

SAVING ENGLAND: ANN VERONICA, SEXUAL MORALITY AND NATIONAL REGENERATION¹

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Concerned about the erotic content of his novel *The Trespasser* (1912), D. H. Lawrence famously told Edward Garnett that he did not wish to be ‘talked about in an *Ann Veronica* fashion’.² It is some gauge of the scandal *Ann Veronica* caused that Lawrence should worry about achieving the same kind of notoriety that *Ann Veronica* brought Wells. To a modern reader, this might appear surprising, as *Ann Veronica* does not seem particularly racy. It is certainly less sexually daring than many contemporary sex novels such as Hubert Wales’s *The Yoke* (1907) or Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks* (1907). Even John St Loe Strachey, a supporter of the National Social Purity Crusade and one of the novel’s most trenchant critics, commented ‘*Ann Veronica* has not a coarse word in it, nor are the “suggestive” passages open to any very severe criticism.’³

If *Ann Veronica* did not offend through franker sexual depictions, many critics still accused Wells of supplanting an old morality based on female sexual restraint and the sanctity of matrimony with a new morality of sexual freedom and self-indulgent individualism. Writing in the *Daily News*, R. A. Scott-James argued: ‘In effect he is content to negate the old morality as something out of date, effete, harmful, tiresome; he puts in its place a negative which masquerades as the supreme assertion of individuality’ (*WCH*, 157). Wilfred Whitten, writing in *T. P.’s Weekly*, referred to the novel’s eponymous hero as ‘a modern British daughter defying the old morality, and saying it is glorious to do so’ (*WCH*, 162). It should be remembered that Wells’s writing was already viewed by many conservative critics as propounding modern views that were anathema to traditional ideas of sexual morality. *Ann Veronica* was one of a number of controversial novels which intervened in the contemporary debate about sexual morality. In the first, *In the Days of The Comet* (1906), some critics had rather crudely elided the novel’s expressions of socialist aspiration with ideas of sexual liberty, branding Wells as an advocate of free love. The furore surrounding Wells’s views on sexuality reached its peak with *Ann Veronica* and *The New Machiavelli* (1911). Such views were also compounded by the perceived immorality

¹ The title ‘Saving England’ is appropriated from an article by W. J. Corbett who pondered on the death of Queen Victoria: ‘What should England do to be Saved?’ Corbett complained that the country ‘has grown old, her national vitality is exhausted. She has arrived at the stage of senile decay, while the United States is just entering upon that of vigorous puberty.’ W. J. Corbett, ‘What should England do to be Saved?’, *Westminster Review*, 155 (1901), 604-613 (612).

² D. H. Lawrence: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. R. P. Draper (London: Taylor and Francis, 1997), 4.

³ H. G. Wells: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Routledge, 1997), 170.

Hereafter *WCH*.

of Wells's own sexual behaviour, at least by those who knew about his extramarital affairs.

In the most famous attack on the novel, John Loe Strachey's *Spectator* review entitled 'A Poisonous Book', Strachey also defends traditional morality against Wells's progressive views. However, a closer analysis of the novel and its reception demonstrate that this critical attack on the novel's immorality is premised less on the defence of Christian morality *per se* than on the effectiveness of traditional moral values in bolstering national health and imperial strength. Thus a debate apparently centred on the morality of Wells's novel figured through a generational conflict between old and new moralities reveals more complex political and moral alignments. While *Ann Veronica* demonstrates that emerging scientific discourses often reinscribe power relations existent in the traditional discourses they ostensibly challenge, Strachey's attack on Wells's novel reveals the extent to which traditional moral discourses melded with new scientific ways of thinking in a defence of nation against both foreign contamination and genetic enfeeblement. More specifically, both Strachey and Wells are concerned with ideas of national regeneration at a time when it was feared that the 'superior' stock of the middle classes was not being reproduced at the rate of the lower classes. Thus while Wells's novel offers a modern morality aligned with socialist ideas that figure the role of motherhood as imperative to the nation, central to Strachey's attack is the idea of saving England not only in terms of saving the national moral character from sexual corruption from both within and beyond national boundaries, but also saving, as in preserving for the future, the racial stock of the nation through the practices of eugenic breeding.

