Female Adolescence in
May Sinclair’s Mary Olivier
and the Construction of a
Dialectic between Victorian
and Modern

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Jacqueline Rose has used the representation of childhood in Victorian culture in order to make a general point about how children figure in the imagination of adults. In The Case of Peter Pan, she argues that the hypothesis of the sexual innocence of children enables the unconscious projection of perverse desire onto them. And she finds evidence of this paradox in photographs of girls and boys by Victorian photographers as well as in the display of the bodies of physically fit young female actors cross-dressed as boys in stage productions of James Barrie’s (1860–1937) Peter Pan (1904).1 The latter example, supporting Rose’s proposition about how the Victorians were licensed to look at boys and girls, also applies to the early years of the twentieth century. It is this crossover that particularly interests me since I believe that latter-day reconstructions of Victorian childhood move within a play of Victorian and modern elements that effectively constitute one another. This essay is, therefore, a study not only of the representation of the onset of puberty in a Victorian child but also of the way in which the terms Victorian and modern have been constructed as mutually complicating around the realities of female sexuality. This dialectical movement is, in turn, central to the way in which the meaning of becoming-woman has been defined in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary culture.

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In order to understand the way in which Victorian culture functions as both a cause and an effect of modern culture, it is worth looking at how understandings of the term *Victorian* were fashioned by writers who experienced childhood and adolescence before the death of Victoria but whose careers took place after her death. Such writers might today be regarded as literary modernists, such as Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), or as "modern Victorians" – Suzanne Raitt’s phrase for May Sinclair (1863–1946).2 The fact that both Woolf and Sinclair were women is highly pertinent since, in novels about Victorian girls by former Victorian girls, such as Woolf’s *The Voyage Out* (1915) and Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), childhood matters primarily in relation to the cultural construction of what Freud (1856–1937) – who, in this respect, functions as another "modern Victorian" – describes as *womanhood*.3

Woolf’s *Voyage Out* marks the transition from childhood to adolescence principally by the absence of a transition. The young female protagonist, Rachel Vinrace, is already an adult at the beginning of the novel. Her upbringing by two spinster aunts, however, has left her in a Lady of Shalott-like remove from the ordinary comings and goings of life. As well, she appears to be remarkably un cognizant of the attraction to young men that one might expect a young woman to evince. As with Tennyson’s Lady, her main point of contact with affect is mediated through artistic performance – playing classical music on the piano, in this case.

This essay focuses on a passage describing the onset of adolescence in *Mary Olivier* by Woolf’s contemporary May Sinclair. In contrast to Woolf’s *Voyage Out*, Sinclair’s novel is a bildungsroman that, like James Joyce’s (1882–1941) *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), follows the first-person protagonist from infancy to her choice as an adult to become a writer. First published in 1919, *Mary Olivier* is didactically modern in ways that respond both to the traumas arising from World War I and to the currency that psychoanalysis enjoyed immediately after the war in the publications of such writers as M. K. Bradby and Barbara Low, both of whom were women.4 Sinclair, who in 1913 helped finance the opening of the new Medico-Psychological Clinic in Bloomsbury, was an early exponent of psychoanalysis in England.5 Freud’s early appeal in England was largely based on the implications of his work for the "wholesale reform of education and child-rearing."6 This interest informs Sinclair’s description of a moment of transition in Mary’s life.

It is important to remember the psychoanalytic context, which indicates how forcefully later notions of Victorian childhood have been shaped by the reconfiguration of Victorian childhood in contrast to modern enlightenment. It is of interest as well that, in Sinclair’s presentation of this moment, Mary seems to change from a girl into a woman with a directness that confuses the two categories while at the same time effacing the early-twentieth-century category of adolescence – despite the fact that the scene occurs in book 3 of the novel, "Adolescence, 1876–1879." In the further working out of the novel, adolescence might be described less as a phase of personal development than as a chronological space in which both daughters and mothers struggle with the metamorphosis from girlhood to womanhood. In this struggle, the chief danger is the psychic collapse of both figures into one another. In this imaginary binding, the mother’s regression to infancy functions as both cause and effect of a similar regression on the part of the daughter. The resulting cross-identification threatens to make adult individuation on the part of the daughter impossible.

In the presentation of Mary’s menarche, childhood is that which precedes the biological changes that make womanhood – meaning wifehood and maternity – a seemingly determinate destiny. Sinclair identifies the occultation of knowledge about the sexually maturing female mind and body with female Victorian rearing practices. In the following passage, the relationship between girls, mothers, and other adult women is represented in terms of silence, betrayal, and a sort of closeting of female knowledge.7 Both Sinclair’s and Woolf’s novels demonstrate the damage sustained as a result of this Victorian construction of a general rite of passage. At the same time, it is through its self-consciously modern stylistic elements that the text discloses that which it accuses the Victorians of suppressing. Sinclair writes:
Mamma whispered to Mrs. Draper, and Aunt Bella whispered to Mamma: "Fourteen." They always made a mystery about being fourteen. They ought to have told her.

