

## VIRGINIA WOOLF AND “FUR CONSCIOUSNESS”

One of the most iconic photo portraits of Virginia Woolf, taken, probably, in 1927 (SILVER, 1999, p. 132), displays her face with her head leaning on her fur-ringed hand and her neck draped about with a fur collar. To wear a fur-collared, fur-cuffed coat in London in the 1920s and 1930s was popular, if not “*de riguer*” (“History of Fashion”, 2016; ROBERTS, 2021; STRIKE, 2016). Woolf writes little about her own wearing of fur (WOOLF, 1980, p. 164), but she does represent a number of fur-wearing characters. Many scholars, including Randy S. Koppen and Celia Marshik<sup>1</sup>, have written about Woolf’s “frock consciousness” (WOOLF, 1980, p. 12), but little (if any) scholarship has been undertaken on Woolf’s “fur consciousness.” In this presentation, I examine the shifting significance of fur as it appears throughout Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction. Interestingly, there seems to be little evidence of consciousness, in all of her representations of fur, of what Carol J. Adams calls the absent referent (1990, p. ix), of the nonhuman animals themselves who originally bore the skin now worn by their human counterparts. Woolf, as I conclude, may demonstrate animal consciousness in her representation of mammals, birds, fishes, and insects throughout her work, as numerous critics have noted. Yet, given the era in which she lived, I argue that it is not surprising that she does not show this same consciousness in her representation of the wearing of nonhuman mammal skins.

This 1927 photo of Woolf in a fur-collared coat was taken at a time when “[f]ox fur stoles and collars were popular” (“History”)<sup>2</sup>. Cheryl Roberts writes that fur—namely the fur coat—was increasingly becoming sought after by working class women in the 1930s, especially as they saw fur-clad women on the screen.<sup>3</sup> Fur was typically associated with “wealth and social prestige” (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. 16; see also HINER, 2010, p. 25; GAULD, 2005, p. 38, 42; QUINN, 2020, p. 914; STILL, 2015). Writes Judith V. Emberley in *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (1997), “the female cosmopolite keeps the official meanings assigned to the fur coat in circulation . . . by wearing it in contexts in which others can reread its symbolic value” (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. 139). Fur was not only symbolic of bourgeois status but it was fetishistic (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. xii) and sexualized (GILBERT, 2019, p. 202), bearing “the mark of femininity itself” (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. 139). Working with Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Pamela K. Gilbert writes that fur “is sexualized when it is made into culture and commodified: that is, when the animal is skinned, and becomes a veil or caul for human use. The

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<sup>1</sup> See also Carolyn Abbs, Jane Garrity, and Lisa Cohen.

<sup>2</sup> See also Cheryl Roberts, who writes in “A Price for Fashion: A Young Working-Class Woman’s Wardrobe in 1930s”: “The stars of the movies brought an escapism for women and an opportunity to gaze at their clothing. It can be argued that some British women adopted aspects of the glamour they saw on the screen in order to take some of the ‘magic’ of the celebrity into their own lives.” (ROBERTS, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> See also Emberley’s discussion of G. W. Pabst’s 1925 silent film, *The Joyless Street* (143-52)

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pelt of the animal becomes the sexualized substitute for animal nakedness over the woman's actual nudity" (GILBERT, 2019, p. 202). The animal, on the other hand, does not have clothes; it becomes clothes (GILBERT, 2019, p. 200). On our species, nonhuman animals "are important ingredients for human cultural experience" (STILL apud Naomi SYKES, 2015, p. 44-45). So, to consider fur is to consider the differential play of human and animal (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. 6).

Virginia Woolf picks up on these multivalent meanings of fur throughout the course of her writing life. The next part of this paper consists of an excursion through her works to look at what fur signifies: 1. the bourgeois; 2. middle-class femininity and female sexuality; 3. the past, old age, and decay; and 4. men's status and privilege. Because this is a survey, I cannot provide a thorough explication, but here, I hope to provide a sampling.

