conceived as an Essay-Novel resulted in two separate texts, the novel *TY* and the essay *TG*. Woolf was ambitious about *TY* but was wary about propagating or moralizing in fiction:

I want to give the whole of the present society — nothing less: facts, as well as the vision . . . And there are to be millions of ideas but no *preaching* — history, politics, feminism, art, literature — in short a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire hate & so on. (*Diary* 4:151-2, emphasis added)

Embarking on a draft of *TG* concurrently, Woolf notes that she “[cannot] propagate at the same time as write fiction” (*Diary* 4:300). While Woolf was comfortable with using non-fiction as a medium for polemic and social critique, she was skeptical about doing the same for fiction. She was convinced that her novel was “dangerously near propaganda” (300). The years spent working on *TY* culminated in a physical collapse. Woolf returned to her diary only after two months, on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1936, and wrote briefly of an “almost catastrophic illness” (*Diary* 5: 24). David Bradshaw and Ian Blyth state that “[no] other novel had absorbed so much of her time and creative energy and none had involved so much frustration and mutation during the course of its emergence” (xii). Although Woolf expected *TY* to be unsuccessful — “the book may be damned, with faint praise; but the point is that I myself know why [it is] a failure, & that failure is deliberate” (*Diary* 5: 65) — the novel attained the most commercial success compared to her previous works (*TY* xxii). Her diary entries in 1937 reveal a conflicting mix of pleasure and devastation upon reading published reviews of *TY*. While a positive review offered Woolf relief that “[her] intention . . . may be not so entirely muted & obscured as [she] feared” (*Diary* 5: 67-8), she would later be convinced by a negative review that her novel was indeed as she thought it “a dank failure” (*Diary* 5: 75). After many agonizing years spent on a project that aimed at social critique, Woolf in *BTA* suggestively expresses skepticism towards socially activist fiction.

The reception of *TG*, arguably the text in which Woolf is most explicitly political and didactic, very likely informed her attitude towards engaging in social criticism in fiction writing. Woolf’s call for pacifism in her

anti-war feminist manifesto was controversial when many saw the need for military participation. Wood suggests that “[*TG*] represents Woolf’s most significant attempt to speak directly and pertinently to contemporary politics, yet many first readers found it unsuccessful in precisely this endeavor” (65).

Sarah Cole writes:

By 1938, Woolf had become an isolated voice . . . in her demand that her contemporaries channel their outrage in the direction of a staunch anti-militarism and, even more challenging, in her insistence that the violence of war — spectacular, news-worthy, historical — is intimately connected with the routine violence against women (342).

For many readers, Woolf’s argument was trite:

It is about one basic truth, the wearisome, dulling fact that violence always batters our culture, in old wars and new, in old tyrants and new, in old sexism and new — round and round the mulberry tree. (Cole 342)

Criticizing Woolf for being out of touch, Graham Greene, for example, considers her argument “old-fashioned [...] a little provincial, even a little shrill” (qtd. in Snaith 117). His choice of the word “shrill” to describe Woolf’s argument is clear evidence of blatant sexism. Throughout her life, Woolf wrote numerous non-fictional works about various subjects from literature to war. Although Woolf criticized Auden and his contemporaries for letting their poetry serve pedagogic and didactic purposes, she perhaps saw non-fiction as the only genre appropriate for such aims. While Woolf did not turn to *TG* with grand hopes that her text would prevent war or convince England to adopt a

pacifist position, she definitely hoped that it might alter the perceptions and behavior of society. *TG*'s mixed reception might have indicated to Woolf that it is far easier to win, through writing, the support of individuals who already shared her viewpoints than to convert those who held different political beliefs.

Several months after her last letter to Ling, as World War II broke out, Woolf began working on a new project alongside what would be her last novel *BTA*. On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1940, Woolf notes in her diary having “conceived, or re-moulded, an idea for a Common History book — to read from one end of lit. including biog; & range at will, consecutively” (*Diary 5*: 318). She provisionally titled this project “Reading at Random” or “Turning the Page” (Silver 359). Although incomplete, these pieces indicate Woolf’s lifelong interest in the creation and reception of art, an issue that she would continue to delve into in *BTA*. Brenda Silver, editor of the pieces “Anon” and “Reader”, states that “Woolf’s diary records side by side with the progress of [*BTA*], a steady stream of reading for the book she now described as threading a necklace through English life and literature” (357). While Woolf’s *TY* and *TG* are fictional and non-fictional works that aimed at social critique, her next text *BTA* lightheartedly shows how individuals engage with art in ways not intended by the artist and hints at the impossibility of achieving social transformation through art.

In this chapter, I argue that despite Woolf’s publicly expressed hope for English Literature to be “common ground” with “no wars breaking out” (“The Leaning Tower” 125), she remained wary about the dangers of using art to promote social cohesion and to forge a collective English identity. In

numerous ways, *BTA* serves as Woolf's response to the wave of writers in the late 1930s that she criticized for their approach to artistic creation. Written during a period of social unrest, *BTA* reflects Woolf's thoughts about English Literature's place in society and suggests that the onus is not on art to fully account for turmoil or provide a remedy. Registering that notions of unity were dangerously championed by totalitarian states at that juncture, *BTA* cautions against the attempt to forge social cohesion through art. The comic elements of *BTA* present art light-heartedly devoid of social mission or the power to change the audience in ways intended by its creators. By refusing to place art on a pedestal, Woolf mocks the grand notion that art can bring about social change. As a novel that places at its center a pageant, *BTA* involves the private experience of reading and depicts the public communal experience of art to which the audience contributes. Underscoring the various ways individuals create, engage with, and resist being changed by art, Woolf resists the notion that art forms can and should serve as tools for radical social transformation. In this examination of art, the artist, and the audience, *BTA* also contemplates key ideas and the limitations of the modernist project.

