Abstract

In her now famous essay, ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1928), Virginia Woolf bemoaned the paucity of woman-centred experience as represented in English literary history: ‘I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends.’ This paper will argue that Somerville and Ross’s fin de siècle novel, The Silver Fox (1897), concerns itself with interrogating the social origins of this imbalance, or what the novel calls ‘theories of womanhood’, and not only attempts to portray the successful emergence of female friendship, but explicitly politicizes that friendship and delves into the socio-political contexts which have hitherto prohibited, or made difficult, the flourishing of such female relations.

Somerville and Ross’s fourth novel is set amidst the political and cultural tension between nineteenth-century English imperial ambition, and the private and social traditions of the native Irish. The three leading female characters in the novel are arguably brought together in friendship via their common social plight as women against the predatory sexual attentions of the novel’s central male character, as well as in their eventual refusal to participate in the novel’s prevailing cultural and political divisions. Ethical and political discourses in Western philosophy and literature have long privileged male friendship within a political context, but female friendship has largely been discounted from the fraternal bonds which such writers and thinkers have aligned with the founding of nation states and political communities, as well as the quest for self-identity and the source of moral awareness. This paper will interrogate the representation of women in The Silver Fox and argue that the friendship between these women enables what Janice Raymond has termed ‘a politically affective state of being.’

This paper will thus finally argue that the coming together of Slaney Morris, Lady Susan, and Maria Quinn, is emblematic of the potential political muscle of female friendship and solidarity, and (even if only temporarily) moves to one side the national and class divisions which dominate the rest of the novel and its tragedies. The novel foregrounds, instead, female relationships as the site of political and cultural healing. Towards the end of the novel, the repaired