Greatness Engendered

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Few novelists, even in twentieth-century avant-garde movements, have had the fortitude to dwell for long among the insignificant masses. It proves irresistible to adorn the homely with significance, to spice up that little old lady’s dinner, or even to turn away from her to grander personages less likely to bore us. Readers consider it their privilege to identify, if not in the usual sense of identifying with a character, then in the sense of being able to distinguish remarkable characters or knots of meaning in the common wood. As I turn now to the heroines (without intending any slight to the heroes), ¹ I follow perhaps the most common route in the interpretation of novels, next to consideration of plot. Reading the “characters,” especially the heroic “shining ones,” we may flatter our sense of selfhood. The grand old women of letters, while dissenting from the cult of individualism, single out certain characters for godlike eminence much like their own. Yet as I hope to show in this chapter, they adapt the conventions of heroic character to accord with a feminine ideal of selflessness.

Readings of any novel by a woman often seize on female characters as keys both to the author’s experience and to her views on womanhood. Eliot’s and Woolf’s heroines, however, are instructive in part because they cannot be reduced to author surrogates. ² As Eliot and Woolf define femininity, and hence feminine heroism, their own story

¹Woolf’s handling of characterization and plot may seem so radically different from Eliot’s that it is difficult even to speak of her heroines or heroes. I use the terms loosely for female and male protagonists but recognize that these functions are often dispersed, in Eliot to a lesser extent than in Woolf. What is Rhoda in The Waves? what is Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway? Extremes of the advocated selflessness, in suicide they extend the more dominant hero or heroine, Bernard or Clarissa.

²It may be that Eliot’s and Woolf’s place in the canon required their suppression of autobiography to some extent; their heroines are less easily mistaken for autobiographi-
is so unfeminine as not to be repeated in respectable fiction. A character who would strive toward published greatness as the authors did would violate the virtue of the unpublicized common life (ambitious characters, male as well as female, are generally condemned to obscurity or death in these novels). Conversely, those who abandon the narrow designs of the self must fail to distinguish themselves, and thus may seem to fall short of heroism and greatness—unless, of course, the masculine norm of heroism might be discarded in favor of a more collective mode.

Eliot and Woolf, like many contemporary writers, conceive a form of heroism in keeping with an ideal of feminine selflessness—and with realistic depiction of circumstances that actually limited women's achievements (Martin 22). This conception of a feminine heroism reflects the development of a newly engendered, literate middle class, a development often narrated in literary history. Terry Eagleton draws on Jean H. Hagstrum's argument in *Sex and Sensibility* (24–49) that the "feminization" of bourgeois culture associated with the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century entailed a "domestication of heroism" (Eagleton 14); according to Eagleton, this domestication marked a shift from the belligerent ethos of a masculine aristocracy to a fashion for the "sensibility, civility, and tendresse" associated with women. At the same time, there was a new emphasis on "possessive individualism" and a stiffening of the hierarchy of the patriarchal family, so that women's confinement to domesticity and their indoctrination in selflessness were further assured. As Eagleton puts it, "The 'exaltation' of women . . . also serves to shore up the very system which oppresses them" (14–15). The contradictions of this oppressive exaltation were not lost on some of those who experienced it. Ann Richelieu Lamb protested in 1844, "Woman, chained and fettered, is yet expected to work miracles" (*Can Woman Regenerate Society?* in Murray 31). Like many nineteenth-century novels, Eliot's and Woolf's fictional experiments with heroism seem less disposed to protest the chains and fetters than to acclaim the miracles performed by women in spite—or because—of them. The very fettered privateness of women is seen as a source of widespread influence and possible greatness. At the same time, such novels help cast doubt on the assumption that those "shapen after the average" are male, and that the female sphere is a lesser, deformed part of the whole, "Man."

What could be the benefits of supposing that privacy and social stand-ins than, say, Dorothy Richardson's Miriam Henderson. Though I may frequently suggest a correlation between these authors' treatment of heroines and their views on women's actual roles in history, it is as important to distinguish the fictions from the practical positions as it is to distinguish characters from authors.
conscience are somehow feminine virtues? It seems dangerous to maintain, as some feminists still do, that even in a possible nonsexist world women would excel in collaboration rather than in Herculean exploits. But it may be useful to suppose that because patriarchal culture denies women and other marginal groups the illusion of independent identity, they are conditioned to know that the subject is decentered. The norm for the autobiographical self, for instance, has been European, implicitly male, and “individualistic”; thus Georges Gushdorf claims that the author of autobiography must “feel himself to exist outside of others” as members of some cultures are not able to do (“Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” 29–30, in Friedman 35). Susan Stanford Friedman tries to convert such a disability of the marginal into a strength: women’s autobiography is generated by the very conditions that in Gushdorf’s view prevent autobiography. “Autobiography is possible,” Friedman writes, altering Gushdorf, “when ‘the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence’ ” (her emphasis). Friedman, following Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow, affirms women’s capacity for a collective identification as “potentially transformative” of the human community (Friedman 35–42). Such endorsements of a decentered feminine subject retain the spirit of the nineteenth-century ideology of influence, though no latter-day feminist intends to mystify women’s “fetters” in the old-fashioned way. Friedman’s hope of basing another kind of self-inscription in women’s culturally conditioned “interdependent existence” seems to me to continue the kind of endeavor to reconceive a feminine heroism that I trace in Eliot’s and Woolf’s works. Those bound to live in others might gain an insight that transforms the chains and fetters into the preconditions of a more authentic and pervasive heroism.

Eliot’s and Woolf’s most honored characters, female or male, emulate an ideal of self-sacrificing, altruistic, or—taking the essentializing risk that these authors take—feminine heroism, either as anonymous vessels of the common life or as near-legendary shining ones. These characters’ spectacular vanishing acts succeed in commanding our reverence—Eliot’s and Woolf’s novels are read seriously—but if we for a moment imagine the authors as impresarios on stage touting silence and suffering and incurable stage fright, we can see the incongruity of the performance. Of course, the great women of letters never

3Too often, the benefits of alternative concepts of the self and of heroism have misled reformers. No one should postpone any effort to remove material and practical chains because of the conditioned strengths of the chained.
have recourse to the bullhorn; their narrators like their heroines appear self-effacing, though Eliot’s narrators are willing enough to speak for us all. But the gap between the understood authorial origin—the famous woman—and the textual doctrine of selflessness is most instructive.

A nineteenth-century model of feminine heroism, based on the ambiguity of the term “selflessness,” shapes the characterization in Woolf’s as well as Eliot’s novels, I would argue, though many would prefer to emphasize in these works the heroism of anger and resistance. As evidence against my claim that the heroic is diverted to selfless ends in these novels, one might highlight the demonic rage and desire in Maggie, Mrs. Transome, Gwendolen, or the Alcharisi, and the sinister egotism in Hetty or Rosamond. Or add to the account of feminist resistance the facts that Rachel, Katharine, Mrs. Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay, Sara Pargiter, and Isa all preserve a fierce chastity of inner life, and Lily, Orlando, and Miss La Trobe refuse to trade in sympathy. Yet interdependent existence is ultimately affirmed for each of these characters; if anything, it is more enforced in Woolf’s fiction, as her permeable characters have only moments rather than chapters to reign as the queen in exile.

Although Woolf attempts to slay the Angel in the House, she turns around and hooks up life-support systems to keep that Angel alive for the sake of counter-individualist and historically evocative fiction. “Feminine” heroism, the standard for both male and female characters in Eliot’s and Woolf’s works, emphasizes interrelation, living for others as the notorious Angel does, forfeiting the spectacle, the credit, the excitement. Feminine heroism arises when an exceptional individual paradoxically, perhaps even boringly, becomes most representative of a social group: the heroine or hero earns quiet honor by subsuming her or his self in the common life.

Obviously, the idea of heroism raises recalcitrant gender questions. Both male and female characters are being held to a selfless, feminine ideal (McKee 25–26), yet their deeds can only be deemed heroic if they affect the public sphere in some way. Lee R. Edwards, in order to make way for the “female hero,” redefines heroism as any action, by women or men, that strives toward an impersonal end in some form of knowledge or love, an end that “brings about a change from an old idea of community to a new ideal” (Edwards 11–13; compare Pearson and Pope 13). Although this definition has the advantage of opening careers to female talent, it alerts us to the difficulty for women to meet this criterion, if they are conventionally defined as incapable of striving for impersonal, grand, or public goals (Holtby 52–53). Indeed, Ed-
wards arbitrarily designates as a mere "heroine" any female protagonist who lapses into the private, non-militant life (Edwards 16, 95). The idea of community and public influence does seem inseparable from the idea of feminine heroism, at the risk of forfeiting femininity. If a female character abandoned the private sphere to engage herself not to one man but to society and public welfare, the disruptive potential would be great indeed. Such is the potential that Eliot tentatively explores in *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Romola*, significantly choosing remote historical settings and at the same time stressing the heroines' voluntary loyalty to patriarchal tradition. In sacrifice to a collective identity, Eliot's and Woolf's heroines may expand the merely local and domestic contours of their lives and find some form of public influence not incompatible with the prescribed privacy and anonymity of women.

After briefly considering some of the ways canonical nineteenth-century novels conceive of a heroic selflessness applicable not only to female characters, I focus in this chapter on the emblematic contrasts between sisters and brothers in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Between the Acts*, the resurgence of Antigone as heroic prototype in several texts, the transformation of living women artists into fictional heroines (like the portraits of lady reformers), and finally the pressure on individual characters to fuse with the "many" in *Middlemarch*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *To the Lighthouse*. Each of these instances reveals various means of working miracles in fetters: infiltrating the public sphere with feminine influence, achieving celebrated selflessness, or obscuring oneself in the common life for the growing good of the world.

