

LIFTING THE VEIL: 'WOMEN AND THE FUTURE' BY DOROTHY RICHARDSON

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First published in *Vanity Fair* in April 1924, Dorothy Richardson's 'Women and the Future' was reprinted the following month in the British edition of *Vogue*. At first sight, this seems an unlikely destination for an essay on feminism by a prominent modernist, but the editor, Dorothy Todd, was an unusual editor, who sought to promote the newest trends in thought as well as fashion. This article asks why Todd chose to publish Richardson's essay and why its contents might have resonated with Todd's vision for the magazine.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf declared: 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'¹ but before Woolf had written her essay in 1929, British *Vogue*, under Todd's editorship between 1922 and 1926, became a metaphorical room, where women writers could express a new feminine literary aesthetic. Both Woolf and Richardson contributed to Todd's *Vogue*, 'sweeping guineas of [its] counter'² and using its pages to 'to write what [they] like[d]'.³ While the magazine was by no means an exclusively feminine arena - male modernists also contributed - Todd's *Vogue* can be understood as part of its editor's quest to define a new feminine consciousness that stood in relation to rather than exclusive of masculine voices. The magazine was to become a neutral space, inclusive of all opinions: a room of the modernists' own.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own & The Voyage Out* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2012), p.29.

² A. O. Bell and A. McNeillie (eds), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 27 June, 1925.

³ Nigel Nicholson (ed.), *A Change in Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. III, 1923-1928* (London, Hogarth Press: 1977), Letter to Logan Pearsall-Smith, Wednesday, 28 January, 1925, p.158.

The first edition of *Vogue* appeared on the news-stands across America on 17 December 1892. Published weekly and costing ten cents, Arthur Turnure's *Vogue* was primarily concerned with society and fashion but also included fiction and poetry. It addressed itself to both men and women, with regulars such as 'On her Dressing Table' - which continued to have been a regular feature well after Conde Nast's takeover - running alongside articles about gentlemanly pursuits and masculine adornment. Turnure died in the spring of 1906 and after being handled briefly by family members, *Vogue* was published by Conde Montrose Nast from 1909. Nast had a vision of an elite magazine, which would appeal to people with money, whose criterion was taste rather than mass popularity. Apart from a new focus on high-class advertising, Nast's *Vogue* continued to run the kinds of articles featured under Turnure's editorship.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, an agency in Germany was put in charge of distributing a small proportion of *Vogue* magazine to England. Nast's focus on advertising revenue led him to appoint William Wood in 1912 to increase *Vogue's* visibility on the newsstands of West London. The British edition of *Vogue* came about because of the war. Regulations regarding non-essential shipping and paper shortages meant that circulation of the American edition started to suffer. With William Wood's support, the advertising agent Walter Mass suggested to Nast that a British edition would be able to secure British advertising copy. With Nast's agreement, content was lifted directly from the American edition. The first British edition 'A Forecast of Autumn Fashions', appeared on 15 September 1916 and promised that 'nothing which has made *Vogue* what it is will be deleted, but also that each issue would be supplemented with carefully selected articles dealing with English Society, Fashions, Furniture, Interior Decoration and the Garden, Art, Literature and the Stage.'⁴ Thus, British *Vogue*, or *Brogue* as it came to be affectionately termed, was born.

⁴ Caroline Seebohm, *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Conde Nast* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982) p.123.

As is the case with any new magazine, the early beginnings of *Brogue* were fraught with changes of management and editorship. In her biography, *Always in Vogue* the then editor of the American edition, Edna Woolman Chase, writes that:

an assortment of editors saw British *Vogue* through its infancy, one of whom was Dorothy Todd. For a time Miss Todd was replaced by a Miss Anderson, for we decided to bring Dorothy to work in the New York office so that she might acquaint herself more fully with our policies and format.⁵

