

**RE-READING H. G. WELLS'S SOCIAL AGENDA IN *ANN VERONICA*
THROUGH A. S. BYATT'S *THE CHILDREN'S BOOK*:
MALE FANTASY OR FEMINIST REVOLUTIONARY?
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H. G. Wells wrote to Frederick Macmillan that *Ann Veronica* was 'the best love story I have ever done'.¹ Perhaps this comment can help solve one of the most evident problems of this novel: whether it is as it first appears a social novel designed to aid the cause of women's suffrage, or as it seems on further investigation, a means for Wells to address his feelings on his own complicated and, by the standards of the day, morally dubious love life. The latter view has been expressed by amongst others, Victoria Glendinning in her biography of Rebecca West, and Patricia Stubbs in *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel*.² Yet interpretation of fiction does not just come from outside of the novel, it also comes from within the form itself. Much has been written on the filmic versions of Wells's science fiction but the twenty-first century literary afterlife of Wells's views on 'the woman question' has been strangely neglected. Most recently Wells himself has been drawn upon in A. S. Byatt's Booker shortlisted neo-Victorian epic, *The Children's Book*, as the partial inspiration behind the sexually dissolute Herbert Methley, who is also a controversial writer and social activist.³ This metafictional interpretation of Wells signalled by Byatt herself in recent interviews and drawn attention to by a succession of reviews; provides a reading of not only Wells's biography but also his literary legacy.⁴ Methley's actions are not only reminiscent of Wells's own, but some of the notable scenes in which he features, are clearly drawn in part from Wells's fictional writing. This juxtaposition of life and fiction seen from a twenty-first century perspective provides a critique of Wells's sexual politics in the context of his time. When this is situated in a novel concerned about the effects of imagination on reality and vice versa, it occasions the astute reader to reflect on Wells's use of fiction as a tool to defend his own sexual choices.

¹ H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1909), ed. Sita Schütt (London: Penguin, 2005). Quoted in 'Note on the Text', xxxv.

² Jane Lewis similarly remarks on these two texts in this context. See Jane Lewis 'Intimate Relations between Men and Women: The Case of H. G. Wells and Amber Pember Reeves', *History Workshop*, 37 (1994), 76-98.

³ A. S. Byatt, *The Children's Book*, (London:Vintage, 2009).

⁴ Byatt comments on her 'defence' of 'self-conscious realism' in 1991's *Passions of the Mind* (Vintage: London, 1993), 4. The following articles all make the connection between Wells and Methley explicit: Peter Kemp, 'The Children's Book by A. S. Byatt', *Sunday Times Review*, April 26, 2009, Caroline Moore, 'Irresistible Highbrow', *Spectator*, May 2, 2009, Charles McGrath, 'A Novelist whose Fiction Comes from Real Lives', *New York Times*, October 9, 2009.

The idea of creative work providing a viable interpretation of other art objects is perhaps most famously associated with Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) which states that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem – a poem not itself*.'⁵ Suggesting that only within the literary form can literature be assessed and only through another work of its own kind can a text be re-read and interpreted. The very act of 'misreading' a text and overcoming authorial precursors or rivals to make something original that still recognises but is not overwhelmed by another work, is in itself an act of criticism. In the terms of Bloom's argument the precursory text can provide insights on the contemporary text. Yet the contemporary text can also reveal much about its forerunners. Graham Allen asserts in his book on Bloom's work that, 'a proper study of influence means that we can no longer retain the belief that individual texts exist,' indicating just such a blurring of textual boundaries.⁶ In the twenty-first century there is a plethora of 'texts' with which a reader or a writer may come into contact, and the number of potential literary interpretations uncountable; with a writer like H. G. Wells whose work has not just ignited academic interest, but inspired that of theatre directors, movie makers and television producers, it would seem that almost every reader has an opinion on an aspect of Wells's work. Consequently his novels are no longer a specifically literary product, rather they have become part of the cultural consciousness; and so are owned by that public, who continually reinvent and reinterpret Wells's creations. Yet are Harold Bloom's theories on intertextuality and influence becoming increasingly relevant or less so as time passes? We are all bombarded with an increasing number of interpretations of literature in our everyday lives. If the interpretation of 'texts' can be widened to include other art forms such as film, music and the visual arts then the number of potentially interpretative texts becomes uncountable and to a certain extent even untraceable. For an 'academic' author of fiction like Byatt, who has also written literary criticism, some of it utilising an interdisciplinary approach in looking at the relationship between disparate art forms such as painting and prose, and who was previously employed as a lecturer at the University of London; the number of images and interpretations she is aware of is further increased to a disproportionate amount.⁷ Bloom's argument that 'there are *no* texts, only relationships *between* texts', when extended in this way, is a symptom of the contemporary condition then, and consequently to view a novel or a poem in isolation seems to be an

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70.

