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REFIGURING MILTON IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition:

Literature

---

by

Rebecca Kirk Marsh

June 2004

REFIGURING MILTON IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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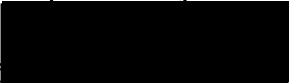
A Thesis  
Presented to the  
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San Bernardino

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by  
Rebecca Kirk Marsh

June 2004

Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Holly Henry, Chair, English

*June 4, 2004*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
Margaret Doane

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DEDICATION

For Ian, Lia, and Gillian

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Virginia Woolf

|      |  |
|------|--|
| AROO | <i>A Room of One's Own</i>                     |
| CDB  | <i>The Captain's Deathbed and Other Essays</i> |
| CSF  | <i>Collected Short Fiction</i>                 |
| E    | <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i>            |
| JR   | <i>Jacob's Room</i>                            |
| WD   | <i>A Writer's Diary</i>                        |

Other Abbreviations

|    |   |
|----|---|
| AI | Harold Bloom, <i>The Anxiety of Influence</i> |
| WC | Harold Bloom, <i>The Western Canon</i>        |
| NR | The New Republic Online                       |



CHAPTER ONE  
CONTEXTUALIZING READINGS OF MILTON IN  
*A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

Introduction

Since 1979 feminist scholars have misread key images in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. They delineated the extended essay as a groundbreaking feminist polemic that advocates abolishing the literary patriarchy, expresses distain for John Milton as chief offender, and calls at the very least for his excision from the canon. Through rhetorical analysis and close readings of passages in *A Room of One's Own* and Woolf's diary, I read advocacy for change in patriarchal education and for opening of the literary canon to women. I also read Woolf's admiration for Milton's poetic mastery, distain for the quintessential patriarchal archetype in the image of *Milton's bogey*, and Woolf self-positioning as Milton's canonical successor.

Chapter One contextualizes my argument within Woolf scholarship on *A Room of One's Own* from 1979 to the present. In Chapter Two, "Finding Felicity: John Milton and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, I analyze Woolf's rhetorical strategy of the dialectic<sup>1</sup> within the lecture

form in the introductory paragraph of *A Room of One's Own*. I also examine how the language in this paragraph acts as an anti-foundational<sup>2</sup> *proem* for the polemic as it parallels the structure and rewrites the content of *Paradise Lost's* Book I *proem*. In Chapter Three, "Saying What She Means: Milton's Bogey as Adam," I identify the *bogey* image from Chapter Two of *A Room of One's Own* as Milton's Adam, arguing that a preceding Miltonic allusion supports this assertion. In conclusion, because the polemic was originally delivered as a lecture and the extended essay retains this structure and because Milton figures to the polemic's argument foundationally in the introductory paragraph, the body of the "lecture," and the peroration. I, therefore, argue that Milton is answered by Woolf as predecessor and as patriarch that must be subverted.

#### *Milton's Bogey: Feminist Readings*

Woolf scholarship traditionally confines Milton's role to the controversial appearance of *Milton's bogey* in chapter Two and in the book's final paragraph. Feminists in the seventies and eighties threw down the gauntlet of Milton as "first of the masculinists,"<sup>3</sup> the omnipotent inhibitor of women who dream to write. In 1979, Sandra

Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote *Madwoman in the Attic*.

Gilbert's chapter, "Milton's Bogey," began a decade of debate about the identity of the image and Woolf's position on the "Great Books" canon. Gilbert considered Woolf's mention of the bogey "perfunctory" "for the allusion has had no significant development, and Woolf, in the midst of her peroration, does not stop to explain it" (Gilbert 188).

I will argue with this assertion in Chapter Two, "Saying What She Means: Milton's Bogey as Adam." Gilbert continues that the phrase is "enigmatic" and "ambiguous" (Gilbert 188). "It may refer to Milton himself . . . to Adam, who is Milton's (and God's) favored creature . . . Or it may refer to another fictitious specter, one more bogey created by Milton: his inferior and Satanically inspired Eve, who has also intimidated women and blocked their view of possibilities both real and literary" (Gilbert 188).

Gilbert surmised that Woolf's allusion was "deliberate":

"Certainly other Woolfian allusions to Milton reinforce the idea that for her, as for most other women writers, both he and the creatures of his imagination constitute the misogynistic essence of what Gertrude Stein called 'patriarchal poetry'" (Gilbert 188). I will assert that, as a deeply immersed reader of "Great Books" herself, Woolf

"deliberately" chose the image, and those familiar with that tradition would readily contextualize the bogey and understand the allusion.

Sandra Gilbert analyzes a diary entry from September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1918, writing that it "may well represent all female anxieties about "Milton's bogey" (Gilbert 189). Woolf, Gilbert asserts, was by 1918 "an experienced, widely published literary critic, as well as the author of one accomplished novel, with another in progress" (Gilbert 190). In the pages preceding this entry, Gilbert writes, Woolf critiqued Rossetti, Byron, Sophocles and others: "Yet . . . Milton alone, leaves her feeling puzzled, excluded, inferior, and even a little guilty" (Gilbert 190-91). In Chapter Two on Milton's bogey, I will argue with Gilbert's assessment of Woolf's emotional response to Milton's prosodic skill. I read admiration, critique, and surprise at finding a poet in better command of the language than Shakespeare, albeit Milton's characters seemed devoid of the human emotion of Shakespeare's protagonists. In the diary entry cited above Woolf is confident and denigrates Eve as Milton's possible domestic grudge. Woolf is not anxious, as Gilbert suggests, unless in the sense of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*—realizing Milton's greatness

and feeling compelled to take mastery in a new and *strange* direction.<sup>4</sup>

Gilbert projects her own feelings on Woolf's closing remarks, it seems:

And her feeling that Milton's verse (not the dramas of her beloved, androgynous Shakespeare) must be 'the essence of which almost all other poetry is the dilution' perhaps explains her dutiful conclusion, with its strained insistence that in the depths of Milton's verse 'is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion.' . . . Milton's bogey, whatever else it may be, is ultimately his cosmology, his vision of 'what *men* thought' and his powerful rendering of the culture myth that Woolf, like most other literary women, sensed at the heart of Western literary patriarchy. (Gilbert 191)

Woolf's critique of Milton—of specifically here his Adam and Eve—not "the depths of Milton's verse," is Woolf's observation. It is neither dutiful, nor strained. It is merely an observation about the quintessential master of impersonal language and poetic form. That the *bogey* is

Milton's cosmology "whatever else it may be" follows from whatever the bogey specifically is. Milton's cosmology is the basis for *Paradise Lost*. I believe the bogey can be identified and I will explore this in Chapter Two.

Sandra Gilbert's Essay, "Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers" incited several feminist critiques on the Western canon using Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Christine Froula, in "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy" (1984), uses Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "the canonical text par excellence of English literature," to illustrate the suppression of women writers from the canon (Froula 326). Allowing for the changes in the literary canon at the time of this article, Froula wrote that women had made inroads into the canon rendering dissolution of it unnecessary. Women did, however, need to continue to "raise[ ] questions about the sources, motives, and interests of this [literary] authority" (Froula 322). Froula's essay compares the patriarchal literary canon (exclusive of women writers) and the Bible as the patriarchal authority, suppressing the marginalized Gnostic Gospels from the sanctioned doctrine of the early Christian church. According to Froula, Eve's nativity narrative in Book 4 "represents the conversion of

Eve to orthodoxy" (Froula 326). Adam and a voice educate her in her secondary position, and she comes to believe it. At her birth Eve sees her image in the waters and wants to stay and admire, but the "voice" calls her to Adam. Adam and the voice instruct Eve. She is created not to glory in her own image, but to be the reflection of Adam, "Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy /Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear / Multitudes" (Milton 4.472-74). Froula suggests that Eve leaves her visible self to obey Adam's invisible authority, and because that authority is mystical, it cannot be opposed. Eve cannot question what she cannot verify empirically. Froula argues that the literary canon is the cultural offspring of the religious patriarchy, and as such, its patriarchal authority has a mystical invisibility that Virginia Woolf challenges when she moves the bogey image out of the way in *A Room of One's Own*. With means and uninterrupted time, a woman would rise to the same literary heights to which men have ascended merely because men were privileged with education, money, and time to do so. Froula writes that *Paradise Lost* is Woolf's "bogey":

From a Gnostic vantage . . . [*Paradise Lost*]  
loses its power as "bogey" or scarecrow and

becomes a cultural artifact situated in history, its power analyzable as that of an ancient and deeply ingrained pattern in Western thought, reinvented to serve the interests of modern society and realized in language of unsurpassed subtlety and *explicable* sublimity. Read in such a way that the invisible becomes visible; the transcendent, historical; the sacred icon, a cultural image; the "bogey," old clothes upon a stick. (Froula 335-6)

In Froula's estimation Woolf triumphs over the bogey (*Paradise Lost*) and this helps "undo the invisible power of the literary tradition and make for a richer world" (Froula 344).