Woolman Chase does not acknowledge the role played by Elspeth Champcommunal who was British *Vogue's* first real editor. Under Champcommunal, British *Vogue* was indeed identical - save for its anglicised spelling - to its American parent. However, as *Brogue* began to build a steady circulation, Champcommunal realised the importance of acknowledging the demands of its British readership and began to insert features amounting to what Aurelea Mahood calls a 'skilfully mixed cocktail'⁶ of society, health, sport and travel. Fashion however remained the main ingredient in Champcommunal's cocktail. It was Dorothy Todd with her 'natural literary and artistic bent'⁷ who transformed *Vogue* from a fashion-based publication into 'an advanced literary and social review'.⁸

Dorothy Todd, or 'Dody' as she was known, is one of, if not *the* most elusive characters in the story of *Vogue*. Born in Kensington, London in 1883, we do not know how she came to take up the editorial reins of the British edition and, apart aside from the years she spent as *Vogue* editor, very little is known of her life. Rebecca West described her as 'full of genius'⁹ and her lover, Madge Garland said she was a 'brilliantly perceptive editor whose aim was to make *Vogue* into a magazine of such literary and social

⁵ Edna Woolman Chase, *Always in Vogue* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), p.130.

⁶ Aurelea Mahood, 'Fashioning Readers: The avant garde and British Vogue, 1920-9', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 13, 1 (2002): 37-47.

⁷ Woolman Chase, p.130.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.131.

⁹ Cited in Joan Russell-Noble, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p.56.

importance that it would be acceptable anywhere ... [she] made *Vogue* the most highbrow magazine of its kind.¹⁰ Dody commissioned articles from prominent modernist writers and included work by up-and-coming artists so that 'each issue of *Vogue* was received as an event of importance'¹¹ that represented the very latest trends in thought and art. It is important also to acknowledge the important role played by her lover and *Vogue* fashion editor, Madge Garland. The two women lived together in Chelsea, where they entertained contributors, making them part of the project. On or about the end of September 1926 something changed. Todd was dismissed by Nast, supposedly because she was 'browsing in the wrong pasture',¹² but a close reading of diary entries and contemporary biographies suggests her removal was more to do with her relationship with Garland and the discovery that she had an illegitimate daughter, Helen.

Before a more detailed consideration of why by 1924 Dorothy Todd might have thought that Richardson's article would be an appropriate contribution to the magazine, some consideration has to be given to its first place of publication, *Vanity Fair*. That title had also been brought by Conde Nast, four years after his purchase of *Vogue* in 1913. Initially, he created a hybrid journal, *Dress and Vanity Fair*, which ran for four issues, but it was not a success. It was not until Frank Crowninshield became editor in 1914 that *Vanity Fair* started to become 'the gold standard for the so-called smart magazines of the era'.¹³ Crowninshield promoted modern artists and musicians in his pages, and included work by the leading literary figures such as Dorothy Parker, Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence and Gertrude Stein. It seems likely that Crowninshield's editorship was Todd's inspiration for the British edition of *Vogue*.

¹⁰ Cited in Joan Russell-Noble, *Recollections of Virginia Woolf* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p.98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Edna Woolman-Chase, *Always in Vogue* (London: Victor Gallancz, 1954) p.132.

¹³ <http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/vintage/oneclickhistory>, accessed on 21 January, 2013.

Certainly, 'Women and the Future', Richardson's sole contribution to the magazine, stands out in the issue in which it appeared. It was the opening article and, apart from one other article, 'Dreams', by an anonymous contributor, it was the only piece that was not a regular feature or fashion-related. Its position and content meant that it dominated the issue. The style is portentous, even verbose, the argument dense and the tone confrontational. Richardson makes a direct attack on those male commentators who believe they have identified 'a new species of woman'.

