"Our life stories are not wholly love stories": Redefining Romance and Spinsterhood in Winifred Holtby's Interwar Novel *South Riding*

Anke van Zijverden

9492275

MA Literature Today (English Track)

Supervisor: Dr Paul Bijl

Second Reader: Dr Saskia Bultman

30 June 2024

Words: 10994

"We must do it ourselves … we are our own redeemers. Accept nothing; be resigned to nothing; refuse to make the best out of a bad bargain" (Holtby, *SR* 170).

"I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I'm going to spin" (51).

Fig. 1. Tara Moore, "Collage of a woman with wool coming from face", 14 February 2020

Abstract

This thesis analyses the defence of spinsterhood in Winifred Holtby's novel *South Riding: An English Landscape* (1936) in connection to its criticism of interwar popular romance fiction that prioritised marriage for women. During the 1930s, the reassertion of traditional gender roles, the shifting attention of feminism away from spinsterhood and the emergence of new theories within psychology and sexology on the negative psychological influence of spinsterhood complicated the spinster's position within society. As a result, these women were stereotypically presented as anomalous, mentally thwarted and marginal figures within literature. Particularly, popular romance fiction that emerged during the 1930s overtly focused on marriage for women and subsequently perpetuated the negative discourse around spinsters. Despite the significant critical engagement with elements of romance in *South Riding*, the influence of the popular romance genre has been largely neglected in previous research on the novel. Until now, literary scholars have mainly placed Holtby within the context of middlebrow fiction and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), ignoring her novel's immediate intertextual and social relationship with the burgeoning popular romance novel of the 1930s and its influence, of which Holtby herself was highly aware. This thesis therefore analyses Holtby's engagement with popular romance fiction in *South Riding* and argues that as a feminist, writer and reformer Holtby challenges the stereotypical portrayal of spinsterhood in interwar literature by subverting its conventions. In this manner, Holtby foregrounds that "[o]ur life stories are not wholly love stories", undermining the importance of the popular romance narrative that prioritises marriage and pathologizes spinsters.

Table of contents

1. Introduction 6

1.1 Interwar Popular Romance Fiction and South Riding *in Previous Research* 8

1.2 Unmarried Women and The Legend of the Frustrated Spinster 10

1.3 The Interwar Spinster in Previous Research 12

1.4 Winifred Holtby: A Frustrated Feminist 13

1.5 Methodology and Structure 14

2. A Spinster in Sunder: Winifred Holtby as a Journalist and Author 16

2.1 Writer or Reformer: Holtby's Personal Balance Between Politics and Art 17

2.2 An Unmarried Journalist: Holtby's Response to the Single Woman Question 18

3. Subverting the Spinster-Stereotype: Winifred Holtby's Vindication of Spinsterhood in *South Riding* 23

3.1 The Interwar Spinster Stereotype 24

3.2 The Sexually Attractive Spinster of South Riding 25

3.3 The Sane Spinster Imitates the Insane Spouse 27

3.4 The Anomalous Spinster Teacher 29

4. Reclaiming Romance for Spinsters: Winifred Holtby's Subversion of the Popular Marriage Plot 31

4.1 Middle-class versus Working-class: The Interwar Romance Reader 31

4.2 Interwar Popular Romance Fiction 33

4.3 An Analysis of Popular Romance Conventions in South Riding 34

4.4 Avoiding the Happy Ending for an Insistent Romance Audience 37

5. Conclusion 40

Works cited 43

1. **Introduction**

> Until about fifty years ago it was taken for granted that the only important thing that could happen to a woman was a good man's proposal of marriage and its consequences. Even now, our romancers, always fifty years or so behind the time, still cherish this belief. … love must remain one of the strongest forces in our life. One—but not the only one … There are more ingredients than love in the real-life happy-ending, and our romancers would tell more convincing stories if they paid greater attention to these. (Holtby, "There is Too Much Talk About Romance" 8)

In the article "There is Too Much Talk About Romance", published in the *Daily Herald* in 1930, Winifred Holtby challenges interwar society's narrowmindedness regarding women's destinies and its perpetuation in romance fiction. During the 1930s, mass-market formula romance fiction emerged as a popular genre in Great Britain (Dixon 35). These novels characteristically ended happily in marriage (27). In this manner, romance fiction perpetuated the interwar ideology of domesticity that prioritised marriage and motherhood for women. Even though the 1930s are frequently perceived as a period of political, legal and social change for women due to feminist developments towards gender equality, the end of the First World War was also marked by a return to traditional gender roles in search for stability (Kershaw & Kimgyongür 5). As a result, women outside of the heterosexual paradigm, such as spinsters, were perceived as anomalous and forced to reside at the margins of society. Moreover, the heightened interest in psychology and sexuality at the time increased the anxiety around unmarried women (Oram 414). These negative connotations were frequently voiced in literary fiction, presenting the spinster as a stereotypically odd or grotesque figure at the margins of the narrative (Liggins 2). Winifred Holtby, one of the key feminist reformers in Interwar Britain, challenged this portrayal of spinsterhood in her novels as well as in her journalistic writing, redefining the spinsters' place within society and

foregrounding their individual potential. In her final ‘spinster novel’, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (1936), Holtby engages with the status of the spinster in interwar society by centring its romantic subplot around Sarah Burton, a middle-aged spinster teacher who challenges the traditional destiny of unmarried women.

Previous research on the romance narrative in *South Riding* focuses mostly on the intertextual references to elements of romance in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Holtby’s direct inspiration as made explicit within the text (Holtby, *SR* 126). This thesis, however, will provide a new perspective on *South Riding* by focusing specifically on the influence of popular romance fiction on Holtby’s defence of spinsterhood. It explores Holtby’s subversion of the interwar popular romance conventions, foregrounding the absence of a betrothal at the end of the novel. Furthermore, it will discuss the debate surrounding the spinster in interwar fiction and answer the research question: How do the conventions of interwar popular romance fiction employed intertextually in *South Riding* enhance Holtby’s defence of spinsterhood? As Marion Shaw asserts in the introduction to the latest edition of the novel, the narrative of *South Riding* is focused on the destinies of women and “placed squarely in contemporary time”, providing detailed political commentary on dominant gender structures in interwar society (xii). Crucially, it explores the development of a middle-aged spinster at the centre of an unstable society that is divided between traditional Victorian values and modernity. In this manner, Holtby challenges interwar society’s overt focus on romantic relationships and marriage, as influenced by popular romance narratives, and questions the new psychological theories that suppose the spinster’s deteriorating mental state due to celibacy. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to reveal that Holtby’s *South Riding* challenges both the stereotypical portrayal of spinsterhood and the importance of marriage within popular romance fiction by subverting its rather conservative conventions.

1.1 Interwar Popular Romance Fiction and South Riding *in Previous Research*

The influence of interwar popular romance fiction on *South Riding*'s feminist tone regarding spinsterhood has been largely neglected in previous research on the novel. In her PhD dissertation *'Men who are Men and Women Who are Women': Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in the Work of Winifred Holtby* (2005), for instance, Lisa Regan argues that Holtby actually steers away from "low-brow" romance novels and, instead, relies mostly on the "middle-brow" romance narrative of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (105). *Jane Eyre*, however, is considered one of the most influential precursors for the formulaic popular romance novel (Schaff 25). Moreover, in her journalistic writing on literary values, Holtby does not consistently distinguish between the "different types of novels on the high-to-lowbrow scale" that emerged during the 1930s (Ewins 255). Instead, she was interested in multiple widely read genres (254) and generally considered reading formative to "what we are and how we live" (255). For *South Riding*, Holtby employs the conventions of popular romance fiction to establish the romantic subplot between Sarah Burton and Robert Carne. By excluding its typical happy ending, the protagonist's betrothal, Holtby undermines the genre's dominant focus on marriage and provides a sustainable alternative for spinsters.

