

“The Other Problem— That of the Woman with Children”

Vera Brittain, Maternal Work, and the Politics of Leaning In

Tensions and battles about career and children, which inform our contemporary “mommy wars,” were equally the driving forces for many first-wave feminists who contested traditional conceptions of wifehood and motherhood. One of the most outspoken figures from this past era, and my focus here, is British author, journalist, and pacifist Vera Brittain (1893–1970). I draw on Brittain’s autobiographical trilogy Testament of Youth (1933), Testament of Friendship (1940), and Testament of Experience (1957), as well as on her 1920s and 1930s journalism in order to reveal how she waged “war” (her term) on Victorian womanhood. She unabashedly and relentlessly led the ranks of team “working mother” during the “mommy wars” of her day, showcasing through theory and by example unconventional approaches to middle-class motherhood. She believed, as she lived, that if mothers are to be completely realized and fulfilled individuals, they must engage in meaningful and remunerative occupations. Anne-Marie Slaughter’s 2012 Atlantic article “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” and Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead (2013) tap, like Brittain’s work, into the zeitgeist of maternal anxiety, confusion, and choice, producing wildly divisive reactions by readers and mothers eager to define and query what it means to be a so-called “modern” and “good” mother. With reference to these contemporary debates, I argue that Brittain remains profoundly relevant to our understanding of twenty-first century maternal politics, and that career-driven mothers today may claim the unfinished business of her feminist agenda as their own.

Introduction: Cookiegate

“I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession,” so Hillary Clinton contentiously

informed a reporter on March 16, 1992 (quoted in Walter). Clinton’s comments have been used to stoke the flames of the “mommy wars,” that media-driven battle between the mother who works outside the home and the mother who remains within the home, the grounds of which were laid out by Nina Darnton in her June 3, 1990, piece for *Newsweek*, “Mommy Vs. Mommy.” Clinton’s cookiegate was invoked in a more recent skirmish, the 2012 face-off between Hilary Rosen, the Democratic strategist who suggested that Ann Romney, wife of Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, “has actually never worked a day in her life”—to which Ann Romney challenged, “I made a choice to stay home and raise five boys. Believe me, it was hard work.” Rosen tweeted in counter-charge, “I am raising children too. But most young American women HAVE to BOTH earn a living AND raise children. You know that don’t u?” (quoted in Walter).

While Clinton, Romney, and Rosen illustrate clear divisions in the mommy ranks, tensions and battles about career and children are hardly novel: they were the driving forces for many first-wave feminists who, one hundred years ago, contested traditional conceptions of wifehood and motherhood. One of the most outspoken figures from this past era—and my focus here—is British author, journalist, and pacifist Vera Brittain (1893-1970). Brittain is perhaps best known for her autobiography *Testament of Youth*, in which she depicts her increasing frustrations with her Victorian-inspired upbringing in the town of Buxton, England, and her subsequent successful efforts to attend Somerville College, Oxford. With the onset of the First World War, she interrupted her studies to serve as a Volunteer Aid Detachment nurse. Her exposure to the consequences of violence as she tended to wounded soldiers, coupled with the battle-related deaths of the men closest to her (her fiancé, brother, and brother’s friends), led her to denounce the patriotic rhetoric that dominated England’s war efforts. In turn, she became an active pacifist, one whose agenda was closely tied to her ongoing engagement with first-wave feminism.

In 1925 she married English political scientist and philosopher George Edward Gordon Catlin (1896-1979), but she did so in strikingly unconventional terms. She kept her own name, and established what she called the “semi-detached marriage,” an arrangement which permitted him to take an academic position at Cornell University in New York for half of the year while she remained in England building her careers as writer, journalist, and public speaker. They had two children, John Edward (born 1927) and Shirley (born 1930). With Catlin not always around to raise them, Brittain’s best friend was: author and journalist Winifrid Holtby (1898-1935) shared Brittain and Catlin’s London home where the two women established an alternative to the parenting and marital dyad. Although he resigned his post at Cornell in 1934, Catlin continued to live a peripatetic life, as did Brittain and Holtby, travelling, lecturing,

and writing throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. Holtby died from Bright's (kidney) disease in 1935; Brittain and Catlin's marriage lasted until Brittain's death in 1970.

In this article, I draw on Brittain's autobiographical trilogy *Testament of Youth* (1933), *Testament of Friendship* (1940), and *Testament of Experience* (1957), as well as on her autobiographical journalism in the 1920s and 30s for publications like *Good Housekeeping*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and the *Nation and Athenaeum*, in order to reveal how Brittain waged "war" (her term) on "the Victorian tradition of womanhood" and motherhood (*Testament of Youth* 602). In the spirit of contributors to the collection *From the Personal to the Political: Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative*, I read Brittain's first-person narratives as social and political texts which, like much maternal autobiography, makes clear that "the personal *is* political" (12). As editors Andrea O'Reilly and Silvia Caporale Bizzini expand, in autobiographies of motherhood which insist "upon the polity of maternity"—as do Brittain's—"not only is motherhood understood to be political, but also, as a result, mothers themselves become political agents or actors." Thus, motherhood autobiography, "in foregrounding the inherent and inevitable self-reflexive and social dimension of motherhood, makes possible a political resistance to institutionalized motherhood" (16).