Most of the prophecies born of the renewed moral visibility of women, though superficially at war with each other, are united at their base. They meet and sink in the sands of the assumption that we are, to-day, confronted with a new species of woman. Nearly all the prophets, nearly all of those who are at work constructing hells, or heavens, upon this loose foundation, are men.¹⁴

'Centuries of masculine expressiveness', Richardson argues, have portrayed women in a limited way, concentrating on her external form, and concerned with her only in terms of 'her moments of relationship to the world as it is known to men'. Nothing, Richardson explains, and especially not the current position of the 'battalions of women [that] have become literate', is formed completely anew:

...masculine illusions are dying like flies. But even to-day, most men are scarcely aware of the searchlight flung by those revelations across the past. These modern women, they say, are a new type.

It does not greatly matter to women that men cling to this idea. The truth about the past can be trusted to look after itself. There is, however, no illusion more wasteful than the illusion of beginning all over again, nothing more misleading than the idea of being divorced from the past.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dorothy Richardson, 'Women and the Future', *Vogue*, Early May, 1924, p.32, p.70.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.32.

To illustrate her point, Richardson takes the example of 'La Giaconda', the 'Mona Lisa' by Leonardo Da Vinci:

Most men [...] sigh for ancient mystery and inscrutability. For la Giaconda... And the most amazing thing in the history of Leonardo's masterpiece is their general failure to recognize that Lisa stands alone in feminine portraiture because she is centred, unlike her nearest peers, those dreamful, passionately blossoming imaginations of Rossetti, neither upon humanity nor upon the consolations of religion.

Richardson's critique of two myths, that of a new species of woman and that of La Giaconda is developed from the principles that lie behind her own literary aesthetic. The creative works of men have participated in a vast 'misrepresentation of feminine reality'.¹⁶ As Brimley Johnson wrote in 1920:

The female novelist of the twentieth century has abandoned the old realism. She does not accept observed revelation. She is seeking, with passionate determination, for that Reality which is behind the material, [...] ultimate truth. And here she finds man an outsider, wilfully blind, purposefully indifferent.¹⁷

That reality is what Richardson herself sees in La Giaconda. The article's subtitle, 'a trembling of the veil before the eternal mystery of La Giaconda', already indicates that:

there is in Lisa more than the portrayal of essential womanhood. The secondary life of the lady is clearly visible. Her traffic with familiar webs, with her household and the external shapings of her life. When Pater said her eyelids were a little weary, he showed himself observant. But he misinterpreted the weariness.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), p.256.

¹⁷ Brimley Johnson, *Some Contemporary Novelists (Women)*, (London, 1920) pp.xiv-xv.

La Gioconda, 'who sat so long that she grew at home in her place, and the deepest layer of her being, her woman's enchanted domestication within the sheer marvel of existing, came forth and shone through the mobile mask of her face', is no more an exception than the 'new' woman of the early 1900s. Although artists such as D. H. Lawrence and August John have attempted to 'resuscitate man's ancient mystery woman, the beloved-hated abyss', this aligns them with the position Richardson describes in an essay published in 1917, 'The Reality of Feminism': women as 'hated and loved and feared [...] as mother nature, feared and adored her as the unattainable, the Queen of Heaven'.¹⁸ The Mona Lisa too is beloved and hated because she is misunderstood as outside of time and history, able to remain 'untroubled and complete'.¹⁹

Many men regard... [women's] advance with mixed feelings, and face her with a neat dilemma. Either, they say, you must go on being Helens and Cinderellas, or you must drop all that and play the game, in so far as your disabilities allow, as we play it. They look forward to the emergence of an army of civilised, docile women, following modestly behind the vanguard of males at work upon the business of reducing chaos to order.²⁰

Against this position, which she associates with H. G. Wells, the figure of the Mona Lisa represents men's historical misunderstanding of women. She is thought to represent docility and order, an unfrontational, unthreatening beauty, the private sphere, and a serene devotion to reproduction and domestication. However, like their misconception that the woman of the 1920s is a 'new type', they overlook what Richardson takes to be the key characteristic of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait: that she is 'centred'.

¹⁸ Dorothy Richardson, 'The Reality of Feminism', originally published in *The Ploughshare*, 2 (Sept, 1917): 241-246, in Bonnie Kime-Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.406.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 'Women and the Future', p.32.

