Women in Richard Aldington's Fiction

Richard Aldington's novels demonstrate a sympathy for the position of women in early twentieth—century English society. Women play important roles in all his novels, and they are the main characters in two: *The Colonel's Daughter* and *Women Must Work*. And yet, even though Aldington is sympathetic to women, in particular to their economic position, he has a tendency to place women in an untenable position. Essentially he views women and male-female relationships idealistically. He portrays actual relationships between men and women in his fiction, but the ideal relationship is elusive, and in fact, I think, impossible. In the two works that have a so-called happy ending, *All Men Are Enemies* and *Seven Against Reeves*, the idealized happy union of man and woman is not described. Perhaps it is a commonplace to say that literature is based on conflict and that if the conflict is resolved, the book must end, but in Aldington's case, there is a deeper reason. He does not show the workings of a happy union between man and woman because such a description would presuppose the reconciliation of fundamental contradictions in the presentation of women. An important influence on Aldington's view of human relationships is Plato, specifically the Theory of Forms and Aristophanes' explanation of love in the *Symposium*.

What the influence of Plato contributes to Aldington's formation of women characters and their lives is, for the most part, an unbridgeable gulf between the ideal and the real. This juxtaposition of opposites is the underlying foundation of all Aldington's fiction. Examples abound, most notably in *All Men Are Enemies*, the only novel in which the main character enjoys a successful and admired union with a member of the opposite sex. In *Death of a Hero* several different arrangements are presented, in particular open marriage, and all are failures. The narrator of the novel believes that George commits suicide, a reasonable assumption, and as the narrator explains, George's death is the result of his experiences in the war and in his personal life. In *The Colonel's Daughter* Georgie Smithers (there is surely some significance in that name, so similar to that of the main character in Aldington's first novel) finds her hopes for marriage with Geoffrey dashed when he runs off with the more attractive and lively Margy. In *Women Must Work*, Etta ends up with all the appearances of a happy life and marriage, but is deeply unhappy about the loss of Ralph. At the end of *Very Heaven* Chris steps back from the brink of the cliff and rejects suicide. He has the possibility of a life with Martha, but he fears their union will fail because of his economic dependency. *Seven Against Reeves* features atypical Aldington main characters in that Mr. and Mrs. Reeves are not young. The conventional portrayal of a conventional marriage is evidenced by its ending: Mr. Reeves assumes the dominant role in his marriage; in effect, he becomes the boss, and life is returned to normal. But his marriage is not seen as exemplary. In *Rejected Guest* David Norris's financial situation rises and falls, as does his emotional life. At the end he has been abused by Diana, who loved him, but who is more concerned with security. And in *The Romance of Casanova*, an anomaly among Aldington's novels in terms of temporal setting, but not in terms of theme, Casanova must give up Henriette so they can both survive. As we are told in this novel, " . . . underneath the eighteenth-century Casanova there lurked the eternal Romantic, whose only real love is the unattainable and the impossible" (61). If real love is unattainable and impossible, then Aldington has set his characters a hopeless task: they must strive for that which they cannot have.

Although love is likely hopeless and definitely perilous in Aldington's fictional world, it is what makes life worthwhile. For both male and female characters, problems are created in their pursuit of love because of their views of what love is and what women are (and obviously what men are). The various pitfalls of the characters result from Aldington's idealistic and Romantic view of love, based in part on Plato and Lawrence. Aldington's view of love makes the creation of believable female characters impossible, even though he is clearly sympathetic to the position of women because women in Aldington's novels are caught between the ideal and the real.

Aldington's familiarity with Plato is expected, and there are two direct references to Plato in *Death of a Hero*. Walking with Mr. UpJohn to Mr. Shobbe's party, George is struck by despair. He thinks: "Why suffer those eyes to search and those nimble unerring tongues to wound? Oh, wrap oneself in solitude, Like an armoured shroud, and bend over the dead words of a dead language! A simian biped! O gods, gods! And Plato talks of Beauty" (119). In describing Fanny, the narrator remarks about her eyes: " . . . perhaps they conformed to some unwritten but instinctively recognized canon of the perfect eye, the Platonic 'idea' of eyes..." (178). In Plato's Theory of Forms, perfection is achieved only by the Idea. The physical world is a mere shadow of the perfect form. When men fall in love with Fanny because of her eyes, they do so for two possible reasons: her sexual attractiveness and the possibility of perfection. Aldington suggests a connection between the ideal of perfection and love in this second reason.

Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* contain extensive discussions of love. The key points for my argument are, first, that love is a kind of madness and that it is spiritually

uplifting. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates says:

> Mark therefore the sum and substance of all our discourse touching the fourth sort of madness—to wit, that this is the best of all forms of divine possession, both in itself and in its sources, both for him that has it and for him that shares therein—and when he that loves beauty is touched by such madness he is called a lover. Such a one, as soon as he beholds the beauty of this world, is reminded of true beauty, and his wings begin to grow; then is he fain to lift his wings and fly upward; yet he has not the power, but inasmuch as he gazes upward like a bird, and cares nothing for the world beneath, men charge it upon him that he is demented. (496)

In the *Symposium* Phaedrus starts off the discussion of love by describing the birth of the god Love. He makes the point of the earlier dialogue that love is central to human elevation: "For neither family, nor privilege, nor wealth, nor anything but Love can light that beacon which a man must steer by when he sets out to live the better life" (533). Phaedrus points out that only "Love will make a man offer his life for another's—and not only man but woman" (533) and uses as an example Alcestis, of whom Aldington was well aware. He had made a translation of Euripedes' play, and he refers to the its prologue in *Death of a Hero* (135). By the end of the discussion, Socrates has introduced through the use of Diotima's argument another key point: the idea "that Love is a longing for immortality" (559) and that there are different ways to achieve immortality. She says:

> ...those whose procreancy is of the body turn to woman as the object of their love, and raise a family, in the blessed hope that by doing so they will keep their memory green, 'through time and through eternity.' But those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than of the flesh—and they are not unknown, Socrates—conceive and bear the things of the spirit. And what are they? you ask. Wisdom and all her sister virtues; it is the office of every poet to beget them, and of every artist whom we may call creative. (560)

Socrates sums up his discussion of love by saying, "Love will help our mortal nature more than all the world" (563). Diotima has attacked Aristophanes' view that love is the search for the other half of our complete beings by saying, "Love never longs for either the half or the whole of anything except the good" (558).

The good is related to beauty, but as always in Plato, it is the ideal of good or beauty that is meant, not the feeble physical representation of good or beauty. In Aldington's depictions of courtship and marriage in his novels, there is a fundamental tension between the idea and the real, and this tension is most clearly articulated in his presentation of women. Several of the topics that Aldington covers in his novels are those commonly thought of as being feminine concerns: courtship, marriage, child-birth, and child-rearing. Aldington shows the centrality of these topics to society as a whole. The importance of marriage to women has long been recognized. One of the strongest statements of this perception is made by Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*: "Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness , must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (111). Fay Weldon in *Letters to Alice* is sympathetic to Mrs. Bennet: "No wonder Mrs Bennet, driven half-mad by anxiety for her five unmarried daughters, knowing they would be unprovided for when her husband dies, as indeed would she, made a fool of herself in public, husband-hunting on her girls' behalf" (36). The economic necessity for women to marry was understood well by Aldington even though he could also consider marriage to be beneficial to men. In a letter to Lawrence Durrell regarding his upcoming marriage to Claude, Aldington remarks, " I should have thought that Claude had had enough of being married—it is a man-devised handicap nearly all to the interest of the male, who gets a free servant, etc..." (*Literary Lifelines* 17 0-1). But then, this letter was written in 1961, and some changes had been made in the position of women.

Aldington's first novel *Death of a Hero*, published in 1929, is often thought of as a war novel, but as Christopher Ridgeway points out in his Introduction to the Hogarth edition of 1984, "The section dealing with George Winterbourne's experiences in France occupies only half of the novel." The other half of the novel is directly concerned with courtship and marriage, first of George's parents. The narrator is scathing in his commentary on this marriage. He points out "Isabel 'married' for money and got what she deserved, viz. bankruptcy. But she had been obliquely taught that it was the girl's duty to use men's sexual passion as a means of acquiring property. Whoring within the law. The Trade Union of married women" (169). Charlotte Lucas does not have to make use of Mr. Collins' sexual passion as it is doubtful that he has any; however, she does make use of his overwhelming desire to please Lady Catherine. Essentially, though, Isabel's situation is similar to Charlotte's and to that of so many other women: status and security are gained through marriage. Marriage also gives a woman a clearly defined role to play: she becomes a wife and possibly a mother. The career options for women before the twentieth century were limited. In "Marriage Perceived: English Literature 1873-1944," Carolyn Heilbrun remarks, "Apart from all its connections with money and property, marriage was the only destiny possible to women who were trained for nothing else" (137). Marriage was the expected job for women to pursue.

