

## A CRITICAL EDITION FOR *LOLLY*: ON THE BENEFITS OF BEING UNREGARDED

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As the prospectus for the 2012 Revisiting Sylvia Townsend Warner conference announced, ‘despite attempts to recover Warner’s work for a wide readership, she is rarely found on university syllabi in the UK or abroad.’ Scholars have amply demonstrated her merits, but Warner shares the fate of many other modernist women writers. Scholars acknowledge her significance and contribution in numerous articles, a spate of books - but these surges are followed by fallow periods. In a piece for *Literature Compass*, the publication of which coincided with the 2012 conference, Jane Garity describes factors contributing to this general neglect: women authors are underrepresented in anthologies, their texts go in and out of print, and male critics ‘ignore or marginalise feminist work’ (2013, p.17). Warner, in fact, is a more fortunate case: she has a journal and society dedicated to her (Garity 2013, p.22). Although feminist,

queer and new modernist scholarship has expanded the field of modernist study, the effect on curriculum has largely been to expand the interpretive lenses focused on canonical works rather than to increase the variety of modernist authors presented to undergraduate students.

Disheartening as this situation can be, it presents a pedagogical opportunity to study the gendered politics of canon formation. There are benefits to disregard. I do teach Warner's work, in my 'British Women Writers' class, but, more pertinently to present concerns, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) is the centerpiece of my introductory critical theory class precisely because the academic reception of her work epitomises the ideological issues around literary canons and canon formation. Students in this class create a critical edition for *Lolly Willowes* as a way of studying both the notion of literary 'greatness' and its selective imperviousness. Gerald Graff might call this strategy 'teaching the conflicts': our ability to create a full-fledged critical edition of *Lolly Willowes* does not suddenly grant Warner canonical status but rather draws attention to debates that shape contemporary literary study.

In some ways, critical editions raise a similar set of issues to those dogging anthologies. Critical editions, like anthologies, validate canonicity by situating a work as significant or great through inclusion in a select series of works, curated by experts. Thus they, again like anthologies, have a vexed position in literary study because of their effect on curricular choice. The introduction to a 2003 *College English* section on 'Editing a Norton Anthology' describes how English professors 'have turned [their] critical sights on how they [anthologies] concretise the canon - Norton anthologies in particular are both widely used for their serviceable reproduction of the canon and decried for the same reason' (p.172). This introduction also speaks of the 'seemingly magical process' by which anthologies are made, a phrase that hearkens to the idea of Marxian mystification and captures the paradox confronting anthology editors who seek to interrogate the canonising

force of anthologies and nevertheless - all protests aside - produce a tome perceived as hegemonic. William Andrews, lead editor for *The Literature of the American South* (Norton 1997), speaks to these issues implicitly when he cites reviews criticising that anthology's content selection (2002, p.111). He also addresses the institutional forces shaping anthologies explicitly, explaining that Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* was chosen over *The Glass Menagerie* because 'Norton had the rights to publish *Streetcar* in any anthology it wanted to for free,' and budget triumphed over expert preference (p.110). The intersection of aesthetics and institutions has practical results that many view with suspicion. Laurie Finke, one of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, cites women writers as one group that can be disadvantaged when the outward criteria for inclusion is 'individual achievement' but that criteria masks 'the collective work - the institutions, practices, and discourses that create, preserve, and circulate "works of art"' (2003, p.194).

Critical editions work in a similar manner: the inclusion of a text in the critical edition series justifies the 'greatness' of the work in question. The critical editions I have in mind here are Norton Critical Editions, published by the W.W. Norton Company in New York, rather than annotated editions designed primarily for scholars. Like anthologies, Norton Critical Editions are inherently pedagogical and designed for use in a classroom: under the aegis of a prestigious editor, these volumes gather and curate significant material about the primary text in one accessible place for instructor and student. In general, the books chosen for inclusion are classics and the volumes contain a set of materials that illustrate and validate particular types of authority and interpretation.