Her thoughts about her mother went up and down. Mamma was not helpless. She was not gentle. She was not really like a wounded bird. She was powerful and rather cruel. You could only appease her with piles of hemmed sheets and darned stockings. If you didn’t take care she would get hold of you and never rest till she had broken you, or turned and twisted you to her own will. She would say it was God’s will. She would think it was God’s will.

They might at least have told you about the pain. The knives of pain. You had to clench your fists till the fingernails bit into the palms. Over the ear of the sofa cushions she could feel her hot eyes looking at her mother with resentment. She thought: “You had no business to have me. You had no business to have me.”

Somebody else’s eyes. Somebody else’s thoughts. Not yours. Not yours.

Mamma got up and leaned over you and covered you with the rug. Her white face quivered above you in the dusk. Her mouth pushed out to yours, making a small sound like a moan. You heard yourself cry: “Mamma, Mamma, you are adorable!”

That was you.8

In presenting this moment in her protagonist’s life, Sinclair breaks a Victorian taboo. When a Victorian novelist refers to the onset of puberty, the topic is likely to be approached indirectly or through metaphor. Operating through the consciousness of her protagonist, Sinclair, however, explicitly rejects the use of figurative language. A few years earlier, in The Three Brontës (1912), Sinclair had remarked that Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) likewise avoids such language in the “red room” scene in Jane Eyre (1847).9

Mary is used to thinking of her mother as victimized by her father, both by his insensitivity and by his incompetence as a provider. In the midst of her torment, however, Mary permits herself for the first time to think of her mother in another way – namely, as a perpetrator of violence against her: Mamma, she now perceives, “was not really like a wounded bird. She was powerful and rather cruel.” In The Three Brontës, Sinclair speaks of Brontë’s description of the red room as expressing “sensation raised to the nth power” (p. 142), and it is sensation that Sinclair attempts to exploit in charting Mary’s passage. In the experience of extreme sensation, Mary recognizes that what is at stake in her relationship with her mother is her mother’s effort to subject her to the domestic future that stretches away in an endless series of hemmed sheets and darned socks.

The function of her mother – and her attendant harpies – is no more or less than to break Mary’s will. Mary also recognizes that this peculiarly female work will be attributed by her mother, in false consciousness, to a patriarchal deity.

Sinclair’s style emphasizes subjectivity and the experience of physical pain. She attempts rhetorically to bring body to the threshold of utterance. The most obvious marker of a modern style in the passage is the use of the pronoun you by the first-person speaker. In this usage, you has multiple referents. It refers to Mary’s conscious sensation as well as to her consciousness of experiencing the sensation. It also suggests how thought can arise as if spontaneously out of intensity. And there may be an element of recall: you may index her memory of her consciousness at a particular moment in the past. The use of the pronoun attempts to move language closer to individual interiority at the same time that Sinclair attempts to move the implicitly gendered reader of the text into the mind of the speaker: “That was you.” To the extent that Sinclair succeeds, she moves her reader into a Victorian torture chamber.

The anxiety and pain experienced by Mary at this moment are exaggerated by her mother’s attempt to mystify the physical metamorphosis that Mary is undergoing. The passage works in a self-consciously feminist way by articulating a sociological culture of female knowledge – or rather ignorance – surrounding this scene. In a socioepistemological register, the scene demonstrates how female ignorance is constituted about (a) one’s own body, (b) the female body more generally, and (c) the bodily processes most specifically related to womanhood. A trio of women create this ignorance. And they do so by imposing fear and suffering on Mary.

The violence visited on the girl prompts important new awarenesses for her – in particular, awareness of the danger posed to her psychic growth by sympathetic identification with her mother. This insight comes to Mary in the form of a disavowal and repudiation of the womanhood being impressed...
on her: "You had no business to have me," she says of her mother. "You had no business to have me." The paragraph following this outburst demonstrates how the moment of recognition of a crucial truth can be immediately accompanied by an operation of the unconscious within consciousness, the effect of which is to begin repressing the newfound awareness. At this point, Mary lacks the psychic strength to conserve her insight into her mother’s (and her society’s) aggression. Hence, Mary finds herself at once disavowing what she now knows: "Somebody else’s eyes. Somebody else’s thoughts. Not yours. Not yours." She dissociates the new knowledge from herself.

The operation of the Freudian unconscious in this paragraph is another marker of its modernism. This contextualization is literal since Freud published a short essay on the unconscious in English in 1912. Moreover, writing at the end of the war, Sinclair anticipated a major advance in psychoanalytic thinking — namely, the invention of object-relations theory by Melanie Klein (1882–1960), who moved to England in 1926. Klein produced her first paper analyzing children in 1919, the year of publication of Sinclair’s novel. Relational analysis is that mode of psychoanalysis that seeks to understand operations in the psyche as structured by patterns of response formed within both early and continuing relations with objects and persons. For Klein, the most important examples are the patterns that exist between an infant and its mother. While the passage cited from Mary Olivier focuses on menstruation, the relational focus is on Mary and her mother’s ambivalent linkage.

