

Male Myth-Making: The Origins of Feminism.

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The feminist writer Kate Millett asserts that although the woman may have been allocated a role no less significant than that of the man by ancient societies with their cult of fertility, over time the role of the woman in procreation was de-emphasised and new religions emerged in which the supremacy of a male God (or gods), became the basis upon which a patriarchal social system, rooted in notions of female inferiority, was constructed and validated (1969: Ch. 2). For example, in Greek mythology, as recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the discredited fertility goddess Pandora is sent by the supreme god Zeus to mankind, bearing a sealed jar which, when opened as a result of her curiosity, releases into the world the evils of old age, poverty and sickness. From Pandora springs "the damnable race of women – a plague which men must live with" (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2; Miles, 1999: 37).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of origins is not dissimilar, and provokes Millett's observation that "Patriarchy has God on its side" (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2). In the beginning was God, and from the beginning God was perceived as male since He created the first man Adam in His own image. Woman, on the other hand, was apparently an afterthought, created by God from one of Adam's ribs, so that Adam might have a "helper like himself" (*The Holy Bible Douay Version*, Genesis: 1-27, 2-20). But woman succumbed to temptation by the serpent, ate of the fruit forbidden by God, and persuaded her husband to do likewise. Consequently, God cast Adam out of Paradise into a world of toil: "to till the earth from which he was taken" (Genesis: 3-23). God made garments of skins to cover the shame which the woman had brought upon herself and Adam. Moreover, He committed the woman to motherhood, under the authority of her husband: "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee" (Genesis: 3-16). Adam called his wife Eve because she would be the mother of all the living.

Millett describes the story of the Fall as "the central myth of the Judeo-Christian imagination and therefore of our immediate cultural heritage", and continues: "This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes" (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2). Through her weakness, woman is believed to have brought about the fall of humanity, represented by Adam. Woman is, therefore, both vulnerable to temptation and a temptress herself, a threat to the moral welfare of mankind. Through her desire to taste of the forbidden fruit of the tree

of life and knowledge, proffered by the serpent with its phallic connotations, woman caused innocence to be forfeited. Woman is thereby seen to disregard authority, to be capable of seeking to usurp divine (male) power, and to be carnal in her nature. In consequence, woman, her sexuality, and her reproductive function must be controlled by man. This is to be achieved through the institution of marriage and through the cult of motherhood, which confine woman to the home, under the authority and protection of her husband, the male, defined by God as the worker and the breadwinner. Thus, the Biblical story of the Creation and the Fall becomes the basis of patriarchy, defined by Rich as a “familial-social, ideological, political system in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (cited in Eisenstein, 1983: 5).

Furthermore, the Biblical, or indeed the Hesiodic, version of the female, by virtue of its theological or mythic apparatus, invests itself with a quality of universality. Thus, all women are felt to be embodied in Eve, or in Pandora; and the characteristics ascribed to the mother figure are deemed to be inherited by the daughters. The identity, which has in fact been constructed for the female by patriarchal religion, is therefore liable to be misconstrued as natural. As Millett puts it: “patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature” (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2). Both sexes become acculturised to accept the patriarchal fictions of female inferiority and degradation as real and natural. Enshrined in sacred literature, the validity of these tenets, and thereby the validity of the *status quo* they support, almost resists questioning. However, as the early feminist, Poulain de la Barre, observes: “All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit” (cited in De Beauvoir, 1949).

Poulain de la Barre’s assertion was made in the seventeenth century, by which time, as De Beauvoir observes a host of disparate (male) writers had urged that “the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth” (1949). As examples, De Beauvoir cites the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle’s argument that “we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness”, alongside the view of the thirteenth century Christian theologian St. Thomas Aquinas that woman is an “imperfect man” and “an incidental being” (1949). Woman is thus defined by male authority, and therefore by the male in general, in subordinate relation to himself, even as the creation of Eve was secondary to and dependent upon the creation of Adam. As De Beauvoir puts it: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (1949). Moreover, the otherness of woman, enshrined in literature and perpetuated by patriarchal society, is not simply a function of difference, of polarity; rather, “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the

common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria” (De Beauvoir, 1949).