In *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, Jane Marcus adds her pen to the fray in support of Froula's position. Marcus suggests, "Female liberty, equality, and sorority were [Woolf's] goals. In imagination and in action she met misogyny full-face" (Marcus 75). Marcus, critiquing Woolf through a socialist feminist lens, quotes Rebecca West's review of the polemic as an "uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda" (Marcus 178) to support her thesis that "Woolf "lays and slays the ghost of Milton"



(Marcus 78). She contextualizes Woolf within her familial heritage to illustrate the extent to which she fought against the injurious patriarchal system:

Woolf was working against the work of her grandfather, James Stephen, Permanent Under Secretary for the Colonies and architect of imperialism under seven changes of government, and professor of modern history at Cambridge; her uncle Fitzjames Stephen, codifier of English law and Indian law, judge of the High Court, and conservative political philosopher; Fitzjames's son, J. F. Stephen, Virginia's first cousin, "bard of Eton and of boyhood," misogynist poet and famous parodist, thought by some to be a likely candidate for the role of Jack the Ripper; her father, Leslie Stephen, compiler of the Dictionary of National Biography, a powerful political tool in the Victorian definition of English history as the biographies of England's great men. (Marcus 80)

Marcus writes that Woolf endured further insult to her intelligence and ambition in the active support for the patriarchy by her female relatives:

But she had also to exercise the work of her female family as collaborators in the making of nineteenth-century British patriarchal ideology. Virginia Woolf's aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen was the author of a monumental history of sisterhoods, an anti-feminist piece of propaganda that perceived and argued forcefully that all separate organizations of nuns and nurses (even women's colleges) were a dangerous threat to the patriarchal family. Woolf scholars have known of Julia Stephen's signing of Mrs. Humphry Ward's anti-suffrage petition and Meredith's warning to her of the dangers to her daughters of a self-chosen role as 'princess to a patriarch.' (Marcus 80-81)

Marcus suggests that Woolf purposefully addressed the issue of women and writing within the patriarchal literary canon by fictionalizing the classical lecture form and deflecting her agency in the personas of Mary Beton, Mary Seton, and Mary Carmichael. Her aunt Katherine Stephen was principal of Newnham when *A Room of One's Own* was delivered in speech form. Marcus records that:

Woolf associated her cousins, the two Stephen sisters, with the most frightening aspects of evangelical patriarchal Christianity. She told Ethel Smyth that Hyde Park Gate preachers made her shudder with horror in memory of her cousins' brutal attempts to convert her in her youth. She thinks of their God as a rapist: 'He's got a finger in my mind.' (Marcus 82)

It is within this overwhelming tradition of this Victorian familial patriarchal system that influenced British politics that according to Gilbert, Froula, Marcus, and some of Woolf's peers like Rebecca West, Woolf dares to deliver a feminist treatise to the colleges of Newnham and Girton, which becomes *A Room of One's Own*. Marcus encapsulates her view that "Milton's God" was the "ferocious male patriarch" that her Aunt's inheritance helped to remove: "The ghost of Milton's bogey, the patriarchal God and the patriarchal father, is laid for Woolf by the visionary example of a maiden aunt and her very practical legacy" (Marcus 128).

### *Milton's Bogey: Miltonist Readings*

Miltonists countered in the eighties with various positions on Milton-the-Feminist, with Joseph Wittreich going so far as to write that before the Victorian period women saw Milton as a feminist and that the shift to Milton-the-misogynist began in the transition from Victorianism to modernism<sup>5</sup>. This thesis asserts a new view of Milton in *A Room of One's Own*—one that paradoxically encompasses both distain for Milton's bogey, framing it clearly and foremost as Milton's Adam within John Milton's Puritan patriarchal worldview, and admiration for his poetic genius by imitating and transforming his proem in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, within the rhetorical form of the classical lecture. I suggest that this clearly acknowledges Woolf's debt to the great poet, not his patriarchal world view, while it sets her up as successor to his literary legacy.

### Virginia Woolf and the Question of Feminism And the Western Literary Canon

#### Woolf as Feminist Icon

Readers culturally inculcated with both the rhetoric of *Virginia Woolf-as-militant-feminist*, and the movement in the twenty-five years to downplay the literary great man

and his works while amplifying previously suppressed minority voices—women here—understandably approach Woolf through the veil of these merged positions. Woolf is the mother of feminist criticism<sup>6</sup>, feminists shun *dead White authors*; therefore, Woolf opposes patriarchal literary tradition. The fallacy of this syllogism is immediately apparent, but the myth seems to perpetuate itself in undergraduate courses in which Woolf is a *flat* feminist icon, an undeveloped character. This thesis reads a Woolf who both argues against the patriarchy, and admires great writers, whatever their gender.

#### Woolf's Education

According to Harold Bloom, Woolf is the "most complete person of letters" of the Twentieth Century—that is, she knew Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare at a scholarly level; and *A Room* suggests she loved this literature (Bloom 403). However, from the volume of feminist criticism that has appropriated Woolf, a reader would assume before analysis that Woolf shares a loathing for at least the Milton of *Paradise Lost*. Well, according to *A Room*, she does in part. She also, however, unapologetically extols Milton's poems, giving them their place in the canon. She speaks the language of literary

elitism in terms of the canon of Western literature in this monumental statement regarding her fictitious writer "Mary Carmichael's" novel: "It seems to be her first book, I said to myself, but one must read it as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books [one of which is *Paradise Lost*] that I have been glancing at" (AROO 80). As Jane Marcus writes, this is "an exact demonstration of Woolf's own socialist thesis in *A Room* that 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births' but are 'the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice'" (Marcus 137). Granted, Woolf refers to Lady "Winchilsea's poems and Aphra Behn's plays" (AROO 80), Jane Austin, Charlotte Bronte (AROO 68), George Eliot (AROO 70), and others, but she also has mentioned Shakespeare with reverence, and Lamb, Milton, Thackeray, Dickens and Balzac (AROO 76). Woolf resumes: "For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her--this unknown woman--as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions" (AROO 80). Woolf does not limit influence

and inheritance to literary mothers, however; *A Room* includes great writers of the past, whether they are male or female. Woolf upheld the Western Canon in its traditional form; and she wanted women to have free entrance to that tradition. It is even more accurate to say that she wanted to see great women writers given the education and freedom to develop their talent to its logical, fully matured greatness—even if it took “another hundred years” to realize this gift (Woolf 94).

Examining Woolf as a woman of letters conjures up images of her walking the halls of women’s colleges. Her education, however, was private. She was trained at home by both her parents and given free use of her father’s library (Shattock 474). Still it galled her to be barred from the privileged education of her father, brothers, cousins, uncles, and grandfather. Her father, Leslie Stephen, was a don in Philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge and her brothers were also at Cambridge (Shattock 474). Her male relatives all held influential positions. Woolf addresses the frustration of being excluded from this men’s club in *A Room of One’s Own* in the character of the college Beadle who waves her off the privileged walkway: “This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows

and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me . . . As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank" (AROO 6). Though irritated, Woolf complies. It is interesting to note that among the Oxford English Dictionary's entries for "Beadle," definition two states: "One who delivers the message or executes the mandates of an authority," citing Charles Lamb for the accompanying contextual example. This stands out because Woolf is again thwarted when contemplating Lamb's statement that "it shocked him to think it possible that any word in Milton's *Lycidas* could have been different from what it is" (AROO 7). It amuses her to guess what word Milton might have changed. She realizes the "very manuscript" in question is in the library before her and she marches over to consider the question first-hand (AROO 7). A man again bars her entrance because she is not a "Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction" (AROO 8). Woolf retraces her steps angrily vowing never to darken the door of this library again: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (AROO 76). Thus, Woolf depicts the frustrations encountered by women who hunger for the same entry into the world of "letters" that is



given to men. Nevertheless, she considers any great writer a part of this long line of heritage that includes Lamb and Milton.

This is fascinating considering a statement that I heard a professor make as proof that Woolf detested Milton: "First we have to get rid of Milton." Though *A Room* refers to Milton both positively and negatively, and I will argue that Woolf imitates *Paradise Lost's* Book I Proem, that statement is nowhere to be read. If it was a general statement meant to encapsulate Woolf's argument, it is overstated. The idea connected with this may have originated with Sandra Gilbert's chapter "Milton's Bogey" in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

#### The Radical Person

Though it is questionable that she is the radical feminist of Gilbert and Gubar, Woolf, additionally, is not the Milton excisionist of my professor. She is, however, unquestionably radical. She is radical personally and professionally. The personal aspect of her socially radical behavior is well documented. According to *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers*:

After their parents' deaths, Virginia, her sister, the painter, Vanessa Bell (1879-1961),

and her brother Adrian, together with the Duckworth half-brothers and a sister, lived in a series of houses in Bloomsbury, which eventually became the nucleus of the so-called Bloomsbury Group of writers, artists, and intellectuals dedicated to opposing Victorian orthodoxy, and promoting a refined modern culture. (Shattock 474)

After Virginia's marriage to Leonard Woolf, the "modern culture" of the Bloomsbury Group consisted of experimentation with homosexual and heterosexual free love among their circle of friends (Shattock 475). This was certainly a scandalous response to Victorian morals. Woolf's writing also expressed fringe ideas.

#### The Radical Writer

Professionally, Virginia was working on a radical novel form—the prose poem. She describes it in *A Room Of One's Own*: "Moreover, a book is not made of sentences laid end to end" (like the linear sequence of conventional novel writing,) "but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes" (AROO 77). Her vision will take several forms in *The Voyage Out*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and others, but *A Room Of One's Own* gives a clue to the

uniqueness she pursues. In it, as if characterizing her own writing, she speaks of a woman writer:

The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands . . . No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not

necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. (Room 77)

This woman, like Woolf, will create something uniquely poetic within the novel form because of the poetry that is innately in her. Parenthetically, the evolution reference of "free use of her limbs" is extraordinary. This refers to the monumental change in humans when they evolved to the standing position. This freed the hands for tool use, opening up a whole new world of possibilities for human supremacy over environment. Woolf implies that women will need the time to evolve into great writers, just as men have over centuries. It is logical to allow for this progress over time. Woolf continues: "For it is the poetry that is still denied outlet. And I went on to ponder how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts—would she use verse—would she not use prose rather?" (AROO 77). Woolf develops these thoughts in her own novels.

