AN AMBIGUOUS IDOL: H. G. WELLS INSPIRING AND INFURIATING WOMEN

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Enid Bagnold, novelist and active member of the Chelsea Babies Club, wrote to H. G. Wells in 1918 that 'you see I've (we've) "got over" your kind of woman – Those jolly, long-limbed, impetuous, frank, rebellious […] women'.[1] Bagnold embodied here what becomes more widely apparent when examining the correspondence received by H. G. Wells (now in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), that for many women of the early twentieth century involved with progressive causes, Wells occupied a somewhat uneasy place. They were enthused by his ideas of wide-ranging social reform but inclined to be infuriated by his dismissal of the part women might play in bringing about his ideals of a new society except in the capacity of healthy mothers of bouncing eugenic babies or the inspiration of men. Enid Bagnold indeed was particularly scathing about the latter: 'damn it dear H. G., you don't suppose a woman educated as I was, on Ann Veronica, goes in for "influence with her husband"! We are much too clumsy-fingered, "honest and brave"'.[2]

Wells had created, in Ann Veronica in the novel of that name, a vibrant figure of modern young womanhood, impatient for experience and seeking something, even if she is not sure quite what, beyond the bounds of her family's conventional suburban life: 'She wanted to live. She was vehemently impatient − she did not clearly know for what − to do, to be, to experience. And experience was slow in coming.'[3]

Although Ann Veronica does achieve her aim of studying biology at Imperial College, destiny and experience definitively arrive in her love-relationship with Capes. The novel ends with them finally married and Ann Veronica pregnant, having apparently abandoned other ambitions. Wells did not pursue her story to the point where she might, perhaps, have found even the most congenial of companionate unions and motherhood no longer absorbing all her energies. The date of the novel meant that it well preceded the Great War and what that meant for women.

Many women contemporaries explicitly revered Wells as an iconic figure of progressive thought and activism. In 1917 Margaret Leonora Eyles, a novelist and socialist living in a South London slum and eking out a living writing romance novelettes, responded to a letter from Wells praising her work with awe and delight:

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[1] Enid Bagnold (Lady Jones) to H. G. Wells, 25 July 1918, B 9, H. G. Wells papers, Rare Book and Special Collections Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I am grateful to the Library for awarding me their John 'Bud' Velde Fellowship in 2007 to undertake research in the Wells papers.

[2] Bagnold to Wells, 25 July 1918, B 9, Wells papers at UIUC.

[3] H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica: A Modern Love Story* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1909), 3.

> Thank you very much for writing to me. I had to sit quiet a few minutes to realize it. It really was a little dazzling to think that you, who are probably better known even than Shakespeare, should have bothered to write to me. I was feeling very miserable when your letter came […] I hugged to myself the thought 'Mr. Wells says my work is fine spirited'[…] you will never understand what an immense lift you have given me.[4]

She subsequently mentioned that 'I lend your books to everyone who is muddled and unhappy. I preach "Wells" all the time'.[5] In 1937 the novelist Storm Jameson wrote along similar lines:

> Other generations enjoy & respect your writing & work, but only mine took it, so to speak, bang in the midriff. You shaped our minds & our lives, & if we had not been grateful we should be utter pigs, but I swear that we are grateful for what you did for us. Certainly you did much more than shape the minds of a generation, but it is not for me to tell you that. I can only speak for myself & for five or six young men who would be speaking for themselves if they were not dead in France.[6]

However, they were also often moved to irritation and even fuming rage by his pronouncements about women and his assumptions concerning their place.

