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### Article

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Lucy Haenlein<sup>1\*</sup>

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\*Correspondence: [lucy.haenlein.17@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:lucy.haenlein.17@ucl.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> UCL, UK

# History and Fantasy in *The True Heart*

Lucy Haenlein

## Abstract

The essay argues that Warner's 1929 novel *The True Heart* explores the possibility of feminist fantasy within the context of historical realism. It considers the pressures exerted on the protagonist Sukey Bond by the constraints implicit within historical, classical, and religious contexts, and looks in particular at the gender implications of the novel's debt to Apuleius's narrative of Cupid and Psyche. The essay compares the ideas of emancipation in *The True Heart* with those in its predecessor *Lolly Willowes*.

**Keywords** Warner, *The True Heart*, feminism, emancipation, fantasy, Apuleius

In her reading of Sylvia Townsend Warner's first novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926), 'A Wilderness of One's Own', Jane Marcus demonstrates how the protagonist Laura Willowes enacts a feminist fantasy in which she escapes from the patriarchal city and reunites with the realm of nature and the earth mother. This essay will explore the extent to which *The True Heart* evokes the possibilities of such a feminist fantasy, while also demonstrating Warner's developing Marxist concern with the hindrances imposed on its protagonist, Sukey Bond, by the material historical constraints of her situation as a Victorian orphan. It will also position both the classical story of Cupid and Psyche, upon which *The True Heart* is based, and the Edenic vision of Adam and Eve, as reinforcing these historical constraints. Ultimately, it will demonstrate that the pressures exerted on Sukey by these three systems – the historical, the classical

and the religious – make for a narrative very different to Laura's, and one which ultimately reinforces her social position and greatly limits her feminist fantasy.

In 'A Wilderness of One's Own', Jane Marcus identifies and defines the 'feminist fantasy' of the twenties as enacting a retreat from the oppression of male power. She argues that Laura's vision of the destruction of London, for example, 'represents a fierce feminist commitment to the life-giving principles of nature, the common urge to wipe out men's cities of oppression and start again'.<sup>1</sup> For Laura, this is articulated as a rejection of 'Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great-aunt Salome and her prayer-book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen other useful props of civilization'.<sup>2</sup> All these are institutions, in other words, that reinforce oppressive patriarchal values. The realm of nature, on the other hand, according to Marcus, may be a 'pre-patriarchal magical world' of the earth mother. It is a 'prelapsarian' and 'preclassical' vision, a return to a landscape before Apollo's killing of the python at the Pythian Games, an act which overthrew maternal Earth and usurped her powers of poetry and prophecy. Apollo's subsequent pursuit of Daphne, Marcus argues, demonstrates his desire to assert male control – and sexual violence – upon her. In turning her into a laurel tree, Peneus is 'loyal to the old order, for the river is in the domain of Artemis'. Therefore, though the male order may have been established, the 'rivers and trees resist and remain in the domain of Artemis'.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately,

the feminist fantasy novel of the twenties is a response to realism's failure to make permanent female space in the citadels of male power. It is a retreat to the garden and the forest to lick wounds from those earlier battles and to reenact the myth of Daphne – lady into tree.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist fantasy creates a space where women are able to connect with their female power – that of the earth mother – and to realise their own potential, free from the constraints of the male city, as well as the structures of both classical myth and Christian doctrine.

In the Marxist terms of György Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937, trans. 1962), however, this 'retreat' could be said to occupy the space of subjective fantasy, and as such to fail to engage with the politically productive 'objective' material realism of historical fiction. Warner similarly articulates a concern with the obligations of the writer to historical realism in her 1940 lecture 'The Historical Novel': 'There must,

it seems, be some recognition of history in the historical novel. The writer of the historical novel cannot escape the obligation of a period.<sup>5</sup> We can locate in *The True Heart* the collision of these two imaginative realms, the fantastic and the historical, with the English countryside being at once the potential site of female empowerment and self-realisation, and yet also a materially and historically specific site of patriarchal oppression. We can thus identify *The True Heart* as occupying what Janet Montefiore describes as the ‘contradictory, liminal ground between realism, with its accompanying claims to truth, and fantasy or daydream’.<sup>6</sup>