⁶ Allen, 18.

⁷ Byatt commenced but did not complete a thesis on seventeenth-century literature at Cambridge and later became an extra mural lecturer at the University of London from 1962-71. She has acknowledged in *Passions of the Mind* (1991) that 'greedy reading made me want to write, as if this were the only adequate response to the pleasure and power of books.' See <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> for Sarah Johnson's biography of A. S. Byatt (accessed September 18, 2010). Also see *Passions of the Mind*, 1.

impossible task.⁸ Can it then be argued that writers can still misread the work of a previous author to create a new art object? Or are all works created in the present day incapable of being 'new' in this way, being instead subject to the past to such an extent that the only available modes of artistic creation are the postmodernist notions of parody, pastiche and simulacrum? If there are, as Bloom indicates, no autonomous texts, then Patricia Waugh's assertion in her seminal work, *Metafiction* (1984) that all works of fiction are inherently self-conscious by their very nature enforces the argument that the 'new' literary work unaffected by external sources is obsolete, if indeed, it existed at all.⁹ Yet it does not necessarily follow that the creative process is demeaned by this or that the novel itself is challenged in anyway. Rather this is a part of the novel's development, in line with that of other works of art which have similarly embraced their past and assimilated it into their creative present.

However, what Byatt is doing in *A Children's Book* is potentially even more revolutionary and perhaps more dangerous to the cultural consciousness, as she has by her own admission not just reconsidered the work of an author through the character of Herbert Methley, but the lives of two human beings. According to *New York Times* reviewer Charles McGrath, 'Methley, Ms. Byatt said, is a cross between H. G. Wells and D. H. Lawrence: he has Wells's predatory sexual habits and Lawrence's way of spouting off about his love life.'¹⁰ That Methley is an authorial hybrid both diminishes the impact on biography and increases it, for which elements one wonders can be safely attributed to which writer, and should the equitable division of assets even be attempted? This is not the first time Byatt has utilised a real-life individual in her fiction, and this is a more complex portrayal in some ways that in other works, such as *Babel Tower* (1996), where Anthony Burgess appears as a witness for the defence in a fictional literary trial.¹¹ But Burgess's transitory and minimal role is quite different to that of Methley's, who is a main character in *The Children's Book*, and whose actions impact dramatically on the lives of several other protagonists. Yet is Byatt's representation of these men any more dangerous than any of the other depictions of them offered to the public in the years following their deaths? These writers after all only exist to the general populace through 'textual' products now, as the result of numerous differing accounts by biographers, critics and television documentaries, not to mention their fictional presentations of themselves and the fictional versions of them by their contemporaries. Methley is also not a direct representation of either Lawrence or Wells, indeed, Wells is even referred to in the text as himself on

⁸ Byatt has written extensively on the connections between the visual arts and literature both within her fiction in *The Matisse Stories* (1993), and also in her literary criticism such as her 2001 work, *Portraits in Fiction*; Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

⁹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Routledge, 1984)

¹⁰ McGrath, 'A Novelist Whose Fiction Comes From Real Lives'.

¹¹ A. S. Byatt, *Babel Tower* (London: Vintage, 2007).