Thus, by means of what Greene and Kahn refer to as the “collusion between literature and ideology” (1991: 19), misogynistic literature and scholarship condition society to accept as given the values of the male and the structures which sustain his dominance. This type of antifeminist propagandistic literature was common in the Middle Ages.

The pinnacle of this misogynistic tradition was reached in Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* (1986). The Wife is a feisty character who challenges the authority of the Church Fathers, asserts the prior validity of her own experience as a five times married woman, dominates her husbands – “I governed hem so wel after my lawe” (123) – and is not ashamed to proclaim her sexuality, or to adduce Biblical references to St. Paul to support her own argument that the ideal of chastity promulgated by certain theologians should not be applied to all women (119). Nor does she have any qualms about tearing the leaves out of her fifth husband’s book of “wikked wives”, a compendium of tales about “wicked” women, both Biblical and legendary, drawn largely from the antifeminist tract of St. Jerome, or about finally throwing it upon the fire (Chaucer, 1986: 133-136). Chaucer’s intentions in writing *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* are open to critical debate; he was, after all, no average medieval man. To what degree was his own attitude misogynistic? To what degree was he sympathetic to the Wife; was he, in fact, poking fun at misogyny? Or, was he, in fact, less concerned with propaganda than with writing comedy for its own sake? However, one chooses to answer these questions, the fact remains that through her words and deeds, not only does the Wife of Bath reinscribe in the mind of the reader the myth of female degradation, but she also becomes an exemplar of the very characteristics which the medieval Church found abhorrent in women. She is lustful, she is insubordinate, she is covetous, she is deceitful, she is a harridan who torments her husbands with her tongue and with her body, and she is even prepared to resort to violence to achieve her own ends. In other words, the very fact that the Wife is neither meek nor complaisant, no matter how much the modern reader may seek to interpret these qualities as marking her out as a profeminist, reminds the medieval reader that women are dangerous creatures; as the Pardoner puts it: “I was aboute to wed a wif: allas, / What sholde I bye it on my flesh so dere?” (121). Moreover, the *Tale* told by the Wife reinforces the traditional belief that women represent a threat to men, that given the opportunity they will seek to usurp male authority, even as Eve, tempted by the fruit of the tree of knowledge, was prepared to disobey God. For the moral of the *Tale*, the terrible truth uncovered by the Knight, is that what all women desire is control over the male:

Wommen desire to have sovereynetee
As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,
And for to been in maistrye him above.

(Chaucer, 1986: 142).

Furthermore, although the heroine of the *Tale* appears to gain her desire and triumph over the Knight – “‘Thanne have I gete of you maistrye’, quod she, / ‘Sin I may chese and governe as me lest?’”(146) – careful consideration suggests that this outcome may, in the final analysis, be as detrimental to the female cause as the *Prologue*’s repetition of antifeminist propaganda. The old hag in the *Tale* asks the Knight to choose:

To han me foul and old til that I deye
And be to you a trewe humble wif,
And never you displese in al my lif,
Or elles ye won han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me-
Or in some other place, wel may be.

(Chaucer, 1986: 145-146).

The Knight defers to her wishes – “For as you liketh it suffiseth me”, whereupon the old hag promises to be “bothe fair and good” to her husband, turns into a beautiful young woman, and thereafter “obeyed him in every thing / That mighte do him plesance or liking” (146). In other words, the ugly hag metamorphoses into the alternative female stereotype, that of the angel in the service of the male, which was to influence patriarchal society and literature and, as we shall see, to haunt female writers for centuries to come.

So, if much of the patriarchal literary output of the Middle Ages continued to propagate the traditional myth of woman as some kind of monster of depravity, the obverse of this image, the icon of female purity, was also commonplace. Ortner explains this “symbolic ambiguity” in terms of the fact that, because woman is denied cultural autonomy, she “can appear to stand both under and over the sphere of culture’s hegemony” and thus becomes the embodiment of the “extremes of Otherness” which the culture of the male “confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing” (cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 19). The type of female purity originates in the Biblical figure of the virgin mother Mary, who may be contrasted with the fallen mother Eve. The image of woman as madonna or angel is no more real than the image of woman as whore or witch, yet once again the Biblical origin of the stereotype validates it and imbues it with the aura of being received truth, which helps to account for its literary longevity. As Gilbert and Gubar observe, “there is a clear line of descent from divine Virgin to [nineteenth century] domestic angel, passing through (among many others)