The feminist fantasy of *Lolly Willowes* is evoked repeatedly in *The True Heart*. Here too a female protagonist feels a profound connection with, and loyalty to, the natural realm of Artemis:

Zeph spoke with the animation of a conqueror, but Sukey took the sea’s part, and so, she thought, did the marsh, for with the rising of the tide did not all the land-locked pools and channels swell in sympathy? [...] It was small wonder that the farm and the life she led there seemed tinged with unreality, small wonder that she felt astray from her proper self. It was dream-like indeed that she should be washing clothes and baking bread where once the fishes swam.<sup>7</sup>

While Zeph here represents the position of Apollo – the male ‘conqueror’ – Sukey not only takes the side of nature, the ‘sea’s part’, in recognising the ‘swell of sympathy’ in pools and channels, but she also seems to be able to speak the language of her natural surroundings. In light of this affinity, the domesticity of her life at the farm is ‘tinged with unreality’ and she feels dislocated from her true self. She recognises the opposition between the material reality of her life of female domesticity, and what should be there in its place – the sea and its fishes.

This episode of feminist fantasy – where Sukey glimpses her natural, wild self and the language of the earth mother – is echoed in further passages throughout the novel. Sukey experiences, for example, ‘a nameless ecstasy and excitement’ (51) at the wind, and describes a piece of straw as blowing past ‘like a witch on a broomstick’ (52), an explicit reference to the magical realm of *Lolly Willowes*. Later she smashes a window, symbolically breaking the boundaries of Victorian domesticity in favour of a union with the natural elements:

A year ago, a month ago, even a day ago, she could no more have struck her hand through a pane of somebody else’s glass than

she could have flown. It would have been there with an eternal and separate being, a thing set, like the bounds of the sea, a transparent wall between her and her desire; and now she had put out her hand and brushed through it, and the melodious noise of its falling still chimed in her ears, and the moist air flowed in at the breach, and circled round her, congratulating her, fawning upon her because she was so strong. (85)

Sukey later recalls the 'blood on her hand' (180) created by this act, and her union with the natural elements is retrospectively imbued with a sexual significance.

As Jane Garrity observes, 'Sukey Bond's most intense sexual relationship is not with a male partner, but with the English countryside'.<sup>8</sup> Sukey takes an almost sexual delight in the landscape of the saltings. Far from the sterile Victorian domesticity of 'yellow soap', this is a visceral landscape of 'sweat', which smells of 'salt', 'rich mud' and even a wild southernwood that has an 'aromatic breath'. Sukey takes a sexual pleasure in plunging her hands 'into a bush' and, in smelling her palms, is so excited she 'found her teeth biting into her flesh' (26). This close contact with nature, and Sukey's innocence of the realities of sex (she believes a kiss has made her pregnant), is a version of the chastity described by Jane Marcus as fundamental to the feminist fantasy of *Lolly Willows*. Marcus argues that this chastity provides 'freedom in a wilderness presided over by Artemis. This ideal exists in relation to its normative opposite, heterosexuality and motherhood within the family and the city'.<sup>9</sup>

Sukey's sexuality, however, is not only expressed in relation to nature, but in her distinctly erotic response to Eric:

For the first time in her life, she apprehended the beauty of the human make: the beauty, not of fine eyes or a white hand, but of each hair distinct and wonderful, of the delicate varied grain of the skin. Thus admiring him, she no longer despised herself, and seeing her hands at their work, she forgot to think of them as red and coarsened with labour, observing only how deft they were in movement, how fit in their proportions. (39–40)

Sukey here clearly grasps a distinction between conventional (sexless) representations of beauty, with 'fine eyes' and 'a white hand', and the visceral pleasure latent in the physicality of the human body, of 'each hair distinct' and the 'varied grain of skin'. Further, in taking pleasure in Eric as a physical being, she is liberated from an awareness of

her own social position and is able to see *herself* in physical terms distinct from any class implications. She no longer sees her hands as 'red and coarsened with labour', but as 'deft' in movement and 'fit in proportions'. Eric, as a 'fool', has no concept of the social implications of his relationship with Sukey and, much like Wordsworth's 'Idiot Boy', holds a position in society somewhat beyond the usual order. In inviting Sukey to his hidden orchard, he allows her the freedom to explore her own sexuality outside of the constraints of her position.

