A Self in Woolf's Clothing:
The Author from the Inside Out in *A Room of One's Own*

This was supposed to be a paper about Virginia Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind. I was going to tell you about how it's an incredibly accurate imagining of the human brain and its hemispheres, which do indeed have the qualities Woolf attributes to each side of the mind.[1] The left hemisphere is verbal, logical, direct, and explicit. The right speaks through images and suggestions and is concerned with relationships, the body, and emotions.[2] By gendering the hemispheres, Woolf highlights how these qualities are entangled with our society's construction of gender while simultaneously challenging the idea that they have anything to do with sex. After all, everybody's brain has two hemispheres that must work together for healthy functioning, though neuroscientists have begun warning–just as Woolf predicted–that failures of integration and an overreliance on the left hemisphere are creating all kinds of problems.[3] It was going to be a great paper. But Woolf wouldn't let me write it. "Yes, yes," she said. "That's all very interesting, and I'm sure I did have brilliant insights into the brain. But that's what you're interested in; it's not the point I'm making." And she was right.

Yet nobody seemed to know what point she was making. When I started researching Woolf and androgyny, I found the scholarly literature in a state of disarray. It was an interpretive free-for-all, with every critic bringing in their own framework and then saying that Woolf agreed with them, or at least that she should. Why were things such a mess? It didn't take me long to find the answer: an article so shocking, so disgraceful, that I finally had to give up on my

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[1] I wouldn't have been the first to make this connection. Thomas C. Caramagno linked Woolf's portrayal of androgyny to Victorian ideas about the gendered distinctions between the hemispheres, though his discussion of *A Room of One's Own* is surprisingly cursory. Caramagno, "Laterality and Sexuality: The Transgressive Aesthetics of Orlando," in *Virginia Woolf: Texts and Contexts: Selected Papers from the Fifth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Beth Rigel Daugherty and Eileen Barrett (New York: Pace University Press, 1996), 183-188.
[2] Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2020), 296; Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 71.
[3] Siegel, 324, 313; McGilchrist, 6.

neuroscience argument to try to set things right. Woolf demanded it. The article was Toril Moi's attack on Elaine Showalter. Here, I have to pause to scold those of you who were academics in the 80s when all this went down. You let her talk to Elaine Showalter like that? Elaine Showalter, who dedicated her life to following Woolf's call and creating a female tradition! Listen to what Moi said about her: "Showalter's position on this point in fact strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism, precluding any real recognition of the value of Virginia Woolf's modernism."[4] That is so rude! But you didn't just let her get away with that kind of disrespect. You also let her make Woolf a puppet ventriloquizing the views of Julia Kristeva. Did you notice that Moi didn't quote Woolf once in the entire article? And that's still not the worst of it. She wrote that Woolf "reveals a deeply sceptical attitude to the classical concept of an essential human identity. For what can this self-identical identity be if all meaning is a ceaseless play of difference, if *absence* and not presence is the foundation of meaning?"[5] Just because Moi's argument was founded on absence–an absence of textual evidence, an absence of understanding of Woolf, an absence of knowing what it means to be a person–doesn't mean that *A Room of One's Own* is the same. Virginia Woolf is present in every word of that essay, and she is showing us what it's like to see the world through her eyes.

The Self from the Inside

In her chapter on Woolf, Showalter raises the question of why Woolf writes from multiple viewpoints not her own, criticizing what she perceives as the resultant impersonality: "Impersonality may seem like the wrong word for a book in which a narrative 'I' appears in every third sentence. But a closer look reveals that the 'I' is a persona, whom the

[4] Toril Moi, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Feminist Readings of Woolf." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 9, no. 1-2 (1985): 135, https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14031/4803.
[5] Moi, 139.

author calls 'Mary Beton,' and that her views are carefully distanced and depersonalized."[6] While I don't agree with Showalter's answer, I believe no question could be more important for understanding *A Room of One's Own*. Why does Virginia Woolf mask herself in this way in the same essay in which she exhorts young women that "it is much more important to be oneself than anything else"?[7] And why is the mask so transparent? Woolf immerses us in her thought process, using phrases like "I thought" and "I asked myself" over and over, and they are thoughts that no random Mary Beton or Seton could have come up with.[8] Woolf's voice is immediately recognizable no matter who she claims to be. And that, I believe, is the point. Woolf is like Shakespeare's rose; call her what you want to, but only she could have written this remarkable essay. External labels are irrelevant compared to the mind at work.

