Once having made a name for themselves, Eliot and Woolf were in a position to instruct their audience but were also expected to dazzle it. Overt preaching or propaganda was taboo; a novel by a woman would be extremely vulnerable to charges of special pleading if it explicitly presented the feminist cause. In *Felix Holt* (1866) and *The Years* (1937) the authors disguised their arguments about gender and class in apparently impartial histories of everyday life, adding more explicit political statements as nonfictional appendices: "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" (1867) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Both novels are clearly serious social histories, whether of class conflict in a Midlands town in the Reform Era, or of the day-to-day impressions of an upper middle-class family in London from 1880 to 1937; as achievements, they appear more admirable than lovable, and neither is a particular favorite with readers or critics. Yet these become extraordinary—and curiously allied—works when considered as women writers' attempts to forge art from political argument.

In response to an immediate political threat—the second Reform Bill or the rise of fascism—each novel advocates gradual amelioration of private life, above all of women's lot. As though keeping up a calm debate in the midst of an air raid, both narrators appear to distract us with an unsettling mixture of historical panorama and domestic vignette, avoiding any direct call to arms. Like so many of their contemporaries, Eliot and Woolf perceived an affinity between women and the "lower" classes, but viewed the bonds of the common life as uneasy at best.¹ The feminism of *Felix Holt* and *The Years* for the most

¹Woolf's pacifism and her belief that "improvement of one's own moral state" was the "answer" to fascist "horror and violence" are signs, for Quentin Bell, of her spinsterish, Victorian sensibility, linked to popular feeling. At a Labour Party meeting, she steered
part is sealed off from the public political action of committees or votes, while ladies are perceived as under siege not only by patriarchs but by the masses.

Eliot more than Woolf openly begs her social questions: Which misogynist is Esther Lyon to marry? Which fate is better for the workers in the short run, brute subjection or brute rebellion? But Eliot seeks to appease the classes and the sexes within the tradition of the novel of manners, through a slightly eccentric marriage in which the heiress marries the poor man (forfeiting her wealth) and seems prepared to help him run a kind of workers' institute. Woolf only hints at the threats to the old order—the Jew in Sara's bath, the futuristic song of the caretaker's children, for example—and offers, as a stay against chaos, the eccentric modes of communion in Sara's friendship with the homosexual Nicholas or in Eleanor's fleeting ecstasies.

_Felix Holt_ may be seen as an attempt to subsume the agitation for women's suffrage in the 1860s under scenes of masculine political life from the 1830s, in the locale and period of Eliot's youth, working within literary and social traditions (Zimmerman, "Felix Holt," 432–37). In _The Years_, Woolf in effect wrote a sequel to _Felix Holt_, a twentieth-century version of the feminist political novel. She purposefully returned in this novel to literary territory dominated by George Eliot. _The Years_ begins in 1880, the year of Eliot's death. The novel proceeds to span a period in which Woolf herself grew up (she read _Felix Holt_ in 1897 [DeSalvo 221]) and in which Eliot's reputation declined, then rose once more with the help of Woolf's centenary revaluation. Finally, "Present Day," the concluding segment of _The Years_, brings the tradition of Eliot's art of fiction up to the date of publication, in 1937.

As a Study of Cultivated Life, _The Years_ resembles _Middlemarch_, which grew out of _Felix Holt_ as another biographical history of the English Midlands in the 1830s. Woolf famously acknowledged _Middlemarch_ as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" ("GE" [1919] 156), but never mentioned _Felix Holt_ in her published statements on her predecessor. This disparity in Woolf's recognition of the two works undoubtedly is due to the enormous difference between them in power and design. Yet many of the elements of the acknowledged masterpiece are already present in the preceding work, though with an almost inverted emphasis. Such inversion makes _Felix Holt_ the more revealing counterpart to Woolf's effort to proclaim a political statement in silence. Eliot's earlier novel leaves the political issues of class and gender surprisingly exposed and unresolved,

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the debate toward local gossip, while her nephew, a committed socialist, watched in dismay: "She was much nearer to the feelings of the masses . . . than I was. I wanted to talk politics, the masses wanted to talk about the vicar's wife" (Bell 2: 186–87).
whereas in her "greater" novel, scenes of political life and feminist protest are marginalized. Is it partly the dictum that great art is not political that has devalued *Felix Holt*, and that hampered Eliot as she wrote it? The *Years* is also, but more guardedly, a political novel—as though taking the lesson of *Felix Holt* to heart. Instead of avoiding charges of propaganda by marginalizing the political while historicizing the personal (as in *Middlemarch*), The *Years* marginalizes both personal and political elements almost equally, resisting the appetite for a hero, a heroine, and even the much-favored device of a concluding marriage. Woolf carries on Eliot’s attempt in *Middlemarch* to convey the illusion of the passage of time in the lives of many people. She subtly integrates imagery and allusion almost on the grand scale of *Middlemarch*, but with a new skepticism toward metaphor and symbol (though not toward myth): sometimes a walrus-brush is just a walrus-brush. In *The Years*, collective history and moments of being are now the protagonists. Unanswered protests have gone underground.

Though *The Years* seems to me a more balanced success as a novel than *Felix Holt*, the balance is largely due to Woolf’s more rigorous suppression of her political “message.” *Felix Holt*, almost in spite of Eliot, seems overtly the more radical text: it could be said to render the evidence, unassimilated, for the kind of feminist case Woolf makes in *Three Guineas*. It is as though Woolf, after “the years” of agitation since Eliot’s day, could face the full implications of the analogy Eliot drew between all injustice and the suppression of the feminine, but perhaps as a result she had to mask the rage Eliot portrayed in *Mrs. Transome*. That ailing woman, before being put to bed and “soothe[d] . . . with a daughter’s tendance” by Esther, says, “Men are selfish . . . and cruel. What they care for is their own pleasure and their own pride.” “Not all,” is Esther’s rather inadequate response to these “painful” words (597–98).

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf continues the “fight that our mothers and grandmothers fought” (TG 102); as I have indicated, she pays a daughter’s homage to the feminist associates of Eliot. *The Years* instead disguises its heritage while invoking the Angel in the House, a creature that haunts Eliot’s novels, only to slay it. The murder goes almost undetected; the novel begins as the mother, Rose Pargiter, a sweet-

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1Obviously, many “great” novels have political themes, and many even stage battle or election scenes (*War and Peace*, *The Red and the Black*, *Waverley*, *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch* come to mind). But it seems that the arbiters of the canon prefer not to be reminded that literature is politically situated.

2My reservations about *Felix Holt* have little to do with the presence of political themes, but rather are based on the implied author’s retreat from their implications. I am not suggesting that *The Years* is in any sense more “art” because less “politics.”
tempered Mrs. Transome tended by her daughters, slowly passes away in an upstairs bedroom, never charging her husband with the selfish cruelty of his adultery.

As in their other writings, in *Felix Holt* and *The Years* the authors strive to reconcile the gendered public and private spheres. Eliot’s narrator announces the attempt to “understand ourselves,” in Woolf’s words, in political context: “This history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life” (FH 129). *The Years* likewise concerns a few representative lives formed by historical change—a family over a few generations. The Pargiters are not as “rooted in the common earth” as Eliot’s characters, but lead the upper middle-class “conservatory existence” that still depends on “a nether apparatus of hot-water pipes liable to cool down on a strike of the gardeners or a scarcity of coal,” as Eliot reminds us (FH 129). Hothouse flowers (like readers) should be deeply concerned with conditions at the mines. Woolf presumes this interconnection much as Forster, in *Howards End*, presumes that the Schlegel sisters must face the inscrutable facts of Leonard Bast and the Porphyrion Fire Insurance Company. Like Forster, Woolf holds less faith than Eliot in widespread fellow-feeling and more in the epiphanic connections drawn by refined beings like the Schlegels. Woolf would reverse Eliot’s emphasis, insisting that there is no public life that has not been determined by a wider private life.

**Fact and Vision, Politics and Art: The Development of the Novels**

Given these ambitions to integrate masculine and feminine spheres of political history, it is not surprising that *Felix Holt* and *The Years* have seldom been read as unified achievements. These novels occupy similar places in the authors’ developments and reflect similar struggles to reconcile elements that have often been read as antagonistic—though Woolf deliberately reflected this antagonism in formal disunity. Eliot and Woolf returned, after *Romola* and *The Waves*, to the realistic portrayal of their own milieus within their lifetimes, in works reminiscent of their early novels yet animated by more acute concern for the lot of women and the threat of untrammeled mass movements, as well as by the more elaborated conception of their vocations derived from their most recently published works. *Felix Holt* borrows its setting and some characterization from *Adam Bede* (in both novels, an edu-
icated artisan has a rich, egotistical rival), while its political intrigue and mob action develop out of Romola. The Years was designed to combine "facts, as well as the vision. . . . The Waves going on simultaneously with Night & Day"; Woolf sought a relief from modernist stringency after "20 years—since Jacob’s Room" (VW Diary 4: 129, 151–52, 133, 233).