Brittain's maternal activism is summed up by biographer Deborah Gorham, who rightly notes that Brittain "came to perceive the challenge of combining professional work with marriage and motherhood and of creating feminist marriages as the most important feminist task" of the post-World War I period (179). Brittain's efforts were especially timely given that, as historian Deirdre Beddoe asserts, "The single most arresting feature of the inter-war years was the strength of the notion that women's place is in the home." The justification for women to confine themselves to the domestic sphere was predicated on the assumptions that women who had enjoyed employment opportunities while men were fighting in the war should necessarily give their jobs back to the men returning from the Front; and women were needed, in the interests of nationhood, to have and raise children to compensate for the generation decimated by war (3-4).

Brittain, however, unabashedly and relentlessly led the ranks of team "working mother" during the mommy wars of her day which, then as now, were fueled by contesting imperatives for women. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, for instance, Sharon Hays explains that while more than half of post-World War II American women became employed, and while late capitalist society promotes self-interest and competition, women are nonetheless urged to become self-sacrificing and devotional mothers by way of an all-consuming parenting strategy she calls "intensive mothering," a "gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in

raising their children” (x). Following Hays, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels argue in *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* that, despite the gains of second-wave feminism and increased presence of women in the workforce, women from the 1980s on embrace what they term the “new momism,” a backlash ideology which posits that the only “right” choice a post-feminist woman can make is to have children. Contemporary women are framed by this myth as they are inundated with images in the media which stipulate motherhood is the goal and testament of true womanhood. Consequently, the concept of the “supermom” took hold, that is, of the liberated professional who intensively mothers and thus “does it all” and “has it all.” But as Douglas and Michaels show, this expectation of “good” motherhood only burdens and oppresses “real” or average women who cannot possibly measure up to the fantasy (83-84).

Hays describes the mommy-war factions of today: “If you are a good mother, you *must* be an intensive one. The only ‘choice’ involved is whether you *add* the role of paid working woman.” In this scenario, the two maternal options are either the “traditional” stay-at-home mother or the “supermom” who “effortlessly” juggles family and career. As participants in the mommy wars, both types of women “make use of available cultural indictments to condemn the opposing group.” Supermoms thus “regularly describe stay-at-home mothers as lazy and boring, while traditional moms regularly accuse employed mothers of selfishly neglecting their children” (131-32). Hays evidences that both groups “end up spending a good deal of time attempting to make sense of their current positions” and they do this by arguing for the benefits of their respective life choices. Drawing on the scholarship of Bennett Berger, Hays reads these strategies as “socially necessary ‘ideological work’” in which women “select among the cultural logics at their disposal in order to develop some correspondence between what they believe and what they actually do” (133).

Brittain’s “ideological work,” showcased by her writing and by her maternal practices, sustains and promotes her conviction that mothers must engage in meaningful and remunerative employment if they are to be fulfilled individuals. Brittain remains profoundly relevant to our understanding of twenty-first century maternal politics not only because she was a mentor to like-minded members of her generation but also because career-driven mothers today seeking work-family balance may claim the unfinished business of her feminist agenda as their own.

New Families, New Forms

Brittain’s texts are preoccupied with the mother within early- and mid-twentieth-century society, especially in her pitting what she characterized as a “modern”

mother against more conventional counterparts. Modern motherhood can be contextualized in terms of modernism, a general term encompassing radical cultural, aesthetic, and political movements taking shape around the western world between roughly 1890 and 1940. Many modernists challenged the ingrained domestic and maternal ideologies which privileged a heteronormative model of the middle-class, married, self-sacrificing mother at home with her children that had dominated from the eighteenth century on. In so doing, they demanded and demonstrated new ways of practicing and representing maternity, as did Brittain.

Over the last few decades, scholars have been revising modernism--gendered male and masculine in canonical literary history--from feminist perspectives, revealing diverse modernisms (both textual and lived) inflected with women's sexual, political, domestic, and maternal realities, sensibilities, and identities.¹ Modernism, for women, "was not just a question of style; it was a way of life," affirm Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers; "What is most striking, both in itself and in relation to their writing, is the shared anti-conventionality of the personal lives" of so many writers "at a time when the overwhelming social expectation was that a woman should marry, bear children, and remain both married and monogamous" (11-12). Bonnie Kime Scott observes that "Radical critiques of the patriarchal family" look to "maternal relationships, and alternate familial forms" (14). And in her introduction to *Testament of Experience*, Carolyn Heilbrun notes, "For women to lose themselves in marriage, particularly if there are children, is to lose their selves, probably beyond recall" but she heralds Brittain as one of those who "dare to live what is revolutionary" (7). In her triadic relationship with Catlin and Holtby, and in consistently using words like "experiment," "new," "revolution," and "pioneer" to describe her approach to motherhood and marriage, Brittain was in the *avant garde* of domestic reform. But in remaining married and monogamous, she might not stand out as living a particularly anti-conventional life. Heilbrun contends that from her early adulthood on, Brittain consistently "found herself living two lives at once, the conventional and the revolutionary, the old life and the new" (4). Brittain thus signals the Victorian and modernist tensions that shaped a profoundly shifting era as she rewrote familial and maternal scripts within existing patriarchal parameters.

