

## Research Article

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# Hothouse Victorians: Art and Agency in Freshwater

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**Abstract:** The Victorian artistic community that grew up on the Isle of Wight around Tennyson and Julia Margaret Cameron has been reimagined in Virginia Woolf's play, *Freshwater* (1923, 1935), and more recently in Lynn Truss's novel, *Tennyson's Gift* (1996). Whereas *Freshwater* should be read as modernist or post-Victorian, *Tennyson's Gift* is neo-Victorian and postmodern in its form and attitude. Integral to both are the discontent of women and the disruption of gender norms. Therefore, this essay looks particularly at the question of female agency in a Victorian world envisioned in 1923-35 and one of 1996. In *Freshwater*, one sees a serious exploration of generational change and the desire for artistic freedom, especially through the character of Ellen Terry. *Freshwater* is a dress rehearsal for *To the Lighthouse*. Truss reimagines *Freshwater* by adding to Woolf's cast the unstable Charles Dodgson, whose *Alice in Wonderland* becomes the familiarizing scaffolding for readers in a Victorian world that seems as strange as *Wonderland* did to Alice. Here, female agency is elusive - too-knowing little girls hold sway and adult women use their power, rather pathetically, to win and hold the undeserving men they love.

**Keywords:** Neo-Victorian, Virginia Woolf, Tennyson

In recreating the mid-Victorian world of the 1860s, Virginia Woolf imagined a “summer afternoon world” with “set pieces” pulled from memoirs: “Tennyson in his wideawake; Watts in his smock frock; Ellen Terry dressed as a boy” (“Sketch of the Past”). Often Woolf writes of an idealised past when beauty reigned, and men hummed *Maud* before lunch, but just as often she recognises the humour in the ideal: “There was something so ludicrous in thinking of people humming such things . . . at luncheon parties before the war that I burst out laughing” (“A Room of One’s Own” 13). The geographical anchor of Woolf’s summer afternoon world was Freshwater Bay on the Isle of Wight where, in the 1860s, a Victorian artistic community grew up around the households of Alfred Tennyson and Julia Margaret Cameron, Woolf’s great aunt. Tennyson’s Farringford purchased as an artistic-domestic retreat, quickly became a magnet for artists, admirers and tourists. Cameron was one such artist-admirer who visited the poet laureate in 1860 and decided to settle. Her Dimbola Lodge and nearby Farringford became artistic hothouses where the likes of George Frederick Watts, Ellen Terry and Lewis Carroll could hear Tennyson recite *Maud* and be subjected to Cameron’s camera.

Woolf wrote several pieces that included Cameron and her circle, including two versions of a “home” theatrical, *Freshwater* (1923, 1935). More recently, *Freshwater* has been reimagined through a postmodern, neo-Victorian lens in Lynn Truss’s novel *Tennyson’s Gift* (1996). These texts share a farcical tone and use similar jokes to lampoon how the artistic community at Freshwater retained conventional Victorian gender and class dynamics despite its Bohemian potential—what would become Bloomsbury in the next generation. Self-absorbed men depend upon younger, energetic women to support their art and their egos, to minister to their moods and manage daily life. The “great men,” in particular, are deflated, rendered

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petulant boys who do not want their hair washed or otherwise to be pulled away from the myopic pursuit of art and thought.

The comedy of both texts depends upon the audience's historical distance and ability to read the undercurrents of discontent and the inevitability of disruption to the community. Truss's distance, however, is greater than Woolf's, and her audience's perspective on the Victorians different. Whereas *Freshwater* should be read as modernist or post-Victorian (a distinction I will tease out in my reading of the two versions of the play), *Tennyson's Gift* is distinctly and explicitly neo-Victorian and postmodern in its form and attitude. Integral to both Woolf's writing and neo-Victorian fiction are the discontent of women and the disruption of gender norms. Just as Woolf's relation to feminism has been complicated, the "role of neo-Victorianism in contemporary feminist politics" is fraught (MacDonald and Groggin 1-2). Therefore, this chapter looks particularly at the question of female agency, which is central to both texts but which also highlights the differences between a Victorian world envisioned in 1923-35 and one of 1996—between, in other words, the post- and neo-Victorian. *Freshwater* is shaped by Woolf's closer view and personal connection to her subject, and one sees underneath the farce a serious exploration of generational change and the desire for artistic freedom, especially through the character of Ellen Terry. *Freshwater* is a dress rehearsal of sorts for *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and its claustrophobic paternalism demonstrates the need for a room of one's own. Truss, on the other hand, re-vision *Freshwater* (and perhaps *Freshwater*) by adding to Woolf's cast an American family, the phrenological Fowlers, and an unstable Charles Dodgson, whose *Alice in Wonderland* becomes the familiarizing scaffolding for readers in a Victorian world that seems as strange as *Wonderland* did to Alice. Here, burlesque takes over, and female agency is elusive—too-knowing little girls hold sway and adult women use their power, rather pathetically, to win and hold the undeserving men they love.