Shattock writes of her novels:

Their use of the stream of consciousness or interior monologue, the absence of conventional plot or action, and the lyrical intensity of the novels marked Woolf out from her . . . contemporaries. (Shattock 474)

Woolf wanted to bend the conventions of the novel to make a prose poem. She shaped characters who would respond impressionistically without a conventional narrator to connect dialogue in the first two-thirds of the *The Waves*. She utilized stream-of-consciousness narrative to capture "living moments" in interior monologue in *To The Lighthouse*. She also gives voice to the silences—the negative space or a kind of absent center of interior monologue that is present during direct dialogue between characters in her first attempt at the novel, *The Voyage Out*. On August 19, 1908, in a letter to her brother-in-law, Clive Bell, Woolf recorded a germ for her first experiment in the novel, which would become *The Voyage Out*: "Ah, it is the sea that does it! Perpetual movement, and a border of mystery, solving the limits of fields, and silencing their prose" (Nicolson 356). In *The Voyage Out* Woolf tests the silence that permeates relationships. She does this in extended interior monologue that is not quite

stream-of-consciousness, but that depicts the rich inner lives that take place between people in relationships. Though Woolf will achieve mastery in her experiments with the novel form, *The Voyage Out* reminds the reader of Woolf's own words to describe Mary Carmichael's first novel: "I cannot be sure whether she's being herself or someone else" (AROO 81). Woolf's first novel does sound like she is putting on voices that are not quite her, but by the time she writes *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, she has fully come into her own voice—and it is radically Modern—finding its most poetic prose in the multi-voiced *The Waves*.

#### The Radical and the Western Canon

Her most unexpected and radical precept, however, if she is correctly labeled the 'mother of feminist criticism,' is not related to her sexual experimentation or her Modernist vision of a "prose poem." Her most surprising statement is the above thesis from *A Room Of One's Own*: "For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (AROO 80). She implies that the canon should stand and women should join the literary conversation within it. She shares this view with her friend T. S. Eliot, who, in "Tradition and the

Individual Talent," wrote: "The whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Eliot 49). To this he adds emphatically: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone . . . You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Eliot 49). Woolf's statement above separates her from Sandra Gilbert who wants to lump the whole of her reaction to Milton in that 1918 letter to Clive Bell, making it "represent all female anxieties about 'Milton's bogey'" (Gilbert 189). It also isolates her from the postmodern revisionists who want to amend the canon to give all voices fair hearing. Not all voices are extraordinary enough to be canonical. Woolf would have appreciated another radical, Emily Dickinson's, criteria for good writing: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry"<sup>7</sup>. Woolf isn't interested in voices just because they haven't been heard. She doesn't want to listen to women writers based on openness, tolerance, or grading on a curve. Of Mary Carmichael's first book, Woolf isn't afraid to say: "She will be a poet . . . in another

hundred years" (AROO 94). Woolf is interested in great writers—male and female. She confines her discussion to the Western Canon, but whoever is a master of writing is worth her attention.

Woolf's motivation lies in the fact that she loved to read and write; and ironically this makes her appear a snob. Harold Bloom writes:

Yet Woolf is now more often discussed as the author of *A Room of One's Own* than as the novelist who wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. *Orlando's* current fame has nearly everything to do with the hero-heroine's sexual metamorphosis and owes very little to what most matters in the book: comedy, characterization, and an intense love of the major eras of English literature. I cannot think of another strong novelist who centers everything upon her extraordinary love of reading as Woolf does. (WC 408)

Her love for canonical texts made Woolf seem a literary snob to many contemporaries as well as readers of *A Room of One's Own*. Clive Bell protested: "Virginia, I protest, was not a snob. She was an elitist. The distinction has never

been properly made in discussing her attitude. A snob is a person who attaches exaggerated importance to the titular great, to birth and accent, to acquired or inherited wealth. An elitist believes that some people are born natural aristocrats, of mind and disposition" (Nicolson xviii). These literary aristocrats interest Virginia Woolf, whether they are Coleridge or Christina Rossetti, as she writes, for "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex" (AROO 104). The only condition of their inclusion among great writers is their talent expressed in their works. Women as well as men should fall into this gender disinterest in order to write well.

#### The Androgynous Mind

In fact, Woolf writes that the best writers have what Coleridge calls an "androgynous mind" (AROO 98). She explains: "If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her . . . It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties" (AROO 98). She further reasons:

Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine . . . Coleridge certainly did not mean,



when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation. (AROO 98)

That statement might leave feminists squirming if they credit Woolf as their progenitor, because it is not a precept Woolf is disputing. Woolf conjectures:

Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind.

[Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. (AROO 98)

Then Woolf crowns "Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind" (AROO 99). She jettison's gender in these statements, leaving "writer" in place of male and female, but uses a man as archetype. Writing is what Virginia Woolf cared about—that is what makes her a literary elitist; that is what somewhat divides her from feminist criticism of the late 1970's and 1980's; and that is what is both significant and radical about her feminism.

working classes" (AROO 48). The argument of *A Room Of One's Own* is a call for equal access to the literary world of men and an end to the familial virtual slavery of women: "How then, could it have been born among women whose work began . . . almost before they were out of the nursery" (AROO 48). She concedes that women and the poor must have had geniuses, but that they didn't stand a chance of expression because of the work pressed upon them and their lack of finances, though "now and again an Emily Bronte or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper" (AROO 49).

#### Women and Writing

This is what Virginia Woolf wants for women--a chance to get onto paper. She wants women to have the same opportunity to develop that "state of mind [that] is most propitious for creative work, because the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent" (AROO 56). She wants this, not to the exclusion of men, but to an equal extent with them, without the weight of the governing patriarchy. Without the advantages men have enjoyed women won't be able to join them in the literary tradition. Again, response within

that tradition takes time and does not occur in isolation: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (AROO 65). Woolf wasn't interested in excluding or revising, but joining the great tradition of Western literature. The 'authentic fact' is what Woolf delights in, in "the white light of truth" (AROO 41; 33). This is to be found in the fertile androgynous mind of man and woman—this genius, which is born and nurtured in an environment of equal educational and financial circumstances. She wanted to add the genius of suppressed women writers to the genius of the already existing canon—to write the female sentence from the androgynous mind of a writer who is a woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Note from James H. Nichols, Jr. translation of Plato's *Phaedrus*: "Dialektikos could come from *dialego*, 'to pick out' or *dialegesthai*, 'to talk through' or 'to converse.' Perhaps some wordplay on Zeus (*Dia* in the accusative case . . . is suggested: dialectic as choosing Zeus—or speaking like Zeus" (Plato. *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. Trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998.)

<sup>2</sup> Foundationalism here refers to culture based on a (Puritan) Christian religious foundation.

<sup>3</sup> (A *Writer's Diary* 5, 6) Sandra Gilbert uses this diary excerpt from September 1918 in her discussion on *Milton's bogey*.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf is one of those "strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors" that Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* examines. Woolf's strength as a writer is defined in her subversive dialectic in Bloom's next statement about great writers: "Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves" (AI 5). (See Chapter 2 of this thesis for discussion on the rhetorical strategy of dialectic)

<sup>5</sup> Wittreich's position was debated hotly among Miltonists who considered his *Feminist Milton* to have taken the supposition too far.

<sup>6</sup> "Reviewing *A Room of One's Own*, Rebecca West saw . . . an 'uncompromising piece of feminist propaganda'" and "the 'ablest' written in a long line of feminist pamphlets from Millicent Garrett Fawcett in the middle of the Victorian age until the actual winning of the vote in 1928" (Marcus 136).

<sup>7</sup> The Norton editor writes that Thomas Wentworth Higginson published a column of advice for young writers in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Emily Dickinson wrote for his advice, and a lifelong literary relationship began. This quote is taken from a letter from Higginson to his wife (August 16, 1870) in which he recounts some noteworthy things Dickinson said. (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. 1)

CHAPTER TWO

MASTERY OF FORM: A MATTER OF TRUTH AND FICTION.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTRODUCTORY

PASSAGE FROM VIRGINIA WOOLF'S

*A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

*We still do not yet know where the drive for truth comes from. For so far we have heard only of the duty which society imposes in order to exist: to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. Thus, to express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone.*

Nietzsche - "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," 1979<sup>1</sup>

