CHAPTER 2

I Have a Dream: Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*

Early on in *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf (or, rather, the first-person narrator Woolf creates) travels through rainy London streets to the ultimate source for truth about any and every subject: she goes to the British Library, then housed inside the famed British Museum. She is determined to find the answers to the “swarm of questions” she has about women—she has “a thousand questions” but not a single answer. Surely the answers are there in the library, just waiting for her. “If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum,” she asks, then where is it to be found? But her search for answers is in vain. Instead, in one of the most poignant phrases to be found in her book, Woolf describes her narrator, standing in the British Library, “looking about the shelves for books that were not there.”

Looking for books that are not there. Even today, even now, as I sit in a room of my own, a room filled with shelf after shelf of books by and about women, I find this image impossibly moving. And yet the very book that might have changed everything for Woolf was there all the time, right on the shelf: the British Library owns a copy of Bryan Anslay’s English translation of Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published in 1521. The Library also owns a lavishly illustrated fifteenth-century manuscript anthology of Pizan’s works, including *The Book of the City of Ladies*, planned and produced in Pizan’s own workshop, probably under her personal supervision. The volume originally belonged to Isabel of Bavaria, queen of France, and contains a beautifully executed illustration of Pizan, on her knees, presenting the queen with this very copy of her work. Would everything have

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been different if only Woolf had found *The Book of the City of Ladies* on the shelves that day in the British Library? I’d like to think so.

If products are any indication, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is now a pop-culture icon. You can buy t-shirts, mugs, aprons, tea towels, and even deck chairs emblazoned with the title of Woolf’s book—you might even be able to buy all these items at the Room of One’s Own Feminist Bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin, though I’m not sure about that. All these products, and more, are available online with a few mouse clicks and a credit card. You might have enjoyed the Roz Chast cartoon, published in the 26 May 2007 *New Yorker*, which “updates” Woolf’s title—among other things, the twenty-first century woman is looking not just for a room of her own, but a room with “adequate ventilation,” “near a grocery store,” and not “please God” in Queens, all for “under $2000 a month.” You can buy a matted print of this cartoon for $125, a box of notecards for $29.95, a hooded sweatshirt, and, of course, a t-shirt, sized not just for women but also for men and children. Meanwhile, *The New York Review of Books* gallery displays five different David Levine caricatures of Virginia Woolf, from 1966, 1970, 1977, 1978, and 1980, but the Woolf t-shirt that first went on sale in 1983 isn’t offered any longer. There’s no reason to be disappointed, however. You can still buy a Levine caricature of Woolf on a postcard—in fact, two different postcard books include Woolf. She’s in the “Women Writers” set, of course, but I am happy to see that she’s also included in the series of “Writers” postcards, and either collection is a bargain—twenty cards cost just $9.95. Woolf is one of thirteen caricatures included in the David Levine 2010 calendar. She is also one of the writers pictured on the David Levine mousepad, available for $12.95.

Cartoons and caricatures published in the *New York Times* and in *The New York Review of Books* may suggest Woolf appeals just to elitists or to snobs, but all the t-shirts and mugs show that her reach extends far beyond the realms of Manhattan and academia. Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway in 1962. I was only eleven then, and just fifteen when the 1966 film version, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, played in theaters. I was too young to see the movie but old enough to conclude that Virginia Woolf must be a terrifying figure. In fact, Albee’s title, if not the play itself, seems to have generated a lot of anxiety about Woolf. Even so, *Masterpiece Theater* invited Virginia Woolf into the living rooms of American homes in 1991, airing Eileen Atkins’s one-woman dramatization of *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf’s life and work have also inspired a few feature films—*Orlando* was released in 1992, *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1998, and Nicole Kidman won an Oscar for her portrayal of Woolf in *The Hours*, released in the United States in 2003. Not that these have necessarily been huge box