Furthermore, Holtby uniquely questions the ideology of domesticity that prioritises marriage for women by placing Sarah, a spinster, within an alternative romantic narrative. This thesis therefore takes a different position from Wendy Gan, who argues that Holtby's defence of spinsterhood in *South Riding* is contradicted by the recurring emphasis on romance and marriage for the unmarried protagonist (202). This supposed "backward glance", she argues, facilitates the spinster's marginal position and "undermine[s] her more radical potential" outside of heterosexual structures (203). Gan sets out three different spinster characters that were prevalent in interwar literature: 1) a 'false' spinster who eventually marries at the end of the narrative; 2) a marginalised spinster who is often a pathetic side-

character that facilitates the main character's romantic engagement; and 3) a reinvented spinster who is interested in endeavours outside of marriage (209-210). Instead of providing an alternative narrative outside of the dominant heterosexual structures, Gan argues, Sarah Burton's narrative in *South Riding* focuses overtly on romance, falling into the first category of spinsterhood for most of the novel (215). This thesis, however, will argue that *South Riding* actually provides a more nuanced portrayal of spinsterhood by relying on romantic elements for the defence of Sarah's position as an unmarried woman. Instead of disregarding romance and creating a reinvented spinster at the margins of society, Holtby criticises the importance of marriage in literature from within, carving out a place for spinsters at its centre. By following the marriage plot as set out in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the conventions of popular romance fiction for the relationship between Sarah and Carne yet subverting its key elements to ensure a positive alternative outcome for the spinster-protagonist, *South Riding* challenges the spinster's position in a patriarchal society that considers marriage essential for women.

Holtby, a progressive author and reformer, additionally criticises the focus on romance and marriage within romance fiction in *South Riding*, since the influence of widely read genres such as these may be "ephemeral" (Holtby qtd. in Ewins 253) yet "deeply formative" (Ewins 253). As Kristin Ewins asserts, Holtby was particularly interested in novels read by the middle-classes, who encompassed most of the "novel reading public", because "the social and ethical values of the great middle-classes" were based on the social and ethical values of these narratives (Holtby qtd. in Ewins 254). Novels, in this manner, were central to the construction of femininity and domesticity in interwar society. In *South Riding*, Holtby engages with the conventions of popular romance novels as a subplot to challenge these ideals and reinforce the autonomy of spinsters. Instead of focusing on the intertextuality of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *South Riding*, as exemplified by Regan and other literary scholars, this

thesis therefore specifically explores the influence of popular romance fiction on Holtby's defence of spinsterhood within the novel.

1.2 Unmarried Women and The Legend of the Frustrated Spinster

From the 1850s onwards, the figure of the spinster became increasingly perceived as an incomplete, anomalous and unnatural outcast in British society. In 1851, the British government issued a census which, for the first time, established the presence of 405.000 more women than men in Great Britain (Greg 14). The position of these 'surplus' women, who could not fulfil their "natural duties" of servicing men according to Victorian ideals (2), became highly debated in society as well as in literature during this period. The nineteenth-century essayist William Rathbone Greg, for instance, described their presence in his essay "Why are Women Redundant?" (1869) as a "problem to be solved, the evil and anomaly to be cured" (11). He drastically proposed the organised mass emigration of these 'excess' women in order to restore the balance of Britain's population (17). The debate around the figure of the spinster developed and continued throughout the following decades, reaching new heights during the 1930s due to the First World War, which further destabilised gender structures and instigated a return to conservative Victorian sexual politics.

As mentioned previously, the end of the war marked a return to traditional gender roles that negatively influenced the perception of spinsterhood, which was magnified by the heightened interest in psychology and sexuality (Oram 414). Whereas the Victorian spinster was judged regarding her superfluous status within society, the interwar spinster was criticised based on her mental state and "personal value" (422). Novel theories within sexology regarded marriage, motherhood and heterosexual intercourse as crucial for women's psychological happiness, which was an unattainable condition for spinsters according to society's definition of spinsterhood (414). These theories were collectively designated as "the

legend of the Frustrated Spinster" by Holtby in her feminist history *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934), outlining the connection that was made between the supposed celibacy of spinsters and their insanity (125). Especially, the middle-aged old maid or maiden aunt, who was already less culturally visible, since she had long failed to fulfil the traditional gender roles that were set out for women, now additionally became seen as threatening, frigid and mentally thwarted as a result of her divergence (Liggins 209).

Within interwar literature, particularly with the rise of popular romance fiction, the spinster became frequently marginalised. As Jay Dixon emphasises in the "History of English romance novels, 1621-1975," after the war, the meaning of "romance" and "romantic" in literature evolved to signify love stories that ended happily in marriage (27). This resulted in a shifting focus towards married women and mothers within popular romance fiction. The continuing social debate around spinsterhood, however, also instigated a surge of critical writing on the status of middle-aged unmarried women in interwar British society, which resulted in the frequent designation of this period as "the age of the spinster" (Adam 59). The criticism became apparent in journalistic writing as well as in literary and popular fictional works (e.g. Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935)). The ambiguity of the spinster in literature revolved around her marginal position that allowed for a certain degree of freedom and the perception of the spinster as a sexually deviant and consequently threatening figure. Various female authors explored this tension in their works (e.g. Winifred Holtby, Winifred Watson and Vera Brittain), focusing on the individuality of the spinster and her potential outside of conventional gender structures, thus attempting to transform her representation in literature and ultimately her position within society.

1.3 The Interwar Spinster in Previous Research

Several scholars have researched the position of the spinster in Interwar Britain and her representation in literature. In *The Spinster and her Enemies* (1985), Sheila Jeffreys argues that the issue of spinsterhood gradually became secondary within feminist politics during the 1930s due to the introduction of sexology (95). She asserts that while spinsterhood was a significant topic for suffrage feminism and was considered a deliberate political decision that was made in response to the conditions of marriage; or, as Christabel Pankhurst defined it, "sex-slavery", the emergence of this new science undermined the spinster's position in the 1930s (89). By prioritising women's sexual activity, feminists marginalised spinsters and shifted their focus towards married women instead. Moreover, spinsters were attacked within feminism as celibacy was considered damaging to women's "health, happiness, social usefulness and mental capacity", posing them as a threat to society (96). Alison Oram, however, challenges this reading in her article "Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses" (1992) by emphasising that sexology simultaneously fuelled the debate on the spinster's position (418). During the interwar period, feminists became divided between New feminists and Old feminists, respectively focusing on marriage and motherhood versus spinsterhood (418). Additionally, despite the renewed centrality of the marriage plot in literature, feminist authors maintained to provide alternative readings of spinsterhood and riot against their marginalisation (428). In this manner, the discussion around spinsters became more complex with the introduction of sexology and subsequently remained a topic of discussion in British society as well as in literature, exemplified by authors such as Holtby.

1.4 Winifred Holtby: A Frustrated Feminist

As part of the feminist organisation Six Point Group and a director of its journal *Time and Tide*, Holtby became a key figure of progressive politics within the feminist community in Interwar Britain. She was one of the first women to graduate with a degree in history from Somerville College at the University of Oxford. Here, she encountered fellow author and lifelong friend Vera Brittain, who supported the posthumous publication of *South Riding*. During her career as an author, Holtby also wrote the first critical biography of Virginia Woolf; *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (1932). Her interest in and connection to other feminist authors greatly influenced her own writing career, focusing on feminist issues and their representation in literary fiction. As Patsy Stoneman emphasises, Holtby frequently relies on the conventions of literary realism, since knowledge of “the real world [is] essential for moral and social improvement” (140). Particularly in *South Riding*, Holtby finds a balance between her knowledge of literary conventions and progressive politics, producing both “a mirror” for interwar British society “and a grammar for the human heart” (Holtby qtd. in Regan, “Introduction” 2).

South Riding became Holtby’s final and most celebrated novel as it provided a quintessential portrayal of local British society and reflected on contemporary (feminist) issues. The novel is set in the fictional landscape of South Riding, based on the East Riding of Yorkshire, and explores the politics of its local government. The communities’ norms are challenged with the arrival of Sarah Burton, a middle-aged spinster teacher who opposes the negative perception of spinsterhood and sets out to introduce her feminist ideals within this rural environment. In this process, she is faced with the views of conservative characters that are projected onto her and the other women within the community. Additionally, she is involved in a brief romantic relationship with Robert Carne, a local conservative farmer. Besides being praised as a prolific journalist, Holtby’s fictional works thus also reflect her

political commentary regarding feminist issues such as the marginalisation of spinsters and society's retrogressive emphasis on romance and marriage.

During the writing process of *South Riding*, Holtby highlighted the continuing tension between her political activism and her literary works in a letter to fellow women's rights activist Lady Margaret Rhondda: "I shall never make up my mind whether to be a reformer-sort-of-person or a writer-sort-of-person" ("Some Letters" 470). This emphasises how her progressive political engagement as a journalist regarding the gender imbalance during this period permeates her fictional works. As an unmarried woman herself, Holtby frequently engaged with the anomalous figure of the spinster. In her spinster novels, *The Crowded Street* (1924), *Poor Caroline* (1931) and *South Riding*, Holtby defies the marginalisation of spinsters as determined by Victorian ideals. *South Riding* particularly questions the negative discourse around spinsterhood and romance, foregrounded in the novel's heroine Sarah who, similar to Holtby, "believed in action … [s]he believed in fighting … [who] had unlimited confidence in the power of the human intelligence and will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom" (Holtby, *SR* 49), which emphasises the political responsibility that is apparent throughout Holtby's works.

