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Freedom, Sincerity, and the Modern Woman in the Interwar Romances of Berta Ruck

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Abstract: Berta Ruck's interwar romance novels address contemporary anxieties about the changing role of women in Britain after 1918. Ruck's novels focus both on the modern woman in contrast to the Victorian woman, and the extent to which modernity and the new freedoms wrought by the First World War emancipated women from the traditionalisms of the pre-war period. Over the course of the interwar period, however, Ruck began to question whether young women were embracing the full potential of their new freedoms or if they were trading one kind of conformity for another. Ruck challenges young women to dispense with unnecessary labels – mods versus the conventional woman – that prevent women from understanding and embracing their true selves. Ruck delays the expected happy ending until the protagonists reject the performative modernity of societal expectations – a journey centered around new employment and courtship rituals that came to define the modern woman – and arrive at a true understanding of self, accomplished by embracing sincerity and emotional honesty.

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A prolific Welsh romance novelist of the early and mid-twentieth century, Berta Ruck wrote approximately a hundred novels between 1915 and 1970. Although her novels often conclude with a wedding or a proposal, Ruck is rarely content to let tradition prevent women from achieving self-fulfillment. Her novels written in the 1920s and 1930s are concerned with young women's negotiation of the freedoms brought about for women as a result of the war and the extent to which these opportunities were being embraced or squandered. In addition to her fruitful career as a novelist, Ruck regularly contributed opinion pieces to newspapers focused on the theme of women and freedom, in which she articulated her beliefs about what women had gained since the Victorian period, her optimism about changing gender conventions, and her perspective on changes in dress and culture. Overall, Ruck was enthusiastic about women breaking free from the Victorian constraints that shackled their mothers, but as the interwar period progressed, her enthusiasm became tempered with concern that many young women were using their newfound freedoms to choose new forms of conformity that paradoxically diminished their freedom. In addition to what one was allowed to wear or was permitted to do, Ruck viewed sincerity and emotional honesty as among the most important of women's freedoms. Consequently, if these 'mods' – as Ruck termed modern women – chose to simply follow trends in fashion, culture, social interaction, and even employment without sincerity and emotional truth, they were trading one kind of conformity for another. While Ruck expressed no desire to return to Victorian codes of gendered conduct, she wanted women to do more with what they had earned. Undoubtedly, her perspective on what was good and what was bad could be subjective and even self-contradictory, but above all, she believed that women had to be sincere in order to be truly free. She expressed these beliefs in her newspaper articles but elaborated on them in her novels, which can be read as fables or cautionary tales for the young women she wrote for and about. Ruck devised romantic engagements that embraced modernity for women, and in doing so explored women's path to emotional maturity through the experience of paid employment, during which the protagonist met her love interest. Before the romance could reach its predictable conclusion, however, the young woman must first negotiate the artifice deemed necessary of her gender according to *modern* social conventions. Ruck ultimately rejects the artificiality of the socially constructed 'modern woman' in favour of the truth of lived experience that is at the heart of 'sincerity.' A woman's self-actualization comes from the blending of social perceptions of modernity for women with an affirmation of the authentic self.[1]

The Modern Woman

The modern woman of the 1920s was a product of the First World War and embodied modernist ideals of womanhood that centered upon economic and romantic freedom (Showalter 4). During the war, those who feared the impact of changing gender roles accused women of overindulgence and impropriety while the men were away. In the 1920s, public anxiety over the modern woman was evident in the press where one man predicted that the modern woman would be the cause of the next war, stating his opinion that,

> We curse the Kaiser for starting the last war, while we pet the cause of the next. Our statesmen are scrapping battleships when they ought to be slapping flappers… The modern girl is a hundred times worse than the girl of last century ("Modern Woman to Cause War" 3).

Others felt the need to defend the modern woman, writing,

> Poor modern woman! Not a day passes without some new indictment of her speech, her manners, her morals, or her clothes! Certainly, looking round among my own women friends and acquaintances, I fail to perceive in any of them the selfish, vulgar, lurid, sex-exploiting creatures of the novelists' nightmares (Edmundton 9).

Clearly, the gender revolution was far from complete in 1918 (Bingham 226). The modern woman became synonymous with change in the 1920s and with what critics saw as a pervasive loss of femininity among women that blurred the differences between the sexes (Melman 22).

In Britain, the modern woman was undoubtedly a symbol of change in the interwar years, but historians continue to debate the extent to which change was real or imagined. Gail Braybon and Deirdre Beddoe have asserted that the interwar years were marked by gender conservatism, while Maggie Andrews has demonstrated that there was a significant degree of change in popular attitudes toward women's sexuality and leisure in the 1920s. As David Monger has shown, the debate about the extent to which the war changed women's roles or even granted them access to new employment opportunities is ongoing with no consensus in sight (218-19). Nevertheless, Berta Ruck embraced the war as a positive turning point for women and characterised it as an event that ushered in new freedoms that had been unknown to the Victorian woman. Ruck's optimism, however, was tempered by her concern that modernity had the potential to become a new kind of cage: the desire to be modern, and to behave in ways consistent with the popular depiction of the modern woman, could have the unintended effect of diminishing women's freedoms. This article contributes to the debate about the extent to which the modern woman was truly free from gender and cultural norms in the "age of freedom" (Ruck, "On Showing Your Feelings" 4). Ruck's novels seek to capture how women perceived change, but she also explores the boundaries of what Mary Louise Roberts calls the "fantasy of liberation," whereby the projection of ideals had the power to become cultural reality (682; see also Andrews; Beddoe; Braybon). Although British society generally embraced modernity, Ruck wrote about and for women who had to navigate new norms and expectations of their gender and determine whether modernity represented progress or the squandered potential for progress.