In January of 1935, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell hosted a private performance of Woolf's play, *Freshwater*, which lovingly satirises the artistic community that grew up around Tennyson and Cameron in the 1860s. Woolf had drafted an earlier version of the play in 1923 as a "distraction" from writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, and had been researching her great-aunt Julia and her circle since at least 1919 (Ruotolo x). *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Between the Acts*, the short story "The Searchlight" and several of Woolf's essays all are linked directly or indirectly to the *Freshwater* scene, just as its general aura of idealised Victorian summer pervades much of the "past" in Woolf's work. *Freshwater* is a slight work in Woolf's oeuvre, never meant for publication, and yet it is an intriguing piece, interwoven with Woolf's more serious texts and shot through with many of the same concerns, but treated with refreshing humour and lightness. It is easy to see *Freshwater* as a welcome distraction for Woolf herself, as she worked through the tensions she felt between the past of her parents' Victorian world and her own modernist present.

How to talk about Woolf in relation to the Victorians has been a matter of long debate. Critics concerned with gender and class, especially, have emphasised the ways in which Woolf's writing breaks with her personal and literary past. "[O]n or about December 1910." Woolf famously remarked "human character changed" (*Essays* III 421). The call of the new, the desire to escape the stultifying confines of Victorian convention, especially for her female characters, is certainly clear in Woolf's work. Nowhere is this desire for escape more explicit than in *Freshwater*, where the 17-year-old Ellen Terry, newly married to the 47-year-old painter George Frederick Watts, escapes to Gordon Square with a sailor whom she has just met. But other scholars emphasise how deeply retrospective Woolf's writing is, how embedded in "the Victorian world of Empire, Class, and Privilege" as Quentin Bell described his aunt (Vol. II 186). Or, more positively, critics have noted how indebted Woolf was to the lyricism and passion of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti, how admiring of the energy and certainty of her great aunt, Julia Cameron (Lee, Joyce).

Steven Ellis, among others, has argued that at least through the 1920s, Woolf is more post-Victorian than modern, her "frequent exhilaration and sense of emancipation" from the past being modulated by her sense of its importance as cultural inheritance (7). By the 1930s, Ellis acknowledges, Woolf had become more ambivalent toward the Victorians, her focus having shifted from maternal figures such as Mrs Ramsey and Clarissa Dalloway toward a "repressive patriarchal legacy" as it was portrayed in *The Years* and *Three Guineas* (109). This transition that Ellis identifies is played out in the two versions of *Freshwater*, the first of which from 1923 reads as post-Victorian in both its form and focus whereas by 1935 the text has become distinctly more modernist.

*Freshwater* is set at Cameron's Dimbola Lodge on a summer afternoon around 1864.<sup>1</sup> Julia and Charles Cameron are preparing to return to India at 2:30 that afternoon, assuming their coffins arrive to accompany them. Nevertheless, Cameron insistently recruits those around her to sit for photographs: the maid as "Truth sipping at the font of inspiration" (complete with turkey's wings for an angelic look) or a local farm boy as "Galahad watching the holy grail by moonlight" (56). Tennyson is using the interval to read *Maud* to them one more time. Watts (referred to by all as "the Signor") is trying to finish his allegorical painting "Modesty Crouching at the feet of Mammon," but Mammon's "big toe" is "out of drawing" and his model and wife, Ellen Terry ("Nell"), has run off to meet a young man (8, 15).

