

## **‘A Society’: An Aristophanic Comedy by Virginia Woolf**

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*‘A Society’*, by Virginia Woolf, was published in 1921. By this time the writer had notoriously proved not only her well-known opposition to the recent Great War but also her outspoken criticism against the inferiority of women writers and artists. She was also well acquainted with both the ancient Greek language and literature, and she continually referred to them in her private diaries and letters, as well as in her novels, short-stories and essays. As a matter of fact, she had already had a review printed on a pro-suffrage adaptation of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (1910) and had read and discussed the translation that her friend Roger Fry had prepared in 1918. The content of this paper argues that ‘A Society’ deploys the mechanisms and plots of famous Aristophanean comedies, such as *Lysistrata* and *Women of the Assembly*, in order to enhance its own utopian and critical message. Taking the genre of ancient comedy as a foil, the development of the story, from the comic idea to the various references to historical, as much as personal, events acquires an enriched dimension that illustrates the writer’s learned and refined art of allusion. All in all, it is a witty and hilarious example of Virginia Woolf’s original and creative art of reception of the Greek classical tradition.

### I

‘and if there’s one thing I love it is female society’

*L* 2, p. 27

‘If the Greeks are to survive, they must prove themselves alive’

*E* 6, p. 373

Probably written in 1920, ‘A Society’ was published together with other short stories within the collection entitled *Monday or Tuesday* in 1921.<sup>1</sup>

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For the writings by Virginia Woolf, I follow the abbreviations from the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. On the date of composition of this particular short story and further details about its exclusion from the posthumous edition in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, see Susan Dick (1987): 51. According to Jane Marcus (1983): 64, ‘A Society’ was ‘never reprinted because of the hostility of male critics.’

However, whether or not it truly belongs to the genre of short story or fiction has been called into question due to the curious blend of serious topics and comic situations. As Susan Dick has clearly pointed out, 'A Society' draws on a variety of literary conventions,<sup>1</sup> one of the most highlighted ones being the essay.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, 'A Society' is considered to be the literary antecedent of her two most well-known feminist essays, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding these difficulties of classification,<sup>4</sup> it should be underscored that it is *fiction*, the creation of imaginary characters involved in a kind of utopian fantasy, which actually defines 'A Society' in a way unlike any other experimental form of essay writing by Virginia Woolf.<sup>5</sup> Although it is true that she may have made use of dialogue and fiction in some of her essays when discussing serious topics, this is by no means comparable to the degree and extent of fictionalisation which pervades this exceptional text. It is also true that the influence of Plato and the Platonic appropriation by the Cambridge 'Apostles' in Bloomsbury provides an undeniable source for a text that could be read as a female version of a Socratic dialogue in response to that tradition.<sup>6</sup>

But the Greek classical tradition that Virginia Woolf transfers to the early decades of the twentieth century is substantially Aristophanic. It is my contention in this paper that through 'A Society', Virginia Woolf experiments with an idea of comedy as well as with the resources of a literary mode so appealing to her.<sup>7</sup> Due to her direct knowledge of Aristophanes' works, in the form of both texts and plays, Virginia Woolf was able to appreciate the

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Dick (1987): 55.

<sup>2</sup>According to Edward A. Hungerford (1983), the dialogic form of the story, as well as the critical consideration of a serious topic, point to a form of experimental writing which is closely related to some of Woolf's essays. Morris Beja (1985) lists 'A Society' as an essay. Similarly, Susan Dick (1987): 55 has also acknowledged that it 'resembles some of Woolf's own essays in which fictional situations serve as the occasion for the discussion of ideas.' For Jane Marcus (1983): 64, "'A Society' is a propagandistic and personal essay much like the papers delivered by young men at the meetings of the Cambridge University secret society, the Apostles.' On the other hand, to Phyllis Rose (1978): 104-5, 'A Society' is one of the most interesting of the stories in *Monday or Tuesday*.

<sup>3</sup>For the better and for the worse, as summarised by Susan Dick (1987): 64, n. 3. See, also, Alice Staveley (1996): 266.

<sup>4</sup>According to Nena Skrbic (2004): xiv-xv, the difficulties related to Virginia Woolf's short fiction in general stem from the 'critical unease about the short-story genre itself.'