Wells's fictional representations of women had been bothering admirers even before the Great War. In 1911 Stella Browne, the feminist sex reformer, wrote to Wells to declare herself delighted at his delineation of 'sex as a thing collectively portentous' and the need for 'the power and beauty of the love of man and woman […] [to] frame a justifiable vision of the ordered world' in *The New Machiavelli*. But he did not go quite far enough for her:

> I just want to suggest, that whereas most men are admitted to be polygynous, there is much less acknowledgement of the fact that <u>many</u> women, & not the least attractive and intelligent, are polyandrous. […] All women are not born mothers […] for a woman with a great deal of temperament […] a baby is not always an efficient safety valve.[7]

Margaret Leonora Eyles also appears to have found *The New Machiavelli* a call to contradiction in spite of her passionate admiration for Wells: in an 'Author's Note' to her novel *A Mother in England* (either unpublished, or not under that title), she wrote that 'this book is written in answer to the challenge made by Mr. Wells in *The New*

[4] Margaret Leonora Eyles to Wells, 1 January 1917, E 157, Wells papers at UIUC.
[5] Margaret Leonora Eyles to Wells, 4 April 1918, E 157, Wells papers at UIUC.
[6] Storm Jameson to Wells , 11 October 1937, J 32, Wells papers at UIUC.
[7] Stella Browne to Wells, [n.d. ?1911/12], Wells papers at UIUC.

Machiavelli […] that no woman can write an honest, introspective account of woman.'[8]

Stella Browne was not alone in being underwhelmed by Wells'sdepiction of women and sex: it was notoriously the young Rebecca West's scathing comments ('old maid's mania, the reaction towards the flesh of a mind too long absorbed in airships and colloids') on his next novel, *Marriage*, which led to their prolonged and painful liaison. She had some pertinent things to say about his vision of women: 'Mr. Wells sees that Marjorie is a thorough scoundrel. The horror of it is that, confused by her clear eyes and copper hair, he accepts her scoundrelism as the normal condition of women.'[9] She later commented that 'Mr. Wells' heroines […] have nothing in common except their persistent trait of dishonesty'.[10]

It is certainly somewhat remarkable that although Wells knew large numbers of women of considerable achievement in a range of spheres (and had affairs with not a few of them) this experience of what women could be capable of beyond the spheres of the domestic, the maternal or the emotional life finds little or no reflection in his novels. Indeed, there is usually a note of satire or scorn for female characters who are dedicated to a cause rather than to a man, as in his depiction of suffragettes in *Ann Veronica*: unless, like Isabel in *The New Machiavelli*, they conclude that they can best serve the cause by serving the man promoting it, or like Mary in *The Passionate Friends*, through exercising 'indirect influence' as an elite political hostess.

He also seems to have been remarkably impervious to the enormous burden that domestic work and motherhood placed on women and the extent to which it limited their creative activities, even when his attention was explicitly drawn to this. In her first letter to him in 1917 Margaret Leonora Eyles remarked:

> People who want to do artistic work of any sort oughtn't to marry. There's the home, a big mouth asking for money pulling one way, there are utterly fascinating babies on the other side, one's man, all dissipating one's mental energies. And they are so insistent that art doesn't get a look in.[11]

She reiterated her sense of 'the crowning idiocy of trying to be an artist and a married woman with a family to support […] the mad, unintelligent slavery of marriage and motherhood as they happen in Peckham' in a later letter.[12]

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[8] Margaret Leonora Eyles to Wells, 4 April 1918, E 157, Wells papers at UIUC

[9] Rebecca West, 'Marriage', *The Freewoman*, 19 September 1912, reprinted in *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1982), 64-9.

[10] Rebecca West, 'Mr. Wells through American Eyes', *Daily News*, 14 August 1915, *The Young Rebecca*, 302-4.

[11] Margaret Leonora Eyles to Wells, 1 January 1917, E 157, Wells papers at UIUC

[12] Margaret Leonora Eyles to Wells, 4 April 1918, E 157, Wells papers at UIUC.