Thus, I start the *Lolly Willowes* critical edition project by having student analyse actual critical editions to determine common elements. They find that Norton Critical Editions are generally divided into three parts: front matter, primary text, and back matter. Typical front matter includes an introduction by the editor, an

outstanding and senior expert on the author and his/her works, who reviews the text's claims to greatness, places it in historical and literary context, and adumbrates the rigorous selection process for inclusion in the Norton series. The introduction is sometimes followed by a note on the text when there are variants: the note explains and justifies the choice made, demonstrating the careful, painstaking work of experts to create a version closest to the author's original intent. The primary text which follows includes substantial annotations to note variations among editions of the work, to define unfamiliar or obsolete words, and to explain allusions or historical context. Annotations link the work to other disciplines (science, mythology, philosophy, etc.), to literary forebears, and to artistic traditions, demonstrating the importance of a broad knowledge for recognising the richness of great literature. Critical editions thus enact T.S. Eliot's claim that the artist's 'complete meaning' lies in 'the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists' (1975, p.38) by pointing these links out to the untutored mind. In addition, annotations imply research skills and access to big libraries, as the sources editors consult are certainly scholarly and sometimes arcane.

Back matter amplifies the annotations by providing more extensive historical and literary-critical context, highlighting a range of appropriate research methods, interpretive lenses, and sources. This section begins with contemporary responses (reviews, etc.) and additional texts by or about the author. This section may also include relevant historical documents, maps, artwork, and photographs; the Norton editions of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exemplify this aspect of edition-making. Following this contemporary material is a section of excerpts from scholarly articles representing the major critics and schools of thought on the text. A chronology and an extensive bibliography for further reading close the volume.<sup>1</sup>

By comparing various Norton editions, students learn that the rules of evidence in literary criticism are both conventional and institutionalized. For example, letters

to/from the author - often quoted in the introduction as well - generate proof of intent: James Joyce's correspondence related to *Dubliners* provides a good modernist touchstone here. Debates among scholars encourage students to attribute significance to particular features of a text and to formulate reasoned responses to them. For example, a selection of essays debating racism in *Heart of Darkness* encourages the view that this subject is an interpretive crux.

From a student perspective, the effect of a critical edition is tautological: the text is on the syllabus so it must be important and the wealth of critical apparatus contained in the edition guarantees that the book selection is correct. The critical edition authorises the expertise of the instructor and the value of the course, and the instructor and the institution authorise the text and edition through text selection. Even though the principle of selection and choice is clearly on display in a critical edition, the fact that there is so much material to choose from only enhances the claim of expertise needed to select, and greatness to have produced, so much commentary. If - the argument goes - so much can be said, over time, by so many, then the text must be significant.

To unpack this tautology, students in the sophomore-level theory class analyse key concepts in literary criticism through the creation of a critical edition. We start the semester by reading *Lolly Willowes* cold and discussing what we find. Most of the students have taken other literature courses so they have skill in interpreting text. We then leave *Lolly* to marinate while we spend the first half of the semester discussing major concepts in contemporary theory - 'author,' 'reading,' 'subject,' 'difference,' etc. - using the textbook *The Theory Toolbox* (Nealon and Giroux). When we get to the second half of the course, these concepts ground our theorisation of the 'critical edition' as we re-read *Lolly Willowes* along with a series of documents germane to interpretation and historical significance. As the students create the edition, they themselves make a case for *Lolly Willowes* as a

canonical work while simultaneously deconstructing disciplinary practices (embodied, in one sense, in the idea of a Norton Critical Edition) that authorise the 'greatness' of a text.

For the purposes of the assignment, I serve as the editor, and the students are my research team. I ask the students to look up my publication record and explain why I might be considered to have some expertise, and I also ask them to suggest who could replace me (were I to run off to Mexico). The students use our library's databases to see who has published on Warner and modernist women writers, and they justify their proposed editors. This portion of the assignment reminds students of the gatekeeping role of experts. Experts deliberate, based on extensive training, on the significance of material in the text, deciding what 'matters' and what does not based on a set of disciplinary criteria. Experts are also familiar with the range and quality of material available. I balance respect for expertise with something our textbook calls 'suspicion': why are the limits set here? Who decides what counts? How do these limitations determine who is 'knowledgeable' and who is not? How do these limits get stretched?