As Lucio Ruotolo has remarked, "much of *Freshwater* is built upon fact, not fiction" (xi). Woolf had read much about her great aunt Julia and the Freshwater circle, but she is also describing a world that she would have heard about throughout childhood and come to appreciate as an inheritance. In her essay on "Pattledom" (1925) Woolf writes that the seven Pattle sisters—her grandmother and great aunts—"ruled a Victorian empire" of energy and beauty. Most interesting to her is Cameron, the sister of "undoubted genius" who "quickly became the best amateur photographer of her time." Woolf expanded her "Pattledom" essay in her introduction to the volume of Cameron's photographs, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* (1926): the Pattle sisters "had the art of making round them, whether at Freshwater or at Little Holland House, a society of their own . . . where they could drape and arrange . . . in a high-handed and adventurous way which painters and writers and even serious men of affairs found much to their liking" (14). This is the world of high-minded manners, beauty, and grace that the young Ellen Terry found at first so attractive and then so stultifying. She had moved into little Holland House with Watts and there came under the authority of Sarah Prinsep, Julia Cameron's wealthy sister who enjoyed "collecting" great men. Terry records in her memoir that "I wondered at the new life, and worshipped it because of its beauty." She writes that when "it suddenly came to an end, I was thunderstruck," but then admits that her break with Watts was "a natural, almost inevitable, catastrophe" (Terry 64).

In the 1923 version of *Freshwater*, the high artistic ideals of this "wonderland" as Terry called it, though severely lampooned, are nevertheless the heart of the play. The action concerns Ellen Terry's escape, but the interest and the comedy are focused on the great Victorians and their art. Tennyson is called a "great poet" and a "true artist" by other characters, and Watts repeatedly exclaims his signature motto, adopted by all of these greats, "the Utmost for the Highest!" In the middle of the play, Woolf writes a speech for Cameron that both pokes fun at and valorizes her great aunt's aesthetic commitment: "All my sisters were beautiful, but I had genius. . . . They were the brides of men but I am the bride of Art. I have sought the beautiful in the most unlikely places. . . . My cook was a mendicant. I have transformed her into a Queen" (64-65). Woolf's sympathy and identification with her great-aunt is clear here, despite the humorous tone. Finding beauty in the quotidian is also at the heart of *Mrs. Dalloway*, written during the same period, though it is treated there without irony: "Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly" (69). In *Freshwater*, Ellen Terry stands in as the younger woman artist to whom Cameron feels a trans-generational connection, one suggested in Cameron's famous portrait of Terry taken during a visit to Dimbola (Figure 1).

"Ellen Terry, age 16" or "Sadness" is a touching and intimate portrait of the newly-married Terry in her nightgown, a figure that embodies the photograph's alternate title, "Sadness." At the end of the play, as the Camerons start for India and "Nell" prepares to leave for Bloomsbury with her new love, Cameron gives the younger woman her camera: "It is my wedding gift, Ellen. Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendants. See that it is always slightly out of focus. Farewell! Farewell!" (73).

<sup>1</sup> Chronology is collapsed in Woolf's play to accommodate several historical events in the course of an afternoon. Ellen Terry split from Watts in 1865, for instance, but the Camerons did not leave England for Ceylon until 1875. Similarly, Truss collapses chronology in order to allow all of her characters to be in Freshwater at the same time. Charles Dodgson and Ellen Terry, for instance, were both at Freshwater in 1864 but they did not meet until 1865 after Terry was sent home to her parents by Watts and Cameron's sister, Julia Prinsep.



**Figure 1:** Julia Margaret Cameron. *Ellen Terry at Age Sixteen*. 1864. J. Paul Getty Museum.

The 1935 version of *Freshwater* is lighter and tremendously pared down from the 1923 version. The earlier version is more Victorian in the sense that modernists meant that term: its speeches are long and ponderous, and too laden with exposition, so the pace of the early *Freshwater* in performance would have felt slow, working against the comedic tone it tries to achieve. Among the casualties of the 1935 editing are most of the long speeches on aesthetics, though Watts retains his fussy musings on his allegories as if to underscore his unsuitability as a husband. Cameron's character in this newer version is smaller, less dreamy, more abrupt and practical. She does not, in 1935, bequeath her camera to Terry or, in fact, seem to have much sympathy for the girl. Cameron orders the slaughter of a turkey so that she may photograph Terry as a muse wearing its wings. When Nell objects Cameron responds: "The turkey is happy, Ellen. The turkey has become part and parcel of my immortal art. Now, Ellen. Mount this chair. Throw your arms out. Look upwards" (14). This is the most aesthetically-oriented speech Cameron makes in the 1935 play, her lines about beauty in unlikely places having been edited out before the final version (49). Further, as Penny Farfan points out, in this scene Cameron is complicit in Terry's patriarchal entrapment (53). When Nell and John Craig are discovered, Cameron turns the event into another photo shot, aligning her artistic agenda with that of the allegorical and patriarchal Watts: "Sit down again, Ellen. . . . Hide your head in your hands. Sob. Penitence on the stool of—" (37). But Nell now rejects her prescribed role in both Victorian aesthetics and marriage: "No, I can't, Mrs. Cameron. . . . Penitence on a Monument—no, that I will not be" (37). Woolf's sympathy and identification with her great aunt, ambivalent but clear in the post-Victorian 1923 draft, is all but absent here in the modernist revision.

