A 'Feminist' Text

Virginia Woolf and Feminism

A feminist critic begins by taking notice whenever it is assumed that all normal people are male. This assumption may be present in the text she or he reads and also in the act of reading.

Feminist literary criticism of the 1970s and 1980s has offered various ways of trying to demonstrate the prevalence of the assumption in members of both sexes, and of beginning both to explain and to correct it. It has taken Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as a crucial description of its enterprise; and Virginia Woolf herself has been adopted as an honorary and distinguished member of the feminist movement. The discussion of her novels, and perhaps especially of *To the Lighthouse*, by feminist critics has often been influenced by their interest in her life and in *A Room of One's Own*.

*A Room of One's Own* is an attractively nostalgic text. It posits the pre-First World War world as a time when the sexes were more equal, as John Burt (1982) has demonstrated. It also offers safely romantic images of the exclusion of women from the world of scholarship and writing, so that readers can indulge dreams of the sad story of Judith Shakespeare, or of being excluded from the lawns of a Cambridge college, and can feel justly angry in terms of those dreams. But the dreams allow the dreamer to forget the real difficulties of excluded groups now – of really poor women, of Blacks. They perpetuate a very English ideal of timeless privilege that should be available to all, and they avoid interrogating the idea of privilege itself. Perhaps that is why *A Room of One's Own* is so popular.

S. Reid, *To the Lighthouse*  
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As well as these images of social exclusion, it also offers images of ways in which women are prevented from articulating their own experience, which is assumed to be necessarily different from that of men. The second half of *A Room of One’s Own* is based entirely on the idea that women have wanted to write but have been unable to do so because the language in which they might be able to articulate their experience does not exist. This idea has become a major part of much contemporary feminist critical theory, but it contains a certain confusion within itself.

In Chapter 4 *A Room of One’s Own* surveys the history of women’s writing in England from the late sixteenth century, very much as the novel *Orlando* does. And as in *Orlando* although less dramatically, we are presented with the imagined figure of a woman who wishes to be a writer but who is faced, as she confronts successive generations, with discouragements of successive kinds, until at last, at the end of the eighteenth century, things become easier for her: ‘The middle-class woman began to write’ we are told (*AROOO*, p. 63). As the narrative enters the nineteenth century it becomes even clearer that the image is that of a personality who exists prior to the act of writing. In her manifestation as Jane Austen she is praised for having written novels which show no sign of the circumstances of their author, of the social pressures against her writing at all; but in her manifestation as Charlotte Brontë she is found to have allowed her own passion to intrude and disrupt *Jane Eyre* (pp. 63–6). Clearly the assumption is that the author exists as a fully formed personality, containing her genius within her, before she writes, and also that the ideal novel exists somewhere too, as something she will manage to realise only if the relationship between herself and her novel is unproblematic:

the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. (*AROOO*, pp. 66–7)

Jane Austen apart, women writers have not yet, *A Room of One’s Own* goes on to argue, reached that unproblematic relationship. As it moves on from Charlotte Brontë into the