Author and Academia:  
Feminist Subversion of a Man's World

As Virginia Woolf approached the podium to lecture to university women in 1928 she stepped into a man's world—academe and writing—to address these patriarchal traditions in relation to women. Those lectures became *A Room of One's Own*. A rhetorical analysis of the opening paragraph of *A Room of One's Own* supports a reading of Woolf's dual feminist subversion of the academic patriarchy. In Nietzsche's words Woolf's subversion is a presentation of a

different truth with different metaphors—the opposition of “a fixed convention” with new lies. She undermines the tradition of the patriarchal didactic lecture with a mock dialectic, challenging the hierarchical academy with a collaborative learning model and individual agency. She also challenges foundationalism by taking the quintessential English patriarchal poet, John Milton, whom, I assert, she greatly admires as a predecessor, and transforms his Puritan poetic “lecture”—God to man, through Milton—into a modern anti-foundational collaboration—Woolf to women, with the proviso that they take what they consider useful and leave the rest. Woolf throws out not only the patriarchal equations, professor=omniscient and student=tabula rasa, but also the absolutes of Milton’s Puritan Christian patriarchy (one of which is that women are, in all things, subject to men) as the last word for women. She crafts this introduction with the modern practice of mastery of form—mimicking the standard, while subverting it with an enlightened concept. The first (subversion of the omniscient professor) is concerned with what the language does as a model of Woolf’s idea of a non-patriarchal teaching model. This argument underlies the discussion on the presence of women in the literary canon

that Jane Marcus has addressed in her 1987 collection of critical essays: *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*. Marcus sets the lectures in their historical moment and asserts that Woolf's talk is an "anti-lecture"—a seductive "talk to girls".<sup>2</sup> I argue that Woolf's dialectic "lecture" demonstrates a better heuristic (actually a return to Socratic dialectic). The second (subversion of Milton's foundational *Truth*) demonstrates that Woolf's information supports her ethos and pathos and that she, in Burke's term, "identifies" with her audience to such an extent that her "women and fiction" argument, which is not under extensive discussion here, is persuasive. In this passage, Woolf "modernizes" the Puritan argument of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the *proem* of Book I with her anti-foundational argument as a modern woman writer. This paper will focus on both the subversion of the classical lecture with an anti-patriarchal dialectic teaching model, what John Bender and David E. Wellbery call *continually returning* (to a previous rhetorical form) *with a difference*, and how the language subtly and skillfully persuades the auditor that speaker and auditor agree.<sup>3</sup>

While opposing the literary patriarchy as an exclusive institution, Woolf does appreciate great male writers. She

also, however, suggests that women must not buy into the patriarchy, but question, amass information, and decide for themselves what they will and will not value. Woolf delivers her mock dialectic—a collaborative heuristic, not hierarchical didactic model—as a better way to teach. She offers cooperative learning and opposes the natural result of hierarchical education—scraping and clawing for titles and accolades, having to prove oneself superior, and, therefore, achieve the pinnacle of prestige and respect. Woolf showed as much distain for this (turning down a lectureship at Cambridge on these grounds) as she did for the military hierarchy and a societal patriarchy thirsty for decorative tufts on the shoulder of a uniform, aggression, and dominance through war. Now, the reader might be tempted to lay Woolf's argument solidly in radical feminism, assuming Woolf favors a gender shift in literary power. A close reading of *A Room of One's Own*, however, reveals that she doesn't. The complexity of her argument lies in the ethos she establishes as an author well-read in the Western rhetorical tradition. Her rhetorical form, tropes, and style in this extended essay both reflect and subvert that tradition. Edward P. J. Corbett writes in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*: "A writer must



be in command of several styles, so that he or she can accommodate his or her manner to various subject matters, occasions, purposes, and audiences. But even within this range of styles, there will be a certain persistent level of style associated with that author" (Corbett 405). In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf integrates a personal voice with fiction to make her point. This work has a different audience in mind than the auditors of her nearly stream-of-consciousness fiction. Her seductive rhetorical choice to identify with her audience as a personable, humorous, literate colleague is a sophisticated tactic, as historical contextualization—the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*—of the polemic will reveal.

*Kairos: The Rhetorical Strategy of  
Historical Context*

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* Mikhail Bakhtin wrote, "The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine—and determine from within, so to speak—the structure of an utterance" (Vilosonov 86)<sup>4</sup>. This is the case with Woolf and the lectures which became *A Room of One's Own*. She responds within a classical rhetorical strategy to the historical canon, with ideas she hopes her female audience will adopt,

utilizing their knowledge of current events. In 1928, *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radcliff Hall was published. The furor generated about its lesbian content resulted in Radcliff Hall being placed on trial for obscenity. Woolf supported the novel's lesbian content. She was called to testify. She and others in the literary community tried to distance themselves from the trial, however, not because the novel voiced lesbianism, but because in Woolf's opinion, it was poorly written. Woolf did not want to have to denigrate the writing in the public forum because that assessment would be connected negatively to lesbianism. In *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, Marcus delineates the *kairos*, or the moment, of Woolf's lecture: "When Woolf asked the students to check that Sir Chartres Biron or Sir Archiblad Bodkin were not eavesdropping, that they were all women in the room, the obscenity trial of *The Well of Loneliness* was still in progress" (Marcus 166). Biron was the 'presiding magistrate' and Bodkin was 'Director of Public Prosecutions' (Marcus 166). Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's lover,<sup>5</sup> worked to support Hall and urged Woolf to also. Marcus asserts that "Much of *A Room* was written to convert her beloved Vita to feminism" (Marcus 166). Woolf considered *The Well* artless and

blatant, generating opposition because of its inability to artfully convey while leaving its auditors gaping, but not quite sure if they read it right. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf sets her feminist argument forth so carefully with allusion to lesbians within the academic and writing issues at hand that she leaves no room for public attack on the grounds of lesbianism of her work. This, I assert, is an instruction to Radcliff Hall, to take seriously the cardinal rule of rhetoric—the last thing the speaker wants to do is alienate the auditor; but the novelist must write well, knowing the audience, with literary tradition behind her so that the message will be heard, not censored.

Woolf's polemic echoes Plato's Socrates in *The Phaedrus*<sup>6</sup>:

But when he has learned to tell what sort of man is influenced by what sort of speech . . . and has also distinguished the favorable occasions for brief speech . . . then, and not till then, will his art be fully and completely finished.

(Fowler 553; 555)

Woolf teaches Radcliff Hall to sophisticatedly seduce, not alienate her audience—to know her audience and historical moment while demonstrating the extent to which she is in full control of that knowledge.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Introductory  
Paragraph of *A Room Of One's Own*

The introductory paragraph of Chapter One is an example of just how well Woolf is in control as a rhetor. The act of mimicking Milton's argument implies admiration for John Milton as a precursor. The anti-foundational content reveals Woolf's opposition to Miltonic foundationalism. Woolf highly respected Milton's poetic skill and demonstrated this in her mastery of the classical rhetoric Milton employs in *Paradise Lost's* Book 1 "Proem." Analysis of Woolf's use of Miltonic catalog to praise his style in her 1918 diary entry also supports my assertion that she admired his poetry. It was his patriarchal Puritanism that she opposed. In the introductory passage of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's language both woos her audience and dispels the popular "hatred myth" of Woolf toward Milton.

Once the introduction to *A Room of One's Own* is isolated, the reader immediately notices that its length of over two pages is all one paragraph (See Appendix). This paragraph is the basis for the polemic's argument, as Milton's proem in Book I of *Paradise Lost* is the basis for his argument<sup>7</sup>: to "justify the ways of God to man" (Milton

1.26), which, according to Roy Flannagan, the editor of the Prentice Hall edition, "suggests a rhetorical structure." Woolf uses this rhetorical structure to subvert the patriarchy on two levels—heuristics and ideology (Milton 117). Woolf shrewdly conducts her lecture as dialectic between herself and her auditors not only to make her point, but also to demonstrate a better way to teach. Woolf also explores this heuristic model in her short story, "A Society," in which she defines dialectic as "a society for asking questions" (CSF 125). Woolf begins *A Room of One's Own* asking a question as if in the middle of an ongoing conversation with the reader, originally her lecture audiences of the Cambridge women's colleges, Girton and Newnham.

Subversion of the Lecture Form With Dialectic:  
Seduction of the Auditor

The text begins argumentatively with the conjunction "But," placing the reader squarely in a cooperative dialectic. Woolf is the speaker expected to deliver the "nugget of truth," expected to usurp the position of the male lecturer with the emancipated female voice. According to Plato's Socrates, the speaker's relationship with the auditor is one of lover, seducer, or rapist. The

patriarchal lectureship is the *rapist* model. The professor possesses all knowledge; the student must receive it and learn it to be initiated into the academic community.

Woolf's language is that of the seductress *with a difference*<sup>8</sup>—not to deceive or manipulate the audience into agreement with her argument, but to coax the historically disadvantaged auditor into a position of agency. She gives the illusion that she is subjecting herself to the expectations of the auditor while, in fact, she is modeling a feminine heuristic and subverting the patriarchal lecture form. The auditor responds subconsciously to Woolf's solicitous tone.

Woolf uses poetic tropes—alliteration, assonance, Ciceronian balance, and privileged syntactical positioning of her auditors to build this rhetorical structure. She begins on a foundation of constructed narration with the personal pronoun "you/your." Considering that *A Room of One's Own* is a lecture series, it is important to keep in mind Woolf speaks first to an audience and ultimately to the community of women readers who will pick up her book for generations. She employs many stylistic conventions to accomplish this and, given the differences in the two facsimile versions of *A Room*, which she titled *Women &*

*Fiction* at the early stage of her writing process in autumn 1929, the text demonstrates that Woolf purposely modeled Milton's Book I proem in her introduction. Woolf's modern feminist worldview is foregrounded; the reader will find that all of this does not depose Milton, but calls for opening literary doors also to great women writers and a new style of education apart from the patriarchal lecture.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book I Proem: The  
Persuasive Power of Patriarchal Authority

Analysis based on comparison to Milton's Book I proem must briefly foreground the proem to contextualize the discussion. Milton presents a hierarchy in the invocation of Book I of *Paradise Lost*: God will give him second sight through the Holy Spirit to tell the Truth to humanity: "Of Mans First Disobedience . . . Sing Heav'nly Muse" (Milton 1.1, 6); "I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song" (1.12-13); "And chiefly Thou O Spirit . . . Instruct me . . . What in me is dark / Illumin, what is low raise and support; / That to the highth of this great Argument / I may assert Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men" (Milton 1.17, 22-26). Milton's eyesight is failing before he begins *Paradise Lost*; he therefore asks the Holy Spirit to give him spiritual sight so that he can

defend God's ways to men<sup>9</sup>. This is a heavy burden Milton lays upon himself—to become God's poet/prophet and tell mankind the Truth. Humanity doesn't have a say in this structure. It will simply read and accept what Milton has received from God.

