

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S RENAISSANCE



*Woman Reader or
Common Reader?*

Juliet Dusinberre



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For Bill
and for
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Juliet Dusinberre
Girton College, Cambridge

Abbreviations

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

- Berg* *Holograph Reading Notes, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, the New York Public Library*
MHP *Monks House Papers, University of Sussex Library, Manuscript Section*

By VIRGINIA WOOLF:

- CR I* *The Common Reader: First Series*
CR II *The Common Reader: Second Series*
O *Orlando*
PA *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*
RO *A Room of One's Own*
TG *Three Guineas*

By JOHN BUNYAN:

- GA* *Bunyan, Grace Aboundingy*
PP *Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress*

By SIR JOHN HARINGTON:

- OF* *Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, translated by Sir John Harington*

JOURNALS:

- JEGP* *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
MLQ *Modern Language Quarterly*
MLR *Modern Language Review*
NLH *New Literary History*
N&Q *Notes & Queries*

<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Studies in Bibliography</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature</i>

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1

Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Amateurs and Professionals

WOMEN AND LITERARY TRADITION

The single most dramatic departure in literary studies in the last three decades of the twentieth century has been the recovery of women as readers and as writers. Literary studies in the late twentieth century have been characterised by women's awareness of themselves not as surrogate male readers, but as *women* readers. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, first published in 1929, with its insistence on the conditions which have governed women's relation to the written word, and its impassioned plea for a rewriting of history and culture along the female line, now looks like a prophetic foreshadowing of late twentieth-century feminist activity. Its sequel, *Three Guineas* (1938), written under the shadow of encroaching war in Europe – a much more virulent attack on patriarchy as the catalyst to the Second World War – proposes a banding together of outsiders, men and women, against the dominant culture of their time. These two works grew from long meditations on the relation of women to culture, which were in evidence from the outset of Woolf's writing career as a journalist in the first decade of the twentieth century, through the publication of the two volumes of *The Common Reader* (in 1925 and 1932). Virginia Woolf always wanted to remap for women the whole male-dominated territory of literary culture.

Woolf was extraordinarily daring and unusual for her time in making her assumptions about culture explicit. She stated that she used the past for a purpose, as an empowering model for herself as woman writer,² and particularly as a writer not of fiction but of criticism and literary history. Her conviction that the history of language determined the history of writing and reading; her realisation of the significance of the printing press – fascinating to her in her own role as printer – in creating new readers; her insistence that great writers emerge from webs of

culture created by readers, writers, education, patrons; her recognition that the body has been ignored in the search for the mind; all these concerns make her critical enterprise crucial for women readers.

Woolf's real confrontation with the male literary establishment took place when she thought of herself not as a novelist but as a literary critic. Born to the purple as the daughter of Leslie Stephen, one of the most eminent and respected of Victorian men of letters, she constituted herself from early on in life as a cultural dissident, a woman who might be described as one of the 'disaffected participants in the literary tradition'.³ As critic she was forced to confront her lack of formal education, her amateur status as a 'lady' writer in a world of professional men, the prejudices implicit in the gender constructions of her time, and the absence of any established tradition of female literary scholarship. She combated that disabling awareness with a defiant belief that all that was needed was pen and paper, personal courage and formal inventiveness. After all, 'for ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare – if one has a mind that way'.⁴ But she knew that traditions empower as well as disable, and that women could not hope to be great writers without the subsoil of ordinary – or 'obscure' – talent which nurtures the exceptional: 'The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman'.⁵ Throughout her entire career as a writer Woolf searched diligently for cultural ancestors, men and women who might constitute an alternative tradition to which both she and other women writers, past and future, might belong.