<sup>5</sup>The influence of 'A Society' on the author's later short fiction has also been claimed. See Selma Meyerowitz (1981): 252. For its relation to later fictional works such as *Jacob's Room* and *Mrs Dalloway*, see Phyllis Rose (1978): 107 and 133.

<sup>6</sup>See Jane Marcus (1983): 64, 67 and 85. The influence of George Moore plays also a pivotal role in the tradition of Platonism in Virginia Woolf. For the writer's appropriation of it, see L. M. Lojo (2003): 71.

<sup>7</sup>My argumentation is supported by Virginia Woolf's fictional and non fictional works, including diaries and letters. Nevertheless, two *caveats* should be anticipated: 1) I will not follow the biographical approach as an aetiological understanding of her writings and ideas, but as a source of information for her own development as an author, as seen in L. Romero Mariscal (2012); 2) I will not intend a psychological exegesis either. The distinction between "genres" and "modes" has several formulations in modern critical literature; I follow Fowler's proposal, as seen in A. Fowler (1982): 55-6, 106-111.

potential of a genre which enjoyed unique freedom to apply harsh criticism of its own society while dealing with the more weighty issues. In terms of Reception Studies, as proposed recently by Lorna Hardwick, we can say that the author has carried out a *refiguration* of Aristophanic comedy, while she reworked a previous tradition in a new and unheard of form of short fictional essay.

For the sake of my argumentation, following the persuasive intimations of M.S. Silk, I consider comedy more as a *mode* (or an archetype), than as a dramatic genre opposed to tragedy. In this way, the literary scope of ancient comedy can be appreciated much better, freed as it is from the straightjacket of simplistic normative definitions. According to Silk, ‘comedy is accidentally dramatic, whereas tragedy is essentially dramatic,’ and he thinks it more appropriate to deal with comedy as form in a *continuum* where the comic displays its possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

This formulation of the generic questions is apposite for my reading of ‘A Society’ as an Aristophanic comedy. It allows me to dismiss the evident generic differences between Aristophanes’ plays and Woolf’s short fictional essay in search of more relevant, illuminating ones. So, when the chorus of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* prays to the goddess Demeter: ‘And may I utter much that’s funny, and also much that’s serious’, they are demanding competence in serious matters notwithstanding their farcical mode.<sup>2</sup> More demanding still is Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians*, where he contends for the capacity of comedy to say right and fair things *too*. The contention that comedy can deal with serious matters in its own right has been difficult to accept in western literary and philosophical culture since Aristotle onwards. When Virginia Woolf dares to expose some of the most urgent and distressing issues of her time in a humoresque tone, without detracting from their seriousness, she is changing some of the more solid literary perceptions of western tradition, and she does so with the help of someone whose company she kept.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Virginia Woolf had read Aristophanes’ *Frogs* relatively early in her life, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 1909, in Greek, in the edition with translation, introduction and commentary by Benjamin Bickley Rogers. She had read it carefully and had filled two pages with notes on her reading notebook.<sup>4</sup> By this time, Virginia Woolf had become well acquainted with Ancient Greek language and literature, due not only to the courses and lessons that she had

<sup>1</sup>M. S. Silk (2000): 52-97, sp. 60-62.

<sup>2</sup>Ar. *Ra.* 391-2. Translation by Jeffrey Henderson (2002). *Aristophanes: Frogs, Assembly Women, Wealth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts – London: Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>3</sup>I am using the idea of W. C. Booth (1989). Along with Aristophanes, Virginia Woolf kept the company of both Peacock and Meredith, who played an important role in her reception both of comedy and of Aristophanes himself. They are also linked with her first voyage to Greece, as seen in *D 2*, 164.

