WORLD'S CLASSICS

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A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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Edited with an Introduction by
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BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

VIRGINIA WOOLF was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. Her father, Leslie Stephen, himself a widower, had married in 1878 Julia Jackson, widow of Herbert Duckworth. Between them they already had four children; a fifth, Vanessa, was born in 1879, a sixth, Thoby, in 1880. There followed Virginia and, in 1883, Adrian.

Both of the parents had strong family associations with literature. Leslie Stephen was the son of Sir James Stephen, a noted historian, and brother of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, a distinguished lawyer and writer on law. His first wife was a daughter of Thackeray, his second had been an admired associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, and also, like her first husband, had aristocratic connections. Stephen himself is best remembered as the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as an alpinist, but he was also a remarkable journalist, biographer, and historian of ideas; his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) is still of great value. No doubt our strongest idea of him derives from the character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*; for a less impressionistic portrait, which conveys a strong sense of his centrality in the intellectual life of the time, one can consult Noël Annan's *Leslie Stephen* (revised edition, 1984).

Virginia had the free run of her father's library, a better substitute for the public school and university education she was denied than most women of the time could aspire to; her brothers, of course, were sent to Clifton and Westminster. Her mother died in 1895, and in that year she had her first breakdown, possibly related in some way

to the sexual molestation of which her half-brother George Duckworth is accused. By 1897 she was able to read again, and did so voraciously: 'Gracious, child, how you gobble,' remarked her father, who, with a liberality and good sense at odds with the age in which they lived, allowed her to choose her reading freely. In other respects her relationship with her father was difficult; his deafness and melancholy, his excessive emotionalism, not helped by successive bereavements, all increased her nervousness.

Stephen fell ill in 1902 and died in 1904. Virginia suffered another breakdown, during which she heard the birds singing in Greek, a language in which she had acquired some competence. On her recovery she moved, with her brothers and sister, to a house in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury; there, and subsequently at several other nearby addresses, what eventually became famous as the Bloomsbury Group took shape.

Virginia had long considered herself a writer. It was in 1905 that she began to write for publication in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In her circle (more loosely drawn than is sometimes supposed) were many whose names are now half-forgotten, but some were or became famous: J. M. Keynes and E. M. Forster and Roger Fry; also Clive Bell, who married Vanessa, Lytton Strachey, who once proposed marriage to her, and Leonard Woolf. Despite much ill health in these years, she travelled a good deal, and had an interesting social life in London. She did a little adult-education teaching, worked for female suffrage, and shared the excitement of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910. In 1912, after another bout of nervous illness, she married Leonard Woolf.

She was thirty, and had not yet published a book, though *The Voyage Out* was in preparation. It was accepted for

publication by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth in 1913 (it appeared in 1915). She was often ill with depression and anorexia, and in 1913 attempted suicide. But after a bout of violent madness her health seemed to settle down, and in 1917 a printing press was installed at Hogarth House, Richmond, where she and her husband were living. The Hogarth Press, later an illustrious institution, but at first meant in part as therapy for Virginia, was now inaugurated. She began *Night and Day*, and finished it in 1918. It was published by Duckworth in 1919, the year in which the Woolfs bought Monk's House, Rodmell, for £700. There, in 1920, she began *Jacob's Room*, finished, and published by the Woolfs' own Hogarth Press, in 1922. In the following year she began *Mrs Dalloway* (finished in 1924, published 1925), when she was already working on *To the Lighthouse* (finished and published, after intervals of illness, in 1927). *Orlando*, a fantastic 'biography' of a man-woman, and a tribute to Virginia's close friendship with Vita Sackville-West, was written quite rapidly over the winter of 1927–8, and published, with considerable success, in October. *The Waves* was written and rewritten in 1930 and 1931 (published in October of that year). She had already started on *Flush*, the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog—another success with the public—and in 1932 began work on what became *The Years*.

This brief account of her work during the first twenty years of her marriage is of course incomplete; she had also written and published many shorter works, as well as both series of *The Common Reader*, and *A Room of One's Own*. There have been accounts of the marriage very hostile to Leonard Woolf, but he can hardly be accused of cramping her talent or hindering the development of her career.