The evidence of this liberating sexuality is revisited as Sukey looks through the clothes she hasn't seen since leaving the Nomans and that 'she had worn in the presence of her love':

One by one they yielded up their secrets, their faithful witness to the past. This fruit-stain told her another tale of the orchard. Her teeth had already sunk into the damson when Eric, turning suddenly, had kissed her, pressing her mouth and the fruit together, so that the damson juice gushed out and ran down on to the bosom of her dress. (179–80)

This erotic scene is immediately followed by the recollection of her symbolic sexual union with nature, as 'a darker and a heavier stain' reminds her of her bloodied hand as she smashes through the windowpane, and the two events are aligned as expressions of Sukey's possible sexual liberation.

But while the country provides the possibility of liberation from female oppression, and the opportunity to be a realised site of the power of woman, it is also the site of a specific kind of conservative and naturalist discourse. As Mary Jacobs observes,

Priestly and Robertson-Scott remind us of the other side of the pastoral idyll, as does Warner in her conclusion that 'the English pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing'. In doing so they are, paradoxically, remaining constant to a longstanding aspect of the pastoral mode, its tension between mythical and naturalistic elements.<sup>10</sup>

*The True Heart* reveals itself to be overtly concerned with this very tension, as these elements of feminist fantasy are set in opposition to the grounded circumstances of Sukey Bond.

From the first sentence of the novel, Sukey is constrained by the material circumstances of her place in history: 'It was the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1873, and the prize-giving day at the Warburton Memorial Female

Orphanage' (1). Sukey, a Victorian orphan, is expected to display the 'virtues' of her station as she makes her way in the world:

Her wages were to be ten pounds a year, and nothing more was required of her than honesty, industry, cleanliness, sobriety, obedience, punctuality, modesty, Church of England principles, good health and a general knowledge of housework, dairywork, washing, mending, and plain cooking. (4)

Unlike Laura, Sukey is thus not only a victim of her gender in her position within Victorian society, but also of her class, which designates her 'knack for obedience' a 'gift' and a 'genius' (6).

Sukey's saturation within the Victorian class system is such that it even permeates her vision of the pastoral landscape she finds herself in, thus over-writing the liberating potential of the feminist fantasy pastoral. She identifies the superior breeding of Tansy the cow in terms of lineage and nobility: 'Tansy might well be a trifle arrogant, for she was very well born. She was sired by the most celebrated bull in Essex, Stingo the Third' (33). She is also acutely aware of her own position within this system, and repeatedly reinforces these constraints with assertions such as 'She must be prudent and think of the future; she must obey the law of her kind and seek for work' (135). Sukey's journey is ultimately dictated by the limitations imposed upon her by her social position, which expects hard work and subservience.

Further, her social position has a huge bearing on Sukey's relationship with her own gender, and on the possibility of joining any kind of ideal 'sisterhood'. As she searches desperately for work, she has the following encounter:

Standing on the stairs, the woman of the house looked down on her with a curious expression, awakened and mournful, as though something about Sukey had summoned her from her private discontent to the recognition of an universally extended trammel of misfortune in which they both alike were netted. Then the baby began to squall louder; she twitched her skirts from Sukey's grasp, said angrily: 'No, get out of this!' and ran on. (139)

Though recognising 'an universally extended trammel of misfortune', the woman of the house is jolted from this solidarity by the material reality of the existence of her baby – a stark reminder of her position within society as 'mother', and one which demands that she reject Sukey.