<sup>4</sup>See Brenda Silver 1983: 169.

received from Professor Warr, Miss Clara Pater and Miss Janet Case, but also to her personal devotion and strenuous dedication.<sup>1</sup> She had also become familiar with Aristophanes both through reading and watching performances.<sup>2</sup>

The following year, in November 1910, Virginia Woolf wrote a review of a modern adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* for the *Englishwoman*.<sup>3</sup> The pro-suffrage aspect seems to have been the most remarkable characteristic of the production reviewed, but the reviewer makes other relevant remarks which deserve our attention.<sup>4</sup> First of all, Virginia Woolf feels proud not only of being part of an audience of a Greek play, but also of having read the original play.<sup>5</sup> Her pride is, nevertheless, combined with an alliance with the 'common reader', which will be recurrent in her writings. This 'common reader' is the non specialist who reads Greek for pleasure with the help of confronted translations ('English fronting Greek') and who is, therefore, tempted 'to suck the meaning from one and snatch the bloom of the lovely language from the other'.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, despite the loss of melodic beauty in translation, the force of the ideas remains, and this is particularly the case with Aristophanes: 'For

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<sup>1</sup>Virginia Woolf started learning Ancient Greek in 1897, and she continually recurred to it during her life, dedicating long hours of reading and taking notes especially until 1925. Concerning Virginia Woolf's knowledge of Greek, see, among the latest, T. Koulouris (2011) and L. Romero Mariscal (2012).

<sup>2</sup>In December 1903 Virginia attended a performance of Aristophanes' *Birds* at Cambridge and on the 10th of November 1910 she attended a performance of Aristophanes' *Wasps* at Cambridge too. See Rowena Fowler 1999: 230, n. 11 as well as Edward Bishop 1989: 19. In the years that follow the publication of *Monday and Tuesday* she will continue with her readings and notes on Greek literature, as she is about to publish her 'Greek novel', *Jacob's Room* (1922) and the first part of her *Common Reader* (1925), where she will introduce her essay *On not knowing Greek*. During the preparation of *The Common Reader*, she read (or re-read) on February 1924 Aristophanes' *Birds*. See Brenda Silver (1983): 15-16, 101-2 and 107; Edward Bishop 1989: 80, and *D 2*, p. 292.

<sup>3</sup>The review was signed by Marjorie Strachey, but the author was actually Virginia Woolf. For the details about this adaptation and the favour which Virginia Woolf did for her friend, who felt unable to review the production herself, see *E 6*, p. 374, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup>On the pro-suffrage interest of the performance, see S. P. Rosebaum 1994: 507, n. 1 and Michael Whitworth 2005: 41. Edith Hall (2007): 86 highlights the significance of this performance as 'the first moment when a British performance of a play by Aristophanes was involved in trying to effect social change.' For important details of the performance and adaptation, see E. Hall (2007): 86-88.

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Woolf refers to the theatrical production as 'a Greek play, which though translated into English, implies somehow that one has the text at home.' See *E 6*, p. 373. It is highly likely that Virginia Woolf had read, or at least knew, the 'spritely translation', also by Benjamin Bickley Rogers, of *Lysistrata*, published in 1878 'in diverse rhythms, under the contentious title of *The Revolt of the Women*' on which see E. Hall (2007): 84. On the history of this comedy in Britain and the paucity of available translations into English, see E. Hall (2007): 86.

<sup>6</sup>*E 6*, p. 373. This is an idea that will be expressed in very similar terms in her essay entitled *The Perfect Language*, actually a review on a volume from the Loeb Classical Library on *The Greek Anthology*, with English translation by W. R. Paton. This review was published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1917. Later, in 1925, she will elaborate on this same topic in the chapter entitled *On not knowing Greek*, published in the collection of essays contained in the first series of *The Common Reader*. See *E 2*, pp. 114-119 and *E 4*, pp. 38-53.

we call Euripides and Aristophanes alive because, even stripped of their poetry, they have an eye on our problems.’<sup>1</sup>

The problems with which Virginia Woolf deals in ‘A Society’ are the ones derived from her dissatisfaction with the so-called civilised world in the decade before the end of the Great War. Indeed, the experience of the war seems to have led Virginia Woolf recurrently to *Lysistrata*. In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1916, she is likely to have in mind, indeed be alluding to, this particular play by Aristophanes, when she wrote: ‘I become steadily more feminist, owing to the Times, which I read at breakfast and wonder how this preposterous masculine fiction [the war] keeps going a day longer –without some vigorous young woman pulling us together and marching through it –Do you see any sense in it?’<sup>2</sup>

Not only does Virginia Woolf recall Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* as the war ruthlessly proceeds, but she also discusses it with Roger Fry, who has attempted a translation of the play himself. The former writes about the latter both in her diary and in a letter to Nicholas Banegal in mid-April 1918.<sup>3</sup> The recourse to a play that so seriously condemned the disasters of war was actually worthy of attention.