### **Pointz Hall and English Literature**

*BTA* opens with the following description: "It was a summer's night and they were talking, in the big room with the windows open to the garden, about the cesspool" (1). What at first glance seems like an idyllic picture of a "remote village in the heart of England" (9) is deflated with the image of sewage. The pastoral imagery is playfully undercut almost immediately. Bartholomew Oliver, the family patriarch and retired colonial officer, makes the first explicit reference to English Literature when recalling his mother "[giving] him the

works of Byron in that very room” sixty years earlier (2). Bart quotes two lines from Lord Byron: “She walks in beauty like the night” and “So we’ll go no more a-roving by the light of the moon” (2). Describing the land as “plainly marked” with “scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleon wars” (1), he also makes the novel’s first reference to war.

The two subjects of Bart’s recollections — literature and war — preoccupied Woolf in the late 1930s. Critics often consider *BTA* as a text that ponders the question of art’s and more specifically English Literature’s role in politically charged times. Wood suggests that *BTA* “engages with and responds to international politics with urgency, expanding Woolf’s late cultural criticism by itself addressing the question of art’s role in wartime” (123). Jane de Gay similarly suggests that the novel continues to explore Woolf’s “ambivalence about the value and relevance of literature at a time of danger” (186), a key concern established in *TG*. Writing to Ling on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1939 regarding her manuscript, Woolf notes that there was little public interest in reading literature as war approached:

At the moment we are finding it very difficult to continue our publishing for nobody will read anything except politics; and we have had to make plans for taking our press away from London, and of course have to face the prospect, should there be war, of shutting up our publishing house altogether. (*Letters* 6: 327)

The repeated phrase “orts, scraps, and fragments”, from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, that runs through the novel in varying permutations best



describes what the Pointz Hall community retains from canonical English Literature. The frequent quotations and misquotations show that while art has an effect on individuals who engage with it, its impact might not be due to any inherent social force embedded in the work, or even what the artist had hoped for, but is rather dependent on what the individual deems meaningful. Considering the varied ways individuals engage with and draw meaning from art, Woolf suggests that it is doubtful that society can ever be collectively altered because of literature. The fact that the Pointz Hall community does not seem to share a common knowledge of the English canon indicates that literary work does not shape a society as a collective. Bart, for example, is hardly invested in English literature and recalls isolated lines from Byron's poetry by chance. Despite Bart's thinking that Mrs. Manresa "has her Shakespeare by heart" (33), she and the others do not possess this knowledge. Mrs. Manresa only offers the opening line of Hamlet's soliloquy (33). Giles is asked to continue but is clueless. More interestingly, the lines Isa and Dodge recall from memory show how individuals engage with literature in personal directions that they do not calculatedly take:

"Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known . . ." Isa supplied the first words that came into her head by way of helping her husband out of his difficulty.

"The weariness, the *torture*, and the fret . . ." William Dodge added, burying the end of his cigarette in a grave between two stones (33, emphasis added).

Isa and Dodge's lines are not Shakespearean quotations. Isa offers a line of

Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Dodge follows with his unintentional reinvention of the following line from the poem. In *BTA*, language is often inadequate in conveying thoughts. Characters confess their failure at linguistic communication. Mrs Swithin enigmatically tells Bart "we haven't the words — we haven't the words" (34). Speaking to spectators at the end of the pageant, "[Mr. Streatfield's] command over words seemed gone" (120). While Isa and Dodge do not communicate meaningfully with anyone at Pointz Hall, the line fragments they recite inadvertently express their unarticulated thoughts. Dodge's slip, saying "torture" instead of "fever", is suggestive especially given that he feels tortured for his homosexuality. Isa's declaration — "Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves hast never known" (33) — expresses her unspoken desire to flee from oppressive circumstances. At other moments, Isa admits to "slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction" (8), affirming repeatedly her love for Giles, "[t]he father of [her] children" (8, 29). Yet, literature does little for Isa who remains trapped in her unhappy marriage to Giles. Through encounters with art, she achieves ends which are not redemptive but nevertheless personally meaningful.

Writing during the war, Woolf contemplates the role literature can play in society. The question about literature's practicality in times of social turmoil is underscored in the scene where Isa browses books in the library. The narrator draws attention to a "foolish, flattering lady" (9) who once asserted that "the library's always the nicest room in the house" (9) before articulating a cliché, that "[b]ooks are the mirrors of the soul" (9). Isa is described "quot[ing]" the same phrases (11) as she scans the titles. However,

the narrative underscores the impossibility of finding the contemporary moment reflected in literature, specifically poetry and fiction:

*The Faerie Queene* and Kinglake's *Crimea*; Keats and the *Kreutzer Sonata*. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age — the age of the century, thirty-nine — in books?" (11)

While books "[stave] off possible-mind hunger" (9), they cannot account for World War II and the violence unavoidable in 1939. Isa turns to poetry, biographies, historical texts, and scientific studies, but finds nothing practical:

Keats and Shelly; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem, a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person's life; a county's. The *Antiquities of Durham*; *The Proceedings of the Archeological Society of Nottingham*. Or not a life at all, but science — Eddington, Darwin, or Jeans.