Dante, Milton and Goethe” (2000: 20). An early and striking manifestation of the idealisation of woman occurs in the medieval concept of courtly love, much evident in the literature of the period. Rogers asserts that “Misogynistic feeling in the Middle Ages was much mitigated by the cult of courtly love, which not only held that the love of woman was free of sin, but exalted it to a degree unprecedented in earlier periods, insisting that the love of women was the root of all virtue (1966: 58). This apparent softening in the attitude of patriarchy has, however, been recognised by feminist thinkers, such as Millett, as having had little impact, in practical terms, upon the social, legal and economic status of women. They remained the subordinate group: “While a palliative to the injustice of woman’s social position, chivalry is also a technique for disguising it. One must acknowledge that the chivalrous stance is a game the master group plays in elevating its subject to pedestal level” (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2).

Moreover, the two extreme images may exist in tension with each other, so that woman is represented not simply as angel or witch, but as a composite figure, in which superficial perfection disguises the “real” nature beneath. Thus, in the medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on one level, the wife of Bercilak, presented as “beyond praise” in her body and her bearing (1986: 204), initially appears to be no more than the innocent servant of her husband in the game designed to test Sir Gawain’s honour: “the wooing of my wife – it was all my scheme” (235). From this perspective, Bercilak’s wife is the mere chattel of her husband, a pawn in his scheme, in which her own feelings are of no apparent consequence. However, Sir Gawain’s misogynistic tirade invites the reader to reconsider this reading, to perceive Bercilak’s wife as one in a long line of dangerous temptresses, daughters of Eve, who have beguiled men only to bring sorrow upon them:

For these were proud princes, most prosperous of old,
Past all lovers lucky, that languished under heaven, bemused.
And one and all fell prey
To women that they had used;
If I be led astray,
Methinks I may be excused” (236).

Sir Gawain holds Bercilak’s wife responsible for his failure to live up to his chivalric ideals, and resolves to wear her green girdle as a badge of the shame she has brought upon him:

This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there
For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there;
This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there (238).

When it emerges that the author of both the beheading game and the test of chivalry is Morgan le Faye, sinister usurper of Merlin’s magical powers and enemy of her virtuous half-brother King

Arthur, a witch who “By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts has caught many a man” (237), Sir Gawain’s misogynistic tirade is lent credibility. Moreover, when Bercilak reveals that Morgan le Fey is none other than the “old withered woman” (237) at the feast of welcome for Sir Gawain, then, in retrospect, the association made then by the poet between the beautiful young wife and the ugly old woman through a series of antithetical comparisons – “if the one was fresh, the other was faded” (204) – suggests that they are in fact but two facets of the same mythic type of evil womanhood: the ugly old witch and the beautiful enchantress (Stiller, 1980: 69).

Although the Renaissance may be differentiated from the Middle Ages as being a period of enlightenment, a period of expanding horizons and of new insights, the prevailing attitude towards women had become so much a constant of the culture as to be relatively unaffected by the momentum of change. Kelly asserts that “there was no Renaissance for women, at least not in the Renaissance” (1977, cited in Greene & Kahn, 1991: 19). Bi-Qi notes that even writers such as Spenser and Shakespeare, who appear to be reasonably free of the prejudices of their age, remain open to some charges of misogyny. Although she identifies Sidney as a notable exception, she highlights the critical consensus that the years between 1550 and 1650 were a “particularly gynophobic century” in which male authors continued to project upon women a “catalogue of vices, an endlessly random list of faults” (Bordo, 1986; Usher & McManus, 1985, both cited in Bi-Qi, 2001). Literature encodes social conventions, and since “each invocation of a code is also its reinforcement or reinscription”, literature becomes not just a mirror but a means of shaping society (Greene & Kahn, 1991: 4). Thus, with the passage of time, the ever-increasing volume of misogynist literature did not simply reflect but in fact continually reconstructed and fortified the dominant ideology.

For Virginia Woolf, one of the founders of modern feminist criticism, this process reached a climax in the work of John Milton. Gilbert and Gubar describe how Milton, in his account of the Fall of mankind *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, sets up a series of deliberate parallels between Eve, Satan and Sin (2000: 196-198). So, for example, Sin is depicted as half woman-half snake, thus establishing a three-way association between the female, the devil and evil:

The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair,
But ended foul in many a scaly fold
Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed
With mortal sting.

