
BOOK REVIEWS

Karen Schneider. *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. 221p.

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Karen Schneider takes on a formidable task: examining in detail the complex attitudes towards war in the writings of major British women authors such as Katharine Burdekin, Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing and analyzing the connections they (and she) make between war and social constructs. What makes this a daunting task is that these writers, like the author herself and like most readers, have a variety of conflicting emotions towards war both in theory and in experience, and because war is inextricably mixed with and the result of deeply imbedded attitudes that persist even in the face of rational repudiations. The imbedded stories and images of war are, in fact, a haunting background theme against which most social institutions are played out.

Schneider begins with the personal example of her father who, underage, joined the U.S. Navy in hopes of participating in World War II, but was too late, and “while others cheered, my father and his buddies, feeling irrevocably cheated, wept” (1). His reaction dramatizes the irony of his avoiding the danger but missing the excitement and the possible glory—missing his chance to tell his own personal war story. What Schneider finds in the literature of war written by women is recognition of the persistence of that myth of war as glory, however perverted, or what Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* calls “the lying nostalgia” of war. And the difficulty is that to relate even an anti-war story “is perhaps inevitably to reinscribe its [the myth’s] assumptions, to affirm (even with regret or repugnance) the abstractions that war concretizes: opposition; hierarchy; dominance and submission; the efficacy, and thus, the necessity of force; and ultimately, conflict as the essence of human relations (not to mention of narrative itself)” (4).

Schneider’s study indicates that the difficulty of “finding a legible space outside the limits of known discourse and tenacious habits of mind” (7) is more evident in Burdekin, Smith, and Bowen than in Woolf and Lessing, whom she saves for last. Woolf repeatedly theorized about the connections between war and gender relations, and also, like Burdekin and Smith, traced the roots of war to “divisive,

adversarial habits of mind—paradigms of difference and opposition” (109). Schneider looks particularly at *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas*, and her late novel *Between the Acts*, all of which suggest a radical need for change throughout the parameters of social interaction. *Between the Acts* is filled with “paradox, ambiguity, multiple significance, and fluid forms of knowing and being,” with both content and style calling for new ways of approaching “reality”; Schneider calls the book “the final legacy of a visionary artist and woman committed to peace and to change” (132).

The concluding chapter on Lessing, titled “A Different Story,” is perhaps Schneider’s most impressive. Lessing’s oeuvre is most significantly about war in its multiple guises. Schneider cites an interview in which Lessing declares that war has been “the most important thing” in her life. Lessing has always seen herself as literally a child of war: born in 1919, the daughter of a World War I British amputee veteran and his wartime nurse, raised on their vision of that war, growing to adulthood at the outbreak of World War II while still living in an African country whose native population was controlled by the British. Schneider specifically examines Lessing’s *Children of Violence* five-volume series (1952-1969) and the now-classic novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), written in the middle of the *Children of Violence* series. These six novels perhaps comprise the most sweeping fictional meditation on war and war’s insidious connections to virtually all aspects of life in this violent twentieth century. Schneider calls them “a roman à clef of epic proportion” which enact history’s intertwined war/romance plots “to expose, demythologize, and rescript them” (133). Lessing’s project is thus to foreground “the endless refrain of history—‘the nightmare repetition,’” and to transform consciousness, as Schneider says, to “extricate us from the Möbius-strip logic of dichotomous thought” (134).

Schneider analyzes all six of these Lessing novels insightfully, from Martha Quest’s first appearance in the novel of that name to her development of paralogical ways of knowing in the final novel of the series, *The Four-Gated City*, and more than many Lessing critics she looks closely at attitudes towards war and the ramifications of the ideologies of war in the sometimes neglected other three novels in the series which show Martha Quest as a young wife and mother in Africa. Schneider’s analysis also traces Lessing’s understanding of the connections between war and the popular myths of war throughout *The Golden Notebook*, including the section which deals with the novel Anna Wulf had written titled *Frontiers of War*.

Protagonist Anna Wulf is suffering from writer’s block, and she claims that is in part due to the fate of her first novel, a story of gender and race antagonism in

Africa during World War II. The novel brought together romantic jealousy, racial difference, and war. When the novel is made into a popular film, screenwriters censor the story and obscure the intertwined themes playing up the “melodramatic sexual relationships” and avoiding the racial conflict and the indictment of war as a force fanning the romance. Anna Wulf despairs at this reductionism, and says, “This war was presented to us as a crusade against the evil doctrines of Hitler, against racism, etc., yet the whole of ... [colonized] Africa was conducted on precisely Hitler’s assumption—that some human beings are better than others because of their race” (155). Doris Lessing here and elsewhere in the novels shows her protagonists slowly learning that no one is free from the myths, and that women as well as men have conspired to play roles, to perpetuate war’s alluring tale of escape and adventure, to validate violence, and to continue prejudices at many levels.

Schneider discusses too the power with which Lessing repeatedly insists on the necessity of re-visioning the stories we use to make sense of our lives, unravelling the plots of war and romance, especially of war as the ultimate “masculinity” and the sex wars as having no connection to war, and ultimately to re-imagine connections rather than to dwell on either/or dichotomies.

In a Coda, Schneider returns to the song “As Time Goes By” (Herman Hupfield, 1931), famous as the theme song from the classic World War II film *Casablanca*: “It’s still the same old story, / A fight for love and glory, / ...” She uses the lyrics of this song as an epigraph for Chapter 1 and refers often to the interactive plots of war and sexual relationships within the narrative of human conflict. British women’s literature of World War II speaks to the need for ending this symbiosis between sexism and war, and, further, to “the dissolution of boundaries, the making of new combinations, the unfettering of the human imagination, and the writing of a new plot” (179). Schneider ends her thoughtful and important study by quoting Denise Levertov’s poem “Making Peace” (1987), which reads in part: “A line of peace might appear / if we restructured the sentence our lives are making, / ... peace, a presence, / an energy field more intense than war, / might pulse then....” ✽