The Years proved an agonizingly difficult book to finish, and was completely rewritten at least twice. Her friend Roger Fry having died in 1934, she planned to write a biography, but illnesses in 1936 delayed the project; towards the end of that year she began instead the polemical *Three Guineas*, published in 1938. *The Years* had meanwhile appeared in 1937, by which time she was again at work on the Fry biography, and already sketching in her head the book that was to be *Between the Acts*. *Roger Fry* was published in the terrifying summer of 1940. By the autumn of that year many of the familiar Bloomsbury houses had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombs. Back at Monk's House, she worked on *Between the Acts*, and finished it in February 1941. Thereafter her mental condition deteriorated alarmingly, and on 28 March, unable to face another bout of insanity, she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Her career as a writer of fiction covers the years 1912–41, thirty years distracted by intermittent serious illness as well as by the demands, which she regarded as very important, of family and friends, and by the need or desire to write literary criticism and social comment. Her industry was extraordinary—nine highly-wrought novels, two or three of them among the great masterpieces of the form in this century, along with all the other writings, including the copious journals and letters that have been edited and published in recent years. Firmly set though her life was in the 'Bloomsbury' context—the agnostic ethic transformed from that of her forebears, the influence of G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles, the individual brilliance of J. M. Keynes, Strachey, Forster, and the others—we have come more and more to value the distinctiveness of her talent, so that she seems more and more to

stand free of any context that might be thought to limit her. None of that company—except, perhaps, T. S. Eliot, who was on the fringe of it—did more to establish the possibilities of literary innovation, or to demonstrate that such innovation must be brought about by minds familiar with the innovations of the past. This is true originality. It was Eliot who said of *Jacob's Room* that in that book she had freed herself from any compromise between the traditional novel and her original gift; it was the freedom he himself sought in *The Waste Land*, published in the same year, a freedom that was dependent upon one's knowing with intimacy that with which compromise must be avoided, so that the knowledge became part of the originality. In fact she had 'gobbled' her father's books to a higher purpose than he could have understood.

Frank Kermode

INTRODUCTION

In these two essays Virginia Woolf develops an innovative and politically challenging analysis of the causes and effects of women's exclusion from British cultural, political, and economic life. Starting from a consideration of the troubled relations between women and fiction in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf moves on to a much broader analysis of the political and cultural implications of women's oppression in *Three Guineas* (1938).

(*A Room of One's Own* is perhaps Woolf's best-known essay. Despite its very polemical style, its concentration on questions of literary form and literary history has made it accessible to readers of Woolf's fiction.)The recent increase in feminist studies of Woolf's life and writing has also led to very significant interest in *A Room of One's Own*, which has been seen by many critics as the first sustained essay in feminist literary theory. *Three Guineas*, on the other hand, is a relatively unknown text. Although Woolf conceived it as a sequel to *A Room of One's Own*, its density, its range of references, and the extremity of the political positions it advocates have pushed it to the margins of Woolf's texts, with even feminist critics expressing unease about its apparent 'empty sloganeering and cliché' and its 'stridency'.[1]

In fact, *Three Guineas* is the result of ten years of research by Woolf, which builds on the arguments she

[1] Elaine Showalter, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny', in *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), 263–95, p. 295; and Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature* (London: Gollancz, 1973, p. 164).

developed in *A Room of One's Own*. Throughout the 1930s Woolf read memoirs, biographies, books of social theory, official reports, and newspapers, with the aim of furthering her understanding of the social and cultural role of women. The political events of the decade made her political focus both more urgent and more radical. The coming to power of Hitler in 1933, the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9, the polarization of British society in an atmosphere of economic recession and massive unemployment, forced Woolf to consider the political implications of the patriarchal structure she had identified throughout both public and private institutions. Thus, in *Three Guineas*, her object is the identification of the social forces that have led to the growth of Fascism. Seeing these as inextricably linked to the institutions of patriarchal power, Woolf then goes on to advocate a form of radical political action in which women would form themselves into a society of 'Outsiders' in order to challenge the rise of Fascism and the drift towards war.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf begins by considering the implications of the historical relations between 'women' and 'fiction'. From three deceptively simple topics—'women and what they are like', 'women and the fiction that they write', and 'women and the fiction that is written about them' (p. 3)—Woolf develops a complex theory of the relations between gender and writing. She begins by examining the exclusion of women from educational institutions, and the relations between this exclusion and the unequal distribution of wealth. Thus, she tells the story of a day spent in 'Oxbridge', where her attempts to develop her ideas about women and fiction are constantly interrupted by her encounters with inequality and exclusion. Her desire to consult a manuscript is thwarted by her

inability to enter the library of an all-male college. Her aspiration to discuss the problem with women scholars is curtailed by her recognition of the poverty of their institutional resources. Such inequalities and exclusions become symbolic of a whole history of negation and exclusion of the intellectual and economic demands of women: 'thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of the writer' (p. 31). Her argument is advanced through a series of narratives, anecdotes, and apparently random observations, which build up into a picture of 'what a difference a tail makes' (p. 16). Against this image of lack, she insists on the importance for women of gaining both a space, 'a room', and a degree of financial independence.