**Feminine Heroism: Some Definitions**

When Eliot and Woolf, like many Victorian and later novelists, single out a female character for a privileged role, they generally obey the provisos of the realist tradition: (1) that she be self-effacing; (2) that her ambitions fail, apart from succeeding in marriage and influence; (3) that she be poor, homely, plainly dressed, an orphan, or humbled in

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*The advantages of a gender-neutral term "hero" seem outweighed by the disadvantages of isolating female characters who do not behave with proper self-determination as "heroines," a kind of lesser, third sex. I prefer to imagine a rejuvenated term, "heroine," freed of its diminutive connotations yet affirming difference. My intention is not to erase the history of salutary attempts to deny difference in moral responsibility; Wollstonecraft and others needed to shatter a double standard by which a heroine's virtue might consist simply in her chastity (Kirkham 19).
some other way; (4) that she be intelligent, sensitive, and talented, but a thorough amateur (or else that she fail as in [2]); and (5) that she be representative of many, of a collective experience, while remaining in private life. One kind of heroine, a favorite in romance and popular fiction, has every advantage; she may be a beacon illuminating a text—"handsome, clever, and rich" like Austen’s Emma—but she should also learn humility, so that she does not outshine those who suffer more under the common burden of womanhood. Austen provides another model for the heroine, at the opposite extreme from that of Emma: that of Fanny Price, without commanding charms but with the self-sacrificial "heroism of principle" (Mansfield Park 265, in Butler 247; compare Little Dorrit).

Charlotte Brontë undoubtedly made the most of this second type, letting us see the superwoman lurking in the mild-mannered nobody. The extreme privacy of such heroines seems not to have satisfied other novelists, who repeatedly sought to carve out a sphere of action in which ordinary women—albeit almost exclusively ladies of some leisure and education—might figure as more than mere pawns of history. In this third, more middling type of heroine, we see a woman of somewhat uncommon endowments stepping into that semi-public arena, the represented world of the novel, with its select social and domestic scope and its implied general public (primarily subscribers to the lending libraries) who nevertheless read in the privacy of home. As amateur prototypes of the social worker, such heroines could challenge men’s predominance in history and culture. Gaskell’s Margaret Hale, Dickens’s Esther Summerson, not to mention Romola, Dorothea Brooke, Mary Datchet, or Eleanor Pargiter, offer instances of the limited but deeply benevolent effect hoped for from such ladies. But at what might seem their most heroic strain, when they display power rather than insinuate influence, heroines violate the code that has determined the feminine heroic ideal. How heroines (or women writers) may overreach their sphere yet do "homage to the convention" of feminine "anonymity" is then the challenge, as Woolf indicates in A Room of One’s Own.

It could be argued that “publicity” has been “detestable” (RO 52) in male or female characters in realistic fiction: that the humbleness of common life is especially favored regardless of any gender ideology. Yet any reader can perceive that something more is expected of female

\footnote{Terry Eagleton notes the double bind of realist fiction (which parallels the double role of these representative individuals): “caught . . . between its local persuasiveness and generalizing force,” such fiction-that-might-be-history must provide plausible details that do not deny its exemplary status (19).See McKee 3–50.
representatives of the common life: a specially enforced privacy and yet a specially interdependent social duty. Male characters in the novel tradition have frequently offered humble instances of heroism (e.g., the Vicar of Wakefield, Waverley). But there have been many grander heroes who distinguish themselves on the public stage of history. The model of the Carlylean Great Man, unlike the feminine model I am examining, cannot be adapted to either sex without severe alterations (N. Auerbach, Woman and Demon, 4; Edwards 14, 20). The plausible heroine must compromise with the demands of domestic life; if like Mrs. Jellyby she too zealously takes up the cause of Borribooola-Gha, she becomes a slattern who neglects her home and family.

The typical nineteenth-century heroine faces a strange form of private life in which her selfhood or individuality is publicly suspect: she must learn to suffer in secret, while at the same time she must appease an intense communal interest in defining her, usually as a term of exchange in marriage or gossip (Homans 251-76). Molly Gibson, in Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, discovers that to move freely about town even on a mission to rescue her friend is to forfeit her reputation; she is finally most heroic when serving unobtrusively in the sickroom. For heroines more than for heroes, self-determination becomes associated with sexual transgression—female chastity is still the underlying concern in the nineteenth- as in the eighteenth-century novel—but romantic error may be forgivable if suitably converted to altruism. A figure like Dickens's Lady Dedlock, hiding her past love even as the newspapers inspect her smallest movements, offers a sinister exemplum at another extreme from Molly Gibson; her ill-gained eminence as well as her outlived passion are punishable by death. But when we are privy to her motherly self-sacrifice, her scarcely retraceable wanderings, we forgive her.6

In keeping with what we might call the commandments of anonymity and collectivity, Eliot devises an all-purpose excuse for her aspiring heroines: their representative or "common" failure. Nowhere is this strategy more brilliantly displayed than in Middlemarch. Here the narrator informs us that heroic women must fall "unwept into oblivion" (though the novelist teaches us to weep). The community asserts its right to interpret the secret motives of any woman who in the least sets herself apart from her kind: the "many Theresas . . . alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other con-

6Lady Dedlock is not so much the heroine of Bleak House as Esther is, of course, but since mother and daughter are frequently mistaken for each other, they seem avatars of the same feminine principle.
demned as a lapse." So defined, female heroism becomes extremely
difficult to detect, since to "common eyes" a woman who attracts
notice has probably lost either common sense or her sense of propriety.
Yet privileged readers, recognizing "spiritual grandeur," will not mis­
take the distinction of a heroine like Dorothea Brooke for self-aggran­
dizement (M 3). We smile at the slight vanity and inconsistency of
Dorothea's self-denial in the scene of sharing out their mother's jewels
with her sister, but we later see that her hobby of giving up has
become an arduous vocation. There is nothing arbitrary in the author's
decision to have Dorothea give up in the end; it is a necessity of the
convention of feminine heroism that she be "absorbed into the life of
another," as the crowning glory of her selfless dedication to the com­
mon life (M 611).

We should ask why the agony rather than the exploit becomes the
favored mode of female heroism, and why so much is expected of
heroines because of their lack of independent selfhood.7 How active or
how effective is the ideal, heroic woman to be? Any appearance of
conscious motive—let alone the daring often expected of a hero—
endangers a heroine's reputation, yet mere decorous idleness in the
safe zone is decidedly unheroic and usually reserved for a heroine's
foils. (Compare Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke to their respective
Rosamonds.) Instead of narrow domesticity, Eliot would most admire
the dedication of a new Saint Theresa, a heroine who fulfills a public
mission rather like that of the grand old woman of letters, provided
she—unlike Daniel Deronda's mother but like Romola—forgo self and
honor household and cultural gods. Woolf famously repudiated the
feminine heroine, but she seems to have been exceptionally intimate
with her, as I have noted. The Angel in the House as Woolf describes
her is precisely the Victorian heroine, but in her wifely and motherly
phase, after the end of most novels:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She
was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life.
She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if
there was a draught, she sat in it—in short she was so constituted
that she never had a mind or a wish of her own. . . . Above all . . .
she was pure. ("Professions for Women" 59)

Woolf hints that this creature of fiction has been impossible to kill: "It
is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping

7Pearson and Pope anachronistically claim that "the female hero does not martyr
herself for others," while they note the actual selfishness of the traditional "helpmate."
"Undertaking a heroic quest to discover the true self" is paradoxically less selfish (14).
back when I thought I had despatched her” (60). Specifically, she must slay her in order to gain her own independence as a writer, but in other respects she wishes to revive Angels of the past who transposed the selfless virtues out of the house.

We have seen that Eliot and Woolf share with many Victorians an expectation that moral guidance will emanate from womanhood, a hampered but vital source. Women’s forced specialization in domesticity was transformed into a socially redeeming vocation by writers as diverse as Harriet Martineau and Sarah Ellis. Martineau, calling for genuine female learning, also urged the lesson of humility: “Let [woman] be taught that she is to be a rational companion to . . . the other sex . . . that her proper sphere is home.” Having mastered the domestic arts, some exceptional women may, without agitating “the cause of Woman,” join the ranks of public servants and great thinkers (91–93, 82–83). Ellis maintained that humble benevolence rather than knowledge was the aim of the cultivation of women: “The most servile drudgery may be ennobled by the self-sacrifice, the patience, the cheerful submission to duty, with which it is performed”; through unobtrusive example, women thus may raise “the moral character of the nation” (her emphasis; 38–42).

Edward Bulwer-Lytton adapts Ellis’s woman’s-mission line to the realm of literary culture; women “are the great dictating portion of the reading world,” and must use their “influence” “nobly” rather than debasing art and the artist to the level of drawing-room entertainment.

With women, whose organization renders them so susceptible to new impressions—who are ever prone, when their emotions are deeply roused, to forego and forget self—who, in all great revolutions of mind . . . are the earliest to catch the inspiration and lead on opinion—with women it will always rest to expedite and advance

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8Victorian writers on the woman question define an ideal that was still resonating for Woolf in the 1920s and 1930s, much as she tried to silence it. In the controversy over the “New Woman” in the 1890s (Jordan 19–20) and the furor over the suffrage movement from the 1890s till the Great War, the tone of the debate changes, as a new kind of female heroism, forthright and aggressive, comes before the public.

9Martineau, though anxious to suppress women’s “self-exaltation,” rejects the Ellis doctrine of noble drudgery: “If great thoughts constitute great minds, what can be expected from a woman whose whole intellect is employed on the trifling cares . . . to which the advocates for female ignorance would condemn her?” (91–93). Ellis explicitly narrows the sphere of feminine greatness: “A high-minded and intellectual woman is never more truly great than when . . . performing kind offices for the sick; and much as may be said . . . in praise of the public virtues of women, . . . a response would be heard throughout the world, in favour of woman in her private and domestic character” (42).
Susceptible, prone, impressionable, emotional, women may yet form the vanguard of history according to this view, but only as a mass, not as self-defining individuals—as readers and hostesses, not as authors. The individualism of Martineau’s program for women’s progress—go out and show what you can do on your own—certainly seems to have been the exception among the Victorians, though common enough among successful women then and now. Generally, women are portrayed as an anonymous, collective influence on history, embodying rather than directing change—if they are not figured as a conservative mass to resist change of any sort.

But what is heroism if not an active differentiation from the common mass? Eliot and Woolf seem attuned to a potential ambiguity in any form of the heroic: a conflict between desired recognition—without which it is no heroism in effect—and the dangers of egotism or of the refusal to share recognition with fellow beings. Utterly unsung heroism is a contradiction in terms, just as greatness must be named in at least one narrative to be known as such. The favored compromise in realistic fiction is that the protagonist’s public fortunes not be great, and that the recognition come from readers more than from the community within the narrative. Thus Eliot articulates a well-established tradition when she insists on the literary eligibility of the Rev. Amos Barton, though she deliberately carries it further than most in choosing a middle-aged, married, clerical gentleman. “Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones” (SCL 42).

