

**SANITY AND MADNESS; ART AND LITE:
A STUDY OF COMMUNITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
TO THE LIGHTHOUSE AND MARY BUTTS'S
ARMED WITH MADNESS**

Roslyn Reso Foy

The pairing of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Mary Butts's *Armed with Madness* (1928) may seem an unlikely one. Published within a year of each other, however, both novels incorporate a community of disparate people, artists, and thinkers who are temporarily living outside the city and seeking an explanation that will define (or redefine) and clarify their lives. Although Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts knew each other, they were not friends, yet undeniable connections may be made between these two very different modernists. In Butts's *Armed with Madness* her community of grail knights may be somewhat more unconventional than Woolf's questers in *To the Lighthouse*, but, similar to the Woolf characters, their individual plights, antagonisms, and confusions find some sort of refuge within the group. Both communities have artists, both have healing central female characters, and both have significant psychological conflicts.

This paper will argue that the female at the center of each novel helps define the individual group's definition of community. Both novels present a pervasive sense of loss or dissatisfaction that calls for togetherness no matter how odd or unique each situation may be. In very distinct ways Woolf and Butts are concerned with the need for permanence, myth, and paradigm. Woolf's Mrs. Ramsey (a traditional source of love) and Butts's Scylla (a thoroughly modern woman) are earth goddesses and symbols of desire for transcendence. As Joseph Blotner and others have observed, Mrs. Ramsey is a life-giver, a "symbol of the female principle of life."¹ I propose that

¹ Joseph Blotner, "Mythic Patterns in *To the Lighthouse*," *PMLA* 71 (1956):

in *Armed with Madness*, Mary Butts creates a character capable of blending the qualities embodied by Mrs. Ramsey with those of Lily Briscoe—artist and independent, self-defining woman. Scylla in *Armed with Madness* also bears the appellation of “female principle of life,” given to her by the outsider of the group, the American Dudley Carston.² Like Mrs. Ramsey she is the life force of the community. She, however, is strongly independent, a modern woman who “wants everything to happen to its last possibility” (19) and who is living temporarily outside the urban landscape in an attempt to clarify the madness surrounding the world at large. Scylla is an authentic extension of the natural world embracing the community. She is goddess, healer, and primal life force. Although early in the novel she thinks “herself too female” (7) for allowing the group to have certain expectations of her, she refuses to relinquish this role as authentic earth goddess connected to the land, its myths, and its rituals.

Virginia Woolf disliked Mary Butts because Butts and her way of life had been maligned by her estranged brother Tony and his friend William Plomer, and Woolf’s Hogarth Press rejected Butts’s novel *Armed with Madness* (supposedly for financial reasons), yet when we examine the two novels, we understand that their sense of community overlaps and appeals to similar longings for unity and continuity. Woolf turns to the inner life of the mind while Butts relies on myth and legend to separate her characters from the realities of their external world. For Butts those realities are the wasteland, confusion, and loss that followed World War I. Her community of grail knights embarks on a quest, an adventure of ritual and mythmaking, in an attempt to redefine and reevaluate their position in the larger community. They struggle to alleviate what Butts calls the “dis-ease” of their present existence:

everywhere there was a sense of broken continuity, a dis-ease. The end of an age, the beginning of another. Reevaluation of values. (9)

Similarly, with the death of Mrs. Ramsey in “Time Passes,” we sense the end of an age, the shifting from a particular way of life toward a new and redefined future. With change, however, comes loss, and for the community surrounding Mrs. Ramsey, particularly Mr. Ramsey, Cam, James and Lily (all symbols of family and continuity), change brings the equivalent feelings of Butts’s “dis-ease,” a sense that it is now time to reevaluate and rethink one’s place in the larger community.

547-62.

² Mary Butts, *The Taverner Novels: Armed with Madness, Death of Felicity Tav-*

Butts's grail knights, in their recognition of such loss, revert to childhood and attempt to restore some kind of mysticism and magic to modern life. They are children playing at life, struggling to cut out the pattern that will define them in the future, just as Mr. Ramsey, James, Cam, and Lily (as surrogate daughter) must find a way to connect the past to the present and ultimately to the future. Mrs. Ramsey's pervasive presence throughout the final section "To the Lighthouse" guarantees that connection in the same way that Scylla's alliance with her primal past offers solace and assurance to the group attempting redefinition and unity. Each group in its own way fights to wrestle order out of chaos.