Each author attempted to confine her argument within a popular, realistic mode, as though wishing to cement her hold on the public. Felix Holt has been read as a political novel in the genre of Disraeli’s Sybil (Williams 103; Bodenheimer 208–10, 222–23). At the same time, Eliot’s novel incorporates the Dickensian model, particularly the treatment of legalistic inhumanity and of the embittered matriarchs in Bleak House and Little Dorrit. More than either of these models, Eliot’s novel attempts an aura of historical authenticity—Felix Holt is one of her heavily researched novels—and her Author’s Introduction assumes the testimonial authority of the sages Carlyle and Ruskin. The Years, similarly, relies on the authoritative convention of the impersonal chronicler. Woolf had in mind contemporary family chronicles such as The Forsyte Saga.4 It is almost as though she set out to conquer the territory she had dismissively relinquished to Bennett, Wells, and Galsworthy in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” the territory of matter-of-fact that Eliot had helped to clear. Woolf would add to such materialists the greater intimacy with the facts of the “ordinary mind on an ordinary day,” as well as the more detached perspective of the searchlight that sweeps the first overture in The Years.

Both Eliot and Woolf suffered more than the usual birthpains in delivering a novel from the union of fact and vision (Zimmerman, “‘Mother’s History,’” 84–85; Rose, Parallel, 221; VW Diary 5: 31). Felix Holt originated in a low period after Lewes had taken the foundering verse drama The Spanish Gypsy out of Eliot’s hands; much as Silas Marner interrupted Romola, Felix Holt at first offered a refreshing return to English territory (Haight 381). Eliot might once again rely on her own memory, while the story could be as remote from autobiography as her earlier stories of a carpenter or a weaver. But the labor on Felix Holt was little easier than that on Romola; she struggled with the novel, suffering “ill health . . . dreadful nervousness and depression,” according to Lewes (Haight 385–86). In addition to the pressures on

4James Hafley compares The Years, “possibly the best” of Woolf’s novels, to The Forsyte Saga (132, 142). Fleishman deplores the resemblance to such popular fiction (Woolf 172). Almost alone, Daiches praises The Years as an advance on the experiments in Mrs. Dalloway and The Waves, not another Forsyte Saga (111–13). See Lipking 141.
the established woman of letters, there may have been the anxiety induced by her first near approach in fiction to current political conflicts.

Most critics of this novel appear to take it less "personally" or biographically than *Romola*. For one thing, Eliot issued no statements about its embodying her endeavors as grand old woman, and for another it is not as radical a departure from the Austen sphere. Instead, critics discuss disjunctive political and "personal" plots or conflicting generic intentions without acknowledging their assumptions about gender difference. Eliot does seem to have been doubly concerned with the accuracy of a historical-political novel on the Reform Era and with the effectiveness of a tragedy in novel form. As Fred C. Thomson reads it, *Felix Holt* originated in Eliot's study of classical tragedy as she worked on *The Spanish Gypsy*, but she later worked up an interest in electioneering politics ("Classic Tragedy" 47; "Genesis"; Introduction). Like the tendency to suppress the subtitle, "the Radical," this belief in the priority of the Transome story reflects a formalist bias toward "apolitical" art. Yet one does not have to be a dedicated formalist to find, as I do, that the greatest energy in the book is sparked by Mrs. Transome rather than by election politics (Vance 119-20). Conversely, critics with a bias toward political art maintain that Mrs. Transome's story is the afterthought. Arnold Kettle represents the view that the novel is not political enough. Reversing Thomson's account of the composition, he claims that the original study of two kinds of radical was deflected by Eliot's interest in "the position of woman"; her "failure" entails a refusal to face "the realities of the social situation... the nature of the common people and their problems" (106-9). A personal (feminist) bias interferes with the social historian's work.

Thus critics resist the idea that the plots centering on Mrs. Transome, Esther, Felix, and Harold might be more than incidentally related; men's politics and women's relationships hardly appear to speak the same language. In spite of the manifest analogies in the novel between the politics of the drawing room and of the hustings, the accounts of Eliot's having been distracted from one sphere into the other persist, partly justified because it is impossible to make a fully...
coherent novel out of *Felix Holt*. There is, especially, a surplus of feminist protest, surplus because narrator, characters, and plot largely ignore it.

The tragedy of Mrs. Transome is that of a woman who is unable to renounce her personal desires and who finds no wider calling; she is a pettier prototype of the Alcharisi, the dark double of the grand old woman of letters. Female ambition without voluntary self-sacrifice is always a disturbing force in Eliot’s work. As though to contain this force, the novel shows the results of conscientious research into things as they were: the history of the Reform Era as it opened and quickly closed the possibility of extending political rights to workers and women (Haight 381; Thomson, “*Genesis,*” 577–83). The Comtean lawyer Frederic Harrison and John Blackwood praised the “politics” of the first two volumes, dispelling her “depression as to [the novel’s] practical effectiveness,” though she remained in her accustomed “state of utter distrust and anxiety about my work” (*GE Letters* 4: 247–48, 256, 300).

Like *Felix Holt*, *The Years* first arose as a relief from the author’s sense of defeat. Woolf had begun *The Common Reader, Second Series* and *Flush* in order to offset her habitual panic on publishing a novel, in this case *The Waves*; this relief characteristically took the form of critical essays, in which she was confident of excelling, and of a playful biography in the line of *Orlando*, immortalizing Barrett Browning’s dog as a very tame precursor. But both works had become drudgery that stood in the way of an ambitious project first conceived back in 1931 (*VW Diary* 4: 142). This was to have been an “Essay- Novel,” alternating essays on the condition of women with selected chapters from an “unwritten” novel about the Pargiter family. As the difficulties of sustaining this double form hit home, Woolf later divided the two elements into the “1880” section of *The Years* and the germ of *Three Guineas*. Much as Thomson and others view Eliot as having shifted intentions in the face of incompatible elements, Mitchell Leaska believes that in February 1933 Woolf compacted the essay “interchapters” into the novel because she recognized the inevitable failure of the “‘marriage of granite and rainbow’” (Introduction, *The Pargiters*, xvii).

Yet two months later she was still hoping “to give the whole of the present society—. . . facts, as well as the vision” (*VW Diary* 4: 151–52). After tediously revising the first, nine-hundred-page draft, she sent the last typescript to be printed in galley proofs before Leonard had read it, so hopeless was she about this novel. Like Eliot, she was ill and tormented by “a feeling of complete despair & failure” (*VW*
“God was cruel when he made women” 211

Diary 5: 24; Bell 2: 191–96). Virginia seized on Leonard’s possibly forced approval of the revised proofs much as Eliot depended on Lewes’s, Harrison’s, and John Blackwood’s praise. Woolf immediately took refuge in writing *Three Guineas*, which like *The Years* grew out of a speech to the National Society for Women’s Service (*VW Diary* 4: 6); her historical research, unlike Eliot’s, was published complete with footnotes. Woolf had advised herself to postpone writing “On Being Despised,” as *Three Guineas* was then called: “This fiction is dangerously near propaganda” (*VW Diary* 4: 300).

Though this warning to herself might seem to confirm Leaska’s claim that the novel was distinguished from the essays as non-didactic art, Woolf like Eliot clothed historical argument in private experience without accepting a conventional separation of spheres: the art of personality was political. Both projects claimed a place in traditional high art; much as Eliot attempted a prose fiction tragedy, Woolf wove a texture of allusion and image in the Dantesque and Miltonic tradition, but with a subversive emphasis on matriarchal cults. The mysterious patterns of red and gold and recurring objects distract us from any traces of polemic, while the lacunae in the work—much of Woolf’s labor on the novel consisted of cutting—disguise her original design of a feminist history, wrong side out, of two hundred years (Radin, “‘Two enormous chunks,’” 221–27).

The response to *The Years* was largely favorable but mixed (Majumdar and McLaurin 371–99), much like the response to *Felix Holt*, though sales were relatively brisk for Woolf—*The Years* was a best-seller in the United States. Beginning with Leonard Woolf, many readers have felt that *The Years* is overburdened with historical fact, a kind of admirable but dull study like *Romola*, perhaps. Jean Guiget, for example, sees the externality of fact in *The Years* as alien to the visionary who had written *The Waves*, and reads the later work biographically: *The Years* is a “novel manqué, whose failure is perhaps the most significant symptom we have of the disequilibrium that made Virginia Woolf’s originality and greatness—and which led to her undoing” (309, 317–18). Since the more sympathetic revival of Woolf in the 1970s, the biographical author is usually granted more control over her fate and more command over the public sphere; with the publication in 1977 of *The Pargiters* and of the revaluation of *The Years* in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, critics more commonly affirm that the amalgamation of fact and vision was successful (e.g.,

Schaefer attributes such a disequilibrium to the incompatible spheres of gender, and traces the sadness of the novel to Woolf’s own discomfort with the “masculine world” of fact (135).
Radin, Woolf’s “The Years”). Recently it appears that this realistic novel demands exegesis on a Joycean scale (Marcus, Languages, 36–74), while its anti-fascism on private and public fronts must be retraced as well (Comstock). For all the careful patterning in the novel, the “drive[ ] toward disjunction” seems purposeful (Middleton 160); Woolf herself wrote, “Its failure is deliberate” (VW Diary 5: 65; Lipking 144). It remains a puzzle, best pieced together by readers who have absorbed the kind of feminist argument that is exposed in Felix Holt and thoroughly explicated in Three Guineas.