The point of demonstrating Barton’s significance is that he is common, one of many. Doing without the opium of Romantic egotism, according to Eliot, will earn us the more widespread infusion of the heroic in the everyday. Woolf’s vision of the “semi-transparent envelope” of vital experience may be less flattering to any one center of self, but the Romantic gleam still shines upon the commonplace, perhaps all the stronger for being impersonal. According to Woolf’s theory at least, consciousness is no respecter of persons. It is not the novelist’s task to evoke sympathy for dull grey eyes, but to dignify the slightest impressions centered on any ordinary being like Mrs. Dalloway. In practice, however, Mrs. Dalloway displays heroic gifts

the career of Social Reform. (quoted in Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 3: 8)
of sympathy; her ordinary day is full of poetry and pathos, tragedy and comedy.

The opium of personal glory proves to be a literary addiction more or less irresistible. Adam Bede, not Amos Barton, sets the pattern that Maggie, Romola, Felix, Dorothea, and Daniel follow (Silas is the only protagonist in the novels who conforms to the wholly unobtrusive Barton model). These are heroic creatures of extraordinary eyes and voices, clearly differentiated from the common mass. Like Adam they make the stranger and reader “turn[ ] round to have another long look,” but they remain for the most part “unconscious of the admiration” they win without trying. Adam is both Saxon and Celt, the true British ideal of the common man, though “uncommon clever” and “an uncommon favourite wi’ the gentry”; he is the type to save his country: “We want such fellows as he to lick the French” (9, 13). Here we are asked to admire greatness in common form, to anticipate the historic service to be rendered by the representative commoner (one of many “such fellows as he”), and finally, to like rather than envy or resent the unpretending one who is singled out for centrality in the text.

Woolf too preserves heroism from the triumph of the commonplace, singling out rarities. Yet she presents the one-among-many with less fanfare than Eliot does, indeed with considerable irony toward greatness, and she allows a heroine to assert her self as equivalent to a man’s. In Mrs. Dalloway, the famous motorcar in Picadilly seems an empty vehicle that the worshipful crowd fills with tenor or meaning. “But there could be no doubt that greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand’s-breadth from ordinary people”; it must be the immortal “majesty of England.” Mrs. Dalloway, an ordinary mortal, decides that it is the Queen inside (23), yet she herself seems to embody the greatness that people vainly try to locate in the motorcar. She is a heroine to her maid, who takes Mrs. Dalloway’s “parasol . . . like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds” (43–44). Such epic similes recur throughout, affirming through comic overstatement the truth-to-life of a narrative not about deities and monarchs, and at the same time revitalizing the possibility that greatness passes by us, hidden, all the time.10

Clarissa, with a gifted susceptibility to others yet an “indomitable egotism” scarcely admitted among Victorian heroines, has a queen’s

10Many have noted the affinity of Woolf’s mock-epic with Ulysses. See DiBattista, “Joyce, Woolf, and the Modern Mind”; Richter.
dignity though her private life is exposed to our scrutiny. She silently defends her own equivalent center of self against Peter Walsh’s masculine assertion: "But I too, she thought, and, taking up her needle, summoned, like a Queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected . . . so that any one can stroll in and have a look at her . . . summoned to her help the things she did; the things she liked . . . her self, in short, . . . to come about her and beat off the enemy." She plies her needle as he clasps his pocketknife in a parody of heroic "battle" (as well as of gender oppositions; 65–67).

Gender oppositions seem doubly reinforced by most conventional presentations of heroism, which polarize the sexes and isolate the heroic figure: the great hero kills the dragon single-handed, the great heroine, abandoned, dies for love, or variations to that effect.11 Yet the "feminine" heroism of some male as well as female characters in Eliot's and Woolf's works emphasizes interrelation and gender indeterminacy, a kind of living for and in others. Considered schematically, Adam Bede might seem to represent the Peter Walsh camp in a conflict between forms of heroism: the unified, masculine subject, "something like the letter ‘I’" (RO 103), quite antagonistic to the alternative, feminine heroism. Eliot does seem to have admired, in heroes like Adam, Felix Holt, and Daniel Deronda, a confident independence that would instantly be suspect in a heroine. Yet these heroes at the same time embody feminine heroism because of certain differences from the old epic type: their lack of personal vanity or fame; their class or religious marginality; and their function as representatives of the common people (Arthur Donnithorne, Harold Transome, and Grandcourt are the heroes' wealthy, vain, egotistical foils). Sympathetic, non-egotistical, often homosexual men in Woolf’s novels share the honors and more of the agonies of such marginal heroism: Septimus Smith, Nicholas Pomjalovsky, or William Dodge, for example.

To say that many of these authors’ male characters are subject to much the same standard for heroism as the females is not to deny that their novels, like canonical nineteenth-century fiction generally, also invoke the distinctive fetters of womanhood. Nor is it to say that female characters in this canon never verge on a “masculine” isolation of impregnable selfhood, but that interludes of independence prove,

11Joseph Campbell figures the dragon-slaying hero as ultimately transcending individualism, reaching an “essence” of selfhood without “separateness”: “a realization of the All in the individual, . . . the Self in all. Centered in this hub-point, the question of selfishness or altruism disappears” (337, 386). This remains a gendered transcendence, however; the heroine has no myth whereby she and the universe become one.
like Jane Eyre’s or Tess Durbeyfield’s wanderings, to be nightmares ended the sooner the better. Many male characters, such as Dickens’s Pip or Arthur Clennam, fail in their self-determined exploits, learning to become the opposite of the modern antiheroic loner; their lives, like those of Eliot’s heroines, turn on a recognition of social bonds and fellow-feeling.

Instead of releasing their heroines for manly exploits as Meredith, Gissing (Heilbrun, Reinventing, 73), and authors of some “new woman” novels provisionally do, Eliot and Woolf constrain their central male characters to womanly agonies. Silas Marner, who seems to have helped Eliot to formulate the vocation of her most publicly eminent heroine, Romola, is the most feminine of heroes: poor, a secret sufferer, a domestic laborer at a craft once thought to be women’s work, he becomes a surrogate mother and learns to feel the selfless love the Victorians associated with motherhood. After one more unconvincing attempt, in Felix, to portray a handsome, muscular hero of the Adam Bede sort (and he is punished for being too self-directed in his reforming zeal), Eliot in her last two novels favors the unambitious, sensitive, somewhat androgynous men who sacrifice ease for the love of a woman and social reform (Ladislaw) or the redemption of an oppressed people (Daniel). Egotists like Fred Vincy, and even the dedicated Lydgate, are schooled in their dependence on the community.

Woolf seems more skeptical than Eliot toward the hero-of-the-people, and apart from Jacob’s Room (which dwells on the absence of the hero) and Orlando (which deconstructs the hero’s masculinity), she never allows a male protagonist to dominate the text. Unlike Eliot, she endorses in many of her characters the privilege of solitary contemplation, but at the same time promotes a percipient selflessness such as Bernard’s in The Waves: “There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, ‘I am you.’ This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome” (377). Bernard has in a sense been chosen, like Daniel, to forge the unborn conscience of his race, or at least of the patterned voices in the novel. In the end, we see why the chosen one is male, as the paradigm of the heroic (male) quest falls into place. The conclusion of The Waves rouses Bernard to action like Tennyson’s Ulysses: “It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (383). A self-annihilation that would preserve from death all the selves that Bernard’s voice has been able to assume does
recall the sacrificial function of heroines like "many Dorotheas," but it 
takes here the form of a phallic fantasy, a one-on-one exploit. Once 
again, we see Woolf tolerating self-contemplation and defiant action 
more than Eliot does; resignation and social duty no longer hold their 
Victorian sway. The design of The Waves as a whole, however, adheres 
to Eliot's prohibition of egotism by creating permeable personae, 
"characters" without identity, existing only in patterns of speech.

Domestic Outsiders and History's Public 
and Private Spheres: The Mill on the Floss 
and Between the Acts

Admittedly, the problem of defining a feminine heroism that allows 
for "unfeminine" public action may derive from a false dichotomy 
between public and private life (MacKinnon 246-47). This distinction 
between spheres, a perennial favorite among apologists for patriarchal 
order, has been revived by feminists to account for the origins of 
oppression; some present-day feminists, like their forebears among 
Eliot's contemporaries, rely on this division as a source of women's 
superiority to male power brokers (Riley 2, 8-9, 80-83). But such 
superiority is affirmed as a possible counter-influence over society, 
immediately calling into question the distinction between private and 
public: such feminists propose extending the private-sphere mode 
throughout public life to cure social ills (Burton 33-37). The dilemma, 
which I have already raised in discussing Eliot's and Woolf's ideology 
of influence, is this: how can you preserve women's difference (and 
perhaps saving influence) if you challenge their isolation from the 
"historical" world? Thus many feminists find themselves clinging to 
a distinction of spheres that they know to be treacherous.

Eliot's contemporaries liked to believe that influence, women's self-
 effacing substitute for power, had to be reckoned with not simply 
behind closed doors; it insidiously reached into every area of historic 
life, affecting "revolutions" and "Social Reform," as Bulwer-Lytton 
maintained. Elizabeth Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and Wil-
liam Veeder note the irony that the Angel in the House often found 
er calling "out of the House," verging on power in the public sphere 
(xv). Woman's marginality could yield a kind of moral authority, but 
when this privilege was acted on, marginality could lose its edge and 
become simply an exclusion or censure. "How much practical energy 
of thought or overawing high mental power should the ideal woman 
have to fulfill her angelic role—before she oversteps its bounds and
becomes a strong-minded woman?" (82)—such would have been the tacit Victorian question. Eliot and Woolf helped transform that insult, "strong-minded woman," into an honor, while remaining attached to feminine heroines who never overstep the bounds.