Isolated on the rugged southwest Cornwall coast, Mary Butts's community of grail knights (five men and one woman, along with their nurse Nanna) in *Armed with Madness* set out to play a sacred game involving a cup, a spear, and a quest of mythic proportions. The game follows no rules; in fact, it reflects the chaos of the world from which they have attempted to escape. Initiated by Picus, Scylla's future husband, the game becomes a search for clarity. What Butts tells us early on is that "[t]here was something wrong with all of them, or with their world" (9) and that what they really sought was "[t]he meaning of meaning? Discovery of a new value, a different way of apprehending everything" (9). The game then, as they search for the origin of the cup, becomes a search for the answer to Virginia Woolf's question "What is the meaning of life?"³ Just as Lily reflects on Mrs. Ramsey's attempt at creating a moment of permanence by saying "Life stand still here" (161), Butts's community calls forth ritual and legend to, in effect, stop time, to find some permanent stay against the madness of the world outside the group. Armed with the madness of that world, they retreat into their own rituals and quests as a kind of revenge on the world they choose not to confront, and this conflict sends them on a frantic and childlike search for meaning.

The repetitive structure of ritual offers the characters a sense of permanence, a way to give meaning to the chaos. In *Armed with Madness* this idea of ritual mirrors the permanence of the creative act in *To the Lighthouse*. As Lily says, "In the midst of chaos there was shape" (161). This shape, this "eternal passing and flowing" are "struck into stability" (161) by the central female characters of each

erner (Kingston: McPherson & Company, 1992) 94. All subsequent references to *Armed with Madness* will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company,

novel. As the focus of each disparate group, Mrs. Ramsey and Scylla suggest a permanence, a female principle from which all the characters draw, each in his or her own way. Mrs. Ramsey creates the pattern (the work of art) with her dinner party and with her centrality to the group. Scylla, as authentic ancestor of the sacred land, finds her pattern in the repetitive structure of ritual and myth. Both characters have an authenticity that is true for them in the realm in which they exist.

Moving from these patterns, both in and out of linear time (for Woolf, artistically as well as spiritually), the role of each central female shifts to a more political and feminist focus. Unlike Woolf, Butts was not overtly political in her writing or in her life. Instead, in the creation of her art, she establishes female characters who live fiercely independent lives, much like Mary Butts did herself.⁴ In defining this character, Butts effortlessly presents the female as a primal source of life, not in opposition to maleness but merely as a human being playing out her role. While remaining both generative force and independent female within the community of men, Scylla comes to represent the fusion of Mrs. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe. Scylla has the strength to sustain both masculine and feminine qualities, and to privilege those features that, in effect, create an androgynous character comfortable in any world. Su Reid interprets Woolf's position on such androgyny from Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

The point of it is that it allows the narrator to imagine a state of affairs when normal people will no longer be assumed to be male, and when that which is thought of as specifically female will be respectable, important, not 'required to be held back.'⁵

If, as Toril Moi states, the "goal of the feminist struggle must be precisely to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of

1981) 161. All subsequent references to *To the Lighthouse* will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

⁴ It is interesting to note that Mary Butts chose to live her life completely on her own terms. She left her first husband, John Rodker, for the wounded (physically and psychically) Cecil Maitland and at the same time abandoned her only child within months of her birth. Butts moved in all the modernist circles but never identified herself with any particular group. She lived an independent life that also involved drugs, magic, the occult (including a temporary involvement with the occult leader Aleister Crowley), and excessive pub crawling, all the while maintaining a clear focus on her art and her work. After her affair with Cecil Maitland failed, she married the artist Gabriel Aitken, an alcoholic and a homosexual. This union, of course, did not last, and Mary Butts lived out the remainder of her brief life (she died at 46) on Land's End in Cornwall, England, where she became an Anglo-Catholic. She never relinquished her addiction to opium, however, and died in 1937 in West Cornwall Hospital in Penzance

masculinity and femininity,”⁶ then Mary Butts’s Scylla in many ways achieves that goal. Initially, Scylla is the cause of opposition between her intended husband Picus and his former, and now scorned, lover Clarence, but her skills allow her to embrace and return the aberrant character back into the communal whole. Scylla survives a ritualistic crucifixion by the artist Clarence, moves from an “absolute contempt of Clarence” (145) into “a state a *clarté* the other side of forgiveness” (146), and finally represents the spiritual core of the novel and the community. A mythic presence with an immense capacity for love and an authentic connection to nature and its magic—a very human earth goddess within the community offering spiritual redemption—Scylla is their “living cup.”

Scylla is not concerned with gender identity, nor is Mary Butts. Scylla embraces Clarence’s (and Picus’s) homosexuality, wraps him in her forgiveness, and welcomes him back into the healing forces of the “home circle.” She stresses the function that Moi cites as deconstructing or breaking down binary oppositions of masculine and feminine. Although Butts’s characters are more extreme and take greater chances than Woolf’s, the themes complement and overlap each other. Moi asserts that Virginia Woolf’s Lily (an artist) “represents the subject who deconstructs this opposition” and tries to “live as her own woman.”⁷ Contrary to Elaine Showalter’s argument regarding Woolf’s “flight from fixed gender identities,” Moi asserts that Lily’s struggle is in fact a “recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature.”⁸ This leads to an attempt to situate Woolf’s androgyny and to define what Mary Butts has done in creating Scylla.