Both the disenchantment with the world and the invention of an idea that could change the given situation for the better are key elements of comedy, *i.e.* Ancient comedy, hence Virginia Woolf’s appropriation of the comic genre as the ideal poetics for her social critique. Moreover, Aristophanic comedy is conspicuous for its allusions to contemporary people and events as well as for the satirical and debunking elements employed in these allusions. ‘A Society’ pokes fun at a memorable event in which Virginia Woolf herself had taken part, and it also alludes to a feminist controversy provoked by two different articles that she also had contested previously in a non-fictional way. Furthermore, Ancient and Aristophanic comedy is also allusive to literary plays, passages or lines more often than not with explicit undertones of parody. ‘A Society’ brims with literary allusions to both ancient and modern authors. Finally, Aristophanic comedy is striking for its unabashed use of the obscene. Obscenity is perhaps the only element lacking in Virginia Woolf’s Aristophanic comedy, although sexual matters are playfully reported to be a matter of concern, and even chastity is proposed to be banned.

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<sup>1</sup>E 6, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>L 2, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>See L 2, p. 230: ‘Since beginning this letter I’ve spent a night at Guilford with Roger, and read his translation of the *Lysistrata*, and talked about every kind of thing.’ See also D 1, p. 140: ‘Then I went to Guilford. I don’t see how to put 3 or 4 hours of Roger’s conversation into the rest of this page; (...) it was about all manner of things; on growing old; on loneliness; on religion; on morality; on Nessa; on Duncan; on French literature; on education; on Jews; on marriage; & on *Lysistrata*. Occasionally he read a quotation from a book by Proust; (whose name I’ve forgotten), & then from his translation [of the *Lysistrata*]; (...)’ Later on, in her biography of Roger Fry, she will refer again to this attempt of translation for an intended performance and will even quote Roger Fry’s opinion about *Lysistrata* and the Greek civilisation.

### III

The story is initially narrated by Cassandra, one of the women who will constitute themselves into a society. With a subtle comic touch, the narrator describes the idleness of a group of six or seven women who are sitting together after tea. Here comes the first ironic allusion to a controversy in which Virginia Woolf herself took part in defence of women. With the description of the women 'gazing across the street into the windows of a milliner's shop where the light still shone brightly upon scarlet feathers and golden slippers',<sup>1</sup> the author is deliberately creating an atmosphere of stereotyped femininity as conceived by misogynist men like H. W. Massingham, with whom Virginia Woolf took issue in an article published as *The Plumage Bill* in the *Woman's Leader* on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1920.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, these women 'began as usual to praise men', another stereotyped pattern of feminine behaviour, conforming to the expectations of a patriarchal society.<sup>3</sup>

Suddenly, one of the women, Poll, 'who had said nothing', breaks the calm of the conventional atmosphere with an unexpected sign of protest, and 'burst into tears'.<sup>4</sup> This extraordinary character contributes to deploy, so to speak, the prologue function of this particular comedy, as she will expose her utter disappointment regarding, precisely, men and their works. Cassandra, the narrator, describes Poll in serious-comical terms, as a 'queer' absent-minded woman devoid of beauty, and, therefore, of hopes of finding a husband. Poll could be defined as the daughter of an educated man who 'left her a fortune in his will, but on condition that she read all the books in the London Library.'<sup>5</sup>

Poll is not crying because no man 'would ever wish to marry her', nor because of her father's most awkward condition in his will, but because, after having read half, or perhaps only a quarter, of the books of the London Library, she has already arrived at the conclusion that books 'are for the most part unutterably bad!' Cassandra the narrator remarks that Poll was speaking 'with an intensity of desolation which I shall never forget.'<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the immediate reaction of those women so accustomed to praising men is an overall protest. They invoke the names of Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley. Like Poll, they are also the daughters of educated men. But they are not members of the London Library, as Poll replies. She only needs to read a few extracts from any of 'the pile of books which she always carried about with her' to convince the others. They feel the same desolation as Poll.