The strain of the private/public nature of feminine heroism is dramatically revealed in the portrayal of sister and brother in The Mill on the Floss and in Between the Acts. Two similar passages characterize heroines as domestic outsiders with an insider's knowledge of human history, apparently justifying the notion of separate spheres: women are bound more than men to the cyclical tasks of nurturing life in the home. Women are not therefore irrelevant to the public record, however; the texts suggest that the two histories, cyclical and teleological, form a counterpoint till gradually the women's theme must be recognized as dominant. In both texts, women submit to the cycles of devotional life, while they (more actively and less predictably) preserve the cultural heritage; men take sides in the successive violent struggles that mark a history conceived in terms of progress and mastery.

Eliot contrasts the experience of Maggie and Tom Tulliver as though they relive eternal differences:

While Maggie's life-struggles had lain almost entirely within her own soul, one shadowy army fighting another, and the slain shadows for ever rising again, Tom was engaged in a dustier, noisier warfare, grappling with more substantial obstacles, and gaining more definite conquests. So it has been since the days of Hecuba, and of Hector, Tamer of horses: inside the gates, the women with streaming hair and uplifted hands offering prayers, watching the world's combat from afar, filling their long, empty days with memories and fears: outside, the men, in fierce struggle with things divine and human, quenching memory in the stronger light of purpose, losing the sense of dread and even of wounds in the hurrying ardour of action. (269–70)

Men enact the drama of historical progress, whereas women are doomed to look on and mimic real battle in repetitious emotional conflict. Yet the apparent disadvantage for the women is subtly discounted; in this passage as in the novel as a whole, the value lies with "memories and fears," not "conquests." The tamer of horses becomes a brute, honoring neither the divine nor the human; even his capacity to feel physical pain has been deadened. It is true that Maggie and Hecuba are in danger of solipsism, and Tom or Hector may momen-
tarily have forgotten self, but “struggle,” “purpose,” and “action” lack true selflessness. Tom’s economic competition renders him all mechanical forward drive, obeying only the law of evolutionary survival; he is doomed to reverse, to obey the recurring commands of the past that have compelled women all along. Thus the heroic Hecuba loses all her apparent irrelevance; while the man may shut out Hecuba, Hecuba is everything to him—the repressed that will return.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf similarly contrasts a brother and a sister (and analogously, two portraits), alluding to age-old oppositions. We are invited to view the difference between Bart Oliver and Lucy Swithin as antedating even classical antiquity: they have attributes of Osiris and Isis. Such attributes correspond with the differentiation of public/masculine and private/feminine history that is emblematically represented by two opposing portraits in the patriarchal house, Pointz Hall: the one is a portrait of an ancestor, a squire whose name history records (though the novel does not utter it), the other simply a work of art, an unknown lady in a timeless sylvan scene. Brutish as Hector, the ancestor holds the rein of his tamed horse and seems to argue still that his “famous hound,” Colin, deserved a place in the master’s portrait and later his grave (there is no mention of the squire’s nameless wife). For all his civilizing power to name and preserve, the hunter has confused the animal, human, and divine like any totem-worshipper (even the Christian minister who suppresses the dog-idol is himself “that skunk the Reverend Whatshisname”).

The lady, in a more graceful dumb show than Hecuba’s, leads “the eye up, down” into an ecstasy of colors that become verbs: “through . . . shades of silver, dun and rose into silence.” She holds a decorative arrow rather than a rein, but she insinuates her own vision on all viewers, who may not be mastered by the ancestor’s argument. The lady’s uncanny influence leads in a spiraling dance as repetitive as Hecuba’s and Maggie’s agonies; the encounter of the gaze and the feminine image, reenacted at any moment, subverts the history of the male line in a gyre of negativity. “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was.” The lady leads to “the heart of the house,” as though her arrow points to the ultimate, domestic counter-history (BA 36–37). Primitive as the appeal of this goddess may be, it has nothing whatever to do with animality or with property.

In less extreme forms than these paintings, the brother and sister at Pointz Hall serve different histories: the public, teleological, and factual; and the private, cyclical, and visionary. Bart and Lucy replicate the relationship between Tom and Maggie, in one of Woolf’s most
direct transpositions of an Eliot text. They are Victorians in this modern novel; their childhood memories echo those of the Tullivers. Bart calls Lucy “Cindy,” the “name that he had called her when they were children; when she had trotted after him as he fished, and had made the meadow flowers into tight little bunches” (BA 21). In their final moments, Tom utters “the old childish—‘Magsie!’ ” and relives with his sister “the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together,” perhaps recalling “one of their happy mornings” when they “trotted along and sat down together” to fish, imagining “they would always live together” (MF 455–56, 37). Grown up, neither pair of siblings remains together in innocence of gender division. Bart is a tamer of animals, a conqueror of India, a “talk-producer” like the pictured ancestor (36). Lucy, like a more comic version of the pictured lady, leads to visionary oneness, as she rereads her Outline of History (which seems to reverse teleology by dwelling on “mammoths in Picadilly” [30]), or as she names the leaves on the pond “Europe. . . . India, Africa, America.” With the Tullivers as with the Olivars, the women are allies of the novelists (while they are also the only genuine readers in the family); Maggie and Lucy preserve an ancient consciousness as the men drive destructively onward, albeit in the guise of heroes. Bart “would carry the torch of reason till it went out in the darkness of the cave,” and he scoffs at his sister for her faith. But “every morning, kneeling, [Lucy] protected her vision,” living in cycles (BA 204–6). 12

The very qualities that exclude women from power render them expressive figures for the perennial emotions that seem, to the novelists, most characteristically human. Women might then take on the heroic function of salvaging “the treasure of human affections” while men fight the world’s battles, as Eliot affirms in Daniel Deronda (159–60). The question remains whether the feminine and masculine heroic modes may be complementary in some redemptive design of history or merely antithetical. The Mill on the Floss and Between the Acts support a tragic response to this question: the male and female antagonists, though bound by shared memories and loyalties, will never come to an understanding that will reduce their differences. Yet the works also provide for a comic disruption of the tragic course. Ostracizing or silencing women like Maggie, Lucy, or Isa, men will propel themselves into catastrophe—heartless material progress or war—but in some

12For her the “slain shadows for ever rising again” are benign rather than sinister, perhaps in part because she is a forgotten old widow, not a young woman like Maggie or like Lucy’s niece, Isa Oliver, who suffers agonies in silence.
transcendent realm, at the novel’s end which seems to dissolve historical time, masculine and feminine reunite.

“In their death they were not divided,” Eliot unconvincingly assures us of Maggie and Tom. Rather, only in death could they be united; their fond memories of childhood union distort what we have witnessed in the opening chapters. Yet in the “Conclusion,” all substantial conquests, including that of death, are proved ephemeral compared to the cyclical order of loving, feminine nature: “Nature repairs her ravages,” and the “two bodies that were found in close embrace” rest in a visited tomb (MF 456–57). That Eliot should choose as epitaph David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan exposes the irresolution of gender difference in this ending. The suggestion in Eliot’s text of an incestuous embrace is lent the sanctity of the supposedly gender-neutral undoing of the law of the father in the Biblical passage: father and son are “not divided” (II Samuel 1:23). But then the woman who divides men is almost ecstatically excluded in the biblical passage, suggesting the homosocial if not homosexual: David mourns for Jonathan, “Thy love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” Thus the epitaph (which is also the epigraph of the novel), interposes patriarchal history in Eliot’s concluding pastoral idyl, but in effect it disconcerts that all-too-confident history. “How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle!” —the echo of David’s famous cry resonates in Eliot’s text, suggesting the vanity of men’s endeavors. Maggie’s love for Tom surpasses her love for other men, but her rescue of him is also a foray into the battlefield to prove her might against his; the love of women (which Tom strangely avoids) triumphs over battle itself.

Woolf like Eliot posits no ready reconciliation between the gender principles, and her novel’s open-ended conclusion, like Eliot’s, partially inverts the usual order by lending women to combat and men to passion. Again, only outside the domain of everyday experience can man and woman unite: “In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse” (BA 36). Isa and Giles, the modern Maggie and Tom or Lucy and Bart, though united in marriage, scarcely meet till their daily life is almost over, when they become abstract figures in a tableau of instinctual woman and man. They will fight “in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night” before they embrace, perhaps to yield “another life,” as the curtain rises on an utterly new yet prehistoric or pan-historical drama (219). Men’s battles may triumph in the history that continues after the novel—World War II will come as foreseen—but the cyclical conflicts of human emotions have outlasted and will override public history. The next act of the
human play will be written by a woman; yet perhaps in spite of itself, it will still incorporate the homosocial, alluding not to the Bible but to Conrad’s modernist dirge for imperialism.

If the antagonistic coupling of feminine and masculine principles represented in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Between the Acts* is typical of these authors’ conception of men’s and women’s roles in history, it may seem less clear than ever how they allow for women’s heroic intervention in the tragic course of the common life. The deadly embrace seems perhaps the most private of moments, having little to do with the public record—or so the conventional historian, the slave of documents, has had to assume. But the texts just considered also show the interdependence of the spheres: Eliot and Woolf furnish missing documents for a history of private experience that they assume has urgent public bearing. Maggie and Lucy, however impulsive or “batty,” offer a profound reading of history by being unfit for their own times. With their passionate loyalties to the past they preserve a common faith, reviving the legends of St. Ogg’s or Saint Lucy and Saint Swithin. If they are martyred—ostracized or laughed at—because of their rare fidelity to passions buried in history, so be it; the heroines’ influence overcomes apparent subordination.

These heroines suffer because they are misrepresented by prejudiced generalizations, but it is their own rare capacity to generalize a universal heritage that distinguishes them in the first place. Though “the world’s wife” summarizes Maggie’s moral conflict as a fall, and she is treated by men as though she were a common “bar-maid,” *she* is singularly heroic in her “adherence to obligation, which has its roots in the past” (428–35). Similarly, Lucy is misread as a simple-minded old Christian widow in an atmosphere of prejudice, whereas she is exceptionally attuned to the novel’s affirmation of collectivity amid diversity. Jews, idiots, and foreigners are “part of ourselves,” we learn between the acts: “If we don’t jump to conclusions . . . perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same?” (194–200). If “wide fellow-feeling” (MF 435) is the benevolent inverse of sweeping preju-

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13The fictitious legend of Saint Ogg, like the epitaph in Eliot’s novel, veers from its ostensible mark (MF 104–5). Maggie is perhaps the madonna rescued from the flood by the ferryman, but in the event, she is also the ferryman. Wiesenfarth traces the legend of Saint Ogg to that of Saint Christopher in Anna Jameson’s *Sacred and Legendary Art* (Notebook 61–62, 185–86). The stress on Lucy Swithin’s eyes and umbrella hints at the image of Saint Lucy bearing her eyes in a dish and the legend that Saint Swithin’s day (July 15) determines the weather for the next forty days. In both cases the heroines are associated with the idea of sacred power as well as martyrdom, while both also have a darker side: Maggie is witchlike, Lucy sibylline. “Lucy,” in Eliot’s text, is the rival of the Magdalen, Maggie.
dice, it too can be rather hard on any single heroic figure. Characters in *Between the Acts* form constellations, none standing out like the tragic star, Maggie.