Both Felix Holt and The Years, then, suggest that the grand old women of letters felt called on to teach their public unwelcome social truths while at the same time advancing artistic tradition, and both have been read as examples of an inevitable clash between such aims, particularly for the woman writer. The authors acknowledged the risk they had taken in attempting political art. After the publication of Felix Holt, Eliot reminded Harrison that “aesthetic teaching . . . if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram . . . becomes the most offensive of all teaching” (GE Letters 4: 300). Woolf too saw the perils of a plan to incorporate “millions of ideas but no preaching.” The challenge, as she stated it, was to “get the round, not only the flat. . . . I mean intellectual argument in the form of art: I mean how give ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life the form of art?” (VW Diary 4: 152, 161). Indeed this was the difficulty: the artful worlds of Felix Holt and The Years at times do seem reduced to two-dimensional tracts. Yet the ambition to unite “intellectual argument” as well as “ordinary waking Arnold Bennett life” with “art” was inherent in the vocation of these historical writers. Mitchell Leaska sees Woolf as a “pargeter” in The Years, that is, “one who glosses and smooths over” the “chasms” between “historic fact” and “immediate feeling.”8 Eliot, too, might be seen as a pargeter in her effort to meld Reform Era politics and domestic drama. Yet those “chasms” between history and experience would have seemed, to Woolf and Eliot, only another aspect of the questionable division between public and private spheres. The gap to be closed between fact and vision was more an aesthetic than an epistemological one: how to write a novel and not a tract out of their insight into the history of the common life.

That politics are personal, that reform depends on private more than public change, is the argument not only of Felix Holt and The Years, but also of their appendices, “Address to Working Men, by

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8Leaska, Introduction, The Pargiters, xiv–xv. Leaska acknowledges Marcus’s suggestion that the word would appear in the English Dialect Dictionary edited by Joseph Wright, the model for Mr. Robson in “1880.”
"God was cruel when he made women"

Felix Holt, and Three Guineas. The latter works seem to preach inaction even as they brandish weapons borrowed from activists. In an essay written for the cultivated audience of Blackwood's Magazine, Eliot adopts Felix's name and homiletic style to admonish an almost preindustrial working class to recognize their common cause with their masters, improve themselves, and consider the greater good of gradual change. Felix seems to view the class order as an ahistorical given, and tacitly excludes all consideration of women, inviting respect for the great men who have added to the common stock of humanity. In Three Guineas, a far more sophisticated and compelling work, Woolf's persona writes to a gentleman of her circle, deferentially explaining why educated men's daughters cannot subscribe to anti-war causes; they must, like Eliot's working men, improve themselves first. The letters gather fascinating historical detail concerning the great lady reformers to show that women do not share a common interest with men of power and that they should mock all symbols of eminence. Eliot's ventriloquism dissociates her from both speaker and implied audience; she places herself among the educated men. Woolf speaks as though she herself belongs to the underprivileged class, yet she is the sister, not the employee, of the men in power. She rephrases Eliot's appeal on behalf of Arnoldian culture, a collective human development that makes demands for individual rights or expression seem impertinent and self-centered. While Eliot's and Woolf's polemical essays release from the novels unruly challenges to powerful men, they do not promise a radical break with traditions of class and gender, though Woolf's separatist critique of patriarchy has transformative potential.

The arguments of both novels and tracts appear politically conservative, resting hope on the influence of the enlightened few. The Tory John Blackwood wrote to Eliot, "How good your politics are... I suspect I am a radical of the Felix Holt breed" (GE Letters 4: 246; Pinney 415). The righteous eponymous hero, generally seen as "too good to be true" (Lerner 49), has been condemned as a spokesman for Eliot's dread of an enfranchised mob, in line with Arnold's response to the Hyde Park Riots in Culture and Anarchy (1869). Woolf is similarly reproached from the left for class insensitivity, but unlike Eliot she

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Greatness Engendered

was censured by contemporaries for her feminist polemic as well. Q. D. Leavis, reviewing *Three Guineas* in 1938, rebuked the author for being “quite insulated by class” and for indulging in a “release of sex hostility” in the mode of “Nazi dialect without Nazi convictions.” Leavis’s own extreme hostility did not prevent her from seeing the Victorian roots of Woolf’s feminist politics: “What respectable ideas inform this book belong to the ethos of John Stuart Mill” (382–85).

In spite of their obvious conservatism in some respects, both novels offer a radical insight into the correspondence between the lots of women and the fate of European civilization, between historical events and moments in the domestic interior. Mrs. Transome’s battle with her son is more than coincidentally linked with the battle between ancient right and the rioting rabble on election day. In the same way, the question of education and professions for women is raised by the ritual of afternoon tea in a Victorian drawing room. Almost defiantly out of step with their times, the novels are set well before the crises of the 1860s or the 1930s, in order to dramatize the gradual change in obscure lives. In addition to this careful historical scale, the novels also suggest a timeless aspect of human relations. Mrs. Transome’s and Esther’s complementary stories have a mythical quality, as though like Demeter and Persephone they enact the recurring seasons; the generations of Pargiter women similarly enact their seasonal rituals of death and rebirth, while Eleanor and Delia, like Mrs. Transome, recognize that home is a Dantesque hell. The complex structures of these novels—shifting between plots, households, times, points of view—draw analogies between the private choices of women and men and the transitional epochs in which they live. What cannot be put asunder, according to the outlook of these novels, cannot be joined without masking the rough margins; the authors are pargeting before our eyes.

**Holding by the Roots, Pargeting the Spheres**

What do we see if we read these novels as being about their own disjunctions, about the imbalance between inseparable spheres and elements? As the biographer of Orlando confesses, “When we write of a woman, everything is out of place” (O 312); when a woman writes of personalized politics, perhaps, the emphasis falls unexpectedly. Before interpreting the gender politics in detail, I want to remark on some of the strange first impressions presented by these emphatically
God was cruel when he made women public, impersonal novels, novels asserting control over detail. Harold Transome claims for men the prerogative of participation in historical change: “Women keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn’t signify what they think—they are not called upon to judge or to act” (FH 117). But if feminine domestic details do have a mind and a development of their own, do signify in history, the patriarchal interpreter is seriously mistaken. Neither novel, however, shouts the voice of Harold down.

The usual interpretive guidelines as to what does signify appear to be missing from both novels. As they wrote and revised, both authors deflected attention from female characters onto male, and deployed impersonal descriptive passages and titles that subordinate the domestic, particular perspective of the women. Mrs. Transome and Transome Court are only part of the story of 1832, and a less timely part; Esther, similarly, remains outside public life, more like Maggie Tulliver than Romola. The struggles of the men, Harold, Jermyn, Rufus, and Felix, on the other hand, appear almost identical with the historical crisis of the novel. Yet as Eliot’s two Radicals are brought to express their feelings for the ladies of the house, so her heroine is allowed to demonstrate her influence on a public stage. Woolf’s primary female characters, unlike the women in Felix Holt, resemble Romola in their ultimate independence from men and in their more constant though subtle involvement with public life. Whereas in The Pargiters, the first version of “1880,” the women predominate, in the finished novel men have an almost equal share; “1880” opens from Abel Pargiter’s point of view, and the novel continues with extensive studies of men interspersed throughout.

Both novels encourage us to know ourselves as one of many, as parts of a general pattern that foils our egotistical plans; hence the impersonal overview of the narrators. The Author’s Introduction and epigraphs to each chapter, added late to Felix Holt, are transformed into the overtures to each “year” in The Years, inserted in proof (Thomson, Introduction, xviii, xxviii; Radin, “‘Enormous chunks,‘” 226). The narrators seem at once intimately acquainted with and pityingly remote from past “weather.” The Proem of Romola and the overtures in The Waves were precedents for such signposts of formal unity and authorial impersonality. The overtures in The Years, however, frustrate the reader’s search for intelligible pattern. After these diachronic preliminaries, both Eliot’s first chapter and Woolf’s open on a certain afternoon in a specific year, centering on an unhappy parent who waits for a delayed change in the family. Women are restless in their
drawing rooms; men return from their affairs in the world and impose their authority. Both novels, then, open with a wide-circling bird’s-eye view, only to perch in a gilded cage.