Individual Agency in *A Room Of One's Own*:  
Persuasion on the Merits

Woolf immediately dissolves this hierarchical notion syntactically by privileging the reader within her argument as a valid participant: "But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" (AROO 3). The counter-argumentative conjunction indicates the audience is a full participant in this discussion. The audience must be answered—added to the discussion as a full-fledged member. Woolf presents the narrator's persona as "bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders"<sup>10</sup> (AROO 4). She gives her audience power with almost every sentence. This strategy subverts Milton's Puritan patriarchy, in which Eve is weak and susceptible to the serpent's ethos laden sophistry, and therefore, she needs to be governed by Adam's natural ability to reason. Milton's teaches the proper female place in Eve's response to Adam in Book 4<sup>11</sup>:



"My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst / Unargu'd I obey;  
so God ordains, / God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no  
more / Is womans happiest knowledge and her praise" (Milton  
4.635-39). Further, it counters Milton's belief that God  
speaks, Milton hears the Truth, and speaks it to his world—  
from God's mouth, to Milton's ear, to the people. The  
masses have a prophet or conduit, and he dictates. Personal  
assessment isn't a consideration because absolute Truth  
comes from outside man; it isn't relative—a thing open to  
negotiation. Woolf, rejecting foundational *Truth*, speaks  
modern ideology, which is a "recovery" of the Sophist  
rhetorical premise that there isn't a basis of absolute  
truth as Milton indicates, but there is relative truth—the  
truth of the speaker's current audience, and the truth the  
speaker seeks to persuade them to believe, as Woolf states  
in this passage: at best "One can only give one's audience  
the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe  
the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the  
speaker" (AROO 4). Woolf cannot absolutely *justify* women  
and fiction to the reader. She merely presents her view  
for consideration: "it is for you to seek out this truth  
and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If

not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it" (AROO 5).

Part of Woolf's "identification" with the auditors as a group, women seeking education, is, as Kenneth Burke declares, "precisely because there is division" (Burke 22). The nature of this division lies in the practice of continuing to teach by means of the patriarchal lecture model at women's colleges. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, explain Burke's theory: "Burke looks at how [key terms] are used to create "identification with a group and its worldview . . . Burke examines the ways in which the terms used to create identification work to include the members of a group in a common ideology, while at the same time excluding alternate terms, other groups, and competing ideologies" (Bizzell, Herzberg 1296). Burke might have included key pedagogical methods, because the lecture form reinforces the ideology of exclusion in the literary patriarchal hierarchy. Woolf subversively presents a dialectic, which is cooperative and inclusive, neither elevating professor, nor subjugating student, in the guise of a lecture. Just as some spirituals that African slaves sang while working sounded like song to help keep to the task, but were actually

instructions for escape on the "underground railroad," so Woolf's disguised lecture holds dialectic, the key to undermining patriarchal authority, offering information and perspective for each student to judge for themselves—elevating each to the position of co-learner. The lecture form is a didactic and serves to reinforce the hierarchy. The professor imparts *the truth*, the information, to students, who must swallow it. The dialectic, however, models shared information, personal assessment, and individual conclusion. Woolf does not speak about absolute truth, because in her modern rational system there are many possible conclusions or extrapolations from useful information. By the modern period, foundational truth for some thinkers no longer exists. In the 1870's Nietzsche wrote:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions: they are

metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force. (Nietzsche 84)

To the academic and literary patriarchy that has invented its own conventions and requires everyone to practice them because they have become "fixed, canonical, and binding," though, according to Nietzsche, they are only "illusions which we have forgotten are illusions," Woolf offers the female voice, option, metaphor (Nietzsche 84). In the academy she supports replacing the lecture with the dialectic. Milton's foundationalism she declares obsolete in the face of relative truth. The familiar tone of Woolf's dialectic woos the auditor with the suggestion that she is free to agree or discard whatever does not suit: "Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it." This is "fictional" truth—opinion about women and fiction—Nietzsche's reality that the world of language is a world of metaphors where lies flow and value is to be determined.

## The Rhetorical Strategy of Style

In addition to persuasion through dialectic in this passage, Woolf uses her own seductive style, which Edward P.J. Corbett calls "'available means of persuasion,' another of the means of arousing the appropriate emotional response in the audience, and of the means of establishing the proper ethical image" (Corbett 381). This is a lecture, though Woolf constructs within it a mock dialectic. Woolf follows the conventions of classical rhetoric to establish her *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—her ethical appeal or credibility as respected authority in her field; her emotional appeal or identification with women scholars, subverting the oppressive patriarchy; and her intellectual appeal or knowledge of classical rhetoric, of the literary canon, and her authority as a visionary for women writers.

My rhetorical analysis demonstrates Woolf's stylistic skill. She uses elements of alliteration, assonance, parallelism, and a Ciceronian triad—a human trinity, which I contrast with Milton's two supernatural trinities. In the Appendix I have highlighted the literary elements and content of Woolf's argument that I examine. All emphasis in the passage is my own for the purpose of isolating words

and phrases in this discussion. Part of Woolf's seductive style lies in her use of poetic elements in her prose. She adds a lyrical quality to the passage with alliteration: "coming," "conclusion," "question," "concern;" "cannot hope to tell the truth;" "fiction," "fact;" "liberties," "licenses."

To this alliteration she adds assonance, repetition of the [o] vowel sound: "One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions." The auditor can imagine Woolf on the banks of the river she speaks of later where she thinks these things through. These low frequency "o" and "ah" vowel sounds invite similar rumination within her reader, which establishes identification and solidarity between speaker and auditor regarding their common struggles in a patriarchal society.

The Ciceronian balance in this passage reflects Woolf's desire to equally weigh each phrase. This demonstrates her credibility through *ethos*—her command—of classical rhetoric. The first is distinguished by the anaphora—the parallel indefinite article (indicated here in italics)—and then Woolf varies the nouns and prepositional

phrases: "They might mean simply a *few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontes and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs. Gaskell and one would have done.*" This sets up a varying rhythm that woos the auditor with a poetic music. The second group repeats *might mean*, helping Woolf set up the reality of variable meaning and relative truth: "The title women and fiction *might mean*, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it *might mean* women and the fiction that they write; or it *might mean* women that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light." The auditor must stop each time and regroup at the phrase, "or it might mean," and it is important to note that Woolf considers that the reader might "have meant it to mean." The auditor has equal agency here and Woolf drives this home over and over in this passage, almost, it seems, in a humorous effort to squash Milton's patriarchal privilege "as a noxious insect"<sup>12</sup> (AROO 31).

Finally, Woolf's demonstration of a Ciceronian triad in her secular trinity is her modernist answer to Milton's

holy and unholy trinities—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and Satan, Sin and Death. Woolf's trinity, validating non-foundational truth, pertains to the humanity of the author: "One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the *limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies* of the speaker." This is one way Woolf begins to shed some light on her "opinion." Any author has limitations, prejudices, and idiosyncrasies, which renders her/his argument unique. Milton imposed his prejudices—his belief system—on his audience. Woolf calls hers to think, absorb, synthesize, and determine for themselves the value of her case. She will trace a line of argument and support it logically. But she will not tell her auditors what to think. She wants them to develop the "freedom to think of things in themselves," (AROO 39) or "Life Itself"<sup>13</sup>, as one of her primary goals (CDB 21-27). Again, in this statement, Woolf seems to allude to, among other moderns, Nietzsche's discussion of language and truth: "The 'thing in itself'<sup>14</sup> (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be)," though Woolf parts company with his continuing assertion, "is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something



not in the least worth striving for" (Nietzsche 82). The thing itself, life itself, is precisely the worthy object. It is the truth wrapped in the lies of fiction—that "movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" spoken in the female voice for her eager audience to emulate (Nietzsche 84). She wants to give them the tools to begin to write themselves into the canon. Her goal is not to enforce a new system, but gain entrance for woman writers into the old and give it a few new non-patriarchal ideas in the process. Woolf sets up her argument as a Miltonic proem both because she admires his prosody and opposes his ideology. Woolf scholars confined their analysis to her discomfort with his poetry and disgust with Milton as patriarchal obstacle in a woman's path. I argue that in the introduction alone, Woolf demonstrates admiration for his skill and opposition to his argument.

Woolf is a Writer First: The Case for  
Admiration of the Patriarchal Poet

Virginia Woolf's passionate love for all great literature is the basis for her love of Milton's poetry. Her rewrite of Milton's proem in Book I from *Paradise Lost* is both an objection to his foundationalism—his

exclusionary patriarchy and his authoritarian pedagogy, and it is an admission of her admiration of his poetic skill. She's amazed at his: "wonderful, beautiful, & masterly descriptions . . . The inexpressible fineness of the style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing in to, long after the surface business in progress has been dispatched" (WD 5). She successfully sets up the polemic in a way that challenges the patriarchal academy and foundationalism, while it woos her auditors into a state in which they already agree with her.