The only true 'sisterhood' perceived by Sukey is that of Mrs Seaborn's servants, both of whom mock and humiliate her for believing herself to be pregnant:

she had stayed to hear more, bird-limed by that murmuring conversation over the currants with its suggestion of some female understanding, some wisdom at once terrible and comfortable, the secret simmering of a cauldron tended and tasted by women alone. (115–6)

The existence of a distinctly witchy sisterhood – again an echo of the fantasy of *Lolly Willowes* – is not liberating to Sukey; it is terrifying and shameful. Rather than unite in this coven, she is intent on seeking relief in Eric, and ultimately in the goals of marriage and motherhood.

These goals are, of course, in opposition both to the idealised chastity of feminist fantasy and to the liberating potential of sexuality, and suggest the world of Victorian patriarchy. Though we may despair of Sukey's determination to win the fool Eric as a husband, and to have his children, such aims have been imprinted on Sukey from childhood. When she enters the orphanage, Sukey is already weighed down by pseudo-maternal responsibilities and female subjugation:

She came there at the age of eleven, a timid, under-grown child with a crooked back, for being the eldest of the family and the only girl it seemed that she had learnt to walk for no other purpose than to carry her brothers. (5)

This responsibility has both mentally and physically defined Sukey, as she almost grows like a tree around the children yoked to her hips, with a 'crooked back'. Though her back eventually straightens, the mental impact remains. Not only is Sukey 'prepared' (5) to take the place of her dead mother, she actively 'regretted the warm burden that had stooped her to one side' (5). Such is her regret that she re-enacts this dynamic in her quasi-adoption of the Mulleins' children and, finally, in having her own child.

Sukey's pursuit of marriage and motherhood, unlike her autoerotic union with nature and her spontaneous sexual response to Eric, is devoid of sexuality. It functions, instead, as another assertion of patriarchal Victorian values. 'Sukey had good principles; she knew that it is wrong to have a baby unless you are married' (47). Marriage and motherhood are thus unified in a system of judgment and morality dislocated for



Sukey from her sexuality. The foundations of this system in Victorian England – of the immorality of extra-marital sex and the sanctity of marital union – were, of course, imbued with religious significance. Eric and Sukey's first kiss is pervaded with imagery of the 'first' man and woman, Adam and Eve. Having given her an apple, Eric takes Sukey on a symbolic journey back to the abandoned 'garden of Eden':

Here were cankered apple-trees, plum-trees weighed down with fruit small and thickly-bloomed as grapes, cherries, sloes and bullaces, and in the midst of these, like a queen, a pear-tree with its straight round stem. The fruit lay scattered in the long grass – small sour apples, insipid pears fallen unripe from the tree, sloes tasting of iron; only the plums had kept a curious watery sweetness. (38)

This is very much the garden *after* the fall, contaminated and 'cankered', its natural processes destroyed by abundance. What's more, while Sukey experiences genuine sexual delight in this encounter, she is distracted by thoughts of Victorian domesticity: 'this was a peaceful place in which to play at keeping house' (39). As described by Marcus, Laura's 'flight into a pre-patriarchal magical world of trees and transformations, animals and plants, and proud inviolateness' is crucially and necessarily 'prelapsarian'.<sup>11</sup> Sukey's and Eric's journey back to the abandoned Eden does not take them far enough in history and myth, and they are still constrained by the framework of a post-lapsarian, Christian value system.

Further, Marcus's vision of the 'prepatriarchal' is also necessarily 'preclassical',<sup>12</sup> before the overthrow of Earth by Apollo. For many, the myth of Cupid and Psyche, upon which *The True Heart* is based, is an archetypal allegory, an expression of fundamental truths. For Warner's biographer Claire Harman, 'the theme is pure love between two simple souls, and Sylvia could hardly have chosen a more difficult one'.<sup>13</sup> But the parallels between the myth and Warner's retelling go beyond the theme of pure love, to one of historical context. In both, the characters are bound by the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of their own society: for Cupid and Psyche it is Apuleius's Rome, and for Eric and Sukey it is Victorian England. Further, these historical contexts fundamentally determine the course of the narrative and the terms on which the couples' unions can occur.