If Mrs. Ramsey represents Victorian womanhood, able to suppress her own desires for those for whom she cares, and Lily, as Moi claims, is the independent artist trying to redefine her role “as far as possible in a still rigidly patriarchal order,”⁹ then Scylla is a woman who is both independent and womanly, self-defining and nurturing. Hers is not a flight into a neuter gender which every human should become. Rather she becomes a female existing as her own woman, her own human being and one who is comfortable in her role. She deconstructs the binary opposition and situates herself in a gender role that satisfies her individual needs. In effect, Scylla represents the

after an operation for a gastric ulcer.

⁵ Su Reid, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 54.

⁶ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985) 13.

⁷ Moi, 13.

modern woman who can retain the elements she chooses from her primal and her immediate past and join them to her newly defined independence, not necessarily androgynous, simply a definition of what it means to be human.

Certainly Butts is not completely free of masculine/feminine power struggles, but Scylla's strength mirrors a blend of what Mrs. Ramsey and Lily Briscoe embody together. That is not to say that Butts did this consciously; rather the ideas prevalent at the time reflected what Julia Kristeva would identify as the first generation of feminism—those demanding their right to a place in linear time. Yet Kristeva contends that the second generation of feminism emerged after 1968; she says, it “rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements.”¹⁰ As Toril Moi interprets it, this second generation “emphasized women’s radical difference from men and demanded women’s right to remain *outside* the linear time of history and politics.”¹¹ If I may project Kristeva’s point backwards, Butts and Woolf are prophetic in anticipating female characters who do, indeed, rejoin with archaic and mythical memory and who therefore in their very natures remain outside the “linear time of history and politics.” As Scylla puts it, “she had not the clean surgery to cut out memory and hope” (118), the memory of her archaic past and her primal authentic connection to that past. Scylla, as a modern woman emerging from a patriarchal order toward a completeness, is able to balance and juggle both positions—earth-mother/life giving force with modern woman defining her herself and her place in the changing world. Although Mrs. Ramsey may be a symbol of Victorian womanhood that feminists fought to change, one cannot deny that in *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsey unifies; like Lily’s art, she reconciles and tempers chaos. Without Mrs. Ramsey there would be no group, just disparate people in a particular place. Without Scylla there would be no real quest, just characters stumbling through a specific period of time.

Both Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts were artists who knew that the time had come to redefine the nature of womanhood. Such womanhood, embodied by Mrs. Ramsey and Scylla, place them at the center of each individual novel, each playing her significant role. By making Mrs. Ramsey the embodiment of Victorian womanhood,

⁸ Moi, 3.

⁹ Moi, 13.

Woolf does not denigrate this character; instead she celebrates those female qualities that nurture, defend, protect, and unite. Mrs. Ramsey is stability within chaos, understanding within confusion. Woolf and Butts, Scylla and Mrs. Ramsey have orchestrated works of art that offer a unique way of viewing what it means to be female. In *Armed with Madness* Carston notes, "I've been living in a work of art" (72), frozen in a sacred game of life. When Lily has her vision, she too understands that time has stood still in recognition of the fusing of qualities. As Woolf herself has commented when asked about the symbol of the lighthouse, "One has to have a central line down the middle" to unify character and community, art and life.

The characters in each novel are searching, questing for meaning. The lighthouse and the sacred cup act as guides to see a way into the future. A survey of the criticism on Woolf indicates that the idea of reaching the lighthouse can mean anything from discovering God to understanding one's role along the journey. Similarly, Butts's grail knights are on a quest to put things back into some form of order, some structure that will allow them a connection with events which are, as Butts tells us, "only part of which are happening on the earth we see" (140). Like other versions of the search for the holy grail, the questers must go through psychological and physical difficulties, must experience loss and chaos, destruction and war, sanity and madness before any of them can achieve vision. Community creates the opportunity; art supplies the order.

Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts looked forward into a future that would not simply kill off the self-sacrificing, Victorian "angel in the house" but would instead reform and redefine woman completely. In a review of Mark Perugini's *Victorian Days and Ways*, published in *The Bookman* in May of 1932, Mary Butts reflects on the struggle of women like herself growing up in Edwardian England, an "agonised, ridiculous, exhausting, confusing, nerve-wrecking, complex-forming struggle" for the right to grow into whatever they might choose to be:

And it is a paradox of that extraordinary age, of which the girls' war was one of the death-throes, that it produced the greatest intellectual statements of women's rights to be human beings that the world has ever known.¹²

In spite of any personal differences between Virginia Woolf and Mary Butts, Butts and Woolf created art, along with female characters to embody the art, that contributed significantly to the "intellectual statements of women's rights to be human beings."

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 194-95.

¹¹ Kristeva, 187.

¹² Mary Butts, "A Glimpse of the Victorian Scene," *The Bookman* (May 1932) 119.

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Roslyn Reso Foy
Department of English
University of New Orleans