Woolf doesn't want to annihilate Milton, and stylistically, as well as in content, she is clear about what she means in the passages in Chapter Two, not vague, as Sandra Gilbert argues. Woolf, "reflecting all those other works that came before," while discussing the "professor's" book about feminine inferiority, alludes to the Milton of her disdain. The anaphora and parallel phrasing in this sentence causes the reader to feel the loathing, which produces anger in Woolf: "It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon" (AROO 32). Repetition of the preposition and determiner—the anaphora—"to the" forces the reader to slow down, emphasize, feel "those emotional and tonal

qualities that come to be associated with words" (Corbett 393), or in this case with phrases—in particular these phrases: "one book," "one phrase," "which had roused the demon." Though Woolf is speaking of the Professor's "statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women," her phrases regarding the "black snake," the "demon" and "the one phrase" unmistakably allude to the language of *Paradise Lost* (AROO 32). Milton's Satan chooses to enter—to possess—the "fittest Imp of fraud," the snake, in order to deceive Eve into disobedience (Milton 9.89). The word 'demon' is associated in the Western mind with Satan, who is the "Chief of many Throned Powers" and the "dread commander" of all demons<sup>15</sup> (Milton 1.128; 589), and although Milton would not designate Satan as a 'demon' (an evil entity of low rank), certainly references to demons evoke the Christian nemesis to Woolf's auditors. Woolf relies on the connotation of these words to link patriarchal privilege with the message of *Paradise Lost* in the reader's mind. This probably was not lost on her student audience.

### Collateral Evidence: A Diary Entry

Woolf considered Milton's poems indispensable to the canon. This is evident in her diary entry of September 10th, 1918:

The substance of Milton is all made of wonderful, beautiful, & masterly descriptions and angels bodies, battles, fights, dwelling places. He deals in horror & immensity & squalor & sublimity, but never in the passions of the human heart. Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon ones own joys & sorrow . . . He was the first of the masculinists; but his disparagement rises from his own ill luck . . . What poetry! I can conceive that even Shakespeare after this would seem a little troubled, personal, hot & imperfect. The inexpressible fineness of the style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing in to, long after the surface business in progress has been dispatched. (*WD* 5, 6)

Given Woolf's supposed visceral objection to Milton, this passage is surprising not only considering the praise she lavishes on the poet whose Adam blocks Eve's view of the

sky. Sandra Gilbert emphasizes Woolf's "anxiety" over Milton that "may well represent all female anxieties about "Milton's bogey" (Gilbert 189). She projects onto Woolf's brief diary entry that "Milton . . . leaves her feeling puzzled, excluded, inferior, and even a little guilty" (Gilbert 191). I read no such insecurity in this passage. On the contrary, her praise is clear, though she amuses herself with the thought that he may have been projecting his own domestic unhappiness.

A reader of Milton would notice the second stylistic compliment Woolf pays to Milton by imitating his convention of lists in *Paradise Lost*. To express Hell's endless array of horrors Milton substitutes spondaic feet for iambs creating a line that looks and feels excessive, though it remains pentameter rhythmically, while also forcing the reader to slow down, emphasizing every word: "O're many a Frozen, many a fierie Alpe, / *Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death, / A Universe of death*" (Milton 2.620-22). Milton's Satan also bitterly enumerates Eden's delights for the very reason that he cannot enjoy them: "If I could joy in aught, sweet interchange / *Of Hill, and Vallie, Rivers, Woods and Plaines, / Now Land, now Sea, and Shores with Forrest crowned, / Rocks, Dens,*

*and Caves*" (Milton 9.115-18) (emphasis mine). Satan, looking at all this splendor stops with a jolting medial caesura in line 118 to confess bitterly that none of this could ever be home to him: "*Rocks, Dens, and Caves; but I in none of these / Find place or refuge*" (Milton 9.118-19). These poignantly evocative lines moved Woolf to praise Milton with her own lists of descriptors joined by ampersands, to emphasize and make the reader slow down, as Milton does with spondees, to soak in her admiration of his mastery: "He deals in horror & immensity & squalor & sublimity . . . joys & sorrow . . . hot & imperfect" (WD 5,6). Each spondee constructed with ampersands causes the reader to involuntarily emphasize, both visually and audibly, feeling Woolf's wonder. Milton uses this epic convention of lists in many places. It's not Milton's prosodic ability she objected to; that is clear. She objected to men shutting women out of the field—like Adam who stands in the way of Eve's view of God, for she must look at God through Adam—to which entrance should only be judged by greatness of talent, not by default of gender.

She closes *A Room* with a crescendo of "if/then" "clauses of condition" that rise past Milton's Bogey and

culminate in a finale relating to reality rather than gender:

For my belief is that *if we live another century or so*—I am talking of the common Life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals—and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; *if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human being not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; if we look past Milton's bogey, for no human being should shut out the view; if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come . . .*" (AROO 113-14) (Emphasis mine)

The modifications to the "if" clauses heighten the effect of the crescendo: "*if we live another century or so*" modified by "real life," not "little separate lives," "five

hundred a year," and "a room," show the reader the complexity and commitment to change of really living. Then, "if" women have the "freedom" to write and "if we escape a little from the common sitting-room" and relate to reality with a view "to the sky" "past Milton's Bogey;" "if we face the fact" then comes the "opportunity." Woolf has wrapped her argument in a neat, albeit complex, love/hate Miltonic bow from the first paragraph, to the passages about Milton and allusions to his patriarchal worldview, to the final admonition—Woolf's relative "nugget of truth"—that it will take time and money and thought, but women must be courageous and take their correct position beside men in literary tradition.

#### Thinking in Common: The Canonical Conversation

She wants this, not the exclusion of men, but equilateral privilege with them. Without the advantages men have enjoyed women won't be able to join them in the literary tradition. Response within that tradition takes time and does not occur in isolation: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind



the single voice" (AROO 65). Woolf wasn't interested in excluding male writers or revising the canon, but joining the great tradition of Western literature. The "authentic fact" is what Woolf delights in—the white light of truth" along with the surprising realization that she delights in the prosody of John Milton (AROO 41; 33). The authentic fact is to be found in the fertile androgynous mind of man and woman—this genius, which is born and nurtured in an environment of equal educational and financial circumstances. She wanted to add the genius of suppressed women writers to the genius of the already existing canon. Virginia Woolf's passionate love for all great literature is the basis for her love of Milton's poetry. Her most radical statements are only challenges to the "fixed convention" of the patriarchy should continue to be "binding upon everyone" (Nietzsche 84). It is on these ideas that she builds her constructed dialectic and supports her argument regarding the anti-foundational nature of truth in her seductively persuasive style.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is from: *Philosophy and Truth: selections from Nietzsche's notebooks of the early 1870's*. Trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale. Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Marcus *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* Chapter 8 "Sapphisty: Narration as Lesbian Seduction" Marcus characterizes Woolf's tone: "The informal 'talks to girls' was an anti-lecture in form, but it also served as discourse of feminist conspiracy" (Marcus 166).

<sup>3</sup> Bender and Wellbery, *The Ends of Rhetoric: "Rhetoricity: One of the Modernist Return to Rhetoric"*

<sup>4</sup> The Russian government censored Bakhtin's publications; therefore, he published under the name "Volosinov". In the Works Cited, Bakhtin is listed under: Volosinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf and Vita Sackville-West were "lovers" in that they shared an intimate, romantic correspondence. It is believed they spent one night together, but the relationship thereafter did not include physical sex.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf used classical references often. It's interesting to note that Jacob, the protagonist of *Jacob's Room*, sits in his room, absorbed in *The Phaedrus*. Woolf describes *The Phaedrus* as "very difficult. And so . . . at length one reads straight ahead, falling into step, marching on, becoming . . . momentarily part of this rolling imperturbable energy, which has driven darkness before it since Plato walked the Acropolis" (JR 109-110). Jacob is modeled after Woolf's beloved brother, Thoby, who died at age 26.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Flannagan explains that epic 'argument' is, "Not an argument in the conventional modern meaning of 'debate in which disagreement is expressed.' The Latin word argumentum meant 'subject matter,' when the writer was discussing the subject of a play or work of fiction. The phrase 'this great Argument' suggests a rhetorical structure, but it also suggests a great subject most worthy of the epic genre" (Milton 117).

<sup>8</sup> See Bender and Wellbery reference to 'continually returning with a difference' on Chapter Two, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Flannagan, in the editor's footnotes to the *Apostrophe to Light* in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* adds explains further the request for inspiration as: "an invocation from a blind poet to a source of inner light . . . Milton humbly invokes light . . . because it is an effluence of God and because he personally needs inward radiance to compensate for outward blindness. (Milton 208) . . ."

<sup>10</sup> (see endnote number 7) Woolf is also referring to the "highth of [the] great Argument" laid on her-women and fiction. She rewrites the epic argument that Milton asserts is to "justifie the wayes of God to men" (Milton 1.26) as the sound of the female voice, sentence, and story in literature.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that it's not necessary to contextualize Eve's response here. Whether she responds to Adam's love, his law, or a divine proscription is not my point. Eve's language supplies a template for the female position in society. Her response marks the appropriate attitude and prescribed status for Western women.

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<sup>12</sup> Woolf's narrator absentmindedly doodles the face of her archetypal patriarchal professor, Professor von X, in a state of frustration while she ponders women and fiction. She looks at the drawing, surprised at the rendering: "His expression suggested that he was labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained" (AROO 31). Woolf's reiterations of "what you may have meant it to mean" repeatedly drive home the agency of her auditors in the face of authoritarian patriarchal privilege.

<sup>13</sup>"Life Itself" is an essay in Woolf's collection, *The Captain's Deathbed and Other Essays* Woolf's in which she explores the theme that fascinated her all of her writing career, "the business of living" (CDB 23).