Much of Brittain's *oeuvre* is autobiographical, and this choice of genre further aligns her with the modernists who sought innovative ways to express themselves through art. In her Foreword to *Testament of Experience*, she outlines her creative method: "I have tried to show how experience is both particular and universal, each separate strand contributing to the texture of the whole. The experience of one person, as practical record and spiritual pilgrimage, may be important in itself; its significance is doubled if the personal narrative is

linked with the experience of many, and approaches the experience of all. In this sense my story reflects one epoch in history” (14). She further comments on beginning *Testament of Youth*: “A new type of autobiography was coming into fashion, and I might, perhaps, speed its development. I meant to make my story as truthful as history but as readable as fiction, and in it I intended to speak, not for those in high places, but for my own generation of obscure young women” (77). In her article “Autobiography as History” she further specifies that what she terms “significant autobiography” (as opposed to “ephemeral” or “gossip” types) “may be revolutionary enough to change the thinking of an epoch” (190).² Overall she claims that the “value of many autobiographical works produced in the last thirty years lies in their power to put the life of the individual into its niche in contemporary history” (192).

Just as *Testament of Youth* takes as its central subject World War I, so *Testament of Experience* deals with the growing threat and aftermath of World War II. Brittain showcases how she, speaking for her generation, bears witness to specific atrocities in history. However, these books, along with *Testament of Friendship* (her tribute to Holtby), deal just as much with the personal and universal convergence of marriage and motherhood. In addition, while her trilogy is obviously a first-person record of her life, her journalism is similarly drawn from her autobiographical and matrifocal or mother-centred perspectives. Her personal maternity is always framed in public and political terms and, to this end, she speaks not only for her generation of employed mothers but for future ones as well.

Marriage and Motherhood: “I Must Not Shrink from that Fight”

Brittain was adamant that neither she nor any woman should stifle her intellectual and artistic drives, and thus she sought alternative ways to accommodate her personal and domestic longings. She felt that “To find a man” who shared her vision “was a novel experience in my post-war life” (*Testament of Youth* 561). Catlin fit Brittain’s bill. Author of texts such as *The Science and Method of Politics* (1926) and *A Study of the Principles of Politics* (1929), he was born in Liverpool, attended St. Paul’s School in London, fought on the Western Front in Belgium in the final stages of WWI, and then went up to New College, Oxford, where he admired Brittain from a distance, having watched her in action for the Somerville Debating Society. Following their courtship which he initiated via correspondence, he proposed, but she agonized about becoming a wife. Although she desired a lifetime union with him and looked forward to being a mother, she refused the imperatives and implications of traditional matrimony that would thwart her autonomous selfhood.

Catlin, for his part, was in love with Brittain precisely because of her inde-

pendent spirit, and made it clear that his was a liberal proposal: “I offer you, I think, as free a marriage as it lies in the power of a man to offer a woman.” He emphasized, “I know that your work is more to you than I am . . . for love . . . is good but it is long after our own work, the work the War imposed on us, the task imposed on us by our knowledge; a knowledge gained in bitter experience” (*Testament of Youth* 600). Despite these promises, she hesitated, summing up her concerns in a 1925 letter to Catlin, identified only as “G.” in the trilogy, which she reproduced in *Testament of Youth*³:

For me . . . the feminist problem ranks with your economic problem. Just as you want to discover how a man can maintain a decent standard of culture on a small income, so I want to solve the problem of how a married woman, without being inordinately rich, can have children and yet maintain her intellectual and spiritual independence as well as having . . . time for the pursuit of her own career. For the unmarried woman there is now no problem provided that she has the will to work. For a married woman without children there is only a psychological problem—a problem of prejudice—which can be overcome by determination. But the other problem—that of the woman with children—remains the most vital. I am not sure that by refusing to have children one even solves the problem for one’s self; and one certainly does not solve it for the coming womanhood of the race.

She stresses that “the need to solve” the maternal problem is “urgent” (600-601).

Drawing on the militant metaphors of her WWI culture as well as on those employed by suffragists of the era, Brittain tells us in *Testament of Youth* that marriage “would involve another protracted struggle, a new fight against the tradition which identified wifehood with the imprisoning limitations of a kitchen and four walls,” and which “penalised motherhood by demanding from it the surrender of disinterested intelligence, the sacrifice of that vitalising experience only to be found in the pursuit of an independent profession.” In the rhetoric of heroism, she decides she must “not shrink from that fight,” believing that “To-day, as never before, it was urgent for individual women to show that life was enriched, mentally and spiritually as well as physically and socially, by marriage and children” (601-02). Brittain’s “ideological work” is predicated on her twin arguments that careers enhance women’s mothering skills, and motherhood makes women better citizens. Her articulation of the fight at hand could well serve as the working mother’s manifesto in these early stages of the mommy wars.

Shortly after her wedding, Brittain and Catlin prepared to uproot themselves to Ithaca, New York, where she had every expectation that she would use her

time abroad to advance her profession. She had already published two novels, *The Dark Tide* (1923) and *Not Without Honour* (1925), and had recently acquired a “precarious foothold” in “London journalism” (*Testament of Experience* 33). However, celebrating their first anniversary at the end of the academic year, she laments that she is little more than a “faculty wife” and realizes her sacrifices were no longer tenable: “By now it was evident that my life with G. had raised in an acute form the much-discussed issue so tritely summarised as ‘marriage versus career’” (*Testament of Experience* 37). She consequently conceived their “semi-detached marriage,” upon which she relocated to London (*Testament of Experience* 39).

