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Evelyn Tsz Yan Chan
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Introduction

> When your secretary asked me to speak to you on Professions, she condemned me to several weeks of … <acute discomfort>, ~~which I can~~ as you will understand when I tell you that ~~in my own~~ I have two proposals to put before you: the first is that all professiona~~l~~ [*sic*] are to be avoided; & the second that several new professions must <at once> be invented.[1]
>
> The chance is there before you, to be as unlike the professional man as possible.[2]
>
> – Virginia Woolf, holograph notes

The two quotations with which this book begins – taken from three pages of holograph notes which Virginia Woolf wrote for her talk for the London/National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931 – provide a good snapshot of the underlying tension in Woolf's engagement with the issue of the professions. They simultaneously express her dissatisfaction with their present state – especially as they had become hegemonic, masculine institutions of economic and political interest and power – and her reluctance to disengage her argument for a new social order completely from professional organisation, so that any innovation is still imagined in the form of "new professions,"[3] and so that people who are as "unlike the professional man as possible"[4] are still professionals. As this book demonstrates, Woolf's life and work were deeply informed by such thoughts on and observations of the professions and their values, and these can be traced not just in the content of both her political and creative writing, but also in their form and aesthetics. Her search for alternatives to what she conceived of as professional methods and structures influenced and became part of her literary methods and experimentation. Her writing, in turn, tried to depict, vex and shape the professions so they could better serve the individual and society.

The purpose of this introduction – instead of repeating the evidence to follow in subsequent chapters which shows how Woolf engaged with the

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professions – is to trace and historicise her relevant thoughts and views on which the chapters will build. This is especially important for elucidating what the concept of "profession" meant for Woolf. She used the word differently in different contexts, accepting its existing meanings yet also resisting and destabilising them through her writing, in order to explore how professionals could engage ethically with the wider public, how the professions could be participated in to lead to meaningful lives, and how one's professional identity could be a vital part of oneself yet not compromise one's integrity as a person.

The Professions, the Public and the Private, and Women

A profession is an unstable combination of the private and the public, the personal and the social, the disinterested and the financial. The religious roots of the word "profession" suggest an activity which, besides fulfilling the public purposes of declaration, promise and avowal, is also personally meaningful and fulfilling.[5] Often used before the nineteenth century to refer to the three ancient professions of medicine, law and religion, the expansion of industrial society led to the translation of the term into the wider socioeconomic realm, so that one of the defining characteristics of "professional" work was its result in financial rewards.[6] As Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes in 1832, a significant change in the social structure in Britain occurred when the professions separated from the church.[7] With the church no longer possessing a monopoly over knowledge and learning, the gradual disassociation between religion and the professions led to a more heterogeneous, diverse society.[8] To enter a profession became less associated with answering a spiritual calling than with qualifications and certifications which would ensure – in a competitive commercial environment which was the legacy of nineteenth-century laissez-fairism – a decent and stable remuneration for services rendered.

The tension between private and public in the word shows itself in the thin line between the sincere enactment of professional ideals and their strategic espousal for the purpose of material rewards. Such a clash is present in the very etymology of the word "profession." The word derives from *profess-*, the past participle stem of the Latin word *profiteri*,[9] which refers to the acts of public statement, declaration and avowal.[10] The word's references to activities in the public eye or domain explain why the word "profess" itself can imply insincerity,[11] with professionals publicly avowing service ideals which they may not privately believe in. Yet owing to its public dimension, the word "professional" also entails the guarantee

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of objective standards and a certain level of competence, due to formal procedures of accreditation or qualification. Because of these special skills that professionals are seen to have, they often enjoy a matching social status and income.