None of them stopped her toothache. (11)

While wars are certainly present throughout history, narrative genres offer no useful knowledge for a generation facing the inevitability of global catastrophe. The narrator's comment — "For her generation the newspaper was a book" (11) — identifies the changed reading habits compelled by political circumstances. Although books do deal with the subject of violence, the newspaper offers daily updates on the violence unfolding abroad and at home. Giles reads the morning paper in the train to Pointz Hall and finds out that "sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf" (28). Isa reads about the gang rape of a girl by English soldiers who

lured her to the Whitehall barracks to see a non-existent green-tailed horse:

as her father-in-law had dropped the *Times*, she took it and read: “A horse with a green tail . . .” which was fantastic. Next, “The guard at Whitehall...” which was romantic and then, building word upon word she read [. . .] And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. (11)

The narrator underscores how the tropes of fantasy and romance associated with some literary genres have no connection to far grimmer events in life. While Giles turns to newspaper for information, he sees books as irrelevant in wartime. Similarly, he sees no value in the annual pageant held at Pointz Hall and performed by members of his community. While Mrs. Swithin seems happy to discuss the pageant at length, Giles “hated this kind of talk” (36). The inaction he sees in the acts of reading and spectatorship frustrates him — “Books open; no conclusion come to; and he sitting in the audience” (37). After the pageant, Giles and Bart read the morning paper, also described as “the paper that obliterated the day before” (134). Yet, Woolf appears to suggest that the onus is not on art to be socially-committed or relevant like the newspaper. Given that human problems always take new forms, Woolf suggests that it is an impossible mission to search for a social remedy in books. Considering the various ways canonical English Literature leaves its mark on members of Pointz Hall community, in Giles’s case not at all, it is more likely that should something that useful lie in the printed book, its impact is necessarily not singular or redemptive.

## **English Literature in Society: Art, The Artist, and the Audience**

Placing the dynamics between art, the artist, and the audience under scrutiny through her description of La Trobe's pageant, Woolf questions if it is worth fighting the war in the name of a collective English identity that is defined differently by various people. Employing the pageant-play form which traditionally celebrates English patriotism for social critique and often to comic effect, Woolf examines how audience members respond to artistic creation and disrupts the idea that a single art work can galvanize a group into action. While Woolf describes the newspaper in *TG* as "history in the raw" (14), a medium that offers the most current updates about war, La Trobe's pageant imaginatively reconstructs English history. The pageant focuses on selected periods of history – from the Age of Chaucer, to the Elizabethan Age, the Age of Reason, the Victorian Age, and finally the present day — with the literature of the period structuring narrative action. According to Jed Esty, Woolf's turn to the pageant follows the interest already registered by her contemporaries, in works such as T.S. Eliot's *The Rock* and E.M. Forster's *Abinger Pageant* (55). The pageant form that these writers experimented with dates back to the Edwardian pageant-play popularized by Louis Napoleon Parker, an outdoor spectacle that pays tribute to English patriotism:

Each pageant presented a series of historical episodes linked by prologues and epilogues, narrative and dramatic choruses, musical interludes, dances, and parades. In the finale, the choruses and cast would assemble in the staging fields for a final triumphant scene before marching past the audience, who would join in for the singing of "God Save the King." (57)

However, this self-congratulatory tone is absent in the one performed by the Pointz Hall community. The pageant is satirical and condemns various aspects of English history.

Spectators respond to La Trobe's reconstruction of English history in different ways. While Colonel Mayhew accepts that it is "the producer's right to skip two hundred years in less than fifteen minutes" (97), he objects to her exclusion of the military in her dramatization of the Victorian Age. He asks aloud: "Why leave out the British Army? What's history without the Army, eh?" (98). Mrs. Mayhew's expectations for the traditional spectacular finale made up of a "Grand Ensemble. Army; Navy; Union Jack and perhaps . . . the Church" (111) are never met. Nonetheless, the military aspect of English history is present but treated with a scathing tone. The British Empire is satirized in a monologue delivered by Budge who plays a policeman. As the mouthpiece of the Empire, Budge represents both imperialist and patriarchal power. Budge's directing of traffic "at 'Yde Park Corner" (100) represents the workings of the British imperial project. Hinting at the violent conquest of land, he speaks aloud about "black men; white men; sailors, soldiers; crossing the ocean; to proclaim [the British] Empire" (100). Having Budge proclaiming the laws of Empire, a humorous daily to-do list including going to church, attending a meeting about "the redemption of the sinner", "dinner", and the "protection and correction" (100) of natives in Peru, La Trobe mocks the moral duty that supposedly drives the imperial mission and implies that it influences daily life at home. Helen Carr suggests that Woolf throughout her career "was most concerned with added self-importance and license for domination imperialism gave powerful men of her class" (199). La Trobe's

representation of the Victorian Age dramatizes “the way the imperial mindset permeates all levels and areas of the social-make up” (190). Some spectators register the critique embedded in the pageant and reconcile their own views with it. Mrs. Lynn Jones’s and Etty Springett’s responses to La Trobe’s dramatization of the Victorian Age are two of several ways a diverse audience can engage with art. Recognizing the parodic element in the scene, Lynn Jones “felt that a sneer had been aimed at her father; therefore at herself” (101). She believes that “[t]here were some grand men among [the Victorians]” (101). Springett uncomfortably assesses the validity of La Trobe’s critique in relation to her personal life:

Yet, children did draw trucks in mines; there was the basement; yet Papa read Walter Scott aloud after dinner; and divorced ladies were not received at Court. How difficult to come to any conclusion! She wished they would hurry on with the next scene. (101-2)

Although Springett dislikes the ambiguity inherent in meaning-making, she continues to comment on the pageant while conversing with Lynn Jones. The following scene between lovers Edgar and Eleanor highlights the connection between the Victorian family and British imperialism. The scene parodies the conventions of the Victorian novel, specifically the courtship plot. Edgar melodramatically proposes to Eleanor promising “a lifetime in the African desert among the heathens” (103); she accepts but not before proclaiming that she “too [has] longed to convert the heathen” (103). Meanwhile, Eleanor’s mother asks about a potential husband and the village chorus repeatedly sings her question “O has Mr. Sibtrop a wife?” (104). The scene of extravagant

consumption — picnickers feasting on stage — is a jab at the excesses of the Victorian Age. Whispering to Mrs. Springett, Lynn Jones admits the justice of this critique: “They did eat . . . That’s true. More than was good for them, I dare say” (105). Springett “[anticipates] further travesty” and finally protests that “[it] is too much” (105) when she sees the characters launching into an irrelevant prayer. Budge closes the scene by addressing the Victorian family, the likely outcome of unions such as Edgar and Eleanor’s:

*Home, gentlemen; home ladies, it’s time to pack up and go home [. . .] Children, gather round my knee. I will read aloud. Which shall it be? Sindbad the sailor? Or some simple tale from the Scriptures? And show you the pictures? What none of ’em? Then out with the bricks. Let’s build: A conservatory. A laboratory? A mechanics’ institute? Or shall it be a tower; with our flag on top (106-7; emphasis in original).*

Interwoven with Budge’s speech is the strain of “Home Sweet Home” from the gramophone. Karen Schneider argues that the “building with bricks serves as a trope for the construction of a civilization [Woolf] finds phallic, divisive, aggressively nationalistic, and ultimately destructive. And the home, with its traditional family, forms this civilization’s center, its breeding ground” (*Loving Arms* 121). Indeed, just as Woolf points out the links between imperial power and patriarchy, she indicates that the Victorian family perpetuates these structures — with the birth of sons who carry “the white man’s burden” abroad (101) and uphold “[purity], prosperity and respectability” (101) at home. This conclusion provokes different responses from Lynn Jones and Springett. Springett sums the pageant up derisively:



“Cheap and nasty” (107) Lynn Jones initially protests against La Trobe’s scorn for the Victorian home. However, she is unnerved and wonders if there are aspects of the Victorian family unit that warranted reform:

Was there, she mused, as Budge’s red baize pediment was rolled off, something — not impure, that wasn’t the word — but perhaps “unhygienic” about the home? Like a bit of meat gone sour [. . .] Change had to come, she said to herself, or there’d have been yards and yards of Papa’s beard, of Mama’s knitting. Nowadays her son-in-law was clean shaven. Her daughter had a refrigerator . . . (107)

While La Trobe’s dramatization points out the hollowness of patriarchal, imperialist, and Christian values underpinning Victorian society, Lynn Jones is not completely persuaded. Comparing characteristics of her daughter’s family life in the 1930s to hers in the Victorian Age, Lynn Jones demonstrates a process of meaning-making that is unique to herself, one which Woolf believed is key to the act of reading. Giles’s protest during the interval—“Let’s hope to God that’s the end!” (109) — is a personal response to art as well.

*BTA* also reveals Woolf’s meditation on the limitations of the modernist project. One strand of thinking in early literary modernism is the view of art as transcendental and stable in an unstable and unpromising social reality:

Adept in finding within individual consciousness, or memory, spaces freer of the pressures of the modern world, modernist literature was also readier than its predecessors to draw

explicitly, sometimes self-referentially, on art and aesthetic order as antidotes to an intolerable actuality. (Stevenson, “1916” 46)

However, while “[a]rt may have seemed more than ever desirable as a surviving domain of coherence in the early twentieth century”, “the order it promised seemed more than ever difficult to create out of an increasing fragmentary reality” (Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 167). Yet, if art offers a remedy to reality and means for reaching truth, via a moment of revelation — what literary critics identify as the modernist epiphany — no epiphany materializes in *BTA*. By humorously presenting La Trobe’s emotional responses to how her audience engages with the pageant, Woolf suggests that it is foolish to expect society to attain a common truth through encounters with art and to be altered as a result, in ways intended by the artist. *Lighthouse* presents a transcendental moment of vision — epitomized in Lily’s final thought “I have had my vision” (170) — as the result of an artist’s endeavor. Lily’s art is produced “under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children” (46). In *BTA*, rather than “I have had my vision”, La Trobe thinks: “Hadn’t [I], for twenty-five minutes, made them see?” (61). Yet, while La Trobe wishes to communicate her vision to the audience, its specificities are unclear. The pride of an artist at having moved an audience is melodramatically elevated — “A vision imparted was relief from agony” (61) — and is quickly shattered when she notices the apathy of other audience members. For La Trobe, the refusal of some individuals to watch the pageant destroys the vision itself: “She saw Giles Oliver with his back to the audience.