Eliot’s narrator is kin to De Quincey (“The English Mail-Coach”), Thackeray’s showman (chapter 7, *Vanity Fair*), and the future Theophrastus Such: “Five-and-thirty years ago the glory had not yet departed from the old coach roads.” He warns that when “Posterity” travels “like a bullet through a tube,” the picturesque “stories of English life” garnered on a coach ride will be lost. Instead, this slow drive through the Midlands will trace a chronological history, “from one phase of English life to another,” from pastoral harmony to market towns to manufacturing districts. Our narrator, like the coachman another “Virgil,” will lead us into the inferno of hereditary tragedies lurking on estates like Transome Court that try to resist social change (FH 75–84). Thus we pass through changing social conditions to enter Mrs. Transome’s hell in chapter 1, when expected good fortune—the return of her son—merely confirms her enslavement to her past and her womanhood. Two chapters later the novel reverses this move, and examines those surrounding conditions in the light of her tragedy.

The action of *Felix Holt* is compressed into the nine months from Harold’s arrival to Esther’s wedding. This compression, while it hastens Esther’s metamorphosis from a creature of Byronic sensibility to one of Wordsworthian duty, calls attention to the design of tragedy as Eliot viewed it; each of the main characters faces an “irreparable collision between the individual and the general.” In “Notes on The Spanish Gypsy,” she particularly illustrates the individual’s needs as those of a woman born with “inherited” disability, like the worse biological share of womanhood (“she may be lame . . . she may be a negress”). Such an individual can only find “well-being . . . through large resignation,” but “happily, we are not left to that. Love, pity, constituting sympathy . . . with . . . the lot of our fellow-men . . . become . . . willing submission and heroic Promethean effort” (Cross 3: 33–34; Thomson, “Classic Tragedy,” 48–49). Though such sacrifice appears triumphant, Eliot means to affirm as well the triumph of general conditions over those unluckily born to subjection.

The compensatory lesson of selflessness is taught in *Felix Holt* partly through repeated deflections from what appears to be the center of interest, the favored individual. When we abandon Mrs. Transome or Felix for long passages until Esther comes to them in their prisons, we should perceive the pattern in a larger web than the fate of one hero or heroine. After meeting Harold, Mrs. Transome, and Matthew Jermyn, we must turn to their equally self-important analogues, Felix,
Mrs. Holt, and Rufus Lyon, accepting the pattern of the frustration of personal desire. "And the lives we are about to look back upon . . . are rooted in the common earth, having to endure all the ordinary chances of past and present weather. As to the weather of 1832, the Zadkiel of that time had predicted . . . unusual perturbations in organic existence . . . that mutual influence of dissimilar destinies which we shall see unfolding itself" (129). The cue for Woolf's weather interludes is sounded here. Social history evolves catastrophically, regardless of individual will or perspective.

Less the endearing raconteur or prophet, Woolf's narrator in the first paragraphs describes "uncertain" weather as a kind of epochal element uniting all England, farmers and Londoners. Instead of a coach ride through the Midlands, we have a survey of London districts filled with "processions" of different sorts of people, carriages, birds. Between sentences we leap the hours of a presumed day in 1880, and then to the passage of all time: "Slowly wheeling, like the rays of a searchlight, the days, the weeks, the years passed one after another across the sky" (3-4). Here is a novel to be read not with the "pity and terror" of passenger and coachman (FH 83), but with the unpersonified inquiry of a searchlight.

*The Years* emulates *Felix Holt* in unfolding interdependent lots in the medium of changeable public "weather." In another typical overture, the narrator travels like a bullet through a tube from the spirit of the age to far-flung scenes, then to a particular character's point of view:

Money was in brisk circulation. The streets were crowded. . . . The wind ruffled the channel, tossed the grapes in Provence, and made the lazy fisher boy, who was lying on his back in his boat in the Mediterranean, roll over and snatch a rope.

But in England, in the North, . . . Kitty, Lady Lasswade, . . . drew the cloak round her shoulders. (89)

Simultaneity binds the fisher boy to Kitty, just as it connects Job Tudge and Mrs. Transome, or Jo the crossing sweeper and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*. Here, however, the "mutual influence of dissimilar destinies" appears less tragic than sublimely incidental—or rather, the recognition that there is only an incidental link between individuals lends a sublime sense of the tragedy of human life.

Woolf's chapters or segments represent not so much the conjunction as the dispersion of dissimilar destinies, even more effectively challenging the egocentrism of narrative focused on individuals, but without affirming a redemptive resignation. In the "First Essay" of *The
Pargiters, ostensibly a speech on professions for women, Woolf argues that “we cannot understand the present if we isolate it from the past. . . . We must become the people that we were two or three generations ago.” (The essay expresses more confidence than the taciturn novel about the power of sympathy to overcome difference.) To perceive the collision of the individual with the general, Woolf will read “chapters from an unpublished novel” tracing the Pargiter family from 1800 to 2032, “to represent English life at its most normal.” Such a utopian “novel of fact” would be truer than the “clumsy” history that declares, “In the year 1842 Lord John Russell brought in the Second Reform Bill’ and so on” (8–9). Woolf here stakes a claim in Eliot’s historical territory: Felix Holt is the novel of two Reform Bills, fleshing out representative English life and casting the chronology of the history books in the background. Woolf’s history indeed casts so much in the background, including any individual Promethean struggle, that it risks being a blur of boring fact, yet it offers glimpses of heroic myth and everyday tragedy.

In such novels mixing tragedy and fact, the customary narrative drive can seem lost. In Felix Holt there are dark family secrets, musty wills, lovers’ lockets, but nothing more sensational arises than an anticlimactic riot. To most readers, Mrs. Transome and Matthew Jermy broadcast their secret affair long before Harold knows of it, while the legal dispute between the Transomes, Durfeys, and Bycliffes remains hardly more than it appears to Esther, a muddle of prerogatives magically invoked to change lives.10 Even the title raises doubts, not only as to the sense in which “Radical” applies to a man who opposes what would become the Chartist program, but also as to the centrality of the fortunate and faith-upholding Felix Holt to the moral drama of the novel. Happy is he who holds by the roots, the title seems to say, yet Felix must undo his father’s errors and Esther must escape her inheritance (Wiesenfarth, Eliot’s Mythmaking, 177–80). E. S. Dallas observed in 1866 that a male author would have named the book after Esther (Carroll, Critical Heritage, 267; Rosenman, “Women’s Speech,” 237). Indeed, most of the novel centers on the metamorphoses of the heroine, whose namesakes, Dickens’s Esther Summerson and Queen Esther, are likewise poor foster daughters who find favor with powerful men. Eliot’s Esther earns her moral crown by refusing a luxurious place as chief concubine, but she uses her influence to help her lover and her father, as Queen Esther saves Mordecai. The

10The Lyons receive the news of Esther’s inheritance as “magic”; Felix says her fitness for ladyship gives “sanction to that musty law . . . the appropriate conditions are come at last” (FH 557).
tragic Vashti, a famous actress in *Villette* (1853), in this novel has become the defeated Mrs. Transome, almost as though Eliot, like another King Ahasuerus, wished to make an example of the rebellious woman.\(^{11}\) Precedent and tradition are subtly modified but without avowed challenge to patriarchal order.

*The Years* similarly sends contradictory signals. With its sequence of dated segments, its details of dress and household objects, its family of characters, it seems to offer a chronicle of the English educated class from 1880 to 1937. Yet Woolf fails to supply the genealogy, and she leaps across “precipices from 1880 to here & now,” seemingly at random (she considered adding “an appendix of dates” reminiscent of Galsworthy [*VW Diary* 4: 129, 146]). There are only one dramatized death and an anticlimactic funeral, no lovers’ vows or weddings, no great achievements or crises, while the historical events of those years are shunted offstage. A street crier announces, “The King’s dead!” at the end of “1910”; in “1911” the men “discuss the situation in the Balkans” while “Eleanor’s attention wandered” (Y 191, 201).

Only Eleanor approaches the role of heroine through her endurance and growing insight. In early drafts of *The Years*, Woolf perceived “Elvira” becoming too much the “dominant” heroine. Much as Eliot had intertwined “Miss Brooke” with Lydgate’s story, Woolf determined that her heroine must “be seen only in relation to other things” (*VW Diary* 4: 152). She divided Elvira’s role between Eleanor and Sara, finally deleting long passages of Eleanor’s development in galley proofs and suppressing the feminist political argument of the original essays (Middleton 163–64; Squier 200; Radin, “’Enormous chunks,’” 234). As published, the narrative shifts for long passages to Kitty’s, Martin’s, North’s, and others’ points of view, while between the years figures like Eugénie have unceremoniously ceased to exist in the manner of Mrs. Ramsay. The title suggests this impartial succession of collective experience.\(^{12}\) Time passes, Woolf declares, and ordinary people are the medium of its passage; life consists mostly of detail. Women here do outgrow their upbringing, but no one is “called upon to judge or to act.”