In the two volumes of *The Common Reader*, Virginia Woolf identified the emergence of women as readers and writers. When she looked back at her *Common Reader* essays in the late thirties she expressed distaste for their urbanity and discursiveness – what she called her 'tea-table training'.⁶ She felt that her anxiety to establish herself as a literary critic in a man's world had caused her to underplay her hand, and that only after *A Room of One's Own* had she gained the courage to speak out about what she was doing in her critical writing.⁷ At her death in 1941, she was working on a third volume of *The Common Reader* which she called her 'Common History', a book which would trace women's relation to an oral tradition in the vernacular, which had been superseded by the written word once the printing press was established. Of this project two draft essays exist, entitled 'Anon'

and 'The Reader', which construct a cultural mythology, identifying a transition between the unnamed singer in the oral tradition – sometimes man and sometimes woman – and the named writer and individualised reader of books in print. Women, in Woolf's model of cultural history, were excised from the record when writing took over from speaking and singing. This transition, which occurred gradually, was complete at some point during the sixteenth century.⁸ The projected work directed Woolf with renewed intensity to a period she had always found particularly congenial, the late English Renaissance, which she characterised as a time of emerging voices, an emergent vernacular, and a new sense of the past.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represented for Virginia Woolf a key aspect of her revolt against the nineteenth century. She discovered, by leap-frogging two centuries, writing which was still malleable, as prose was shaped to new modes for new readers. The novel was unborn, but its predecessors were everywhere, in Montaigne's essays, in letters and diaries and strange hybrid writings such as Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. The transition from manuscript to print culture, from oral utterance to written word, and from public theatre to private reading, embodied for Virginia Woolf her own need to reach behind the traditional models of masculine education which dominated the literary world into which she had been born. In September 1921 when the first *Common Reader* was beginning to germinate in her mind, she returned eagerly to her writing after an enforced break, rejoicing in the 'recovery of the pen' which was both a repossession, and a re-entry into vitality: 'Thus the hidden stream was given exit, & I felt reborn' (*Diary*, 2. 134, my italics). The metaphor of rebirth, *renaissance*, occurred to her as she embarked on the exhilarating project of *The Common Reader*. The Renaissance had been a period of unique rebirth of culture. In her own reading of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature Virginia Woolf connected herself with a life which included her own rebirth as writer and reader through the recovery of female forebears.

The sense of rebirth was not just, of course, occasioned by reading women writers. Woolf's critical project was always twofold: the reading by women of literature written by men, and the discovery of women as writers and readers. Her own distinctive viewpoint was to inform all her writings on male authors,

so that received critical judgements, and with them accepted notions of how to write, became subjugated to an idiosyncratic renegotiation of the past through a woman's vision. Often, as in the cases of Montaigne and Donne, this process involved analysing the extent to which the male writer felt himself to be ill at ease with his own relation to culture, and particularly to the gender boundaries created by his own time. Montaigne and Donne occupy key positions at the beginning of the two volumes of *The Common Reader*. But when, in the late 1930s, Woolf contemplated the third volume, the 'Common History', she returned to the early modern period with an intensified awareness of the immense changes it had witnessed and created, and other writers surfaced in her mind as part of this process: Bunyan, Pepys, Madame de Sévigné. Writing after 1660, they are all chronologically too late to carry any credence as Renaissance writers, a term which has expired by 1625, with the end of James I's reign.

Joan Kelly-Gadol's celebrated question: 'Did Women have a Renaissance?' has usually been answered decisively in the negative. The Italian Renaissance affected a handful of well-born women, both in Italy, France, and, in the Elizabethan period, in England,⁹ but the vast majority were unaffected by the rebirth of classical learning, as were also the vast majority of working men. But if the chronological boundaries of the Renaissance were to be redrawn to reach further into the seventeenth century, the picture might be very different. Most intellectual historians would hardly wish to talk about 'the Renaissance' as having any definable meaning as late as 1660. Yet in 1660, with the Restoration of that extremely un-Renaissance monarch, Charles II, Milton had still to write *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan had not yet composed *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Pepys's *Diary* had received only its first entries, and Dorothy Osborne's letters were just seven years old. These writings all bear witness to the new world brought into being by the multiple changes wrought in the sixteenth-century Renaissance in Northern Europe, itself a late manifestation of the expansion of learning and art witnessed in *quattrocento* Italy.