If debates circulating around the novel reveal complex contemporary moral and political alignments, much of the rhetoric of *Ann Veronica*'s critical censure was couched in the familiar language of moral disgust at the narrative concentration on sexual desire at the expense of more morally elevating ideals. *Ann Veronica*'s love for Capes, for example, is described by Whitten, as 'a savage and devouring selfishness originating in an untutored greed of life, intellectual in character, but essentially hard, cheap, and unspiritual' (*WCH*, 163). Strachey, moreover, writing anonymously for the *Spectator*, claimed:

When the temptation is strong enough, not only is the tempted person justified in yielding, but such yielding becomes not merely inevitable but something to be welcomed and glorified. If an animal yearning or lust is only sufficiently absorbing, it is to be obeyed. Self-sacrifice is a dream and self-restraint a delusion. Such things have no place in the muddy world of Mr. Wells's imaginings. His is a community of scuffling stoats and ferrets, unenlightened by a ray of duty or abnegation (*WCH*, 170).

Here, the connection between animality and sexuality is made explicit, although Strachey has imaginatively leapt from the usual tropes of porcine and canine animality to the more idiosyncratic comparison of stoat and ferret. As with criticisms

of Zolean Naturalism thirty years earlier, giving in to animal yearnings, and even representing characters who do so, can lead to national perdition. *Ann Veronica* was a danger to young English women and thus England itself. Indeed, Wilfred Whitten hopes that ‘the British daughter will keep her head’ (*WCH*, 161) as the novel invites her ‘to run amuck through life in the name of self-fulfilment’ (*WCH*, 164).

As Whitten’s comments imply, *Ann Veronica* offends because it complicates nineteenth-century binaries of accepted female behaviour if now figured through the generational conflict between the new morality of young middle-class rebellion and the older sexual morality of Victorian expectation. This older morality is most clearly represented in the novel by Ann Veronica’s father who believes, ‘Women are made like the potter’s vessels – either for worship or contumely, and are withal fragile vessels’ (*AV*, 13). This Victorian dividing practice is also amplified by Ann Veronica’s suitors. While Manning clearly wishes to worship women, Ramage perceives them as ‘a sex of swindlers’ who ‘have all the instinctive dexterity of parasites’ (*AV*, 168). Manning’s traditional view of women is further articulated by Miss Garvice who believes ‘women were not made for the struggles and turmoil of life – their place was the little world, the home’ (*AV*, 175) as Ramage’s sexual cynicism regarding women is mirrored by Miss Miniver’s Tolstoyan sexual cynicism regarding men who ‘are blinded to all fine and subtle things; they look at life with bloodshot eyes and dilated nostrils. They are arbitrary and unjust and dogmatic and brutish and lustful’ (*AV*, 145).

Both the novel and its eponymous character consistently champion the new morality in reaction to these largely Victorian classifications of both sexes. As Ann Veronica tells Manning: “‘Men ought not to idealise any woman. We aren’t worth it. We’ve done nothing to deserve it. And it hampers us. You don’t know the thoughts we have; the things we can do or say’” (*AV*, 236). Similarly, Ann Veronica denies Miss Miniver’s belief that men are “‘silly coarse brutes’” and ought to be loved only platonically: “‘Bodies! Bodies! Horrible things! We are souls. Love lives on a higher plane. We are not animals’” (*AV*, 144). The aesthetic sense Ann Veronica develops through her scientific training leads her to question the elevation of spirit at the expense of flesh: ‘Don’t we all rather humbug about the coarseness? [...] We pretend bodies are ugly. Really they are the most beautiful things in the world. We pretend we never think of everything that makes us what we are’ (*AV*, 144). Ann Veronica rejects both Manning’s adoration of women and Miss Miniver’s feminist glorification of them as both intellectually dishonest and restrictive of any real sense of female emancipation.