several occasions, yet Herbert Methley not only shares life history with Wells but a first name, and this is surely an indication that Byatt wishes the reader to be aware first and foremost of Wells when reading this character. Byatt's admission that Wells's life and/or works were involved in the creation of Methley cannot but be viewed then as a 'reading' of sorts of Wells's life and how it compromised and contradicted his works. Seen as a feminist interpretation of Wells's hypocrisy on 'the woman question', the presentation of Methley can consequently be interpreted as a fictional retort to a writer who conducted many of his own personal arguments through fiction, and it is therefore entirely pertinent to address him in this fashion. Wells's representation of the Fabians Beatrice and Sydney Webb in *The New Machiavelli* after their outspoken criticism of his affair with Amber Reeves, reveals his own ability to be both cruel and petty in this respect.¹² Wells's excitement with each new sexual relationship and his subsequent dissatisfaction have been explored through his fictional output in works such as *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900), *Ann Veronica* (1909), *The New Machiavelli* (1911), *Marriage* (1912), *The Passionate Friends* (1913) and *The Secret Places of the Heart* (1922), to name just a few of the examples of how his writing was used as a tool to defend and contemplate the choices of his private life. In addition to his own novelistic explorations of his personal life, there are the literary responses to his behaviour by his lovers Amber Reeves and Rebecca West; his wife, Jane, and his son, Anthony West, which present a historical dialogue considering his behaviour, his politics and his fiction which Byatt's work both explores and evolves. Yet Byatt does much more than simply provide a fictional criticism of Wells the man, she juxtaposes him with his own invented world in such a way as to challenge the liberalist romanticism of such works as *Ann Veronica*, and to compare them with his own actions, actions which revealed motivations sometimes far wide of the social purpose he purported in his non-fiction. Indeed, as Byatt's work is set in Well's lifetime it offers a critique of the man and his work in the context of his time in the way that an objective, scholarly, twenty-first century work of criticism or biography could not.

The Children's Book is just what it says it is – a book about children, and about the relationship between children and literature. Although the profession of arguably the 'central' character, Olive Wellwood who is an author of tales for children, seems to suggest that the novel is directed to the impact of writing *for* children, yet its effects are actually much more wide ranging. As McGrath's *New York Times* article asserts:

Not coincidentally, Ms. Byatt went on, it was an era of great writing for children – Nesbit, Beatrix Potter, Kipling, Kenneth

¹² See Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), 46, and Lewis, 78. Also see David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 111.

Grahame, J. M. Barrie. 'I think they wrote to prolong their own childhoods,' she said, 'or the fantasy childhoods they would like to have had.' And yet, she added, she couldn't help being struck by 'all the children of the children's writers who killed themselves'.¹³

It is particularly apt to place an individual drawn from the life of H. G. Wells in a work of this nature which examines not only the impact of the written world on the lives of children but also the effect of the *writing*. Olive's literary role and her personal position as wife and mother become inextricably linked and this affects every relationship she has, as well as those her husband and children go on to have. The same can be said of Methley and of Wells. Methley does not have any children with his wife, Phoebe, but their relationship occasioned her to leave her first husband, meaning that by law in Victorian England she had no custodial rights over her children. As a result of this, the social role of mothers has become something of an obsession to her. In the course of the novel, Methley has two children with two naive and vulnerable young women, Elsie Warren and Florence Cain. Wells also had two illegitimate children, who were similarly cared for without much intervention by their father. Wells's affairs with the numerous women in his life were deeply affected by the issue of children which was inevitable perhaps considering the precarious nature of many of his relationships in a period when sex outside of marriage was still taboo to the majority of people and illegitimate offspring were often focussed upon as a lasting reminder of the transgressions of the parents. Contraception was not widely available but even though it is considered likely that the promiscuous Wells did use condoms he also apparently gambled on the withdrawal method on a number of occasions. Such risks are purported to have led certainly to one unplanned pregnancy, that of Rebecca West's son, Anthony, and potentially to another, as Dorothy Richardson claimed she lost a baby of Wells's.¹⁴ In addition to this, the middle-aged Wells agreed to Amber Reeves's request to give her a child despite his obvious awareness of the treatment of unmarried mothers, referred to his own writings and his own equally evident desire to remain married to his second wife, Jane.¹⁵ Amber Reeves's subsequent and convenient marriage to Rivers Blanco White possibly appeased any potential later resentment to her own situation but Rebecca West's anger at Wells has been well documented, as has her son's unhappiness over the measures she took to try and deal with the difficulty of her circumstances. Wells's situation was also compounded by his role as an author, for Wells's work appears to have assumed greater importance to him than any of the women in his life or his children, and it was this desire to work that led him to be increasingly adventurous

¹³ McGrath, 'A Novelist Whose Fiction Comes From Real Lives'.

¹⁴ See Sherborne, 221, 179.