The final paragraph of the passage indicates the powerful effect produced on Mary’s mother by this scene. Projecting into her daughter’s anxiety, suffering, and confused helplessness, Mary’s mother unconsciously regresses to a preoedipal state. She even loses the capacity of language: "Mamma got up and leaned over you and covered you with the rug. Her white face quivered above you in the dusk. Her mouth pushed out to yours, making a small sound like a moan." Mary, too, regresses, apparently helpless to prevent her own outburst: "You heard yourself cry; 'Mamma, Mamma, you are adorable!'" Yes, "That was you."

The powerful psychological register of the passage resonates with Sinclair’s feminist sociology of Victorian culture. The transformation from girlhood to womanhood sketched in this passage is not a move from an immature to a mature state. Rather, accessing womanhood is both an occasion and a cause of a regression to a construction, at once social and unconscious, of childhood that Sinclair catches in the mother’s response but that is likewise a continuing psychological state. Psychically, Mary’s mother is a child. And Mary too regresses into adoration of — one might say fusion with — the mother with whom a moment earlier she was justifiably angry. The passage warns that the shift from girlhood to womanhood minus the individuating and exploratory forays of adolescence continually reverts to childhood, even to infancy.

This specter of the woman-become-child recurs in Sinclair’s characterization of Mary’s Aunt Charlotte, an intelligent, perceptive, and attractive spinster whose siblings eventually lock her in a mental institution. Charlotte’s mental illness takes the form of being a child-woman. She plays with tiny dolls, which she gives to Mary. Her fatal immaturity shows in her tendency to declare her affections to whatever male passes by, whom she fancies to be her future husband. Charlotte’s expressed need for intimacy and her radical performance of sexual adolescence are presented to Mary by her mother as symptoms of Mary’s own future, should she fail to adhere to her mother’s will. But Mary, who sympathizes with her aunt both anxiously and with love, senses in Charlotte’s fate the return of a Victorian repressed.

Although Charlotte is a secondary character, she figures prominently in the structure of the novel. Book 1, "Infancy, 1865–1869," ends with a scene of "Aunt Charlotte standing at the foot of the kitchen stairs taking off her clothes and wrapping them in white paper; first, her black lace shawl; then her chemise. She stood up without anything on. Her body was polished and shining like an enormous white china doll. She lowered her head and pointed at you with her eyes" (p. 46 [1.5.4]). At the time, Mary believes that she has seen this action in a dream; but, as she recalls the dream afterward, it seems that the incident is one that she actually witnessed. As with the scene of her first menses, this disruptive moment is framed by a verbal exchange...
among female adults: "Mamma had told Aunt Bella all about it when they talked together that day, in the drawing-room. [Mary] knew because she could still see them sitting, bent forward with their heads touching, Aunt Bella in the big arm-chair by the hearth-rug, and Mamma on the parrot chair" (p. 46 [1.54]). They are bent forward, of course, whispering so that Mary (and the servants) will not be able to hear what they are saying. The scene is isomorphic with that of Mary's menses in book 3. A display of female sexuality is bracketed by the complicity of adult women instilling ignorance in a girl.

This scene and its attendant ambiguity return a decade later at the traumatic end of book 3. Mary dreams the earlier scene – or dream – again; only, this time, she is wakened by hearing her aunt scream, followed by a commotion upstairs. Again, Mary is unsure of what she actually saw as a child. But she is aware that Charlotte, whose mental health has further deteriorated, has become extremely agitated during the night. And she sees her brother, Dan, nursing an injury to his hand. Later, she hears someone leave the house. At daybreak, the local doctor arrives; and Mary, wakened, sees her aunt for the last time as she is dragged out of the house and driven away in the doctor's brougham. Given her mother's repeated warnings that Charlotte's fate will befall Mary, the end of book 3 has a strong force as a figure of nemesis. Although, in this case, the scene has definitely taken place, it also operates as a projection of Mary's (and her mother's) deepest anxieties regarding Mary's future.