<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly Woolf also bases her ideas about 'life itself' on Plato, whose character, Socrates from *The Phaedrus*, seems to define Woolf's foundation for writing about life experience: "to know the truth of each of the things that [she] speaks or writes about" and "able to define everything in relation to the thing itself" (*The Gorgias* and *The Phaedrus*. Trans. James H. Nichols Jr. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998). This seems to be Woolf's constant obsession—to know an object, a person, or an event, and to "define everything in relation" to it.

<sup>15</sup> Though I use 'demon' generally to represent evil entities, Roy Flannagan explains, "There is a hierarchy and rank in Heaven exemplified by the many orders of angels, including Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Domination, and Powers" (Milton 121). The fallen angels become the evil counterparts of these designations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SAYING WHAT SHE MEANS: MILTON'S BOGEY AS ADAM

#### A New Reading of *Milton's Bogey*

The twenty-five year debate over *Milton's bogey* cooled in the 1990's with a seemingly tacit agreement between Woolf and Milton scholars that the image had been 'beaten to death.' Upon reading *A Room of One's Own* not long after researching *Paradise Lost*, however, I noticed a previously unidentified Miltonic allusion in the narrator's rumination over the archetypal academic patriarch in Chapter Two:

"Anger had snatched my pencil while I dreamt. But what was anger doing there? Interest, confusion, amusement, boredom—all these emotions I could trace and name as they succeeded each other throughout the morning. Had anger, the black snake, been lurking among them? Yes, said the sketch, anger had. It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon; it was the professor's statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women." (AROO 31-2)

Woolf's reference to that despicable "phrase" of "Professor von X" immediately resonated with John Milton's: "Hee for God only; shee for God in him," from *Paradise Lost*, the line often quoted in feminist objections to Adamic privilege and its implications (Milton 4.299). The professor's 'phrase' stuck out like a signpost: 'Milton's Adam ahead.' Sure enough, in the chapter's apex *Milton's bogey* is the central image, embedded in a discussion of the polemic's central solution in which Woolf's narrator, with her monetary inheritance, uninterrupted time, and private space successfully moves *Milton's bogey* out of the way—Adam out of the way of Eve—effectively removing the patriarchal impediment from the path of aspiring women writers. *Milton's bogey* seemed such a conundrum in the 1980's. I wondered why, since *his* identity seemed woven in the collective memory of literary tradition to which Woolf's narrator claims to respond<sup>1</sup>. The editor's introduction to Woolf's essay "On Not Knowing French," which first appeared in the *New Republic* in 1929, explores Woolf's characterization of knowing a first language. It also informs this discussion of the subconscious nature of continuous literary conversation:

Virginia Woolf wrote "On Not Knowing French" for the *New Republic* in 1929, a few months after the publication of *Orlando* and only a few weeks before she would begin writing *A Room of One's Own*. As in Woolf's more famous essay, "On Not Knowing Greek," what she means by "knowing" a language has little to do with the ability to conjugate verbs or decline nouns. Rather, Woolf argues that "to know a language one must have forgotten it," a process that can only occur if a language has been learned unconsciously during early childhood. Any language studied later can be learned only superficially; the new words will never engage the mind's deeper associations and memories.<sup>2</sup> (*NR Online*)

Literature and its allusions are a language of their own. Woolf, having been reared in a family of scholars and immersed in the Western canon from childhood, knew the language "unconsciously." She knew any discussion of the literary patriarchy must answer Milton, as the quintessential English epic poet and "first of the masculinists"<sup>3</sup>. My rhetorical analysis in Chapter Two demonstrates that Milton's religious patriarchy has been

answered in the introduction, the body, and the conclusion of the lecture that became *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf responded directly to his poetic mastery in her 1918 diary entry. The results of my analysis are two-fold. First, that Milton is of central significance to the polemic as a literary patriarch of patriarchs, given the organization of the speech form, in which the central issues are introduced, woven throughout, and reiterated in the conclusion. Second, that Woolf neither despised Milton's poetry, nor wanted him excised from the canon as a patriarchal exclusionist. Woolf was in awe of his poetry and saw herself as a part of the literary tradition that included Milton. My close reading of the bogey image in Chapter Three asserts that Woolf, as the "most complete person of letters of the Twentieth Century,"<sup>4</sup>—immersed in the language of literature as a "first language"—identifies the hotly contested bogey image as Milton's Adam in the allusion which precedes it. Woolf expects the allusion to resonate within the collective literary memory of her educated auditors.

*Milton's Bogey in Context*

In Chapter Two of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf situates her narrator in that famous room in Bloomsbury looking across "people's hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows" (AROO 25). She's has not yet discovered that "essential oil of truth" to impart to her eager auditors (AROO 25). Here, her introductory questions, which demonstrate the sophisticated rhetorical strategy of Ciceronian balanced phrasing, become more specific: "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" (AROO 25). She seeks answers where answers *should* be found, in the annals of that great patriarchal institution, the British Museum: "If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum," Woolf's narrator wryly exclaims, "where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?" (AROO 26). Woolf's narrator spends the fictitious day fruitlessly compiling contradictory and disparate opinions from books men have written about women. Next her subconscious frames the allusion which sets up the identity of *Milton's bogey*: "But while I pondered I had unconsciously, in my



listlessness, in my desperation, been drawing a picture where I should . . . have been writing a conclusion" (AROO 31). It is a picture of the figure Professor von X, the writer of *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex* (AROO 31). The Professor is "heavily built, has "a great jowl," "very small eyes, and "was very red in the face" (AROO 31). Woolf realizes the professor is angry and she proceeds on one of her mercilessly funny quests<sup>5</sup> to discover why. Could his wife be "in love with a cavalry officer? . . . Had he been laughed at, to adopt the Freudian theory, in his cradle by a pretty girl?" (AROO 31). In the end she discovers that, while she fancied herself researching with a cool head, she has actually been reacting to the patriarch's self-aggrandizing denigration of women. It is significant to this discussion of *Milton's bogey* to notice that Woolf's narrator again refers to her drawing as having been the product of the unconscious, building these ideas on the notion of Freud's theory, because, as she asserts in this passage:

it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top. . . .  
A very elementary exercise in psychology . . .  
showed me, on looking at my notebook, that the

sketch of the angry professor had been made in anger. Anger had snatched my pencil while I dreamt. But what was anger doing there? Interest, confusion, amusement, boredom—all these emotions I could trace and name as they succeeded each other through out the morning. Had anger, the black snake been lurking among them? Yes, said the sketch, anger had. It referred me unmistakably to the one book, to the one phrase, which had roused the demon; it was the professor's statement about the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women" (AROO 32).

As a women writer discussing the patriarchy's effect on women and fiction within the framework of her auditor's shared knowledge of all Western literature—for "masterpieces are not single and solitary births." [They are] "the out come of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (AROO 68-9).

Woolf's narrator also explains that we read one book "as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books" (AROO 80). Woolf's statement must apply to the preeminent, offending patriarchal work,

*Paradise Lost*, and the archetypal offending patriarchal phrase "Hee for God; shee for God in Him" (Milton 4:299). These images are supported with two more allusions to *Paradise Lost*. The "black snake" and the "demon" in Woolf's essay both represent anger. The narrator chooses the words "snake" and "demon," however, to surround "the one book," "the one phrase." These put the auditor in mind subconsciously of the Christian patriarchy and consciously of Milton, *Paradise Lost*, and Satan's temptation of Eve—the text upon which subjugation of women has been justified for centuries.

The Literary Unconscious: Evidence  
for the *Bogey* as Milton's Adam

In Chapter Six of *The Madwoman in the Attic: "Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers,"* Sandra Gilbert tackles the question of what Woolf meant by referencing Milton in a "perfunctory" way in the image of "Milton's bogey" (Gilbert 188). She considers this reference surprisingly vague and analyzes what Woolf might have meant, finally settling on this: "Whatever else it may be, [it] is ultimately . . . his powerful rendering of the culture myth . . . at the heart of Western literary patriarchy" (Gilbert 191). Certainly, this is the case.

However, next, she punctuates this statement with odd support from Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, though he does not agree with the feminist "appropriation" of Woolf's polemical works, with whose cause, as he reiterates in *The Western Canon*, he believes Woolf "shares little" (WC 406). He further asserts: "I am puzzled each time I reread *A Room of One's Own* . . . as to how anyone could take these tracts as instance of "political theory," the genre invoked by literary Feminists for whom Woolf's polemics have indeed assumed scriptural status . . . Woolf is no more a radical political theorist than Kafka is a heretical theologian. They are writers and have no other covenant" (WC 407). I do not agree with Bloom that *A Room of One's Own* is not a polemic; however, in large part my thesis is built on the fact that Woolf loves great writing, whether it is written by the "first of the masculinists" or Charlotte Bronte. Bloom's statement points back to the *kairos* or historical moment in which Woolf delivers her lectures, as discussed in Chapter Two. Woolf's hesitancy to testify at Radcliff Hall's trial for her lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was because she considered it poorly written. Woolf is concerned primarily, as Bloom asserts, with good writing; however, she does advocate for women and

female influence in society in *A Room of One's Own*. Sandra Gilbert cites Bloom to support her supposition despite his disparate opinion: "In a line even more appropriate to women, Bloom adds that 'the motto to English poetry since Milton was stated by Keats: "life to him would be death to me"' (Gilbert 191). Gilbert applies this statement as if Woolf is addressing Milton. This implies something far wider than Woolf probably intended. *A Room of One's Own* doesn't support Milton's annihilation. It supports moving Milton's Adam, as representative of the patriarchy who deny women access to education and public life, out of the way. As I've argued, Woolf's allusion is clear about the *bogey's* identity, not vague, as Gilbert suggests.