In spite of the cruelty of generalization, then, both works imply that a humanitarian ethics must affirm wide fellow-feeling and our common rootedness in the past. In full recognition of all human histories, we transcend self-love, and scarcely regret individual suffering and death. Further, we can celebrate the heroic sacrifice that promotes the common weal in subtle ways; Maggie and Lucy may not change the acts of Parliament, but they rule between the acts, as outsiders inside the gates. This is not the complete story, however; the novels also reveal the justified rage and rebellion of female individuals compressed into feminine forms.

The selfless influence and the rage don’t seem to go together; what Eliot divides between her heroine’s womanhood and childhood, Woolf divides between the aunt and her niece Isa (as Maggie pounds her fetish in the attic, Isa imagines the girl in the Whitehall barracks hitting the rapist with a hammer). Perhaps the division is necessary to allow for progress. Maggie’s unruly potential in childhood carries forward to times of greater opportunity for women in Eliot’s present and beyond, when adulthood might not mean complete self-suppression. Isa, though stifled, can be a forthright antagonist: “the age of the century” (19), she poses a more independent challenge to men than the saintly Victorian, her aunt, ever did. As though speaking to all warmongers, she silently taunts Giles: “No . . . I don’t admire you. . . . Silly little boy, with blood on his boots” (111). This defiance does not assuage Isa’s masochistic woe, nor does it free her from her duty to weep “all people’s tears” (180). Fettered, self-sacrificing womanhood seems to instruct the patriarchal worlds of these fictions in the generalized fellow-feeling that alone can lead humanity out of brutish conflict. But angry individuals, defying the maxims of gender, threaten to break the vessel of human affections or to expose its emptiness: “A vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (BA 36–37).

**The Antigone and Its Moral**

Eliot’s and Woolf’s works frequently pose feminine heroism as a means of overcoming the exaggerated division between spheres or genders, though this heroism itself paradoxically confirms the maxims of gender. Even as heroic characters work miracles of reconciliation,
they raise the troubling question: can we do without the fetters that bind the feminine? Women’s education for suffering has sometimes been seen as a cause for celebration, as well as a source of vengeful strength. When Adrienne Rich exalts the endurance of women under a relentless catalogue of abuse (“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”), she represents only a more Amazonian version of the division of labor between men and women that we have just seen in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Between the Acts*. Instead of dwelling on female suffering and covert resistance, others envision women’s readier access to a disruptive libidinal energy. Thus Luce Irigaray sounds a familiar note when she celebrates this-sex-which-is-not-one, with its fluid, speechless, elusive currents subverting masculine discourse; Rachel Vinrace’s escape from heterosexual conquest into madness and death and Isa Oliver’s watery poetic soliloquys take part in this subversive but still sacrificial mode. It is not certain that a miraculous abdication of patriarchal rule would eliminate the demand for such feminine heroism, which offers a diffusion of identity in a collective resistance to tyranny.

Besides the dilemma of reaffirming the maxim of selfless femininity—do we have *everything* to lose *without* our chains?—there is the other dilemma central to my redefinition of heroism, that of attributing *individual* greatness to selfless martyrs. One feature of these authors’ treatment of heroism evades this second dilemma by sidestepping the common and in a sense history itself, perpetuating an aristocratic myth of archetypal individuals. In the story of Antigone both authors found their ideal heroine, a martyr to the irreconcilable difference between a private law—the obligation rooted in the past that Maggie honours—and the public law of patriarchy. Here the classic conflict is purged of the circumstantial detail that would make a modern martyr appear a selfish fool; a solitary woman directly challenges and foils the king, leaving her mark on the state as few real women ever have. Both authors mute one obvious reason for their attraction to Antigone, the fact that she is almost the only heroine of antiquity who is neither a violent egotist like Medea nor a passive victim like Alcestis, but who acts on principles that seem to her universal.

In her essay “The Antigone and Its Moral,” Eliot lauds Sophocles’ tragedy as an evocation of perennial human nature; the heroine, like an ancient precursor of Maggie Tulliver, dies of “the antagonism

\(^{14}\) *ouissance* may be less quiescent than Victorian bloom, and its theorists proclaim its nonessentialism, but it is another concept that affirms the ineffable superiority and retributive power of an ahistorical femininity (Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One” and “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids,” *This Sex*, 23–33, 106–18).
between valid claims," the "collision" between "the impulse of sisterly piety" and "the duties of citizenship." Eliot is peculiarly oblivious here to the dynamics of gender in the tragedy, just as she is insistently even-handed in reading its "moral":

Wherever the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, there is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon; such a man must not only dare to be right, he must also dare to be wrong. . . . Like Antigone, he may fall a victim to the struggle, and yet he can never earn the name of a blameless martyr any more than the society—the Creon he has defied, can be branded as a hypocritical tyrant. (265)

As Thomas Pinney points out, "There is an intense personal note" here (261), but the woman author who still respected the ideal of the female "blameless martyr" refused to specify the hypocrisy of men's tyranny over women; instead, she insists on the universal relevance of the story to the struggles of men of conviction. The possibilities for a modern woman's tragedy along these lines did not, however, escape Eliot. Romola poses with her father for a painting of Antigone and Oedipus, and as though petitioning Creon, she pleads with Savonarola to save her godfather (K. Chase 307, 311). Dorothea is likened to "a sort of Christian Antigone," and the novel analyzes the way in which this "new Antigone" is mismeasured and thwarted by "the rules which society has sanctioned" (M 141, 612).

Eliot cautiously adopts Antigone as a type of female heroism in the fiction but as a universal model for "man" in the essay, in striking contrast with Irigaray's conviction that the myth is "a 'feminist' fable" that undermines "the teleology of Oedipus within his own family" (Burke 300). In Irigaray's Derridean vision, the law of the father (or uncle) is indisputably a hypocritical tyrant. Though it seems true, as Gillian Beer claims, that "the myth which meant most to George Eliot was that of Antigone, resisting the authority of the king-uncle" (Eliot 54), Eliot no more than Sophocles sided entirely with the resistance: she did not prevent her resisting heroines from being buried alive. The sanction of the patriarch retains some of its ethical authority for Eliot, in spite of her portraits of misogynist, benevolently incompetent patriarchs like Bardo, Mr. Tulliver, Mr. Brooke, or Sir Hugo Mallinger. The author appears to share some of Dr. Kenn's nostalgia when, in comforting the fallen Maggie, he recalls that society once resembled "a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual
father” (432). What is most urgently longed for in such a dream of community is the clear function of the woman; Eliot reveals a lingering wish that “a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother’s burial” (M 612). That a new Antigone might rather defy her brother for the sake of her own fulfillment, as Eliot had done, would be a personal note, not to be publicly uttered, of defiance against patriarchal tyranny.

In keeping with a twentieth-century willingness to air the defiantly personal voice, Woolf’s reading of the Antigone is closer to Irigaray’s than is Eliot’s. Sophocles’ portrait of Creon is an “instructive analysis of tyranny,” Woolf writes; the play outlines the difference between “unreal” and “real loyalties” through “Antigone’s distinction between the laws and the Law” (TG 81). Here we know whose side we are on, yet there is also an urge to universalize the myth as Eliot did, avoiding the particular grievances of the heroine’s story. Woolf avows that one is “impressed . . . by heroism itself, by fidelity itself” in the Antigone; “the stable, the permanent, the original human being” is to be found in the Greeks, whose characters “behave in . . . the way in which everybody has always behaved” (“On Not Knowing Greek,” CE 1: 4; see VW Diary 4: 257). Yet to revive Antigone in a contemporary context cannot simply serve the purpose of congratulating ourselves on our universal humanity; in the usual view, “the original human being” has “always behaved” according to a masculine, European norm. As Eliot shows in her story of the Christian Antigone, there is something especially poignant in the struggle of an exceptional woman faced with competing claims, when her very womanhood has been defined as a responsiveness to others’ claims.

Woolf’s evasive talk of “heroism itself” and Eliot’s reference to the man who dares to be both right and wrong each occur in a discussion of a classic written in a language that the women had had to learn on their own; their impersonal stance as well as their learning inevitably have an aspect of making up for the difference of womanhood. Yet in Three Guineas even more explicitly than in Middlemarch, the new Antigones behave not just like “everybody,” but like the nineteenth-century feminists struggling for rights: “They wanted, like Antigone, not to break the laws, but to find the law,” substituting their own principles for the patriarchal rule that pretends to eternal validity (TG 138). This is as utopian as Dr. Kenn’s Christian brotherhood, but unlike Dr. Kenn, the women of letters also recognize the inevitability of a clash between the woman and the patriarch. Eliot and Woolf appeal to something unchanging in woman’s nature that heroically challenges the patriarchal law, an absolute that questions absolutes.
Both authors conceive this feminine heroic ideal as tragic—patriarchy appears to win—but the cumulative effect of many Antigones in the narrative of history may be a qualified comic progress.

Dorothea, buried alive in Casaubon’s labyrinth like an Ariadne or Antigone, escapes to a more useful if disappointing role as the wife of a reformer of laws. It is pleasant to suppose that Eliot envisions a resurgence much like the rebirth of “Shakespeare’s sister”: Dorothea perhaps becomes the mother not only of the heir to Brooke’s estate but also of a daughter (“two cousins” are said to visit Celia’s children) who, like one of Woolf’s Victorian Antigones, would “spend her heroic piety” in the women’s cause in the 1860s and 1870s (M 612). Later Antigones of course also would be stifled; the captivity of a Pargiter daughter, in the “1907” episode of The Years, again suggests comparison with the ancient story. Sara reads her cousin’s translation of “The Antigone of Sophocles” while her mind dwells on heartbreak and being “buried alive” (Y 135–37). Yet the historical outline of the modern novel registers a progressive escape from Victorian entombment, as the Pargiter women in later years find spheres of independent action undreamed of by Dorothea.