The assignment then builds out in three parts: shared readings, a scavenger hunt for texts deemed important by the editor, and independent research. This part of the course reinforces what we learned earlier about the conventions of literary study. We return to our first critical term: 'author' and its attendant term 'authority.' Our textbook seeks to disturb the common notion of the author as the guarantor of meaning in a text. The ideology of the author promises that there is a meaning that is best or most true - 'If the author were here, he or she could tell us what the text means' (Nealon and Giroux p.17) - and we are justified, then, in searching for meaning. We thus begin with materials that point - possibly - to Warner's intent and consider what kinds of interpretations Warner's own words authorise. Sections of Warner's correspondence with David Garnett indicate that Warner agreed with Garnett's comparison of Laura to

'the Beauty in the wood' (1994, p.26). How much credence should be given to Warner's assent? What avenues of interpretation do the author's assent authorise readers and scholars to pursue? In a later letter, Warner describes the response of Margaret Murray, author of *The Witch-Cult in Modern Europe*, to *Lolly Willowes*: Murray 'liked my witch, though she was doubtful about my devil' (1994, p.29). This reference in a letter would seem to authorise an examination of the relationship between Warner's work and Murray's, and indeed my students frequently advocate for including sections of Murray's work in the critical edition.

Writings by Warner also insert her into early 20<sup>th</sup>-century debates about women's rights and women's writing, and Warner can be clearly placed in the tradition of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). We read Warner's 1950 lecture to the Royal Society of Arts, 'Women as Writers,' which was reprinted in *Collected Poems* (1982) and later republished in *The Gender of Modernism* (1990). Warner's opening reflection on the topic 'Women as Writers,' her discussion of the role of domestic work in shaping aesthetics, and her alliance with Shakespeare all extend and sometimes rebut Woolf's famous treatise. How does this lecture authorise feminist readings of *Lolly Willowes*? How are Warner's ideas about women's roles reflected in Laura Willowes the character? Moreover, what do we make of Laura's declaration that 'Nothing is impracticable for a single, middle-aged woman with an income of her own' (Warner 1999, p.95)? Laura makes this declaration in 1926, three years before *A Room* appeared with the well-known thesis that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (Woolf, p.4). My editorial team has discussed whether selections from *A Room* might be relevant context to include - and we have wondered whether there is a connection between *Lolly Willowes* and *A Room*.

To engage the concept of reference and the strategies of annotation, we read a short sketch of the painter Henry Fuseli from *The Lives of the Most Eminent British*

*Painters* (1873), and a description of John Milton's relationship with his daughters from Barbara Lewalski's *Life of Milton*. Students may have a general idea of who John Milton is, but they do not know Henry Fuseli. An annotation might read, 'Henry Fuseli, English-Swiss painter (1741-1825) of *The Nightmare* (1781),' leaving most readers none the wiser. Reading an account of Fuseli's obstreperous personality, in a book Warner (b. 1893) could have found on a family bookshelf, renders Laura's distaste for her nephew Titus's obsession with 'Fuseli the man, Fuseli the sign of his times, etc.' more palpable (Warner 1999, p.145). Similarly, Lewalski describes the fractious nature of Milton's relationship with his daughters, and the presumption that they, as unmarried women, were natural, willing, and available amanuenses for the great male author's projects when blindness incapacitated him. The bitter comparison Laura makes between Milton's daughters, *Paradise Lost*, and her own conscription for Titus's *Life of Fuseli* (p. 190) underlines Warner's critique of the expected sacrifice of women's desires to male priorities.

Interest in Sylvia Townsend Warner among scholars surged as women's studies entered the academy, and surged again as interest in gender expanded to gay and lesbian studies, and so our literary criticism readings begin with that strain of analysis. Currently, I use Jane Garrity's "Encoding Bi-Location: Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Erotics of Dissimulation" (1995) and Alison Oram's historical essay "Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World: The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses" (1992). Oram's essay contextualises the designation '*Spinster*' appended to Laura's name on legal documents (Warner 1999, p.57) both by defining the term as it would have been understood in the 1920s and offering three case studies of women writers who - like Warner - combated attacks on spinsters as frigid and unfulfilled (1992, p.414). Garrity draws on Warner's 'Women as Writers' as the basis for a tight and textured close reading of the novel's 'overt portrayal of a single, middle-aged woman's psychic evolution, and its more



covert, allusive mapping of a lesbian subtext through its depiction of this independent spinster's mutation into a witch' (1995, p.244). Garrity's article sits at a transitional point in analyses of Warner's work: the reading emphasises gender and sexuality, drawing together the two major critical approaches to the work. This article allows our class to reflect back toward the critics who preceded Garrity, and forward to the postcolonial turn Garrity and others, including myself, took from this point.<sup>2</sup>