Charlotte's breakdown and disappearance signify effects of sexual hysteria that also befall Mary. Moreover, this identification is not confined to the register of individual psychology. The identification of woman with hysteria also resonates in relation to contemporary political struggles. Sinclair completed Mary Olivier in the months following the war. Earlier in the decade, she had been involved in another war, one between the sexes, over political rights for women. In that fight, too, the charge lodged against the suffragettes was that they were hysterics. Sinclair responded by producing Feminism, a pamphlet commissioned by the Women Writers' Suffrage League in 1912 in answer to an attack by Sir Almroth Wright (1861–1947), professor of experimental pathology at the University of London. Earlier that year, Wright had published a letter in The Times in which he argued: "[T]he mind of woman is always threatened with danger from the reverberations of her physiological emergencies. It is with such thoughts that the doctor lets his eyes rest upon the militant suffragist. He cannot shut them to the fact that there is mixed up with the woman's movement much mental disorder; and he cannot conceal from himself the physiological emergencies which lie behind." Sinclair sums up: "His hypothesis is that what we may call journalistically the 'hysteria bacillus' is present as the pathogenic agent in every case of what the journalists are calling 'Suffragitis.'" The militant suffrage movement disappeared almost overnight with the declaration of war in August 1914. When, at the end of the war, Sinclair returns in the art of fiction to the disturbing ghost of Wright's supposedly scientific allegation, she does so with the psychoanalytic grammar of dream and enactment that she mastered in the years immediately before the war.

Given the attack against women based on female physiology made by experts such as Wright, Sinclair was, in turning to Freud, seeking a psychological explanation of the female malady. Readers of Freud will be aware of his claim precisely to offer psychological explanations in place of the physiological ones offered by Victorian psychiatrists and sexologists. Thereby occurs the shift from Victorian to modern psychology. But Wright's arguments are a reminder that, in 1912, the Victorian arguments were still considered modern. And readers of Freud will also be aware that, as late as 1920, he was unable to abandon physiological explanation of phenomena such as sexual inversion. Instead, he conflates the new analytic approach with physiologically based arguments already found in sexology and experimental psychology.

Against this background, it is not surprising that Sinclair's Feminism pursues its objective of questioning Victorian female typologies within the framework of Victorian psychology itself – in particular, within the terms of degeneration theory. Beginning by conceding too much, Sinclair writes: "In all large assemblies of human beings (men as well as women) you will
find some neurosis and hysteria and degeneracy, neurosis being the scourge of modernity" (p. 7). Moreover, just as, in a letter from prison in 1896, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) had contended that the rhetoric of Max Nordau’s (1849–1923) attacks on male artists, including Wilde himself, was contaminated by the very degeneracy that Nordau alleged against others,\textsuperscript{18} Sinclair finds in Wright and men who read him with approval symptoms of the "hysteria, neurosis, and degeneracy" (p. 7) that they purport to find in leading suffragists. The difference, however, is that Wilde parodies the rhetoric while Sinclair accepts its legitimacy.

This compromise leaves Sinclair on the defensive in speaking on behalf of a number of female types: wives, mothers, and spinsters. She quotes Wright: "The recruiting field for the militant suffragists is the half-million of our excess female population; the half-million of the unmated" (p. 16). She counters that most members of suffrage societies are both married and mothers. Regarding celibate women, she argues that their libido, which she calls "the Life-Force" (p. 30), is often directed toward humanitarian ends that contribute to the progress of "the race" (p. 20). As the phrase suggests, the rhetoric of Social Darwinism provides another Victorian frame of the argument. Wright’s suffragist typology includes "THE MILITANT, THE FRUSTRATED, THE INCOMPLETE, and THE INTELLECTUAL." (pp. 16–17).\textsuperscript{19} Sinclair rejects his characterization of the second group — "sexually embittered women" (p. 16), virgins or spinsters, who make the mistake of attempting to do men’s work as well as the fourth. Instead, she counters with a synthetic ideal of the complete woman, who succeeds as wife, mother, and intellectual. The synthesis embodies an evolutionary ideal. After the rare type of "the heaven-born feminine genius, . . . next come the possessors of inherited aptitudes, of strong natural talents, and of good all-round average brains. Other things equal, you will seldom find that these ‘Intellectuals’ are incomplete; on the contrary, though they are not commonly ‘precocious,’ they are as a rule remarkable for the strength and endurance of their sex instincts and for their physiological perfection" (p. 21). "And it is to such Intellectuals as these (with occasional reinforcements of the gentle bovine) that we look for the continuance and improvement of the race. They are the best wives and mothers in the country, and there are thousands of them in the Suffrage movement." (pp. 21–22). Sinclair refers to this type as "the NATURAL INTELLECTUAL." (p. 24): it consists of "doubly vital women" (p. 23).

While it might seem that this type is the end point, it is not. For, while Sinclair goes out of her way to affirm woman in her evolutionarily privileged role as mother and, in that sense, as guardian of race survival, she is hostile to one of Wright’s two "Ideal Types" of women, "the gentle, docile, brainless, bovine woman, who herself cares for no other activities than those of physiological motherhood" (p. 18). In mocking this type, Sinclair invokes the name of George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950): "[T]he maternal bovine . . . is dangerous. She is dangerous to Peace. She is the type celebrated by Mr. Bernard Shaw’s immortal greengrocer when he said that she was such a ‘born wife and mother’ that all the ‘children ran away from home.’ And her husband is frequently so bored with her that he, too, runs away and becomes furtively polygamous. So that her existence does not make for the all-round improvement of the race" (p. 20).