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<sup>1</sup>CSF, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>According to Massingham, women were responsible for the massacre of birds just for the sake of fashion. In Massingham's view, women were just intent on buying natural feathers to adorn their hats regardless of the consequences. On the context of the controversy and the reply and counter-reply of both Massingham and Woolf, see *E* 3, pp. 241-245. For the learned irony of this article and the resonance on Woolf's intellectual ideas on feminism and female creativity, see Reginal Abbott 1995.

<sup>3</sup>Something similar appears in the short story entitled 'The Introduction.' See *CSF*, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup>CSF, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>CSF, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup>CSF, p. 124.

Ironically enough, they find in those writings the faults of ‘verbose, sentimental foolery’ that would be traditionally applicable to the style of women writers.

Once the initial disappointment is plainly exposed, the comic hero is expected to come up with the Comic Idea that would solve the problem. Nevertheless, in this particular comedy, heroism is not individual but communal, as the title implies.<sup>1</sup> Individual women are named, but their joint association is always highlighted. Virginia Woolf’s appropriation of Aristophanic comedy plays on the literary tradition of the community of women as well as on the role of the chorus as a communal character. In this sense, the author makes Jane, ‘the eldest and wisest’, rise to her feet and speak first, but she is followed by Clorinda as well as by the rest of the women at once.<sup>2</sup>

Clorinda answers the outspoken but rhetorical question posed by Jane in an Aristophanic way. She has understood the value of reading as a real eye-opener thanks to Poll. As a new Lysistrata, she is aware of men’s failure to deal with their due commitments and proposes abstaining from having children until they know for sure whether the pains of bearing them are really worthwhile. Like Lysistrata, Clorinda suggests they take an oath: ‘Before we bring another child into the world we must swear that we will find out what the world is like.’<sup>3</sup>

In order to find out what the world is like, they form themselves into ‘a society for asking questions’, *i.e.*, they will get involved in a Socratic inquiry as unrelenting as Socrates’ in their pursuit of truth.<sup>4</sup> But it is the Aristophanic, even more than the Platonic tradition that prevails, as the narrator insists upon the fact that they vow ‘solemnly’ not to bear any children until they are satisfied.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is possible to perceive the echoes of the poetic contest of the *Frogs* when, in their ‘simplicity’, the women ‘agreed that the objects of life were to produce good people and good books’. These two objects in life can only be achieved by poets who, according to the Euripides that Aristophanes makes speak from Hades, ‘make people better members of their communities’.<sup>6</sup> In Virginia Woolf’s reception, it would be women poets who would be able to accomplish both objects in life and produce good people and good books. As soon as they have ascertained that men have failed at least with regard to the latter, and are not likely to devote themselves to the former, women will have to believe in themselves, in spite of men’s prejudices, in order to succeed in both.

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<sup>1</sup>On the multiple associations of the term ‘society’, see Susan Dick (1987): 62-63.

<sup>2</sup>The dialogic form, stemming from Plato’s *Dialogues*, has been highlighted by L. M. Lojo (2003): 71-2. On the importance of the female characters as heirs of the literary tradition of Sappho, see M. Reynolds (2001): 314.

<sup>3</sup>*CSF*, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>On Virginia Woolf’s admiration of the ‘dramatic genius’ of Plato, see her above-mentioned essay *On not knowing Greek* in *E 4*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>5</sup>*CSF*, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup>*Ar. Ra.* 1008-9.