The character of Ellen Terry undergoes an even more dramatic shift between the *Freshwaters* of 1923 and 1935. In the later version, all of the sympathy and affection for Cameron has been transferred to Terry who, though a great late-Victorian in her own right, can easily be seen as a transitional figure between the old and the new. In the 1923 draft, Terry is portrayed as a surly teenager complaining about her elders. Her first speech is an entire page of exposition and complaint:

Nothing ever changes in this house. Somebody's always asleep. Lord Tennyson is always reading *Maud*. The cook is always being photographed. . . . If I only could escape. [*She wrings her hands in desperation.*] For I never thought when I married Mr. Watts that it was going to be like this. I thought artists were such jolly people—always dressing up and hiring coaches and going for picnics and drinking champagne and eating oysters and kissing each other and—well, behaving like the Rossettis. (59)

In the 1935 version, in contrast, the elements of Nell's long first speech are either eliminated or scattered through the act as conversation with other characters. Her first lines establish her as put-upon by her idealistic painter husband but nevertheless as light and artful: "Oh, Signor, can't I get down? I am so stiff. . . . Only four hours! It seems like centuries. . . . And I would like to go for a bath. It's a lovely morning. The bees on the thorn" (10). Largely silenced or ignored by the Victorian greats, Nell desires to break free from static modelling and go swimming in the bay. This association of Terry with the natural, with vitality and impulsive movement, corresponds to Woolf's portrait of her in her 1941 essay, "Ellen Terry." There Woolf describes Terry as "mutable woman, all instinct, sympathy, and sensation" who takes her theatrical parts "out into the woods" where, rambling "down grassy rides, she lives her part until she is it." Though I would argue that the 1935 Nell is a more liberated and natural Ellen Terry than the 1923 version, these associations with the natural—with swimming and flowers—also suggest Terry's famous early stage role of Ophelia. Focusing on this association, Nina Auerbach finds the 1935 *Freshwater* to be "more sober" and "suffused with ominous references to Ophelia and drowning" (109). Auerbach contrasts Nell's escape in 1923, where she is dressed as a boy, with that of 1935 where she is "'painted, powdered—unveiled—'" as a fallen woman (109). If fallen, however, Nell is nevertheless light-hearted and hardly tragic in her escape to a bourgeois world outside the confines of *Freshwater*.

Unlike her ambivalent portraits of Julia Cameron, Woolf finds nothing ludicrous or embarrassing about Terry. Indeed, in her essay and in *Freshwater*, Woolf goes to some lengths to protect Terry's reputation, most notably by eliding mention of her children's father, Edward Godwin, with whom she lived for a number of years after leaving Watts. In the essay, Woolf acknowledges simply, "At any rate, the marriage [to Watts] was a failure. . . . And so, skipping a page or two. . . . She is a mother now. Two adorable children claim all her devotion," ("Ellen Terry"). In *Freshwater*, Woolf's elision of Godwin is more clever. In both versions of the play, Ellen Terry runs off to Bloomsbury with a sailor named "Craig,"<sup>2</sup> the surname that Terry gave to her two children by Godwin after her relationship with him foundered. In other words, with the character of John Craig, Woolf demonstrates her familiarity with Ellen Terry's story and pays tribute to her theatrical children, whom she knew and admired. But she also makes Terry the property of no actual man: the 1935 version repeatedly refers to John Craig as a "fact," but he is, on the contrary, the only purely fictional character in the play (43).