(Milton, 1986: 716).

This is reinforced when Adam addresses Eve as “thou serpent!” (813). Through Adam, Milton reiterates the patriarchal view of Eve, and therefore of woman, as degraded: “defaced, deflowered” (798); and as vulnerable: “thy frailty and infirmer sex” (815). In the words of Woolf, in *Paradise Lost* “is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion” (1918, cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 190). “What men thought” of women, the distillation of centuries of antifeminism, is rendered by Milton through Adam’s tirade against the creation of the female, who was superfluous, flawed, fallen, an eternal temptress:

..... all was but a show
 Rather than solid virtue, all but a rib
 Crooked by nature – bent, as now appears,
 More to the part sinister – from me drawn;
 Well if thrown out, as supernumerary
 To my just number found! Oh, why did God,
 Creator wise, that peopled highest Heaven
 With spirits masculine, create at last
 This novelty on earth, this fair defect
 Of nature, and not fill the world at once
 With men, as angels, without feminine;
 Or find some other way to generate
 Mankind? This mischief had not then befallen,
 And more that shall befall – innumerable
 Disturbances on earth through female snares,
 And straight conjunction with this sex.

(Milton, 1986: 813-814).

Almost three centuries after these lines were written, Milton, supreme poet and propagandist of “the culture myth at the heart of Western literary patriarchy” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 191), remained for Woolf the “bogey” man whom women, and in particular aspiring female writers, had to confront if they were to assert their relation to “the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women” (Woolf, 1992: 149).

Gilbert and Gubar describe how patriarchy and its texts have, over the ages, subordinated and confined women, denying them both an identity of their own and the right to authorship (2000: 3-44). In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf discusses the apparent discrepancy between the positions of woman in fiction and woman in fact, as well as the ambiguous nature of the literary version of the female, in the period up to and including the seventeenth century: “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant” (1992: 56). In real life, women were regularly abused, often illiterate, and inevitably regarded as the property of the male, whether husband or father (55-56). In literature, on the other hand, women were “heroic and mean;

splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater” (55). Of course, these paradoxes may be resolved if one remembers that literature encodes ideology. Just as a woman may be literally confined to the home as the chattel of the male in a patriarchal society, likewise in patriarchal literature, woman is defined by the pen of the male and confined to the image which best serves his needs. This, as we have seen, tends to be a version of one of two stereotypes, the angel or the witch, neither of which reflects reality, and neither of which promotes female interests. However, the former may prove deceptive since it is not overtly antifeminist and even appears to exalt the importance of woman.

Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, published in 1740, may be cited as an example of this. If one disregards the alternative, antifeminist reading of Pamela as a manipulative hypocrite, typified in Fielding’s parodic *Shamela* (1741), the heroine would appear, in many ways, to be a prototypical feminist role model. Pamela resists, and thereby exposes, the contemporary double standard in sexual mores. Through her virtue and the premium she places upon chastity, she converts the lust of her master, Mr B. into love and a marriage proposal, and thus triumphs in the face of his ubiquitous power - as a male, as her employer, and as the representative of institutional justice. Through her letters, she defines herself and retains control of her own story, so that she divests the male of authorship. In the final analysis, Mr. B. seeks to know Pamela’s whole personality, her moral and emotional self, as represented by her letters, even more than he desires to know her physically. Through her marriage to the aristocratic Mr. B., the servant-girl Pamela transcends her social class and transfigures her economic situation. However, despite *Pamela*’s psychological realism, and the apparent triumph of the heroine, her ultimate destiny is marriage, in which state she resolves to make the obliging of her husband her “whole study”, in line with the “indispensable rules” for her future conduct which he has been pleased to give her (Richardson, 1985: 467-470). In other words, Pamela is now established as a paragon of the matrimonial virtues, or as Armstrong puts it: “the female voice flattens into that of pure ideology” (1989: 125). Pamela’s soul has been tested and found to be equal indeed to “the soul of a princess” (Richardson, 1985: 197). The concept of chastity as a supreme virtue, which had been associated primarily with the noble lady in courtly literature, has thereby been transposed down the social scale, and found to be applicable to women of a humbler background. Thus, the patriarchal stereotype of the angel gains a wider field of application. Moreover, since the destiny of the virtuous woman is marriage, the stage has now been set for the angel to be imprisoned in domesticity as “the angel in the house”. In Armstrong’s view, through *Pamela*, male desire, which had formerly been oriented towards a woman’s claim to family name and fortune, was “redirected at a woman who embodied the domestic virtues” (1989: 8, 109-110). This reorientation in male