1.5 Methodology and Structure

This thesis will investigate Holtby's defence of spinsterhood through her attack on popular romance fiction by placing *South Riding* in the historical and literary context of the 1930s, focusing specifically on the frequent negative portrayal of unmarried women. It will do so through close reading of literary and journalistic texts, as well as historical contextualization. Since the opinions expressed in Holtby's literary works are intimately connected with those in her journalistic writing, it is crucial to analyse *South Riding* and its defence of spinsterhood within its journalistic context as well. By exploring the negative

discourse around spinsterhood and the interwar romance readers' expectations, this thesis ultimately finds that Holtby both subverts the stereotypical representation of spinsters in literature by employing the conventions of popular romance fiction and simultaneously critiques this genre by subverting its final crucial convention of betrothal.

The thesis consists of three chapters that discuss how Holtby defies the negative portrayal of spinsters as a journalist and an author. The first chapter focuses on Holtby's key feminist nonfictional account, *Women and a Changing Civilization*, and several of her short stories that engage with the spinster in Interwar Britain. Additionally, it will analyse how these texts influenced the defence of spinsterhood that Holtby presents in *South Riding*. The second chapter elaborates on how Holtby's *South Riding* subverts the stereotypical image of spinsterhood that dominated interwar literature and society, relying on concepts from spinster studies and previous research on interwar women's writing. Furthermore, it discusses the characterisation of Sarah as an alternative spinster teacher who refuses to recede into the margins of society. The third chapter, framed by popular romance fiction studies, explores the influence of popular romance fiction on Holtby's defence of spinsterhood. It foregrounds Holtby's subversion of the final, and most important, convention of popular romance fiction; the protagonist's betrothal. In this manner, she provides an alternative choice for unmarried women within the romance plot, emphasising their potential, and critiques the conservative ideals for women as presented within this genre. Lastly, this thesis will conclude with an overview of its argument and provide suggestions for further research.

2. A Spinster in Sunder: Winifred Holtby as a Journalist and Author

Holtby's fiction and journalistic writing both propose an alternative, more nuanced, position for spinsters in interwar society and critically assess the popular romance genre. As a feminist, journalist and author, Holtby's writing is embedded in the cultural and political debates of her time. She contributes mostly to the agenda of Old Feminists, particularly focusing on spinsterhood and its representation in literature. Although several literary scholars have argued that Holtby's *South Riding* facilitates "the spinster's ambiguous place, adjacent to the heterosexual economy" (Gan 203) by relying on heterosexual romance (Sponenberg 174), in the context of her journalism it becomes apparent that Holtby's defence of spinsterhood is in fact *aided* by the inclusion of this dominant paradigm. In *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, for instance, Holtby argues that society should not categorise women based on "social tradition" but instead should consider their "individual ability" and "release their richness of variety" (192). Moreover, she asserts that society should allow for more "elasticity" (191), not reducing all humans "to the same dull pattern" of traditional gender roles. In this manner, Holtby emphasises the ability and complexity of all women, drawing spinsters from their marginal position to the centre of society. In "There is Too Much Talk About Romance" Holtby additionally emphasises that authors "would tell more convincing stories" by including other elements of women's lives besides romance (8).

South Riding, similarly, provides a nuanced image of spinsterhood and romance at the centre of its narrative, reflecting Holtby's opinions as expressed in her journalistic writing. In this chapter, I therefore expand on Regan's observation that it is crucial to analyse Holtby's journalistic pieces, particularly *Women and a Changing Civilization*, in the context of interwar feminism to determine her position as a journalist as well as an author (*Men* 33). Moreover, I suggest that a reading of her broader journalistic work on spinsters and popular

romance fiction contributes to a deeper understanding of Holtby's defence of spinsterhood in *South Riding*.

2.1 Writer or Reformer: Holtby's Personal Balance Between Politics and Art

The discussion of spinsterhood and romance in Holtby's novels is highly reflective of her journalistic opinion, as she attempted to find a balance between her identity as a *writer* and a *reformer* throughout her career. In a letter to her friend and fellow Six Point Group activist Lady Rhondda, as mentioned before, Holtby directly expresses her concern regarding this tension ("Some Letters" 470). As a result, she deeply engages with interwar political and social issues in her fictional works besides her journalism. Additionally, both her fiction and journalistic pieces are frequently based on autobiographical material (Berry & Shaw x). As a result, her fictional works can mostly be placed on the "borderline between journalism and fiction" (x). Holtby's three spinster novels, for instance, partly reflect her political engagement with the defence of single women as well as add to its main arguments. Furthermore, her affinity for the spinster narrative was informed by her own status as an unmarried woman.

The connection between Holtby's journalism and fictional works can be drawn out even further by Holtby's reliance on the conventions of Realist fiction and focus on the middle-class and lower middle-class reader. According to Holtby, Realist fiction was "the nearest thing to life" and could be employed to discuss social issues and achieve social improvement through literature (Stoneman 140). The plot of *South Riding*, for instance, discusses the domestic and political interests of a small community in England from 1932 to 1935 and, within this context, challenges its readers to reconfigure their ideas regarding the spinster figure. Furthermore, Holtby was interested in the influence of novels read by the "great middle-classes" such as social comedies, detective stories and romantic narratives,

since their social and ethical values became deeply formative for the general norms in interwar society (Ewins 254). Particularly, the connection between popular romance fiction and Holtby's *South Riding* is drawn out in her journalistic writing. In "There is Too Much Talk About Romance", for instance, Holtby questions interwar romance authors' emphasis on marriage and romantic love, inadvertently influencing the importance of these values within society (8). By focusing on the influence of popular fiction and by relying on the genre conventions of Realism, Holtby's novels are frequently designated as middlebrow novels written for a more general public. Thus, by employing elements of Realism and popular romance fiction, Holtby is able to portray contemporary political and social issues in her fictional works, such as spinsterhood, for 'the great middle-classes' in order to promote change. This approach increases the tension between Holtby's journalism and novels.

2.2 An Unmarried Journalist: Holtby's Response to the Single Woman Question

Holtby's defence of spinsterhood in fiction and journalism is frequently supported by this acute awareness of interwar literary trends and their influence on social ideals. Holtby's feminist analysis of interwar society *Women and a Changing Civilization*, in particular, challenges the marginalisation of spinsters by defying the stereotypical legend of the frustrated spinster and emphasising their individual potential and humanity. As Regan asserts, Holtby's text is based in historical feminism to analyse the status of middle-class women in the 1930s (*Men* 15). It engages with contemporaneous theories regarding gender equality and spinsterhood, such as Freudian psychology, fascist politician Sir Oswald Mosley's quest for "men who are men and women who are woman" (Mosley qtd. in Holtby, *Women* 193) and philosopher Anthony Mario Ludovici's categorisation of spinsters in *Woman: A Vindication* (1923). According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the repression of "sexual instinct" as a result of spinsterhood manifests itself in hysterical symptoms (Regan 124). Following this theory,

Ludovici adamantly emphasises the abnormality of spinsters and their "morbid influence" on the nation (233) as a result of the inability to discharge their "sexual energy" (238). He additionally makes the distinction between "positive spinsters" and "negative spinsters" (235). The first category possesses a natural tendency towards motherhood yet is unable to find an outlet for it, whereas the second category is less conscious of the "opportunities that promise to lead to motherhood" yet exerts every effort to find another (unnatural) outlet for these feelings, such as teaching (235). In this manner, the negative spinster poses a more dangerous threat to society. Moreover, Ludovici asserts that despite continuous efforts to prove her importance to society, she is not part of the "main stream of Life", and should therefore reside at its margins (259).