Much literature produced at the time reflected and engaged with the perception that the war had changed women (Hackney 116), intimating quite clearly popular concerns about the displacement of traditional gender roles and illustrating the extent to which the modern woman was thought to be at variance with her conventional Victorian counterpart. In her newspaper writing, Ruck compares the Victorian woman to her modern counterpart and acknowledges that women have faced and embraced a great deal of change since the Victorian period. The modern woman, who is defined by her dress, hairstyle, choice of

work, and social relationships, offers a striking contrast to her Victorian counterpart, who had to conform to prescribed gender roles in order to be accepted by society. Alan O'Shea argues that "modernity was not the experience of living through and making sense" of the modernization of society, but of making "sense of one's life and one's identity within a complex and fast-changing world" (19). For Ruck, these rival images of womanhood, the Victorian woman, defined by her conformity and lack of sincerity because she was not free to "follow her own bent," versus the unconventional mods, who represented the potential for freedom and emotional honesty, are at the heart of *women's* concerns over changing gender roles and are often perceived by women themselves as either-or categories ("Freedom's New Friend" 2).

Ruck was optimistic about women's futures during the First World War, particularly regarding romantic relationships. In 1917, she wrote that

> for centuries Woman was such an unknown quantity to the other sex. Many put her either on a pedestal to be worshipped from afar, or in the basement to act as his handmaiden. In either case he saw precious little of her; and he never saw her as she was!… But now at last that cloud of misunderstanding has really begun to roll away from between the sexes. Woman, the Angel and the Cat and the Helpless Fool and the Goddess of men's dreams, has come forward as Woman the War-Worker. And Man, seeing her all day and every day, in the factory of munitions, in the canteen on the motor-transport wagon, has found out that most of his theories about her are quite wrong ("Woman the New Comrade" 5).

In this article, Ruck is filled with hope about the potential for the postwar years and does not lament the end to the Victorian period, a time when "people opined that if Man met Woman on equal terms he would lose his chivalry and his respect for her" ("Woman the New Comrade" 5). Through work and social interactions, men and women had the freedom to meet each other as equals, to really come to know one another in "friendship or love," or both ("Woman the New Comrade" 5). This optimism about the future is evident in *A Land Girl's Love Story* (1919) where a masculine woman and an effeminate man find love on the farm where she is employed as a Land Girl, suggesting that gender identity mattered less than the truth of lived experience. In both her fiction and non-fiction writing, Ruck encourages the reader to dispense with restrictive categories and to embrace the potential for love and happiness when men and women are free to be themselves.

Ruck continued to develop her ideas about the relationship between freedom and emotional truth in the 1920s. In 1927, Ruck wrote that the change in women's circumstances comes not from "a change in the mind of woman," but from the changes in women's economic circumstances and to the male psychology that came as a result of wartime experiences ("The Feminist Forces" 7). Women are and have always been adaptable, "from being unpractical, sentimental, fragile, [woman] has turned businesslike, a mine of common sense, a tower of strength… What a revolution!" ("The Feminist Forces" 7). But appearances are misleading, and Ruck cautions:

> Why speak of feminists as though they were a manifestation of the last few decades when one remembers Queen Elizabeth? Why censure as 'modern'

> that 'made-up, cigarette-smoking, cocktail absorbing, vamping, neo-Georgian nymph,' when one reads of the Restoration minx?… It is not Eve who has changed. It is only that at last men are beginning to see us as individuals ("The Feminist Forces" 7).

Women have always been adaptable, and their daughters and granddaughters will be adaptable, too:

> What is not new is her essentially feminine power of adaptability. Heaven knows what may be required of her daughter in 1947, or her granddaughter in the nineteen-sixties! Only one thing is certain; they will be found successfully readjusting themselves to the newest requisitions (Ruck, "The Feminist Forces" 7).

Women had achieved greater freedom to be themselves, but for Ruck, true freedom had to be accompanied by emotional honesty, what she sometimes calls 'sincerity.' While Ruck does not use the word 'sincerity' often, and never defines it, she does make the distinction between a lack of sincerity in the Victorian period and the great potential for modern women to achieve sincerity in the early twentieth century, writing,

> Think of the Victorians', the Edwardians', timid roundabout way of alluding to the most innocent natural functions with our breezy way of mentioning anything that comes into the day's work. What endless 'Don'ts' hampered any girl 'if she wished to be looked upon as a lady!'…Compare the lack of any frankness or sincerity among the average young people who met socially in those days, the chaperonage, the espionage, the furtive gossip and giggling," with the modern woman who is "free as birds—free, say, as the sea-gull (Ruck, "Freedom's New Friend" 2).

Quoting E. Nesbit, Ruck argues, "If you aren't a lady, don't try to be one; much better stay a free and happy bounder!" ("The Days of Prudery are Over" 14). Ruck is writing about the constraints imposed by Victorian conformity, noting that in the Victorian period women relinquished emotional sincerity in order to be accepted. They were not allowed to be free and so conformed due to ridicule and laughter – the weapons of conventionality. For the mods, however, laughter and ridicule were the sounds of freedom as the young criticised the old world. By "Freedom's new friend. I mean Laughter. Ridicule is a turn-coat that used to be on the side of all the reactionaries, the retrogrades, the kill-joys and the spoil-sports of the world," Ruck wrote ("The Days of Prudery are Over" 14). Ruck believes that the mods' criticisms of the old world are justified, but only if their actions, ridicule, and laughter are sincere.

