

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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Sylvia Townsend Warner*

How to cite: Warner, S.T. '*Lolly Willowes*: The Berg Collection Manuscript'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2022(1), pp. 3–8 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.22.1.02>.

Published: 7 July 2023

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This is a reprint of a manuscript originally found in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

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Abstract

The article gives a brief account of the manuscript of *Lolly Willowes* in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library and of Warner's process of revising it for publication. Two extracts from the manuscript follow, the first from the beginning of the novel, and the second from Laura's dialogue with Satan near the end.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; *Lolly Willowes*; textual revision; manuscript study; the Berg Collection.

Editor's note: One of the most fascinating items among Warner's manuscripts is a handsome exercise book containing the 280 handwritten pages of her original manuscript of Lolly Willowes, together with her longhand revisions. She first sent this to her publisher Charles Prentice on 25 February 1925. Following his acceptance of the novel for Chatto & Windus, she asked him on 4 March 1925 to return the manuscript so that she could make some revisions, incorporated in due course into the book as published in 1926. It was eventually presented to the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, where it can be found today. It includes a great many revisions but does not represent the final text of the novel. Warner has written on the cover sheet 'Lolly Willowes / Written in London, / c. 1923–1925. / Sylvia Townsend Warner'.

We do not have many such detailed specimens of Warner revising her own work, and this is a document of the first interest. A proper investigation

of the manuscript would make an excellent project for a critical edition or a doctoral thesis. It includes a wealth of revelatory glimpses of the writer at work. It shows, for instance, the care and imagination she gave to names and locations. The novel's *Fancy Willowes*, to take one example, was at first the less fanciful *Marion Willowes*, and then became *Nancy*, with both names crossed through; and *Fancy's* second husband started as *Mr Rhys-Thomson*, then became *Mr Woolf Saunders*, and then the *Woolf* lost an 'o' and gained the werewolf-like hyphenation to end up as *Mr Wolf-Saunders*. *Aunt Salome* started as *Sabina*, a little anomalously for an Englishwoman (Warner's very English *Willowes* clan is frequently touched by cosmopolitan influences), but not so spectacularly blasphemous by association as *Salome*. *Salome's* father *Titus* was originally *Ephraim* before his name took a colouring from the only well-known English *Titus*, the wildly and variously scandalous figure of *Titus Oates*. *Laura's* Roman-sounding great-uncle *Constantine* became more Greek when Warner changed him to great-uncle *Demetrius*. Among the locations, *Henry and Caroline's* London residence changes from *Porchester Terrace* to the even grander and more Wellingtonian *Apsley Terrace*; while the florist's sister lived at *Amersham* before Warner moved her to *Chenies*, with its suggestion of an etymology from the French word for an oak tree, 'chêne'. Warner also tried out various ideas for the birth dates of the *Willowes* clan. *Laura's* grandfather *Henry* was at first born in 1824 until this date was crossed out and replaced by 1818. She considered the years 1858, 1864 and 1866 for the year of *Henry's* birth before settling on 1867; corresponding earlier thoughts for *James* were 1864, 1865 and 1867 (1869 in the book), and for *Laura* 1866 (1874 in the book). *Laura* and her siblings are made a little more modern, while the sisters *Larpen* go in the other, more Victorian direction (they are 68 and 64 years old in the manuscript, and 73 and 69 in the book). And the manuscript's *Satan* reads *Rimbaud*.

Two excerpts are given below. First, the start of the novel, and second, a much-revised and eventually expanded passage of *Laura's* dialogue with *Satan* near the end. The first excerpt corresponds to pp. 3–6 of the 2021 Penguin Modern Classics edition (or pp. 1–6 of the original Chatto & Windus edition and the Virago reprint). The second one is an earlier version of the passage starting on p. 149 of the Penguin Modern Classic edition and ending on p. 153 (pp. 229–34 of the Chatto and Virago editions). The two extracts together complement the excerpt that was published in the 2001 *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (pp. 32–3), showing the original ending which Warner revised following suggestions from *Charles Prentice*.

1. *The opening of the novel (pp. 1–5 of the numbered manuscript).*

When her father died Laura Willowes went to live in London with her elder brother and his family.

‘Of course – said Caroline – you will come to us.’

‘But it will upset all your plans. It will give you so much trouble. Are you sure you really want me?’

‘Oh dear, yes.’

Caroline spoke warmly, but her thoughts were elsewhere. They had already journeyed back to London to buy an eiderdown for the bed in the small spare-room. If the washstand were moved towards the door would it be possible to fit in a little writing-table between it and the fire-place? Perhaps a bureau would be better because of the extra drawers. Of course, that was it. Lolly could bring the yellow walnut bureau with the false handles on one side, and the top that jumped up when you touched the spring by the inkwell. It had belonged to Lolly’s mother, and Lolly had always used it, so Sibyl could not raise any objections. Sibyl had no claim to it whatever, really. She had only been married to James for two years, and if the bureau had marked the morning-room wallpaper she could easily put something else in its place. A stand with ferns and potted plants would look very nice.

Lolly was a gentle creature, and the girls loved her. She would soon fit into her new home. Of course the small spare-room would be rather a loss. She could not give up the large spare-room to Lolly, and the small spare-room was the handier of the two for ordinary visitors. It seemed extravagant to wash a pair of the large linen sheets for a single guest who came but for a night or two. Still, there it was, and Henry was right: Lolly ought to come to *them*.