The next phase of her journey takes her to the British Museum, and to a realization of the vast number of texts that have been written about women by men 'who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women' (p. 34). She finds in these texts a bewildering array of categorical, but contradictory, statements about the nature of woman. What surprises her particularly, however, is the anger that she finds in these texts. This leads her to conclude that men have a strong emotional and political stake in the social inferiority of women, since 'Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size' (p. 45). This recognition of strong psychic investments in existing power relations prefigures much recent work by psychoanalytic feminist critics, who have tried to understand the unconscious processes which lock individual subjects into particular social or symbolic structures.

Leaving the figure of 'woman' she has found in texts by men, Woolf moves on to consider fictional and poetic writing by women. Once more, her emphasis is economic and historical. As if to answer the frequent charge that 'there has never been a woman writer as great as Shakespeare', Woolf invents the figure of Judith Shakespeare, William's sister. Judith's desire to become a writer is compromised by her lack of education, and by the fact that she cannot contemplate a career as an actor. Finally, however, she is destroyed by the social codes that immediately identify a woman in public as sexually available. Having been befriended by an actor–manager, she becomes pregnant, and kills herself.

Her fate thus echoes that of the fictional Mary Hamilton who haunts *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf began *A Room of One's Own* by eschewing any fixed identity: she will tell many stories from many different points of view in order to construct a textual and theoretical collage. Indeed she says, 'call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please' (p. 5). These three Marys are characters in a well-known ballad, which is sung by a fourth Mary, Mary Hamilton. Mary Hamilton, having had a child as the result of an illicit relationship with the King, is about to be put to death. Since Woolf identifies the other three Marys at various points in the essay, there is an increasing sense of Woolf's own identification with the fate of Mary Hamilton, and thus also with Judith Shakespeare. Woolf writes: 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?' (p. 62), and thus signals the troubled relation between women writers and the bodily which continues to preoccupy feminist critics.

In Chapter IV Woolf moves towards a stylistic consid-

eration of the problems facing women writers. Once again, she finds the traces of exclusion and oppression in texts by women. Even when women had access to the financial and social resources necessary for writing, Woolf finds their texts marked by a 'flaw in the centre' (p. 96), which is the legacy of their anger and indignation. Woolf's critical judgements at this point, her privileging of Jane Austen and Emily Brontë over other women writers, have a degree of arbitrariness, but her overall argument is clear. She insists that women writers have suffered from the lack of a literary tradition, of a prose style in which they can produce female subjectivity without strain. Her remark about 'a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use' (p. 100), which has struck many critics as either idealist or mystificatory, has to be understood in relation to her unease with the status of the first-person pronoun in contemporary prose-writing: 'a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I"' (p. 130). Such a powerful subjective presence cannot express the complexity, fragmentation, and plurality which she sees as typical of women's experience.

When Woolf goes on to discuss an imaginary fictional text, *Life's Adventure* by Mary Carmichael, however, she finds innovation and hope not principally in its style, but in its representation of relations between women. For centuries, women had been represented as rivals, or as mediators in relationships between men, but now 'Chloe liked Olivia' (p. 106). Woolf finds in this fictional representation of women's friendship a powerful symbol of transgression, which allows for the development of a form of writing that will not be marked by defensiveness and anger.

Such enthusiasm, however, turns to unease, as Woolf questions the wisdom of praising her own sex. This leads

her to a consideration of the conceptual limitations implicit in thinking of the two sexes as distinct. Observing a man and a woman entering a taxi-cab, and citing Coleridge as her authority, Woolf explores the imaginative and political resources of the concept of androgyny. Woolf argues for the importance of a unified creative mind, which would express both masculinity and femininity, arguing that 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex' (p. 136). This move has angered many feminist critics, who have seen it as evasion on Woolf's part, as a failure to face up to the implications of the oppression she has documented and explored so fully in the first five chapters. Indeed, Elaine Showalter has written of Woolf's use of the concept of androgyny as 'the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness' and thus as a betrayal of any feminist project.[2] Certainly it is true that the enormity of her discoveries seems at times to unsettle Woolf's writing: her insistence that anger should be avoided functions uneasily in a text which has represented so clearly the historical causes of that anger. Still, it does not seem that Woolf's conclusion can be dismissed as simply the result of a failure of conceptual or political nerve. Instead, she can be read as seeking to move beyond the representations of 'man' and 'woman' which have produced so much anger, exclusion, and violence throughout *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf never questions the historical, political, or bodily significance of sexual identity. What she does challenge is the rigidity with which the categories of 'man' and 'woman' are produced in contemporary fiction. Yet un-doing dominant categories of thought can never be easy, and, when Woolf tries to find an image of the androgyous mind at