Showing true emotion is a form of sincerity, and through her writing, Ruck makes a case for emotional honesty because the mask of indifference is ultimately hiding important truths. Writing in 1927, Ruck says she is not one of those "people who remain in perpetual mourning for the past, and who consider every new fashion or freedom in dress or speech an insult to the memory of dear departed days" ("On Showing your Feelings" 4). Modern life is not only different from the past, but is, regrettably, "outwardly… less gay" ("On

Showing your Feelings" 4). She is writing specifically about dances and the joy women felt in the "old days" as "smiles of happiness widened those girlish mouths… [and] whichever they most enjoyed, they let it show in their faces" ("On Showing your Feelings" 4). But in the, "Self-possessed young moderns… One saw calm features, faultless hair, and a mask of indifference as smooth as the make-up" they wore ("On Showing your Feelings" 4). The modern woman has,

> sympathetic partners, pretty frocks, and music far more stimulating than our old-fashioned waltzes, it isn't possible that the girls of the Nineteen-twenty-seven dancing floor *have* no more rapturous feelings to show… Odd that in this age of freedom this one form of repression seems gaining ground. Odd that where girls seem to have left off boys seem to have begun to be demonstrative ("On Showing your Feelings" 4, italics in original).

Ruck is also commenting on what she sees as men becoming more emotionally outgoing, whereas women are not showing emotion, and she criticises the modern woman's artificial composure that has been "japanned on to those calmly pretty faces. And from those vividly reddened but discreet young lips one seldom caught any comment more enthusiastic than a 'Not too bad, a Quite'" ("On Showing your Feelings" 4).

Ruck elaborates on this connection between freedom and emotional honesty in the legend of "Mrs. Everyman from Fairyland" in an article in 1929. Here Ruck writes about how convention can crush a person's spirit if the conventionalist expects conformity from another individual. In the story, a young lord meets a wild nymph in the lake and when she eventually agrees to marry him it is on the condition that he never strike her without cause. He scoffs at the suggestion that he would ever harm her, but she tells him that on the third causeless blow, she will disappear forever. Over the course of the story the lord attempts to correct his wife's behavior, striking her softly for three social faux pas, including the final blow for laughing loudly at a funeral, after which she disappears. According to Ruck's interpretation of the legend, the Fairywife is an artist and freethinker, owns her own thoughts and actions, and is the embodiment of sincerity. She laughs at what she finds funny, but her husband, who was initially attracted to something that was different and mysterious, now tries to make her conform to his ideal of what a wife should be. When shackled to a conventionalist, the modern woman's soul can be killed and while she may not disappear, her freedom of spirit can fade (7).

Freedom is the ability for women to be themselves. What the mods have, Ruck writes, is a liberty that was unthinkable in the Victorian period, but writing about women in the 1930s, she states, "it never strikes her that any girl had to ask for freedom" ("Freedom and Fallacy" 2). While achieving freedom does not diminish one's desire to be free, Ruck understands that freedom is not guaranteed, even for the modern woman. To illustrate her point, Ruck recounts the story of the Courting Bridge. In nineteenth-century Yorkshire, the men from one village crossed a river with a strong current to court the women of the village on the opposite side. It was a dangerous venture and victory was achieved through a marriage match. Fearful of the dangers facing the young men, the villagers built a bridge to connect the two sides. The journey was safer, but no marriages took place, with the suggestion being that once you are free to do something, you no longer desire it. Ruck is "dead against this theory" ("Freedom and Fallacy" 2). "It strikes me as

defeatist," she wrote, explaining that the modern woman does not suffer from the same constraints as Ruck endured in her youth, and the world is better for it, but removing the obstacles to freedom is not the same as embracing that freedom ("Freedom and Fallacy" 2). Once you stop segregated bathing or chaperoned interactions, she writes, people can be free to be themselves, but just because they have earned the ability to be free does not mean they will be free. Freedom is sometimes inhibited by self-imposed constraints that repress the true self or subjects women to different kinds of confinement ("Freedom and Fallacy" 2).

Ruck developed the connection between freedom and sincerity – emotional truth – over the course of the interwar years. In 1934 she addressed the "Modern Young Things" in an article where she conveys her discontent with the way young people interact with one another and the ways in which she believes some have squandered their potential. By the 1930s Ruck felt as though men and women should have been able to talk about anything, but they chose not to. Their conversations are "Dull and Dimmed," reduced to pat phrases such as "How lousy!," "How marvelous," or "Isn't it sanguinary?" (Ruck, "This 'Freedom' of Speech" 2). They speak in a prison of verbal conventionality: guided by American films, they simply parrot slang and lingo that does not convey substance. Ruck is not implying that the mods have nothing to say; rather, she argues that modern culture is stifling discourse and creating a new kind of conformity. Ruck criticises the artificiality of modern culture that impacts how young people interact with each other and the choices they make.

In the 1934 article "Enjoyment Should Be Free," Ruck confronts the 'musts' of modern culture, which she describes as "another form of tyranny… [or] the laying down of the law by highbrow or intellectual snobbish friends [who] will not allow you to enjoy the Pretty-Pretty" (supposedly frivolous entertainment). Instead, these snobs impose upon you the 'must' of the "ugly-ugly" that is, high-brow intellectualism that few understand or truly enjoy. And yet, the mod embraces the "hauntingly gloomy Russian drama from which he derives not five minutes of real entertainment, of coming away bored to coma and taking it out by saying firmly, 'You MUST go. You simply MUST NOT miss that treat!'" Ruck recounts an example of two young acquaintances of hers who attended a new foreign play. While each assumed that the other 'must' have been "gobbling it with zest," during the interval one confesses to the other that he hardly understood a word of it and "at the end of the second act they went home" ("Enjoyment Should Be Free" 8). Ruck's belief is that modern young people are participating in culture, living their lives in a particular way, out of a sense of obligation and cultural significance, not because they enjoy it. Sincerity is implied by its absence in those who contravene freedom by doing what they think they 'must' do and not what they truly want to do. The sincere moment is when one theatre goer admits to the other that they did not understand the play and they did not enjoy it. Ruck wants young people to live their lives with emotional honesty and she is perplexed by the willingness of the mods to sacrifice sincerity and true freedom for conformity by another name.