desire towards the idealised figure of the virtuous wife who would make the family home a moral sanctuary reflects the values of the burgeoning, largely Puritan, middle class in the eighteenth century, and would become embedded in the patriarchal culture of the nineteenth century.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which she argued that the definition of woman as an inferior creature designed to do his pleasure was a male invention, which had gained credence as a consequence of his denial of education to the female. Only through education would woman attain such “habits of virtue” as would render her independent: “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience” (Wollstonecraft, 1792: Ch. 2). Thus, the work of this early feminist associates virtue with independence rather than with complaisance, and postulates the capacity of the female to determine her own identity if given access to education. However, as De Beauvoir notes, just as feminism began to gain a voice “woman was ordered back into the home”. The French feminist attributes women’s re-incarceration in domesticity to a male fear that competition with emancipated females in the productive arena might represent a threat to his hegemony (De Beauvoir, 1949). Thus, in the post-feudal industrial era, although the male now found it increasingly possible to forge his own place in society, he still deemed it necessary to devise “new denigrations of female nature new celebrations of female needs for protection (which would) exclude women from full social and political participation” (Fox-Genovese, 1982, cited in Greene & Kahn, 1991: 19). So, in *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, the scientist Darwin who, ironically, had challenged the Biblical account of the origins of mankind with his theory of evolution, nonetheless lent new support to the patriarchal myth of the female as inferior, by describing woman as being “characteristic of a past and lower state of civilisation” (cited in Bressler, 1999: 181). In terms of the alternative patriarchal exclusion tactic, the Victorian ideology of separate spheres fixed woman in the home as “an aesthetic object, decorous, chaste, dependent” (Kelly, cited in Greene & Kahn, 1991: 19).

The ideology of separate spheres alleged that biological differences existed between the sexes which in turn engendered specifically masculine or feminine characteristics. The passive qualities associated with femininity – self-sacrifice, patience, sympathy – were held to make the domestic arena the natural environment of the female; whereas, the active qualities associated with masculinity – determination, resourcefulness, aggressiveness, rationality – were held to justify the male domination of the public arena (Dyhouse, 1978: 175; Eisenstein, 1983: 8; Kent, 1999: 179). Since woman was biologically endowed with the capacity “for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision”, in the words of Ruskin, and since she was too pure to be exposed to public life, her proper role was

to “radiate sympathy and moral influence throughout the domestic sphere” (Gillooly, 2002: 397-398). The Victorian ideal of marriage and domestic life thus incorporated romantic notions of love, companionship and spiritual equality, but in the reality of the institution women remained legally and economically subordinate to their husbands (Kent, 1999: 191). Millett cites Beigel’s observation that the romantic version of love, like the courtly, is a male concession out of the whole range of his powers. She goes on to argue that while the effect of this concession is to disguise somewhat the patriarchal nature of western culture, the attribution of impossible virtues to woman in fact confines her to an extremely narrow sphere of behaviour (Millett, 1969: Ch. 2). By associating woman with submission and man with control, the ideology of separate spheres extended the dominance of the male over the female, in both the public and the private spheres (Eisenstein, 1983: 14). Moreover, the ideology did not fail to incorporate the other element in the traditional angel-witch dichotomy, since it also accommodated the image of the fallen woman, the woman who resists male authority and pursues her own sexual desires, but in so doing exposes herself to a different kind of male abuse (Kent, 1999: 180).