In this passage, Sinclair appears to part ways with Social Darwinists, including Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and his praise of motherhood as a female vocation.\textsuperscript{20} At the same time, she concedes that the brains of many women are insufficiently evolved for intellectual work. She complains that expanded opportunities for education, especially by competitive examination, are doing harm by attempting to turn women not suited for the work into intellectuals (pp. 22–25). She says of this class: "It is by their bodies, stunted, anaemic, undeveloped, that you can tell the Artificial Intellectuals" (p. 25).

Sinclair now arrives at the point that she is most concerned to make — namely, that the identification of woman with "the Life-Force" need have no necessary relation to marriage and motherhood in the lives of many and perhaps the most valuable of women. The essay begins to shift into a mystical register:

There is everything in that everlasting readiness to bring forth: everything in those profound and intarissable wells of instinct, in that stream of the
Life-Force of which Woman is pre-eminently the reservoir. What I venture to dispute is the conclusion that for a woman there is only one kind of alternative between frustration and fulfilment of the Life-Force, and that is — hysteria, neurosis and the detestable manifestations of degeneracy. I dispute it without for one moment blinking the frightful possibilities of the celibate kind of alternative between frustration and fulfilment that for a woman there is only one Life-Force of which Woman is pre-eminently when things seen — common things — trees in a field — a stretch of sky — became transfigured and took on I know not what divine radiance and beauty, whoever has known the exaltation, the exquisite and unspeakable joy, the sheer ecstasy and the ultimate peace that accompany such vision, however fleeting, whoever, I say, knows and remembers, will remain unmoved while the physiologist points out that these moments are most intimately associated with adolescence and the dawn of womanhood; that they are incident to falling in love; that they are part of the pageant of sexual passion, the psychological side of the great decorative illusion by which the Life-Force lures us to its end. (p. 30–31)

Continuing in this direction, Sinclair writes:

Whoever has known and can remember certain moments of heightened vision and sensation, when things seen — common things — trees in a field — a stretch of sky — became transfigured and took on I know not what divine radiance and beauty, whoever has known the exaltation, the exquisite and unspeakable joy, the sheer ecstasy and the ultimate peace that accompany such vision, however fleeting, whoever, I say, knows and remembers, will remain unmoved while the physiologist points out that these moments are most intimately associated with adolescence and the dawn of womanhood; that they are incident to falling in love; that they are part of the pageant of sexual passion, the psychological side of the great decorative illusion by which the Life-Force lures us to its end. (p. 30–31)

On this point, Sinclair, "the physiologist," and Freud are in agreement. Shortly after the publication of Mary Olivier, Freud wrote:

Libido is an expression taken from the theory of the emotions. We call by that name the energy . . . of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word "love." The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists (and this is what is commonly called love, and what the poets sing of) in sexual love with sexual union as its aim. But we do not separate from this — what in any case has a share in the name "love" — on the one hand, self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas. Our justification lies in the fact that psycho-analytic research has taught us that all these tendencies are an expression of the same instinctual impulses; in relations between the sexes these impulses force their way towards sexual union, but in other circumstances they are diverted from this aim or are prevented from reaching it, though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognizable (as in such features as the longing for proximity, and self-sacrifice).

Sinclair concludes:

It is little wonder, therefore, and little shame if the physiologist tells us that the sublime enthusiasm and self-devotion and self-sacrifice of the suffragists spring from the same root [as the sex instinct]. They will join with the lovers, the musicians and the saints (whom after all I can't keep out of it) in praising God for the wonderful root, deep-hidden, that bears the mystic flower. (p. 32)

Book 3, "Adolescence, 1876–1879," of Mary Olivier begins with a passage that evokes in fictional form the "moments of heightened vision and sensation" that Sinclair refers to in Feminism:

Mary went slowly up the lane between the garden wall and the thorn hedge.

The air, streaming towards her from the flat fields, had the tang of cold, glittering water; the sweet, grassy smell of the green corn blades swam on it. The young thorn leaves smelt of almonds and of their own bitter green.

The five trees stood up, thin and black, in an archway of golden white fire. The green of their young leaves hung about them like an emanation.

A skylark swung himself up, a small grey ball, spinning over the tree tops to the arch of the sunset. His song pierced and shook, like the golden white light. With each throb of his wings he shrank, smaller and greyer, a moth, a midge, whirling in the luminous air. A grey ball dropped spinning down.