In this, she conforms to the ideal she associates with Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Describing the former, she writes,

> The reason perhaps why we know so little of Shakespeare—compared with Donne or Ben Jonson or Milton—is that his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. We are not held up by some 'revelation' which reminds us of the writer… If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare. If ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded, I thought, turning again to the bookcase, it was Shakespeare's mind.[9]

For Woolf, Shakespeare's greatness lies in the fact that we are not distracted by biographical details; we can focus fully on the perspective he manifests in his writing. She explains this idea more fully when she comes to Austen:

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[6] Elaine Showalter, "Virginia Woolf and the Flight Into Androgyny" in *A Literature ofTheir Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 282.
[7] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, edited by Mark Hussey (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005), 109.
[8] Contra critics like Brenda S. Helt, who claims that Woolf employs personas "to frame Mary Beton/Seton/Carmichael's ruminations on androgyny as commonsensical ones that any woman might have about this fairly common idea, rather than as autobiographical self-revelation or as a new theory didactically proffered by a famous author." Helt, "Passionate Debates on 'Odious Subjects': Bisexuality and Woolf's Opposition to Theories of Androgyny and Sexual Identity," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56, no. 2 (2010): 161, note 20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41062468.
[9] Woolf, *AROO*, 56.

> Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at *Antony and Cleopatra*; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare.[10]

We do not think *about* Shakespeare or Austen when we read their works; we think *with* them. We see through their eyes rather than looking at them. Woolf's ideal, then, is neither impersonality nor a deconstruction of identity. Her analysis of authors like the fictitious Mary Carmichael hinges "whether she is being herself or someone else," whether the writer's mind is "communicating its experience" or "alter[ing] its clear vision in deference to external authority."[11] Her description of the mind's "clear vision" indicates how Woolf understands the self: as a perspective, a mind looking out on the world. She encourages her listeners to cultivate their own perspectives, to "think of things in themselves. That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad?"[12] In focusing on what we see, we come to know our thoughts and opinions, looking through our own eyes rather than the borrowed lenses of other people.

In so doing, we can attain the status of an author rather than a character. We know an author by their voice, by their perspective on the world, yet they are a Godlike figure, never seen or touched, but only evidenced in their creations. A character, in contrast, is known through their appearance and actions, in some ways more fully realized, yet at the expense of their agency and freedom (would it be too on the nose to say authority?). We never quite forget that they are the art, not the artist. Woolf seeks to escape the status of a character by replacing herself with Mary

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[10] Woolf, *AROO*, 67.
[11] Woolf, *AROO*, 80, 103, 73.
[12] Woolf, *AROO*, 39.

Beton/Seton/Carmichael; we can look only at her fictions, and we can see them only by the light of her words.

Light is key to her metaphor, that "incandescence" which she repeatedly says characterizes the mind of a great artist. Marilyn R. Farwell notices the strangeness of this image, but, like Showalter, she views it as a marker of impersonality and objectivity, linking it to the ideas of T.S. Eliot.[13] But if we ground it instead in Woolf's essay, we can see that it links the author again to God–"Let there be light"–but also to the photographer, who sets off the flashbulb that illuminates the picture. Woolf uses photographic metaphors throughout *A Room* to illustrate her vision of the self as perspective.[14] When she discusses "unity of mind," she writes, "Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives."[15] Here, the mind is a camera, constantly adjusting the focus but remaining a single lens. The incandescent flash of the writer's vision reflects and stamps itself onto the light-sensitive "film" in the back of the mind. Woolf describes this film as "traced in invisible ink on the walls of the mind… a sketch which only needs to be held to the fire of genius to become visible," a process she directly compares to "expos[ing] it."[16] She also suggests exposure in her final allusion to the androgynous mind, which she says "must lie wide open" like the shutter of the camera lens.[17] However, to develop the film, the artist must then create a darkroom in her mind lest further light exposure destroy the image: "Not a wheel must grate, not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn. The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind

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[13] Marilyn R. Farwell, "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny," *Contemporary Literature* 16, no. 4 (1975): 447-450, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1207610.
[14] Such imagery is typical for Woolf; Maggie Humm argues that she frequently uses analogies drawn from photography. Humm, "Virginia Woolf and Photography," *Études brittaniques contemporaines* 53 (2017), https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3957.
[15] Woolf, *AROO*, 96.
[16] Woolf, *AROO*, 71.
[17] Woolf, *AROO*, 103.

celebrate its nuptials in darkness."[18] The sexual metaphor combines with the photographic, so that the union of the two sides of the mind also resembles the chemical reaction that develops the latent image on the film into a photographic negative. In contrast, in books by authors who lack integrity, "something seems to check them in their *development*: or if they bring to light only a faint scribble in that corner and a blot over there, and nothing appears whole and entire."[19] The photograph is a failure, unable to communicate what the artist has seen.