\(^{11}\) The Book of Esther sets the context of *Felix Holt*, but the heroine’s role as political savior of her people has been privatized. Lawyer Jermyn is Haman the villainous minister; Felix, like Mordecai, is an unruly outsider yet a guide for Esther inside the palace. See Zimmerman, “Felix Holt,” 441n.11. Charlotte Bronte’s “Vashti” is judged as a woman rather than as an artist, suggesting a precedent for Eliot’s defiant Alcharisti in *Daniel Deronda*.

\(^{12}\) Woolf’s list of possible titles confirms her intention to narrate a collective experience of time: The Pargiters, Here and Now (chosen because it would “not compete with the Herries Saga, the Forsyte Saga & so on” [*VW Diary* 4: 176]), Music, Dawn, Sons and
As though avoiding the unpersuasive electioneering scenes of *Felix Holt*, Woolf’s narrator ignores such drama as the General Strike altogether and abbreviates the suffragette or Irish agitation as an anecdote in the life of Rose or Delia. Eliot, on the other hand, ignores the implications of the domestic drama that *The Years* was to reenact and that the essays of *The Pargiters* and the letters of *Three Guineas* were to interpret. Significantly, Eliot made no public statement on the sexual politics of *Felix Holt*, as though unaware that her novel alluded to any current issue besides the second Reform Bill of 1867, yet she was closely allied with agitators for female education and enfranchisement. Woolf similarly glosses over the class issue her predecessor sought to settle, even though Virginia shared with Leonard Woolf a commitment to a kind of socialism.\

In the novels themselves, political activity is shown to be corrupt, idealistic, ineffectual, or worse, the cause of social chaos; Felix gives a fine speech, Rose joins a committee, and both are jailed for their part in civil disorder, but these enthusiasms are shown to breed further violence. Whereas Felix, wounded and imprisoned, endures an ordeal of the passive femininity he initially despised, Rose remains fixed in a martial fantasy as “Pargiter of Pargiter’s Horse!” “Force is always wrong,” says Kitty in “Present Day”; “still . . . Rose had the courage of her convictions. Rose went to prison.” Martin denounces the suffragettes because they led the mob into the Great War; their means, like those of Felix, spelled disastrous ends: “She smashed his window . . . and then she helped him to smash other people’s windows. Where’s your decoration, Rose?” (Y 420).

The fate of these political activists alerts us to a set of convictions that the novels are not reluctant to teach. You cannot evade the claims of the past (you self-making men!); force is always wrong; politics must accommodate the inner common life. At odd moments, these principles are revealed. Lawyer Jermyn, trying to blackmail the opportunist Scaddon, incriminates himself as well to the reader: as he says, “There may indeed be claims which can’t assert themselves—a—legally, which are yet molesting to a man of some reputation” (315). The lawyer is one of the devious masculine “radicals” who profit by their changeability, but who in the end must recognize the rule of consequences that women seldom defy; he might complain that “’tis grievous, that with all amplification of travel . . . a man can never

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13Leonard Woolf called himself “a heretical socialist,” not quite in harmony with the “true-red socialist nor even the pinkish trade unionist” (*Downhill All the Way* 85).
"God was cruel when he made women"  221

separate himself from his past history” (epigraph, chapter 21, 310). There are no shortcuts in moral life, the perhaps-Tory, perhaps-female narrator tells us; “the slow old-fashioned way of getting from one end of our country [or life] to the other is the better thing to have in the memory” (75). Jermyn has become a gentlemanly villain by a slow, coach-ride process, “led on through the years by the gradual demands of a selfishness.” Like the egotist Jason abandoning the woman he believes he is “not at all obliged to,” Jermyn will meet his Medea’s vengeance (513).

In the world of Woolf’s novel there is no coherent vengeance. The “dead hand” of the past has relaxed; memory recurs not as a matter of ethical responsibility but as a matter of self-knowledge. As in Felix Holt, in The Years your enemy is always your semblable, but no “plots” undo you. One cryptic scene, when Sara and Martin lunch together in a City chophouse, might be a later version of Eliot’s study of “the market dinner at ‘the Marquis’” in Treby Magna: both mark the changes in traditional hierarchy when outsiders enter the elite male world of commerce and politics, with its “many gradations of dignity”; like the effigies in the Florentine church of the Nunziata, many vie for access to “the secret of the highest affairs” (chapter 20, FH 299). Woolf’s scene confronts martial Martin, who is beginning to question orders, with his poor, spinsterish cousin Sara, a kind of Antigone. This educated man’s daughter will never sell herself to men’s prosperity (TG 93); she is a true radical in a sense only hinted at, in Eliot’s novel, by the rebellious Mrs. Transome (who is consciously Tory). In one oracular outburst, Sara denounces war and all hegemony:

“ ‘Roll up the map of Europe,’ said the man to the flunkey. ‘I don’t believe in force!’” She brought down her fork. A plumstone jumped. Martin looked round. People were listening. (232)14

Martin is still trapped in his patriarchal role, the notions in which he was brought up; he laughs at being treated like “God” by the old servant Crosby, yet he is enraged, just as his father would have been, when the waiter tries to cheat him.

14 All responses to institutionalized violence seem subtly implicated in that violence. Sara seems to attack the lunch table, while the man repudiating force seems to command not only his flunkey but all of Europe. Compare the motto on the statue of Nurse Cavell: “Patriotism is not enough.” Eleanor calls this “the only fine thing that was said in the war,” though the statue honors Nurse Cavell’s contribution to the war effort. Eleanor curses the “bully” Mussolini and tears up his picture in the paper (Y 336, 330–31; Marcus, Languages, 42).
In Woolf’s novel, a community of outsiders arrives at a vision of personalized politics only dimly foreseen by Felix and Esther. In “1917,” Eleanor encounters a discussion between a Frenchman, her cousin Maggie’s husband, and their Polish friend Nicholas, concerning Napoleon and “the psychology of great men”—Carlylean subjects Eleanor at first assumes to be beyond her “reach” (281). As though Felix were to ask Esther’s opinion on corrupt electioneering practices, however, Eleanor is brought into the political discourse; the demarcations between spheres have disintegrated—“the war, perhaps, removing barriers” (284). The men are themselves outsiders, in exile; instead of hero worship, they propose a history of common experience. Nicholas explains to Eleanor, “I was saying we do not know ourselves, ordinary people . . . , how then can we make religions, laws, that—”; Eleanor completes the thought: “that fit—that fit.” Eleanor is surprised that his thought so closely fits hers, but Nicholas observes, “We all think the same things; only we do not say them” (281–82). Eleanor the Victorian is slowly catching up, realizing that Nicholas the homosexual and Sara can love each other without romance, realizing that her squeamishness about homosexuality is obsolete.

Eliot would have been as slow to catch up, perhaps, as Eleanor. The Victorian author cannot consciously declare all battles ignoble, all decorations spurious; she must still rely on the revelatory plot and the clearly ordered progression of individual enlightenment. The modern perspective unravels teleological narrative, makes change less intelligible, and doubts, for example, that in nine months (the span of Felix Holt) men can learn feeling and women can learn responsibility. Yet both Victorian and modern meditations on social difference vacillate between liberal dreams of consensus—we all think alike—and visions of dissolution and miscommunication. The interrupted monologues of the eccentric Rufus Lyon and Nicholas Pomjalovsky both suggest that the preacher must be a kind of outsider. No one succeeds in commanding a sympathetic, discerning audience in either novel; the sheltered circles addressed by Romola and Orlando are no longer so comfortably entertained. If art is a means of extending our sympathy for the common life, why are most common figures so repugnant here? The human animals of the Sproxton mines or the streets around Sara and Maggie’s flat are noted but scarcely particularized, and they manifestly threaten educated ladies. What has become of the progressive social vision that I have argued Eliot and Woolf share with Victorian lady reformers? Where are the positive effects of feminine influence?

It seems that in Felix Holt and The Years the hopes of the ideology
of influence are more difficult to abandon because they are so obviously hopeless; the schisms within the traditional social order have never before gaped so wide in these authors’ works. Feminine difference cannot be directly questioned if there is to be any escape from a pattern of patriarchal fatality. Thus, while the injustices of class and gender are barely “pargeted” over, the wall of civilization, as Woolf figures it in *Between the Acts*, still stands, supported by the personal feelings, the moments of sympathy, in which women have specialized for so long. Meanwhile, the women’s desperation, their lack of something to do outside the world of love, is finely delineated but neither judged nor acted upon.

