A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

24 October 1929

79. From an unsigned review, 'Women and Books', *Times Literary Supplement*

31 October 1929, 867

'How she was able to effect all this is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions.' These unobtrusive words have grown familiar; Jane Austen, the surprising person, has emerged into what to her would have been an inconceivable fame. Mrs Woolf quotes the sentence in her essay, and it must have suggested the image for her title. It seems, certainly, to make a room of one's own look superfluous. But though there may have been men of letters, and perhaps women, who have been unperturbed by the chatter of their families, they probably did not feel obliged to hide their writing from the eyes of servants or visitors as Jane Austen did. By a sort of pre-established harmony within her she achieved the perfect result; the chief wonder lying, as Mrs Woolf observes, in the entire absence from her books of any signs of fear, protest or resentment aroused in her by doing something which it seemed not quite creditable to do. For 'a room of one's own', like the *arrière-boutique* of Montaigne, seems the natural symbol of detachment and calm; and it will stand as well for the material minimum of freedom, means and opportunity which is essential to a writer.

But—to keep to the main path of a delightfully peripatetic essay—these necessaries, spiritual and material, have been long in coming within the reach of women. It is common knowledge, no doubt, but it sparkles into life again as Mrs Woolf describes what might have happened to an imaginary gifted sister of Shakespeare....

[An expository paragraph has been omitted.]

But the most interesting, if less diverting, points are those in which it touches the art of writing. It is certainly of interest to find an artist who has (one is tempted to say) so masculine a sense of literary form as Mrs Woolf remarking that women must devise a 'sentence' of their own, as the weight and stride of a man's mind are too unlike theirs to be useful. And since 'the book has somehow to be adapted to the body', theirs should perhaps be shorter and more concentrated than men's books. Their fiction, too, has counted for more than their poetry, even if the first impulse was poetic. Here, among other causes, may be the straits of poverty—one thinks of the tragic case of Charlotte Mew. However, in her work or Emily Dickinson's, as in the higher and more accomplished art of Christina Rossetti or Alice Meynell, a certain concentrated quality reappears. So it does in Katherine Mansfield's stories, where at times one feels the point is almost too exactly made. Perhaps such concentration in little is women's equivalent to masculine grasp. 'Grasp' seems to imply both a wider surface and a trenchancy not so much of emotion as of brain.

But here it is a question of the imaginative reason. Coleridge, who said that he had known strong minds 'with Cobbett-like manners' but never a great mind of that sort, believed that all great minds must be androgynous. And it is that thought of his which Mrs Woolf persuasively develops. There is nothing very startling in the belief that, with artistic natures at least, the man's mind has a share of the feminine and the woman's of the masculine, and that the two elements must fuse with and fertilize each other to produce a complete creation. So to Mrs Woolf Shakespeare seems the type of the androgynous unimpeded mind, 'though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women'. It would be amusing, and at times perplexing, to go on with illustrations. Coleridge, for instance, pronounced Wordsworth to be 'all man'. But we can hardly suppose that he excluded him from the great minds in consequence. Mrs Woolf may provoke some surprise when she says that Mr Galsworthy has not a spark of the woman in him. But though we may dispute cases, the principle itself bridges those divisions of sex-consciousness which are disastrous to our age and have led men, in Mrs Woolf's opinion, to write only with the male side of their minds. And her essay, while it glances in a spirited and goodtempered way over conflicts old and new, is really always bent on more intrinsic matters. These, one might say, are a love of life, a love of freedom and of letters; meeting in the conviction that if a writer does what he should he will bring us into the presence of reality.

80. V.Sackville-West, from a review, *Listener*

6 November 1929, 620

V.Sackville-West (1892–1962). Novelist and poet. A very close friend of Virginia Woolf. Her life and family history formed the basis of *Orlando*.

Mrs Woolf, as you probably know, is a critic as well as a novelist; but this little book, which is not a novel, is not pure criticism either. In so far as it is 'about' anything at all, it is a study of women, their circumstances (especially in the past), and the effect of those circumstances upon their writing....

The burden of Mrs Woolf 's exhortation to women is that they should be themselves, and should exploit their own peculiar gifts instead of trying to emulate the gifts proper to the masculine mind; and you will see also from these quotations that the book is not only full of ideas but also of commonsense. Mrs Woolf has perhaps never been given sufficient credit for her commonsense. Airy, fantastic, brilliant– all these adjectives have been lavished on her, till you might think her work as coloured but as empty as an iridescent bubble; you might overlook the fact that the fluttering leaves on the tree to which I compared her just now are tethered to solid boughs which in their turn are tethered to a solid trunk; you might forget that her extravagances, if they have imagination and poetry for grandparents on the maternal side, have also sense and erudition for grandparents on the paternal. I make this allusion to the ancestry of Mrs Woolf's creative genius all the more confidently because she herself, in this essay, indicates the need for something of the sort in reference to literature. No less a critic than Coleridge, she reminds us, said that a great mind is androgynous. She tells us a little parable of a man and a woman getting into a taxi and driving off together, and then she adds, 'Certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab, the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason would