In 1851, Harriet Taylor Mill argued in *Enfranchisement of Women* that patriarchal constructions of gender identity were not based in reality, and that “the proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to” (Kent, 1999: 194-195). In her essay *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf identifies two of the obstacles which men have placed in the way of the female who aspires to be a successful novelist, and indeed of the female who aspires to success in any professional capacity (1966: 285-286). The first of these Woolf calls The Angel in the House, after the title of a book of poems by Coventry Patmore (1885), in which the iconic image of the female promulgated by nineteenth century patriarchy took literary form in the person of the heroine, Honoria. In Woolf’s view, the image of the self-sacrificing, complaisant, pure female, which was used to confine Victorian woman to the domestic sphere and to control her behaviour there, continued to haunt the female writer into the twentieth century, urging her that she should “Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure” (Woolf, 1966: 285). In other words, the female writer’s capacity to discover her own identity as an artist remained constrained by patriarchal constructions of gender-appropriate behaviour. Woolf argues that to write as a critic or novelist means to tell the truth about what you think about human relations, morality and sex (286). However, “the extreme conventionality” of the male sex with regard to the female, evident in the limits which patriarchy imposes upon a woman’s freedom to explore her sexuality, to describe her passions, to write as she truly is, remains a rock against which the woman writer continually founders (287-288).

The Angel in the House thus becomes the symbol of the hold the male continues to exercise over the female psyche. Moreover, out of this arises the second obstacle to female self-realisation identified by Woolf: a woman psychologically constrained in this way cannot know herself, she will only find herself if she is allowed to express herself freely “in all the arts and professions open to human skill” (286). It follows that the fictitious but persistent Angel in the House, whom Güneş describes as the “internalised symbol of Victorian womanhood”, must be destroyed if woman is to succeed as a writer, or in any other profession (2007: 25). As Woolf herself puts it: “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (1966: 286).

However, before a woman could develop a “mind of her own” she needed a “room of her own”. Just as Woolf uses the image of the Angel in the House to represent the psychological hegemony of the male, so she uses the notion of acquiring a “room of one’s own” to symbolise the emancipation of the female writer from centuries of economic dependence upon and domestic subservience to the male. By the time she wrote *Professions for Women*, Woolf was able to acknowledge that her own path had been made smooth for her by the women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least in terms of the fact that she faced few material obstacles and that writing was now considered to be “a reputable and harmless occupation” (1966: 284). In contrast, in her essay *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf describes how the social, familial and moral values of sixteenth century patriarchal society made inevitable the loss of any female artistic talent which might otherwise have come to fruition. To illustrate her point, Woolf creates the character of Judith Shakespeare, sister of the great poet and playwright William Shakespeare, postulates that she is equally gifted, and then demonstrates how she could never have attained the heights of artistic success reached by her brother. As a girl, her education would have been inferior to that of her brother, and her time would have been filled with domestic duties; as a young woman, the path laid out for her would have been marriage in accordance with her father’s wishes; as a runaway in pursuit of the realisation of her gift, her fate as a female would have been exclusion from employment, poverty, the inability to find a “room of her own” in which to develop her talents, recourse to the protection of the unscrupulous male, loss of chastity, pregnancy, death and an unmarked grave (Woolf, 1992: 60-62). Had Judith Shakespeare somehow survived, then the nervous stress of living a free life in London, in an age when female chastity was held to be of paramount importance, would certainly have threatened her sanity and distorted her writings (64). All this would have come about because her “poet’s heart” was “caught and tangled in a woman’s body” (63), because “all the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain” (66).

