

## William Courtney and ‘the Woman Question’

In recent years, the portrait of a man with a fine Edwardian moustache has looked down on us as we were seated at High Table in Hall. The subject, it transpired, was the writer, and former New College fellow, William Leonard Courtney, and the artist was Hubert von Herkomer (1849–1914), a British painter born in Bavaria, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford from 1885–94, and the first president of the Oxford Art Society, established in 1891. My connection with Courtney came through one of the first reviews written by Virginia Woolf, then Virginia Stephen: this was a short review, published in the *Guardian* (25 January 1905) of W. L. Courtney’s 1904 study *The Feminine Note in Fiction*. ‘Is it not too soon after all to criticise the “feminine note” in anything? And will not the adequate critic of women be a woman?’, were the questions Woolf posed in response to Courtney’s book.<sup>1</sup> The portrait piqued my interest, as I contemplated the figure of the man who wished to define this ‘feminine note’.



Portrait of William Leonard Courtney (oil on canvass) by Hubert von Herkomer  
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<sup>1</sup> *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1, 1904–1912*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 15. A copy of W. L. Courtney, *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904) is held in New College Library, Oxford, NC/COU.

William Courtney studied at Merton, where the Hegelian F. H. Bradley had been appointed to a fellowship in 1870, and himself held a fellowship at Merton for a year after his graduation in 1872; he gave this up when he married in 1874, more for financial reasons than because of the ban on married fellows which had just been lifted. After three years as headmaster of his old school, he taught philosophy at New College from 1876 to 1890. He was also Treasurer of the University Boat Club (in which role he had the title of ‘Commodore of the Fleet’) and participated enthusiastically in Oxford theatrical activities. He was recalled (in a description which contrasts with the austere image presented by Herkomer) as ‘a man with the dash and swagger of the cavalry officer rather than the “remote and ineffectual don” he should have become’. Alan Ryan described Courtney as ‘an excellent philosopher, who held the unfashionable view that it was possible to defend Hegel in decent, clear English and demolish J. S. Mill in terms which any second-class man could understand’.<sup>2</sup>

Courtney’s book on *The Metaphysics of John Stuart Mill* (1879) was followed by *Studies in Philosophy, Ancient and Modern* (1882), which included a chapter on ‘The New Psychology’, also tracing the development from Mill to George Henry Lewes, with its discussion of the implications of psychology for ethics foreshadowing his *Constructive Ethics* (1886). This substantial work, intended to be the first of two volumes, was thoroughly Hegelian in its conception:

If I am right in supposing that the progress of thought is a gradual transition from an ambitious attempt to decipher ethical facts, through a period of criticism, to a reconstruction of morals on a metaphysical and indeed an ontological basis, then it would seem clear that the ethics of the future, whatever other features they may contain, need not be merely interpretative, and must not be exclusively critical. . . . Whether the details of the Hegelian system be or be not accepted, the contention of the present work is that a properly constructed system of morals can only be reared on the foundation of Absolute Idealism.<sup>3</sup>

In 1890 Courtney left Oxford to join the *Daily Telegraph*. A sonnet penned to mark his departure from the New College Senior Common Room mourned his loss: ‘Courtney! by Nature formed in genial mood / (How loved, too well, missing thy smile we learn) / To set just bounds to courts and rule the flood—/ The praise of unborn centuries to earn’.<sup>4</sup> In 1894 he also became editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, which he edited until his death. He also wrote on a wide range of topics, with books including *The Idea of Tragedy* (1900) and a study of Maeterlinck (1904); the latter included shorter chapters on Georges Rodenbach, Huysmans, D’Annunzio, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Gorky, Dmitry Mereykovsky, Chekhov, and the ‘reactionary statesman’, as Courtney described him, Konstantin Pobedonostsev.

His last books included *Armageddon—and After* (1914), calling on ‘the young idealists of all countries’ to make a better world after the end of what he correctly estimated would be a ‘long stern war’.<sup>5</sup> In *Pillars of Empire* (1918) he differentiated between imperialism (bad and exemplified by Germany) and empire (good, especially in its British form). His autobiography, *The Passing Hour* (1925), abundantly documents his enthusiasm for theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Bradley’s life fellowship at Merton was subject to the condition that he remain unmarried (as he did), Courtney was already married (to Cordelia Blanche Place) when he became a fellow of New College. His wife, who had joined him in playing an active part in the social life

<sup>2</sup> Alan Ryan, ‘Transformation, 1850–1914’, in *New College Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. John Buxton and Penry Williams (Oxford: The Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford, 1979), pp. 72–106, at p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> W. L. Courtney, *Constructive Ethics: A Review of Modern Moral Philosophy in its Three Stages of Interpretation, Criticism, and Reconstruction* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1886), ‘Preface’, p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> J[ames] J[oseph] S[y]lveste[r], *A Pair of Sonnets*, May 5, 1890 (Oxford, 1890), New College Library, Oxford, NC/SYL.