The separation strained the relationship. Brittain was reticent in publishing intimate details about their marriage, but Gorham documents that Catlin engaged in multiple extra-marital affairs that had significant “emotional costs” for Brittain (198-199). Gorham makes the convincing suggestion that Brittain withheld public commentary on her domestic troubles because she “had an investment in presenting her own marriage as a successful experiment in the project of creating new feminist forms for heterosexual relationships” (189). Brittain’s suppression of personal failure thus serves to privilege a modernist commitment to a larger political project. At the same time, Brittain was ambitious professionally and career consistently took precedence over relationships—as we heard Catlin concede, “I know that your work is more to you than I am.” In this light, then, we can appreciate that she held firm to her decisions for semi-detachment as she assessed their conflict accordingly: “Why, I asked myself, should a man get the best of both worlds, but a woman be compelled to choose between personal relationships and the work for which she was fitted? Was any community justified in sacrificing intelligence and creative ability solely on the ground of sex?; “And would not each woman who consciously ‘gave in’ make it harder for all the struggling women to come?” (*Testament of Experience* 45-46). Brittain’s refusal to “give in” reverberates with the likes of Clinton today.

Back in London in 1926, Brittain found herself in demand as a journalist. In 1927, as she recounts in *Testament of Experience*, she was delighted to learn that she was pregnant but she nonetheless worried that “motherhood would inevitably double the obstacles which had still to be overcome in the struggle to be both a wife and a writer” (50). Because she was financially dependent on her craft—“only through journalism could I make my one-third contribution” to her “joint household” with Catlin and Holtby—Brittain returned to work shortly after giving birth, telling us that “When I left the nursing-home a woolly fog enveloped my mind, but within a few days I was again writing for the usual journals” (54). This economic reality is offset by her “inestimable joy” in her child, and admission that “I never thought I could love such a young

baby so much” (54). Wanting to work, having to work, wanting to be with her child: these facts help us to appreciate how Brittain’s personal situation resonates with and in fact helped to generate her public commitment “to solve” the “problem—that of the woman with children” (*Testament of Youth* 600–601).

Sacrifices, Servants, and Surrogates: “The Load of Domestic Detail”

Winifred Holtby (1898–1935), the third adult member of Brittain’s household, represented one solution to this “problem.” Author of novels such as *Anderby Wold* (1923) and *South Riding* (1936), and journalist for the feminist magazine *Time and Tide*, she was described by Brittain as “my second self” (*Testament of Experience* 29). Growing up in Yorkshire, England, Holtby attended Queen Margaret’s School in Scarborough, whose program “was designed for middle-class girls of moderate means with their living to earn; even in Winifred’s time it was assumed that the majority would follow some professional career and strive to make themselves independent.” Holtby remained “thankful for this early inculcation of modern ideas” which she would later put into practice with Brittain (*Testament of Friendship* 34). The two women met at Oxford in 1920 and, graduating together in 1921, determined to support themselves through writing. They “agreed to share. . . the adventurous, experimental London life” where they set up a studio in the neighbourhood of “intellectual Bloomsbury” (*Testament of Friendship* 108, 113). In the fall of 1923, feeling cramped, they moved to “a spacious mansion flat” in the less fashionable area of Maida Vale where they lived together until Brittain transferred to the United States with Catlin (*Testament of Friendship* 113). Within a year, though, Brittain returned to England and to the flat with Holtby (who remained single for life). Catlin would join them during the months in between his teaching terms at Cornell. With her second pregnancy they moved again, to Glebe Place in Chelsea (*Testament of Friendship* 290).

Many inhabitants of Chelsea and Bloomsbury—sites of modernist art and living—perhaps unsurprisingly attracted gossip. The trio’s situation was viewed by some as scandalous for it was assumed that Brittain and Holtby must be gay. While critics debate the likelihood that Brittain and Holtby engaged in a lesbian relationship, such speculation is beyond my scope here.⁴ The issue does bear note, though, in so far as it profoundly impacted Brittain’s sense of indignation as a married woman, underscoring that her efforts to find alternative domestic structures to accommodate her initiatives for career–family balance came at multiple costs to herself and those around her.

While never a biological mother, Holtby valued and in fact privileged children, believing “not only the women but the men who had no contact with children lived in an artificial world which lacked an essential part of experience”

(*Testament of Friendship* 277-28). *Testament of Friendship* recounts the ongoing mothering of Brittain’s children by Holtby, who cared for them at home for upwards of several months at a time while Brittain and Catlin travelled around the world on lecture and writing tours. No matter how much she revised domestic narratives, within the confines of her ongoing patriarchal society Brittain was unable to wholly undermine and indeed benefitted from a version of the Victorian angel in the house as embodied by Holtby. An unconventional feminist author and advocate for equality of the sexes, Holtby also served in a conventional, self-sacrificing role that helped to make Brittain’s career feasible.

Brittain’s and Holtby’s mothering must be contextualized within the class structures of their day: even when they functioned as hands-on parents, they were almost always supported by hired help. Recall that Brittain and Holtby moved from Bloomsbury to Maida Vale in 1923 because they needed a larger apartment. Specifically, for Brittain the “sole object in moving to the unfashionable end of the Edgware Road was to acquire space for a housekeeper who would shoulder all domestic obligations, and leave us more time for our ever-increasing work” (*Testament of Friendship* 114). Early in her career Brittain commented that a benefit of her increasing success was that she could afford “a better-qualified nurse for John” (*Testament of Experience* 54), underscoring that she viewed professional work as a means to “good” mothering. Brittain was immensely prolific precisely because of the efforts of others who alleviated maternal and domestic strains. She employed a team of housekeepers, as well as nurses and governesses. While Holtby had become Brittain’s staple surrogate, following her death Brittain continued to rely on household staff, the children’s day and boarding schools, and her own mother who had been an enormous source of childcare, all of which highlight the practical and economic considerations of trying to “do it all.”