## 1. The bourgeois

One of the first appearances of a fur coat on the pages of Woolf occurs in *The Voyage Out*, with Mrs. Dalloway calling to have her "fur cloak brought to her" and then settling herself into it, adjusting it about her neck (WOOLF, 1948, p. 45). Fur does not just, of course, provide comfort and warmth. By dressing her, and, we later learn, the other passengers, in fur, Woolf is marking their middle-class status. She makes the link between furs and respectability explicit in *A Room of One's Own* in the scene of "a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps, both so respectably booted and furred that their dressing in the afternoon must be a ritual, and the clothes themselves put away in cupboards with camphor, year after year, throughout the summer months" (WOOLF, 1948, p. 92-93). Fur is among the other appendages (including arms) and clothing that link the generations together to provide a sense of continuity. The mother and daughter are among "the majority of women" whom the narrator lauds, and, included in this majority, is another fur-clad woman, "a bustling lady who had, by some means or other, acquired a splendid fur coat and a bunch of Parma violets" (WOOLF, 1948, p. 100). The adjective "bustling" and the phrase "by some means or other" suggests that this woman may have resorted to some degree of scrappiness to acquire her "splendid fur coat" rather than, like the previous two, inheriting hers.

## 2. Middle-class femininity and female sexuality

Fur, in *A Room of One's Own*, is associated with middle age along with the middle class, and that is true for *Orlando* as well. At the end of *Orlando* we see Orlando, in a department store, espying his former mistress, Sasha, now become "a fat, furred woman, marvellously well preserved, seductive, diademed, a Grand Duke's mistress"

(WOOLF, 1956, p. 303). Fur is linked with femininity, a point Woolf had made earlier in *Orlando* with Addison's famous description from *The Spectator*: "I consider woman as a beautiful, romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 210). And fur is above all symbolic of women's sensuality, most evident in the portrait of Sasha as a young woman, who, of all Woolf's characters, is most associated with fur. In her heavily exoticized, Orientalized, and deliberately over-the-top portrayal, the narrator also animalizes Sasha as a "white Russian fox" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 44); Sasha is like "a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 44). With her, "wrapped in a great fur cloak[,] Orlando would take her in his arms, and know, for the first time, he murmured, the delights of love" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 44-45). Sasha, of course, also dresses in fur: when Orlando first meets her, she is clad "entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 37). I do not know if Woolf knew about Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 *Venus in Furs*, renowned for its representation of "fur's sexual fetishism" (EMBERLEY, 1997, p. 11), but one can see elements of this novella in *Orlando* in its representation of the mock fetishization of fur and its erotic power of a woman over a man.

Fur, in *Night and Day*, takes on a different resonance; as a metaphor for friendship. I do not have time to discuss the fur scene in detail, but I include it here to emphasize that fur does not mean any one thing in Woolf. In *Night and Day*'s memorable fur moment, Mary Datchet, overcoming her jealousy of Katharine Hilbery, talks with her, and in the course of the conversation, fingers the fur bordering the hem of Katharine's dress. This gesture comes across as affectionate, as petting; stroking the fur becomes a form of creating an intimate space so that, by the end of the conversation, Mary and Katharine sit in silence, "side by side, while Mary fingered the fur on the skirt of the old dress" (WOOLF, 1948a. p. 278; see also COOLEY, 1993, p.73).

### 3. The past, old age, and decay

In the scene I just described, fur is associated with shabbiness; Woolf de-glamourizes fur here, and in several of her other works. Along with *To the Lighthouse*'s Mrs. Ramsay, who, on her missions of mercy, wrapped herself "in an old fur coat" (WOOLF, 1955, p. 76), are representations of other worn-out furs, unworn furs, furs in storage. At his meeting with Queen Elizabeth, Orlando is reminded of "some old cabinet at home where his mother's furs were stored" (WOOLF, 1956, p. 25). In *The Years*, fur is associated with the nineteenth century, in the person of an "old lady" who is "hung about with chains," her fingers "knobbed with rings," and her "sharp stone-coloured face, riddled with lines and wrinkled into creases, look[ing] out from its soft nest of fur and laces" (WOOLF, 1948c, p. 266). Fur is reminiscent of decay in *Between the Acts*. The free-floating narrator, venturing into the background of Mrs.

Manresa, concludes, that, “with George the Sixth on the throne[,] it was old fashioned, dowdy, savoured of moth-eaten furs, bugles, cameos and black-edged notepaper, to go ferreting into people’s pasts” (WOOLF, 1969, p. 40).