The addition of the interlude between Nell and the fictional John Craig in the 1935 version is the single greatest difference between the play's two versions. What had been a short single act play in 1923 became three acts in 1935. Director David Richman, who staged a production of *Freshwater* in 1974, commented that "the structure of the three acts is much like that of a symphonic composition. The fast-paced first and third acts are similar in their abundance of thematic material to the outer movements of a classical symphony. The middle act, a lyric section which focuses on Ellen Terry and her lover, is in the nature of an andante" (*Freshwater* 50-51). Whether or not Woolf intended this "musical structure," as Richman calls it, the play's revisions show thoughtful consideration of theatrical form and suggest the influence of new, modernist theatrical ideas of which Woolf was aware and which were associated with Terry's children. Terry's son, Gordon Craig, was a revolutionary theatrical designer and director in the early twentieth century (Innes 11). Her daughter, Edith Craig, founded the Pioneer Players (1911-20), which promoted and staged women's and other progressive theatre (Cockin). After Terry's death in 1928, Edith turned her mother's estate, Smallhythe Place, into a monument to Terry's theatrical career, complete with a barn converted for theatrical performances. Edith and her life partners, Christabel Marshall (Christopher St. John) and Clare (Tony) Atwood, were dedicated to progressive politics and social movements, including women's suffrage; their home at Smallhythe Place became a cultural centre reminiscent of that at *Freshwater*, albeit very different in tone and scope. Woolf knew and was at least tangentially part of this group through Vita Sackville-West. She had applied to join Edith's Barn Theatre Society in 1933, before her revision of *Freshwater* began,

<sup>2</sup> The reality was much messier: in 1865, Terry was sent home to her parents by Watts and Woolf's great aunt, Sara Prinsep, and she stayed there for three and a half years before finally escaping with Godwin. The relationship with Godwin foundered by the mid-'70s, and in 1887 Terry gave her children, Edward Gordon and Edith, the surname "Craig," because she thought a rock formation in Scotland, Ailsa Craig, would be a good stage name for Edith (Holroyd ch. 21).

and attended performances there (Holroyd Ch. 48). It is also worth noting that Woolf's essay on Terry was written on the back of manuscript pages of *Between the Acts*, a novel in which Edith Craig figures as the theatrical director Miss La Trobe (Lee 739).

As various critics have noted, Woolf's addition of the middle, lyrical section to *Freshwater* (1935) makes Terry the literal centre of the play, her escape from Freshwater to Gordon Square its central action (Farfan 49). Nell's flight is justified by two things: her discovery of love and the limited range she is allowed in the Freshwater world of Victorian roles. Of the two, the latter seems eminently more important, for when John Craig shows her what love is by kissing her, it makes Nell think not of him but of a wider life for herself: "beef steaks; beer; standing under an umbrella in the rain; waiting to go into a theatre; crowds of people; hot chestnuts; omnibuses—all the things I've always dreamt about" (26). In the Freshwater circle, Nell's roles are limited to the traditionally Victorian. She can be "modesty," a muse, or "penitence"; she can be "Maud" or "a beautiful young woman. . . found drowned." As Farfan remarks, Nell is "the reluctant model for a range of feminine images that are essentially variations of the same Victorian ideal of womanhood that Woolf. . . regarded [by 1931] as the mortal enemy of women artists" (53). Or, as Woolf herself writes of Terry, Nell was too original for traditional women's roles: "Something of Ellen Terry . . . overflowed every part and remained unacted" ("Ellen Terry").

In the 1935 *Freshwater*, Woolf is intent on entertaining her in-the-know audience—moderns for whom the Victorians are as familiar as grandparents but who have come into focus through texts such as Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and her own *Famous Men and Fair Women* (1926). The extended exposition of the earlier, post-Victorian version of the play is deemed unnecessary, and *Freshwater* becomes a thing in itself, conceptually and stylistically modern. Woolf is still referencing the Victorian subjects but not writing *about* them in the same way. Rather, Terry takes over the play, rejecting Victorian standards of behaviour, ideas about marriage and the roles that women might play in society.