Ludovici's theory is a prime example of what Holtby defines as the legend of the frustrated spinster in her journalism or "potted psychology" in *South Riding* (Holtby 262). In the section "Are Spinsters Frustrated?" in *Women and a Changing Civilization*, Holtby critiques the theories that comprise this legend by highlighting that spinsters are not necessarily virgins, consequently negating the supposed unnatural discharge of sexual energy, and that frustration and spinsterhood are not identical as it can also be brought on by events such as poverty and child-bearing (127). In this manner, she asserts that not all spinsters are negatively influenced by their position and that the remaining frustration is dictated by an "unfulfilled social ideal" that determines marriage and romance crucial to women's experience (129). Furthermore, Holtby's text foregrounds the spinster's individuality: "All flesh is not the same flesh. There is one glory of the sun and another glory of the moon and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another in glory" (133). This underscores Holtby's general argument in *Women and a Changing Civilization* that women can have different destinies besides the dominant forms of marriage while maintaining a central position in society. Holtby's feminist journalism thus undermines the binary categorisation

presented in popular interwar theories and defines the middle ground between spinsterhood and marriage, providing a more nuanced portrait of these women.

Holtby expands on this defence in some of her shorter journalistic pieces by focusing on the social perception of spinsterhood in interwar society that dictated her stereotypical figure in social discourse as well as in popular romance fiction. As Rebecca D'Monte points out, the spinster was stereotypically perceived as a physically anomalous and mentally affected older woman (5). This image was largely informed by the importance of marriage according to novel theories on women's mental state. In the short story "The Maternal Instinct" (1933), for instance, Holtby explores the different social responses to spinsters and their married counterparts. Its protagonist, the married Cynthia, is primarily concerned with her duties as a wife and mother whereas her friend, Fanny, remains unmarried. When Fanny questions Cynthia about her opinion on the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay, a well-documented military conflict of the 1930s, Cynthia admits to not being interested in its developments as she is now a mother who has more pressing issues on her mind (Holtby, *Remember, Remember!* 64). She subsequently forgives Fanny for her "funny" interests (64), as she is a frustrated spinster who "really [is] not fit … for civilised society" and ought to get married soon (66). This passage sets out the negative perception of spinsters and their mental state that pervaded interwar society. At the same time, however, by reflecting on a politically relevant element, it ironically emphasises the (mental) limitations placed on women through marriage and motherhood.

Additionally, Holtby's journalism challenges the ageism inherent to the stereotypical definition of spinsterhood. As Emma Liggins emphasises, the negative portrayal of spinsterhood frequently targeted the older generations as society venerated young people and feared the 'old' (214). The status of unmarried women was typically intertwined with age, as emphasised by Holtby's own definition of the spinster:

> Now by spinsters, I do not mean all the young girls who are expecting almost hourly to meet the man of their heart ... I mean the women over thirty, like myself, who have no particular intention of marriage, whose principal interests are non-domestic, and who think it extremely improbable that they will ever themselves become mothers. (“The Non-Combatants” 6)

Here, Holtby distinguishes between young single girls and ageing spinsters, as the latter were considered anomalous figures who defied the conventional gender structures of interwar society. In her essay “The Right Side of Thirty” (1930), she asserts that women are frequently judged based on their youthful appearance and mental stability, which, according to interwar theories, gradually decay after the age of thirty (Holtby, *Remember, Remember!* 218). Spinsters are particularly affected by this attitude since age is inherent to their status: a spinster is “any single woman in old or middle age … beyond the typical age for marriage” (“2.b spinster”). Whereas the period after thirty is generally considered as without pleasure and pervaded by the “hourly peril of going gaga” (218), Holtby argues that ageing is characterised by “a knowledge of life” that moves away from the unease and inexperience of youth (225). In this manner, Holtby defies the stereotypical spinster figure by emphasising that the ageing process leads to the positive development of women’s mental capacity instead of its degeneration.

Holtby’s *South Riding* opposes the patriarchal and ageist structures of the interwar period that determined the spinster’s negative representation in literature by centring its narrative around a productive middle-aged spinster. As Andrea von Hülsen-Esch asserts, “productive ageing” within ageing studies constitutes the continuing participation of older people within society (6). Holtby, therefore, negates the decreased social value that was ascribed to ageing unmarried women by emphasising Sarah Burton’s productive contribution

to society as a progressive teacher. In this manner, *South Riding* challenges the limitations placed on ageing spinsters by an ageist patriarchal society.

Overall, Holtby's journalism has had a major influence on her fictional works. Her defence of spinsterhood in the feminist journalistic pieces *Women and a Changing Civilization*, "The Maternal Instinct" and "The Right Side of Thirty", particularly provides the context for Sarah's alternative spinster status in *South Riding*. Furthermore, Holtby's journalistic comments on Realism and the influence of mass-market novels on the middle-class reader illuminate the effect of Holtby's own narrative techniques. The subversion of popular romance fiction Holtby proposes in "There is Too Much Talk About Romance" thus provides a worthwhile framework for the analysis of *South Riding*, as this novel is often acknowledged for its romantic subplot. In this manner, while Gan and Sponenberg argue that placing the spinster within the dominant paradigm of romance and marriage weakens Holtby's defence of spinsterhood, her journalism justifies the importance of portraying spinsters at the centre of the heterosexual economy that characterised interwar society in order to affect change.

3. Subverting the Spinster-Stereotype: Winifred Holtby's Vindication of Spinsterhood in *South Riding*

Similar to Holtby's journalistic arguments against rigid social ideals for women, her novel *South Riding* challenges the heteronormative structures of interwar society that informed gender stereotypes by portraying the narrative of an independent spinster. During the 1930s, the social and political aftermath of the First World War came into conflict with the progress of First Wave Feminism (D'Monte 15). In the aftermath of the war, fixed, rather anachronistic, gender roles were considered crucial to stabilise the chaotic state of British society. Women's roles within this context revolved mostly around marriage and motherhood due to the loss of a generation, a declining birth rate and a growing debate on eugenics (10). Additionally, a renewed focus on psychology and women's sexuality further foregrounded the importance of marriage and motherhood, since any deviance from a woman's supposed natural roles would affect her mental health. New Feminism responded to this attitude by abandoning the defence of spinsterhood and, instead, focusing on the concerns of wives and mothers (Oram 418). This precedence heavily impacted the way in which unmarried women were viewed. As D'Monte argues, despite the spinster's marginal status, her representation in popular culture rose significantly during the interwar years (5). These women, however, were frequently categorised as one-dimensional "types" who acted as "comic figure[s] or ideological device[s]" (5).

Holtby's *South Riding* is one of the narratives that attempts to subvert this stereotyping and present the spinster in a more positive manner. In this chapter, I will first set out the spinster stereotype that dominated interwar literature in order to analyse Holtby's portrayal of Sarah Burton in *South Riding*. Then, I will demonstrate how Holtby's *South Riding* opposes the diminishing discourse around spinsters that emerged during the 1930s and provides space

for an alternative representation by portraying the development of a more nuanced spinster who deviates from the stereotypical spinster figure both physically and psychologically.

3.1 The Interwar Spinster Stereotype

The term spinster originally referred to a woman who worked as a spinner, but spinster gradually evolved into a derogatory synonym for women who remained unmarried after passing their late twenties. As argued by Marie and Garry Radford, stereotypes emphasise the differences between groups of people by reducing everything about a group or person to widely recognized exaggerated and simplified characteristics regarding them, and consequently fix them within this representation (58). Furthermore, stereotyping creates boundaries that ensure the exclusion of "everything [that] does not belong", identifying people as "other" (58). The repetitious representation of a stereotype in literature subsequently influences the reader, constructing anxiety around these figures and ensuring their marginalisation. Spinsters in interwar fiction were typically represented as "middle-aged, eccentric, ill-natured, selfish or even evil" figures who were resented by others (Chang 47). Moreover, they were stereotypically characterised as "comic, grotesque, ugly, dull [women], or as … alienated misfit[s]" who were psychologically affected by their "failure to achieve a relationship with a man" (47). Richard Llewellyn's interwar play *Poison Pen* (1939), for instance, employs the figure of the psychologically thwarted spinster who, as a result of social and sexual frustration, sends venomous anonymous letters to members of her community that unleash chaos. By reinforcing this stereotypical image in literature, unmarried women were made to believe that they were incomplete without fulfilling their 'natural' roles as wives and mothers.

As Ewins asserts, Holtby was particularly interested in this influence, since she argued that "the social and ethical values of the great middle-classes" were constructed on the social

and ethical values displayed in popular novels (254). *South Riding*, consequently, explores the stereotypical marginal representation of the spinster and provides an alternative, more complex, spinster figure at the centre of the narrative. As Sarah Burton emphasises, she is aware of her status as an unmarried woman in a patriarchal society yet transcends this categorisation as she knows her own value as a woman: “I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I’m going to spin” (Holtby, *SR* 51). In this manner, instead of relying on the marginal, sexually deviant and psychologically disturbed spinster-figure, Holtby foregrounds the spinster’s individuality and constructs an alternative central figure who devises her own destiny.