### Heroines Drawn or Withdrawn from Life

If Antigone represents the heroic ideal that Eliot and Woolf are most attracted to, how can they reconcile this ideal with their pledges to portray the common life as truthfully as possible? Is the idea of a modern Antigone fantastic, given that, as Eliot puts it, “the medium in which [Antigone’s and Saint Theresa’s] ardent deeds took shape is forever gone” (M 612)? In fiction, the age of miracles might not be dead, but realistic heroines are meant to work miracles not by grand deeds but by spiritual resistance to a petty medium. Martyrs and tyrants in realistic narrative generally find no clearly opposing causes. Indeed, the authors postpone the benefits of women’s self-sacrifice, deflating the idealistic hopes of the characters for the sake of a more realistic promise for the readers. The historical effect of fettered womanhood is portrayed as miniscule, but in Eliot’s words, it is “incalculably diffusive.”

When Eliot and Woolf chose to represent moderately successful heroines, they took care to moderate the success that some real women of their own day, including themselves, had achieved. Eliot and Woolf avoided direct self-portraiture in part because their own escape into artistic freedom seemed improbable if not inadmissible. To portray
women who became public figures without sacrifice would have seemed the kind of wishfulness that Eliot found in "silly novels," or an evasion of "life as we have known it," in Woolf's terms. Perhaps even more important than plausibility, however, may have been the desire to represent that special efficacy earned by feminine self-denial. Thus, in two unusual instances in which heroines are drawn from life, Eliot and Woolf used as models strong-minded women near them who attempted a reconciliation of domestic and artistic demands, but they altered the terms of these women's success in favor of selfless influence. In the process of transcription, the self-assertion of the women whom Eliot or Woolf admired and loved must yield to the ideal of miracles in fetters; ambition and romance plots are severed and women are divided against each other, making them serve competing functions that might be united in life. The point is not to affirm that these novelists were captives of representationalism or to expose romans à clef, but to emphasize the conventions of feminine heroism that censored the models' actual self-determination. The transformations of Barbara Bodichon into Romola and of Vanessa Bell into Katherine Hilbery mark a process of effacement not unlike the development of Eliot's and Woolf's own impersonal narrative personas.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Eliot based her portrait of Romola on her close friend Barbara Leigh Smith, painter, educator, feminist reformer, who in effect accepted an annual, Persephone-like exile in Algiers when she became Mme. Bodichon, but who continued to enjoy considerable independence. She shared some of Marian Evans Lewes's marginality, as an illegitimate daughter, as a successor to Marian in John Chapman's dubious affections, and most importantly as an artist and a critic of the subjection of women. The fictional heroine, Romola, shares with the living model, Barbara, mainly the notable qualities of Pre-Raphaelite beauty, moderate wealth, childlessness, and a zeal for alleviating suffering (Bradbrook 6-12); Romola does not, however, share the same degree of marginality or of successful defiance of convention as Eliot and Bodichon. Romola repeatedly resists, then capitulates to patriarchal authorities whom she eventually outlives; she ultimately triumphs as long-suffering "virgin" mother, having outgrown all personal ambition. In contrast with Romola, Bodichon never gave up her art or her activism and she remained happily married, though like Romola she expressed her solidarity with a community of women, particularly those who produced The English Woman's Journal. Above all, Bodichon never became transfixed as a humorless, asexual madonna exemplifying the Comtean idea of "woman as moral providence of our species."
Eliot’s friendship with Bodichon was all the stronger because the latter was one of the few who accepted right away the writer’s deviation from the ideal of selfless chastity in living with Lewes. Eliot wrote to Bodichon in 1859,

I will not call you a friend—I will rather call you by some name that I am not obliged to associate with evaporated professions and petty egoism. I will call you only Barbara, the name I must always associate with a true, large heart. Some mean, treacherous Barbara may come across me, but she will only be like a shadow of a vulgar woman flitting across my fresco of St. Barbara. (GE Letters 3: 119)

When she later traveled to Italy, Eliot admired the image of Saint Barbara by Palma Vecchio in Santa Maria Formosa at Venice: “It is an almost unique presentation of a hero-woman, standing in calm preparation for martyrdom—with . . . pietism, yet with . . . serious conviction” (Cross 2: 177). The legend of Saint Barbara that Eliot found in Jameson’s Sacred and Legendary Art suggests elements of the narratives of Romola and of Antigone, including captivity in a tower and defiance of the father’s laws and beliefs (Wiesenfarth, Notebooks, 63). The living Barbara undoubtedly had very little predisposition for martyrdom; she gloated over Adam Bede:

1st. That a woman should write a wise and humourous book which should take a place by Thackeray.

2nd. That YOU that you whom they spit at should do it!

I am so enchanted so glad with the good and bad of me! both glad—angel and devil both triumph! (GE Letters 3: 56)

The wicked triumph here may be more vicarious than egotistical; Bodichon remained a wholly dedicated friend, if a friend who enjoyed Eliot’s unfeminine victory. But Eliot’s foreboding that her friend might be overshadowed by an egotistical double reveals that Eliot’s portrait of a living model passes through an idealizing censorship. The heroine (or the pictured saint) must be clearly distinguished from a self-willed, “vulgar woman” such as one meets in everyday life. For Eliot, the common term “friend” becomes charged with treachery—most specifically that of the friends whose loyalties evaporated when Marian Evans became that vulgar woman, Lewes’s mistress. Hence the intensity of Eliot’s worship of “a hero-woman,” the corollary of her distrust of her own egotism (Hertz 79–83).

In a similar deflection from the complex case of a living woman
artist to a fictional heroine, Woolf modeled Katharine Hilbery on Vanessa Bell. She advised Janet Case to “try thinking of Katharine [Hilbery] as Vanessa, not me; and suppose her concealing a passion for painting and forced to go into society by George [Duckworth]—that was the beginning of her” (VW Letters 2: 109, 400). Night and Day appears to reconcile the heroine’s passion for work with her resistance to society by ending in a promising marriage like that of the Bells (or Woolfs), but the novel withholding the more disruptive elements of the story of Woolf’s sister. Katharine’s secret and abstract vocation, mathematics, is a rather pale substitute for Vanessa’s public, sensual experiments in art. Like a traditional heroine but unlike Vanessa, Katharine remains under her parents’ roof or in “society” till marriage. In a novel deliberately faithful to conventions, there is no hint either of the liberties Vanessa took (her marriage had already expanded beyond recognition), nor of what success Vanessa had in combining the supposedly antagonistic roles of artist and mother. Katharine like Romola clearly longs for cultural achievement, not babies (Marcus, Languages, 26–27); like Romola, she is allowed to escape both her father, the “uncivilized male, . . . gone bellowing to his lair” (ND 500), and the fiancé he sanctions. Unlike Romola, however, she approaches the conventional heroine’s end in marriage, albeit a union in which boundaries of self seem to dissolve.

Notably, Katharine is not asked to fulfill Romola’s role as “visible madonna”: such arduous feminine heroism is reserved for another woman. Ralph and Katharine in the end contemplate the lighted blinds of Mary Datchet’s room as though she were the true heroine, the woman who “has her work.” They imagine “something impersonal and serene in the spirit of the woman within, working out her plans far into the night—her plans for the good of a world that none of them were ever to know” (ND 505–6). Both novels end with a static portrait of the self-sacrificing, unmarried heroine who could be preparing the way for Shakespeare’s sister: Romola, in a saintly fresco, instructing the coming (male) generation in the failures of great men, and Mary, a shadow framed behind the blinds, working for feminist causes. These two-dimensional images suggest how unwilling the authors were to record the well-rounded achievements of their fellow women artists. In both instances, heroines are portrayed as having outgrown personal desires (Mary herself loved Ralph, but forfeits him to Katharine), while romance and sexuality are assigned to others in the interest of a purer ideal of feminine heroism. If we compare the forceful and brilliant Cassandra (who marries Katharine’s first fiancé) with Tessa, Eliot’s condescending portrait of the “kept woman” as
Florentine contadina, we may suppose that Woolf is more tolerant of female sexuality, but we should recall Tito's Dionysian allure for Romola in the beginning and Katharine's apparent lack of sexual feeling throughout.

The division between heroic women and women who marry still seems very marked in Woolf's novel. Jane Marcus offers a paraphrase of Woolf's optimistic answer to patriarchy in Night and Day: "Let the temples to dead men be opened to living women. . . . And not only to heroic women alone, but to women with men" (Languages 32). The appeal is very much the same in Romola, and yet in neither narrative are women with men allowed heroic achievement; it is as though the conjunction of romance and ambition in one woman were an unspeakable fantasy. Later, in Middlemarch and Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, both authors tried to combine heroism and womanly fulfillment, perfecting the sacrificial ideal, yet they continued to withhold the prerogative of work from Dorothea, Clarissa, and Mrs. Ramsay. The apparently irreconcilable functions—sexuality, motherhood, social influence, creative work—still tend to be assigned to diverse female characters, as they are so divisively in Daniel Deronda and Between the Acts. In spite of moments of communion between women, the functions of artists, wives, mistresses, mothers scarcely coincide in these fictions, though in real life they might be united in one person.

If Eliot and Woolf had wished to grant their heroines the full scope of the women they admired and loved in life, they might for once have shown how flimsy the barriers between men's and women's fields of endeavor could be, even when women accept the traditional duties of wife or mother (neither Bodichon nor Bell fulfilled both duties, any more than Eliot or Woolf did). Perhaps instead the authors were more interested in weighing women's fetters and thus enhancing the secret heroism that works miracles in spite of them.