London would be a pleasant change for her. She would meet nice people, and in London she would have a better chance of marrying. Lolly was twenty-eight. She would have to make haste if she were going to find a husband before she was thirty. How strange it would feel to get married at thirty, where one had grown used to one’s own ways! (I do not think – thought Caroline Willowes in parenthesis – that I should have liked getting married at thirty.) Poor Lolly, black was not becoming to her. She looked sallow, and her pale grey eyes were paler and more surprising than ever underneath that very unbecoming black mushroom hat. Mourning was never satisfactory if one bought it in a country town.

While these thoughts passed through Caroline’s mind Laura was not thinking at all. She had picked a red geranium flower, and was staining

her left wrist with the juice from its crushed petals. So, when she was younger, she had stained her pale cheeks, and had bent over the greenhouse tank to see what she looked like. But the greenhouse tank showed only a dark shadowy Laura, very dark and smooth, like the lady in the old holy painting that hung in the dining-room and was called the Leonardo.

‘The girls will be delighted’ said Caroline. Laura roused herself. It was all settled then, and she was going to live in London with Henry, and Caroline his wife, and Fancy and Marion, his daughters. She would be an inmate of the tall house in Porchester Terrace where hitherto she had only been a country sister-in-law on a visit. She would know without hesitation which of the polished brown doors was which, and become quite accustomed to the position of the cistern, which had baffled her so on that night when she lay awake and tried to arrange the house inside the box of its outer walls. She would recognize a special something in the physiognomy of that house-front which would enable her to stop certainly before it without glancing at the number or the door-knocker. She would watch the children on their ponies and the fashionable trim ladies in Rotten Row, and go to the theatre in a cab.

London life was very full and exciting. There were the shops, processions of the Royal Family and of the unemployed, the gold tunnel at Whiteleys, and the brilliance of the streets at night. She thought of the street-lamps in their rows and felt abashed before their scrutiny. Each in turn would hand her on, her and her shadow, as she walked through those streets, and in time she would take them and the man with the long pole who kindled them for granted. But in London there would be no greenhouse with glossy tank, and no apple-room, and no potting-shed, earthy and warm, with bunches of poppy heads hanging from the ceiling, and sunflower seeds in a wooden box, and bulbs in thick paper bags, and lavender drying on a tea-tray. She must leave all this behind, or only see it as a visitor. Unless James and Sibyl happened to feel like Henry and Caroline, that of course she must live with *them*.

Sibyl said:

‘Dearest Laura! So Henry and Caroline are to have you ... We shall miss you more than I can say, but of course you will prefer London. Dear old London with its picturesque fogs and the Symphony concerts and all. How I envy you your thrills! But you mustn’t quite forsake Lady Place. You must come and pay us long visits, so that Tito doesn’t forget his aunt.’

‘Will you miss me, Tito?’ said Laura, and stooped down to lay her face against his prickly bib and his smooth warm head. Tito fastened his hands round her finger.

'I'm sure he'll miss your ring, Laura.' said Sibyl. 'You'll have to cut the rest of your teeth on the poor old coral when Auntie Lolly goes, won't you, my angel?'

'I'll give him the ring if you think he'll really miss it, Sibyl.'

Sibyl's eyes glowed: but she said – 'Oh no, Lolly. I couldn't think of taking it. Why, it's a family ring.'

When Fancy Willowses had grown up, and married, and lost her husband in the war, and driven a lorry for the government, and married again from patriotic motives, she said to Owen Woolf Saunders her second husband:

'How unenterprising women were in the old days! Look at Aunt Lollie. Grandfather left her five hundred a year and she was nearly thirty when he died, and yet she could find nothing better to do than to settle down with Mum and Dad, and stay there ever since.'

2. From Laura's final dialogue with Satan (pp. 268–71 of the numbered manuscript)

Laura felt a momentary embarrassment. She had long wished for a reasonable conversation with her Master, but now that her wish seemed about to be granted, she felt rather at a loss for an opening. At last she observed.

'Titus has gone.'

'I thought he would. Clever young men don't really like the country, except to write poems about. Titus will write his poems much better in Bloomsbury.'

'I think you misjudge him a little.' Now that Titus was gone, Laura began to defend her dear. 'Titus is really fond of the country. All the Willowses are. Except perhaps my brother Henry –'

'Your brother Henry has never come my way.'

'– and the poems aren't so bad. At any rate they are quite plain faced poems.'

'Of course I prefer Rimbaud,' observed Satan. Laura had never heard of Rimbaud, so she went on with Titus:

'Not that I think they matter. I'm sure he ought to breed. Will he never go back to Lady Place?'

'In about ten years time. Till then, London, with dips into the country.'

Laura shot a glance at her companion. He answered her thought.

'I think you were unduly alarmed.'

'Then -?'

'Perhaps I did take a slight advantage of your distress. Do you very much mind?'

Laura went round that question. She said: 'In that case you owe me some amends. Satisfy my curiosity. Tell me about yourself.'

'Tell me first what *you* think,' he answered.

'I think -' she began cautiously (while he hid his cards it would not do to show all hers). 'I think you are a kind of Black Knight, riding about and succouring distressed gentlewomen.'

'There are warlocks too, remember.'

'I can't take warlocks so seriously, not as a class. It is we witches who count. We have more need of you. Women have such vivid imaginations, and lead such dull lives. Their pleasure in life is so soon over. They are so dependent upon others, and their dependence so soon becomes a nuisance. Do you understand?'

He was silent. She continued, slowly, knitting her brows in the effort to make clear to herself and him the thought that was in her mind.

'It's like this. When I think of witches, I seem to see all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded. I see them, wives and sisters of respectable men, chapel members, and blacksmiths, and small farmers and Puritans.'

From the manuscript in The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.