Many moments in *The Years* suggest that Woolf in effect is summarizing and extracting many *Felix Holts*, many unwritten Victorian novels, as they repeat themselves over the years. A scene in “1880,” for instance, proposes what might have been the story of *Felix Holt* from Esther’s point of view: Kitty meets an educated worker, Jo Robson, the self-made scholar’s son, fresh from carpentry work in the garden (is he another Adam Bede?). Mr. Robson, whose original, Joseph Wright, provided the dictionary definition of “the Pargiters,” might have played a role like that of Rufus Lyon (or Caleb Garth). In the humble setting, Kitty is ashamed of her fine clothes and manners, and the muscular hero appeals to her. However, like Dorothea Brooke’s sister Celia (dubbed “Kitty”), she later marries the eligible, titled suitor, whereas Esther adapts herself to her romantic hero of the working classes. Like most elliptical moments in *The Years*, Kitty’s encounter is the road not taken, the Victorian memory of yet another memory, as though nostalgia for the unrefined passion of youth or for the un-bourgeois classes were an inherent condition of the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty.

If the gentlewomen are captives in both novels, they (and a few rare sympathetic men) nevertheless have an insight into the perpetual emotions that offer the only recourse as institutions fail to meet human needs (and both novels project a universal humanity from the English middle class). Fellow-feeling is no magic remedy in either historical crisis. The double standard weighs heavily on both men and women, and there is little to alleviate the ache of loveless family bonds; generations will continue to suffer unless they can come to know themselves. Yet there is a glimmer of hope in a harmony of the sexes, figured here in the concluding wedding of Felix and Esther or the arrival of a couple in a taxi at dawn. Historically, Woolf’s redaction inscribes the failure of Eliot’s rainbow of promise; the granddaughters of Esther and Felix would still struggle between domestic oblivion and public achieve-
ment as the Pargiters do. Successive generations have to work out for themselves the terms of compromise between men and women. The crisis of one year becomes the same old story, repeated over many. A sense of closure has given way to an uneasy segue.

How Those Details Signify

Simply to note the trivial matters of lives of the obscure may be a form of protest. If women have been consigned to lives of domestic detail, it is time the history of such particulars were related. No details of women’s lives should be dismissed as “small airs and small notions,” as Felix calls them. On the contrary, these novels maintain that such matters are of determining importance: the key to the history of nineteenth-century parliamentary reform or of twentieth-century world wars was kept in the workbasket and writing tables of mothers, daughters, wives. Yet when women cross the boundary of their sphere, the consequences are not pretty: Mrs. Transome’s cold lust for power, Rose’s militarism, and the doctor Peggy’s lonely rationalism provide monitory examples. Instead, the influence of Esther, the freedom and innocence of Eleanor and Sara are presented as the feminine alternative to the corruption of masculine power and ownership; Esther’s testimony is the forthright Victorian counterpart to the modern spinsters’ trancelike prophecies. Several male characters are brought in the end to acknowledge women’s claims on them. As Harold must accept his dependence on others, and Felix must accommodate his idealism to the fact of a wife, Martin and North must question their own relation to authority and the patriarchal family.

The boundaries of English ladies’ lives remain essentially the same in 1832 and in 1880, when The Years begins; even in 1937, “Present Day,” the past lives on in such figures as Eleanor, whom Peggy sees as a “portrait of a Victorian spinster” (Y 333). In both novels, these limits are defined by the threshold of the home: women are depicted indoors, looking out; home becomes sanctuary or prison, while life outside beckons as well as threatens. At Transome Court, Esther opens the blinds to see the river and the trees: “She wanted the largeness of the world to help her thought.” To Mrs. Transome, the same vista only reflects “boundary” and “line,” “the loneliness and monotony of her life” (590, 596). (Compare Dorothea’s view from the boudoir at Lowick.) In the end, Esther rejects “a silken bondage” as a lady at the manor in favor of “the dim life of the back street, the contact with sordid vulgarity” (591–92), much as Eleanor decides, in the repressed drawing room of “1880,”
that “the poor enjoy themselves more than we do,” and her sister suspects her of wanting to “go and live” with them in the back streets (30–31). The younger Pargiter girls, not allowed to occupy themselves with charity, peep out the window at the young man arriving next door (“Don’t be caught looking” [19]), while Kitty, trapped in the Lodge of an Oxford college, stares out at the tormenting tree that leans but never falls. It appears that the social order itself is founded on the clear demarcation of spheres and on the liminal status of women who, like little Rose, must pay if they cross the boundary.

In 1832, ladies depend on gentlemen’s protection; during the riot, Felix reassures Esther in her home before he tries to lead the mob, only to find himself swept along in its rampage toward Treby Manor. There, as earlier in an inn, his knightly impulse is to rescue the women, but ironically he is forced to pose as the aggressor, brandishing his “sabre” in a lighted window before “a group of women clinging together in terror,” frightened as much by him as by the pillagers he is trying to turn away. The soldiers shoot him as though he were the leader of the rabble, wounding “the shoulder of the arm that held the naked weapon which shone in the light from the window.” The phallic image of the man who has entered the women’s interior incriminates him, though his intentions were chivalrous indeed (431–32).

The Pargiter girls in 1880 are still captives, while they restlessly vie for male attention; they compete for invitations to dinner and talk only of marriage. The Pargiters do escape in time, though the threat of sexual assault has lurked beyond the door; in their sorties, they destroy the old ideal of the lady. Eleanor must deal man-to-man with the contractor for the housing she has had built. Maggie and Sara in their poor lodgings must live by the rhythms of the street; criers, musicians, drunks, trucks invade their once enforced privacy, making a city flat seem like a primitive cave (189). Yet Eleanor progresses from being the spinster servant of her father to being an Athena-like seer (Marcus, Languages, 61), pursuing youthful adventure in increasingly exotic places with a gypsy’s freedom. Woolf seems to be redefining women’s sphere and influence; in the end Eleanor has her own flat with a newly installed shower-bath, as though the “goddess” (14) were at last able to appoint her own shrine and font.

Female characters in both novels are represented in relation to household trappings. Compare the use of certain objects to trace the history of the characters and family relations in both novels: Bycliffe’s locket and notebook; the Pargiters’ ink-stained walrus-brush; the “crimson chair with gilt claws” (see Leaska, “Woolf, the Pargeter,” 184–85; and Marcus, Languages, 58).
daughter who objects to the smell of ale and tallow candles. Her fastidiousness sets her apart from the vulgar, "weak sisters" who pester their minister Rufus (133), yet she herself threatens her father's and Felix's vocations. Felix sneers at Esther's indulgence in wax candles: "I thank Heaven I am not a mouse to have a nose that takes note of wax or tallow" (140). Catherine Gallagher points out here the conflict of Felix's contempt for such material "signs" and the narrator's realistic method (Industrial Reformation 237–43); misogyny and contempt for detail coincide in Felix with an egotistical denial of interdependence. Felix declares: "A fine lady is a squirrel-headed thing, with small airs and small notions, about as applicable to the business of life as a pair of tweezers to the clearing of a forest" (153). He will have to refine his sense of scale, to learn how the sexes might collaborate in domestic and public life, whereas Esther must recognize that the doll-madonna is a captive, and that wax candles may come at the price of a woman's freedom.

As though her wish for refinement were granted, Esther is invited to choose a new home with all the amenities lacking in Malthouse Yard. Transome Court seems like "Paradise" until she recognizes the role of the woman in it; it is "haunted by an Eve gone grey with bitter memories of an Adam who had complained, 'The woman . . . she gave me of the tree, and I did eat' " (585). In contrast with Felix, Harold prefers the decoration to the life, asking Esther to pose in finery like one of the Transome portraits. She refuses, however, to adopt a fixed, false image (498). The portrait of Mrs. Transome in young and hopeful days seems to admonish her to "put out the wax lights that she might get rid of the oppressive urgency of walls and upholstery," thus rejecting her first vanity for a higher vision (586; Coveney 47).

Although Esther's choice, like that of so many heroines, is personified by two lovers, it is clearly prompted by a dread of powerlessness. Both the man who sneers at domestic detail and the man who wants to pile it up around his women are dangerous suitors for a woman who likes self-definition, just as these men are distressing sons to their willful mothers.16 Eliot seems to be defining radicalism as masculine independence from hereditary authority; both Harold and Felix eagerly replace the father and repudiate the mother and all feminine influence. Harold's "busy thoughts were imperiously determined by habits which had no reference to any woman's feeling" (93). The man

16Felix rejects the dishonest occupation of his dead, mountebank father, thus distressing his mother; Harold repudiates his Tory lineage, neglects his imbecile "father," and almost kills Jermyn, his real father, all in a contest of wills with his mother.
uprooted from the past, the man who cannot be domesticated, is the man trying to his mother’s will; thus Mrs. Holt and Mrs. Transome, “women who appear . . . to have a masculine . . . force of mind,” have “come into severe collision with sons arrived at the masterful stage” (535).