Many Dorotheas, Jacobs, Mrs. Dalloways, and Mrs. Ramsays

As I began this chapter by suggesting, Eliot's and Woolf's conception of heroism vacillates between celebration of the rare individual and of the anonymous many, much as the heroines themselves are strained between an ideal femininity and self-fulfillment. While Eliot's and Woolf's novels single out heroines of miraculous powers, they confirm the realistic imperfection of the lives of women (that is, English ladies) in general; thus the authors generate a redemptive feminine
influence on Western history by sacrificing female individuals to the multitudes, as the representative "woman" is extrapolated to "women." If "the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history" (MF 335), then history, these works imply, has no life but that born of unhappy women's histories. Each exceptional spirit, trapped in her general womanhood, tells a common story that becomes "part of the human gain" (TL 74). Though Lily Briscoe laughs at Mrs. Ramsay, though there are hints that Ladislaw's worship is extended narcissism and that Dorothea is quixotic, and though there is contextual justification for reading feminist protest in these texts, we should not wish away the powerful designs of desire for sacrificial "woman," for the feminine "many." Though Woolf was much more alert than Eliot to the perils of such desire, and had more reason to doubt the possibility of universal "human gain," her fiction like so many narratives before hers continues to ignite from this spark.

As we have seen, Eliot emphasizes her heroines' "common" failure, their place among "many Theresas . . . who found for themselves no epic life." Dorothea is explicitly rendered plural in Prelude and Finale as a means of clarifying her heroic role, her submission to a collective cause. Yet as I have been arguing, truly diffusive heroism is unintelligible. Thus the Prelude of Middlemarch opens with the story of one fulfilled heroine who does find "an epic life," though significantly it must be a "martyrdom," a "life beyond self."

Eliot rhetorically claims the fame of this unique story—"Who that cares much to know the history of man . . . has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa"—as if the childhood experience of one of the few women known to history were of course a public concern (the oddity of such an opening to a novel set in Reform Era England must have been striking to first readers, most of whom, in Protestant England, had undoubtedly thought little about Saint Theresa). Secularizing hagiography, Eliot elicits the humor of childish idealism; Saint Theresa is portrayed as a happier Maggie running away from home with a dedicated, younger brother in a more nationalistic cause than that of joining the gypsies. We may be encouraged to "smile[] with some gentleness" at children who "toddled" toward martyrdom, but those who would laugh at all women must be severely mocked themselves. In the second paragraph, we are assured that our labors of attention to the foibles of great women have only begun: there are "many Theresas" potentially as great as the original. To reduce "blundering lives" to evidence of "the inconvenient indefiniteness" of "the natures of women," or to attempt to calculate scientifically "one level of female incompetence," is in effect to misconstrue
not only women but "the history of man . . . under the varying experiments of Time." Again we encounter the criticism of generalization—look closely at the variations within women's apparent "sameness"—accompanied by the urge to generalize. If Saint Theresa were "the last of her kind," all hope would be lost. The shift from the one to the many in these two paragraphs foreshadows the shift in the course of the novel from Dorothea's role as eminent heroine with comic aspirations, to her sacrifice to Casaubon and her madonna-like rescue of Lydgate, and finally to her role as one of many Dorotheas.

Turning from the Prelude to chapter 1, we see "Miss Brooke" taking an even more commanding position than Saint Theresa. She is allowed to dominate Middlemarch at first, a traditional heroine as privileged as Austen's Emma. Just as the story "Miss Brooke" gave shape to the manuscript of Middlemarch when Eliot added it to the early chapters on Lydgate (Haight, Introduction, M xiv–xv), Dorothea herself offers reader and author an interpretive standard with which to begin. Providing both continuity and disjunction between ancient and modern, sacred and profane, she stands out like a "quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper." Her dress, designed ostensibly to obscure herself, distinguishes her from the common run of women whose new-fashioned claims on our attention vanish into mass consumption and obsolescence like journalism. Eliot's historical art, likewise, will gain from Dorothea some of the glamor of an Italian painting of "the Blessed Virgin," accruing the unique status of a sacred text, though it also chronicles "provincial fashion" (5). The narrator later claims to choose Dorothea in emulation of Herodotus, "who also, in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman's lot for his starting-point." Though for most purposes Rosamond would do as well (like Herodotus's Io she is "beguiled" by showy dress), we clearly must read by a subtler standard the unshowy meaning that could not have been produced by Mrs. Lemon, the provincial manufacturer of "accomplished female[s]" (71).

While the idea of the saintly, unfashionable heroine helps readers distinguish between the true lady and the bourgeois facsimile, as between the work of fine art and commercial entertainment, Dorothea is also designed to cast doubt on such distinctions, restoring faith in a collective historical life. Like the triumph of significance over indistinguishable details, like the candle that organizes the scratches on a pier-glass, Dorothea shines as heroine of Middlemarch, but on condition that she abjure such privilege. Her rare history must be absorbed into others' histories—not just Ladislaw's or Lydgate's, but
all histories in our “middlemarch”—thereby (potentially) undoing the effects of privilege in a patriarchal reading of history.

Dorothea repeatedly figures as an apposite interruption of a spé­
cious historical record (today’s newspaper), as well as an attractive focal point disturbing our faith in individualism. “When George the Fourth was still reigning over the privacies of Windsor, when the Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister, and Mr Vincy was mayor of the old corporation in Middlemarch, Mrs Casaubon, born Dorothea Brooke, had taken her wedding journey to Rome” (139). What could be a more poignantly comic drop in the scale of importance—king, duke, mayor, lady? What at the same time could more clearly invert the hierarchy of historical fact? The king has become a private man (in whom we have very little interest or confidence) and our heroine has taken on the importance of a public personage. Yet we have missed her over the past chapters, and resent the summary, “born Dorothea Brooke,” as chilly in its way as Mrs. Ramsay’s parenthetical death in “Time Passes.” The heroine seems to invite such swift contractions and expansions of view, as a kind of centripetal yet centrifugal force. Her diffusive influence may influence the narrator to be diffusive, to include everything in a metonymic “particular web” (105). Yet we have seen that the woman can also function as the “make-believe of a beginning” (as the epigraph of Daniel Deronda puts it) and as a dwelling point for sojourners in the narrative of history.

In the Finale, at last, the heroine becomes centrifugal. The blame for missed potential no longer applies to women’s “mistakes” and “bungling” but to our misperception: feminine heroism may not be “widely visible,” but we should acknowledge the many “who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” We may deplore the loss of our favorite in her two unsatisfactory marriage plots, but should take heart that this serves a public quest. Dorothea, one of “many Dorotheas,” becomes an originator like Saint Theresa, yielding “fine issues” for “the growing good of the world” (compare Mary Datchet), yet dispersed, “like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, ... in channels which had no great name.” Such similes in this “home epic,” like those in Mrs. Dalloway, suggest that the strug­gles of this commonplace Brooke have been as momentous (and liter­ary) as those of the famous but unnamed river broken by the patriar­chal hero. Dorothea will be as irrepressible, nameless, and diffuse as nature beneath men’s desire for mastery and naming (608, 612–13).

Dorothea’s very representativeness shifts her function from that of rare “cygnet” among ducklings to one of a great mass to be privately honored (by how vast a public audience for Middlemarch!). Eliot forfeits
Dorothea’s historical prominence to show the woman’s “effect” through “unhistoric acts,” as well as to challenge our collusion in the social procedures that sacrifice women in general. Dorothea ostensibly ends without any more chance at a permanent public monument than the ambitious “huckster’s daughter” dismissed in the first paragraph of chapter 1, but she helps Eliot’s novel to earn a place in the gallery of the Masters who claim exalted subjects for art. Between them, failing heroine and triumphant author defy the limits set on “the natures of women” and their exclusion from patriarchal history (3–5, 611–12).

Less explicitly, Woolf’s novels also challenge the priority of the heroic individual—“why always Dorothea?” (M 205)—and of the public sphere—“why always George the Fourth?” In the later historical narratives, the king’s reign becomes entirely contingent to diverse consciousnesses, none of which can claim, even intermittently, Dorothea’s rule over a text. Observers may try to single out a saintly Mrs. Ramsay, for instance, but she is always already one of many. What Eliot calls “the tragedy . . . of frequency” (M 144) emerges in Woolf’s ironic treatment of heroic privilege and of common disillusionment, as well as in a stylistic diffusion that constantly reminds us of the competing relevancies impinging on any particular web.

The narrator in Jacob’s Room, for instance, resembles the troubled historian of Middlemarch, though employing the absent hero as dubious starting and ending point:

The observer is choked with observations. Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification . . . stalls, boxes, amphitheatre, gallery . . . . There is no need to distinguish details. But the difficulty remains—one has to choose. For though I have no wish to be Queen of England—or only for a moment—I would willingly sit beside her. . . . And then, . . . how strange . . . to be a man of valour who has ruled the Empire. (68–69)

In spite of the hierarchy in this vision of society as a kind of opera house, the convenience of generalization must yield to the necessity of observing insubordinate detail. We could all be the heroines and heroes famed in history.

A favored organizing principle of literary discourse has been the heroic young man, but Jacob’s Room demonstrates that no figure could be more elusive. Thus not only the indefinite variety of women’s natures but also of men’s defies scientific certitude. Narratives may
hitherto have depended on an arbitrary choice of one exemplary being, but Woolf even more than Eliot chides us for avoiding the struggle with competing data. Even more than Eliot's heroine, Woolf's hero filters through others' judgments, threatening to disappear as he is revealed. Often the existence of Jacob seems to depend on the impressions of his female companions; he is sighted, for instance, by an unknown old lady, his fellow passenger in a train (the hero as seen from the point of view of Mrs. Brown, perhaps): "Nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built, like her own boy? One must do the best one can with her report. . . . It is no use trying to sum people up" (31). With his death, Jacob leaves the narrative not as a martyr to human progress but as a missing signified; his effects are worse than incalculable. "Such confusion everywhere!" his mother cries in his abandoned room, holding out his empty shoes (176).

We need "a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary women" to "turn history wrong side out" ("Women and Fiction" 44), but can we get it? Gossips, like the judges of Dorothea in Middlemarch, "never come to a decision. . . . They would apply themselves to Jacob and vacillate eternally between two extremes." The narrator offers an exchange of superficial and contradictory comments on Jacob, and then facetiously gives up the whole ghost of realistic biographical history:

So we are driven back to see what the other side means—the men in clubs and Cabinets—when they say that character-drawing is a frivolous fireside art, a matter of pins and needles, exquisite outlines enclosing vacancy, flourishes, and mere scrawls.