Perhaps, though, and most shocking for the reading public, was that Ann Veronica’s sexual behaviour challenged the prevalent notions that women should have little interest in sex and that sex should only occur within marriage. At one stage, after asking Capes to kiss her, Ann Veronica states: ‘I want you. I want you to be my lover. I want to give myself to you’ (*AV*, 250). As David Trotter argues, Ann

Veronica's discovery of 'a fine golden down' on Capes's cheeks (*AV*, 147) represents, '[n]ot so much a feature as a space between features, the golden down becomes the evidence and emblem of Ann Veronica's desire. Her apprehension of it eroticises Capes.'⁴ Wells provides a clear description of a young woman's sexual awakening when in normative discourses of sexuality young women were supposed to remain sexually dormant. Moreover, once sexually awakened, Ann Veronica refuses to be the passive object of male desire but actively pursues an inappropriate sex partner, a divorced adulterer. The objection to Ann Veronica's choice of partner is made explicit by Whitten who refers to Capes as a man 'already married, and [...] an adulterer of the worst type' (*WCH*, 161).

The critics' claim, however, that the novel sanctioned sexual selfishness and challenged more durable forms of morality through depicting women as sexually interested, needs to be contextualised by contemporary debates about national regeneration. Hopes for national regeneration and fears of national degeneration reflect a perceptible Edwardian shift away from the control of working-class sexualities to an increasing preoccupation with the self-regulation of middle-class sexualities. This new emphasis is clearly visible in the eugenics movements where a 'negative eugenics' which 'aims at checking the deterioration to which the human stock is exposed' needs supplementing with a positive eugenics 'which sets itself to inquire by what means the human race may be rendered intrinsically better, higher, stronger, healthier, more capable'.⁵ In *The New Age*, the eugenicist C. W. Saleeby wishes that Mrs. Grundy be buried, alive if need be. He argues that, 'In general, we may say that so far as what one may call positive eugenics is concerned, education must be our inchoate method.'⁶ The importance of positive eugenics within the broader scientification of sexuality is succinctly summarised by Frank Mort:

It was undoubtedly true that the idea of scientific breeding, to increase the quality and quantity of imperial, British stock, was an influential strand of the new collectivist policies for national efficiency in the years before the First World War. Such ventures coupled the demands of post-Darwinist evolutionary biology with

⁴ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History, 1895-1920* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 201.

⁵ F. C. S. Schiller, quoted in Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 3. However, it should also be noted that eugenics often came in for severe criticism. Writing in 1908, M. D. Eder could wittily cast aspersions on the specific notion of middle-class superiority that eugenics implied: 'The scientific gentlemen who have been carrying on these valuable researches belong to the English middle class. Naturally they think this is the class we should try to increase by encouraging its fertility. As one academical gentleman puts it: "The upper-middle class is the backbone of a nation; it depends upon it for its thinkers, leaders, and organisers." As this class is only the backbone of a nation, and as I do not belong to it, I naturally look elsewhere for the head of the nation.' M. D. Eder, 'Good Breeding or Eugenics', *New Age*, 7 (1908), 27.

⁶ C. W. Saleeby, 'Race-Culture and Socialism', *New Age*, 7 (1908), 28.

the new social pathologies of degeneration, which had been generated by the inquiries into the condition of the urban poor after 1880.⁷

Framed morally, as eugenic discourses invariably were, England might still have been in danger from moral and physical pollution from working-class bodies, but it increasingly expected middle-class women to fulfil their procreative duties to the nation. The increasing popularity of eugenics was related to a general perception of a declining birth rate. As Richard Soloway argues:

The fall in the birth rate was the catalyst that transformed eugenics from a relatively obscure, neo-Darwinist, statistically based science into an organized propagandist movement and, more important, into a credible biological way of explaining social, economic, political, and cultural change readily comprehensible to the educated public.⁸

More significantly, this perception highlighted a differential birth rate between the middle and working classes; it appeared that the 'superior' stock of the middle classes was not being reproduced at the rate of the lower classes. Furthermore, as Soloway points out:

To contemporaries, a reading of the demographic map of society often led to the discovery that the poorest and least educated, healthy, intelligent, and skilled portion of the population were continuing to reproduce themselves in large numbers, while more and more people in the wealthiest, best-educated, and highly skilled classes were rapidly reducing the size of their families.⁹

Strachey's rhetoric might privilege a timeless old against a faddish new morality, but their objections to Wells's novel are predicated on the same defence of middle-class hegemony against working-class threat as propounded by eugenicists.