Whereas Felix is a kind of hippie (his mother grieves that he wears no stock), Harold is no genuine radical, but a composite of all the prejudices of the privileged European male: he is imperialist, racist, classist, and sexist. As Esther senses, “to Harold Transome, Felix Holt was one of the common people who could come into question in no other than a public light. She had a native capability for discerning that the sense of ranks and degrees has its repulsions corresponding to the repulsions dependent on difference of race and colour” (522–23). Thus she shrinks from telling Harold that she has been intimate with Felix—that she has privately shared in the common life. Yet she is horrified to hear that Harold’s first wife “had been a slave—was bought, in fact” (541). Esther’s “native” discernment has everything to do with her having been conditioned as a woman; she may play along with ranks and degrees, but she begins to find them repulsive in themselves, since race and gender remain, like class, the registers on which the patriarch marks his supremacy.

Somewhat like Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda, Esther resists the surrender implied in accepting a man: “The homage of a man may be delightful until he asks straight for love, by which a woman renders homage.” Harold’s love “seemed to threaten her with a stifling oppression” (592), almost as though she intuits the opinion he declared when he first returned from Smyrna as a widower: “I hate English wives; they want to give their opinion about everything” (94). Perhaps less ominously, after having kissed Felix “she felt as if she had vowed herself away, as if memory lay on her lips like a seal of possession” (592); he at least has taken the trouble to argue with her opinions. Crudely, she must choose between the radical who sees women as useless delights and the radical who sees women as temptations unless useful. With more conscience and foresight than Mrs. Transome, Esther chooses duty rather than pleasure, the man who scolds her rather than the man who flatters.

In outline, Eliot’s novel promises little for women. While Esther seemingly must submit to Felix in the end, Mrs. Transome must endure a living hell for her adultery. Yet as to the necessity for such sacrifices, the narrator offers contradictory commentary, generated especially by the figure of Mrs. Transome. Having married an imbecile, chosen a lover, and with him managed her failing estate, Mrs. Trans-
ome is now told she must become "grandmamma on satin cushions" (95). Her power has not gained her love, and now she is powerless; the narrator can only advise resigned silence: "Half the sorrows of women would be averted if they could repress the speech they know to be useless" (117). It is advice that Eliot herself, in the powerful voice of the narrator, does not follow. Observing Harold’s bulldozing egotism, the narrator offers this rebuke:

It is a fact kept a little too much in the background, that mothers have a self larger than their maternity, and that when their sons have become taller than themselves, and are gone from them to college or into the world, there are wide spaces of their time which are not filled with praying for their boys, reading old letters, and envying yet blessing those who are attending to their shirt-buttons. Mrs. Transome was certainly not one of those bland, adoring, and gently tearful women. (198)

Those bland women seem to be relegated to the world of unrealistic fiction. Esther, too, is not one of the quiescent type; at least in the beginning she appears self-sufficient, working as a tutor of French and setting herself up as judge of men’s taste and behavior. But faced with the long-range prospects for women, she knows her best hope is to find a man who will appreciate her taste and behavior, her mind as well as her beauty. She complains to Felix: “It is difficult for a woman ever to try to be anything good . . . when it is always supposed that she must be contemptible.” Men may choose a “hard” and “great” lot, but “women, unless they are Saint Theresa’s,” “must take meager things, because only meager things are within [their] reach” (364-67). Esther’s growing desire to dedicate herself as helpmeet to noble reform seems to excuse this early egoistic complaining, but nothing in the novel suggests that she does not complain of a real injustice.

For some time it seems likely that Esther will take Harold, who is within her reach. Mrs. Transome predicts Esther’s sacrifice to Harold with the bitterness of one of the damned. “This girl has a fine spirit—plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit. . . . What is the use of a woman’s will?—if she tries she doesn’t get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when he made women” (488). The servant Denner replies that she is used to being a woman, and as Mrs. Transome later says, “the misery of being a woman” is preferable to “the baseness of a man” (519). Denner’s view is the comic relief to her mistress’s tragedy: “I shouldn’t like to be a man—to cough so loud, and stand straddling
“God was cruel when he made women” 229

about on a wet day, and be so wasteful with meat and drink. They’re a coarse lot, I think” (488). Censure of men may be warranted to some degree, but the novel cannot recommend it. In complaints or reproaches, “poor women, whose power lies solely in their influence, make themselves like music out of tune, and only move men to run away” (437). To point out in this way the selfish, cowardly response of men may not be the surest way to recommend women’s submission, but it does appear to exalt the strategies of influence on the premise of feminine superiority.

As a chivalrous gentleman, Harold never appears to “straddle about,” but the narrator, like Mrs. Transome and eventually Esther, detects the flaws of egotism beneath his veneer: “‘A woman ought never to have any trouble. There should always be a man to guard her from it.’ (Harold Transome was masculine and fallible; he had incautiously sat down this morning to pay his addresses by talk about nothing in particular; and, clever experienced man as he was, he fell into nonsense)” (499–500). The corollary of Harold’s gallantry is that women should protect men from wounded vanity. Thus Harold is uneasy when he suspects that Esther has a mind as well as a beautiful face: “She was clearly a woman that could be governed. . . . Yet there was a lightning that shot out of her now and then, which seemed the sign of a dangerous judgment; as if she inwardly saw something more admirable than Harold Transome. Now, to be perfectly charming, a woman should not see this” (525). The final caustic comment belongs, in spite of the counsel of resignation, to a feminist narrator rather like Austen’s in Northanger Abbey.

Esther has what Eliot maintains are womanly flaws: “She was intensely of the feminine type, verging neither towards the saint nor the angel. She was ‘a fair divided excellence, whose fulness of perfection’ must be in marriage” (551). Characteristically, Eliot presents feminine independence as the exception to the common order, a possibility for rare spirits like Saint Theresa or Romola. Yet an inert and ignorant Angel in the House will spread a curse as much as any demonic Mrs. Transome. Esther must retain her will and aspiration. At her great moment, she assumes the role of a heroine of history:

When a woman feels purely and nobly, that ardour of hers which breaks through formulas too rigorously urged on men by daily practical needs, makes one of her most precious influences. . . . Her inspired ignorance gives a sublimity to actions . . . that otherwise . . . would make men smile. Some of that ardour which has . . . illuminated all poetry and history was burning to-day in the bosom
of sweet Esther Lyon. In this, at least, her woman’s lot was perfect: that the man she loved was her hero; that her woman’s passion and her reverence for rarest goodness rushed together in an undivided current. (571)

There could hardly be a more explicit image of the compensations of influence, yet Esther does not consume her life in obeisance to her manly hero. Like another Elizabeth Bennet, she could only be happy with a man “greater and nobler than I am,” but she reserves a little of her wealth and, playfully, of her power: “You don’t know how clever I am. I mean to go on teaching a great many things”—including Felix—“and you will not attribute stupid thoughts to me before I’ve uttered them.” She will enjoy the “retribution” of demanding that he be worthy of her sacrifice (602–3). Eliot would later present a more convincing portrait of such a relationship in that of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy. Felix unlike Fred must play the part of mentor, but it is a role Esther creates and makes him worthy of.

As in most positive images of marriage in these authors’ novels, the final union in Felix Holt is cleansed of any hint of sexual mastery. Felix and Esther unite rather as though Maggie and Tom Tulliver were able to prolong their last moment outside of gender difference, like children or angels: “He smiled, and took her two hands between his, pressed together as children hold them up in prayer. Both of them felt too solemnly to be bashful. They looked straight into each other’s eyes, as angels do when they tell some truth” (556). The fusion of male and female lots at the end belies the instructive disunity of the novel. Felix and Esther leap out of history and gendered sexuality into the vanguard of an idealized common life. Yet as with Orlando and Shelmardine, for all practical purposes their future will retain the division of labor and separation of spheres; Esther can look forward to no professorship, no career of public lectures in the “Cause.”

In The Years, women’s choices no longer have to be personified by men. Nonetheless, the young women in “1880” confront their domestic heritage in objective forms strikingly similar to those in Felix Holt. The Pargiter daughters, trapped in the drawing room of Abercorn Terrace—midway, it might be said, between Malthouse Yard and Transome Court—fuss as Esther did, not about cheap candles but

17Coveney points out that Esther’s “laugh as sweet as the morning thrush” in this concluding scene echoes the scene in prison when Esther, “like a thrush . . . a messenger of darkness,” warns Felix of failure (chap. 45, n.1, chap. 51, n.2).
about an "old-fashioned" kettle decorated with "a design of roses that was almost obliterated." Whereas Esther’s mother is a romantic memory, Rose Pargiter lies almost obliterated on her deathbed, like the kettle that won’t boil. Once again, the matron haunts the drawing room in a portrait of her lost youthful purity: "The portrait of a red-haired young woman in white muslin holding a basket of flowers . . . smiled down on" Milly and Delia (10). Like Esther with her little luxuries and the volume of Byron in her workbasket, these girls furiously adorn their barren world with romantic aspirations.