Warner draws out these social parallels in the very naming of Sukey. As Gay Wachman points out, "Sukey" meant a general servant or slavey from about 1820, according to Eric Partridge's dictionary

of slang. And indeed, in the Apuleius story Venus forces the former princess, Psyche, to become a slavey'.<sup>14</sup> As Warner herself writes in the preface to *The True Heart*,

I spent a great deal of ingenuity on the Victorian versions of the divine characters, disguising their names and abilities. Mrs Seaborn was the sea-born Venus, Mrs Oxey, Juno the patron of marriage (it was an axiom of that date that only by the provision of brothels could modest women retain their virtue); the apple-woman and Mrs Disbrowe are Demeter. Queen Victoria is Persephone. These disguises were so efficient that no reviewer saw what I was up to. Only my mother recognised the basis of the story. (v-vi)

Warner's language here is telling; the characters from the myth are not merely the inspiration for her own characters, they are Victorian 'versions' with their names and abilities simply 'disguised'. Mrs Seaborn 'was' Venus, and Mrs Oxey Juno, the apple-woman and Mrs Disbrowe 'are' Demeter, and Queen Victoria 'is' Persephone. Warner's representation of these characters, we can deduce, comes from a reading of the original myth that precisely positions these characters as products of a Roman patriarchy.

The nature of the relationship between the original classical characters and their Victorian 'disguises' is repeatedly intimated. The scene in which Sukey visits Mrs Seaborn to declare her love for Eric (and her phantom pregnancy), for example, combines complex layers of the Victorian, the Christian and the classical. Mrs Seaborn's fury at Sukey is ultimately one of Victorian Christian patriarchal outrage:

To tell me? What have you to tell me that I should listen to? To tell me that you have been behaving like a fool, and worse than a fool? That you have no sense, no modesty, no gratitude, no decency? That you have pestered my son into an illness and disgraced yourself in the eyes of all respectable people? That for all the good training you have had, and all the advantages, you have shown yourself no better than any common creature on the streets? (101)

Sukey's eventual apprehension of Mrs Seaborn's unkindness and cruelty, however, is figured in terms which suggest her classical character:

A cold air streamed in, a bleak daylight shone full upon her, upon the other Mrs Seaborn, no bad dream now, but the reality, as real as a stone. She never looked at Sukey. She turned the fixed

lightning of her beauty upon the garden, where the sparrows were still flying about, where the solid masses of evergreens stood like dark tombs. (105)

Both the image of Mrs Seaborn as 'real as a stone', and that of the 'solid masses of evergreens' which 'stood like dark tombs', evoke visions of classical statues and allude to the fixity of classical standards. They are as they always have been, and this Victorian expression of their nature does not change their essential being.

Ultimately, Sukey succumbs to the pressure of her historical position. Like the wolves she cries for in her journey through the wilderness, she longs for the comforts of her domesticated other life:

And she wept more and more bitterly as she imagined a starving wolf creeping humbly under cover of a snowy twilight such as this to the threshold of a cottage standing alone in the fields. The windows were lit, a pleasant smoke curled from the chimney; the wolf had lain for days in the wood nearby, hearing the woman of the house calling up the dog to come in to be fed, until at last, in desperate suppliant craving, it had come cringing through the dusk to lie down before the door and to howl once, very gently. (120–1)

Though 'wild' – and by implication free – the wolf is 'starving' and 'desperate', willing to forgo his wildness for the comforts of domesticity, even if that involves suppliance and 'cringing'. Sukey enacts an equivalent journey, as she travels towards London – the exact reverse of Laura's journey to Great Mop – symbolically accepting and validating all the systems which oppress her. She arrives in the commercial centre of (capitalist) London, Covent Garden. No sooner than she arrives, she meets an aristocratic man, and reminds herself to 'remember one's place' (239). This aristocratic gentleman feeds his dog Indian tea, and Sukey makes the inevitable connection with the British Empire and her mission to meet Queen Victoria: 'From India one might lead the conversation round to the Crown Jewels, from the Crown Jewels – the clocks began to chime again...' (241). Her thought process is interrupted by the chiming of the clocks of the belfries, a reminder of the Church. From the minute she arrives, Sukey's inferior place in London society is made repeatedly apparent, from the belittling description of her as 'any small feather' (247), to Mrs Cole's humiliating thought that 'If, instead of Sukey Bond, her mistress had commissioned her to escort a chimpanzee

to Buckingham Palace, she would have carried out her orders in the same exaltation of humility' (255).