In 1932 Wells published a substantial non-fiction volume, *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*, setting forth his ideas concerning the enormous changes that had taken place in the world of recent decades, a 'change of scale' in how people apprehended their position in the world, the need for measures of adaptation to new circumstances. He intended it as 'a sincere and strenuous attempt

to make economic and social science come alive and be personal'.[13] A chapter on 'The Rôle of Woman in the World's Work' was only inserted at the suggestion of his former lover, the original model for Ann Veronica, the writer, feminist, and socialist Amber Blanco White, 'although it does not by any means present her particular views'.[14] He conceded that much about women's position in contemporary society and the degree to which she contributed to the work of the world was still strongly influenced by longstanding historical factors of female oppression and legal disadvantage. However, the extent to which he overlooked or dismissed the role of women's own agency in improving their own lot and in working for other causes would not have pleased woman readers who were active about the world's work; nor would they have been quite so sanguine as he that their work in literature art and science 'suffer[ed] under no handicap'. His conclusion that the role of woman 'seems to be still decorative or ancillary,' and 'had released no new initiatives in human affairs,' distressed a number of his women friends and associates.[15] This chapter, and similar pronouncements in press articles and interviews throughout the 1930s garnered a considerable and considered response and reaction from his female friends and associates.

Lady Rhondda, feminist activist and the editor of the influential periodical *Time and Tide*, wrote thanking him for 'his section on Women,' which she read in draft.[16] While she found it very interesting and useful and something that needed doing, she had some doubts about his suggestion that 'women – more than men – tend to become outstanding rather for what they are than for what they do. Isn't that accounted for mainly by the attitude of the men?' She mentioned important women reformers who were unknown outside limited circles, unlike film stars: 'the public doesn't want to know about a couple of drab schoolmarms who did a long solid dull /but essential/ piece of work over a long period of years.'[17] Although he thanked her for her comments, it does not seem as though they made much impression. The following year she wrote to him again, expressing what seems to have been a common feeling: 'I don't think you are a feminist – I don't even think you know the meaning of the word […]. Still, what matter? […] you, after all, are one of the finest world citizens

[13] H. G. Wells, *The Work Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (London: Heinemann, 1932), 'The Object of this Work', 1-26
[14] *Work, Wealth and Happiness*, 22-3.
[15] *Work, Wealth and Happiness*, 'The Rôle of Women in the World's Work', 523-62.
[16] *Work, Wealth and Happiness*, 24.
[17] Lady Rhondda to Wells, 29 July 1932, R 106, Wells papers at UIUC.

we have. I'm sorry women now they've got the vote don't come up to your expectations – do men?'[18]

Naomi Mitchison, the novelist, birth control campaigner and Labour Party activist (and mother of a large family), wrote to him that she found this chapter on women worrying:

> [W]hen you say that nothing good has yet been produced by women, I wonder if you realise the tremendous weight we have to push against still? We are still so discouraged all the time… there are constantly people jibing at us, which may not be worth bothering about, but – it's like working in a cloud of mosquitos.

She also commented on pressures upon women to spend and consume, activities that Wells had deplored.[19]

In July 1938 an article by Wells in the *Sunday Dispatch* aroused serious ire in the bosoms of several eminent feminists. Sylvia Pankhurst, a veteran of the militant suffrage movement, wrote furiously:

> [Y]ou have the impudence […] to state publicly that it is "impossible to treat" woman "as another worker" because she is "lazy when it comes to serious work." Forgive me being frank, but are not you, like most others, a dwarf in intellectual achievement as compared with Marie Curie.

She feared that, 'Your confessions, with their absurdities about women, in the "Sunday Dispatch" seem to pave the way for an exit into Fascism… an act of treachery to the cause of social advance.'[20] A few years later she asked him 'You don't regret women's enfranchisement I suppose,' and argued that 'women are more efficient than they were since it was secured,' although she conceded that 'too many are mere passengers still.'[21]

Dora Russell, writer and educationalist, former wife of Bertrand Russell following bitter legal struggles over divorce and child custody, was similarly shocked at his expression of his belief about women that 'that we cannot do serious work and are lazy and use our sex etc'. She pointed out that:

> Ever since you first knew me I have been doing serious work, practically all unpaid […]for the sake of work and causes I believed in. […] [B]ecause I am a woman people in general pass over my work for that of men far less outstanding in education. […] And the reason is that Dora Russell has consistently refused to be the kind of woman that you say all women are, and has stood out for the society and the relations between men and women in which you once believed […]. Has it ever occurred to you that women are driven back into creeping and flattering because the marriage and earning system continues to be stacked against them?