#### 4. Men’s status and privilege

When it is used to emphasize the past, the old, the antique, it is easy to overlook the representation of fur. When it is use to evoke power, it is more difficult to miss. In this evocation, Woolf crosses the gender-line: fur, on men, represents patriarchal power, and Woolf, as many critics have noted through the years, ridicules this power in its many dimensions—war, religion, politics, law, academia—in *A Room of One’s Own* and especially in *Three Guineas*. In the first chapter of *A Room of One’s Own*, the narrator, excluded from the university grounds, observes the men issuing out of the chapel door after the service: “Many were in cap and gown; some had tufts of fur on their shoulders; others were wheeled in bath-chairs” (WOOLF, 1957, p. 8). Fur, meant to be resplendent and symbolic of status, is reduced to “tufts,” usually affixed to nonhuman animals or inanimate objects (like cloth). In *Three Guineas*, the narrator’s mockery bursts through as she is addressing the furred procession of bankers, politicians, lawyers, judges, and prelates:

Your clothes in the first place make us gape with astonishment. How many, how splendid, how extremely ornate they are. . . . Now . . . your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine. . . . Now you wear wigs on your heads; rows of graduated curls descend to your necks. Now your hats are boat-shaped, or cocked; now they mount in cones of black fur. (WOOLF, 1966, p. 19)

Along with shoulders, fur covers heads, which are themselves covered by another nonhuman animal covering, or horsehair, for the wigs (see also WOOLF, 1966, p. 61, 150). A few paragraphs later in *Three Guineas* Woolf notes that academics share “the same love of dress. There, too, are velvet and silk, fur and ermine.” To what end? “[T]o emphasize their superiority over other people . . .” (WOOLF, 1966, p. 21)<sup>4</sup>.

From this brief survey, one can see that Woolf shows an acute understanding of the social semiotics of fur. For women, fur signifies the bourgeois, femininity, intimacy, sexuality, and old age and the past; and for men, masculine display and power. Woolf renders fur, though, as a remnant, a strip of garb—as in the collar of a coat, the border of a skirt, the lining of slippers, or part of a hat, along with an entire coat—and not as that which had belonged to the body of a living animal. Apart from

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<sup>4</sup> Woolf dresses the nineteenth-century literary establishment in “fur tippets” in *Orlando*, and, in the sartorial history that features in part of this faux biography, represented the nobility, not the middle class, wearing fur in the seventeenth century (“An old nobleman—for such his furred gown and golden chain proclaimed him . . .” (WOOLF, 1966, p. 63).

Sasha's resemblance to the fox furs that envelope her, and Katharine Hilbery's fur-lined skirt being stroked by Mary Datchet as if it were a pet, it is easy to forget that fur, in Woolf's writing, was ever part of an animal.

Yet, when Woolf represents the plight of other animals, she more often than not shows a renowned awareness of them in their creatureliness and some degree of empathy. One of the most famous instances is, of course, the letter she wrote in 1920 on behalf of the Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Act, which was passed in 1921. "Millions of birds are doomed not only to extinction but to torture" (WOOLF, 1988, p. 241), she writes, just so women can adorn their hats with feathers. The feather, she reminds us, is attached to a bird body. She shows sensitivity to fishes throughout her work, as many critics, including Saskia McCracken (2017), Kim Shirkhani (2011), and Dubino (2020), have noted—e.g., when, in *To the Lighthouse*, she draws readers' attention to McCallister's boy carving out a piece of a fish and then throwing the live fish back into the water (WOOLF, 1955, p. 268). She mourns the death of a moth in the essay of that title (WOOLF, 1970, p. 3-6) and sympathetically portrays the dismemberment of a fly in "The Introduction" (WOOLF, 1989, p. 187-88).<sup>5</sup> Her works are full of horses (DAUGHERTY, 2011), birds (GILLESPIE, 2011; BRADSHAW, 2014), dogs (GOLDMAN, 2007; DUBINO, 2014). Why, then, do the creatures who previously bore the fur get left out of her world of somewhat or more or fully represented animals?