Also Cobbet of Cobbs Corner. She hadn't made them see. It was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her" (61). La Trobe "glowed with glory" (86) after the dramatization of the age of Reason. Ironically, that act involved a parody of a restoration comedy. Characters with ludicrous names, Sir Spaniel and Lady Harpy, scheme to separate lovers Valentine and Flavinda for material gain; Sir Spaniel meanwhile hypocritically feigns love for Lady Harpy so to gain the one who he truly desires, her niece. While Mabel Hopkins playing Reason declares that "reason now holds sway" (78), these machinations present a darker side to this supposedly rational and controlled age. When the flat happy ending provokes a reaction from an unidentified spectator — "All that fuss about nothing!" (86) — La Trobe asserts that this same individual "had seen" and "had heard" (86). La Trobe's emotions oscillate throughout the pageant depending on how her audience responds. Far from communicating a vision, she fails to achieve a far modest aim. She cannot even hold the audience's attention completely. Woolf's portrait of the artist figure La Trobe is possibly a jab at socially committed writers who turned to their art to effect social transformation, a mission that she thinks is impossible considering art's inconsistent impact.

It is through nature and not art that one glimpses a vision. Before the pageant begins, George is fascinated by a flower:

It blazed a soft yellow . . . All that inner darkness became a hall, leaf smelling, earth smelling of yellow light. And the tree was beyond the flower; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete. (6)

While George's thoughts resemble an epiphanic moment of illumination, he does not recognize that he has achieved such a vision. When critics like Schneider assert that war "eroded [Woolf's] faith in the possibility of any significant change in ways of seeing and being" ("Of Two Minds" 95), "a formidable blow to one whose life's work variously affirms the necessity of some liberating evolution in consciousness" ("Of Two Minds" 95), one wonders if Woolf believed that this could be accomplished through fiction. The comic tone of *BTA* suggests that Woolf is not mourning art's efficacy but demonstrating to what extent art can alter "ways of seeing and being" in society. Pamela Caughie stresses that "[w]hat many critics interpret as doubt and disillusionment [about art] is merely the text's refusal to be lured by its own voice . . . or to take itself too seriously" (391-2). In *BTA*, Woolf refuses to place art on a pedestal and "avoid[s] setting up [herself] or [her] art as an authority or model" (Caughie 392). Indeed, Woolf rejects the notion that art can bring about much beneficial social change by showing how it fails to transform the audience in ways intended by the artist.

Woolf humorously exposes how the elements that shape art and its reception are beyond the artist's control. *BTA* convincingly suggests it may be asking too much of art that it should alter society. In "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Woolf refers to the "looseness and freedom of *Tristram Shandy*" (*Granite* 22) and suggests that Laurence Sterne has to "bring to bear upon his tumultuous and contradictory emotions the generalizing and simplifying power of a strict and logical imagination" ("Narrow Bridge" 22). For Woolf, the subject of prose can be disorder but the work still has to attain unity in form: "Tumult is vile; confusion is hateful; everything in a work of art should

be mastered and ordered” (“Narrow Bridge” 22). Faced with “the problem of space” (*Lighthouse* 141), Lily Briscoe struggles to achieve cohesion in her painting. Her ideal aesthetics involve an appearance of delicacy and a strong structure that holds the work together:

Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. (141)

Unlike Lily’s painting, La Trobe’s pageant is not self-contained. For La Trobe, sustaining “illusion” (87), ensuring that an audience is immersed in her art, is a mark of artistic success. However, this is an impossible mission. Persistently identifying the individuals who play characters on stage, the audience sees through the pageant’s artifice. Also, the pageant is constantly reshaped by elements beyond her control. Phyllis Jones who plays young “England” (47) forgets her lines. Hilda who plays an England “grown” (49) fails to sing on cue. In one comedic moment, “the wind gave a tug at [Eliza’s] head dress . . . [and she] had to steady the ruffle which threatened to blow away” (53). Despite this, the parody of Queen Elizabeth does not fall short: “But the audience laughed so loud that it did not matter” (53). When the chorus fails to obey her commands to sing louder, due to the wind “[blowing] gaps between their words” (86), La Trobe breaks down: “And the stage was empty. Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralyzed. Her power had left her. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed” (87). However, bellows from cows compensate for this failed illusion. They “annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued

the emotion” (87) to La Trobe’s relief. Noting how the pageant’s flow is constantly interrupted by nature and technology, several critics assert that “the audience’s experience of the play is partial and fragmented rather than linear and continuous” (Snaith 148). Wind frequently obscures lines delivered on stage. At one point, “only a word or two was audible” (*BTA* 50). At other junctures, nature elevates the scene. “Real swallows [dart] across the sheet” which has been painted to represent a lake (102). This synthesis of art and nature provokes awe from Springett. Towards the end, the lines between artwork, nature, and technology blur: “Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead” (119) interrupting Streatfield’s address. The audience mistakes the sounds from the aircraft for music and beholds the planes as the spectacle itself.