There are also pedagogical reasons for choosing these articles from among the many that merit consideration. These articles are both readable for undergraduates and exemplary in their deployment evidence, and thus good models for student essays. The overt/covert dynamic charted by Garrity also intervenes in a debate that always erupts about the 'meaning' of Laura's sexuality. Inevitably, students resist reading Laura as a lesbian, even though they accept the feminist interpretation of the text without a qualm. Their debates allow me to emphasise the connections between art and 'real life' in that students often use the argument, 'Yes, she is, but it doesn't matter.' Or, 'No she isn't; there's not enough evidence.' We talk about 'what counts' as evidence, what kind of ideas or aspects of character are significant in literary interpretation, and what exactly it means to say 'it matters.'

From this shared frame of reference and practice applying theoretical concepts, we expand our research. In the first iteration, the editor assigns each student a source already designated as relevant for the critical edition, and the students fan out to find their respective sources and then explain why the editor thinks the source is significant context for the novel. The sources vary with the number of students, but quite frequently they include the Russian fairytale 'The Baba Yaga' in Ralston's *Russian Folk-Tales* (1873), a version Warner herself might have read and later recalled for use in Laura's ruminations on 'Russian witches' (1999, p.134). Ralston's version has the advantage of online availability through Hathi Trust

and a section discussing themes and variants of the Baba Yaga tale. Another common assignment contextualises Laura's war experiences: Warner's first published work, an unsigned article entitled 'Behind the Firing Line: Some Experiences in a Munition Factory' that appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in February 1916. And I always send a student to the 2001 edition of this journal for a reprint of the original ending to *Lolly Willowes*, since this piece returns us to questions of authorial intent.<sup>3</sup> Finally, students propose their own contributions to the critical edition based on their developing expertise. I give them the run of the novel and some freedom of choice: they can seek out additional works by Warner, critical articles, biography, and book reviews; they can compose an annotation (*mugwort* is always popular); they can seek images or source texts for the novel. The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society website helps them locate sources in the journal, and I put the print run, the newsletters, and my collection of Warner material on reserve in the library. Imagine my surprise - during the first iteration of the project in 2007 - when a student sought out the woodcut of 'Matthew Hopkins the witch-finder' to which Laura refers when she names her kitten Vinegar (Warner 1999, p.164). Students in my class argued for the inclusion of paintings by Henry Fuseli - the works that 'didn't matter' to Titus (p.145) - to indicate how contrary Fuseli's understanding of witches and the devil is to that ultimately supported by the novel. I have since made these images part of our regular classroom discussion.<sup>4</sup> A battered, faded, copy of 'Mehalah, by the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould' (p.104) appeared one year, and another year a student found a newspaper advertisement from Chatto with the teaser, "'Madam, will you walk...?'" and she walked with—SATAN' in Gothic script. Students also build on our previous work to find other critical articles, journal entries, poems, short stories, and letters.

Among these delightful discoveries, there have also been productive failures that lead to discussions about balance, excerpting, and relevance. I have had to defend

limitations on the number of book reviews or critical articles given the scope of the assignment. We debate whether or not to include excerpts of scholarship about other works by Warner. Further, excerpting proves a difficult task as students routinely select much larger sections of an article than a critical edition includes. Pages, after all, are money. But taking on the responsibility of 'expert' who selects material for others triggers discomfort similar to that voiced by anthology editors: what are the politics of choosing, of cutting? On the other hand, students have pushed me to justify where I put the gateposts in terms of appropriate content. Thus we are consistently engaged in emulating and critiquing conventions of literary analysis.

Through this work, students also become much more informed consumers of annotations. To write an annotation, students have to find the reference but they also have to use an academic - and sometimes an obscure academic - source. For example, who is Mother Shipton (Warner 1999, p.13)? Wikipedia has an entry, but students must follow the reference back to academic sources. They also have to figure out how to write an annotation, and thus how far to go in suggesting the uses to which a reader might put the information in the annotation. As a result, they become critical of what I call factoid annotations: the annotation giving a definition without any context. Either the reader is 'just supposed to know' or expert assistance is required.