Brittain reports very little on Caltin’s involvement with the children, indicating that his role in the daily and mundane chores associated with raising them was limited. She tells us, for instance, that “When John was only four weeks old, G. returned to Cornell for the spring semester” (*Testament of Experience* 51). In 1933, she was “At home, taking care of two children suffering from whooping-cough, and alone because G. was now in America” (*Testament of Friendship* 351). Another time, at the end of 1939, Brittain accepted an American lecture tour on the understanding that Caltin, in the U.S., would be back in England: “I had been counting on his return to our household before my departure,” she emphasizes, but he decided to stay abroad to lecture in Canada. She then comments, “Abandoning all hope of shared responsibility for the children, I arranged with their respective schools to keep them, in any emergency, until I came back from America” (*Testament of Experience* 227). Examples such as these prove how she was living, as Heilbrun attests, both “the conventional and the

revolutionary” life. While Brittain certainly embraced her experimental marriage and the professional advantages it afforded her, she continued to operate within a traditional structure in which organizing the home and accounting for the children were the mother’s responsibility.

Moreover, her writings reveal the gendered tensions of many women—both in her day and in ours—caught between maternal and business worlds. Anxiously preparing to leave on a book tour in the U.S., she wonders: “Why was a professional job, regarded as meritorious when performed by a man, so often made by circumstances to appear selfish and callous when done by a woman?” The day before her departure, she confesses, “At midnight, when I went upstairs for a final look at the sleeping children, [Shirley] half woke up and put her arms round my neck, and my resolution to fulfil my engagements, come what might, almost broke down.” Her guilt over leaving her children continued the following day when, travelling with Catlin who was returning to Ithaca, she laments, “All the way to the coast I thought wretchedly of their faces vanishing as the train left the platform.” However, she reports that “gradually a sense of proportion returned. After all, three months wasn’t long, and with Winifred in charge I need not fear for the children” (*Testament of Experience* 111-12). This passage evidences how Brittain struggled to negotiate her multiple identities.

Brittain does offer glimpses of respite, as when she took the children to the seaside town of Bournemouth. She recalls “One radiant day spent with them on the sands below the cliff”: “I took some work down to the shore, and the children, busy with buckets and spades, left me as free to write as I should have been in my study at home” (*Testament of Experience* 200). In like manner she has moments of “having it all,” as when she exclaims upon her book’s publication: “How golden the world seemed now that *Testament of Youth* was finished and accepted! How wonderful it was to have produced such a large book and brought up John and Shirley too!” (*Testament of Experience* 87). Brittain here proves her earlier conviction that by not “giving in” to communal restrictions on a woman’s “intelligence and creative ability” she can, like a man, “get the best of both worlds” (*Testament of Experience* 45-46).

Igniting the Mommy Wars: “She Has More to Give”

Having examined Brittain’s treatment of the conflicting goals, realities, and rewards of motherhood as documented within her trilogy, which totals some 1,500 pages of text composed in contemplation over several decades, I turn to her journalism to explore how these themes are addressed on a more daily and immediate basis. Looking at her reports on such topics as the mother with a career and the role of the father illuminates how fully her autobiography and journalism functioned symbiotically, each form reflecting and driving her fusion

of the personal and political, and the subjective and the objective.

Recalling Hays’ distinction between the working supermoms who “describe stay-at-home mothers as lazy and boring” and traditional mothers who “accuse employed mothers of selfishly neglecting their children” (131-32), we find Brittain using her journalism to advance the working mother’s cause. Her tone is often harsh and unforgiving towards stay-at-home mothers, and she stridently opposed those who give themselves too fully to their children—our “intensive mothers” of today. Brittain was, however, addressing her generation of women who were historically vying for unprecedented professional status and privileges, and her “ideological work” must be framed by her era for which the concept of the employed middle-class married mother was a new and highly fraught one. Her writings also speak, though, to the ongoing “struggle” mothers continue to face in the workforce and, as such, presciently counter the images of the “effortlessly” successful supermoms who dominate our media today.

Brittain heralds the mommy wars in her 1928 piece “What Does Motherhood Mean? The Possessive Instinct,” where she states that the subject of motherhood has become acutely controversial in light of recent suggestions that “for some women, being a mother may not be sufficient to occupy the whole of their time, thoughts and energy. But it is the question whether motherhood can be combined with remunerative work that sometimes reduces people to the state of mind which is usually described as ‘seeing red’” (1). She boldly supports women in the professions: “I believe that any mother who plays her part in the life of the community, who retains some practical acquaintance with its habits and fashions, and who above all keep [sic] in touch with its changing ideas, gives more to her children than the stay-at-home type, for the simple reason that she has more to give” (3).