[18] Lady Rhondda to Wells, 12 March 1933, R 106 Wells papers at UIUC.
[19] Naomi Mitchison to Wells, M 382, Wells papers at UIUC.
[20] Sylvia Pankhurst to Wells, 10 July 1938, P 38, Wells papers at UIUC.
[21] Sylvia Pankhurst to Wells, 12 November 1941, P 38, Wells papers at UIUC.

Like Rhondda, she invoked the significant group of women which Wells seemed to have completely overlooked in his diatribe: 'Most of the women I have known have been, like myself, not charmers, but serious, and on the whole, intelligent hard workers.'[22]

These women were all busy with their public lives, and in the case of Russell and Mitchison, also bringing up young families. Even so they found time to produce these ripostes to what they perceived as Wells's low estimate of their sex.

He had a more sustained correspondence, over several years, from a young married woman living in South London and not entirely happy with her lot. Mrs. Jones wrote to him first in November 1936:

> I am writing to protest against your low estimate of the probable contribution to be made by women to the civilisation of the future. […] You mention casually that a certain amount of energy is used up by marriage and motherhood; but you do not realise just how much. You forget that women with the kind of vitality that gets things done tend to mate fairly early, and the first keen edge of their enthusiasm is worn away by domestic duties.

She gave him an outline of her own life:

> I intended to be a doctor, but at seventeen I fell violently in love, so I took the quickest degree I could find, an ordinary arts degree, and was capped before I was twenty. I know your opinion of the M.A. degree: I merely mention this to show that my mental capacity is up to normal.

She obtained a teaching certificate, then sat the open competitive Civil Service examination, and was appointed an assistant inspector of taxes. A year later her beloved decided that he was in a position to marry, and she was required to relinquish her post:

> The government whose requirements I had satisfied in an open competitive examination informed me that I must give up my appointment before marriage. No-one has ever explained to me the logic of this procedure; but the result was that the Civil Service was now closed to me.

She then had two children, and during the depression her husband was out of work for six months: 'The task of looking after a small child and running a household on very little money left me without an ounce of superfluous energy. Even if I had been a genius I could not have done any useful constructive work at this period.' Now that her children were a little older she was planning on not spending her life in domestic drudgery but finding a job, both for her own satisfaction and 'to help to bring about this new and better world that you describe':

[22] Dora Russell to Wells, 9 July 1938, R 321, Wells papers at UIUC.

> There must be hundreds of women like me who might have been doctors, scientists, lawyers, civil servants, but have been diverted from their life-work by their sex. […] In a better organised state there would be tremendous release of feminine energy for social purposes, and apart from Russia, you have at present no data available for estimating the value of this new contribution.

Yet at the end of this very long letter, she concluded:

> You have made such an impression on my mind that I even dream about you. I dreamt that you were sitting by fire trying to write with a blunt pencil, and I
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> sharpened your pencil for you. It must have been a dream-fulfilment of my longing to be a helpful disciple.[23]

This again embodies the tension between women's attraction to many of the ideas Wells promoted and to the idea of working for a better society, and their discomfort with his attitudes towards them as a gender.

She did not, however, give up on the possibility of bringing him round to a better sense of women's potential worth, even though, in January 1937, she saw that, 'I have failed to alter your conviction that in all matters requiring initiative and creative thoughts one must expect a negligible contribution from women.' Nonetheless she wrote a long, well-considered letter on the reasons why women's achievements had not been as remarkable as they might have been and how this might improve in future. The points she raised included: 'We have at present no means of estimating the full extent of women's capabilities because under existing conditions woman's persona is wrongly designed and her impulse towards creative intellectual work is inhibited.' There were two societal ideals of womanhood: 'Efficient Housewife, and […] Beautiful, Alluring, Irresistible Syren,' neither of which were conducive to socially useful work: furthermore, 'In spite of all we hear of modern labour-saving devices, our system of individual housekeeping is criminally wasteful of female energy and talent.' She invoked the discoveries of contemporary genetics:

> Modern biology has never suggested that the genes which carry hereditary characteristics, transmit particular ability to men but not to women. From this it is reasonable to conclude that the potentialities of men and women are the same.