<sup>5</sup> W. L. Courtney, *Armageddon—And After* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1914), p. [2].

<sup>6</sup> W. L. & J. E. Courtney, *Pillars of Empire: Studies & Impressions* (London: Jarrolds, 1918); W. L. Courtney, *The Passing Hour* (London: Hutchinson, 1925).

of the College, died in 1907. In 1911 he married Janet Elizabeth Hogarth (1865–1954), who was working as an editor on the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, having earlier worked for Courtney on the *Fortnightly Review*. As an undergraduate at Lady Margaret Hall, graduating with a first-class degree, she had successfully applied for permission, as a student of philosophy (still reserved for males), to attend lectures at Balliol (where she had to sit separately from the other undergraduates, at the High Table) given by Lewis Nettleship on the pre-Socratics. She subsequently attended lectures at New College given by Courtney on Plato, where she had to employ a chaperone.<sup>7</sup> On occasion, the chaperone was a paid companion (and one of these apparently knitted energetically throughout the lectures). At other times, Janet Hogarth was accompanied by Elizabeth Wordsworth (founding Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, in 1879, and subsequently founder of St Hugh's College, established for the benefit of poorer women students) who was apparently a vocal presence during the lectures.

Courtney also helped Janet Hogarth to secure access to other lectures. She endorses the general view that he was an exceptionally effective teacher of philosophy.

How valuable this power of grasping a point of view and helping its holder to develop his thought clearly and logically was to prove to an Editor . . . needs no demonstration. . . . Clearness can be illegitimately attained by leaving difficulties out; but any subterfuge of this kind he was quick to detect. I remember once saying to him that I feared I was confused on the difficult question of Causation. 'No', he said, 'you are not confused but you are sometimes shallow.'

Although she suggests that by 1888 'Courtney was wearying of the Oxford round',<sup>8</sup> as he confirmed in his autobiography,<sup>9</sup> she recounts also that once he was working on the *Telegraph* and she had joined the Civil Service, 'both Courtney and I . . . were a bit superior and pedantic . . . But neither of us had long left Oxford, and Oxford takes a lot of forgetting'.<sup>10</sup> After some contortions around the Ordinances, involving a referral to the Visitor (the Bishop of Winchester) in 1912, it was agreed that his remarriage should not affect his fellowship.

Having initially opposed women's suffrage, Hogarth changed her mind after her marriage made her aware of the legal disabilities suffered by married women. She wrote later that 'we had no desire to stop the women's movement. We merely wanted to regulate its pace and to prevent a noisy minority from bringing us all into discredit . . . perhaps we should have done better to turn ourselves into a right wing of the constitutional suffragists.'<sup>11</sup> As soon as the *Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act* was passed in 1919, she became a Justice of the Peace. She co-authored Courtney's *Pillars of Empire*, and her own books included, before her marriage, a translation of essays by Pierre Marie Augustin Filon on *The Modern French Drama* (1898), a pamphlet on 'Education and Professions: The Higher Education of women' (1903), and, under the name of Courtney, *Freethinkers of the Nineteenth Century* (1920), *The Making of an Editor* (1930), the biography of her husband (and of the *Fortnightly Review*), an autobiography, *Recollected in Tranquillity* (1926), in addition to several books on women and women's associations. In her autobiography, she wrote that 'A woman with the home spirit can create the right atmosphere just as easily when she comes in from her office as can her suburban sister who has spent the greater part of the day shop-gazing in Oxford Street. If the husband is out, or occupied, and the children are at school, or grown up, why should not the woman with skill and brains and training let the world have the benefit of them?'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Vera Brittain, *The Women at Oxford: A Fragment of History* (London: Harrap, 1960), p. 75. Brittain (p. 72) also records that women students were allowed to read in the Radcliffe Camera at a special 'Ladies' Table'.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Courtney, *The Making of an Editor: W. L. Courtney, 1850–1928* (London: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 16, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Courtney, *Passing Hour*, p. 177.

<sup>10</sup> Courtney, *Making of an Editor*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Janet E. Courtney, *The Women of my Time* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1934), p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in *The Spectator* 136 (1 May 1926), 809.