In urging women to pursue intellectual interests outside the home, Brittain launches a trenchant attack on married, middle-class mothers with too much leisure time in “Superfluous Women are Really the Tennis Mad Who Neglect their Homes.” She queries, who “is the really superfluous woman”—the so-called “spinster”—i.e., “the hard-working unmarried teacher or the tennis-inebriated wife who regards the possession of a husband as sufficient justification for the complete abandonment of all useful activities, and the procreation of children as a function which automatically endows her with a virtue that has cost neither sacrifice nor study?” For Brittain, “the self-appointed critics of womanhood” must leave “both the spinster and the professional mother to work on in peace” and concentrate on “those married women who are firmly attached to the little mill wheel of trifling social amusements.” She rightly challenges the assumption that it is the career mother who necessarily neglects her child, but she also enacts the problematic put-down of working mothers who “describe stay-at-home mothers as lazy and boring,” as Hays puts it.

Brittain depicts an economic battleground in her 1930 “Why I think Mothers can have Careers.” She cautions that just because women have won the vote, society must not lapse into complacent thinking that “the long battle is over” and “there is no feminist crusade any more” for, as she argues, “The crusade continues; it is only that the crusaders are different, and are fighting on quite another front,” and this front is a maternal one. The new recruits are “the women who are endeavouring to solve the problem of combining marriage and motherhood with paid employment.” Brittain establishes the problem as demanding *avant-garde* action: “The life of the employed wife and mother is so hard to-day chiefly because she is still a pioneer.” She explains that if the vote is to be meaningful it must lead to economic equality, stressing in mommy-wars rhetoric that “every professional and business woman who continues her work after marriage is fighting her successors’ battles as well as her own” (55).

In “Is it Foolish to be an Old Maid from Choice?” Brittain reiterates her thesis that a woman “wants, exactly as a man does, to have the *best* of two worlds” and “there is no reason why she should not have it!” (740). Brittain dramatically pronounces that working mothers make “The Best Mothers”: “The children of to-morrow need the finest mothers—and one of the types best suited to motherhood is the strong, vital woman who is keen on her job.”⁵ Brittain calls for a reorganization of business and professional worlds, which she recognizes as daunting, yet she is confident that “such obstacles can be overcome, as I know from experience”—further signaling her autobiographical imperatives. Explaining how she refused to give up her career in journalism when her son was born, and that balancing work and children “means a hard life for a few years, while one’s family is young,” she thinks that “most women would rather work a little too hard for a time than feel thwarted and dependent” (741). She closes with a few suggestions for “changes that would benefit everybody”: “labour-saving houses, properly trained domestic workers, more community kitchens, laundries and well-run restaurants, more open-air nursery schools throughout the country.” She implores women to take action, stating: “changes will come if girls *demand* them, for even young women have now got the vote, and this gives them power over the nation’s policy and money.” Women must not be cowards, she warns, but “must go on asking, and not be content with the old cruel choice laid down for them by men,” emphasizing the need for self-definition and determination (772).

Brittain contends that women must have economic independence and that a key factor in obtaining time to hold down a job is for men to assume an equal share of domestic labour. In “Reform the English Home!” she puts the onus on women to stop internalizing Victorian ideologies that equate virtue with “household drudgery,” and she is dismissive of the married woman who “continues to hug her domestic chains as a protection against the struggle

to find a foothold in a critical and competitive world.” The related fear that working outside the home is harmful to one’s children is confronted in “The Child Mind. Lectures for Middle-Class Mothers,” where Brittain reports on a series of lectures given in Chelsea in 1929 by a Dr. Potts. She finds his “conclusions of modern psychology” to be a victory for mothers who work outside the home, for in lauding the healthy separation of mother and child, he alleviates many anxieties felt by the professional woman.

At the same time, Brittain’s *avant-garde* status comes in part from the attention she paid to and involvement she demanded from men. In “Bringing up a Son. Future Husbands and Fathers,” as Brittain’s son celebrates his first birthday she reflects on what she will be able to tell him about domestic politics when he turns thirteen. She is specifically determined that John will be guided by the principles of equitable parenthood: “I honestly believe that a mother can bring up her son to be a good husband and father.” In her eyes, “The good husband of the future will be the man who understands how to play the part of equal comrade to a wife” (3). While Catlin certainly encouraged Brittain professionally, his absences from home exonerated him from taking an active role in daily fathering and domesticity. Perhaps Brittain used the public forum of journalism to voice both societal and private complaints and edicts.

Conclusion: “Equality is Within Our Reach”

Heilbrun posits that Brittain “does not emerge from her *Testaments* as wholly lovable” (11). There is no doubt that in her unyielding insistence that women must not devote all their energies to children, and her flagrant assertion that professional women are the “best” mothers, Brittain alienates women around the world who deviate from her directives. Brittain fanned the early flames of a mommy war between career- and home-oriented mothers, but as Heilbrun qualifies, “A woman less controversial would have accomplished nothing that remains to us of her efforts, least of all her record of them” (11). Brittain’s extensive autobiographical record documents how her childhood desires to have the kinds of physical and intellectual freedoms unquestionably afforded to her brother and other male contemporaries, coupled with the traumatic and long-lasting impact of the First World War on her sense that her generation had been wronged, led Brittain to devote her life to challenging and changing the institutional and domestic structures of her present society in the interests of her own and future generations. Her personal and political sensibilities were profoundly shaped by maternity, specifically her overarching commitment to solving “the problem” of how a woman can achieve career-family balance.