Even as Strachey writes in defence of Christian values, this old morality is realigned to the nation's health. Sexual continence is not merely about individual virtue but is a matter of national well-being and linked to the 'life of the State'. What Strachey refers to as the 'duty of self-control and continence in the interests of the family,' is not exclusive to women but placed on them in 'a special degree' as 'the duty of giving his life for the State is imposed in a special degree upon the man' (*WCH*, 170). Strachey states that he 'do[es] not wish to boycott or denounce any and every book which does not accept the ethical standard of Christianity,' but feels compelled to warn his readers against a work which might 'undermin[e] that sense of continence and self-control in the individual which is essential to a sound and healthy State' (*WCH*, 170). In Strachey's opinion *Ann Veronica* offends because it privileges

⁷ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge, 2000), xxi.

⁸ Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and Declining Birth Rate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (North Carolina: U of North Carolina P, 1990), 18.

⁹ Soloway, xv.

individual fulfilment over national necessity and, specifically, female desire over female duty to the nation. It also attacks marriage and particularly, as Whitten comments, the family: ‘The legal husband, wife, and child are still the units of society. The best woman is still the good woman, who maintains her culture by imparting it to her children’ (*WCH*, 164). However, a closer reading of Strachey’s critique demonstrates a shift away from a defence of Christian morality *per se* to a defence of Christianity as the best means of making women, particularly middle-class women like Ann Veronica, conform to their duty to the state by producing healthy offspring for the nation. Strachey’s Christian morality is thus deployed in an argument primarily concerned with national efficiency.¹⁰ Christian morality, particularly as it focuses on the institution of the family, functions most effectively as a bulwark to the state. According to Strachey:

Unless the citizens of a State put before themselves the principles of duty, self-sacrifice, self-control, and continence, not merely in the matter of national defence, national preservation, and national well-being, but also of the sex relationship, the life of the State must be short and precarious. Unless the institution of the family is firmly founded and assured, the State will not continue. (*WCH*, 170)

Wells’s attack on the family is so harmful to nation and race precisely because the institution of the family is the foundation of the state.¹¹

It has been argued, by Wells’s son among others, that the degree of scandal *Ann Veronica* caused must be understood within the context of Wells’s own sin against the old morality: his affair with Amber Reeves.¹² However, Wells himself acquitted Strachey ‘of anything but an entirely honest and intolerant difference of opinion’ (*WCH*, 172). This is not to deny the effect the knowledge of Wells’s private life might have had on the reception of the novel in some quarters, but rather to stress that *Ann Veronica* was criticised foremost as an attack on a Christian morality which specifically demanded unmarried middle-class women, the archetypal British daughter of Whitten’s article, remained sexually inactive and uninterested. This class element is, moreover, clearly significant to the sexual binaries that the novel

¹⁰ The importance of ideas of national efficiency not only to areas of economics but also to eugenics and even literature has been commented upon by several critics, most recently by Susan Raitt in ‘The Rhetoric of National Efficiency in Early Modernism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 13 (2006), 835-51.

¹¹ The idea that Wells’s socialist ideals attacked family values was contested by Wells in his pamphlet, ‘Will Socialism Destroy the Family?’ (1907) in which Wells argues that, ‘Socialism regards parentage under proper safeguards and good auspices, as “not only a duty but a service” to the state; that is to say, it proposes to pay for good parentage – in other words, to *endow the home*. Socialism comes not to destroy but to save.’ H. G. Wells, ‘Will Socialism Destroy the Family?’, *New Worlds For Old* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 114-36 (124).