Ruck rejects the artificiality of choosing the ugly-ugly simply because the pretty-pretty is not the 'must' of the day. In a 1926 article in *The Evening Chronicle,* she presents the mods as a constructed category that risked reducing women to inauthentic versions of themselves – performances for public consumption that spoke as much to women's new freedoms as to their fears of what it would mean if they failed to embrace those freedoms ("The Modern Woman" 5). There was no single way to be modern, but print media helped to construct the modern woman and "conferred modernity onto the user" of products

associated with modernity, including clothing, hairstyles, and sports cars (Tinkler & Kranick 116-17).[2] In Ruck's view, mods were not necessarily freethinking, sexually liberated, and economically independent women, although they had the potential to be; rather, the designation 'mod' was replete with norms and expectations that were meant to distinguish them from the Victorian woman. Paul Fussell argues that the "modern versus habit" or the "mode of gross dichotomy" created a provocative chasm to enunciate difference and change (79). Opposites helped people make sense of that change and the new status quo that emerged from the war years. The "versus habit" intensified women's concerns about the degree of change they were expected to embrace and what they had to give up if they chose to be mods.

For Ruck, the danger was not the modern woman herself, but the belief that one had to *be* a mod or at least perform the identity. Identity that fit into such neat categories was not only insincere in that it forced women to choose an identity and wear it as one would an outfit, but it also meant that the pre-war gender norms that restricted women's freedoms were replaced with new modern versions, albeit ones that were supposedly chosen by women as symbols of their emancipation and empowerment. Caroline Kanerick writes that Ruck wanted to "articulate social realities in ways which suggest an authorial concern for the complexities and contradictions inherent in 'ordinary' life" (689). Her goal was not escapist fiction, but rather 'sentimentalized realism' that spoke to women's concerns. In Ruck's post-war novels her characters are mods unaware of the potential falsities of that label.

Gender Fluidity and Diverse Identities

In Ruck's novels, the romance plot was part of a woman's journey through the social and economic changes in interwar Britain that were permeated by modernity. The modern woman in interwar literature is rooted in women's expectations of and experiences with romance and how the mod identity contravened romantic expectations and desires. In her newspaper writing, Ruck acknowledges that although women are objectively freer, the performance of modernity had the ability to threaten that freedom. What Ruck wants is for women to continue to embrace the potential of freedom though sincerity, and in her early 1920s' novels she embraced what she hoped was the unlimited potential for women and men to be their true selves, regardless of gender categories or conventional expectations of love and courtship. In *Sir or Madam* (1923), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Ralph Wellalone is a baron, big game hunter, and author who finds traditional romance and courtship tiresome. He has hired a new chauffeur from London to drive his sports car and to run interference with his flirtatious and conventionally beautiful cousin-by-marriage, Lady Day, who is now widowed. The chauffeur, Jim Smith, is—unbeknownst to Wellalone— a cross-dressing woman, the Honourable Guelda Rhos. Guelda is a well-bred girl, twenty-one years old, and sister to the Honourable Reggie Rhos, a Captain in the Indian Cavalry. At 5'8" and weighing nine stones, she looks just like her brother Reggie. Rather than assuming her brother's identity, she chooses to be a version of her true self, believing she was made with a bit of "boy-stuff left over from the making of Reggie" (88).

Guelda was always fascinated by stories of girls masquerading as boys, but hates how clumsily it has been done in literature. "You know how interested I've always been in the countless stories there are of girls masquerading as boys, with nobody spotting them," she tells her friend. In the story of Mademoiselle de Maupin, written by Theophile Gautier in 1835, the titular character engages in adventures dressed as a boy and has a romance with a woman. She is eventually revealed to be a woman, betrayed by her feminine figure, and marries a man. "You know perfectly well the girl hadn't an attempt at the straight-up-and-down-with-no-jumps effect that people get nowadays. No! Her figure was trussed up into a bouquet, like they always did in that century," Guelda proclaims, and while the costume of Charles I may have been a useful disguise, "she used to walk in and out of another girl's bedroom in what they call her 'night attire' and the other girl was never supposed to notice a thing! So improbable!," she complains (18). Guelda wants to live as a man and takes great care to mask her identity, obstinately mindful not to be revealed by her feminine features as she carefully wraps her breasts in bandages and sports a bob that is skillfully swept to the side negating the need for a cap.

Smith is tasked with driving Lady Day to her various engagements and during their first encounter Lady Day becomes convinced that Smith is a gentleman disguised as chauffeur, which emboldens Lady Day to dispense with her own falsehoods. During her punting lesson Lady Day stares at Smith's "pleasantly-moulded, fresh and not too deeply pink lips" and fantasises about what it would be like if he kissed her hand. Catching herself lost in the moment, she asks if he had ever been in love. He tells her he once heard that "neither domestic happiness, nor the moments of keen delight, not both combined together, make Love the real thing." He wanted "the rainbow" – "to find in Love and in the woman he loved… [a]ll that's in Life in every form that appeals to him" (134). Lady Day, unaware of the context, scoffs at his sentimentalities, telling him he would spend the rest of this life in "solitary-abnegation, dreaming of the Perfect Playfellow… You can't marry what isn't, Mr. Smith! You can't make love to it" (136).