3.2 The Sexually Attractive Spinster of South Riding

In *South Riding*, Holtby subtly criticises the physical stereotyping of the unmarried woman as “a grotesque, ugly, dull … misfit” (Chang 47) by presenting a spinster whose appearance deviates from this conventional image. When Sarah is first introduced to the community of South Riding, she seemingly performs her role as a “good plain woman” by wearing sober brown clothing to defend her position as a spinster (Holtby, *SR* 23). She additionally invokes “her smallness [and] her femininity” to convince the school board of her decency as an unmarried teacher. Several of the governors, however, immediately recognise her diverging appearance from the ugly, drab spinster-stereotype: “[B]ut from her sensible walking shoes rose ankles which were superfluously pretty. Head mistresses, ran the unformed thought in the mind of more than one governor, should not possess ankles slender as a *gazelle*’s and flexible arched insteps” (23; emphasis added). Employing the term “gazelle” in this (interwar) context foregrounds her elegance and beauty as a woman. Another feature that is noticeably contradictory throughout the narrative is Sarah’s hair, which is “red – not mildly ginger but vivid, springing, wiry, glowing, almost crimson, red” (23). As Brenda

Ayres asserts, red hair frequently symbolises rebellion (14). Moreover, a woman's hair can be an object of "erotic appeal", particularly red hair (1). In this manner, Holtby presents Sarah as a sexually attractive woman whose fiery appearance challenges the stereotypically dull spinster figure.

By emphasising Sarah Burton's continuing sexual appeal in the narrative, Holtby defies the categorisation of spinsters at the margins of heteronormative society. The second time Sarah appears in the novel, she is sprinting "like a deer" to make the Kiplington bus (Holtby, *SR* 46), reiterating her female elegance and agility. During the bus ride, Sarah recalls her time in London, visiting dog races, drinking beer and meeting with "Derrick, or Mick, or Tony" (47), not shying away from "flirtatious back-chat" (51). As Gan argues, these experiences emphasise that Sarah is "a woman keen to embrace the world" instead of a "desiccated spinster" (213). Her position as a sexually attractive woman who refuses to remain at the margins of society is reiterated by her romantic experiences. She has been engaged three times: first to a college friend who was killed during the Great War, second to a South African farmer whom she fought with over politics, and third to an English Socialist member of Parliament who did not approve of her feminist ideals (Holtby, *SR* 50). As a result, Sarah is aware of her own desirability and realises she was only withheld from marriage "by the bars of death or of principle" (51). By emphasising Sarah's past and present romantic opportunities, Holtby counters the stereotypical image of a pathetic, sexually repressed spinster figure who has failed to secure a relationship with a man and is without opportunities (Chang 47-48). Moreover, Sarah's romantic experiences challenge the legend of the frustrated spinster, which assumes the spinster's celibacy and consequent sexual frustration.

3.3 The Sane Spinster Imitates the Insane Spouse

Holtby further dismantles the legend of the frustrated spinster, as defined in *Women and a Changing Civilization*, by exploring the perception of Sarah's mental capacity as a spinster within the community of South Riding. The anti-spinster discourse in the novel regarding psychological abnormality is mostly voiced through Miss Dolores Jameson, the school's Classics Mistress. She initially misguidedly presumes Sarah to be a typical man-hating spinster (Holtby, *SR* 65) who has no opportunities besides teaching (62). Furthermore, encouraged by her own romantic engagement and the theories of "potted psychology" (262), Miss Jameson attacks Miss Parsons, another one of the spinster teachers, by ascribing her incompetency to her status as an "embittered, middle-aged spinster" (259). Holtby underscores Sarah's awareness and defiance of these negative interwar theories on spinsterhood, informed by the writings of figures such as Mosley and Ludovici, by negating Miss Jameson's presumptions: "I know you have odd theories about middle-age and virginity Miss Jameson. They don't convince me" (259). Sarah's opinion reiterates Holtby's journalistic defence in *Women and a Changing Civilization* that "in the twentieth century frustration and spinsterhood need not be identical" (133). Moreover, the comparison between Miss Jameson's engagement and Miss Parsons's solitary existence foregrounds Holtby's argument for a woman's individuality. Miss Jameson desires to get married, as this is conventionally correct and she is afraid of becoming isolated (*SR* 262). Miss Parsons, however, has had "[a]ll her human appetites and self-sacrifice … amply satisfied" by being a teacher and consequently considers being alone "a luxury" (264). The difference between these women emphasises that indeed "all flesh is not the same flesh" (*Women* 133), since women have different opportunities and attitudes towards life. In this manner, Holtby defies the categorisation of the spinster based on a simplified spinster type.

Furthermore, Holtby challenges the (virginal) spinster's supposed mental instability by comparing Sarah to Muriel Carne; an insane married woman. Muriel resembles *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason as she is Carne's (i.e. *South Riding*'s Mr. Rochester) "wild" and beautiful wife, who is institutionalised due to her insanity and remains voiceless throughout the narrative (Holtby, *SR* 176). In this manner, similar to Bertha, she partly functions as a psychological double to the novel's protagonist. Muriel is described as a beautiful aristocratic woman whose madness is a result of violating her own sentiments regarding femininity by becoming a wife and mother, whereas Sarah is a plain yet sensible spinster teacher. As a result of her desire for Carne, however, Sarah's identity gradually "melts … into that of Muriel" (Regan, *Men* 169). Instead of avoiding sexual frustration as a spinster through romance, her mental state increasingly deteriorates because of this relationship. During the climax of the romance narrative between Sarah and Carne, which occurs in the aptly titled sixth book of the novel, "Mental Deficiency", and the chapter "Two in a Hotel are Temporarily Insane", Sarah's struggle to uphold her identity as an independent professional woman becomes increasingly apparent (170). She attempts to imitate Muriel by adapting her physical appearance and assuming a more feminine "smallness" (Holtby, *SR* 364), hoping he will confuse her with his wife. Furthermore, she becomes emotionally unstable due to her desires. Sarah emphasises that she feels "hot tears rising" because of her own "incongruity" as a woman (361) and acting like "a little tart" (367). Sarah's parallel deterioration to Muriel underscores the potential dangers of romance, marriage and motherhood to women as opposed to spinsterhood. As Holtby argues, women, unmarried or married, who comply with society's dominant notions of femininity and deny their individual purpose or fulfilment will become "frustrated in their needs for ecstasy, power, and devotion" (*Women* 130). Whereas Muriel has been pressed beyond her "own instincts and traditions" through marriage and motherhood (*SR* 83), Sarah ultimately regains charge of her own destiny and focuses on her potential as a

teacher. Thus, Holtby reassigns the spinster's designated frustration to women who, contrary to their own wishes, assume the female identity as a wife and mother that is forced upon them by conventional society.

3.4 The Anomalous Spinster Teacher

Besides challenging the manner in which interwar society pathologizes spinsters, Holtby vindicates the spinster's position as a teacher by emphasising Sarah's continuing contribution to the community of South Riding. Due to the casualties of the First World War and the economic recession of the Great Depression, an increasing number of unmarried women had to "establish a professional identity as an alternative to marriage" (Mortimer 80). These women were mostly employed as nurses or teachers (81). As spinsters' psychological state became questioned during this period, the spinster teacher, in particular, became "subject to ridicule, and even contempt" (81). Ludovici, for instance, argues that the spinster teacher poses a powerful threat to the younger generations, since it is inevitable that part of her anomalous position as an unmarried woman and "distorted view of life" will influence her pupils (241). Their abnormality as teachers was partly based on the lack of feminine qualities deemed desirable for the role (Mortimer 81). In *South Riding*, Miss Jameson and Carne project these conventional views onto Sarah by condemning her as a "typical spinster school-marm" (Holtby, *SR* 62) with a masculine appearance (29). Sarah's position as a spinster and her progressive ideals, however, ultimately influence her pupils in a positive manner. When discussing the increasing popularity of cosmetics during the interwar period with Mrs. Beddows and her family, Sarah asserts that she would rather choose a spinster wearing lipstick to teach, as "her influence on the girls would be far wider, more exhilarating and more healthy" (193). This comment underscores Holtby's argument that spinsters have the opportunity to live "enriched" lives that "contribute … to the world" and assure satisfaction

(*Women* 129). As a spinster, Sarah has had the opportunity to enjoy higher education at Oxford and to spend several years teaching in London and South Africa. These experiences and broad knowledge of the world provide her pupils with ample information to face society's demands, which is emphasised by Sarah's motto to question everything and "ask no man permission to perform" (*SR* 124).