The allusion that precedes the *bogey* image "engage[s] the mind's deeper associations and memories" (*NR Online*), of Milton's Adam and the problem of his exclusive privilege, and culminates in a solution that will move *Milton's bogey* out of the way—a room and money, giving women the power of time, means, and privacy to develop into canonical writers. The narrator's educated aunt presents the solution:

Indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me,  
and substituted for the large and imposing figure

of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky (AROO 39).

Milton's Adam stands in the way, and if Eve is to move him in order to write a book, she needs to have the independent means to do so. Woolf certainly and viscerally objected to and opposed the Milton of *Paradise Lost* as another patriarchal view of female "mental, moral and physical inferiority" in this hierarchical positioning of Adam and Eve. She did not, however, reject Milton's poetry along with his Puritan views.

Woolf considered Milton's poems indispensable to the great works of the canon. This is evident in her diary entry of Tuesday September 10th, 1918, in which she writes:

Though I am not the only person in Sussex who reads Milton, I mean to write down my impressions of *Paradise Lost* while I'm about it. Impressions fairly well describes the sort of things left in my mind. I have left many riddles unread. I have slipped on too easily to taste the full flavour. However I see, and agree to some extent in believing, that this full flavour is the reward of highest scholarship. I am struck by

the extreme difference between this poem and any other. It lies, I think, in the sublime aloofness and impersonality of the emotion. I have never read Cowper on the sofa, but I can imagine that the sofa is a degraded substitute for *Paradise Lost*. The substance of Milton is all made of wonderful, beautiful, & masterly descriptions and angels bodies, battles, fights, dwelling places. He deals in horror & immensity & squalor & sublimity, but never in the passions of the human heart. Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon ones own joys & sorrow? I get no help in judging life; I scarcely feel that Milton lived or knew men and women: except for the peevish personalities about marriage and the woman's duties. He was the first of the masculinists; but his disparagement rises from his own ill luck and seems even a spiteful last word in his domestic quarrels. But how smooth, strong and elaborate in all is! What poetry! I can conceive that even Shakespeare after this would seem a little troubled, personal, hot & imperfect. The inexpressible fineness of the

style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing into it, long after the surface business in progress has been dispatched. Deep down one catches still further combinations, rejections, felicities and masteries. Moreover, though there is nothing like Lady Macbeth's terror or Hamlet's cry, no pity or sympathy or intuition, the figures are majestic; in them is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, or our duty to God, our religion. (WD 5, 6)

Though the rhetorical style and content of this passage are analyzed in detail in Chapter Two, here, I compare what Woolf wrote about Milton and Shakespeare, given her supposed visceral objection to Milton. In discussion of the ideal state of mind for a poet, Woolf writes in Chapter Three of *A Room of One's Own*: "What was Shakespeare's state of mind, for instance, when he wrote *Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*? It was certainly the state of mind most favourable to poetry that there has ever existed" (AROO 51). She concludes this chapter with a crescendo of Shakespeare as the ideal "incandescent" mind:



The reason perhaps why we know so little of Shakespeare—compared with Donne or Ben Jonson or Milton—is that his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. . . . All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded. If ever a human being got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare. If ever a mind was incandescent, unimpeded, I thought, turning again to the bookcase, it was Shakespeare's mind. (AROO 56-7)

Shakespeare is the master of human emotion. Milton is the master of the stylistic expression of the sublime. Woolf reads Milton's grudges in his poetry, but it's not Milton's prosodic ability she objects to; that is clear. She objects to men shutting women out of the literary tradition. She objects to Milton's patriarchal Adam, who stands in the way of Eve's view of God for she must view God through the veil of Adam. This she equates with the patriarchy blocking women's view of *the sky* or unlimited possibility—preventing women from achieving beyond the

domestic sphere. Woolf advocates that entrance into the field of writing should be judged by greatness of talent, not by default of gender.

As discussed in Chapter One, feminists tackled the problem of *Milton's bogey* for a decade. Christine Froula (1984) and Jane Marcus (1988) read Milton as powerless in Woolf's deconstruction of Milton's bogey. Louise DeSalvo and others wrote on the experience of women and writing, and on Woolf's role as canon abolitionist, based on the bogey image. Heated counter arguments from Miltonists ensued. Joseph Wittreich, Joan Webber, and William Shullenberger read Milton as feminist in the eighties—a radical reformer of his own Early Modern age, and stated that Milton's Eve was misread as meekly subservient to the patriarchy. In "The Politics of Poetry: Feminism and *Paradise Lost*" (1980), Joan Webber wrote that Gilbert "badly misrepresents . . . Milton" (Webber 21). In 1995, Lisa Low, the first to respond to both arguments, stated that feminists have yet to counter-respond to these claims. Low responds as a Woolf scholar integrating the text of *Paradise Lost*. Low favors the Miltonist position in "'Two Figures in Dense Violet Night': Virginia Woolf, John Milton, and the Epic Vision of Marriage," stating that:

Milton [is] a possible precursor not only for Woolf, but for twentieth century feminism . . . [and] that Milton is at the very least ambivalent rather than misogynistic in his portrait of women and that Woolf may have misread Milton, even as she might have given a 'local habitation and a name' for latter-day feminist misreadings of him (Low 71).

I argue that Woolf herself saw Milton as her predecessor, and that contrary to previous arguments, her diary indicates she admired his poetry, even that of *Paradise Lost*. I suggest Low misreads Woolf, not that Woolf misreads Milton. In the style of the first extended paragraph in *A Room's of One's Own* I read Woolf's modernist version of the prose arguments Milton added to *Paradise Lost*. I contend that Milton's bogey represents not John Milton the poet (Gilbert), or the Christian God (Marcus), or *Paradise Lost* (Froula), but Milton's Adam (the progenitor of patriarchal society) who obstructs Eve's view. Adam represents men, who, for centuries, have hindered women who aspire to careers beyond the home.

Conclusion: The Centrality of Milton  
to the Polemic

Milton's role in *A Room of One's Own* cannot be viewed as confined to the *bogey* image. Rhetorical, stylistic, and close analysis of the polemic's introduction, *Milton's bogey*, and the diary entry of September 10th, 1918, support Milton's central role in Woolf's discussion of the patriarchy's effect on women and writing. Woolf masters the classical lecture form and subverts it with dialectic to create agency and entrance into the literary canon for previously excluded women writers. She knows the Western canon from Homer to her modern peers. She knows her audience. The extended essay convinces generations of women readers that Woolf is 'one of us.' She establishes *pathos* seductively in the introductory paragraph with a friendly, familiar talk-to-sisters-in-the-fight-against-patriarchy. She establishes *logos* by demonstrating mastery of Milton's proem and rewriting it with her modern feminist anti-foundationalism. She establishes *ethos* in the use of *Milton's bogey*—the archetypal patriarch of the "first of the masculinists" in the body and the peroration of her "lecture." Unless her auditors have been educated in the same tradition they won't realize that she has declared

solidarity with them, not they with her; that she knows and loves great writers, whether male or female; and that she has written herself into the canon as Milton's successor and urges them to do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> "It seems to be her first book, I said to myself, but one must read it as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those to her books that I have been glancing at . . . for books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately" (AROO 80).

<sup>2</sup> Essay "On Not Knowing French," originally printed in the *New Republic*, February 13, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> See diary entry of September 10th, 1918 (from *A Writer's Diary* 5, 6), quoted in full on pp. 13, 14 of Chapter 2: "Mastery of Form: A Matter of Truth and Fiction Rhetorical Analysis of the Introductory Passage from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*."

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 1: "Contextualizing Milton in *A Room of One's Own* from 1979 to 2004," page 11.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf was notorious for flaying friends and guests with her razor wit and fanciful guesses about who they were and what they were about. Although she wrote that it was impossible to determine character conclusively—to 'sum people up'—she often made sport of them for fun and possibly for practice in character development.

APPENDIX

VIRGINIA WOOLF: *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*,

CHAPTER ONE, PARAGRAPH 1 (3 - 5)

## APPENDIX

Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*,

Chapter 1, paragraph 1 (3 - 5)

But, **you** may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain. When **you** asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply **a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontes and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs. Gaskell and one would have done. But at second sight** the words seemed not so simple. The title women and fiction **might mean**, and **you may have meant it to mean**, women and what they are like; **or it might mean** women and the fiction that they write; **or it might mean** women and the fiction that is written about them; **or it might mean** that somehow all three are inextricably



mixed together and **you** may want me to consider them **in that light**. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand **you** after an hour's discourse a **nugget of pure truth** to wrap up between the pages of **your** notebooks and keep on the mantle-piece for ever. All I could do was to offer **you** an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as **you** will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions—women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends I am going to do what I can to show **you** how I arrived at **this opinion** about the room and the money. I am going to develop in **your** presence as fully and freely as I can the

train of **thought** which led me to **think this**. Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices that lie behind this statement **you** will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction. At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—**one cannot hope to tell the truth**. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of **drawing their own conclusions** as they observe the **limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker**. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact.

Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences [sic] of a novelist, to tell **you** the story of the two days that preceded my coming here—how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which **you** have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and **made it work in and out of my daily life**. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; "I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real

being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the wastepaper basket and forget all about it.

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