Therefore, she argued, what was at fault was the psychological chains placed upon women, imposed by education – 'I mean the ideas she absorbs from the current ideas of the community in which she lives.'[24] In a later letter she pointed out in greater detail the structural problems with hindered women's achievements. Reading the life of Madame Curie:

> It brings home to me the reason why women so seldom distinguish themselves. It requires such a rare combination of circumstances. She must have ability, she must

[23] P. Jones to Wells, 10 November 1936, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC.
[24] P. Jones to Wells, 8 January 1937, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC.

be born into a family where it is regarded as natural for a woman to use her brains, and she must marry the right man.[25]

Perhaps surprisingly, Wells not only took the trouble to respond to her letters, or at least to annotate them for his secretary to compose a reply: he encouraged her in her project of giving lectures at local evening classes, and also, a couple of years later, agreed to sponsor her so that she could obtain a ticket for the Reading Room at the British Museum in order to pursue research.[26] She continued to debate his ideas, though she seems to have been using him as a sounding board in order to organise her own thoughts. She critiqued his novel *Brynhild* (1937) and the suggestion that the most positive thing a married woman might do with her life was have five children:

> In the years it would take me to rear five children, I could help fifty, or perhaps a hundred of these boys [in her night classes]; given them some of the necessary knowledge; start them questioning and discussing; direct their energies towards creative effort; save some of this human material from being wasted. On the other hand, if I keep on producing children, they may be put on the scrapheap along with the two sons I already have, because the menfolk have failed to put the world in order. Which course of action seems to you to have the more urgent claim upon my attention?

She also characterised his heroines as 'amiable spectators of life's battle' (echoing earlier criticisms by Rebecca West). She mentioned the prejudice she encountered on trying to return to the world outside the domestic sphere:[27]

> When the various [London County Council] inspectors heard that I had spent the last seven years as a housewife they were horrified at the idea that I should lecture in economics and biology and psychology.[28]

When she tried to return to the world of academic study:

> I find that learned gentlemen in academic circles are convinced that after a woman has spent some years in keeping house she is no longer fit for intellectual effort.

The research she was considering pursuing was, slightly ironically, on a subject close to Wells's own heart, given his enthusiasm for motherhood: an investigation into possible means of increasing the birthrate – 'a subject which should be treated from a woman's point of view'.[29]

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[25] P. Jones to Wells, 9 March 1939, Wells papers at UIUC.
[26] Wells to P. Jones, 10 January 1937, Wells papers at UIUC; P. Jones to Wells, 3 March, 15 May 1939, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC.
[27] P. Jones to Wells, 2 February 1938, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC ; West, 'Marriage'.
[28] P. Jones to Wells, 2 February 1938, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC.
[29] P. Jones to Wells, 15 May 1939, J 113, Wells papers at UIUC.

What became of Mrs. Jones we do not know: her last letter to Wells was dated July 1939. Did the advent of war tie her still more closely to domestic cares, or did the emergency situation finally provide an outlet for her talents? Mrs. Jones seems almost an archetype of a woman responding to Wells. She was inspired by Wells, she argued with him, she used him as a means to formulate her own ideas. Perhaps, like Amber Reeves, later Blanco White, a woman who did not rest in the domestic sphere and in the enjoyment of motherhood but returned to active engagement in the worlds of work and politics (and collaborated with Wells and incited him to write that controversial chapter on the role of women), she was what might have happened to Ann Veronica after the novel ended, a story that Wells himself never wrote.