What Richardson means by this is developed in a section subtitled, 'The Essential Egoist'. There she contends that the egoism of the 'growing army of man-trained women, brisk, positive, rational creatures with no nonsense about them' is nothing to the 'egoism of the womanly woman, the beloved-hated abyss, at once the refuge and the despair of men'. After dismissing further masculine misconceptions about what the new role of women should be, she suggests that it is this 'womanly woman' that most upsets men's gendered versions of modernity.:

For the womanly woman lives all her life in the deep current of eternity, an individual, self-centred. Because she is one with life, past, present and future are together in her unbroken. Because she thinks flowingly, with her feelings, she is relatively indifferent to the fashions of men, to the momentary arts, religions, philosophies, and sciences.²¹

If we take the essay's subtitle, 'A Trembling of the Veil', as a metaphor for the shift in literary form Richardson's work represents, then the veil trembles before the 'eternal mystery of La Gioconda' because women, now vocal, can lift it by posing women in their fiction as subjects rather than objects, representing consciousness, their internal states of being, as they are understood and known by their female creators. Women writers have become as centred as the Mona Lisa, but, in contrast to her silence, vocal and opinionated.

Modernism, according to Kate Fullbrook, provided hitherto unknown opportunities for 'the expatriate woman, the lesbian or bisexual woman, the politically or socially rebellious woman, the self-directing woman to speak'.²² As the editor of British *Vogue* at this time can be included amongst such women, perhaps it is not so surprising that she offered similarly self-directing women the opportunity to speak. However, the key to my reading of *Vogue* as a modernist periodical is the fact that Todd not only gave space to women, but to those men who were also 'in revolt against all

²¹ Ibid, p.70.

²² Kate Fullbrook, *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth Century Women's Fiction* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) pp.113-114.

forms of previous fixture and propriety'. Together, women and men, united by their formulation of a new movement in the arts, co-existed intellectually between the covers of *Vogue*. While most of Richardson's article is combative, a compromise is suggested. The final paragraph of the article sets out the terms of a possible collaboration between the sexes:

The world at large is swiftly passing from youthful freebooting. It is on the way to find itself married. That is to say, in for startling changes. Shaken up. Led by the nose and liking it. A question arises. How will his apparently lessened state react on man? In how far has he been dependent on his illusion of supremacy? Perhaps the answer to this is the superiority of men in talent, in constructive capacity. It is the talent of man, his capacity to *do* most things better than women, backed up by the genius of woman — the capacity to *see* — that is carrying life forward to the levels opening out ahead.²³

Even while Richardson distinguishes between male and female capabilities, she seems to be hinting that these binaries are of inherent value. If we extend her distinctions to literature, then it was men who were the instigators of the realist movement in fiction - in which they wrote within their own narrative framework of action and intent - but it was women, represented here by Richardson herself, who created a genre of writing concerned with the inner consciousness of their characters - the feminine literary aesthetic enabled by women's 'capacity to see'.

Within the framework of a new approach to literature and the arts Todd's *Vogue* promoted a collaborative vision of gender relations. This idea is also central to Richardson's article. A majority of men at the beginning of the twentieth century still viewed women as 'uncivilisable'. There was still a battle being fought. *Vogue* however, could show the way for women who wanted to be taken seriously as writers and critics. It could play its part in disseminating the new feminine literary aesthetics.

²³ Ibid.

Todd maintains *Vogue's* position in the cultural field as an outlet for the expression of all things feminine, but by including women's avant-garde writing she is also making a statement about the new breadth of women's expression. As an editorial the following year stated, *Vogue* must not continue 'to limit its pages to hats and frocks',²⁴ as this was no longer the only domain open to women. *Vogue* under Todd helped to formulate and envisage a future for the arts. The experiment might only have lasted from 1922 to 1926, but in that time the veil trembled just enough to allow a glimpse of the women of the future.

²⁴ Editorial, *Vogue*, Early April 1925, p.xiv.