I don't have a conclusive answer. I can speculate. When Woolf wrote "The Plumage Bill," as Reginald Abbott writes, her "essay appeared just as a well-organized and anti-plumage campaign was about to succeed in banning the importation of exotic feathers" (ABBOTT, 266). That is, she was part of a trend that was well underway. In another instance of being influenced, Woolf writes in "A Sketch of the Past" that, as a girl, she thrilled at the tug of a fish on a line until her father said to her "I don't like to see fish caught" (WOOLF, 1976, p. 116). "It made me," she writes, "decide that I dislike fishing" (WOOLF, 1976, p. 116). She became familiar with animal protection arguments, as Christina Alt writes, at an early age (ALT, 2010, p. 127). Did these arguments lead to her dislike of blood sports, a dislike which is very evident in *Three Guineas*? (WOOLF, 1966, p. 6, 146; see also ALT, 2010, p. 128-31). It is true that she "expressed reservations regarding protection as a movement" (ALT, 2010, p. 131, 141-42), but at the same time she, along with her friends, was "a subscriber to some animal rights groups or a signatory on some petitions, including one, sponsored by The National Society for the Abolition of Cruel Sports (1935), to end the hare-hunt at Eton" (DUBINO, 2020, p. 100).

Virginia Woolf was responsive to the people around her and to the movements of her time. But there were no anti-fur movements. Woolf was keenly aware of the connection, in particular, between fur and militarism, or, as she writes, "between the sartorial splendours of the educated man and the photograph of ruined house and dead bodies. . . . [Y]our finest clothes are those you wear as soldiers" (WOOLF, 1966, p. 21). But her concern for animals does not register in her depictions of fur.

<sup>5</sup> See Alt, who notes that Woolf overlooked the toxicity of pesticides like Paris Green (2007: 98).

She explains the commodification that turns birds into feathers, but not fur-bearing mammals who are turned into remnants and garb. Furry animals like dogs have a voice in her work, but fur does not.

Virginia Woolf, like great authors, is a bellwether—another furred animal!—of her time. Situating her works in their multiple milieus enables readers to see her genius and how attuned she was to the world around her. In my research on the fur trade, I read accounts that included occasional remarks on cruelty, such as animals being caught for extended periods of time in traps (INGRAMS, 1924, p. 603). In addition, those involved in and those who observed the fur trade did voice concern over depletion of fur-bearing animals and the need for conservation at the beginning of the twentieth century and before (INGRAMS, 1924, p. 604; ASHBROOK 1922; KAY, 2009). There were lone voices, such as Henry S. Salt, who wrote, in 1892, in *Animals' Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*:

the fur trade, in so far as it is a supply of ornamental clothing for those who are under no necessity of wearing fur at all, is a barbarous and stupid business. It makes patch-work, one may say, not only of the hides of its victims, but of the conscience and intellect of its supporters. A fur garment or trimming, we are told, appearing to the eye as if it were one uniform piece, is generally made up of many curiously shaped fragments. It is significant that a society which is enamoured of so many shams and fictions, and which detests nothing so strongly as the need of looking facts in the face, should pre-eminently esteem those articles of apparel which are constructed on the most deceptive and illusory principle. The story of the Ass in the Lion's skin is capable, it seems of a new and wider application. (SALT, 1980, p. 84)

Salt is a great exception. At the time Woolf wrote her world did not include groups like PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals)<sup>6</sup> with its anti-fur campaigns. Furthermore, most of the fur came from elsewhere (RAY, 1990, p.98), especially Canada (INGRAMS, 1924, p. 601; BOCKSTOCE, 2018, p. 16-40, 111). When Woolf was alive, animals were typically hunted and trapped, and the animals most commonly used for fur, like the ermines she mentions, were not endangered. There were few fur farms, and those were located in the US and Canada (INGRAMS, 1924, p. 602; ASHBROOK, 1922, p. 7). That is, the acquisition, production, and trading of fur would have been largely invisible to Woolf and to her fellow British—not, in other words, on their radar.

Reading Woolf in the context of fur reminds the contemporary audience of the importance of activism and social movements in raising one's consciousness—including that of great writers. In the past few decades scholars have undertaken significant work on the many animals who populate her pages. When I re-read Woolf in light of Animal Studies scholarship, I am awed by her extraordinary mindfulness of

<sup>6</sup> Woolf might have ridiculed PETA, or, at the least, have been somewhat wary.

animals and the close attention she pays to them and to their worlds. That she does not attend to the animal bearing the fur is not a “failure” on her part, but rather a reminder of how, at the time she was writing, the animal rights movement had not yet arrived there—and would not until the 1980s, until another half century had passed (EMBERLEY, 1997, xi, p. 23-27).

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