Lynn Truss's 1996 novel, *Tennyson's Gift*, is also a homage to the Freshwater circle and, perhaps, to Woolf's play, though Truss claims not to have read *Freshwater* before finishing her novel (Dunn). Like Woolf's, Truss's rendering of Freshwater is decidedly light in tone and contains many of the same jokes: Ellen Terry Watts's sexual frustration, Tennyson's social insensitivity and relentless reading of *Maud*, Julia Cameron's frenetic energy and overbearing generosity. Still, there are clear differences between the humour of the two texts. In *Freshwater*, Woolf uses humour to create a safe distance for herself and her audience to assert their difference from the Victorians and their legacy. Truss, on the other hand, seems to use humour to (re)familiarise her audience with the Victorians, who, because of the broad strokes Truss must use, embody modernist stereotypes seen through a postmodern lens. On the issue of Victorian hygiene, for instance, Woolf's play begins with a quaint argument between the Camerons about how often Julia insists on washing her husband's head—"The sixth time in eight months!" Charles complains (7). In *Tennyson's Gift*, in contrast, Emily Tennyson, we are told "was very proud of Alfred, despite his touchiness, insensitivity and meanness, and despite even his tragic standards of personal hygiene. . . Truly Alfred Tennyson was the dirtiest laureate that ever lived" (11). Emily believes that these faults "did not make him a lesser poet or a lesser husband," but Truss's details seem designed to assure the reader of the contrary (11).

As opposed to the complex periodisation of Woolf's play, Truss's novel flaunts its neo-Victorianism. It is self-reflexive and referential, winking at the audience as Cameron is compared to Tennyson's Mariana and Terry to his Maud, and as it becomes clear that the whole is suffused with the language and structure of *Alice in Wonderland*. It is a pastiche piled high with historical facts and anecdotes derived from memoirs and letters: Garibaldi *did* plant a tree at Farringford; Dodgson *was* phrenologized in Edinburgh and pronounced "emulous"; Tennyson *was* deemed untidy by even Victorian standards. Many such anecdotes are also present in Woolf's writing, where they appear more in the guise of "family legend" or gossip that is generally understood. As a relatively rare example of flat-out farcical neo-Victorian biofiction, *Tennyson's Gift* presents its tid-bits with a postmodern high-definition resolution that emphasises the warts and wrinkles of the subjects. Fowler assumes Dodgson is a "pervert" (139); Cameron, being plain looking, is, of course, jealous of Terry; Terry, being beautiful, is "silly" and has no judgment (112).

Of the subgenres of neo-Victorian fiction, biofiction has come under particular criticism for being "less concerned with revisioning historical "realities" and real figures than with the cultural myths constructed/

woven around them” (Robinson 40). Marie-Luise Kohlke suggests that this prominent subgenre capitalises on “our reality TV show fascination with confession, voyeurism, and celebrity” and “only accentuates these obsessions” through salacious and traumatic revelations of Victorian subjects (4). Kohlke points to *Tennyson’s Gifts* as an example of celebrity biofiction that unfairly debunks the “great” figure (Tennyson) “through ridicule, satire, and travesty” (7). What some critics have called “exploitation” of historical Victorians becomes particularly sensitive when the subjects belong to culturally oppressed groups—the working classes, colonised peoples, or women. Bonnie Robinson argues that in the case of “marginalised women and wives . . . especially the ‘helpmeets’” of famous men, biofictional portraits can border on “(re)discrimination . . . reiterating their position as one of culture’s internally colonized Others” (22). Is the impulse to revisit Victorian gender roles in contemporary fiction an act of nostalgia that reifies those roles? Or does it allow for a more genuine sort of revisionism vis-à-vis the gender politics of the present? In terms of female agency, *Tennyson’s Gift* is a mixed bag. The novel brims with figures of feminist legacy and potential agency—not only Cameron and Terry, but Lydia and Jessie Fowler were all formidable women of accomplishment. There is also the unspoken legacy of Woolf—as Cameron’s great-niece if not as the writer of *Freshwater*. And, for the most part, Truss follows Woolf in making female figures catalysts and problem solvers. Still, their actions are almost always performed in relation to men and male desires. This is particularly true of Cameron but also of Terry, Woolf’s heroines from *Freshwater* of 1923 and 1935 respectively.

Truss’s title signals the novel’s central interest in Cameron’s devotion to Tennyson (a passion entirely absent from *Freshwater*) and her desire to capture him in photographs. Cameron is portrayed as so utterly in love with Tennyson that she has the red roses in her garden painted white and sends to the Tennysons an unceasing series of extravagant and inappropriate gifts—“a leg of Welsh mutton, an embroidered jacket, a child’s violet poncho, and six rolls of bright blue wallpaper decorated with . . . the Elgin Marbles” (10). For much of the novel, Cameron vies with his wife, Emily, for how best to please him while he routinely rebuffs or ignores both of their efforts. Emily Tennyson is “steadily sacrificing her life” to maintaining her husband’s illusion that “the world adored him without the faintest reservation” (8). She handles his correspondence and orders the household to suit his contradictory needs for privacy and adoration. Most dramatically, when Emily sees a parody of *In Memoriam* in *Punch*, she eats it at the breakfast table before Alfred can read it (11).