In conclusion, Holtby's *South Riding* provides an alternative spinster figure who challenges the stereotypical image of spinsterhood that dominated interwar literature and society. As opposed to the typically grotesque, ugly and dull spinster, Sarah is a physically attractive woman with distinctive features that emphasise her rebellious character. Crucially, she is aware of her own desirability as a result of her past romantic experiences. This undermines the presumed celibacy of the legend of the frustrated spinster that dictates the spinster's ultimate psychological deterioration. Holtby subverts this legend by attributing insanity to Muriel instead, a married woman, disconnecting frustration and spinsterhood. Sarah's profession adds to the defence of the spinsters' position in society, as it emphasises their valuable contribution to society. Thus, by exploring interwar anti-spinster prejudice through Sarah, a confident and independent spinster, Holtby defies the spinster's conventional qualities and provides a more nuanced image of the spinster and her position within society. This positive portrayal of spinsterhood and Holtby's critical stance towards conservative gender structures is enhanced by Holtby's subversion of the popular romance conventions, which will be analysed in the next chapter of this thesis.

4. Reclaiming Romance for Spinsters: Winifred Holtby's Subversion of the Popular Marriage Plot

In *South Riding*, Holtby engages with the conventions of interwar romance novels as a subplot to reinforce the autonomy of unmarried women. As mentioned before, during the 1930s, popular romance fiction evolved into love stories that ended happily in marriage (Dixon 27). In previous narratives, "a happy ending was not always assured" and romance novels often ended tragically with the death of one or both lovers (27). Moreover, the popularity of formula romance novels began to rise during the 1930s when Mills & Boon, an English publishing house, later acquired by Harlequin, became a romance-only publisher (35). The focus on highly formulaic narratives recalled elements from nineteenth-century novels by authors such as Jane Austen and the Brontës, and introduced well-known authors such as Mary Burchell, Barbara Cartland and Georgette Heyer to readers. Holtby was interested in the influence of these mass-market novels, since according to her, they inform the values of society (Holtby qtd. in Ewins 254). Holtby challenged the conventions of romance novels in particular, because there are more elements to life than romance and, according to her, (romance) authors could tell more complete stories if they focused on these as well ("There is" 8). In *South Riding*, Holtby therefore undermines the conventional marriage plot to advocate for social change regarding the perception of spinsterhood in a patriarchal society that prioritises marriage, emphasising the spinster's potential outside of the heterosexual paradigm.

4.1 Middle-class versus Working-class: The Interwar Romance Reader

By subverting the conventions of popular romance fiction in *South Riding*, Holtby urges popular romance readers to question the values presented within this genre. Regan argues that Holtby actually avoids intertextual reference to popular romance fiction and,

instead, focuses solely on *Jane Eyre* and its feminist potential to redirect a “middlebrow” audience from the “emotional indulgence” of a happy ending to “intelligent questioning” of its prominence within romance narratives and, ultimately, society (*Men* 128). Furthermore, Regan asserts that *South Riding* signals its own middlebrow audience by explicating Sarah’s familiarity with *Jane Eyre* as a result of her “well-educated mind” (Holtby, *SR* 126). The romance elements from *Jane Eyre*, however, are also accredited as archetypal to the conventions of popular romance fiction (Regis 86). Moreover, Holtby herself initially categorised *South Riding* as “a romance”, which is emphasised by its early subtitle, “A Romantic Comedy of Local Government”, signalling the centrality of its romantic elements (Holtby qtd. in Ewins 261). Analysing the influence of interwar popular romance on Holtby’s *South Riding*, as presented in this thesis, therefore provides a different and worthwhile perspective on the structure of Holtby’s defence of spinsterhood within the novel.

Additionally, both lowbrow and middlebrow romance fiction became increasingly popular to both working-class and lower-middle-class women during the 1930s as a result of the gradual increase in literacy since the mid-nineteenth century (Sanders 88), ultimately negating Holtby’s perceived middlebrow focus. Books also became generally more accessible due to publications in “weekly story papers” (88) and with the emergence of twopenny libraries. These were commercial libraries that charged customers per loan, waiving the mandatory subscription fee of existing libraries (Hilliard 199). They mostly focused on popular fiction, such as detective stories and romance narratives, yet also offered middlebrow bestsellers (201). As Christopher Hilliard notes, this ultimately reduced the different reading habits between middle-class and working-class readers (219), broadening the audience for particular middlebrow novels. Moreover, as reading became a more social activity, books became increasingly significant to women “in defining and determining the ways in which [they] might relate to the world, and the ways in which [they] might see and characterise

[themselves]" (Battershill 14-15). Holtby was particularly interested in this formative influence of popular reading on social values and the female experience, as mentioned previously. Following these ideals, Holtby's *South Riding* urges its readers to reconstruct their thoughts regarding femininity and spinsterhood by reconfiguring the conventions of popular romance fiction, consequently addressing an audience beyond the middle classes.

4.2 Interwar Popular Romance Fiction

Women's lives in interwar fiction were generally narrated through a marriage plot, which perpetuated the marginalisation and negative social perception of spinsters. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2007), Pamela Regis sets out eight narrative elements that can be applied to the romance genre from the eighteenth century up to the twenty-first century, particularly foregrounding its quintessential happy-ending:

> [1] the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court; [2] the meeting between heroine and hero; [3] the barrier to the union of heroine and hero; [4] the attraction between heroine and hero; [5] the declaration of love between heroine and hero; [6] the point of ritual death; [7] the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier; [and 8] betrothal. (30)

These elements, according to Regis, must all be present in a romance novel but can appear in any order (30). One of Mills & Boon's initial romance authors, Georgette Heyer, became increasingly popular during the Great Depression and is viewed as "the mother of" the Regency romance novel whose style is frequently emulated in contemporary romance fiction (125). In her interwar romance novel *Regency Buck* (1935), for instance, Heyer develops the romantic relationship between Judith Taverner and her initially insufferable guardian the Earl of Worth within the extremities of Regency society. They face several barriers throughout the

narrative yet are betrothed in the concluding scenes of the novel. This betrothal, the novel's final element, is considered typical for romance fiction to such an extent that "readers insist on it" (9).

By appealing to interwar readers' familiarity with popular romance fiction for the romance subplot in *South Riding*, Holtby subverts its conventions and consequently questions the spinster's representation in literature. Although the novel is frequently praised for its political engagement, the early subtitle to the novel emphasises the centrality of its romantic influence. The romance between Sarah and Carne develops according to the conventions of the happily-ever-after romance novels that emerged during the 1930s. Because of the formulaic nature of the romance genre, "looking at the embodiment of" the conventional narrative elements in "any given romance novel can be key to understanding what is at stake in that novel" (Regis 31). The following section will therefore provide an analysis, based on Regis's analysis of romance fiction, of how Holtby navigates these elements in *South Riding* to strengthen her defence of spinsterhood.

4.3 An Analysis of Popular Romance Conventions in South Riding

At the beginning of the novel, Holtby provides a thorough description of the 'English Landscape' that comprises the community of South Riding by discussing its social and political concerns (element 1). In the "Prologue in a Press Gallery", Lovell Brown, a young reporter for the Kingsport Chronicle, sets out the crucial characters within the novel who embody the political differences that emerged during the interwar period. He particularly emphasises the tension between conservatism and socialism within the local government, which provides an image for the interwar reader that reflects on national politics as well (Holtby, *SR* 3). Furthermore, Holtby explores the developments of interwar feminism and its antagonists throughout the novel, foregrounding the interwar social conventions and politics

(e.g. the rise of fascism) that complicate Sarah's position as an unmarried woman. In this manner, the passages that establish the community of South Riding, reflect the typically complex society that the heroine and hero will have to navigate in order to "court and marry and which, by their union, they symbolically remake" (Regis 31).

The first meeting between Sarah and Carne at the interview for a new headmistress for Kiplington Girl's High School already hints at the barrier to their relationship (element 2), which is generally the case for romance novels (31). Sarah immediately perceives Carne's indifference towards her as "[s]he gathered all eyes but his" during the interview (Holtby, *SR* 25). From Carne's point of view, the reader learns of the marriage to "his lovely Muriel" and the manner in which he prioritises the wellbeing of their daughter Midge (28). This continuing adoration for his wife and daughter already foregrounds one of the main external barriers between Sarah and Carne. Moreover, he judges Sarah as a stereotypically masculine spinster-teacher who "[is] neither gentle nor a lady, and her bosom was flat and bony as a boy's", instead of the affectionate, motherly figure he wishes to support his daughter (29). His conservative attitude regarding Sarah's spinster identity and her perception of his apathy towards her mark the beginning of the discordance between them, while simultaneously reflecting the negative discourse around spinsters in interwar society.