¹² Anthony West wrote: ‘My father’s novel was attacked because it could be read in the light of the scandal as a self-serving justification of his own scandalous behaviour.’ Quoted in Margaret Drabble, ‘Introduction’ to *Ann Veronica* (London: Penguin, 2005), xiii-xxxiii (xxiv).

challenges. Whereas many Victorian novels depict the dangers of working-class sexuality, Wells's sexually aberrant protagonist is a middle-class girl from the suburbs. Wells's novel could be read in light of Michel

Foucault's assertion that sexual governance was as concerned with the self-regulation of the middle class as it was with the policing of the working class. As Foucault comments: 'The bourgeoisie began by considering that its own sex was something important, a fragile treasure.'¹³ *Ann Veronica* is concerned precisely with the fragile treasure of bourgeois female sexuality. Referring to the bourgeois idle woman, a construct that can be historically located before Wells's novel but certainly resonates with the position of many women in the first decade of the twentieth century, Foucault states: 'She inhabited the outer edge of the world in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations.'¹⁴ While Wells apparently attacks the peripheral role of the idle women in *Ann Veronica*, he reinscribes her on the 'outer edge of the world' by insisting that her chief public duty is still procreation, if she is now allowed greater choice with whom she procreates. *Ann Veronica* is neither a fallen woman nor the working-class bait for middle-class temptation that say *Nana* is in Zola's novel. *Ann Veronica* is clearly figured as middle-class by the novel's narrator and as a middle-class aberration by the novel's detractors.

If the old morality of Strachey seems more aligned with discourses of national efficiency than it might first appear, then Wells's new morality, by implication opposed to traditional Christian values, challenges less Strachey's Christianity than that his view overlooks 'that in practice the arrangement you manifestly approve is not giving the modern State enough children, or fine enough children, for its needs' (*WCH*, 173). Wells does not dispute that the chief public duty of women is to bear children but only the efficacy of the 'Christian ideal of marriage and woman's purity' (*WCH*, 173) to bear them in sufficient numbers. Wells's reply to Strachey champions less free love as liberation from the constraints of traditional morality than free love as the most effective means of bringing about national regeneration. This is not to assert that Wells was a positive eugenicist in the sense that he endorsed the kind of state practices outlined by Francis Galton and others. Wells questioned both the practicalities and effects of Galtonian eugenics in *Mankind in the Making* (1903), but in *New Worlds for Old* published a year before *Ann Veronica*, in outlining the improved position of women in the socialist future, Wells comments:

Under Socialism they will certainly look less to a man's means and acquisitive gifts, and more to the finer qualities of his personality. They will prefer prominent men, able men, fine, vigorous and attractive persons. There will indeed be far more

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1976), 120-1.

¹⁴ Foucault, 121.

freedom of choice on either side than under the sordid conditions of the present time. I submit that such a free choice is far more likely

to produce a secular increase in the beauty, in intellectual and physical activity and in the capacity of the race than our present haphazard mercenariness.¹⁵

Although Ann Veronica does not live under socialism, her rejection of the haphazard mercenariness of the marriage market through her free choice of a prominent, able, vigorous and attractive if divorced man will surely benefit the race. The children they will now ‘dare to have’ will presumably be made of the ‘hard stuff’ that has prevented Capes and her from ‘going under’. The implication of giving ‘the natural instincts of womanhood freer play’ in their selection of men, as Wells argued in his rejoinder to Strachey, is that the race will be improved and population decline reversed.

Certainly, giving womanhood freer play does not imply giving women greater political, economic or legal power in Wells’s controversial novel. Not only does Ann Veronica find the suffrage movement ‘defective and unsatisfying’ (*AV*, 203), a position mirrored by the satirising of the 1908 October raid on the House of Commons as ‘wild burlesque’ (*AV*, 188), but also, in her revelatory stay in prison, Ann Veronica realises:

A woman wants a proper alliance with a man, a man who is better stuff than herself. She wants that and needs that more than anything else in the world. It may not be just, it may not be fair, but things are so. It isn’t law, nor custom, nor masculine violence settled that. It is just how things happen to be. She wants to be free – she wants to be legally and economically free, so as not to be subject to the wrong man; but only God who made the world, can alter things to prevent her being slave to the right one. (*AV*, 204)