Financial security is a reason for many marriages even still, but as Henry James so graphically illustrates in the example of Isabel Archer, money does not eliminate the desire for, or necessity of, marriage. Rich women are limited by social constraints. For example, Isabel in *Portrait of a Lady* inherits a fortune, and because of her wealth becomes victimized by Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. Isabel wrongly believes that she is preserving her independence and doing something fine. What she discovers is that she has married the man least likely to help her preserve her independence, a fact firmly demonstrated when Isabel wishes to go to England to visit the dying Ralph. Osmond doesn't want her to go because he is worried abut how things will look. He says to Isabel: "Your cousin's nothing to you; he's nothing to us. You smile most expressively when I talk about us, but I assure you that we, we, Mrs. Osmond is all I know" (446). In explaining his marriage to Caspar Goodwood, Osmond uses a particularly grim simile: "'We're as united, you know, as the candlestick and the snuffers'" (420). Having money is no guarantee that a woman can have a meaningful life in an essentially patriarchal society.

Aldington approaches the problem of the situation of women in a variety of ways. With George's parents he illustrates how limited are the choices both for men and women in a sexually repressed world. With George's generation comes a change, but Aldington shows how insubstantial is the change. George and Elizabeth's marriage is presented as an affront to the idea of free love that the three main characters—George, Elizabeth, and Fanny—like to think they believe in. As the narrator notes:

> To hear them [Fanny and Elizabeth] talk theoretically was most impressive. They were terribly at ease upon the Zion of sex, abounding in inhibitions, dream symbolism, complexes, sadism, repressions, masochism, Lesbianism, sodomy, etcetera. Such wise young women, you thought, no sentimental nonsense about them. No silly emotional slip-slop messes would ever come their way. They knew all about the sexual problem, and how to settle it. There was the physical relationship and the emotional relationship and the intellectual relationship; and they knew how to manage all three, as easily as a pilot with twenty years' experience brings a handy ship to anchor in the Pool of London. They knew that freedom, complete freedom, was the only solution. (24)

But talk of freedom vanishes when Elizabeth thinks she is pregnant: "No more talk of 'freedom' then! If she had a baby, her father would cut off her allowance, people would cut her, she wouldn't be asked to Lady Saint-Lawrence's dinners..." (25). Over and over in his fiction Aldington makes the point that women are more practical than men. Ironically it's because of the limitations placed on them, combined with the fact of bearing children, that necessitates practicality. Convention may be seen to win in the case of Elizabeth and George, but the fact remains that parents cannot raise children on nothing. And in any case the freedom advocated by Fanny and Elizabeth is accepted by Elizabeth as a concept, as a reality for her only. When she discovers that George has been having an affair with Fanny, she is furious. Reality is entirely different from the ideals formerly espoused.

Aldington's awareness of the economic necessity for women to marry is based on procreation and economic security. When women can control these two aspects of their lives, marriage may no longer be important. As the narrator of *Death of a Hero* says, "...marriage is a primitive institution bound to succumb before the joint attack of contraceptives and the economic independence of women" (130). I use the word may because the narrator disagrees that freedom in sex is the key to happiness: "It seems to me that the error of the Elizabeth and George generation was that they were far too absolute, too general, too dogmatic in their 'ideas' about sex...But they failed to see that in the way they went about it they were merely setting up another tyranny—the tyranny of free love. Why shouldn't people be monogamous if they want to be?" (163-4). By monogamy Aldington does not necessarily mean marriage, but he does mean a commitment between a man and a woman that they will be faithful to each other, not because of a decision to forsake other liaisons but because the idea of being intimate with anyone other than the chosen partner simply does not arise. Having one mate is the ideal for Aldington in his fiction, although sexual experimentation with different partners is taken as natural and desirable. In his one novel with an exemplary and happy ending, All Men Are Enemies, Aldington presents us with a couple who have survived sexual relationships with others but who are happy only with each other. Carolyn Heilbrun offers an important observation about the presentation of marriage in novels by the late nineteenth century: "Only occasionally is there a glimpse of a marriage which seems to hold the promise of life. In these marriages...the woman is noted for being unusually competent, for sharing to a rare degree her husband's life, decisions, and adventures, and for being openly admired by him. What we notice here, of course, is that these marriages...bear the marks of friendship" (140). The only friendship between a man and a woman in Aldington's novels is that between Antony and Katha in All Men Are Enemies.