¹⁵ See Sherborne 194-208. Sherborne details Wells's procrastination on the possibility of divorce but ultimately quotes Wells saying, 'I found the idea of divorce from Jane intolerable.'

in the name of inspiration, most notably in his sexual liaisons, as well as being used as a reason for his inability to tolerate the noise and disruption of family life.

In this way his behaviour is reflected by several of the characters of *The Children's Book*. The resulting emotional impact on Wells's children and his lovers has been well documented but what had never been attempted before is to compare the personal life with the fictional and social writing of Wells from a variety of female points of view in a single work of fiction. With the benefit of hindsight Byatt has been able to contextualise Wells's personal life and his artistic vision, and then consider the impact his actions and his opinions may have had on the lives of women from his time who came from different social spheres. Rebecca West and Amber Reeves have both written fictionalised accounts inspired by their respective relationships with Wells, but these provide only their perspectives and therefore do not consider the issues in a wider context.¹⁶ *Ann Veronica* is admittedly written from the title character's perspective, but via Wells. The lack of judgement in Wells's portrayal of Ann Veronica as a sexually independent woman has been praised; but critics have also acknowledged the possibility that Wells's novel was motivated more by attaining fulfilment of his own desires, than by aiding the cause for women's suffrage.¹⁷ As Byatt has astutely emphasised within her fiction, sexual freedom in an age where contraception was unreliable and moral judgement could be socially excluding, was most problematic for women and children; something Wells indirectly accepts when he refers in *A Modern Utopia* to the 'socially desirable' prospect of men being able to have affairs outside of marriage, but not women.¹⁸

Ann Veronica is now generally accepted as reflecting Wells's personal relationship with Amber Reeves, a situation which did not escape censure even from liberal minded contemporaries of the author, such as leading members of the Fabian Society, Beatrice Webb who commented in her diaries that the situation was complicated 'because we none of us know what exactly is the sexual code we believe in, approving of many things on paper which we violently object to when they are practised by those we care about. Of course, the inevitable condition today

¹⁶ These include Rebecca West's *Sunflower* (London: Virago, 1990), described by Victoria Glendinning in the Afterword as being based on West's relationship with Wells. Also Jane Lewis remarks that Reeves's novels provide 'some insight' into the 'issues involved' (86).

¹⁷ See for example David C. Smith, who states that *Ann Veronica* was one of Wells's novels which 'involved his sexual longings, and ultimately those feelings [...] needed expression' but who also writes on *Ann Veronica* and the Amber Reeves affair that, "it is not the case that the book is a crude justification for their liaison". *H. G. Wells Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 176, 204. Patricia Stubbs states that 'He supported sexual liberty in women but because his ideas came primarily out of his own personal needs, he still saw women first and foremost as sexual partners.' However, she also comments on the positive depiction of *Ann Veronica* as an independently sexual woman. *Women and Fiction Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London: Methuen, 1981), 183-4, 193.

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905), ed. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005), 132-4.

of any “sexual experiments” is deceit and secrecy – it is this that makes any divergence from the conventional morality so sordid and lowering.’¹⁹ Amber Reeves was a member of the so-called Fabian ‘nursery’, an off-shoot of the main section of the society for the children of its founders. She was twenty-one years younger than her married lover, and only twenty-two when she became pregnant with his child in 1909. What shocked people the most was not so much the affair, as the public nature of their conduct, as Jane Lewis comments:

The affair was, in important respects, a new kind of scandal. It was not comparable, for example, to the affairs of Rosamund Bland’s father, Hubert, who handled his extra-marital relationships in the traditional manner, preaching adherence to a strict code of morality, while privately flouting it. Wells, and so far as it is possible to tell from much more limited evidence, Reeves, were open in calling into question both sexual morality and the ways it affected relationships between men and women. H. G. Wells had already taken this a stage further during 1906 in his efforts to integrate his views on the family and personal life into the Fabian understanding of socialism. Thus while the affair itself never became an entirely open scandal, Wells made the issue of sexual relationships a public issue. He claimed *Ann Veronica* as a turning point in the public portrayal of sexual relationships and of female sexual desire in particular.²⁰