As Socrates did, the women also make arrangements to visit people and institutions where, through their inquisitive questioning, they may find the answers that satisfy them. Notwithstanding, once again the comic strategies are overwhelming, as recourse to disguise, cross-dressing, and absurdity abound. One of the most commented ones is the allusion to the famous 'Dreadnought Hoax' in which Virginia Woolf herself took part in 1910.<sup>1</sup> The allusion takes advantage of the consequences of that hoax and transforms the episode into a sort of hilarious slapstick comedy.<sup>2</sup> The scenes that follow do not differ much from this.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, one scene that will have a distinct effect on the society of women. It is, in fact, a scene built on Greek names and Greek authors of playful resonances.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of this scene is Castalia, whose very name alludes to the spring in Delphi which was dedicated to Apollo and the Muses, and credited with powers of prophecy and cleansing.<sup>5</sup> Castalia has been to Oxbridge where, disguised as a charwoman, she managed to gain access to the rooms of several professors. One of them, professor Hobkin, had indeed written a book, the value of which, alas, is not at all clear. Professor Hobkin's book is an edition of Sappho 'not all by Sappho', since 'most of it is a defence of Sappho's chastity, which some German had denied.'<sup>6</sup> Despite 'the passion with which these two gentlemen argued, the learning they displayed, the prodigious ingenuity with which they disputed the use of some implement which looked to me for all the world like a hairpin', Castalia honestly doubts the actual worth of their efforts. Indeed, to Castalia's view, academics not only do not produce good people and good books, 'the objects of life', but they actually do not produce anything at all.

Castalia compares professors to cactuses. The women protest. She must have made some mistake. Surrounded as scholars are by knowledgeable people, 'the finest human beings that have ever existed', they must be 'generous, subtle, imaginative', 'overflowing with humour and invention'. Castalia decides to try again.

After her second attempt, Castalia appears 'in the highest spirits.' This time she has not been to Oxbridge asking questions but 'answering them.' She has 'broken the vow' and is going to have a baby. Or, more precisely, at last, after five years, she is satisfied with her own conclusions. As we know, she does not ask questions any more but gives answers. As a matter of fact, the scene gives way to a new twist of comedy, adorned with strikes of theatricality. It is Castalia who proves to have understood Sappho when she evokes fragment

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<sup>1</sup>On the Dreadnought Hoax see, especially, *E* 6, pp. 560-580.

<sup>2</sup>*CSF*, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup>*CSF*, p. 126-127. Perhaps it is worth commenting on the hotchpotch of 'paratragedies' that is deployed in the scene with Helen.

<sup>4</sup>On Woolf's use of allusive names, see Susan Dick (1987): 60-62.

<sup>5</sup>See *Brill's Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, s. v. Castalia.

<sup>6</sup>As Margaret Reynolds (2001): 314 explains, here Virginia Woolf is writing 'a skit on the real endeavours of classicists like Welcker, Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and Bascoul.' See also Jane Marcus (1983): 81.

114 Voigt and cries: ‘Chastity! Chastity! Where’s my chastity!’,<sup>1</sup> aware of the importance of her new step, but also mocking the diatribes of the professors.<sup>2</sup> The name that her mother gave her as a symbol of purity is also invoked in what seems to be mocking a tragedy.

Castalia confesses to the other women that she is ‘an impure woman’. But in this comedy, impurity is not considered a stain. Poll states that ‘chastity is nothing but ignorance’ and even proposes that only unchaste women should be admitted to their society and, as in a democratic assembly, votes that Castalia shall be their President.<sup>3</sup> The re-elaboration of the Aristophanic comedy continues with the rest of the female protagonists. Echoes of *The Women of the Assembly* are perceived in Judith’s measures ‘for dispensing with prostitutes and fertilising virgins by Acts of Parliament.’<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless the war would put an end to the women’s society for putting forward questions. After the war, Castalia and Cassandra, the narrator, met ‘in the room where their meetings used to be held’. They remember those times with a sort of nostalgia and renewed disenchantment after the experience of the war. Castalia speaks up the words that she knows Cassandra would state, as Lysistrata did in a comedy that was performed after the Disaster of Sicily in 414 BC.: ‘the horror of bearing children to see them killed.’<sup>5</sup> But the bleak atmosphere is softened in the end by the mutual respect of these two women both for themselves and for the legacy of their mothers. Now Castalia is also a mother of a daughter, to whom she may pass on her answers. Cassandra, whose name is also evocative of a famous prophetess from Greek literature, gives her own oracular answer too.<sup>6</sup> Castalia should let her daughter learn to read and

<sup>1</sup>CSF, p. 128-129. Castalia re-enacts a dramatic dialogue that Sappho includes in one of her epithalamia, a dialogue between the bride and virginity, in which, when the former said: ‘virginity, virginity, where are you gone leaving me behind?’, the latter replied: ‘no longer will I come to you, no longer will I come’ (translation by Anne Carson (2002). *If not, winter. Fragments of Sappho*. New York: Random House).