[2] Showalter, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny', p. 264.

work, she finds herself caught in a fairly uncomfortable embrace: 'The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials darkness' (p. 136). The difficulty of finding an androgynous image to express her creative and political aspirations is an index of the dimensions of the issues with which Woolf engages in *A Room of One's Own*. Insisting that 'it is natural for the sexes to co-operate' (p. 127), what Woolf actually finds is a history of conflict and inequality, which marks and restricts the whole field of creative writing.

Woolf's interest in the significance and understanding of sexual identity is also clear in her mock-biographical text, *Orlando* (1928). This novel has a central character whose gallop through literary and political history is complicated by his changing into a woman. The stress this puts on the linguistic and structural resources of the novel is considerable, and the resulting text is a hybrid of the fictional, the biographical, and the satirical. Its generic confusion thus mirrors its gender confusion, in ways that foreshadow the rhetorical and narrative complexities of *A Room of One's Own*.

The formal implications of radical conceptual change became even clearer for Woolf, however, as she moved towards her sequel to *A Room of One's Own*, which was to have been called 'Answers to Correspondents', or 'On Being Despised', but ended up as *Three Guineas*. The idea for this text can be found initially in a speech which Woolf gave to the London/National Society for Women's Service in 1931. This society consisted mainly of professional women who were struggling to increase the presence of women in higher education and in the professions. Woolf's involvement with this group was part of her network of relationships with political groups, ranging from her early

involvement with suffrage groups, to work with the Labour Party and the Women's Co-operative Guild. Woolf's speech, later published in a modified form as 'Professions for Women', addressed the difficulties faced by women in entering the literary profession.[3] The main barrier, Woolf argued, was the figure of 'the Angel in the House', the historically and culturally embedded representation of an ideal of femininity. Woolf can see no escape from this figure, except through violence: 'I turned upon that Angel and caught her by the throat.'[4] This violence is justified by a plea of self-defence, since the Angel's ideals of charm, selflessness, and purity have been the death of so many women writers.

The violence implicit in *A Room of One's Own* has here become explicit, and it is blamed on the destructiveness of patriarchal culture. Woolf's sense of the need for new forms of literary production to encompass the perceptions and experiences of women is also intense: she imagines her powers of rationality turning in frustration on her imagination and saying 'I cannot make use of what you tell me—about women's bodies for instance.'[5] This exploration of a new literary form in which to capture the subjective and the bodily was also being carried on in Woolf's writing of *The Waves* (1931).

By early 1932 Woolf was trying both to extend her thinking on gender and education, and to develop an

[3] For the text of the speech, see Mitchell A. Leaska (ed.), *The Pargiters by Virginia Woolf: The Novel-Essay Portion of 'The Years'* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), pp. xxviii–xliv. 'Professions for Women' is in Leonard Woolf (ed.), *Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf* (4 vols.; London: Hogarth Press, 1966–7), ii. 284–9.

[4] *The Pargiters*, p. xxxi.

[5] Ibid., p. xxxiv.

entirely new literary form. She started writing *The Pargiters*, which was to be a 'novel-essay', alternating fictional explorations of the history of the Pargiter family since the late nineteenth century with discussions of educational opportunities for women, the destructiveness of the professions as presently constituted, and the troubled relationships of women to their own bodies. This experiment, however, was never to be concluded. Instead, Woolf produced two separate texts: *The Years* (1937), a novel which explored the subjective, economic, and political development of a middle-class family from 1880 to the 1930s; and *Three Guineas*, an extended analysis of the social and economic position of women, and a political treatise against Fascism.

Woolf presents her argument in *Three Guineas* as a reply to three letters which she has received, asking for her political and financial support for different causes. The first letter is from a middle-aged, prosperous barrister, who asks her opinion about the most effective way to combat the drift towards war. He also asks her to sign a petition, to join his society which is working to preserve peace by protecting culture and intellectual liberty, and to give a donation to this same society. The second letter she receives is from the treasurer of a women's college, asking for a contribution to its Rebuilding Fund; the third asks her to donate money to a society which aims to promote the entry of women into the professions. Woolf considers each of these requests in turn, ultimately deciding to send each correspondent the sum of one guinea. Her reasons for doing so are, however, complex, and involve her in an analysis of the history of women's education, the political and individual values which dominate public institutions, the relations between militarism and masculinity, and the