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be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate.' Mrs Woolf is too sensible to be a thorough-going feminist. There is no such thing as a masculinist, she seems to say, so why a feminist? And she goes on to wonder (amateurishly, she says) whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? I know of no writer who fulfils this condition more thoroughly than Mrs Woolf herself. She enjoys the feminine qualities of, let us say, fantasy and irresponsibility, allied to all the masculine qualities that go with a strong, authoritative brain; and it is precisely this combination added to her profound knowledge of literature which fits her so admirably to discuss women in general, and women who write in particular. I hope all men will read this little book; it will do them good. I hope all women will read it; it will do them good, too.

81. Arnold Bennett, from 'Queen of the High-Brows', *Evening Standard*

28 November 1929, 9

I have often been informed by the elect that a feud exists between Virginia Woolf and myself, and I dare say that she has received the same tidings. Possibly she and I are the only two lettered persons unaware of this feud. True, she has written a book about me and a mythical Mrs Brown. But I have not read the book (I don't know why). True, I always said, until she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, that she had not written a good novel. But I have said the same of lots of my novelist friends. True, she is the queen of the high-brows; and I am a low-brow. But it takes all sorts of brows to make a world, and without a large admixture of low-brows even Bloomsbury would be uninhabitable.

One thing I have said of her: she can write. *A Room of One's Own* is a further demonstration of this truth. (She has her private notions

about grammar, See p. 50.) And I have said that you never know where you are in a book of hers. *A Room of One's Own* is a further demonstration of this truth also. It is stated to be based on two papers read to the Arts Society of Newnham and the One-Damned-Thing-After-Another Society at Girton. On p. 6 she refers to herself as a lecturer. On p. 6 she suggests that you may throw 'it' into the wastepaper basket. Well, you can't throw a lecture into the waste-paper basket. You can only walk out from a lecture, or treat your ears as Ulysses treated the ears of his fellow-mariners.

The book has a thesis: namely, that 'it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on it if you are to write fiction or poetry.' With the implied corollary that women, being usually without five hundred a year of their very own, and liable to everlasting interruption, are at a serious disadvantage as novelists and poets.

The thesis is disputable. Dostoevsky wrote some of the greatest novels in the world while he was continually distracted by terrible extra-artistic anxieties. And I beg to state that I have myself written long and formidable novels in bedrooms whose doors certainly had no locks, and in the full dreadful knowledge that I had not five hundred a year of my own—nor fifty. And I beg to state further that from the moment when I obtained possession of both money and a lockable door all the high-brows in London conspired together to assert that I could no longer write.

However, Virginia Woolf's thesis is not apparently important to her, since she talks about everything but the thesis. If her mind was not what it is I should accuse her of wholesale padding. This would be unjust. She is not consciously guilty of padding. She is merely the victim of her extraordinary gift of fancy (not imagination). If I had to make one of those brilliant generalisations now so fashionable, defining the difference between men and women, I should say that whereas a woman cannot walk through a meadow in June without wandering all over the place to pick attractive blossoms, a man can. Virginia Woolf cannot resist the floral enticement.

Some will describe her book as a feminist tract. It is no such thing. It is a book a little about men and a great deal about women. But it is not 'feminist'. It is non-partisan. The author writes: 'Women are hard on women. Women dislike women. Women—but are you not sick to death of the word? I can assure you that I am.' Admirable attitude! And she comes to no satisfactory conclusion about the disparateness of men and women. Because nobody ever has and nobody could.

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You may walk along Prince Consort Road, and through the open windows of the Royal College of Music hear the scrapings, the tinklings and the trillings of a thousand young people trying to make themselves professional musicians. And you may reflect that ten years hence nineteenths of the girls among them will have abandoned all scraping, tinkling and trilling for love, domesticity and (perhaps) cradles. And you may think that you have discovered the origin and explanation of the disparateness of men and women. Not so! Great opera-singers have borne child after child, and remained great opera-singers.

82. M.E.Kelsey, from 'Virginia Woolf and the She-Condition', *Sewanee Review*

October-December 1931, 425–44

The writer, drawing on the explicit comments in *A Room of One's Own*, discusses the 'feminine' aspect of Virginia Woolf 's work. It is a long article, with illustrations drawn from all of Virginia Woolf's work then published. The following brief extracts indicate the general line of the argument.

It is the feminine sides of life which motivate the greater part of Mrs Woolf's fiction. The root of plot and character and setting reach deep into a rich feminine soil. Such a statement demands careful definition, for Mrs Woolf s attitude is far from the polemics of traditional Feminism. From the ashes of those bitter conflicts has arisen a new conception of the whole problem, to which Mrs Woolf gives a form and a voice.

...She explains in *A Room of One's Own*, 'Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being, a vacillation from one sex to

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