Their conversation about 'the rainbow' follows a similar conversation between Wellalone and his French friend, Professor Lemeroier. While being driven by Smith, Wellalone says a home with a wife and mother for his children would never be enough for him. Nor would a "Voluptuous Interlude" suffice (77). He wants to be seduced by a woman, but does not want a wife who is also a seductress, nor does he want sentimentality or idealism. He wants what is found when the "Passion is silent and when Affection seems a trivial thing" (80). He wants sincerity, which Lemeroier calls 'the rainbow.' While listening to the conversation, Smith realises that "*She* wanted rainbows," with all the complicated emotions and complexities that exist between two people (80, italics in original). Ruck is interested in shedding the performativity of love and romance to tell her readers that love, like identity, is an inner revelation. "Lord how I love all of you," Wellalone tells her once her identity has been revealed. "Even if I am unfeminine? Even if I am a Boy-Girl," she cries (363). Guelda and Ralph marry, but they are not a conventional couple. He tells Guelda he will call her Jim and she changes from her wedding gown into the costume of a bridegroom – she is once again Smith indicating that neither character's sexual desires or identities have been altered by marriage.[3]

Ruck cautioned her readers about the dangers of confining people to categories, but she also offers a glimpse into the "slippages and overlaps between gender inversion and sapphism" (Doan 523-24). Ruck explores discourses around gender and sexuality that

inevitably emerged in response to wartime propaganda that declared "every woman is a man," at least insofar as the gender transgression supported the war effort (Doan 523). Sally Ledger has shown that there was a complex relationship between the New Woman at the turn of the century and "emergent homosexual identities" (5), which Ruck explores in her depictions of the modern woman by using the romance novel to examine a woman's consciousness as a gendered and sexual being. Wellalone falls in love with a boy, but the love is not acted upon until Smith is revealed to be a girl, stopping short of a sexual transgression that would have certainly departed from the typical romance narrative of the 1920s. As an adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, however, the story of a man who falls in love with a cross-dressing girl, while Lady Day fantasises about being kissed by a boy whom she does not realise is really a girl, gives Ruck leeway to show that gender can be constructed in any number of ways. Xiaotian Jin's work on modern sexuality shows that changing discourse about women's sexuality was one part of the "cultural constructions of the New Woman at this moment—a mannish modern girl or a lesbian feminist—painted her as dangerous and vampish, but her emancipated sexuality was in some fictional portrayals celebrated as part of the social progress" (255). As in *Twelfth Night*, the gender reveal does not completely reverse the narrative. Wellalone fell in love with a boy and Guelda admits that she is neither fully a boy nor fully a girl. Ruck embraces the complexities of the modern woman and man at the same time that she challenges traditional gender norms that are incompatible with Guelda's fragmented self-consciousness. The modern man rejects old masculine values, and the masculinized woman is eroticized by her gender fluidity, producing what Nicola Humble calls a "new language of romance" (209). The 'rainbow' rejects conformity in favour of the subjective self that is central to Ruck's conception of sincerity.

While Ruck grapples with gender identity as the central part of the love story in *Sir or Madam,* the overarching message of her 1920s' novels is the range of possibilities open to women beyond the fluidity of gender dynamics. Even in circumstances where women have had independence thrust upon them by circumstance, Ruck shows that true freedom required making choices. In *Mind of a Minx* (1927) Millicent Saunderson was raised by Aunt and Gov (no relation to her) after her parents died and now works as a mannequin in a West London shop. Millicent and her brothers are partially educated "waifs" (5), and she labels herself a "nobody girl with no money or prospects" (17).[4] She has three primary romantic entanglements, and all three men offer a contrast to Millicent, a modern woman who loves dancing, fashion, and the cinema. She is the type of woman who could not imagine a life of "all kinds of domesticities," "trotting meekly back to my Newly Wed bungalow, furnished in the Wage way… darning my husband's socks, and waiting for him to get back from the Depot to take me to the local cinema. How I'd have grown to hate him" (33). She longs to be an actress, and although the chances of success are low, she would use the money to buy her brother the "Super Ninety he is madly in love with" (48). Millicent is obsessed with the latest clothes, cars, and entertainment and has decided that if her dream comes true, she will go by the stage name 'Minx' (46).

The contest between modernity (her pursuit of material things) and sincerity (self-truth and the freedom to be oneself) unfolds over the course of the novel. On a trip to the country estate of Mrs. Anstruther, Millicent meets a film producer named Mr. Sydney Einstein and is told by her host to "behave as prettily to him as you do to lots of other men… Otherwise, you'll be letting me down" (58). Although the modern woman was

popularly presented as sexually transgressive and with masculine attributes (Ledger 3-5), Millicent rebuffs Einstein's advances. He sits too close, overwhelming the space between them, and when asked if she "didn't like to be kissed?," she replies, "I adore it from the right person… But not you… You're too horribly repulsive and much, much, *much* too old!" (*Mind of a Minx* 60). Ruck confronts the expectation that mods are so sexually free that they should have no objection to using their bodies to get what they want and therefore should not be offended by a quid pro quo exchange of physical relations for career advancement.