To some extent *Ann Veronica* was just such a turning point; despite Wells’s struggle to find a publisher to accept such a controversial text, it was the first published work to not only allow the heroine to make unusual and independent choices about her career and her sex life, but also did not judge her for it.²¹ Fourteen years earlier Thomas Hardy had ended his novel writing career with the publication of *Jude the Obscure*, a novel in which a character who has similar reservations about living a conventional life, Sue Bridehead, comes to see herself as severely punished by God or destiny for not accepting the expectations of the age. While Wells admired the book and found it difficult to understand the public censure of its content, his own work did not criticise sexual freedom, but romanticised it.²² *Ann Veronica* elopes with a married man but eventually achieves domestic harmony and is happily reconciled with her family. Wells’s affair with Amber Reeves could easily have left her unmarried and with a child to support, a concept anathema to the majority of Edwardians even in the more forward looking

¹⁹ *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, 4 vols, ed. Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie (London: Virago; London School of Economics and Political Sciences, 1984), III, (1905-24), 121.

²⁰ Lewis, 77.

²¹ Wells’s initial rejection by Macmillan is well documented: see Drabble, xiii-xiv.

²² Smith, 39.

and liberal circles to which she belonged. Although to some extent this novel is a roman-à-clef, Wells did not behave towards his own amours in the same fashion as Ann Veronica's lover, Capes. Amber Reeves married another man; after a failed and very brief attempt at domesticity with Wells where the couple ran away to France and contemplated the prospect of a long-term exile if Wells remained married or even the possibility of legalising their own union. It soon became clear that Wells would not risk the convenience of his arrangement with Jane. Rebecca West was not as easily provided for and struggled for many years in her role as Wells's mistress, hoping for marriage and even adopting her own son so that he would not have the stigma of illegitimacy attached to him, but would appear to be a parentless infant taken in by a spinster.²³ At school he was to address her as aunt and not as mother.²⁴ His discomfort at this situation has been made clear through such works as his autobiographical novel *Heritage* (1955), but his anger is directed towards his mother for numerous complicated reasons. However West may have acted as a mother, her position was made extremely difficult by a situation she could not control. Contraception was unreliable, abortion illegal, and unmarried women widely socially unacceptable.²⁵

As a response to Wells's novel, *The Children's Book* is arguably more effective than a piece of non-fiction, as perversely the reality of the situation can be more clearly illuminated through descriptions of moods, sensations and inner monologue than through facts, dates and figures. Wells has not presented his novel as a utopian vision of the future but of his present, the use of real persons and events which were easily recognisable, further anchored the plot in his own lifetime, a period where his heroine would not have escaped from criticism so lightly. The novel was rejected by Macmillan due to fears over the nature of the content, and taken up by T. Fisher Unwin. Some early reviews were positive about the novel although most were restrained in their praise. However, John St Loe Strachey's review in *The Spectator* described the work as 'capable of poisoning the minds of those who read it' and classed it as 'depraved'.²⁶ Sherborne notes that Strachey was by no means isolated in his opinion and the book was consequently banned from a number of libraries.²⁷ This was not the first time Wells's fiction had created a sensation due to his treatment of sex and sexuality. His 1906 novel *In The Days of the Comet* depicted a vision of a future where sexual freedom involved the possibility of multiple lovers for men and women alike, a consideration which had understandably attracted criticism from his Edwardian contemporaries; and in what

²³ Anthony West, 'Introduction', *Heritage* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1984), viii.

²⁴ Glendinning, 65-66.

²⁵ Stubbs, 191.

²⁶ John St Loe Strachey, 'A Poisonous Book', *Spectator*, 20 November 1909, in *H. G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Routledge, 1972), 169-171. Wells's rejoinder (1909) is reprinted on pages 172-4.