Suffragists like Elizabeth Robins objected to *Ann Veronica* and Wells’s comment that the portrait of the suffragettes was meant as ‘only a gentle kindly criticism’ (*AV*, introd., xxiv).¹⁶ There is little in Ann Veronica’s ruminations in prison that Strachey might have found morally offensive. A woman needs more than anything else a man

¹⁵ Elsewhere, Wells’s comments on the suffrage movement were decidedly less gentle. In *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866)*, 2 vols (London: Gollancz, 1934), Wells wrote: ‘That feminism had anything to do with sexual health and happiness was reputed by these ladies with flushed indignation [...]. They were good pure women rightly struggling for a Vote, and that was all they wanted’ (vol. 2, 407).

¹⁶ See the chapter entitled “The Problem of the Birth Supply” in *Mankind in the Making* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1903), 34-73.

‘who is better stuff than herself’ which is ‘just how things happen to be’. There can be no real equality as women are inferior to men, as Ann Veronica acknowledges, and it is nature that dictates it is so and that women, unless changed by an act of God, must remain subservient to men. Wells, in fact, is arguing for female choice to avoid ‘the wrong man’ so as to make the nation more effective. As Anne B. Simpson has noted:

Wells’s fiction is often marked by tensions between a passionately articulated liberalism and a deeply conservative vision – between the wishful fantasy that select individuals might attain more than contemporary culture had to offer and a pronounced fear of how the new might disrupt the foundations of that culture.¹⁷

In *Ann Veronica*, such a tension can be witnessed in the collision between the emancipatory narrative of the heroine’s escape from the gendered limitations of suburban society and Wells’s affirmation of the central importance of motherhood to the nation. Wells radically challenges the morality of mainstream Edwardian fiction by rewarding his sexual transgressors with a degree of conventional marital contentment rather than a demonstration of the consequences of sexual aberrance, while leaving the plot sufficiently open-ended to imply, as the review of the novel in the *Athenaeum* noted, that the ‘revolting daughter remains a revolting daughter to the end, though she bows to conventional rules – ostensibly’.¹⁸ However, Ann Veronica’s prison thoughts must not be taken as exceptional, or as the immature stage in a *Bildungsroman*. They are key to the trajectory of the novel. Although Ann Veronica makes an initial mistake in her choice of partner by getting engaged to Manning, her eventual selection of the alpha male, Capes, might go against traditional morality, but mating with a man of ‘better stuff’ is thoroughly good eugenic practice. After the consummation of their marriage in the Nietzschean setting of mountain slopes away from the common herd below, the novel concludes with Ann Veronica as a middle-class housewife entrusted to the rearing of her future eugenically superior children. The novel’s championing of female selection over the dictates of Christian morality might be juxtaposed with Ann Veronica’s fear of losing the uniqueness of herself, her experience, her love for Capes and concern that her life is now ‘hedged about with discretions’ and with ‘all this furniture’ (*AV*, 291), but this does not alter, contest or complicate the notion that Ann Veronica is where she should be and doing what she should be doing which is fulfilling her ‘chief public duty’.

Wells promotes the right of women to select their sexual partners, but once chosen Ann Veronica concludes the novel as a dutiful, largely subservient wife on the verge of complying with her duty to the state. Is there much difference by the end of the novel between dutiful Ann Veronica on the cusp of motherhood and Whitten’s good

¹⁷ Anne B. Simpson, ‘Architects of the Erotic: H. G. Wells’s ‘New Woman’, *Seeing Double: Revisioning Edwardian and Modernist Literature*, ed. Carole M. Kaplan and Anne. B. Simpson (New York: St Martin’s, 1996), 39-58 (41).

¹⁸ *Athenaeum*, October 16 1909, 456.

woman? ‘The best woman is still the good woman, who maintains her culture by imparting it to her children, who interpolates her mother wit in a world of pioneering and argument, and who, as far as may be, makes her own home a microcosm of Utopia’ (*WCH*, 164).