After Death of a Hero with its male main character, Aldington turned to a female main character in The Colonel's Daughter. This novel strikes me as the other side of the coin presented in the first novel, instead of dealing with a man's suffering because of war and a disastrous personal life. An indication of the similarity between these two characters is the similarity of their

names: George and Georgie. The war affects both characters: it directly contributes to George's death, and it eliminates the possibility of marriage for Georgie because of the lack of available men. Mr. Purfleet crudely expresses Georgie's problem and his own solution: "In an over-populated country superfluous women have a hell of a life' "(52). In a society in which so many men have been killed in the war and in which women gain status through marriage, women can be labelled "superfluous"; they have no value of their own, except their sexual attractiveness—and of course, fulfilling sexual desire requires a partner. Margy, Georgie's rival for Geoffrey and ultimate winner of the prize, is described by Mr. Brock as having "loathly sex appeal" (27). Georgie has none according to the standards of the day, and yet she still has feelings and sexual longings. She is a victim of her society and class, and certainly a victim of her parents, in particular her father who exemplifies the double standard applied to men and women in his affairs. Georgie has been brought up to fill a role that does not exist. Her loss of Geoffrey is unfairly attributed by Richard E. Smith to be Georgie's fault: "Georgie's ultimate failure with Geoffrey is especially touching and ironic because she appears to have so many chances for success" (124). Smith apparently ignores the fact that she is quickly supplanted by other more attractive young women and that Geoffrey is "naturally almost idiotically unobservant" (250). Geoffrey's treatment of Georgie is insensitive and cruel; the fault is certainly not all Georgie's. Mr. Judd's comment that "'a woman's place is the 'ome'" (168) is clearly not Aldington's. For one thing, the home no longer exists; and there are few alternatives.

Aldington's third novel, *All Men Are Enemies*, stands alone in his fiction as the one work that has a happy, exemplary ending. In *Life for Life's Sake* Aldington says, "I wanted to write a story about two people genuinely in love" (374). In the preface to the American edition, Aldington states his aim:

> I call this book "A Romance" because for me Antony Clarendon is an example of the modern romantic idealistic temperament. A realist in his position would have settled down to a comfortable business career and a get-along-somehow marriage with Margaret. But Antony, like many of us, is an ordinary fallible human being struggling towards what he believes to be a finer and fuller life. In this struggle he holds two instinctive beliefs which I willingly allow to be romantic: First, that the complete human being is formed by a man and a woman; second, that living implies much more than acquiescence in a set of formal beliefs, more than getting and spending money. Just as he abandons the secular religions of Nationalism, Socialism, and Communism, so he abandons a false marriage and a false career (v-vi).

The idea that "the complete human being is formed by a man and a woman" is an abridged version of Aristophanes' view of the nature of man in the *Symposium*. Aristophanes tells the story of how human beings were originally a race of creatures divided into three sexes: male, female, and a combination of the two. The creatures attempted to usurp the place of the gods, and so Zeus cut them all in half. He rearranged their bodies so that they could propagate when male and female came together. Aristophanes elaborates:

> ...if man should conjugate with man, he might at least obtain such satisfaction as would allow him to turn his attention and his energies to the everyday affairs of life. So you see, gentlemen, how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another. (544)