Tennyson’s celebrity is important to both texts, of course, since it caused him to move to the Isle of Wight in the first place, and was the reason that the Freshwater community sprang up. Woolf’s play captures neatly the poet laureate’s frustration that his retreat has been invaded; his opening lines begin: “The son of man has nowhere to lay his head! . . . Twenty earnest youths from Clerkenwell are in the shrubbery; six American professors are in the summer house; the bathroom is occupied by the Ladies Poetry Circle from Ohio. The son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (8). Woolf’s Tennyson is essentially a sympathetic figure—harried by tourists and self-absorbed, but nevertheless sensitive to Nell’s beauty, indeed “to beauty in all its forms” (12). “I sometimes think,” Nell tells him, “that you are the most sensible of them all” (12). Emily Tennyson does not appear in Woolf’s play except for her husband’s comment that she “has lain on her sofa for fifty years” (13). When Nell asks him if he has ever been in love, it is not Emily but Hallam that he references. In this case, as elsewhere, Woolf’s treatment of potential scandal is light and off-hand, a nod to her modernist audience’s tolerant sensibilities in sexual matters.

Truss’s method of handling the scandalous, in contrast, is rather to inflame than diminish. Playing upon a twenty-first-century audience’s delight in lapses of Victorian decorum, the artistic community at Freshwater becomes in Truss’s novel an absurd burlesque with little sympathy or cultural connection to the present. The most significant plot difference between the two texts is Truss’s addition of Charles Dodgson (soon to be Lewis Carroll), who in 1864 was preoccupied by his own farce of Victoriana, the as yet unpublished *Alice in Wonderland*. Few figures of the Victorian period offer greater prurience potential for twenty-first-century audiences than Lewis Carroll, whose intense relationships with and photographs of young girls have engendered charges of paedophilia. Yet, much evidence suggests that in his own time and well into the twentieth century, Carroll’s behaviour would not have seemed particularly scandalous—certainly not when set beside, for instance, Ellen Terry’s sexual indiscretions (Woolf, J. “Introduction”).



Dodgson certainly considered Terry the more scandalous, dropping their once-intense friendship after she eloped with Godwin. Dodgson and his *Alice* offer artistically legitimate reasons for inclusion in this novel, but Truss nevertheless exploits the more prurient possibilities of Dodgson's life.

In *Tennyson's Gift*, Dodgson visits Freshwater to renew his tentative acquaintance with Tennyson and to request that he be allowed to dedicate *Alice* to Tennyson's sons, Hallam and Lionel. Dodgson functions as an outside observer of the Freshwater community, which seems in his eyes (and thus in the reader's) as strange as Wonderland itself. Of course, Dodgson himself is not the least strange character of this group, so his perspective and role as a guide in the novel is unreliable. Truss's use of *Alice*, with its extended metaphor of the looking glass "suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image" even as it nods to the novel's postmodern reflexivity (Joyce 16).

One of Dodgson's positive functions in *Tennyson's Gift* is to flesh out Ellen Terry's character beyond the silly child wife that the novel's "adults" seem to view her. For him, she is foremost an actress whom he calls "Miss Terry" (as opposed to "Mrs. Watts"). Dodgson's visit to Freshwater did not, in fact, overlap with that of Watts and Terry, though Terry did become another celebrity that Dodgson would court, and the conflation of their visits to Freshwater makes for high drama.<sup>3</sup> Dodgson had first seen Terry in 1856 at age nine playing the king's son in *A Winter's Tale* and "especially admired the acting of the little Mamillius, Ellen Terry, a beautiful little creature who played with remarkable ease and spirit" (qtd. in Collingwood Ch. 2). Dodgson's friendship with and photographs of Terry and her family date from after her separation from Watts, when she was again living with her parents. In these, she is no longer a "little creature" and certainly not at ease. As Nina Auerbach has pointed out, Dodgson shows Terry "grim," "stiff and somber," her hair tightly constrained and her dress black (122) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Lewis Carroll. *Ellen Terry, Back to a Window*. 1865. Musee D'Orsay, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> The Wattses stayed at Dimbola lodge in March of 1864, shortly after their marriage, to escape the "ribald 'speculation in the press'" about their May-December union (Boyce 82). Dodgson visited Freshwater in July 1864.