²⁷ Sherborne, 203-4

came to be a typical pattern for Wells, his public and private dramas coincided.²⁸ As Margaret Drabble asserts in her Introduction to *Ann Veronica*, ‘the scandal over *The Days of the Comet* merged, inevitably with the scandal over Wells’s excessive interest in Rosamund Bland and Amber Reeves.’²⁹ Miss Bland was the illegitimate daughter of Hubert Bland and was brought up by his wife, the children’s author, Edith Nesbit. She was also a member of the Fabian Nursery and preceded Reeves in Wells’s affections. There is some evidence to suggest Wells also had relations with Edith.³⁰ It is interesting to note that in Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* although there is no character easily identifiable as Rosamund,³¹ Edith Nesbit has been indicated as the inspiration behind Olive Wellwood, who also has a sexual encounter with the Wells character, Methley.³² Such a complicated personal life conducted with such well-known figures often in an open fashion, inevitably attracted censure in a period where women and their children were ostracised for extramarital affairs and illegitimacy. Such issues connected to so-called ‘fallen women’ in this period, are explored through Byatt’s depiction of Methley’s relationships. Byatt portrays extra-marital affairs and illegitimate children without the romanticism of *Ann Veronica* or the optimism of Wells’ utopian tracts, yet the reality of such a situation is still kept at bay to a degree. Methley’s first seduction in the novel is of Elsie Warren. Elsie has fled from a poverty stricken working-class family after the death of her last remaining parent, in search of her brother, Philip, whose ambition to be a potter has led him to the family of the eccentric and unpredictable Benedict Fludd. The reader is informed that the Warren family’s situation was so extreme that the children had to sleep alongside a dead infant when there was nowhere else to keep the body. Elsie undertakes the role of unpaid housekeeper in Fludd’s home, even though she soon becomes aware of the potential threat of Fludd’s perverse sexual predilections. It is not Fludd, however, who takes advantage of this situation but Methley, who is described as having, ‘a skill the young men had not developed. He could tell which of the women were, as he put it to himself, in need, potential wild girls’ (443). Elsie becomes pregnant and she fears it will forever prevent her from pursuing any other kind of life. Ironically, Methley lectures on women being given independence and sexual freedom, in the same way that Wells advocated ‘taking sex lightly’, an attitude to sexual behaviour that was unusual for the period to say the least.³³ As Methley’s wife is aware, he is the father of Elsie’s child; it is likely Methley also knows, yet

²⁸ Stubs, 185-6 and Drabble, xxi-xxii.

²⁹ Drabble, xxii.

³⁰ Smith, 208-9.

³¹ There is an argument however, for seeing Byatt’s character, Dorothy Wellwood as inspired by Rosamund Bland. Dorothy’s step-father, Humphrey, sexually assaults her before she is aware they are not related, and Michael Sherborne has discussed the possible incestuous desire of Hubert Bland for his daughter (182-3).

³² Jane Shilling, *The Telegraph*, April 26 2009. This connection is also referred to by Charles McGrath in his *New York Times* interview with Byatt.

³³ Lewis, 80.

despite his public protestations he offers her no assistance and he goes on to repeat the situation with another similarly virginal woman, Florence Cain. Wells did however, financially support his children when it was necessary and did not leave his lovers entirely without friends and support. He also had prolonged contact with many of the women he slept with, whereas Methley appears to have just brief sexual encounters. Methley cannot be deemed a perfect reflection of Wells the man; but as an incarnation of Wells's philosophy on sexual activity rather than as a representation of the person, Methley's behaviour here is quite illuminating and perfectly depicts the potential threat of his views to the well-being of many women of his time.

There were those that feared Wells's ideas on sexual behaviour were ultimately dangerous to women in his own milieu. Mrs Humphry Ward was one of them.

H. G. Wells appeared to her to threaten to make women of her own social class more vulnerable by destroying the marriage contract whereby man provided for women and stood between them and a predatory outside world in return for sexual fidelity and household services.³⁴

Although this view might sound circumspect from a contemporary perspective, in the Edwardian period it was perfectly reasonable. Young women still tended to be relatively ignorant about sex and its repercussions, and methods of birth control would certainly have been extremely difficult to obtain amongst the lower classes, if they even knew about them, which most of them would not. The more Bohemian styled upper-middle class circles frequented by Wells were better informed and more open minded, but even in these groups criticism for Wells's affair with the middle-class Reeves was rife: 'as Beatrice Webb remarked, it was one of those very rare cases where the man attracted more opprobrium than the woman.'³⁵ A lower-class woman risked being not only rejected by her family but also becoming financially destitute. Elsie Warren is certain she will have to leave her place at the Fludd's and consider a 'Home for Fallen Women'(317-8), the very name making the social moral classification of sex outside of marriage quite clear.³⁶ Wells may have been looking forward to a new world where sexual freedom was a possibility, but he and the women he had affairs with still lived in an England where women were still much restricted and social opprobrium was the result of transgression. Byatt writes that whilst training to be a doctor in 1909 one of her young female characters must wear a skirt that would not show her ankles even if she were bending over to a patient. Ann Veronica, who dresses as she likes and does what she likes with very little censure from anyone outside of the inhabitants of

³⁴ Lewis, 81.