By the gate of the field her sudden, secret happiness came to her. (p. 109 [3.12.1])

Earlier, I referred to the onset of Mary's menses as a moment when child is transformed into woman to the exclusion of adolescence. But, as this passage indicates, book 3 focuses on a number of ways in which Mary's sexually maturing body is matched by changes in experience. Just as, in Feminism, Sinclair takes pains to defend the female intellectual, Mary's physical growth occurs in parallel with her mental growth, specifically her challenge to Anglican orthodoxy and her concurrent embrace of philosophical pantheism.
This development situates the mother-daughter struggle of book 3 within the framework of masculinist ideology, as attested both by Mary's mother appealing to God's will and by Wright appealing to the truths of modern science. In Feminism, in arguing against Wright's view that anatomy is destiny, Sinclair repeatedly instances Will (e.g., p. 26). This term might seem to open a possibility of female agency not predetermined by what Wright called "the reverberations of her physiological emergencies," although it is possible that Will too is programmed by heredity. Women's intellectual achievements are grounded as much in physiology as in mystical experience and in what Sinclair sees as the prime motive of suffragette action — namely, "the Enthusiasm of Humanity." The Life-Force is the spring of the Suffrage movement; the Enthusiasm of Humanity; that passion which is above sex and above self; that all-sacrificing and all-suffering Love, beside which even a mother's devotion to her child is imperfect and impure. Very few, and those only the highest types, are capable of feeling it" (p. 33). Mother love, a primary instinct, is secondary to enthusiasm on behalf of the race.

The need to exceed the limits of physiology is signaled in the capability discovered by Mary to think beyond the limits of both libido and sexual ideology. In book 3, Sinclair figures this discovery in the trope of a woman's reading of the book of knowledge, in this instance the entry on Baruch Spinoza in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Sinclair sexualizes Mary's discovery of pantheism through a metaphor of female sexual self-initiation:

The big puce-coloured books stood in a long row in the bottom shelf behind her father's chair. Her heart thumped when she gripped the volumes that contained the forbidden knowledge of the universe. The rough morocco covers went Rr-rr-rimp, as they scraped together; and there was the sharp thud as they fell back into their place when she had done with them. These sounds thrilled her with a secret joy. When she was away from the books she liked to think of them standing there on the hidden shelf, waiting for her. The pages of "Pantheism" and "Spinoza" were white and clean, and she had noticed how they had stuck together.

The positioning of Victorian oppression against a modern struggle for enlightenment that I observe in Sinclair's description of Mary's menarche has been complicated by my subsequent account of how, in Wright and even in Freud, the Social Darwinist thesis that biology is destiny continues to affect medical thinking in the years before and after World War I. I have been unable to locate a modern knowledge altogether outside the parameters of Victorian science. The same observation holds true for the bisexual mental development that, in the passage quoted above, Sinclair associates with female adolescence.

If Victorian ideology persists in modern thinking, however, it is as likely to be true that modern enlightenment may make its appearance in contestations of Victorian bourgeois ideology within the Victorian period itself. Sinclair appreciates this point and, for this reason, pursues her thinking about the Woman Question not only in the biosocioeconomic terms of the essay on feminism but also in the aesthetic framework of a prolonged series of meditations on the Brontës. Not surprisingly, the virility of the Bronte sisters becomes an important point of reference in these discussions. Again, female bisexuality can be recaptured for the physiologically based arguments of Social Darwinists. However, the aesthetic, both in the Brontës and in Sinclair's novel, permits a much fuller exploration of what one might describe as the evolutionary potential of bisexuality than one finds in Wright or Freud.

At any rate, it was crucial to Sinclair herself to recognize intellectual and aesthetic bases of feminism within Victorian culture. For example, in The Three Brontës, she locates the impetus to the frank avowal of sexual capability in adolescent females in the fiction of Charlotte and Emily Brontë. I have already mentioned the power that Sinclair attributes to Charlotte's ability to express sensation. Likewise, she singles out Charlotte Brontë as a "master of the psychology of passion and of suffering" (p. 139). This passion is as ardent as it is chaste:

[I]t was this thing [passion], cast down, defiled, dragged in the mud, and ignored because of its defilement, that Charlotte Brontë took and lifted
Jane became the parent of George Eliot’s Cate-
up. She washed it clean; she bathed it in the
dew of the morning; she baptized it in tears;
she clothed it in light and flame; she showed it
for the divine, the beautiful, the utterly pure
and radiant thing it is, “the very sublime of faith,
truth and devotion.” She made it, this spirit of
fire and air, incarnate in the body of a woman
who had no sensual charm. Because of it little
Jane became the parent of [George Eliot’s] Cat-
erina [Sarti] and of Maggie Tulliver; and Shirley
prepared the way for [George] Meredith’s large-
limed, large-brained, large-hearted women.
(p. 138)

In all these aspects, Sinclair’s early-twenti-
eth-century critique of Victorian domestic
ideology and her affirmation of female pas-
sion are explicitly grounded in the precoc-
cious feminism of Victorian fiction itself.