Woolf's metaphor of the mind as a camera again aligns the self with what it sees. Rather than suggesting objectivity, the photograph creates a record of the individual's unique perspective, as well as a way of sharing one's view with others, who, by looking at the photograph, can see what the photographer sees. Photographs thus reveal the personality of the photographer, as Woolf highlights in her essay on her great-aunt, the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron: "All her sensibility was expressed, and, what was perhaps more to the purpose, controlled in the new born art."[20] Cameron's photographs do not merely replicate the real world; instead, they transform it according to her artistic vision. In her pictures, "Boatmen were turned into King Arthur; village girls into Queen Guenevere. Tennyson was wrapped in rugs: Sir Henry Taylor was crowned with tinsel. The parlour-maid sat for her portrait and the guest had to answer the bell."[21] The photographer turns those around her into characters and thus shapes and transforms the world around her, all the while denying others the chance to do the same to her. She is the invisible presence behind the camera, directing our gaze and illuminating her vision.

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[18] Woolf, *AROO*, 103.
[19] Woolf, *AROO*, 72. Emphasis added.
[20] Virginia Woolf, Introduction to *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men & Fair Women by Julia Margaret Cameron* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1926), 70. http://www.woolfonline.com/?node=content/contextual/transcriptions&project=1&parent=45&taxa=46&content=6282&pos=65.
[21] Woolf, Introduction to *Victorian Photographs*, 70.

The Self from the Outside

Why have we lost this understanding of Woolf? How could Showalter and Moi end up agreeing that Woolf "refus[es] to be pinned down to one unifying angle of vision"?[22] Here, again, Showalter points us to the answer. She worries about the "idealization and mystification of Woolf's life style," especially her suicide, and writes that "I think it is important to demystify the legend of Virginia Woolf."[23] The problem is that Woolf has become a character. We have ceased to look through her eyes because we are so busy looking at her and telling stories about her life. Woolf left us plenty of material with her volumes of journals and letters. It also hasn't helped that Woolf was blessed (or cursed) with an amazing fairy-tale name, a resonance Edward Albee picked up on in the title of his 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*[24] How could we not imagine her as a literary heroine, transgressing boundaries as both the virgin and the wolf? Indeed, we have hints that Woolf viewed herself in this light, like her comment that she will not attempt predictions about the future of women and fiction lest she "wander from my subject into trackless forests where I shall be lost and, very likely, devoured by wild beasts."[25] As someone named Hope, I sympathize; it's hard having to worry about whether people see me as a person or a personification. Yet these associations certainly do shift our perspective from inside out to outside in. Showalter gives an example of this shift when she draws our attention to Woolf's depiction of Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925): "A great deal of her anger comes out in the portrait of Sir William Bradshaw, the Harley Street nerve doctor. Personal experience explains the inartistic lack of proportion most critics have noticed as a 'flaw' in this fiercely

[22] Moi, 135.
[23] Showalter, 265.
[24] The play itself is a grim, tawdry affair, a cuckolding plot with neither Falstaff nor merry wives to redeem it, but Albee struck gold with that title even as he further distracted attention from Woolf's own perspective. Tellingly, Moi repurposed the title for her essay, signalling a similar failure to attend to what Woolf actually thought and wrote.
[25] Woolf, *AROO*, 76.

vibrant section of the novel."[26] Showalter's analysis echoes Woolf's own critique of Charlotte Brontë: "in the passages I have quoted from *Jane Eyre*, it is clear that anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance."[27] Why has Woolf swerved from her ideals, transforming her novel from a camera into a mirror? How did she come to haunt her works and distract our attention until Moi thought it necessary to exorcize her entirely?

Woolf herself might tell us that there is nothing more common. Writing of nineteenth-century women novelists, she constantly sees evidence that

> the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'. She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis. It does not matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it.[28]

Certainly, Woolf was angry–she admits as much in *A Room*–and very aware of men's criticism. Farwell quotes her journal entry from the time of the essay's publication in which she worries about its reception among her male friends and the wider public, fretting that "there is a shrill feminine tone" and that she "shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist."[29] However, despite Woolf's warnings to pay no attention to such outside opinions, it is impossible to walk through the world without imagining oneself as the object of others' gazes. None of us can think only of things in themselves and our own opinions of them, nor would such imperviousness to the views of others be desirable. Only sociopaths truly don't care what other people think. Indeed, Woolf herself acknowledges that "it is the nature of the artist to mind

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[26] Showalter, 277.
[27] Woolf, *AROO*, 72.
[28] Woolf, *AROO*, 73.
[29] Farwell, 443.

excessively what is said about him."[30] Even Jane Austen, she admits, "thought it necessary to hide her manuscript from visitors," though Woolf cannot "find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest."[31] Was that really because Austen wrote "without hate, without bitterness, without fear"?[32] I don't think so, and I'm not convinced that Woolf did either. As Woolf knew perfectly well, Shakespeare and Austen are uniquely understood through their works because we otherwise have so little information about them. In stark contrast to Woolf's epistolary abundance, few records of Shakespeare and Austen have survived. And if the credit, in Austen's case, belongs to her sister Cassandra for burning her letters, that very act suggests that the letters did in fact contain hate, bitterness, and fear that needed to be permanently concealed. Nor has the absence of information about either author prevented us from viewing them as characters and telling stories about them. In *A Room*, Woolf confirms that "we have lives enough of Jane Austen,"[33] and elsewhere she laments the superfluity of criticism about Shakespeare, fantasizing that "a paternal government might well forbid writing about him."[34] While artists may have a unique power to develop and share the pictures illuminated and captured by their minds, they are not exempt from the everyday indignity of being seen and misunderstood by other people, cast into a part on the world's stage. Woolf herself worked to carve out a new, more elevated role for Austen, transforming her from "the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of 'single blessedness' that ever existed" to "the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal."[35] Woolf set her literary mother alongside Shakespeare as the goddess of English literature, and Britain's ten pound note today is a testament to her success.