Brittain was in the vanguard of her time but her rebel yell for familial reform rings just as loudly and urgently in our own day as well. We have heard

her warn her contemporaries that obtaining suffrage was not the endgame of feminism, and that “The crusade continues” on the frontlines of motherhood (“Why I Think”). Continue it has, for as Andrea O’Reilly observed in 2012, “motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism.”⁶

Two of our contemporaries who are trying to finish off this business are Anne-Marie Slaughter and Sheryl Sandberg. In the July/August 2012 *Atlantic* cover story “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” Slaughter, a married mother of two sons, made headlines with her confession that she quit her job as the first female director of policy planning at the State Department (2009–2011) in order to be more available to her teenage children. Having spent her career “telling young women at my lectures that you *can* have it all and do it all, regardless of what field you are in,” she concedes, “I still strongly believe that women can ‘have it all’ (and that men can too). I believe that we can ‘have it all at the same time.’ But not today, not with the way America’s economy and society are currently structured” (86–87). Because these structures continue to privilege career over family, like Brittain she calls on women and men to fight for changes in social policies that will make work-family balance feasible. Despite resigning from her Washington post, Slaughter remains a Princeton University professor of politics and international affairs, continuing to negotiate her career and mothering.

So too does Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook and author of the immediately controversial *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. Addressing the fact that there are still so few women in positions of power today, Sandberg echoes Brittain when she asserts: “In addition to the external barriers erected by society, women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves. We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in” (8). Her book, which she calls “sort of a feminist manifesto” (9), is aimed at arming women with strategies to become corporate leaders and to incite them (as Brittain was wont to do) to “wage battles” (9) against both external obstacles like sexism and the lack of child care and parental leaves, and internal obstacles like women assuming they must perform the majority of domestic and child care labour. In making “the case for leaning in, for being ambitious in any pursuit,” she announces that “The time is long overdue to encourage more women to dream the possible dream and encourage more men to support women in the workforce and in the home” (10–11).

In contrast, and in part in response to Slaughter and Sandberg, Lisa Miller wrote “The Retro Wife” for the March 25, 2013 *New York* magazine, in which she explores a new breed of women, the neo-traditionalists who are “untouched” by the idea of “having it all” because they are “too busy mining their grandmothers’ old-fashioned lives for values they can appropriate like

heirlooms, then wear proudly as their own.” (These “grandmothers” are the very contemporaries whom Brittain was challenging.) Citing the ongoing balancing act of high-powered mothers like Slaughter and Sandberg, as well as of Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo who infamously went back to work just a few weeks after giving birth, Miller asks, “But what if all the fighting is just too much?”⁷ Miller wonders how to accommodate the aspirations of the more average or typical woman, asking: “what if a woman doesn’t have Sandberg-Slaughter-Mayer-[and we might add Brittain-] level ambition but a more modest amount that neither drives nor defines her?” Miller focuses on the stance adopted by countless middle-class women for whom feminism “has fizzled, its promise only half-fulfilled.” In response to this failure, many feminists have taken a step back in time, as Miller’s investigations lead her to identify a group who “offer a silent rejoinder to Sandberg’s manifesto, raising the possibility that the best way for some mothers (and their loved ones) to have a happy life is to make home their highest achievement” (22-23).

Intersecting and contentious issues about maternity, careers, and child-care have been dominating political, economic, and cultural discourses since the early twentieth century. Like Brittain before them, Sandberg, Slaughter, and others tap into the zeitgeist of maternal anxiety, confusion, and choice, producing wildly divisive reactions by readers and mothers eager to define and query what it means to be a so-called “modern” and “good” mother. From Brittain’s time on, mommy wars have been particularly middle-class battles. Brittain’s activism extended to lower- or working-class families--as when she writes about birth control, domestic wages, and infant and maternal mortality and welfare—but her focus and point of reference remained professionally-oriented women of the middle classes like herself. Today, Hays qualifies that her study is grounded in middle-class conceptions of parenting because “the model of the white, native-born middle class has long been, and continues to be, the most powerful, visible, and self-consciously articulated” one (21). Slaughter specifies that her article is directed at her demographic of “highly educated, well-off women who are privileged enough to have choices in the first place. We may not have choices about whether to do paid work, as dual incomes have become indispensable. But we have choices about the type and tempo of the work we do” (89). Slaughter and Sandberg seem to represent opposite sides of the careerist coin: Slaughter recounts her decisions leading up to and the consequences following her “decision to step down from a position of power—to value family over professional advancement, even for a time” (87), while Sandberg encourages women to step *up* and *into* those positions of power. Of course, Slaughter remains a prestigious Princeton academic and so clearly did not “step down” too far.

Brittain refused to forego her career for her two children or husband and

instead spent decades advocating for societal, political, and economic changes so that women should never be called on to make professional sacrifices in the name of maternal ideals or to accept that a woman's only option was to choose between them, goals shared by Slaughter and Sandberg. Sandberg describes, "When the suffragettes marched in the streets, they envisioned a world where men and women would be truly equal. A century later, we are still squinting, trying to bring that vision into focus" (5). She adds, "It is time for us to face the fact that our revolution has stalled" (7). While there are countless reasons to account for this slow-down—inhospitable working environments for mothers, media-driven supermom myths, and a culturally permissive disengagement of fathers, to name a few—we can look back to Brittain for evidence of what the revolution was, and towards Slaughter and Sandberg for what it continues to be.

