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The ‘Other Woman’: Rebecca West’s ‘Difference of View’

Rebecca West’s life was shadowed by her own role as the ‘other woman’ in a triangle drama. Her position as mistress of the married H.G. Wells not only dominated her life during the decade-long affair, necessitating tortuous cover-ups which included bringing up their son to call her ‘Auntie Panther’, but became an identity from which she was never able fully to escape. Indeed, ‘Rebecca West’, the pseudonym which the nineteen-year-old Cicily Fairfield borrowed from the heroine of Ibsen’s Rosmersholm, the rebellious New Woman who loves the married Rosmer, now seems uncannily prescient. As Sinclair’s literary identity was dominated by the label ‘spinster’, West’s was overcast by that of the ‘other woman’ – the ‘mistress’, the ‘unmarried mother’.

West’s status as an important contributor to and commentator on modernism has only recently been recognised. Much early criticism focused on the relationship of her work to that of Wells, a focus which obscures not only West’s modernism but her connections with women writers and her interest in relations between women.¹ Such criticism demonstrates, to borrow from Woolf, the tendency for a male critic to be puzzled and surprised by a woman writer’s attempt to alter the ‘current scale of values’ and therefore to see in her writing not ‘a difference of view but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental’ (Woolf, 1966–7, Vol. II, 146). Woolf herself recognised West’s ability and used West as an exemplary modern woman writer in A Room of One’s Own: ‘Z, most humane, most modest of men, taking up some book by Rebecca West and reading a passage in it, exclaimed: “The arrant feminist! She says that men are snobs!”’ (Woolf, 1977c, 35) West’s writing, Woolf recognises, is a mirror where Z sees himself, not reflected at ‘twice [his] natural size’ (1977c, 35), but as ‘other’. West understood that ‘The woman who is acting the principal part in her own ambitious play is unlikely to weep

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because she is not playing the principal part in some man’s no more ambitious play’ (West, 1982, 84–5). Her own ambitious books give the ‘principal parts’ to women.

West provides an important connection between the ‘modernist’ writers of the period, such as Sinclair and Woolf, and more ‘traditional’ writers, such as Holtby and Brittain, not just on a personal level but as professional writers with a common commitment to feminism. West, like Holtby and Brittain, contributed to Time and Tide, and she knew them on a social level – it was at Brittain’s house that West met her future husband, Henry Andrews. Brittain saw West as a symbol of feminism: ‘the twentieth-century successor of Mary Wollstonecraft and Olive Schreiner’ (TY 588). West also knew Rosamond Lehmann, to whom Woolf wrote that West is ‘a very nice woman […] She is rather fierce, and I expect has some bone she gnaws in secret, perhaps about having a child by Wells. But I couldn’t ask her. Perhaps you know her’ (Woolf, 1975–80, Vol. VI, 521). As this comment indicates, the identity of ‘unmarried mother’ acted as a barrier between West and other women.

At first glance West’s writing seems primarily concerned with relations between the sexes. Bonnie Kime Scott remarks: ‘Where West’s women do bond, it is usually in the presence of, or for the sake of a man’ (1987, 277). However, what West offers in her first two novels – The Return of the Soldier (1918) and The Judge (1922) – is precisely an exploration of relations between women which are ‘for the sake of a man’. Her analysis of how women’s commodification within Western culture isolates women, allowing them to relate to each other only in relation to that ‘third term’, a man, anticipates Irigaray.

Indeed, West’s entire oeuvre can be read as an extended meditation on gender, an attempt to think through what Irigaray calls ‘one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age’ (1993a, 5), the issue of sexual difference. This difference is defined in Black Lamb and Grey Falcon (1941) where, noting that the word ‘idiocy’ comes from a Greek root meaning ‘private person’, West writes:

IDIocy is the female defect: intent on their private lives women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy: they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outline of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.

(1942, Vol. I, 3)