Though Queen Victoria, the object of Sukey's pilgrimage, acts as a sort of fairy godmother to Sukey, she is also symbolic of all of these systems. She is the head of state and Empire, the ultimate expression of British nobility, and the head of the Church, whose one act of benevolence is to grant Sukey a bible. Even her potential matriarchal power is qualified by her characterisation as 'mothering' in a formal, Victorian sense:

But one day, later on, some time in the twentieth century, people will look back. And there she'll be, sitting up against the horizon like St. Paul's, blue and majestic and dumpy; but superbly dumpy, sitting there bolt upright with her crown on, dwarfing and mothering everything. (245-6)

In arriving at Buckingham Palace, Sukey is even abandoned by Mrs-Disbrowe-as-Demeter, her one remaining connection to the feminist fantasy realm of nature: 'Once she glanced from a window, ready to see Mrs Disbrowe standing among the dwindled houses; and not seeing her, saw nothing' (257). Finally, in her marriage and childbirth, Sukey fulfils her scripted role in Victorian society. In giving birth, and accepting her place as wife and mother, she must say goodbye to her former self, in whom the hope of feminist fantasy was once so alive: 'the former Sukey watched with her, a faithful presence, a sister; but even now she was unsure of her tenure [...] at the child's first cry she would vanish like a ghost at cockcrow' (293).

In *The True Heart*, Sylvia Townsend Warner explores the possibility of feminist fantasy within the context of historical realism. Her protagonist Sukey Bond is, like Laura Willowes, drawn to the realm of nature and wildness as a place of female power and liberation. Unlike Laura, however, Sukey is an impoverished orphan, and must exist within a version of the English countryside which is powerfully shaped by the Victorian class system. Much as she longs for a union with nature and a sexual relationship with Eric unshackled by the demands of society, her narrative is finally defined by her place within history and, like the wolves she imagines, she too pursues the comfort and warmth of the domestic over the freedom of the wild. Where Laura, notwithstanding her relationship with the devil, is in a social position to liberate herself in something akin to the pre-patriarchal, prelapsarian and pre-classical realm of Artemis, Sukey's position in

the English countryside ultimately fulfils patriarchal, Christian and classical expectations. In her diaries, Warner writes of the despair of her friend David Garnett at the turn the narrative takes from Sukey's arrival in London: 'In the morning a very serious letter from Bunny, saying the blue dog in *The True Heart* had led me astray' (*Diaries*, 35).<sup>15</sup> But though we may agree that Sukey has been led astray, she has been so led by nothing less than the weight of material circumstance in Victorian society.

## Notes

- 1 Jane Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own: Feminist Fantasy Novels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner', in *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 134–60 (p. 156).
- 2 *Lolly Willowes* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), p. 150.
- 3 Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own'; quoted phrases from pp. 136–7.
- 4 Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own', p. 141.
- 5 Warner, 'The Historical Novel', in *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2007*, p. 54.
- 6 Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 146.
- 7 Warner, *The True Heart* (London: Virago Press, 1978), p. 21. Subsequent references to *The True Heart* are incorporated into the article and given by page number.
- 8 Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 162 n. 103.
- 9 Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own', p. 136.
- 10 Mary Jacobs, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral, 1925–1934', in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner; English Novelist 1893–1978*, ed. Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simon (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p. 63.
- 11 Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own', p. 136.
- 12 Marcus, 'A Wilderness of One's Own', p. 136.
- 13 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Penguin Random House, 1989), p. 86.
- 14 Gay Wachman, "'The True Story of England's Greatness": Degeneracy, Primitivism, Eugenics', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2000*, p. 35 n. 2.
- 15 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Random House, 1994), p. 35; entry for 9 May 1929.

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