<sup>2</sup>For the defence of Sappho, or the ‘modern cult of Sappho for daughters of educated men’ and ‘A Society’, see Jane Marcus (1983): 80-82 and 86. Sappho will appear again in this story in allusion to the famous controversy with Desmond MacCarthy in which Virginia Woolf invoked the name of Sappho to defend women against the accusation of intellectual inferiority. See *D 2*, Appendix III, pp. 339-342, as well as Jane Marcus (1983): 82-83; 87, and Susan Dick (1987): 57.

<sup>3</sup>CSF, pp. 129-130. For the relevance of this passage for *AROO*, see Susan Dick (1987): 65, n. 16.

<sup>4</sup>CSF, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup>CSF, p. 134. Virginia Woolf will invoke Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* again concerning the Second World War in *TG*, p. 275, n. 10. It is only natural that Morgan Forster compared Virginia Woolf to Lysistrata when he analysed her interest in society and feminism: “Like Lysistrata, she withdrew.” See Rosembaum 1975: 215. Nevertheless Jane Marcus (1983): 84-5 is the only critic who has related ‘A Society’ to *Lysistrata*, even though in a very indirect way. On the reelaboration of some aristophanic scenes in *MD*, see Molly Hoff (2001).

<sup>6</sup>The names of Castalia and Cassandra are similarly euphonic and Hellenic. Virginia Woolf may be possibly playing with the feminine associations which the character of Cassandra as a prophetess carried with her in Victorian literature, especially through the burlesque reception. For the codes that shaped the reception of the Cassandra myth throughout the Victorian period, see Laura Monrós Gaspar (2011). Moreover, the author had already used this name for a character in her second novel, *Night and Day*. This was a usual practice of Virginia Woolf, as

then, 'Once she knows how to read there's only one thing you can teach her to believe in –and that is herself.'<sup>1</sup> As Castalia confirms, 'Well, that would be a change.'

The comedy celebrates in this way the dawn of a feminist utopia. Notwithstanding, one last touch of humour is introduced to bring the play to an end. While the women solemnly give the papers of the 'Society of the future' to little Ann, Castalia's daughter, who was playing with her doll, the child 'burst into tears, poor little girl'.<sup>2</sup>

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Isobel Grundy (1983): 210-211 has exposed, together with her sensitivity for the relationship between the names of the surrounding characters. Furthermore, Cassandra will also be remarkably invoked in her later essay *On not knowing Greek*. As a student of Professor George C. W. Warr, here Virginia Woolf is highly likely to have chosen Cassandra for her gender resonances. For Warr's introduction to his translation of the *Oresteia* and his 'striking account of the trilogy', centred on Cassandra confronted with Apollo and Athena, see Edith Hall & Fiona Macintosh (2005): 474.

<sup>1</sup>CSF, p. 136. See S. Meyerowitz (1981): 241 and A. Staveley (1996): 266.

<sup>2</sup>CSF, p. 136. On the literary associations of this ending, see Susan Dick (1987) 60, 63 and 65, n. 17 as well as Margaret Reynolds (2001): 314. Ann K. McClellan (2008): par. 20 and 24 refers to this ending as 'a more pessimistic conclusion' than the one in 'Slater's Pins Have No Points', a later short story by Virginia Woolf in relation to which she believes this particular short story should be read, since they both provide 'contrasting views of independent women intellectuals'. Nevertheless McClellan (2008): par. 26 admits that there is actually hope, despite the difficulties, for the 'Society of the future', in as much as there is hope at the end of 'The Introduction', another later short story by Virginia Woolf, where the seemingly apocalyptic vision of the conclusion can also be read 'as a newfound sense of the responsibility educated women will face in the new millennium.' Therefore, something similar could be applied to the 'Society for the Future' in 'A Society.'

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