And not only in female writing. Sinclair
places this feminism within a longer poetic
tradition that, like Vernon Lee’s (1886–1935),
includes Percy Bysshe Shelley. Sinclair,
however, reaches farther back to William
Blake and comes to the near present in the
work of A. C. Swinburne (1837–1909). Ac-
knowledging the extent to which her own
view of the Brontës is shaped by Swinburne’s
writing on the two sisters, she locates her
feminism in the context of Victorian aes-
theticism and the Decadence, a contextual-
ization that, in turn, recognizes Emily and
Charlotte Brontë as figures of revolt. This
point is a significant one not only histori-
cally; it is also significant because it links
Mary’s revolt against womanhood with oth-
er leading aspects of Sinclair’s feminist ide-
ology. In Mary Olivier, feminism is pantheist,
androgy nous, and passionate, but celibate,
and most emphatically enamored of female
genius.

Swinburne’s 1877 book on Charlotte Bron-
të and his 1883 review of the poet Mary Rob-
inson’s (1857–1944) biography of Emily Bron-
të played a crucial role in establishing the
basis of the Brontës’ modern reputation.77
Sinclair constructs her feminist Brontës on
the template set out by Swinburne, who
brings to his writing on the Brontës a con-
tinuing interest in the imaginative fusion of
the sexes in artistic genius. Swinburne finds
this quality in Cathy’s cry in Wuthering Heights
(1847): “I am Heathcliff.” He dissociates aes-
thetic bisexuality from a consummated het-
erosexuality by associating it instead with
ancient Greek fatality and passionate iden-
tification with sublime landscapes. “There
was a dark unconscious instinct as of prim-
itive nature-worship in the passionate great
genius of Emily Brontë,” he writes. Emily
displays “antichristian fortitude,” a “self-
dependent solitary contempt for all out-
ward objects of faith and hope.” Instead of
thinking of masculinity and femininity as
characteristics of the complementary rela-
tion of the sexes as formulated in Victorian
bourgeois ideology, Swinburne imagines
gender polarity to be a set of something
like electromagnetic forces that structure
everything that exists. In this way, he draws
both genders into, and sees them as aspects
of, the Earth Mother that he imagines Emi-
ly Brontë to have worshiped: “It is into the
lips of her [i.e., Emily Brontë’s] representa-
tive Shirley Keeldar that Charlotte puts the
fervent ‘pagan’ hymn of visionary praise to
her mother nature – Hertha, Demeter, ‘la
déesse des dieux,’ which follows on her fear-
less indignant repudiation of Milton and his
Eve.” These views, all of which Sinclair re-
peats in The Three Brontës, place in a new
light the continual suggestions in Mary
Olivier that Mary’s nascent ambition, her
curiosity about the world, her interest in
books and education, her learning about
ancient Greek, etc. all signify masculine
deivation from her properly gendered path.
When these accusations come from Mary’s
mother, they seem simply to confirm the
conventionally Victorian demands that she
makes on her daughter. In light of Swin-
burne’s notion of aesthetic bisexuality, how-
ever, the remarks suggest a real – and Vic-
torian, in a different sense – difference in
Mary, one that helps explain her eventual
choice of writing as a vocation and of soli-
tary celibacy instead of marriage to her lover,
Richard Nicholson. In Mary Olivier, Swin-
burne’s doctrine of aesthetic bisexuality
finds fulfillment in a feminist celibate.

In The Three Brontës, Sinclair distinguishes
these two different Victorianisms by means
of a neat chronology. She attributes the at-
titudes of Mary’s mother to the “mid-Victo-
rian” period, but those of the Brontës – and
of young Mary – she associates with “the lit-
erature of revolt that followed” (p. 48), such
as that of Swinburne. In this way, she inter-
ernalizes the Victorian/modern dialectic with-
in the period twice over: once, in the con-
trast between mid- and later-Victorian cul-

ture and, again, within mid-Victorian cul-

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tecture itself, which experiences its own revolu-
tional moment in the work of Charlotte, whom Sinclair dubs "the revolutionist" (p. 20). As for Emily, Sinclair conjures her in the following words: "You see her tall and slender, in her rough clothes, tramp-
ing the moors with the form and the step of a virile adolescent. Shirley, the 'bête fauve,' is Emily civillised" (p. 194).

Sinclair's sense of a dialectic internal to Victorian culture permits a more complex view of the commonplace opposition between Victorian and modern culture, both generally and with specific reference to definitions of gender and the life possibilities of women. Outstanding features of the mid-Victorian period in Sinclair's study of the Brontës are male attacks on the sisters made in the name of domestic propriety. Sinclair instances, for example, the letter Charlotte wrote at age twenty-one to Robert Southey (1774–1843), in which she sought his advice as to the possibility of a career as a writer. Southey responded, advising her of the futility of her ambition: "'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity'" (p. 106). When Jane Eyre was published, the inclusion of Rochester's list of past mistresses provoked the Quarterly Review to condemn the author of the novel: "If we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex." (p. 134). Here the complaint is precisely about the definition of womanhood.