Moreover, the external and internal barriers that Sarah and Carne are faced with throughout the novel already signal their assured separation (element 3). As Regis asserts, these barriers drive the romance novel, exploring the issues within the protagonist's mind as well as those of the society around her (32). In *South Riding*, the crucial internal barrier between Sarah and Carne is drawn out to explore the tense political situation of interwar British society. Sarah considers herself a feminist from the working classes who "[believes] in action … [believes] in fighting", focusing more on progressive politics, whereas Carne is a conservative aristocrat who, according to Sarah, is "against experiment, … against reason …

against progress" (Holtby, *SR* 112) and subsequently poses as her "new enemy" (114). Underscored by her previous failed engagements as a result of politics, the reader gradually perceives Sarah and Carne's incompatibility as romantic partners because of their diverging political views.

Additionally, the external barrier of Carne's marriage to his wife Muriel, who has been institutionalised in an insane asylum, seems impossible to overcome. Muriel echoes the characters of Blanche Ingram and Bertha Mason in the archetypal romance narrative *Jane Eyre*, displaying both beauty and madness (Regan, *Men* 162). Similar to Jane, Sarah compares herself to this Other woman (162). While Muriel is considered "beautiful" and "flawless" (Holtby, *SR* 176), Sarah describes herself as an "ugly, clumsy, vulgar" schoolmistress, "not a lady" (416). Moreover, she gradually realises that Carne could never be attracted to her as he continues to love his wife: "he was hers, hers, hers; and she could not touch him" (416). This undermines the fourth element of Regis's romance conventions (i.e. the attraction between heroine and hero). Sarah initially attempts to declare her love by imitating Muriel's "wild unstable loveliness" (Holtby, *SR* 176) by wearing similar clothing, hoping that Carne will not notice her and think she's Muriel (364): "She redressed herself … in the satin undergarments she had bought for her sister", looking in the mirror, "[s]he saw a small light figure, vivid and inhuman as a paroquet" (359). Sarah's desired invisibility once again foregrounds the perpetual influence of interwar society on the spinster's marginalisation. In addition, by invoking the animal imagery of the "paroquet" here and paralleling Sarah's counterfeit outward appearance with Muriel's beauty, Holtby underscores the demeaning influence of Sarah's mimicry.

Eventually, Sarah acknowledges Carne's indifference towards her. When he is sleeping next to her after their failed sexual encounter, Carne utters the words "[m]y love, my love, my dear and little love" (373). Knowing he is thinking of his wife instead of her, Sarah

points out that "[t]his story could not have a happy ending. It did not even have a happy beginning" (373). As per element five, the happy ending of a romance novel is typically ensured by the release of these barriers and the declaration of love between heroine and hero (Regis 33), yet Sarah's contemplation marks the point of ritual death for their romantic relationship (element 6). This means that they are unable to overcome the barriers between them (element 7), which is partly why *South Riding* does not end with their betrothal (element 8). In this manner, Holtby analyses the negative discourse around spinsters in interwar society by employing the conventions of popular romance fiction, while simultaneously undermining the romance reader's expectations by ultimately subverting them, creating an alternative space for unmarried women within interwar fiction.

4.4 Avoiding the Happy Ending for an Insistent Romance Audience

By subverting the conventions of popular interwar romance fiction in *South Riding*, Holtby urges a broad audience to question the dominant interwar gender ideology that prioritised marriage for women. Although the romantic subplot between Sarah and Carne in Holtby's *South Riding* initially follows the conventions of popular romance fiction, it does not comply to its crucial happy ending, providing an alternative destiny for its main character as a teacher. In the article "There is Too Much Talk About Romance", Holtby questions the emphasis that is placed upon women's essential destiny as a wife and mother:

> There are more ingredients than love in the real-life happy-ending, and our romancers would tell more convincing stories if they paid greater attention to these … Work and health are motives in human conduct that dominate us long after the force of love has passed, and they play as large a part in our lives as love, or a larger one, even during 'the season made for joy' … A romantic attitude towards work and a scientific attitude towards romance would be a welcome change. (8)

Holtby's *South Riding* introduces this "welcome change" by avoiding the expected marriage between Sarah and Carne at the end of the novel and, instead, focus on Sarah's position as a teacher.

This deviation greatly affects the popular romance reader who would expect a betrothal at the end of the novel as prescribed by the conventional narrative structures that comprised popular romance novels such as those published by Mills & Boon. As Regan rightly asserts, Holtby does not allow her readers to indulge in these "romantic fantasies of marital union" without critically questioning the interwar gender ideology that places overt emphasis on marriage for women's physical and psychological development and the broader political issues raised within the narrative such as education, the marriage bar, and the rise of fascism (*Men* 129). This is foregrounded by Sarah's speech as a headmistress to her students that urges them to not "love … anything without questions", to "[q]uestion everything – even what I'm saying now" (Holtby, *SR* 510). Here, she addresses both her pupils as well as the novel's readers to critically assess what society and literature demand from them (Regan, *Men* 129). In addition to Regan's observation, Holtby particularly reflects on women's individual potential outside of the conventional marriage plot by creating an alternative ending for Sarah. Despite Sarah's conservative placement within a romance narrative, Holtby deliberately avoids satisfying the expected betrothal, emphasising Sarah's individuality. Indeed, Sarah does not reach "her full potential and identity as the partner of a man", according to the conventional gender structures of interwar society, but finally finds "what she had been seeking" as a teacher and valued member within the community of South Riding (Holtby, *SR* 515). This underscores Holtby's journalistic defence that women can have "adequate material for happiness" besides marriage and should be allowed to pursue alternative paths besides the ones prescribed (Holtby, *Women* 133).

In *South Riding*, therefore, Holtby employs yet ultimately subverts the conventions of popular romance fiction to question interwar society's overt focus on marriage for women. This becomes apparent, especially during the final scenes of the novel, which focus on Sarah's professional identity instead of her betrothal to Carne. In addition to the romantic experiences in the course of her life, opposing the legend of the frustrated spinster that assumes the spinster's virginity, Sarah's continuing spinsterhood at the end of the romance subplot challenges the limited destinies forced upon women in interwar society. Thus, by relying on popular romance conventions in addition to constructing an alternative spinster character, Holtby's *South Riding* provides a more complex image of spinsterhood that negates their marginal position within society, emphasising that "all flesh is not the same flesh … for one star differeth from another in glory" (131).

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined the defence of spinsterhood in Winifred Holtby's interwar novel *South Riding* and its intertextual criticism of popular romance fiction. During the 1930s, the reassertion of traditional gender roles, the divide within feminism and the rising influence of new theories within psychology and sexology negatively influence the spinster's position within society. Middle-aged unmarried women, in particular, became increasingly perceived as physically and psychologically anomalous figures due to celibacy. They were subsequently stereotypically presented as odd, inadequate and marginal characters within literary fiction. Holtby opposes this stereotypical representation in her journalistic writing as well as in her fictional accounts, challenging the traditional outlook on the individual potential of spinsters.

In the feminist history *Women and a Changing Civilization*, Holtby questions the novel theories that comprise the legend of the frustrated spinster by foregrounding the need to disconnect frustration and spinsterhood. She emphasises that women can and should pursue different destinies besides marriage as "[a]ll flesh is not the same flesh … for one star differeth from another in glory" (Holtby, *Women* 133). Furthermore, in the article "There is Too Much Talk About Romance", Holtby challenges the manner in which romantic relationships and marriage are prioritised in literature, particularly in romance fiction. This overt focus within popular fiction reinforced the restrictive social ideals that were forced upon women in the interwar period. Instead, she argues, authors should focus on other "ingredients" in "the real-life happy ending", discussing health and work for example ("There is" 8).

In her final spinster novel *South Riding*, Holtby therefore presents a more nuanced and independent spinster figure who finds "what she had been seeking" outside of marriage, as a teacher in the community of South Riding (Holtby, *SR* 515). This alternative narrative for spinsters is substantiated by the subversion of popular romance fiction conventions for the

novel's romantic subplot. By emphasising Sarah Burton's romantic experience, Holtby negates the spinster's stereotypical mental instability as a result of celibacy. Additionally, *South Riding* juxtaposes Sarah's sanity with Muriel's insanity that was instigated by marriage and motherhood, attempting to fulfil conventional roles that were "beyond her fragile power" (153). When Sarah briefly attempts to fulfil similar roles within her relationship with Robert Carne, she gradually coalesces with Muriel's mental state as well. The different outcome, however, underscores the damaging influence of traditional gender structures that force women into set categories and emphasises the individual potential of spinsters.