Despite Woolf’s skepticism about English society being held together by art, critics often read *BTA* as an affirmation of art’s power to act as a tool of unification during the national crisis. Existing scholarship is polarized. Ignoring the comic elements, Galia Benziman argues that “[d]espite its critique of nationalism, Woolf’s novel presents the artistic spectacle as an important instrument for social and national solidification” (63). Peter Lowe states that despite the fragmentary nature of the text, “there *are* nonetheless moments in which a greater harmony is suggested and, occasionally, glimpsed (12; emphasis in original), thus affirming the potential for social cohesion in art. Contrastingly, Schneider argues that *BTA* indicates Woolf’s lack of faith in the “validity of her vision of an ultimate, unified reality underlying apparent fragmentation, and more important, faith in the efficacy of art to effect social transformation (“Of Two Minds” 95). Judy Reese argues that Woolf

“succeeded only in the displaying the futility of the artist’s attempt to join the divergent values of human society” (146). This argument about how successful *BTA* is as a medium for social unification fails to notice that Woolf is disinterested in unifying society through art and wary about the dangers of such a mission. Woolf had indicated her interest in focusing on a collective whole in *Pointz Hall*, the original title for *BTA*: “‘We’ . . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs and strays — a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole (*Diary* 4:135). In *BTA*, she considers whether writers should encourage collectivity with their art. Considering Woolf’s belief that English Literature is “common ground” for all individuals and her skepticism towards nationalism, it is questionable that she would wish for art to unify English society. Indeed, Woolf recognized that “concepts of unity can be dangerously ideological” (De Gay 198) and that “it is dangerous for artists to seek to create social cohesion at a time when social order and conformity were being championed by totalitarian states on both the right and left” (De Gay 199).

While I am not suggesting that the pageant is fascistic, the rhetoric employed to describe La Trobe and her unspecified mission highlights the problems with using art to unify society. La Trobe is not distinguished by anyone in the community as an artist — only Dodge is identified as one but he does not claim that label — but is described in military terms. She is described as “[having] the look of a commander pacing his deck” and the “attitude proper to an Admiral” (38). Additionally, the gramophone used in the pageant “recalls *Three Guineas*, where gramophones are associated with the establishment and its war machine, suggesting that La Trobe’s desire to unite

her audience is potentially deeply conformist” (De Gay 199). The narrator states that “[t]he tick, tick, tick [of the gramophone] seemed to hold them together” (51). La Trobe feels pride at having held “the dispersing company” (61) together even if for a moment. At other points, she is frustrated when her spectators are distracted: “Every moment the audience slipped the noose; split up into scraps and fragments” (76). While the audience slipping the noose is clearly undesirable to La Trobe, it is a positive image of individuals achieving freedom from fatal constraint. It also suggests that while people can engage with art communally, the artist cannot unify them or control their responses. Although La Trobe fears this loss of control over the audience, such a situation affirms the multiplicity of artistic reception.

Although some critics take the final act, “Present Time” (109), as affirming the underlying harmony of the community, the spectators do not arrive at any common understanding. La Trobe’s attempt to blur the division between art and life, “to douche [the audience] with present-time reality” (111), spirals out of control — “Reality too strong” (111). As it did earlier, nature unpredictably contributes to the pageant. She longed to “shut out cows, swallows, present time” (111). The audience does see something of the present captured in the pageant but not what La Trobe had intended. Despite La Trobe’s inability to hold the audience’s interest and the varying ways in which spectators engage with or reject her art, critics often see the pageant creating order and unity in some form, however imperfect. Mary Shanahan argues that “though as an art piece, the pageant cannot directly cure specific maladies or relieve particular human agonies . . . it can and does mirror (literally) individual bits, ‘orts and scraps,’ from life” (133). She suggests that some



more perceptive individuals will be able to “[see] that the random scraps are ordered in the process of art” (133). Lowe affirms “the novel simultaneously suggests that such fragments are not necessarily the alternative to harmony but rather, if we could but see or hear it, traces of that harmony itself” (12). Benziman affirms the power of art and its ability to forge a collective English identity: “Collectivity is asserted through everybody’s acknowledgment of their own separation and difference” (69). For Benziman, England celebrates and allows for heterogeneity. England as a collective is hence not premised upon uniformity, but rather individuals who see themselves as constituent of a group but also recognize their selfhood. However, there is no evidence that members of Pointz Hall recognize their differences and are united in that knowledge. While some critics are eager to claim that the pageant creates social cohesion, they ignore the fact that the audience is pulled apart in different responses to art. Their responses, not all of them desired and intended by La Trobe, testify not to unity among artist and audience but rather separation between all individuals.

Even before the act starts, the audience expresses skepticism that La Trobe can represent the present-day:

“Ourselves . . . .” They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939 —it was ridiculous. “Myself” — it was impossible. Other people, perhaps . . . (110)

While spectators accept La Trobe’s artistic license when she depicts the earlier ages, they doubt her presentation will be accurate when it comes to them. This

may be one reason why individuals resist being changed by the art they encounter. While the audience is quick to applaud when La Trobe offers a “flattering tribute of [them]selves” (112), they deny art’s applicability if it attacks their behavior or suggest that they should be altered.