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[30] Woolf, *AROO*, 56.
[31] Woolf, *AROO*, 67.
[32] Woolf, *AROO*, 67.
[33] Woolf, *AROO*, 45.
[34] Quoted in Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 98.
[35] Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," in *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/64457/pg64457-images.html#Jane_Austen.

Woolf's admiring characterization of Austen suggests one solution to the problem of being seen through others' eyes: viewing yourself through the eyes of someone who loves you. Maggie Humm describes the "constant exchange of photographs" between Woolf and her friends; she both solicited photographs of friends and sent them pictures of herself.[36] Woolf's comments about her self-portraits reveal relatable discomfort with being seen from the outside. When she sent her picture to her friend Emma Vaughan, she wrote that "it is somewhat like an ancient beast of my acquaintance."[37] She dehumanizes herself, viewing herself only as the Wolf, or perhaps the Goat, her family nickname decidedly not used in the Simone Biles sense. Sending another photograph of herself to Leonard before their marriage, she asked, "Dyou like this photograph?—rather too noble, I think. Here's another."[38] Sending the pictures despite her discomfort was an act of faith that the recipients would look on images of her with love rather than judgment or criticism, requiring Woolf to imagine their views of her in addition to her own.

Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928), written about and for her lover Vita Sackville-West, is the exemplar of this solution to seeing oneself from the outside. Critics often quote Vita's son Nigel Nicolson's description of the novel as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature" only to dismiss it,[39] but the enamored perspective of the author is the point: Woolf gave Vita the chance to see herself through her lover's eyes. She depicts her beloved according to the principles of "The New Biography" (1927), illustrating her personality not through a realistic account but by making her into a fictional character. Much like the Doctor in *Doctor Who*, she gets to travel through time and regenerate (into a new sex rather than an entirely new body), but her personality and identity remain stable. I can't imagine a more exciting and flattering gift than

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[36] Humm, para. 4.
[37] Quoted in Humm, para. 3.
[38] Quoted in Humm, para. 4.
[39] Quoted and dismissed in Maria DiBattista, Introduction to *Orlando*, ed. Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2006). Kindle.

someone making up stories of my adventures. Who wants to be immortalized in a sonnet when you could be living on and having a great time as a character and a legend? Fittingly, Woolf paired her literary portrait with photographs of Vita as Orlando, further enabling Vita to see herself from Woolf's point of view.[40] Her success is clear in Vita's reaction. After reading the novel, she wrote that Woolf had "invented a new form of Narcissism,–I confess,–I am in love with Orlando–this is a complication I had not foreseen."[41] In seeing herself through her lover's eyes, Vita could fall in love with herself, internalizing Woolf's perspective and thus achieving a new, admiring relationship to herself.

Virginia Woolf was not so lucky. Here, I'm going to risk some of that "historical-biographical criticism" that Moi criticized Showalter and Jane Marcus for employing, asking "does it really matter whether or not Woolf was in the habit of trembling at her desk? Surely what matters is what she wrote?" I think it matters quite a lot, and that Showalter and Marcus' "combination of radical feminism with this traditionalist critical method" is indicative not "of a certain theoretical and methodological confusion in the field of feminist criticism" but of the necessary contextualization of women's writing in the circumstances of their lives, a concern that is also central to *A Room of One's Own*.[42] Showalter describes the nightmarish events leading up to Woolf's suicide, which hinge on the failures of both Leonard and her doctors to provide supportive external perspectives. Woolf was repeatedly sent to nursing homes "for female lunatics" for the rest cure hauntingly immortalized in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Showalter details one such episode, later recreated in Septimus'

[40] Humm describes how the photography sessions that produced these images were an important part of Woolf's courtship of Vita. Humm, para. 5.
[41] Quoted in DiBattista, Introduction to *Orlando*.
[42] Moi, 145.

visit to Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway* (the same scene discussed earlier as one in which Woolf's personal anger shines through):

> in the summer of 1913 Leonard insisted that she should return to the nursing home. Virginia insisted that she was perfectly all right. Leonard, having secretly consulted a new physician, suggested that they should go to a doctor and each present their case. He was delighted when Virginia suggested they visit the very physician he had consulted; predictably, the verdict was that she was ill and that she should enter the home. That night she attempted to kill herself.[43]