If one argues that women had no Renaissance, working men must join them in that exclusion. Bunyan's case offers a particularly striking possibility of revision: that for women and working men there is a much later 'Renaissance' discernible in the mid-seventeenth century in a sector of society whose members were initially untouched by the educational ferment of the earlier

period. The same revision affects many other writers, both men and women, whose Renaissance defies traditional chronological boundaries. Like Virginia Woolf, they also were reborn in the life of the pen, even if it was a later manifestation of the rebirth which animated Montaigne and Donne.

Virginia Woolf's Renaissance encompasses two different phenomena: her affinity on many different levels with the early modern period, and her own sense of being reborn through the creation of an alternative tradition of reading and writing whose roots go back to the Elizabethans and beyond. This book will explore both aspects of her Renaissance. It spans her reading and writing about particular authors, and her identification of the areas in which the late Renaissance period spoke to her own condition, not just as a modernist writer casting aside the traditions of the nineteenth century, but as a woman writer, painfully aware of the absence of a female literary tradition. In suggesting such a tradition I shall, as Woolf herself does, carry the idea of a Renaissance into the late seventeenth century, so that the heirs of Montaigne and Donne – male and female – can be seen as clearly as the original writers. Montaigne's *Essays* were the single most important force in suggesting new forms of thinking and writing which proved to be open to women writers, just as his original most devoted reader had been in fact a young woman, Marie le Jars de Gournay. This is not, however, a study of literary influence, nor is it primarily a study of interaction between Woolf's critical writings and her novels.¹⁰ It engages with Woolf's theories about the relationship between different periods and different forms of writing, and how this affects the emergence of women as readers and writers.

Woolf believed, as did T.S. Eliot, that writers need a tradition and that tradition nourishes the individual talent. But what was for him, in the famous essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent',¹¹ a lucid interaction between the voices of the past and the individual voice of the poet in the present, for Woolf was complicated by the fact that the voices of the past were predominantly male voices. This dilemma affected her not as a novelist – as she was well aware of her many eminent female fore-runners in that art – but as a literary critic and journalist. Her solitariness in those roles, and the masculinist assumptions that surrounded them, fired her to scrutinise the past for a tradition which might belong to women. Locating women's exclusion from

dominant culture in the history of education, of language and of literary forms, Woolf turned to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a time when 'professional' writers emerged at the expense of an 'amateur' tradition. For her one of the most difficult and ongoing struggles had always lain in the uneasy territory she herself occupied somewhere between amateurism and professionalism.

In her early twenties Virginia Woolf rebelled against the rigid boundaries between amateur and professional in her father, Leslie Stephen's, literary world. She claimed in *A Room of One's Own* that the first woman professional was the Restoration playwright, Aphra Behn: 'It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits'.¹² But although the earning of money always remained intensely important to her as testimony of her own professional standing, she queried the terms of male professionalism. Her discontent was fuelled by her perception that Montaigne and a number of Elizabethan writers did not recognise the rigid division between amateur and professional – and its concomitant relegating of women to a leisure class – which went virtually unquestioned in her own world.

Woolf's career as a writer demonstrates a dilemma which has dogged women throughout the twentieth century as they gain access to various forms of professional life. The standard orthodoxy of a patriarchal society has been that the professional and the private must be kept separate; Shakespeare's Antony wreaks destruction on himself and his supporters when he allows his passion for Cleopatra to invade the sphere of public duty. The public world has historically belonged to men, and their success in it has usually depended on the degree to which women, as symbols of personal life, have been excluded from that public domain. When male educators in Renaissance Italy undertook the tuition of aristocratic women, they did not envisage their pupils' entry into a public sphere of activity, such as would have constituted an appropriate climax to the Humanist education of young men.¹³ Renaissance women themselves recognised that their choice lay between the reclusive solitary life of a scholar, and domestic roles.¹⁴ In neither activity had they any access to a public arena of their own. Elizabeth I, one of the few women who did have such access, negotiated her own special charter of rights as a woman ruler, which depended on a cunning manipulation of