Millicent's views of modernity are continually challenged, echoing public anxiety about the changes in women's status. During her travels she meets a young man in Austria to whom she is attracted, despite his outdated attire. They meet naturally, as modern young people could, swimming in the Danube, alluding to co-ed swimming that fascinated the British public in the 1920s (Harwood 661). There are neither chaperons nor the need for contrived interactions. She accepts his invitation to dinner and as the two linger in the park after dark to enjoy a coffee, Millicent admits that "He attracted me more than any one I'd seen for months" (145).[5] He looks at her, but not "as if he owned everything he could see," something she had felt during her interaction with Mr. Einstein, but rather wishing to "take in more of something that pleased" him. In that moment "I felt as for months I hadn't been made to feel – a *woman*" (145, italics in original). As she sits in the dark with a man she hardly knows she worries about how it might look to a passerby, and so "under that stranger's steady, half-puzzled, half-caressing glance, I made myself distant. I put my coral beads straight and looked away. I was miles away" (145). Leaning forward, he calls her "*Fanny*," but she implores him to call her Mixy, a pet name used by her former boyfriend, George: "Just as you said 'Fanny,' say 'Mixy!,'" she whispers (146, italics in original). The attraction she feels for the Austrian both confounds and excites her. She likes him, in spite of his poor appearance and old-fashioned clothing, and enjoys his company. The interaction between them emerges naturally, characterised by a sense of emotional honesty that she had not felt in a long time, making her question what she truly wanted for herself.

The freedom Millicent experiences during her interaction with the young Austrian is juxtaposed with her contrived and tightly controlled interaction with Madame Inez Cottrell. Millicent models an expensive swimsuit as her boss issues commands for her to turn and lift her arms. As Cottrell inspects the suit, her companion asks, "Do you suppose… that she minds beings shoved about like a doll, in front of everybody?" "Isn't it what she's here for?," replies Cottrell (230). Cottrell describes Millicent's modern-girl body as childlike, stating "Looking at any of these young English girls, one knows they will never be what one calls a woman" (231). Millicent feels judged and uncomfortable, a stark contrast to how she felt in the company of the young Austrian. Although she had always loved fashion and the sense of empowerment she felt when modelling clothing, even if she did not have the means to purchase it for herself, she comes to realise that there is something artificial about the "element of decoration," of "Creations," and "showing-off" behind plate-glass (237-238). Millicent comes to understand that her prior aspirations of being a successful model would obscure her true self through the performance of a contrived identity literalized as standing like a mannequin behind a window. Exasperated, Millicent states,

> If this sequin Absurdity, which will never know the kiss of salt water, is sold to this Spanish plutocrat… I'll beg for the motor-run, out to the primitive

> village, and the pine-woods, all in the cool moonlight. I shall have deserved it after this glaring, staring Plage-fatigue (232).

Millicent verbalizes her new understanding of freedom. She wants to be desired for who she is, not the image she represents, and she wants the freedom to be herself. Millicent increasingly understands the benefits and problems of the modern woman and the artificiality that can define modernity.

Millicent's true love is George Ainsworth, but she ended their relationship because she could not bear to be bound to an un-modern man: "Victorian? Exactly. Practically, pre-Aunt's day." "How could a girl, accustomed to my life, ever stick that other? I'd be miserable. Bored to tears," she explains (33). They reconnect in France while listening to the orchestra and watching the fisherfolk dance in simple attire. George wants to marry her, but to do so would make her a modern pauper. The happy ending waits for Millicent to know who she is, not just in terms of work or leisure, or even what she desires in courtship, but who she is when all the "chopping and changing and shifting from being one bit of Minx to being another bit of Minx comes to a sudden black-out, and I'm given the chance, at last, to be just one woman." Something had happened to her: the "Things, ideas, people I was used to, I can't do with any more" (310). This is not to suggest that Millicent no longer sees herself as a modern woman; rather, "to be just one woman" is to be herself, with all the complexities and contradictions that being herself will inevitably entail. What she is rejecting is the self-imposed conformity that she thought was essential to her mod identity, but that prevented her from being truly happy. Ruck understands a woman's desire to be modern and to be free, and she cautions readers about what is lost if one comes at the expense of the other.

Modernity and Emotional Honesty

A woman, Ruck argues, is too complicated to be just one thing, and modern love had the chance to emerge naturally, but only if young men and women found the emotional honesty to dispense with the artificiality that often defined the mods. As Ruck emphasised in her newspaper writing, women wanted freedom, but modernity's true value lay in the freedom it gave women to know sincerity, which was essential if they hoped to find happiness in marriage. The relationship between modernity and emotional dishonesty is perhaps most notable in Ruck's 1935 novel, *Sunshine Stealer*. Carmen Allen is a dispirited London business girl who had been orphaned at the age of eighteen. Carmen, who was once from a wealthy family, now lives in a slum, and has recently been fired from her job. On her way home from work she finds fifty pounds in a notecase and after making minimal effort to return the money to its owner, Lady Wilcox, she decides to go on a Mediterranean cruise.[6] She spends the money on luggage and clothing, convinced that the warm weather will cure the tedium of her miserable life. On the cruise she meets a variety of people who wonder why the youth of the 1930s do not embrace life in the same ways as the Victorians – they do not have adventures, they do not have stories, and in conversation they can only manage to say "the rain rained, the fog fogged and the traffic jammed" (8).

Aboard the ship, Carmen meets Mr. Jim Travers, a London detective who is curious about this girl who is not what she appears to be. All of their interactions center on her deception – how she handles her money, what she reveals about herself, and her romantic interest in a man who is also a police agent. Ruck contrasts the healing properties of sunshine and water (swimming) with the destructive forces of deception and falsehood. Rather than the cruise providing much needed relaxation, Carmen is anxious as she lies to those around her. Ashore for a day trip, Carmen comes to a market of Arab traders. She feels sorry for the "troupe of performing fleas, [who] skipped like brown gutter-Arabs, turning handsprings and cartwheels and screaming for sous," but is told not to waste her sympathies – they are little more than common thieves (105). Carmen simultaneously feels mirrored by these 'thieves' because of her own act of theft (calling herself a convict) and deceit as she performs the identity of a wealthy lady when she is in fact a destitute 'waif.'