Seeking validation through an outside perspective, Woolf instead encountered a conspiracy to declare her mad and confine her. Her suicidal response only served to confirm the diagnosis, and she was once again locked away. Showalter sums up the situation by writing, "Thus Woolf became the real-life epitome of that feminine archetype, the Mad Wife."[44] This transformation was effected through the dominance and enforcement of Leonard's view of Woolf, which must have been profoundly destabilizing to Woolf herself as she sought to ground herself in the midst of her struggles with mental illness.[45]

The Self as Character

In such straits, what other options did she have to anchor her identity and navigate through the stormy waters? *A Room of One's Own* suggests a common alternative: identification with fictional characters and their authors. Indeed, Woolf suggests that fictional women and their authors are key to how women understand themselves. In the opening of the essay, she writes, "The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what

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[43] Showalter, 275.
[44] Showalter, 276.
[45] As Humm describes, in this effort Woolf once again turned to photographs: "Woolf believed that photographs could help her to survive those identity destroying moments of her own life—her incoherent illnesses. For example, writing to Margaret Llewelyn Davies in 1915, Woolf 'wanted to say that all through that terrible time' [a week's attack of apparent insanity] 'I thought of you, and wanted to look at a picture of you, but was afraid to ask!' (Woolf 1980, 60). Photographs of friends were crucial to Woolf's own sense of identity. Friends' photographs often provide solidly visible autobiographical evidence when feelings of loss of identity become overwhelming." Through these photographs, Woolf could not only reassure herself of the ongoing existence of her loved ones but could also imagine them thinking of and looking at her, a reminder of her own personhood. Humm, para. 4.

they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together."[46] Woolf claims that this final idea, while the most interesting, is too ambitious and that she has settled for the more modest argument that women need money and a room of their own to write, but it underwrites the rest of the essay. And it makes sense: if gender is a social construct, then we have to learn what it means to be women and what paths might be open to us somewhere. If we don't want to follow in our mothers' footsteps (and so few of us do), then we turn to fiction to find other roles that might be available. It's clear that Woolf did. However, the tricky part is that these roles cannot be extricated from their narratives. In identifying with a character, we are also imaginatively aligning our lives with that character's story. Life often ends up imitating art, so we need to pick not only the right role but also the kind of story we want to be in.

Hence the importance in Woolf's literary history of Aphra Behn, who debuted the role of the woman novelist. The imaginative possibility she created made it possible for other women to do the same: "For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen."[47] Nor did Behn only open the door for women to be professional writers; she also provided an alternative to the fallen woman narrative, the plot in which a woman who has sex outside of marriage is doomed to die (usually by suicide, and often after an interlude of prostitution; think Fantine, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, Edna Pontellier, Tess Durbeyfield, etc.). While, as my list indicates, this storyline proliferated in the 19th century, the fallen narrative is one of the oldest stories about women. The original fallen woman is Eve, whose consumption of the forbidden fruit, often understood as

[46] Woolf, *AROO*, 3.
[47] Woolf, *AROO*, 63.

sexual transgression, leads to the Fall and death not only for herself but for all mankind. And the fallen woman plot is still going strong today. The 2023 film *Poor Things*, for instance, is a clever retelling of the narrative in which the heroine's suicide fantastically precedes her sexual awakening and career as a prostitute to disrupt the chain of causality that blames female sexuality for women's problems. Woolf suggests that the alternative *Poor Things* takes up began with Aphra Behn. The parental objection to daughters following in Behn's footsteps and becoming a professional writer–"Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better!"–highlights the fact that Behn did not succumb to the fallen woman narrative despite her libertine lifestyle.[48] She continued living "the life of Aphra Behn." Disapproving parents might think an early death would be a better ending to her story, but it wasn't. And when she did die, she ended up not in the Thames, the traditional final resting place of the fallen woman,[49] but in Westminster Abbey.

The significance of the new possibilities opened by Behn–including for Woolf herself–becomes clear in Woolf's story of Judith Shakespeare. As Margaret J.M. Ezell argued in her 1990 article "The Myth of Judith Shakespeare," this fictional imagining of what might have happened to Shakespeare's equally gifted sister has been taken for fact with disastrous results. Based on Woolf's assertions about the lack of women writers before the 18th century, compilers of anthologies of women's writing largely excluded women writing during the Renaissance and Restoration, even citing Woolf's essay as a source of historical information. Ezell, however, follows their lead in taking Woolf seriously, soberly explaining that Woolf "is a great

[48] Woolf, *AROO*, 63. Behn's alleged promiscuity fits neatly with the association between writing for publication and prostitution. See Deborah Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1995), 12.
[49] The fallen woman commits suicide by jumping off a bridge into the river, as depicted in Thomas Hood's 1844 poem "The Bridge of Sighs," George Frederic Watts' 1850 painting *Found Drowned*, and, more recently, *Poor Things*.