The consequence of the denial of a “room of their own” to women in the early modern period was the lack of a female literary tradition in the context of which, had it existed, the women writers of subsequent generations might have found it easier to realise their female artistic identity. In its absence, as Woolf points out, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and George Sand found it necessary to seek refuge from exposure as women writers in the use of male pseudonyms. Woolf perceives this desire for anonymity as a relic of the cult of female chastity. In the absence of a groundbreaking female literary tradition to make their work respectable, writers such as Eliot may have feared male opprobrium, and certainly believed that a semblance of male authorship would ensure that their works would be judged on their own merits, rather than with reference to notions of gender appropriate behaviour (McSweeney, 1991: 80-81). The lack of a female literary tradition left nineteenth century women writers without any point of external reference other than that provided by the male canon. In consequence, “the whole structure of the early nineteenth-century novel was raised, if one was a woman, by a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority” (Woolf, 1992: 96). In Woolf’s view, only Jane Austen and Emily Brontë “wrote as women write, not as men write” (97). So, for instance, Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss* is unable to resolve the dilemma of her heroine Maggie Tulliver. The social and ideological formation which Maggie experiences as a child leads her in the final analysis to choose self-abnegation. She denies herself the possibility of romantic fulfilment in a relationship with Stephen because she is not prepared to sever the bonds of duty and love which attach her to her family, or to sacrifice her feminine quality of sympathy in the pursuit of selfish desires. On the other hand, Maggie’s protest against the patriarchal system which has brought her to this pass is felt, even at the end, in her “doubt in the justice of her own resolve (Eliot, n.d.: 629). Within the confines of the patriarchal system, Eliot can find no way out for Maggie which does not damage her in some way, either by alienating her from her family, or by leaving her physically or emotionally unfulfilled. As Woolf puts it, George Eliot’s heroines “charged with suffering and sensibility” yearn for something “that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence” (Woolf, 1948: 217). Eliot, therefore, can only find release for Maggie in death. But Eliot, like her heroines, was also searching: “For her too, the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge” (Woolf, 1948: 217). Moreover, whatever the fate of her heroines might have been, Eliot herself was successful in “confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men” (218). By earning her living as a writer, Eliot claimed a room of her own in the literary edifice which had previously been occupied largely by male authors. Eliot thus helped to pave the way for future generations of female writers, to the extent that in the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf was able to affirm to the aspiring

woman writers, and other professionals, of her own era: “the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared” (1966: 289).

It has been the work of Woolf and subsequent generations of feminist writers and critics to engage in the process of furnishing and decorating this room of their own. For some, this has involved exposing and challenging literary stereotypes of woman. For others, it has involved re-evaluating female authors (Bressler, 1999: 190). For some, it has involved re-examining the male literary canon from a female perspective, in what Adrienne Rich calls “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (cited in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 49). So, for example, the “re-visionist” might interpret Chaucer’s sympathetic treatment of the Wife of Bath’s “feminism” as an attack on the prevailing antifeminist tradition; might interpret her openness, her vitality, her resilience, and her mastery of her husbands as evidence of feminine power; might argue that her proclamation of the validity of her own experience over authority represents an early attack on the male myth-making which would long hold women subservient; and that the fictitious nature of the male version of the female is further exposed by her commonsensical declaration:

By God, if women hadden written stories,
As clerkes han within hir oratories,
They wolde han written of men more wikkednesse
Than al the merk of Adam may redresse.
(Chaucer, 1986: 134).

Moreover, again from this perspective, Chaucer seems to hint, both in the Wife’s account of her fifth marriage and in the conclusion of the *Tale*, at the possibility that where the wife rules the husband a happy union may ensue: “And thus they live unto hir lives ende in parfait joye” (Chaucer, 1986: 146; Rogers, 1966: 82). Similarly, the “re-visionist” might interpret the fact that the beheading game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* proves to have been organised by Morgan le Fay as evidence for a narrative of maternal origins, which might be opposed to the traditional patriarchal account of creation; or that the green girdle, the love-lace, implies feminine power over the male (Margherita, 1994: 141).

For some, it has involved challenging male-oriented approaches to literary scholarship and developing female models of literary analysis based on female experience; relying, for example, upon Freudian or Lacanian analysis of the female psyche, or upon analysis of the female use of language and of feminine imagery within a text, or upon analysis of the impact of cultural factors upon the construction of female identity (Bressler, 1999: 190-191).

For some, such as Woolf, it has involved replacing gender polarisation with a multiplistic approach to questions of identity, as symbolised in Woolf's Orlando, whose "continuous ambiguity and oscillation from one sex to the other, or from one position to another one, undermines the basis of the stereotypes of politically and culturally constructed gender identity (Güneş, 2007: 196-197). For others, in contrast, it has involved a woman-centred approach, which has sought to identify those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of feminine power (Eisenstein, 1983: xii). It is perhaps worth noting that this approach, if carried to the extreme, runs the risk of replacing a male myth of female inferiority with a female myth of female superiority.

Clearly then, in view of these various strands of feminist literary and critical activity, the process of furnishing and decorating is well underway. Indeed, the female writer's "room of her own" has become a house of her own, inhabited by a real Woman in the House who, at last, has a mind of her own.

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