³⁵ Lewis,77.

Morningside Park, is both very lucky and very unusual. Ann Veronica would have had no autonomy in law, something she does learn to a certain extent through her experience with the suffragettes and her financial dealings with Ramage but the dangers of such dealings for a lone woman at this time are not explored in the light of the reality of the situation and the potential hardship she could have suffered had Capes not supported her.

The Children's Book, like *Ann Veronica*, depicts the suffragette movement and the widespread anger against the women who fought for the right to vote but whereas in *Ann Veronica* her venture into campaigning aggressively for women's suffrage and consequent imprisonment is merely a stage in an education which leads to Ann's eventual realisation that her primary ambition is to marry, in *The Children's Book* the full horrors these women experienced is made clear. Ann Veronica's prison sentence is glossed over to a certain extent, an unpleasant experience but not the horrendous one many women endured. Wells did not agree with the methods of these women but his omission of the details of their situation softens the social realism of his work.³⁷ *The Children's Book* considers the situation rather more directly both through the character of Hedda Wellwood, who like Ann aligns herself with an aggressive group of women protesters and is consequently imprisoned, but also through the consideration of real women who went through such experiences, such as Emily Davison and Sylvia Pankhurst. Byatt writes:

There were tales of suffering in cages, of force-feeding that amounted to torture – wooden gags between the teeth, or metal clamps, breaking them, the terrible tube forced in, whilst the warders held the struggling woman, by the ears, by the breast, by the hair, by the hands and legs. And the snaking pipe might miss the surging target, might enter the lung, might rupture the bowel [...] women who went into their captivity looking forty and came out looking seventy. (569)

These horrors are juxtaposed with Methley's arguments on female emancipation which seem to be focussed on free love and removing the sense of shame in the naked body. His behaviour towards the opposite sex further enforces the lack of responsibility behind his arguments and his lack of concern for the minds and hearts of such women. When the inspiration behind Methley is brought into play and his actions are reconsidered in the light of Wells life and work, it is difficult not to see this as a critique of Wells, and a signalling of a double standard in his life that was perhaps disparaging, rather than furthering the female cause of which he claimed to be a proponent. *Ann Veronica* concludes in prison that a 'woman wants a proper alliance with a man, a man who is better stuff than herself. [...] She wants to be free – legally and economically free, so as not to be subject to the

³⁷ Stubbs, 186-7.

wrong man; but only God, who made the world, can alter things to prevent her being slave to the right one' (204). It is difficult to see this woman who eventually marries conventionally, has children, and reconciles with her family as quite the revolutionary she is at first presented to be. Rebecca West criticised Wells's novels *Marriage* and *The Passionate Friends* for being at least in part anti-feminist.³⁸ Methley's works which provide a similarly fantasy tinged reality are easily comparable. As Elsie Warren comments on Herbert Methley, 'He doesn't write about the real world, that's for sure' (554), and Rebecca West's reviews of the work of H. G. Wells largely concurred.

However, Byatt's most incisive use of Wells's ideas can be seen in Herbert Methley's sexual encounter with Florence Cain, which is particularly illuminating when considered alongside Ann Veronica's near rape by Ramage.³⁹ There are also more similarities between this relationship and those in Wells's own life. Florence is more like the sort of woman Wells pursued, from a good yet liberal family, well educated, and to a certain extent in pursuit of him as much as he was of her.⁴⁰ The seduction of Amber Reeves purportedly occurred from within the walls of Newnham College, Cambridge something that particularly shocked Beatrice Webb, and it is in Florence's room at this very college where Methley first makes his intentions clear, inviting her to meet him again at a later date.⁴¹ Although Florence is more clearly aware of Methley's intentions and reciprocates his sexual interest in a way Ann Veronica does not with Ramage, the two events are startlingly similar in many respects. They both meet an older man for lunch they know to have an interest in them beyond that of the platonic; they both go to a French restaurant, and they are both taken to a private room which is furnished in much the same way, being designed for the same purpose. Despite the differences in the two encounters the two women are left with the same feelings. In Wells's novel '[w]hen Ann Veronica reached her little bed-sitting room again, every nerve in her body was quivering with shame and self disgust.'⁴² Florence leaves Methley feeling sick and out of control, 'by then she hoped never to see or hear of him again' (495); she stays overnight at her family home and then returns alone to her rooms at Newnham. Byatt thus creates a connection between the novels and the two women as well as the two men. If Methley can be seen as an incarnation of Wells's sexual ideology, then in this comparison Byatt is arguably asking the

³⁸ See Glendinning, 49, and Rebecca West, 'Marriage', in *Critical Heritage*, 203-8.