novelist, an inspired analyst of the process of literary creation–but she is not a great historian and it is unfair to demand that she act in such a role. She was bound by the limitations of the historiography of her day."[50] Here, she underestimates Woolf, who was perfectly aware that she was making up a story.[51] Her tale of Shakespeare's sister is a classic fallen woman narrative, and Woolf repeatedly highlights its fictionality. She opens by writing, "Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say," making it clear right off the bat that the story is a fabulation.[52] She ends the tale with a similar emphasis: "That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius."[53] "It's a story!" she practically yells, as if she knew that we would be prone to misunderstanding its import. She even makes Judith's seducer Nick Greene, also a character in *Orlando*, just in case we haven't gotten it yet.[54] And the reason the story would run thus is because of the dominance of the fallen woman narrative. No one would have been able to imagine that a young woman could run away to London without coming to grief, probably sexually. Indeed, Woolf emphasizes the ideological entanglement of the woman writer and the prostitute throughout her story.[55] When Judith appeals to Greene for work, "He hinted–you can imagine what." She wants to "roam the streets at

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[50] Margaret J.M. Ezell, "The Myth of Judith Shakespeare: Creating the Canon of Women's Literature." *New Literary History* 21, no. 3 (1990): 587, https://www.jstor.org/stable/469128.

[51] Interestingly, I think that one person who did understand Judith Shakespeare's mythic status and created her own version of Woolf's legend is the novelist V.E. Schwab. Her 2020 bestseller *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* tells the story of just such a runaway girl, but the eponymous heroine, rather than dying, is cursed to be continuously forgotten, leaving her mark only as the Muse of other (mostly male) artists.

[52] Woolf, *AROO*, 46.

[53] Woolf, *AROO*, 48.

[54] Greene plays a similar role in both stories, thwarting the hero/heroine's literary ambitions through his mockery. Orlando, fortunately still male at this point in the story, escapes the encounter with a wounded ego, though he burns his manuscripts in shame. Nick Greene does have a real-world counterpart: Robert Greene, who scorned the "upstart crow" often understood as Shakespeare himself.

[55] In case you didn't read note 48, I refer you again to Deborah Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets* for a fuller discussion of this association.

midnight;" her genius "lusted" for experience to write about.[56] "Caught and tangled" in these associations, her sexual fall is inevitable.

Ezell blames Woolf for promoting–maybe even creating–the myth of "the isolated self-destructive female artist,"[57] but Woolf situates Judith alongside imaginative alternatives, starting with Shakespeare himself. Her Shakespeare is no more a historical figure than his sister. Here, you must prepare yourself for something very shocking. I believe that Woolf was an anti-Stratfordian: she didn't believe that William Shakespeare, the actor from Stratford-upon-Avon, was the author of the plays attributed to him.[58] We know that Woolf was aware of the authorship question. It was in the air. Her father wrote a satirical essay–"Did Shakespeare Write Bacon?"–arguing against the idea that Francis Bacon wrote the plays.[59] The unfortunately named J. Thomas Looney had published *Shakespeare Identified* in 1920, introducing Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, as a candidate for the author, a theory that remains popular among anti-Stratfordians today. Vita liked to fantasize about finding Shakespeare's manuscripts at Knole.[60] And Woolf herself was keenly aware of the speculative nature of biographies of Shakespeare, like the one written by her father's *Dictionary of National Biography* colleague Sidney Lee. As Alice Fox writes, "In even the best of the Shakespeare critics Woolf noticed the tendency to indulge in what she called 'autobiographical criticism': 'It

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[56] Woolf, *AROO*, 47-48.
[57] Ezell, 585.
[58] To my surprise, I couldn't find anyone writing about Woolf and Shakespeare who came to this conclusion, and I looked quite hard. Based on her title, I thought that Michelle M. Dowd would take the plunge in her article "Judith Shakespeare's Brother," but no. Marjorie Garber makes several references to the authorship question in her book *Shakespeare in Bloomsbury*, but she never contends that anyone in the Bloomsbury Circle held such an unorthodox belief, merely noting that "some people, then and now" have questioned the traditional attribution. Journalist Elizabeth Winkler asks suggestive questions about Woolf's views, perceptively noting contradictions in her claims about the possibility of a woman writing the plays, in *Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies*, but she ultimately leaves her questions unanswered. Dowd, "Judith Shakespeare's Brother," *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2019): 51-74, doi: 10.1215/00267929-7247282; Garber, *Shakespeare in Bloomsbury* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), in chapter 3, in the section "'He Sat at Twitchett's Table: *Orlando* (1928)"; Winkler, *Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2023), 364-369.
[59] Garber, in chapter 2.
[60] Garber, in chapter 3, in the section "The Home of All Your Tribe."