In later years, the younger Pargiter women choose, like Esther, not to repeat the decorative captivity of the ladies in the portraits. Yet the teakettle and the portrait persist like timepieces to clock changes in the family. To Martin, who like Felix has always resisted things feminine, the painting in 1908 “had ceased to be his mother” under its film of dirt, while the hateful kettle seems worse than obsolete now (149, 152). In 1910, the second Rose relates memories of the portrait and kettle as traces of ancient history (166). At last, in “Present Day,” Peggy notices “the picture of her grandmother” over her aunt Eleanor’s, formerly the grandmother’s, writing table. The portrait has been cleaned, so that the flower on the grass, which Martin missed in 1908, has reappeared, but Eleanor doubts the portrait’s likeness to the real Rose or to the granddaughter Peggy, said to resemble her. Records of the past are inevitably distorted, while present interpreters, faithful as they try to be, can only see through new eyes: “One thing seemed good to one generation, another to another” (325–26). Abercorn Terrace “was Hell!” Delia repeatedly declares to the present generation (417), much as Esther recognizes hell in the seeming paradise of Transome Court. The entire novel suggests an alternative to a revision of myth like The Waste Land, as the women ritually tend vessels such as the teakettle (Marcus, Languages, 43), in honor of the dying goddess of the portrait, reborn in each generation.  

In contrast with Felix Holt, The Years revises the tragic plots of the adulteress or the stifled wife, inventing new plots with succeeding generations. Kitty, although she cannot emulate her spinster tutor, Lucy Craddock, finds moments as Lady Lasswade when she masters

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18For example, Eleanor “descend[s]” the stairs (apparently “carrying a . . . pitcher on her head”) as though descending into hell, passing the sulphur in the dog’s bowl and stepping over this domestic Cerberus (43). Marcus observes that the house suggests the unburied dead, “abier” meaning dead but unburied in Wright’s dialect dictionary: “With ‘corn’ and ‘terrace’ it suggests the ritual of the death and rebirth of the Year-Spirit and Antigone’s burial of her brother” (Languages 40).
a vast domain. In the present day, Peggy has her career as a doctor. Women no longer must choose meaner things; everything is within their reach, even, rarely, being “happy in this world—happy with living people” (Y 387). Back in “1880,” Eleanor observes her sisters’ malaise: “They stay at home too much, she thought. . . . Here they are cooped up, day after day. . . . Again she stopped herself. She must wait till she was alone” (32). Her critique of the drawing room captivity of middle-class women seems a guilty thought in that drawing room—a stifled protest, like Esther’s unvoiced doubts about Harold’s chivalry, from a woman who shares the point of view of the poor.

The women’s self-suppression is complemented and enforced by the compulsive egotism of men. Over the years women begin to break free as they frankly observe this compulsion at work. After the death of the unchallenged patriarch, Colonel Pargiter, Eleanor half-listens, with some lingering admiration, to the imperialist adventures of Sir William Whatney, a man who might have been her husband: “stories that sailed serenely to his own advantage” (202). But it is Maggie’s husband Renny, a skeptic about war and the psychology of great men, whom Eleanor would have liked to have married. (Notably, Woolf’s radicals are non-domineering men who, along with a few visionary women, recognize the claims of women and the past.) Whereas Esther confined her criticism of Harold or Felix to occasional sallies, in the new century Peggy never wavers in her self-assertion; she yields neither her attention nor her respect to a young man’s hammering “I, I, I.” “But he couldn’t help it, not with that nerve-drawn egotist’s face. . . . He had to expose, had to exhibit. But why let him?” Deliberately, she in turn says “I” to drive him away (361). As Eliot observes in Felix Holt, men run away from women’s self-assertion.

In the present, men too are becoming critical of the old sexual code. Peggy’s brother North, like Felix an outsider who dreads domestication, mocks the bonding customs: “The men shot, and the women . . . broke off into innumerable babies” (375). Like the two “radicals” Harold and Felix, North expresses the misogyny of those threatened by women’s independence, but he responds with Felix’s hostility rather than Harold’s flattery: “Damn women, he thought, they’re so hard; so unimaginative. Curse their little inquisitive minds. What did their ‘education’ amount to? It only made her [Peggy] critical, censorious” (395–96). As in Felix Holt, the denigration of women is mirrored by their abuse of men. Peggy counters North’s unspoken insult: “The vanity of men was immeasurable. . . . He’ll tie himself up with a red-lipped girl, and become a drudge. He must, and I can’t.”
I shall pay for it, I shall pay for it" (396). Women like Mrs. Transome and Peggy who deliberately oppose men will lose the comforts of love. In Woolf’s later version of sexual politics, the possible fusions of gender seem to multiply. Throughout the tormented party in “Present Day,” Eleanor keeps discovering miracles: Sara and Nicholas’s new kind of love (370); the change “for the better” in human nature exemplified by Renny and Maggie, “two people out of all those millions [who] are ‘happy’ ” (386–88). The novel concludes with images of a perpetual sexual mystery. Two children of the caretaker, the “younger generation,” their sex unidentified, sing nonsense both ancient and futuristic; even this nightmarish chant of the other can be heard without terror in the new day. Eleanor witnesses the arrival of unknown newlyweds by taxi at a neighboring house, promising that the ritual will continue, each time a little different, each time perhaps a little better if we gradually come to know ourselves.

The “Progress” of Political Art

Woolf’s continuation of the history of the common life, although it represents progress since the compromise of the heroine of 1832, displays skepticism about such apparent advance, as though insisting that the inherent divisions in society that Eliot exposed ought to undermine the teleology of the novel itself in an unending ritual of return. In both Felix Holt and The Years, the social divisions are conceived in terms of class as well as gender. As in Romola and Orlando, Eliot and Woolf represent the common people ambiguously, as both the medium of continuity and a volatile force for change; common people and upper-class women are implicitly linked in their shared exclusion from corrupt modes of power. As before, the novels exalt less the crowd or the suffering masses than individual obscure beings, the Bartons and Browns. Educated, independent men or women of the people such as Felix Holt, Rufus Lyon, Lucy Craddock, or the working-class don, Mr. Robson, exhibit the selfless virtues that will influence the growing good of the world (though Felix and Rufus both have egotistical failings that Woolf’s obscure saints apparently do not). Their influence may be narrow and unsteady, but it is the ingredient heretofore missing from public life. Ladies at times are able to collaborate with them. Esther rises in court in defense of Felix, “break[ing] through” the rigid systems of men (571) very much in the spirit of Three Guineas. Eleanor eagerly petitions her brother Edward, the Oxford don, on behalf of Runcorn the porter’s son, who “wants to go to
college," to rise on his merits; Edward grudgingly accepts his duty to help bring about such rises (410–11).

In the twentieth century, it is no longer an article of faith, as it still was for Felix, that "there's some dignity and happiness for a man other than changing his station" (FH 557). The Pargiters are living out the effects of the challenge to inherited station that in 1832 jarred the Treby Magnas of England out of a slumber of centuries; the family witnesses the decline of empire and the loss of the power and prosperity of the upper middle class in Britain. Eliot tries to dramatize the political crisis of her times, but public events are upstaged by the skirmishes between men and women, which in her view more profoundly determine the course of human history. Woolf seems at once more confident that the history of the common life takes precedence over the public record, and more cautious in writing a political novel, where propaganda may defeat art. Her aim is to revise the history of the people that "we" were, to fight her literary predecessor's fight, at a time when many of the barriers that had constrained Marian Evans had at last broken down. Woolf implicitly honors "radicals" of any gender: social experimenters who do not try to lay down the law and who are not afraid to think back through their mothers. Yet from a certain perspective, neither author radically questions sexual difference, which they rely on to outlast historical change; genders will continue to find only temporary fusion, and the feminine must temper the masculine.

In the different Victorian and modern contexts, we are shown a radical disjunction between those interlocked spheres, private and public life. Through the guidance of women, Eliot and Woolf seem to say, the business of the world may be conducted less deceptively, so that signs of authority are not mistaken for signs of virtue or merit. Indeed, if women and other outsiders can teach us to know ourselves, ordinary people may become more an honor to our species, though never all alike. Women such as Mrs. Transome should be allowed to lead by "virtue of acknowledged superiority" (91), once they have been truly educated; instead they have been cultivated for "bloom and beauty" without regard for "things not personal" or for "what is . . . good for mankind" (105). Women such as Peggy should be allowed to become doctors without forfeiting Eleanor's beauty or selfless sympathy, and without losing the possibility of marrying a man like Renny. Such things should be, but Eliot and Woolf are not so crude as to preach them in so many words. Still less do they condone the anger of Mrs. Transome and of Peggy because these ideals have so far proved impossible. God was cruel when he made women—perhaps;
“God was cruel when he made women” 235

but should he have created men? The mitigating art of love practiced by Esther and by Eleanor would be too great a loss, Eliot and Woolf seem to say, if a bomb were dropped on the hell of home, leaving male and female alike. Meanwhile, might the misery of being a woman be preferable to being a base egotist, whether radical or tyrant? Are these the only alternatives defining “man”? 