³⁹ For more on this scene see Emelyne Godfrey, 'Uses for a Hatpin', *Times Literary Supplement*, February 5 2010.

⁴⁰ Smith, 209. Smith comments that Wells 'was being chased, and very steadily, by the young women of the Fabian kindergarten – Amber Reeves and Rosamund Bland.' This stands in opposition to the image of Reeves and Bland as victims. The arguments for and against Reeves in this respect are examined in more depth by Jane Lewis. Michael Sherborne states that 'whereas most of Wells's lovers were [...] strong, independent women' Rosamund Bland was 'something of a victim of those around her' (183).

⁴¹ Drabble, xxiii.

⁴² Wells, *Ann Veronica*, 170.

reader to consider if Ramage either embodies Wells's views as well, or if his behaviour is a likely result of Wells's theories. To a certain extent both women are taken advantage of, being inexperienced and vulnerable when Ramage and Methley approach them. Wells even took responsibility for West's pregnancy stating that as the more experienced of the two of he held himself accountable.⁴³ However, even if Byatt does not intend a comparison to Wells's life, surely she is questioning his ideology. Can sex be viewed lightly if women do not have the same experiences and therefore the same knowledge as men? Sexual freedom in this novel is depicted as only true freedom if both parties are on an even footing. *Ann Veronica* recognises this also but it does not really investigate the dangers of such considerations, and Ann Veronica eventually succumbs to the status quo without really confronting the reasons for her failure to overcome social convention. Wells reverts to a facile image of the woman being created fundamentally to desire male dominance, equality being in this novel merely the liberty to choose to whom you are enslaved.⁴⁴ For Byatt's characters there are harder lessons but the message is one for a better world where the solutions are not easily won.

The Children's Book is not the only contemporary treatment of Wells's life and work via the medium of fiction, but it is one of the few portrayals which draw upon his 'realist' prose and present a comparison between social ideology, social behaviour and artistic creation. For an author who not only played out the dramas of his personal life through his own creative output but also lectured 'that sexual relationships were best discussed via the medium of the novel, a view that was in line with his idea that great and important beliefs were grounded less in fact than in artistic impression'; this is perhaps the most apt way of contemplating the issues surrounding his work whilst simultaneously asserting the import of historical context.⁴⁵ Wells's literary work, his social vision and his behaviour were after all products of his time; regardless of how forward thinking he was in many respects. Without men like Wells presenting alternative ways of living to the general populace, many of the subsequent developments in sexual equality may not have occurred, but he was still a man born into a society which legally recognised patriarchal authority. It is hardly surprising then that Wells's attitude toward female emancipation was so contrary, especially considering how his promiscuous nature was gratified by many of his choices. To view Wells's ideas in his historical milieu from a contemporary perspective is then both to judge him with the benefit of hindsight, but also to comprehend the limitations of the period and what this meant both for him and for the women with whom he associated and those he may have influenced. Byatt's self-conscious meta-narrative, which exhibits awareness

⁴³ Glendinning, 50.

⁴⁴ W. Warren Wager comments on the 'lukewarm feminism' of *Ann Veronica* and how the heroine ends 'settling down as a dutiful wife and mother. No career for her!' in *H. G. Wells Traversing Time* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 127.

⁴⁵ Lewis, 79.

of the power of the fictional and of the author-creator, confronts Wells's attempts to exert social influence through fiction, acknowledging the desire for sexual adventures in both genders, and the import of sexual equality whilst simultaneously highlighting the disparity between envisioned sexual utopia and the reality of the present he inhabited. Her use of female characters from different social classes who nevertheless have comparable aspirations and intellect, yet who are similarly compromised by their relations with the Wells-inspired Herbert Methley serves to emphasise the impact of Wells's opinions on women from a variety of social backgrounds and to make transparent the extent of the dangers of his ideology for a complete society. *The Children's Book* therefore serves as both fiction and social criticism and provides a new method of assessing Wells on his own terms.