For the professional women in Woolf's audience – for whom the speech from which the two opening quotations originate was drafted – the professions were an important way to enter and participate in the public sphere which they had historically been denied access to. The issues arising from this navigation for women with similar socioeconomic backgrounds to Woolf who wished to earn money doing brainwork had always preoccupied her in various ways. In her first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), the two female protagonists, both young women, have had no formal education,[12] yet show potential in specialised areas. In the sense that they could be making their living on work which is also personally meaningful to them, Rachel Vinrace could be a professional pianist and Katharine Hilberry a professional mathematician, but they are not. There is a latent rift already present in their characterisation between the notion of an individual and literal "profession" of oneself to a fulfilling activity in which lies one's interest and talent, and a socioeconomic conception of profession which is located more firmly in the public sphere. *The Voyage Out* describes a conversation between Rachel and Terence Hewet, revolving around the politics of the professions and their genderedness:

> "There's no doubt it helps to make up for the drudgery of a profession if a man's taken very, very seriously by every one – if he gets appointments, and has offices and a title, and lots of letters after his name, and bits of ribbon and degrees.... What a miracle the masculine conception of life is – judges, civil servants, army, navy, Houses of Parliament, lord mayors – what a world we've made of it! Look at Hirst now.... [N]ot a day's passed since we came here without a discussion as to whether he's to stay on at Cambridge or to go to the Bar.... And if I've heard it twenty times, I'm sure his mother and sister have heard it five hundred times. Can't you imagine the family conclaves, and the sister told to run out and feed the rabbits because St. John must have the school-room to himself.... But St. John's sister –" Hewet puffed in silence. "No one takes her seriously, poor dear. She feeds the rabbits."
>
> "Yes," said Rachel. "I've fed rabbits for twenty-four years; it seems odd now." (197)

Rachel's so-called rabbit-feeding has taken the place of formal education. She possesses little basic knowledge such as "[t]he shape of the earth, the history of the world, how trains worked, or money was invested, what

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laws were in force, which people wanted what, and why they wanted it, the most elementary idea of a system in modern life" (26). Yet Woolf writes, no doubt from personal experience:

> [T]his system of education had one great advantage. It did not teach anything, but it put no obstacle in the way of any real talent that the pupil might chance to have. Rachel, being musical, was allowed to learn nothing but music; she became a fanatic about music. . . . At the age of twenty-four she . . . could play as well as nature intended her to, which, as became daily more obvious, was a really generous allowance. (26)

Rachel's unconventional education has not prepared her for a public profession, but has allowed her to exercise her intrinsic talent to the full. Her death cuts any future possibilities short, but even before she dies, the novel hints at the difficulties she would have faced in pursuing her talent as a public profession. She is engaged to be married to Terence, whose demands are already intruding on her practice of music:

> "No, Terence, it's no good; here am I, the best musician in South America, not to speak of Europe and Asia, and I can't play a note because of you in the room interrupting me every other second."
>
> "You don't seem to realise that that's what I've been aiming at for the last half hour," he remarked. "I've no objection to nice, simple tunes – indeed, I find them very helpful to literary composition, but that kind of thing is merely like an unfortunate old dog going round on its hind legs in the rain."[13] (276)

Terence trivialises her ability as a hobby, and in so doing encloses it within the preserves of the private sphere. Although Rachel dies before the conflict comes to a head, in *Night and Day*, Katharine consciously wishes to break free from the constraints of her sheltered upbringing:

> "I suppose you're one of the people who think we should all have professions," she said, rather distantly, as if feeling her way among the phantoms of an unknown world.
>
> "Oh dear no," said Mary at once.
>
> "Well, I think I do," Katharine continued, with half a sigh. "You will always be able to say that you've done something, whereas, in a crowd like this, I feel rather melancholy." (45)

However, Katharine is unable to connect her talent in mathematics to her desire to have a public profession and be productive in this sense. In a subsequent short story, "A Woman's College from Outside" (1920), Woolf imagines women receiving formal university education at Newnham College at the University of Cambridge, "for the purpose of earning [their] living[s]" (*CSF* 146). Like in the two novels just mentioned, Woolf

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has yet to engage fully with materialist specificities. As Patrick McGee has pointed out, Woolf, looking at the college "from Outside," creates primarily a "dream of a feminine universe."[14]

Katharine's longing is echoed by Elizabeth in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), who comes from a similar socioeconomic background and likewise yearns for a future of professional productivity. She thinks:

> And every profession is open to the women of your generation, said Miss Kilman. So she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. Animals are often ill. She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. . . . And she liked the feeling of people working. . . . In short, she would like to have a profession. She would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament, if she found it necessary, all because of the Strand." (149)

The city's bustling activity entices Elizabeth with a sense of professional purpose. Yet her highly romanticised notion of the professions is problematic: Any profession, it seems, is a possible avenue for the assertion of individuality. Elizabeth's view is less of an insistence on professing herself to one particular line of work for which she possesses special aptitude, and more one of seeing the professions in general as a way to escape the historical restrictions of the private sphere for women. But what Elizabeth here ignores are the practical considerations of how to successfully bridge the public and the private, to negotiate between social ideas of productivity and personal interest, which are crucial to a fruitful relationship between oneself and one's profession.

All three young women in Woolf's novels share a troubled relationship with the professions, and reflect facets of Woolf's own ambivalent relationship with them that were to be engaged with even more fully in her writing from the late 1920s onwards. Such early representations of the question of how – and significantly of whether – to transfer one's personal "profession" to the socioeconomic sphere, to subject one's talent to its scrutiny and evaluation, foreshadow the full-blown professional anxieties experienced by the later Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* (1941), both of whom will be discussed in Chapter 3. The "professional" activities of these two characters maintain, with difficulty and at some sacrifice, a precarious autonomy from financial concerns.

Woolf thought carefully about how women should participate in the elaborate systems of financial and social recognition of the professions. She wrote about the topic right before and when it first became a legal right for women to earn money in the professions on the same basis as men, with the passing of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act in 1919. After

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the passage of the act, the continuing issue of women's income seemed a sequel to what Leonard Woolf described as "the great dilemma of the nineteenth century," that is, "the question whether the establishment of political equality would not inevitably lead to a demand for economic equality."[15] Many of the questions Woolf had when she was thinking about the professions revolved around this fundamental issue of money.[16] Material reality dictated that it was necessary to perform socially productive work, and the professions were the most suitable type of such work for people of her background; yet she was keenly aware of the limitations of the professions, and harboured a desire to escape the restrictions and hypocrisies of such bureaucratic systems, to realise what she would call in *The Years* (1937) "a world in which people were whole, in which people were free" (285). In her notes in 1933 entitled "Draft of Professions," for instance, she asks: "What is the need of employment? To escape from the house. To have money, to enjoy life. But how can we enjoy it without some money? But how much?"[17]

In the 1920s and 1930s, her works increasingly address the potential disadvantages of women's entry into the professions. The mission of the London/National Society for Women's Service, Woolf's speech for which was referenced at the beginning of this introduction, was to "obtain economic equality for women by propaganda and non-party political work," and to distribute "information for women's education, economic opportunities, and 'freedom for women in pursuit of their work.'"[18] Its focus on economic opportunities for women in the public sphere was reflected by the audience for the speech: "some hundreds of younger professional and business women,"[19] whom Woolf would later in her diary describe as "well dressed, keen, & often beautiful" (*D* 4: 7).[20] Although the exact version of the speech is lost, the holograph on which it was based foreshadows what she was to discuss at length later:

> And you are bound to find when you come to practise your innumerable professions that your difference of outlook is bringing you to loggerheads with some respected … <chiefs> of your profession. But one of your most amusing and exciting experiences will be precisely on this account – ~~when you~~ <that you will have to> make your profession adapt itself to your needs, your sense of values, your common sense, your moral sense your sense of what is due to humanity and reason. ~~I have no right to speak; but~~ as a member of the general public, who sometimes has to employ lawyers, then architects, then builders, then doctors, stock brokers and so on – I can assure you that I think it is high time ~~you got to work upon these professions and brought them rather more into line with common sense.~~ <that these ancient and privileged professions came more in touch with human needs.> (*P* xv)