Furthermore, by employing most of the conventions of popular romance fiction for the romantic subplot of *South Riding* yet subverting its final, and crucial, element of betrothal, Holtby urges her readers to challenge the importance of marriage for women within interwar society. Although previous research on the novel has largely neglected the influence of popular romance fiction on the novel, this thesis asserts its importance to Holtby's *South Riding* by analysing its apparent influence in the context of her journalism on literary developments of the 1930s. Regan, for instance, argues that Holtby solely focuses on a middle-class audience by invoking romance elements from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The romantic elements that can be found in *Jane Eyre*, however, are considered archetypal for the popular romance novel that emerged during the 1930s. Holtby also does not deeply engage in the topical discussion on middlebrow and lowbrow fiction of the interwar period. Instead, as Ewins sets out, Holtby was particularly interested in the influence of popular novels read by a broad audience, such as romance fiction (254). Furthermore, Gan and Sponenberg both argue that the romance narrative in *South Riding* weakens Holtby's defence of unmarried women, as this supposed retrogressive approach to spinsterhood undermines the spinster's potential and re-establishes the dominant heterosexual paradigms of romance and marriage for women (Gan 203). The analysis presented in this thesis, however, emphasises that the influence of popular

romance fiction elements actually *enforces* Holtby's defence of spinsterhood within the novel. By playing into the expectations of popular romance readers yet purposefully removing the crucial element of betrothal, Holtby challenges the reader's values based on previous reading, criticising the popular romance genre and subsequently creating an alternative space for spinsters within interwar fiction. Sarah Burton's happy ending as a teacher within the community of South Riding reconfigures the traditional ideals of interwar society and firmly establishes, once again, that "[o]ur life stories are not wholly love stories" (Holtby, "There is" 8).

The analysis of Holtby's *South Riding* in the context of popular romance fiction, as provided in this thesis, reveals the potential of romance elements as armour for the defence of unmarried women in literature. It would be interesting to determine whether the influence of this genre applies to Holtby's other spinster novels as well. Particularly, as *The Crowded Street* and *Poor Caroline* contain similar "work-versus-romance narrative[s]" (Gan 212). Furthermore, this analysis could provide a framework for further research regarding the potentially conducive connection between romance and spinsterhood, as the spinster stereotype and overt focus on romantic love continue to be employed in contemporary literature, other media and society in general.

Works cited

Adam, Ruth. *A Woman's Place, 1910-1975*. Persephone Books, 2000.

Ayres, Brenda. "'Hair is the woman's glory' – Unless It's Red." *A Vindication of the Redhead: The Typology of Red Hair*, edited by Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 1-20.

Battershill, Claire. "'Tricks of Aspect and the Varied Gifts of Daylight': Representations of Books and Reading in Interwar Women's Periodicals." *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939: The Interwar Period*, edited by Catherine Clay and Maria DiCenzo, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 14-27.

Berry, Paul and Marion Shaw. "Introduction." *Remember, Remember! The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby*, edited by Paul Berry and Marion Shaw, Virago Press, 1999, pp. vii-xiii.

Chang, Anne Wan-lih. "A Woman Alone: The Depictions of Spinsters in Irish Women's Short Stories." *Estudios Irlandeses*, no. 10, 2015, pp. 44-57.

Dixon, jay. "History of English romance novels, 1621-1975." *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger and Hsu-Ming Teo, Routledge, 2020, pp. 27-50.

D'Monte, Rebecca. "Passion, Penury, and Psychosis: Representations of the Spinster by Interwar Dramatists." *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, edited by Josephine Dolan, 2012, pp. 3-16.

Ewins, Kristin. "'Revolutionizing A Mode of Life': Leftist Middlebrow Fiction by Women in the 1930s." *ELH*, vol. 82, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 251-279. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2015.0003.

Gan, Wendy. “A Return to Romance: Winifred Holtby’s Spinster Novels from between the Wars.” *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2003, pp. 202–218, https://doi.org/10.1034/j.1600-0730.2003.00771.x.

Greg, William Rathbone. “Why are Women Redundant?” London, Trübner, 1869. Internet Archive, archive.org/details/whyarewomenredu00greggoog/page/n2/mode/2up. Accessed 16 Mar. 2024.

Hilliard, Christopher. “The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and ‘Middlebrow’ Novels in Britain, 1930-42.” *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2014, pp. 199-220. doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwt027.

Holtby, Winifred. *Remember, Remember! The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby*, edited by Paul Berry and Marion Shaw, Virago Press, 1999.

—. “Some Letters from Winifred Holtby by Lady Rhondda.” *Time and Tide*, 4 Apr. 1936, pp. 470.

—. *South Riding: An English Landscape*. London, Virago Press, 2010.

—. “The Non-Combatants: Spinsters and Maternal Mortality.” *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Sept. 1930. *Hull Archives*.

—. “There is Too Much Talk About Romance.” *Daily Herald*, 12 September 1930, p. 8.

—. *Women and a Changing Civilization*. Chicago, Cassandra Editions, 1978. *Internet Archive*,

https://archive.org/details/womenandchanging00holt/page/n3/mode/2up. Accessed 8 Feb. 2024.

Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*. Spinifex Press, 1997.

Kershaw, Angela, and Angela Kimyongür. "Women in Europe between the Wars: a Culture of Contradictions." *Women in Europe between the Wars: Politics, Culture and Society*, edited by Angela Kershaw and Angela Kimyongür, Ashgate Publishing, 2007, pp. 1-22.

Liggins, Emma. *Odd Women?: Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s-1930s*. Manchester University Press, 2016.

Ludovici, Anthony Mario *Woman: A Vindication*. London, Constable, 1923. *Project Gutenberg*, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/71805/pg71805-images.html#FNanchor_48. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Moore, Tara. "Collage of woman with wool coming from face." *Cosmopolitan*, 14 February 2020, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/love-sex/relationships/a30868873/spinster/.

Mortimer, Claire. "'Dangerous and unwholesome': The Spinster Teacher." *Spinsters, Widows and Chars: The Ageing Woman in British Film*, edited by Claire Mortimer, Edinburgh University Publishing, 2021, pp. 78-97.

Oram, Alison. "Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-War Feminist Discourses." *Women's History Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1993, pp. 413–433, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029200200010.

Radford, Marie L. and Gary P. Radford. "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian." Library Quarterly, vol. 73, no. 1, 2003, pp. 54-69.

Regan, Lisa. "Introduction: 'A Woman in her Time'." *Winifred Holtby, "A woman in her time": Critical Essays*, edited by Lisa Regan, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 1-22.

—. *'Men who are Men and Women Who Are Women': Fascism, Psychology and Feminist Resistance in the Work of Winifred Holtby*, 2005. The University of Warwick, PhD dissertation.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Sanders, Lise Shapiro. "Making the Modern Girl: Fantasy, Consumption, and Desire in Romance Weeklies of the 1920s." *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1918-1939: The Interwar Period*, edited by Catherine Clay and Maria DiCenzo, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 87-102.

Schaff, Barbara. "The Strange After-Lives of *Jane Eyre*." *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, edited by Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger, BRILL, 2007, pp. 25-36.

Shaw, Marion. Introduction. *South Riding*, by Winifred Holtby, Virago, 2010, pp. xi-xv.

Sponenberg, Ashlie K. "'This Tyranny of Sex': Holtby's Spinsters, Psychology, and Fascism." *Winifred Holtby, "A woman in her time": Critical Essays*, edited by Lisa Regan, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 172-193.

Stoneman, Patsy. "'They Had Shared an Experience': Realism and Intertextuality in *South Riding*." *Winifred Holtby, "A woman in her time": Critical Essays*, edited by Lisa Regan, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 139-148.

"2.b spinster." *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 2024. *OED Online*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spinster_n?tab=meaning_and_use#21453009. Accessed 30 Mar. 2024.

Utrecht University, "Logo." *Utrecht University*, 2 Jun. 2024, https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/corporate-identity/guidelines/logo.

von Hülsen-Esch, Andrea. "Introduction: Perspectives on Cultural Aging at a Glance." *Cultural Perspectives on Aging: A Different Approach to Old Age and Aging*, edited by Andrea von Hülsen-Esch, De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 1-17.