The battleships ray out over the North Sea. . . . At a given signal all the guns are trained on a target which . . . flames into splinters. With equal nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and . . . suffocate uncomplainingly together. . . .

These actions . . . are the strokes which oar the world forward, they say.

Such strokes will annihilate Jacob, one of the many "tin soldiers" or "fragments of broken match-stick" "seen through field-glasses" (155–56). The trivialization of his fate, however, cannot genuinely undermine the narrator's confidence that the ladies' work of novel writing

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15Mrs. Brown appears in print in 1924, after Jacob (1922). But the little old lady in the railway carriage had first insinuated herself in "An Unwritten Novel" (London Mercury, July 1920; Monday or Tuesday, 1921). She may also trace her ancestry to the widow discussed by Rachel and Richard in The Voyage Out (1915), as I suggested in Chapter 3.
("pins and needles") is far more crucial to the progress of human life than the mechanical, destructive drive of men’s works.

It is “character-mongering,” for instance, that can detect the “heroic” in a mild person like Clara Durrant, a minor figure who might warrant as much consideration as Dorothea: “What does it matter . . . that Clara . . . never yet had the chance to do anything off her own bat, and only to very observant eyes displayed deeps of feeling which were positively alarming; and would certainly throw herself away on some one unworthy of her one of these days unless . . . she had a spark of her mother’s spirit in her” (154). Such hints of unwritten novels in Jacob’s Room suggest that the heroine is familiar territory to the novelist, and that Woolf feels the greatest challenge in trying to individualize and characterize one of those remote tin soldiers in a world run by “banks, laboratories, chancellories” (156). Since Jacob like Clara eludes commodification by conventional character-mongers and prefers throwing himself away to becoming a fixed entity, he may perhaps thus attain to something like Clara’s feminine heroism. Deconstructing Jacob has been one way to turn history wrong side out.

Having made the male subject relative to the perceptions of those around him, particularly women, Woolf might question the idea that the nature of women was their tendency to fail in their aspirations but to flourish in their incalculably diffusive influence: men too might follow this pattern. Yet Woolf cherishes the possibility that women have a privileged access to the epic life in a secret form of heroism. Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay disrupt today’s newspaper like allusions to the sacred; like Dorothea, they are living poems. Various interpreted, they influence moments of deeper communion because they are not great men but many women to many people. They may even extend their spirit to the suffering common man, as Woolf uneasily speculates in linking Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Smith, or Mrs. Ramsay and Charles Tansley. If such figures appear too ignoble or inarticulate for a redemptive design, the fault may partly lie in our perceptions, as Eliot admonished in the Finale. What is Clarissa but a society hostess? It may seem “a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another” (M 611), but in that sacrifice lies her heroism (Edwards 256–57).

Clarissa Dalloway begins as Dorothea ends up, feeling “invisible; unseen; unknown;” taking part in the “rather solemn progress with the rest of them” (MD 14). A less boastful version of Tennyson’s Ulysses, she celebrates her diffusion: “On the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, . . . she being part, she was positive, of the
trees at home . . . part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best" (12). She responds to the story of Septimus Smith as a part of her whom she has never met (280); her sympathy is much like the redemptive faith that Dorothea extends to Lydgate. The latter-day, middle-aged "heart large enough for the Virgin Mary" (M 563) has become "affected" by illness (MD 4), and in fact rescues no one, but Clarissa has already given up the common yearning of womanhood for the sake of an impersonal ideal of influence.

Repeatedly Clarissa sacrifices herself to unify the dispersed consciousnesses of her circle. She exclaims to herself: "Why not risk one's one little point of view? . . . Life was that—humiliation, renunciation" (255). Her gift is the feminine gift of selflessness, "knowing people almost by instinct," and seeing beyond boundaries of self: "As we are a doomed race . . . let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners" (11, 117). Woolf grants her heroine more human failings than Eliot grants Dorothea; Clarissa, like Rosamond, is birdlike rather than statuesque, and she enjoys rank, fashion, and other fine ephemera (14). But Mrs. Dalloway at times has a goddess's gift, and she sustains the public life of her politician husband.

In To the Lighthouse, Woolf recurs to the troubling ideal of woman as martyr, woman as a kind of mist pervading the common life. As in Middlemarch, there is a rich texture of points of view on the heroine, the ironic treatment permitting glimpses of unalloyed grandeur. Lily Briscoe, who takes the place of Will Ladislaw and Peter Walsh as dominant observer of the heroine, interprets the beautiful mother and wife with resentment and awe. She witnesses Mr. Bankes's gazing at Mrs. Ramsay in "rapture," a disinterested, diffusive "love." Mrs. Ramsay's "sublime power" is disturbing to the lonely woman artist who disobeys the matriarch's commandment that all women "must marry" (73, 77). Though Lily sees that Mrs. Ramsay "completely failed to understand" the "destinies" she ruled, Lily also desires to worship this goddess. Mrs. Ramsay must possess

some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all. . . . She imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman . . . were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. (78–79)

Lily's reluctant worship of Mrs. Ramsay as a biblical quotation in today's newspaper, as vessel of ancient, sacred consciousness, holder
of the key to all mythologies, suggests Woolf’s ambivalence toward an ideal of feminine heroism. In “Time Passes,” Mrs. Ramsay has become part of people she has never met, part of trees and mists, though as an unsympathetic force unlike Dorothea and Clarissa. “The nights now are full of wind and destruction; the trees plunge and bend and their leaves fly helter skelter.” Under such assault, language seems driven to imagine a providential memory of “woman,” to reconstitute referentiality and intentionality. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Woolf shatters the mimetic order of gender: “No image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand,” just as “Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly” eludes the outstretched arms of her husband (193–94). The particular story of a man seeking his abruptly absent wife, linked to an impersonal search for an “image with semblance” in the sea and wind, has much the effect of Eliot’s Finale, asking us to relinquish our attachment to the one heroine in order to sense the fuller power of her diffused influence.

Death itself might be the lovely secret hidden in the breast of Mrs. Dalloway or Mrs. Ramsay, but also a feminine, undulating life. We have seen that the restoration of the house and of life after death is left to the combined labors of obscure women, centering on one Mrs. McNab, whose song of universal woe becomes “the voice of witnessless, humour, persistency itself” (TL 196). Mrs. McNab seems to become many as she personifies the spirits of the house: “Like a yellow beam or the circle at the end of a telescope, a lady in a grey cloak, stooping over her flowers, went wandering over the bedroom wall. . . . It was too much for one woman, too much, too much. She creaked, she moaned” (205–6). The difference between Mrs. Ramsay and her servant becomes immaterial in this sublime perspective, unlike the cherished difference between Dorothea, the county deity, and Rosamond the manufacturer’s daughter.

To determine the nature of an incalculable influence becomes the preoccupation at the end of To the Lighthouse as well as Middlemarch, and again competing versions of the heroine almost cancel each other.

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16 The “nothingness” that drives the action of “Time Passes” (TL 190) might be the feminine without the personal. It resembles the emptiness and silence at the heart of Pointz Hall: “So loveliness reigned and stillness, . . . a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, . . . scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen” (TL 195; compare the image of Mrs. Dalloway as queen glimpsed with her guard down). Lily almost consciously apotheosizes the mother figure (in terms recalling the feminine art of character drawing in Jacob’s Room): “She called out silently, to that essence . . . that abstract. . . . Ghost, air, nothingness, . . . she had been that. . . . Suddenly, the empty drawing-room steps, . . . the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing around a centre of complete emptiness” (266).
out. As Lily observes, “Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with” (294). When Mr. Ramsay expects Lily to reincarnate feminine influence and “sympathy,” she feels the rage of the childish Maggie or thoroughly modern Isa. “That man took. She, on the other hand, would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died.” Yet to some extent Lily yields to the sexual division of labor: “Surely, she could imitate from recollection the glow, the rhapsody, the self-surrender, she had seen on so many women’s faces . . . evidently . . . the most supreme bliss of which human nature was capable” (223–25). This portrayal of feminine selflessness certainly gives and takes: the ecstasy is supreme, though fatal, at least fatal to one’s independence and one’s creative work. The memory of Mrs. Ramsay as ministering angel compels admiration: “It was her instinct to . . . turn[] to the human race, making her nest in its heart.” But Lily expresses doubts about the compulsive self-sacrifice of the lady reformers: “This, like all instincts, was a little distressing to people who did not share it” (291–92).

The burden on individual women to represent the mass, to accept the feminine duty of altruism as if it were instinctual, was deadly indeed. Woolf allows a woman of a later generation to question such essentialism, and at least momentarily to resist the compulsion to give of herself. Yet like the narrator of Middlemarch, Lily still desires the ecstasy of feminine self-annihilation, standing in awe of the feminine heroine while deploiring her loss. Her self-effacing dedication to art in effect is a reincarnation of the earlier woman’s sacrifice in less deadly, gendered terms.

These fictions try to overcome the tension between the egotism of heroism and the selflessness of femininity by singling out the exceptional beings who dedicate themselves to the common life, and then by diffusing their identity. The dedication itself is sometimes figured as a female instinct, not a matter of vanity or ambition; even if the heroine’s dedication was rare indeed, it must be honored to some extent in an impersonal way. The sacrifice within the text—the dispersal of the rare woman—substitutes for the authors’ and other living women’s sacrifices, making unapologetic individuality more permissible for many women. In a sense “the growing good of the world” may be due to novels such as Middlemarch and To the Lighthouse that offer up heroines as messianic representatives of common womanhood, much as scripture retells, and thus confirms, the substitution of ritual for human sacrifice. Admire or worship as we more or less consciously do, we gaze on Dorothea as a quaint figure already obsolete in Eliot’s day of improving education for women, and Mrs. Ramsay as even
more irrevocably buried in the pre-war, pre-suffrage past. Eliot and Woolf urge us to see their stories as indispensable to an understanding of human history, and they imply that these outsiders inside the gates govern our lives more profoundly than public rulers. Yet the authors cannot wholeheartedly wish to resurrect the feminine heroic ideal in practical terms, least of all to apply it to themselves. When it comes to the genuine Barbara or Vanessa, independent creative fulfillment cannot be denied. Complete selflessness seems possible only in the past, in some age of heroines.