Dodgson's poses of Terry seem to insist upon her sorrowful propriety—as if she is assuming here the role of “Penitence” that she rejects in Woolf's play. An interesting contrast is the photograph that Dodgson took at the same time of Ellen's sister, Kate, posing as Artemis chained, a portrait that implies empathy with the unhappily married Victorian woman and perhaps—with the close association of the sisters who often played each other's parts on the stage—with Ellen Terry herself (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Lewis Carroll. *Kate Terry, “Artemis chained.”* 1865. Musee D’Orsay, Paris.

Though Dodgson pointedly cut Terry from his acquaintance when he learned of her elopement with Godwin, he quickly reinstated her once she had respectfully married Charles Wardell in 1881, and they remained close friends, he admiring her acting and she assisting his young female friends when she could.

Unfortunately, this historic friendship is largely absent from *Tennyson's Gift*, limiting our sense of Terry as the important late-Victorian figure that she was. In the relationship between Terry and Dodgson, Truss chooses to emphasise Terry's relation to Dodgson's girl-heroine, Alice, whom Terry believed she had inspired (Auerbach 126). Truss portrays the actress as hungry for love and recognition and nostalgic for her life as “little Miss Terry” rather than desiring adult freedom as she does in Woolf's play. In the novel, Ellen insinuates herself with Dodgson, sure that she is his Alice, while he pursues much younger prey among the girls at the beach. She also insinuates herself with the other male outsider of the novel, Lorenzo Fowler, who has come to Freshwater to read heads and sell pamphlets on healthy living and phrenology. Using a cross-dressing conceit from Woolf's 1923 play, Ellen dresses as a boy to visit Fowler and be phrenologized. He sees through her guise and begins an exciting flirtation with her, telling her that she possesses “large Amativeness, combined with large Hope and small Caution” (85). She believes, naively, that he can help her win her husband's love but she is herself awakened into sexual feeling by Lorenzo and by the sight of him kissing his uninhibited wife, Lydia. At the end of the novel, a newly awakened Ellen has grown up and possesses the “new-found authority of sadness” (220). She is no longer in awe of her husband, and she is prepared to give expression to her needs. However, we do not see her act.

Cameron does not fare much better. She has tried and failed to blackmail Tennyson into sitting for her photographs. Ultimately, she wins Tennyson's gift of himself as photographic subject not through her own actions or merits but through a convoluted plot twist. The Queen has visited Farringford and accidentally

taken away one of Fowler's sexually explicit tracts on married love. Tennyson strikes a bargain with God that he will sit for a Cameron photograph if the Queen is not angry. Predictably, the widowed queen is delighted by the sex tract, and Tennyson is therefore delighted as well. "Come into the garden" he calls up to Julia, turning her—finally—into Maud rather than Mariana.

On balance, Truss's novel is in line with feminist uses of the Victorian, which remains a productive site for gender revision precisely because we still have much to reform in our own. But there are dangers here. First, the agency of these two potential heroines—as well as most of the other women of the novel, heroic or not—is largely surrendered to "great" men. Second, Truss's humour is so sharp that figures such as Cameron and Terry become ridiculous and embarrassing without the affection present even in the more rebellious 1935 version of Woolf's play. Such characterisations, while smacking of historical stereotype (repressed angels and frustrated artists) are not sensitive to actual historical context or the real accomplishments of these women and the degree to which both lived and worked outside Victorian conventions for their sex. Woolf's comedy in *Freshwater* is more difficult to access—it assumes an insider's knowledge of the great Victorians, their ideals and their foibles. But whether in the post-Victorian or modernist version of the play, the humour exudes a lightness that is whimsical and gentle, that acknowledges the connection between the present and the past, and that admires the Victorian dedication to beauty even when that means photographing a cook as a queen or a boot boy as Cupid. Still, Truss's novel, in a typical postmodern way, redeems itself by understanding and commenting on its own project, the deconstruction of Victorian greatness. Tennyson explains to his wife that he avoids Cameron's camera because the dissemination of his image is an "unseemly" intrusion into his private life: "Even in death I will not be safe. For there is a fashion for writing lives of poets. . . . [S]uch scoundrels might tell the world that a man is mad, or dirty, or worse! And he has no defence!" (140-41).

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