is a commonplace to say that every critic finds his own features in Shakespeare.'"[61] In "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), Woolf's narrator refers to her musings about Shakespeare as "historical fiction,"[62] and Woolf emphasizes the made-up nature of Shakespeare biographies in *A Room* as well. She begins her account this way:

> Shakespeare himself went, very probably,—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighbourhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right.[63]

Her language highlights the abundance of speculation: "very probably," "may have learnt," "perhaps." She devotes a single sentence to his rise to fame: "Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen."[64] The compression of events and hyperbolic language–"lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody"–again suggest a fictional account. In *Orlando*, likewise, she deliberately keeps Shakespeare's identity ambiguous. Near the end of the novel, the heroine muses, "He sat at Twitchett's table… with a dirty ruff on… Was it old Mr. Baker come to measure the timber? Or was it Sh–p–re?"[65] Woolf emphasizes both that the William Shakespeare we've credited with the authorship could be confused with a servant and that the man has been deified, his name unspeakable like the Jewish God's. Both

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[61] Fox, 97.
[62] Quoted in Garber, chapter 3, in the section "'He Leant His Forehead on His Hand': 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917)."
[63] Woolf, *AROO*, 46.
[64] Woolf, *AROO*, 46-47.
[65] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed, Mark Hussey (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), 228.

ideas should raise our suspicions about the attribution.[66] [67] In her unfinished history of English literature, Woolf tellingly placed Shakespeare in the section "Anon."[68] Most damningly, the central thesis of *A Room* denies the possibility that the uneducated man from Stratford could have written the plays: "genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born to-day among the working classes."[69] As much as she admired the plays, Woolf did not have the faith required to believe in William Shakespeare the man.

Instead, Woolf portrays Shakespeare as another myth of the author, this time a successful writer whose natural genius is so great that his humble birth, lack of education, and tumultuous youth cannot prevent him from becoming the God of English literature. The appeal of this legend for any writer, including Woolf herself, is obvious. In setting him alongside Judith, however, Woolf highlights how these stories are gendered: male authors get to imagine they are like Shakespeare, however improbable his story, while female writers are haunted by the fear that they are doomed to the fate of fallen women. But Woolf's point is that both of these stories are fictions. Fictions with power, to be sure, that have a very real impact on the lives of aspiring authors. Yet their power comes from our belief in them, and we are free to come up with new stories, as did the writer of Shakespeare's plays. His heroines are often threatened by the fallen woman narrative (Hero, Desdemona, Imogen, Hermione, etc.), but they are always innocent and

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[66] Winkler ties the controversy about Shakespeare's authorship to the rise of modern Biblical scholarship questioning traditional claims about the authors of Scripture and its veracity more generally, as well as doubts about the existence of Homer. Winkler, 206.

[67] Additionally, as Garber notes, Orlando's belief that "to write, much more to publish, was, he knew, for a nobleman an inexpiable disgrace" aligns with the explanation offered by Oxfordians as a reason their man would have used a pseudonym. Woolf, *Orlando*, 57; quoted in Garber, chapter 3, in the section "'He Sat at Twitchett's Table: *Orlando* (1928)."

[68] Garber, chapter 3, in the section "Nothing but Shakespeare and Oneself." Winkler notes the same connection between Shakespeare and the anonymous writing of women in her reading of *A Room*. Winkler, 365.

[69] Woolf, *AROO*, 48. William Shakespeare's lack of education is a key reason anti-Stratfordians do not believe he could have written the plays. Winkler, 19.

often resurrected. Other Shakespearean heroines succeed where Judith failed: they run away from home and change their fates, often by crossdressing as men (Rosalind, Viola, Portia, Helena and Hermia, etc.).[70] Woolf attempts to claim the latter storyline for herself by way of allusion in *Orlando*: if Vita is Orlando, then she is Rosalind. Indeed, we can read *Orlando* as an alternative to the stories of both Shakespeare and his sister. Unlike Shakespeare, who "never blotted a line," Orlando becomes a successful author not through an outpouring of natural genius–his youthful works, like most people's, are not very good–but through years of practice and revision. After being transformed into a woman, she remains sexually active and even spends time in the company of prostitutes, putting herself squarely into fallen woman territory. When she arrives in the 19th century with its obsession with marriage, she nearly succumbs to the fallen woman's fate only to be rescued and redeemed by Shelmerdine, a reincarnation of *Sense and Sensibility*'s Willoughby who turns out to be as good as he seems. As a married woman, Orlando can continue her unconventional life, creating a path other than the fallen woman's. Orlando, then, provides an avatar not only for Vita but for all readers seeking an escape from the gendered binary of narratives represented by Woolf's Shakespeare siblings, enabling them to imagine different life trajectories.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf implicitly offers her readers another character to identify with: Virginia Woolf. Though she deflects attention from her external self with her narrative personas, instead asking readers to see through her eyes, she nonetheless exemplifies a woman who, having acquired money and a room of her own, has become a famous author. As Christine Froula writes, "Woolf's project is not simply to take stock of the contingencies that have burdened women writers but insofar as possible to *realize* her vision of the woman writer's