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Lois Cucullu has argued that in this speech, Woolf's "peroration is simple and direct: social reproduction now rests with the expert class; either join it or become its object."[21] But this ignores Woolf's criticism of this expert class, and her emphasis that women had to make it "adapt itself to [their] needs." Professions, which were established to address "human needs" and render their services accordingly, had in Woolf's eyes become so "privileged" that they had paradoxically become detached from those needs. Departed from "moral sense," "humanity and reason," the professions needed an overhaul from the outside. The professional women whom Woolf was addressing were given the task of using their female "difference of outlook" to transform the professions to be "more in touch with human needs" for the benefit of themselves as well as the "general public." To Woolf, the importance of the difference of the woman – whose "experience is not the same" and whose "traditions are different" (*P* xii) and in whom she saw the power to change society – meant that she thought it imperative that this difference was valued and preserved. But this gave rise to contradictory impulses in Woolf – on the one hand she supported such societies as the National Society for Women's Service, who made it their objective to help women enter the professions, and on the other she feared that the difference of the woman would be effaced by this new environment, that women would be locked in the same system as men. Therefore, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the narrator writes: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (21). And in *Three Guineas* (1938), a work which she called "my book on professions" in its conception stage (*D* 4: 102), she describes professionals as imprisoned in a dance "round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property" (199). When she depicts the only female doctor in her fiction, Peggy Pargiter in *The Years*, Woolf does not represent her as receiving the fulfilment from her work that decades of feminist campaigning had fought for. Instead, as we will see in Chapter 1, being a doctor has made Peggy bitter, twisted and trapped (*Y* 257–58).

Although the focal point of investigation in this book is not the relationship between the public and the private, nor is the aim of the book to subsume every aspect of Woolf's engagement with the professions under this larger rubric, it is part of the pattern which emerges from her response to the professions, and which enables us to connect the discussion on Woolf and the professions to existing debates on Woolf and the public/private. As critics such as Anna Snaith and Melba Cuddy-Keane have persuasively demonstrated, Woolf was seeking the right balance between these two realms, constantly traversing the boundaries between them.[22]

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This book, with some continuity, shows how she attempted to shape the professions so that they could become individually and personally, not just materially and socially, more rewarding pursuits. Her hope for them was, to use a phrase she applied to literature, one of "perfect integrity" (*CE* 2: 145), of wholeness and meaningful unity, so that their practitioners could lead through them full lives without the need to preclude essential facets of their being. As she writes in *The Years*, "[t]he soul – the whole being. . . . It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form – new combinations," not to live "screwed up into one hard little, tight little – knot," "[e]ach in his own little cubicle" (216). But Woolf was also aware that this ideal was difficult, if not impossible, to realise in the actual world. Her writing became the site where she could both critique the existing professions and imagine alternatives to them.

In the preceding discussion, the issue of the professions has been looked at as a feminist one. But although Woolf's concern with the professions may have begun as a feminist issue, it was a much larger topic for her, as I have started to suggest. Her portrayal of male professionals in her work, for instance, testifies to a wider concern about the professions as both social institutions and personal vocations. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Sir William Bradshaw, a Harley Street psychiatrist, is perhaps as much imprisoned within the "social system" (*D* 2: 248) as Septimus is, trapped in his own unyielding "sense of proportion" (109) and understanding little else beyond this limited and meagre view of life. In *The Years*, North, on his return to England after farming in Africa, is asked by everyone about his plans, and his sister Peggy predicts that he will go down the conventional path for someone of his background: "You'll marry. You'll have children. What'll you do then? Make money. Write little books to make money" (286). Yet what North really wants is not to be restricted by the conventional way of living for someone of his class, but "[t]o live differently . . . differently" (309). In *Between the Acts* (1941), Giles, a stockbroker, is trapped within his "job in the city": "Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice. So one thing led to another; and the conglomeration of things pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water" (30–31). That the professions were satisfactory personally, and not just economically, was essential to all members of society, male or female.