After her trip to the market, Carmen faces disparaging judgment herself. She is aggressively pursued by her cousin Juan who tells her with conviction that "no woman says 'NO' unless she means 'yes'" (150). At a dance, Carmen, in high heels with red lips, dances sensually with Juan. He calls her a coquette, insists she will marry him, as Juan mistakes lust for love and Carmen, who wants to be accepted by those around her, mistakes the spectacle of her performance for self-truth. Ruck explores themes of sexual dominance and submissiveness as Juan later tries to kiss Carmen in a café at knifepoint. His unwanted attention makes her feel like "an arid, sexless, shapeless herring" (157). Carmen is not just subject to his relentless gaze; rather, he overpowers her, invades her space, forces her to see herself, which in Carmen's mind is as a "selfish, spineless little voluptuary" (166). The narrator wants the reader to feel sorry for Carmen, but adds that "she did deserve all that was coming to her" (124). Ruck does not romanticise women's sexual subservience to men, nor does she embrace the sexual wildness of desert romances; rather, Ruck makes Carmen ultimately responsible for how the story ends. The narrator is ambiguous about exactly what Carmen deserves, whether it is rape or the threat of rape, but the implication is that she deserves the consequences of her choices. Carmen's inauthenticity in conjunction with her theft and deception makes the encounter with Juan seem to be the logical conclusion of her own choices, whether she has thought them through or not.

After confessing her crime to Jim Travers, the two, now engaged, go to the Wilcox home in London. The Wilcox family represent the tug-of-war between modern and traditional. Most of the décor is modern and Billy (Lady Wilcox's daughter), who is thirty-eight years old and single, wears Chanel and smokes Virginian cigarettes, while her brother chases after film stars. Both offer a juxtaposition to Lady Wilcox who is described as a "period-piece," a woman in her eighties who "belongs to an epoch when corsets, etiquette and principles were rigid" (94). She had accepted an arranged marriage, hated horse racing and sports cars, and generally resisted the changes in women and men's fashion.[7] Travers tries to explain to Lady Wilcox that Carmen is destitute and had tried, unsuccessfully, to return the money. He then offers to replace the lost bills. Lady Wilcox disapproves of his explanation, and while she does not verbalise the reasons for her disapproval, the narrator makes clear that modernity does not give a woman the freedom to err with impunity or to have a man rescue her from the consequences of her choices. Carmen then speaks, telling Lady Wilcox that she is a thief. For Lady Wilcox, what mattered was Carmen's sincerity. She was a girl caught between past and present and like many young women in the interwar years, she felt unsettled, exposed, and at times discouraged

by the difficult choices she faced. As Elaine Showalter demonstrates in her collection of autobiographical essays from the 1920s, for the modern woman "the old rules fail to work; bewildering inconsistencies confront her… slowly, clumsily, she is trying to construct a way out to a new sort of certainty in life" (14-15). The end of the novel marks Carmen's revelation of sincerity, but it also illuminates Ruck's increasing concern that women were continuing to scorn freedom.

Progress and Regress

By the end of the 1930s Ruck was increasingly critical of women's progress, as her earlier optimism waned. Showalter demonstrates that the struggle for freedom was not over, and, in some ways, the interwar years represented a period of "retreat and postponement" as women struggled to negotiate the complexities of their independence (27). In *Handmaid to Fame* (1939), Ruck is concerned about the modern woman's apparent dispassion and the artificiality and repression that can result when a woman's freedom and happiness is stifled by her desire to be modern. Terry Grey, a woman "getting well-stricken in years" (1), was raised in a Victorian villa in Brixton Hill that her father was selling in order to embrace the modern lifestyle of his new wife, the young and beautiful Sylvia Smith, who is everything the drab and book-smart Terry is not (6). After her employer dies, Terry takes a post as a personal assistant to film star Valentine Lavery (11-17). Terry is not selected by Lavery himself, but rather by his fiancée, Miss Flower Armitage, a beautiful actress whose own insecurities led her to choose the least attractive woman sent by the employment agency (28). The narrative centers on the glitz and glamour of the 1920s cinema, which is presented in the novel as a world where the women dominate at work, dictating everything from staffing, to wardrobe, to the direction of scenes. Flower Armitage has gone so far in embracing her modern lifestyle that she no longer recognises her true self, and therefore her relationship with Lavery, based on fantasies of freedom and happiness, is doomed to failure from the outset.

Terry wears her unremarkable appearance as a badge of honour, separating her from the excessively modern Flower. As an educated, intelligent, working woman, Terry wants to be taken seriously as a professional modern woman, but to do so feels she has to suppress her desire to find love, choosing instead to focus on her career. While in some ways she feels empowered by her professionalism, she describes herself as "far too mousy," unlike Flower, who had a "face like a wild rose and laughs until she cries at any joke a man makes" (79). Even after Val tells her she is "attractive, original and refreshing" (80), Terry lacks the confidence to dance, choosing instead to watch the others whom she describes as "on top of their worlds—the Beauty, the Celebrity, and the young Made-of-Money… All making themselves unhappy" (87). In the company of these mods, Terry doubts herself and her own success, but she is also confounded by how these men and women—who want for nothing, and who can be anything—can be so miserable. In *Handmaid to Fame*, Ruck addresses the difference between true freedom and the perception of freedom. She may not reject modernity, but she is critical of those mods who have sacrificed their freedom by embracing a different kind of conformity.