The audience engages with the pageant in their own personal ways. Isa, for example, does not respond to La Trobe’s art but rather to the sudden downpour. She muses: “The little twist of sound could have the whole of her. On the altar of the rain-soaked earth she laid down her sacrifice” (112). Mr. Page the local reporter highlights La Trobe’s presumed use of symbolism and offers a politically-inflected interpretation which focuses on war, inevitable destruction, and the reconstruction that will follow:

With the very limited means at her disposal, Miss La Trobe conveyed to the audience Civilization (the wall) in ruins; rebuilt (witness man with hod) by human effort; witness also woman handing bricks. Any fool could grasp that. Now issued black man in fuzzy wig; coffee-coloured ditto in silver turban; they signify presumably the League of . . . (112)

The closing scene where actors hold mirrors to reflect the audience heavily-handedly reinforces La Trobe’s intention of blending art and life. The effect: “the audience saw themselves, not whole by any means, but at any rate still” (115). As if anticipating that the audience will deny her art’s applicability, La Trobe forces the audience to confront their reflections. However, the audience simply rejects her act: “All evaded or shaded themselves — save Mrs. Manresa who, facing herself in the glass, used it as a glass; had out her mirror; powdered her nose” (115). Some spectators in the front row refuse to “submit

passively to this malignant indignity” (115). Others prepare to leave. In a telling sentence — “Each tried to shift an inch or two beyond the inquisitive insulting eye” (115) — Woolf shows that while the critique embedded in an artwork may be valid, individuals reject it because they find it personally offensive.

It is perhaps intentional that Woolf has the gramophone, an instrument used to galvanize collectives, play a key role in the pageant. Showing how uncomfortably close art is to language that rallies social groups, Woolf resists the notion that it can and should serve as a tool for social transformation. The gramophone blasts a harsh message that connects fascism to the vice and hypocrisy of present-day English society:

*Don't hide among rags. Or let our cloth protect us. Or for the matter of that book learning; or skilful practice on pianos; or laying on of paint [. . .] Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly.*

(116; emphasis in original)

This follows with a question to the audience: “*Look at ourselves [. . .] Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall [. . .] which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by [. . .] orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves?*” (116; emphasis in original). However, the gramophone’s message is inconsistent. It quickly changes its tune and praises certain unnamed individuals:

*[T]here's something to be said: for our kindness to the cat; note too in to-day's paper “Dearly loved by his wife”; and the impulse which leads us — mark you, when no one's looking —*

*to the window at midnight to smell the bean. Or the resolute refusal of some pimply dirty little scrub in sandals to sell his soul. There is such a thing — you can't deny it [. . .] All you can see of yourselves is scraps, orts and fragments? Well then listen to the gramophone affirming . . .* (116; emphasis in original)

However, a mistake occurs — “The records had been mixed” (116) — and instead of an affirming message, the audience hears “the anonymous bray of the infernal megaphone” (117). The inconsistent and incomplete message played on the gramophone complicates audience responses. The spectators respond differently at the pageant’s end but their readings are valid in some way.

While Reverend Streatfield’s closing address is an authoritative interpretation of the pageant, it is not the most discerning. His romanticized take on La Trobe’s art advocates the community’s need to unite despite their differences and is a thinly veiled response to the approaching war:

To me at least it was indicated that we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole [. . .] We act different parts; but are the same [. . .] Scraps, orts, and fragments! Surely, we should unite? (119)

Spectators do not readily accept Streatfield’s interpretation and debate the meaning of La Trobe’s pageant:

Miss Whatshername should have come forward and not left it to the rector . . . After all, she wrote it . . . I thought it brilliantly clever . . . O my dear, I thought it utter bosh. Did *you*

understand the meaning? Well, he said she meant we all act all parts ... He said, too, if I caught his meaning [. . .] And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning . . . Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? (122-4)

Considering the spectators' conflicting responses to the pageant, it is doubtful that Woolf saw in art a solution to social chaos or a higher ground where such a crisis is inconsequential. Nonetheless, she affirms that society will engage creatively with art forms, even if this does not translate to actual social change.

Despite's Woolf's skepticism that art can alter collectives, *BTA* indicates that art might be redemptive for the artist herself. Unlike La Trobe's, Isa's art is never shown to an audience. Isa is described as "abortive" (9) and the same could be said about her artistic attempts. She hides her poetry in "an account book in case Giles suspected" (9). Those words that "weren't worth writing" (9) are rendered in snippets. They find their way in Isa's humming or run through her mind during her domestic routine and the pageant. Analyses of Isa's poetry often point out how it is tied to her oppressive circumstances. Ronchetti states that "so much of her phrase-making arises from the pain of her imprisonment in a deeply frustrating role" (120). Alex Zwerdling identifies her poetry as offering cathartic release, "an escape from the tensions and abrasions of the real world in which she finds herself" (231). Isa's improvised verses that are sometimes inspired by La Trobe's pageant, specifically the repeated refrain "dispersed are we" coming from the gramophone, are evidence of creativity that do not amount to artwork. On one

occasion, Isa follows Mrs. Menresa's continuation of the "dispersed are we" line and hums freely in response (60). At another point, she murmurs again "dispersed are we" as she prepares to drink tea before telling herself a brief story:

"of china faces, glazed and hard. Down the ride, that leads under the nut tree and the may tree, away, till I come to the wishing well, where the washerwoman's little boy —" she dropped sugar, two lumps, into her tea, "dropped a pin. He got his horse, so they say. But what wish should I drop into the well?" (64)

Evidently, Isa's art has no social mission and is sometimes also unwritten. For Isa, it is most important for art to provoke emotion. Confused upon watching the dramatization of the Elizabethan Age, Isa questions: "Did the plot matter?" (56). She wonders: "The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot (56)". Isa later speculates that there are only three universal emotions, love, hate, and peace, which are "the ply of human life" (57). Thinking about Giles, she likens her life to a narrative: "The father and my children, whom I love and hate". Love and hate — how they tore her asunder! Surely it was time someone invented a new plot, or that the author came out of the bushes . . ." (134). Perhaps aware that artists can seek to forge social cohesion, Woolf presents, through the figure of Isa, art being materialized for its own or the artist's sake rather than for a specific social function. Isa recognizes universal emotions of love, and hate, and peace in art and life. However, as much as she may write various plots in her art, she cannot chart a new one for her life.

Closing on Giles and Isa confronting each other, the narrator imagines how the night would unfold, a plot that might come reveal both hate and love:

Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. (136)

It is evident that neither Isa nor the author hiding in the bushes La Trobe can write a plot to undo personal suffering. The enigmatic final sentences of *BTA* — “Then the curtain rose. They spoke” (136) — liken Giles and Isa to characters on stage, not much different from the ones they witness in the pageant earlier. Considering the place of literature in society as war approached, Woolf suggestively concludes with an artist figure whose creativity, unlike that of La Trobe’s, does not provoke the question of whether art can forge unity. Through the figure of Isa, Woolf presents a conception of art that is not redemptive but personally meaningful. Also, Woolf shows how language can be employed for various purposes. Words, which are described as tools that can inflict harm earlier in the novel — “Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you” (37) — allow Isa to find solace although they do not end her suffering or redeem her.

In “How Should One Read a Book?”, Woolf begins with this advice: “The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions” (*Second Common Reader* 258). Woolf’s belief that individuals engage with art in their own personal and idiosyncratic ways is

expressed strongly in *BTA*. Her answer to why should one should read English Literature — “Yet who reads to bring about an end, however desirable? Are there not some pursuits that we practice because they are good in themselves, and some pleasures that are final?” (270) — might explain her disapproval of English poets in the 1930s who saw in reading and writing, possibilities of transforming society. Exploring the ways in which individuals create and respond to art, *BTA* contemplates the role English Literature plays in society during wartime and beyond. Considering Woolf’s belief that English Literature is “common ground” for all members in society, *BTA* expresses her skepticism that it should be employed for social unification, and especially when war was being waged between various collectives. The text not only responds to these writers who she believed had committed their creative writing to pedagogic and didactic ends, but also suggests that it is delimiting and dangerous for writers to use art in service of an explicit social mission.



## CONCLUSION

Occurring against the backdrop of war, the correspondence between Ling and Woolf was unfortunately short-lived but proved particularly fruitful. Woolf's support was crucial in Ling's completion of her only work in English. While this unlikely transnational encounter has not gone unnoticed, studies have thus far narrowly focused on the power dynamics structuring their relationship or considered it in relation to points of convergence between artists, writers, and publishers in China and England during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this thesis, I draw a strong connection between Ling and Woolf based on their shared resistance to contemporary literary trends brought about by national crises in China and England during the late 1930s. Using the relationship between these women writers as a starting point, I have demonstrated how Ling and Woolf went against the grain of these trends and refused to turn to artistic creation as a patriotic or political response to war. Their chosen subject matter and distinctively different approach to art as compared to that of their contemporaries demonstrates a shared perception of English Literature as "common ground". Studying the literary projects embarked on while they were conducting their correspondence, I have shown how they refused to subject their work to political and social demands.

Focusing on childhood, Ling's *AM* examines the circumscribed positions of wives and mothers, roles that other women writers took care to deemphasize in autobiographies written during the war years. Highlighting her process of coming to terms with how gender ideology and social norms structured the home in which she grew up, Ling resisted the wartime politicization of literature and the call for writers to put their work in service

of a patriotic cause. Her reworking of aspects of Mansfield's fiction in her autobiography and the fact that she chose to write in a foreign tongue best testify to how Ling saw in literature a common ground where she is free to roam and write as she wished. Similarly, Woolf rejected contemporary literary trends. *BTA* serves in various ways as her response to English writers and expresses Woolf's skepticism that art can bring about social transformation or should be used to achieve such a mission. Woolf's suggestion that the onus is not on art to account for turmoil or provide a remedy for social instability contrasts with the way that writers in both England and China turned to creative writing with social missions in mind. While Ling and Woolf believed in the common ground of English Literature, the reception of Ling's *AM* in England during the 1950s also proved the presence of national barriers that shape how readers engage with texts. Considering how post-war sexism and the beliefs held by the Bloomsbury Group about art influenced intellectual culture in England, we can see why readers fail to understand *AM* as Ling had intended, as a critique of Chinese society and the polygamous family unit.

My project has revealed the parallels between Ling and Woolf, both established writers who are representative of literary modernism and women's writing in China and England. It is my hope that this study contributes to the English-language scholarship on Ling's only work in English and Woolf studies.

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