The Professions: A Historical Overview

The historical relevance of Woolf's concern with the professions is not limited to the prelude to and aftermath of the Sex Disqualification Removal

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Act. Woolf's portrayal was situated in what Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey call "the new consumerist and professionalist society" of the time.[23] It was marked by a proliferation of writing which first attempted to theorise the professions, as people were starting to think more widely about their roles, and as they were becoming a more general concern in discussions on the well-being of society as a whole. The earliest book-length studies on the professions appeared in Britain at the very end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. *Unwritten Laws and Ideals* (1899) is a compilation of essays, edited by E. H. Pitcairn, on a number of professions by experts in their own fields who outline their history. The book sets out to describe "the Unwritten Laws" that professions operate by, and the "Ideals" these embody.[24] It includes chapters not only on the three ancient professions of medicine, law and the religious order, but also on, for example, vice-chancellors, schoolmasters, "boys at public schools," banking, music and art.[25] *Professionalism and Originality* (1917) by F. H. Hayward is a systematic, chapter-by-chapter critique of the professions. Hayward equates professionalism with ordinariness and mediocrity,[26] yet at the same time asserts that professionalism is necessary to modern society for several reasons: as "an important link with the past," because it is "one of the chief agents by which social heredity is handed down"; as a form of "specialization," because "all affairs of life demand, at some point or other, specialist training"; and because it allows the satisfaction and pride of being skilled in one area, and performing work in it with merit.[27] His argument in the book is that "[t]hough Professionalism exists for the purpose of achieving certain desirable ends (Health, Justice, Education, etc.), it is frequently an enemy to the realization of those ends – It loses contact with the facts of Life and the needs of Society" (9). This echoes Woolf's own view in the holograph version of her 1931 speech. The most comprehensive book on the subject is perhaps *The Professions* (1933) by A. M. Carr-Saunders (with whom Woolf was acquainted)[28] and P. A. Wilson, which considers the general characteristics of the professions, treating a range of occupations beyond "certain vocations of ancient lineage which by common consent are called professions, law and medicine among the foremost," because "[t]here are many other vocations which, though more recently and therefore less firmly established, are nevertheless usually granted professional rank."[29] The justification for the book is that in the past few years "the interest of the public in professionalism has become more direct and immediate, because numerous practical problems relating to the organisation of the professions and to the availability of professional services have had to be faced."[30] These included the expansion and state organisation of medical service, the

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regulation of professional education, and the establishment of state registers for new professions. But beyond such practical concerns, professionalism, the authors point out, has also become "one of the themes most debated by political theorists," as "there are few associations more important or powerful than those formed by professional men."[31] They locate "a new wave of professional association" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and criticism of the "exclusiveness, selfishness, and slothfulness of their fossilized corporations" as accompanying this rise. They state that "[o]pinion was then, and long remained, hostile to professional association as it was then understood."[32] Included in the book as examples of professions which had established elaborate administrative structures are law, architecture, engineering, medicine and stock-broking, the same ones that Woolf named in her speech as her own examples of "ancient and privileged professions" (*P* xv). The book explains at length their professionalising process: Although all had existed in some form or other in previous centuries, many had not organised themselves into the massive administrative bodies that attracted Woolf's criticism until the nineteenth century and beyond, and changes in their organisation were still ongoing in her time.[33] Despite their own specificities, all the professions that Woolf named shared similar characteristics of professionalism: a historical tradition of the practice, intricate levels of organisation, and often concerns with social status and prestige.

The lucidity in the analyses of the professions provided by Woolf's contemporaries is in contrast to the difficulties late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social commentators faced in theorising the professions, when they were still an emerging social category. In the late eighteenth century, Adam Smith labelled professionals as part of the "unproductive labourers," whose services may be important in the functioning of society, but whose labour did not add value to a material object which lasted beyond the duration of service-provision.[34] Claiming that only productive labour "replenishes circulating capital and so contributes directly to the wealth of nations,"[35] Smith effaced the emergent professional class in his very effort at describing them. In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx highlighted above all the hierarchical relationship between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the manual labourer, the latter adding value to material which is appropriated by the former.[36] This model was at the expense of a more accurate description of the middle class at the time, which Matthew Arnold more perceptively describes as "cut in two in a way unexampled anywhere else," consisting "of a professional class brought up on the first plane, with fine and governing qualities, but disinclined to rely on reason and science," and of an "immense business class," "brought up on

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