Sinclair argues that it was unprecedented for Jane Eyre explicitly to tell Rochester that she loved him (p. 131). But, although it is necessary that Sinclair's modern woman be fully woman — that is, that she be the subject of desire for a man and that she desire to be a mother — both Emily and Charlotte are better characterized as passionate virgins, chastely celibate. Sinclair praises Charlotte for her cool, possibly coy comment to her good friend Miss Ellen Nussey about a woman's necessary reserve in matters of love:

"Did you not once say to me in all childlike sim-
plicity, 'I thought, Charlotte, no young lady should fall in love till the offer was actually made?' I for-
got what answer I made at the time, but I now reply, after due consideration. Right as a glove, the maxim is just, and I hope you will always attend to it. I will even extend and confirm it: no young lady should fall in love till the offer has been made, accepted, the marriage ceremony performed, and the first half-year of wedded life has passed away. A woman may then begin to love, but with great precaution, very coolly, very moderately, very rationally. If she ever loves so much that a harsh word or a cold look cuts her to the heart, she is a fool. If she ever loves so much that her husband's will is her law, and that she has got into a habit of watching his looks in order that she may anticipate his wishes, she will soon be a neglected fool." (p. 76)

Sinclair also defends Charlotte Brontë against the assumption by male and female biographers alike that her work was influenced by men for whom she experienced unrequited love. Likewise, Sinclair repudiates the view that Heathcliff was based on Emily's experience of her sub-Byronic brother, Branwell. Instead, the only literary influence that matters for their work is their influence on one another — or, at least, the influence of Wuthering Heights on Charlotte (pp. 145–46). At the same time, Sinclair feels a need to defend the women against male writers who unsex them — for example, against George Henry Lewes's (1817–78) allegation that Charlotte lacked a sense of "Maternity" (p. 66), a charge echoed, in turn, by Swinburne (p. 63). In Sinclair's words, such authors have "defaced and disfigured" Brontë. Sinclair insists to the contrary: "We are face to face here, not with a want in her, but with an abyss, depth beyond depth of tenderness and longing and frustration, of a passion that found no clear voice in her works, because it was one with the elemental nature in her, undefined, unuttered, unutterable" (p. 63). As "nature," both Charlotte and Emily needed to be capable of female-male desire and of the desire to be mothers. But for them as modern women — that is, as writers of "genius" — marriage could be only a trap and maternity likely a death sentence. At any rate, it is in this way that Sinclair sees Charlotte's fate: "Her marriage, at Haworth, to her father's curate, Arthur Nicholls, . . . cut short her life, and made an end of her celebrity" (p. 39). And, of Charlotte's opinion about
the necessity of marriage for mid-Victorian women, Sinclair remarks, apropos of Mrs. Oliphant’s (1828–97) view to the contrary, that Charlotte was “a thorough revolutionary” (p. 70).

For Sinclair, the onset of puberty for a girl was, as I mentioned earlier, an occasion for education—not only about sexual maturation but also about what it means to become a woman in the world. As a feminist, a philosopher, an intellectual, a cultural activist, and a writer of fiction, Sinclair treated becoming-woman as having to do more with intellectual emancipation and access to written expression than with the rituals and institutions of reproduction that sexual health makes possible. For Sinclair, moreover, intellectual health requires more than womanhood; it requires a bisexual imaginative capability, one that, in her account, does not prevent but will likely foreclose the possibilities of marriage. For Sinclair, sexual maturation was about womanhood, but the womanhood that she envisaged and lived meant negating womanhood as God, Wright, Freud, and Mary’s mother understood it. At the inauspiciously brutal beginning of our own new century—and at a time when the Victorians’ purchase on reality seems, perhaps, to be slipping ever farther away from us—it is worth remembering that, a century ago, the stimulus to a radical feminist understanding of becoming-woman came to some modern women from within the Victorian period itself.

NOTES


12. Raitt, May Sinclair, 120.


17. See, e.g., ibid., 170–71.


19. When quoting Wright, Sinclair often uses typographic emphasis of varying kinds.


21. Sinclair explores these “possibilities” in the novel The Life and Death of Harriet Frean (1923). The
novel also includes a study of a classic case of hysteria in Frean’s unhappily married friend Priscilla Heaven. For a recent edition, see May Sinclair, The Life and Death of Harriet Frean, with an introduction by D.J. Taylor (London: Virago, 2003).


23. In his letter to The Times (see n. 13 above), Wright makes it altogether clear that the economic subordination of women both in the home and in the workplace should continue.


25. Boll, Miss May Sinclair, 320.


27. A. C. Swinburne, A Note on Charlotte Brontë (London: Chatto & Windus, 1877). Swinburne’s review of Agnes Mary Frances Robinson’s Emily Brontë (1883) appeared in the Athenaeum for 16 June 1883 and was republished in Miscellanea (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886).