In poring over a variety of sources, the students find more than enough material available to construct the edition: a Norton *Lolly Willowses* is conceivable on the same terms Norton uses. Warner can be shown to have upstaged Virginia Woolf in the 'room of one's own' category - yet she seldom finds a slot on the modernist syllabus which has already stretched for Virginia Woolf (usually), Jean Rhys, or Katherine Mansfield.<sup>5</sup> We are decades out from the initial edition of *The Gender of Modernism* (ed. Bonnie Kime Scott, 1990; companion volume 2007) and Margaret Crosland's survey *Beyond the Lighthouse* (1981) - the title of which called attention

to Virginia Woolf's eclipsing effect on other women writers. The scholarship on 'other' writers that blossomed from these surveys and anthologies has only trickled into the undergraduate classroom. Indeed, the effect of all this work appears to be a narrative that reifies Warner's secondary status: she is pointed to as evidence of the richness and variety of the work produced under the aegis of modernism - so much richness and variety that we can't teach it all so, through a 'seemingly magical process,' the same texts dominate.

Late in *Lolly Willowses*, Laura explains that the best candidates for witchcraft are 'women living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded' (p.211). Warner's works - and the works of other early twentieth century women writers like her - are also 'living and growing old' and 'unregarded.' They remain vivid testimony to the hegemonic demand that art be 'universal' in significance, a universality implicitly and actually, usually and typically, male. A more productive way of stimulating appreciation and curricular inclusion may be to consider Warner 'minor' in the sense Sonita Sarker uses the word, to see Warner in dialogue with other writers challenging aesthetic and political hegemonies 'as a matter of *position* and *strategy* as much as of *identity*' (2013, p.9). A course deliberately paralleling mainstream modernist writing with other streams could produce new ways of creating knowledge about literary traditions. In constructing a critical edition, we make a start by arguing through example: *Lolly Willowses* has 'a life of [its] own, not an existence doled out . . . by others' (Warner 1999, p.215) even if that life is not deemed significant enough to merit inclusion on many syllabi.

Perhaps Claire Harman is right to comment, in the introduction to Warner's *New Collected Poems* (2008), that the canon is 'to some extent, sealed, and she is on the outside' (p.2). Perhaps T.S. Eliot's claim, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' that the canon changes only for 'the new (the really new) work of art' (1975, p.38) tacitly judges Warner insufficiently innovative, despite the occasional essay lamenting this lack of appreciation.

But such neglect can be flipped to question Eliot's constellation and the notions of 'importance,' 'greatness,' and 'knowledge' that buttress it. The critical edition project demonstrates not only that there is substantial material available on Warner, but also that this material has a critical mass. And by demonstrating the conditions of academic 'life' for a work of literature, we reveal the ideological and institutional underpinnings of a modernist canon.

Students who engaged in this ambitious and sometimes complicated project over the years have expanded my knowledge in expanding their own. For that, and the pleasure of introducing them to an author they find surprising and rewarding to read, I am grateful.

#### NOTES

1. To be fair to Norton, the types of material considered relevant for analysis has expanded, and some recent new titles demonstrate that curricular priorities have shifted and copyrights (an issue that stymies critical editions of some twentieth-century texts) have been negotiated. Yet the majority of texts in the series are those typically considered canonical.

2. Among the predecessors to Garrity are Terry Castle, Robert Caserio, Jane Marcus, Barbara Brothers, and Bruce Knoll. Garrity later revised this argument in her book *Step-Daughters of England* (2003), which incorporates insights from postcolonial theory. Robin Hackett (2003), Fay Wachman (2001) and Jennifer Nesbitt (2005) likewise address the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and imperialism in their books. Since the early 2000s, a new set of critical analyses has appeared, including work by Rosemary Sykes, Mary Jacobs, David James, Jacqueline Shin, Kate Macdonald, June Dunn, Chris Hopkins, and James Harker. This journal has also reprinted key critical works and reviewed relevant monographs.

3. Other assignments have included material from the *PN Review* special issue on Warner (1981), short stories and poems by Warner, John Updike's "The Mastery of Miss

Warner” from *The New Republic* (1966), and book reviews.

4. These instances predate Jacqueline Shin’s ekphrastic analysis of the novel, which appeared in *Modernism/Modernity* in 2009.

5. See Garrity (2013) pp.17-18. Nor do I discount the claim for other women modernists.

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