What Ruck wants for the mods is emotional honesty and the freedom it enables. To achieve this goal, Terry is put in the position of dealing with what she perceives as her boss's self-pity as he comes to terms with Flower's success in film as well as his sulking and excessive drinking that arise in response to Flower meeting a wealthier and more successful man. After Val is fired from the film, he tells the director that with Flower "There are no limits! Drive any man to suicide" (*Handmaid to Fame* 127-28). As Val leaves the studio and heads toward the river for some fresh air, Terry, who overheard the conversation, mistakes his emotional honesty regarding his life and career as an intention to harm himself. It is in the interaction that follows between Val and Terry, whereby he comes to terms with his own unhappiness, that Terry sees "his real self," that "Lavery was holding back something that would presently break loose" (134-35). Lavery is not suicidal but is rather coming to terms with the choices he made and is on the verge of discovering his true self.

The union between Terry and Val is not dependent on him declaring his love for her. Instead, Ruck first establishes that both understand the limitations of false identities. Ruck's narrator proclaims that Flower was "killed by luxury and living at extravagant hotels" that prevented her from becoming the person she was meant to be (174). It is only after Flower nearly drowns and is saved by Terry that she understands her own insincerity, but this recognition is only the beginning of the process toward emotional honesty, which is beyond the scope of the novel for this character (227-28). Terry tells Val that so many people fail to live their real lives and she cannot marry him until she has come to terms with her sincere self.

Throughout the novel Terry insists that she does not wish to marry and while it may be a natural thing for "9 out of 10 girls," she "got the business groove early" (148). In the late 1930s women were expected to have "A home of her own to look after. Children. Man to look after her," and there was still stigma around the non-traditional woman (148). Terry feels there is room for both, but believes the modern woman had to navigate new freedoms in an old world. Could a woman have a happy marriage and a career simultaneously? Terry finally reveals to Val that she is a playwright and has written a play called *The Secret*. Val is delighted: the play is not the work of an amateur, and a playwright is a "great thing to be" (192). At dinner that evening the hostess recognises Val Lavery the film star. When asked if Terry is also in films, Val says no, she writes plays and the hostess's admiration switches from Val to Terry (201). Validation, however, comes not from Val or the hostess, but rather from within through the emergence of her authentic self when she finally acknowledges 'the secret'—her desire to be a playwright *and* a wife, but a playwright first.

At the opening performance of *The Secret,* Val announces his engagement to Terry. As Ann Allen has shown, progressive feminists in the 1930s saw the ability to combine marriage/motherhood with paid employment as distinctly modern (138). The narrator reveals that the relationship works because happiness emerged naturally, the end result of "The pull of the Real over the Artificial" (259). They had come to know one another, "they had known jealously and gay open-air enjoyment and disgust… They had encouraged and lost patience with each other… After all these things had tried them, they were, and they were like to remain, most ardent lovers" (255-56). While film stars played at romance and cinema offered a glamorous fast-paced world of perfect mods, neither was real. Ruck's happy ending rejects the artificiality of fairytales. True happiness, the author insists, cannot

exist without sincerity: men and women living their lives with emotional honesty (260). "Remember who you are," Val tells Terry in the final lines of the novel. Terry comes to understand her true self, but not by conforming as Flower and Val had done, but by her revelation that "I'm not any longer second fiddle to anybody… Fame is now Handmaid to *me*!" (260-61, italics in original). Ruck believes, as is evident from her non-fiction writing, that much had been won for women during the war and she did not want women to waste that progress by performing an identity that many women felt was necessary in order to be a mod.

Conclusion

Ruck's interwar novels embody her belief that the war was transformative for women, whom she hoped would embrace the unlimited potential of their new freedoms. Her optimism about the 'age of freedom,' as expressed in her newspaper articles, is evident in her early 1920s' novels, where she embraces gender fluidity and divergent sexual identities that challenged traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity. In writing for and about young women, Ruck also infuses her novels with cautionary tales that speak to the immediate concerns of her readers, specifically the social challenges faced by young women after 1918 (*A Story-Teller Tells the Truth* 189). Although Ruck is certain that Britain had been changed by the war and she expresses great faith in women's ability to adapt to and embrace new social and cultural norms, she was also wary that some women would conflate the appearance of freedom with true freedom, grounded in emotional honesty. While Ruck was not critical of modernity itself, believing it freed women from the prudery of the Victorian period, in the 1930s she became concerned that women were scorning freedom in what she saw as a relentless desire to embrace modernity as evidence of their freedom and emancipation. For Ruck, conformity, which had defined her own youth, was the opposite of sincerity and in the 1920s and 1930s too many young women were chasing the fantasy of modernity rather than using their new freedom to be emotionally honest, what Ruck calls 'sincerity.' The novels she published during this period, however, offered women a path to freedom without compromising through conformity.

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[1] While Ruck does not define what she means by authenticity, she seems to be borrowing from romanticism's understanding of authenticity as the aporia within sincerity or the feelings not the words spoken (cf. Miles & Sinanan 20).

[2] For more on the relationship between modernity and consumerism, see Rieger.

[3] Laura Vivanco's work on *A Land Girl's Love Story* (1919) also demonstrates Ruck's rejection of gender binaries, but also the need to complicate traditional understandings of marriage.

[4] A similar trope of forced independence is also found in *The Pearl Thief* (1926) and *Sunshine Stealer* (1935).

[5] For more on spinsterhood and identity in the 1920s, see Joannou.

[6] Carmen phoned the number on the inside of the wallet, but there was no answer.

[7] The relationship between sports cars and modernity was established in the 1920s (cf. Scharff). Attitudes toward female drivers also changed as a result of the First World War (cf. Matthews & Pike).

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