[70] Contra Dowd, who looks for Judith Shakespeare's story in the plays and oddly lands on the lost princess plot of heroines like Imogen and Perdita.

potential: first, by creating a fictional yet realistic counterexample of the woman novelist, in Mary Carmichael in *Room*, and second, by herself striving to become one example of Shakespeare's sister."[71] In aligning Woolf with Shakespeare's sister, Froula points our attention back to the issue not only of character but also of narrative. I think she is right to identify Woolf with Shakespeare's sister, but the question is: in which story?

The meaning of a narrative and its protagonists is determined by the ending, and this is particularly true in stories in which the protagonist aspires to challenge the status quo. The outcome signals whether the change the hero or heroine desires is possible. Is the story inspirational or a cautionary tale? Is its worldview comic or tragic? Endings rely on authorial control, particularly if the protagonist is going to beat the odds and achieve something unlikely. Literary critics often complain about the use of a deus ex machina, but from the characters' perspective, what could be more welcome? Don't we all want a higher power to tip the scales in our favor, making sure that everything turns out okay? Woolf gave that gift to Vita in *Orlando*, shepherding her heroine not only to literary success but also to a mythic reunion with her beloved Shelmerdine.[72] This final gift from author to character has strong religious overtones that emphasize Woolf's divine intervention. Shelmerdine's reappearance recalls the Second Coming (the Biblical one, not the Yeats version), and their final union is blessed by the appearance of the wild goose, a symbol of the Holy Spirit among Celtic Christians. Yet Woolf also acknowledges her human limitations: just as the Fairy Godmother's magic fades at the stroke of midnight, she cannot take her heroine beyond the present moment. The future remains unknown.

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[71] Christine Froula, "Virginia Woolf as Shakespeare's Sister: Chapters in a Woman Writer's Autobiography," in *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, ed. Marianne Novy (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 134.
[72] Contra Lisa Rado, who reads the departure from realism as a sign of a descent into madness. Rado, "Would the Real Virginia Woolf Please Stand Up? Feminist Criticism, the Androgyny Debates, and *Orlando*," *Women's Studies* 26, no. 2 (1997): 162-163, doi: 10.1080/00497878.1997.9979158.

This lack of authorial direction offers a certain freedom, an ability to make one's own choices and to choose one's own path, but at the cost of uncertainty. In our lives, we are stuck with being characters, and, without an author, we cannot know what kind of story we are in.[73] In an oft-quoted passage from *Moments of Being* (1972), a posthumous collection of Woolf's autobiographical writings, she sums up her philosophy:

> that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.[74]

It's a beautiful idea, at least until you really think about it. What would it mean for *Hamlet* to be the truth about existence? I certainly don't want to live in Hamlet's reality, one in which a conscientious young man who balks at taking a single life unjustly instead precipitates events in which he and everyone he cares about ends up dead. The play is a vision of a world in which people have no real control, where intentions don't matter, and nothing can prevent the final catastrophe. In stark contrast to the Messianic hope that Shakespeare's sister will come again with which Woolf ends *A Room*, *Hamlet* offers its characters not freedom but tragic determinism.

Tragically, that is the kind of story Woolf decided she was a character in. Showalter describes the circumstances of her death: "In 1940, after the years at the uncannily named Monks House, there was a question of the rest cure again. Virginia made her woman physician promise that there would be no rest cure 'ordered,' but it was clear that no such promise would be kept. She killed herself the next day."[75] Maybe Woolf felt like she had only two stories to choose from,

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[73] Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the English translation of which premiered on the West End in 1922, enacts this dilemma and suggests that, without a caring author to resolve the plot's conflicts, things are likely to end in tragedy.

[74] Quoted in Maria Popova, "Virginia Woolf on Why She Became a Writer and the Most Important Capacity Necessary for Being an Artist," *The Marginalian*, September 9, 2015, https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/09/09/virginia-woolf-cotton-wool-moments-of-being/.

[75] Showalter, 278.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening*, and she chose the latter. But this choice did not only cut her story short; it also permanently altered her legacy. Rather than authoring an alternative to Judith Shakespeare's fallen woman narrative, her life became indistinguishable from it. Showalter makes this clear in her epigraph from *A Room*: "It needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled apart by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her own health and sanity to a certainty."[76] We cannot help but read the passage biographically as a description of Woolf herself, another fallen woman who, unable to navigate life's currents, ended her story by drowning herself. The tragic irony is that the legend of her character eclipsed the unique authorial perspective she wanted to share with us. Her incandescent light was quenched, her eyes darkened. Her ultimate room of one's own was the grave.

[76] Showalter, 263.

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