10

‘Finding New Words and Creating New Methods’: *Three Guineas* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Maroula Joannou

In 1935 Virginia Woolf wrote to the organizers of an anti-fascist exhibition in London seeking assurances that this would include a section about the position of women under the Nazi regime in Germany. But feminist ideas had fallen out of favor with many anti-fascist intellectuals in Britain during the 1930s. Naomi Mitchison observed in *Left Review* that the very women who had started before the war as good little bourgeois feminists, determined to beat, or at least equal, men at their own game, had ‘ceased to be militant feminists, ceased to regard men as enemies’ after the vote had been won and had sometimes come to think of ‘the economics of feminism as part of the general economics of possessor and possessed’.¹ As Johanna Alberti has put it,

the very real threat to the lives of European opponents of Fascism and their children meant that the specific threat of Fascism to women assumed secondary importance for many feminists. Those feminists who worked with refugees, or called attention to the victims of Nazism, were unequivocally opposing Fascism but could also be distracted from Fascism’s specific attack on women.²

By the mid-1930s there was little support in Britain for the proposition that resistance to fascism might take a gendered form. The reply that Woolf received from Elizabeth, Countess Bibesco was distinctly unhelpful, for Bibesco refused to see sexism as a part of the fascist programme, writing ‘. . . it had not occurred to me that in matters of ultimate importance even feminists could wish to segregate and label the sexes’.³

M. M. Pawlowski (ed.), *Virginia Woolf and Fascism*
© Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited 2001
But Virginia Woolf, who had visited both Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, had become convinced of the necessity to establish an independent feminist opposition to fascism. Her classic anti-fascist treatise *Three Guineas* (1938),⁴ is the product of much reflection on how men and why women are situated differently in relation to violence: ‘scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle’ (*TGs*, p. 13). Although she never joined any anti-fascist organization, *Three Guineas* is also a meditation on how best women might collectively express their opposition to tyranny in all its manifestations, domestic, public, national and international, and irrespective of whether the ‘iniquity of dictatorship’ was to be found in ‘Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain’ (*TGs*, p. 187).

I wish to analyse Virginia Woolf’s importance as the inheritor and perpetrator of a cultural tradition that assumes the existence of a specific and highly polarized relationship between women as peace-makers and men as warmakers. According to the political theorist, Jean Bethke Elshtain, this cultural legacy is made up of socially fabricated and perpetuated myths and memories whereby men are deemed to ‘fight as avatars of a nation’s sanctioned violence’ and and women ‘to work and weep and sometimes protest within the frame of discursive practices that turn one out, militant mother and pacifist protestor alike, as the collective “other” to the male warrior’.⁵ Elshtain has analysed how ‘in time of war, real men and women – locked in a dense symbiosis, perceived as beings who have complementary needs and exemplify gender-specific virtues – take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls’.⁶

She contends that man is ‘construed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably or reluctantly and tragically; woman as nonviolent, offering succor and compassion’. Moreover, ‘these tropes on the social identities of men and women, past and present, do not denote what men and women really are in time of war, but function instead to re-create and secure women’s location as noncombatants and men as warriors’.⁷

In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf berates man, whether in uniform or not, for his bellicose attitudes, resolutely maintaining, in the face of much evidence to the contrary, including the disclaimers of prominent feminists with whom she corresponded after the publication of *Three Guineas*, that woman was by her nature non-combative in disposition