Brittain's feminism was played out between the two main camps of the 1920s and 30s, described by Beddoe as "old" versus "new" feminism: the former group "regarded feminism as being about equal rights and were therefore opposed to any form of special protective legislation for women in the workplace"; the latter "concentrated on the special position of women as mothers; their platform was primarily the welfare of women at home and the main aim of the new feminists was to bring about 'family endowment', or family allowances" (136). These camps were grounded to a significant extent in class differences: "new" feminism offered gains to working-class women while "old" feminism appealed to middle-class women in or seeking careers (139). Brittain—and Holtby—were "old" feminists driven by the ideal of "Equality First," but biographers Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge qualify that Brittain "remained a moderate," sympathetic to "new" feminist initiatives to provide not only family allowances but also access to birth control information and training in mothercraft, for instance; "pragmatic and independent, [she] refused to become involved in any of the disputes which threatened the larger interests of feminism" (177).

Brittain articulated a family politics grounded in her ongoing conflation of home and state. She insisted that the health and progress of her present and future generations are predicated not only on the ability of mothers to maintain their careers but also on the achievement of gender equality on domestic and professional levels. Sandberg concurs: "The gender wars need an immediate and lasting peace. True equality will be achieved only when we *all* fight the stereotypes that hold us back" (168). Our goal—as was Brittain's—should be the elimination of gender, creating a "world where those social norms no longer exist. If more children see fathers at school pickups and mothers who are busy at jobs, both girls and boys will envision more options for themselves. Expectations will not be set by gender but by personal passion, talents, and interests" (169). Sandberg insists, "We are a new generation and we need a new approach" (160).

We are definitely “a new generation,” but as the life and writings of Brittain prove, the approach we need today resembles the one she promoted nearly a century ago. In not only encouraging but zealously demanding that mothers find meaningful work beyond children and homemaking; in emphasizing the need for and outlining proposals for child care, day-nurseries, flexible hours and maternity leave; and demanding increased participating by fathers, Brittain was one of the most vocal advocates for work-family reform. She exemplifies one version of what scholars refer to as feminist and empowered motherhood,⁸ terms deriving from Adrienne Rich’s now-classic distinction in her 1976 *Of Woman Born* between “two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.” Of the latter she expands, “for most of what we know as the ‘mainstream’ of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (13). She clarifies that her study “is not an attack on the family or on mothering, *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*” (14). Rich claims that she and her husband became “outlaws” from institutional motherhood (195). O’Reilly draws on Rich in defining feminist motherhood: “A feminist practice/theory of mothering ... functions as a counter narrative of motherhood: it seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women” (2007, 796).

As a feminist mother, Brittain used her textual spaces to achieve outlaw status from the domestic realm, anticipating Slaughter by leaning *away* from the kitchen table and leaning *in* to the professional sphere. Just as Brittain envisioned the future for John, Shirley and their generation, so Sandberg ends her book by looking “toward the world I want for all children—and my own. My greatest hope is that my son and my daughter will be able to choose what to do with their lives without external or internal obstacles slowing them down or making them question their choices” (172). Slaughter contends that by “changing social policies and bending career tracks to accommodate” the choices of women, “We’ll create a better society in the process” not just for women but for men (102). So Brittain assures her readers at the end *Testament of Youth* that “however stubborn any domestic problem, a lasting solution could be found if only men and women would seek it together” (602). Heilbrun states that in her *Testaments*, Brittain “described her refusal to live by any of the accepted scripts for women’s lives. Those professional young women who today have children and work can find in her story a pattern for that brave undertaking” (4). Slaughter acknowledges, “I owe my own freedoms and opportunities to the pioneering generation of women ahead of me” (89), while Sandberg is hopeful that “The hard work of generations before us means that equality is within our

reach” (171). Sandberg and Slaughter, along with anyone seeking career-family balance—like me, an English professor and mother of two—could agree with Brittain that successful autobiography is “revolutionary enough to change the thinking of an epoch” (“Autobiography” 190). Buttressed by Brittain’s texts, we are poised today on the threshold, leaning towards the future of our epoch.

¹For example, see Ardis and Lewis, Benstock, Hanscombe and Smyers, and Scott.

²All quotations from Brittain’s journalism are from the Vera Brittain Archive, William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Series G, and identified in the Works Cited as VBA. I extend my gratitude to the Library for generously granting me permission to quote the material.

³Catlin asked to remain anonymous. See Gorham 188.

⁴For a detailed discussion of this debate, see Gorham 149-165; Berry and Bostridge 272-279.

⁵Here and elsewhere Brittain reveals her class biases as she advocated for eugenic birth control to ensure the “finest flowers” of humanity. In her article “Our Malthusian Middle Classes,” for example, she argues that middle-class parents should be financially stable before having children in order to be able to provide the best for them; “How else, save by children brought up in decency and order, and nourished upon the beauty and affection which complete control of circumstances alone makes possible, are we to leaven the national lump of mediocrity and inefficiency?”

⁶O’Reilly made this statement during her opening remarks for the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement (MIRCI) Conference, Mothers and History: Histories of Motherhood, Toronto, on May 10, 2012.

⁷Mayer’s decision generated the expected controversy. See for example “The Pregnant CEO: Should You Hate Marissa Mayer?” in which Amy Keyishian states, “Ye Olde Mommy Wars are triggered again.” Keyishian challenges detractors to support Mayer, as she does, for Keyishian views her as taking a courageous stand which proves “Every mom is a warrior in one way or another.” *Forbes.com*. 19 July 2012.

⁸See for instance Green, Gordon, and O’Reilly (2004, 2007).

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