This view of the nature of human beings and love has as a basis that individuals are imperfect and lacking. Love can join two people, thereby creating a whole. In *All Men Are Enemies*, the love between Tony and Katha is clearly supposed to be the kind of love that Aristophanes talks about in the *Symposium*. The positive effect of love is argued by Tony. He tells Margaret, "'We have to give ourselves to others before we can get anything from them. It's right to hate what you think is evil , but we only grow through what we love...'" (73). Margaret suggests that one should attempt to love everyone, and Tony vehemently disagrees: "'Love is the most intimate, the most personal thing. It is like a flower which can only be given to one person at a time. You cannot give a flower to a crowd or a country. If you love, you must give all yourself, and feel yourself accepted—and perhaps in love it is harder to accept all than to give. We know what we give, we cannot know what we have to receive'" (73-4). By saying that an individual can love only one individual, Tony implicitly agrees with Aristophanes' view of love. Antony's mistake is that he confuses Margaret with an ideal. As the narrator points out, "It was not a woman he was holding, but love; not a lovely body, but an ideal passion....he now shut [his eyes] to grasp a dream, not knowing that he had abandoned the real for the impossible" (74). Tony eventually finds himself married to Margaret even though their relationship is nothing like his and Katha's: "With Katha, he had talked nonsense by the hour, and there had never been this sense of incompleteness and conflict" (175). When he is reunited with Katha, he explains his feelings with direct reference to Plato:

> Tony thought of Plato's myth of the Men-Women who had once been a single complete living thing, and then had been severed, so that the half, Man,

> and the half, Woman, must always go seeking the other half for completion. He wanted Katha's blood to run with his, as if they had but one heart; to enter her body with his flesh and give her the mysterious seed which was his blood; to drink the breath of her life in her kisses and breathe back life to her; to give his body as her shield and his toil to foster her days; and if they must die, to die with her, so that even their ashes would be together. (427-8)

When Tony finally touches Katha, he reiterates his sense of completion: "If he had doubted before, which he had not, he would have known for certain then that this gentle body beside him was the lost half of his own" (453). After being reunited with Katha, Tony has only one desire: to have a child with her. Such a desire is explained in the *Symposium* by Diotima: "...Love is a longing for immortality....the mortal does all it can to put on immortality. And how can it do that except by breeding, and this ensuring that there will always be a younger generation to take the place of the old?" (559). When Tony learns that Katha is unable to have children, he tells her that she is enough for him: "'It was selfish in me who have the perfect flower to want the fruit as well....Have faith in me when I tell you that the flower of you is enough for my life's happiness...'" (491). But the novel does not end on a completely happy note. One difficulty is that they must guard their love from others; the other difficulty is looking too far into the future, an action that will cause them to, as Tony says , "look to an inevitable end we can't bear to see" (495). This end, their deaths, and because they cannot have children, the chance for immortality—as Diotima explains it to Socrates—is lost.

Evidently, *All Men Are Enemies* uses some of the ideas about love and human nature that are proposed in Plato. Of all Aldington's novels, this one is alone in showing the possibility of a love that is true and good. One reason that love is possible is that Katha and Tony are friends as well as lovers. They can talk to each other, and they share many ideas and feelings. This kind of communication is not found in any other Aldington prose. In his remaining novels, Aldington explores various ways that love goes wrong. And frequently the reason for failure is linked to the limitations placed on women by a male-dominated society. It's important to note that Tony and Katha find each other on a small idyllic island, away from the pressure of conventional society. It is while Tony is under the effect of society that he marries Margaret and attempts to follow the dictates of society. The novel ends with Tony and Katha's reconciliation: wisely perhaps, Aldington does not describe their life together after they leave Aeaea.

Because of the restraints of space, I will not give a detailed analysis of Aldington's remaining four novels. These novels pick up and elaborate on the themes presented in the earlier works, and the view of love and women is consistent. The ideal relationship between men and women is that of Katha and Tony; anything less not only prevents the elevation of the individual but also leads to loss of self. The ideal must be striven for, even if it cannot be attained. Perhaps a good way to end this paper is with Aldington's own words on idealism. In an unpublished essay titled "Speaking of Romance..." Aldington says:

> A Romantic has been defined as one who is 'in love with the impossible.' That may be true of some exaggerated forms of Romanticism, but it is essentially unjust. The Romantic is an individualist, for whom idealism begins at home. He thinks that to make the best of himself is a first, though admittedly tiny, step towards the improvement of humanity. It is time to start improving others when he is quite sure the first task is completed. He isn't content to say 'Aw, what the hell' and to let himself drift and sink. His impulse is to discover his potentialities and to realise them. He takes the crude facts of existence and refines upon them, embellishes them until they are no longer crude but complex and beautiful. Isn't that civilization?

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