The question of women's education was clearly an important one for William Courtney, and he addressed it in his introduction to *The Feminine Note in Fiction*. Virginia Stephen pointed to his equivocations about the nature of 'feminine' and 'masculine' writing and took issue with his comment that women are seldom artists 'because', in Stephen's paraphrase, 'they have a passion for detail which conflicts with the proper artistic proportion of their work'. She also raised doubts about his suggestion that the rise of fiction written by women for women was 'extinguishing the novel as a work of art'. Her measured conclusion was that:

It is, at any rate, possible that the widening of her intelligence by means of education and study of the Greek and Latin classics may give her that sterner view of literature which will make an artist of her, so that, having blurted out her message somewhat formlessly, she will in due time fashion it into permanent artistic shape. Mr Courtney has given us material for many questions such as these, but his book has done nothing to prevent them from still remaining questions.<sup>13</sup>

For the Woolf reader and scholar, the review (written at the very beginning of Woolf's career, and only the third piece of writing that she published) has particular interest, raising questions and concerns that would run throughout her writing life: the 'difference' between male and female writing (explored at length in *A Room of One's Own*); the relationship between fleeting and ephemeral experience and the 'permanence' of art; the question of what a woman might become, once the education and privileges available to men of her class had been made available to her.

*The Feminine Note in Fiction* explored the work of Victorian and Edwardian women writers, including Mrs Humphry Ward and the Suffrage novelist and playwright, Elizabeth Robins, in addition to shorter pieces on 'Diaries and Love-Letters' written by women across the centuries. Courtney indeed claimed that 'the diary is the first form of literary composition for the majority of women-writers', an assertion that firmly bases the roots of women's fiction in the intimate, the personal and the autobiographical.<sup>14</sup> More interesting, perhaps, are his attempts to deal with some of the paradoxes presented by debates about the 'New Woman' of the turn of the century. Courtney discusses at some length two recently published books by the Baltic-German writer and translator Laura Marholm (1854–1928), translated as *Modern Women* (1896) and *Studies in the Psychology of Woman* (1899).<sup>15</sup> A contentious figure in her time, Marholm's insistence on the radical differences between men's and women's nature and on female fulfilment and happiness as residing exclusively in marriage and motherhood seemingly positioned her as an enemy to the emergent women's movement. Yet she shared with many early feminists, and 'New Woman' thinkers and writers, the belief that the future was female: as she wrote at the close of the *Psychology of Woman*: 'A period of thought which has lasted four hundred years, has now gone by; a period of feeling is approaching, and with it comes the time of the woman'.<sup>16</sup>

Such attitudes were clearly perplexing to Courtney, whose commitment to women's education ran completely counter to views such as those expressed by Marholm, not least in her claim that John Stuart Mill (whose treatise 'On the Subjection of Women' was a major contribution to women's emancipation) was, in Courtney's gloss, 'the worst of all the men-traitors who have ruined [a woman's] career'. *Modern Women* he writes, 'is an interesting book to read, but it leaves on the mind an impression half of sadness, half of bewilderment':

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Feminine Note in Fiction', in *Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1*, ed. McNeillie, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Courtney, *Feminine Note*, p. xxxv.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Marholm, *Modern Women*, trans. Hermione Ramsden (London: John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1896); Laura Marholm, *Studies in the Psychology of Woman*, trans. Georgia A. Etchison (Chicago and New York: Herbert S. Stone, 1899).

<sup>16</sup> Marholm, *Psychology of Woman*, p. 348.

You can tell a woman that it is not her business to attain knowledge, that her life work is anything but the prolonged study indulged in by the recluse and the ascetic, and that if she be wise she will confine herself to those gifts and graces which a benign Providence ordained, let us say, in the Garden of Eden. Or else you may tell her that she ought to make use of such intellectual powers as she possesses, that it is the simplest of all duties when you have a brain to give it exercise . . . But what you cannot do—what is so illogical and contradictory as to be absolutely ridiculous—is to acknowledge the necessity of cultivation, and yet solemnly warn the woman of to-day that she is forfeiting thereby her right place in the economy of nature.<sup>17</sup>

The emphases of Laura Marholm's work, and those of many women writers of her generation, in their insistence on the 'enigma' of woman and their celebrations of anti-rationalism, remain fascinating aspects of an age which was posing the charged issue of what, in Woolf's words, a woman might become. W. L. Courtney might not have had the answers, but I like him for having posed the questions.

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<sup>17</sup> Courtney, *Feminine Note*, pp. xxii, xvi, xvi–xvii.