



Virginia Woolf's shadow: sex bias in academic publication

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Virginia Woolf's shadow: Sex bias in academic publication

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I am interested in data that shows how the academic publishing industry functions as a gatekeeper for scholarship. In the research I describe below, I collected two datasets: (1) representations of women essayists in a teaching anthology and a work of synoptic overview; and (2) monographs and essay collections in print in January and February 2016, on female subjects active between 1930 and 1960, drawn from the online catalogues of seven leading British publishing houses with a worldwide market.

My principal findings are that, within these parameters, women authors publish on female subjects much more than male authors do, and male authors rarely publish on women subjects, unless they are Virginia Woolf. An unanticipated result from the data shows that, as a subject, Woolf dominates the British academic monograph market for this period. She throws a historiographical shadow like no other twentieth-century woman author, which exacerbates a serious imbalance in the publication of scholarship on other women writers of this period.

It is tremendously difficult in the present straitened times to persuade a publisher to invest in critical writing on a woman author whom they do not consider to be saleable. Academic publishing has to be a business, despite the inclinations of publishers and editors to encourage scholarship and enhance the critical landscape with new work and new subjects. Scholarly books are published in order to sell to university libraries first, and to scholars second. University libraries have the biggest budgets, and are most likely to subscribe to book series, whereas far fewer individual scholars buy books that cost over £50. Most academic books are published in 'library' format, and only works from the very biggest academic publishers, or those titles with crossover appeal, will appear in paperback or in high street bookshops. Publishers have a range of motivations, which vary in emphasis from publisher to publisher. There is considerable investment (and risk) in the business of scholarly publishing, and in the arts and humanities market profits are unlikely to be high. For these reasons, academic publishers may have limited flexibility to offset a niche

publication or a book with a limited market. While an individual book need not make a profit, the list as a whole must.

Thus it could be said that a self-perpetuating circle ensues:

- a publisher is very unlikely to publish works on subjects they think will not sell
- publishers follow the market in their strategic thinking: they are likely to publish an academic book if the author can prove that courses in the USA and in the UK are teaching that subject, i.e. that enough university libraries will buy the book
- if the subject has not yet been published on, or is not being taught, it is unlikely that an academic publisher will touch it as a single-author monograph.
- thus authors on whom no monographs have been published are much less likely to get taught, or researched.

Methodology

Outside the academy, there has been increasing interest in counting the numbers in gender balance and bias in humanities publishing.

- A 2015 report from the Royal Historical Society on gender equality in UK higher education (<http://royalhistsoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/RHSGenderEqualityReport-Jan-15.pdf>)
- An article in *History Today* about double standards for female historians (<http://www.historytoday.com/suzannah-lipscomb/case-double-standards>)
- The campaigning organisation VIDA counts sex disparity in literary periodicals and literary publishing each year (<http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count/>).
- The Stella Count performs a similar function for Australian literary reviewing (<http://thestellaprize.com.au/the-count/the-prize-count/>).
- Macquarie University published a widely publicised study of sex-based disparity in Australian publishing in October 2015

http://www.businessandconomics.mq.edu.au/our_departments/Economics/econ_research/reach_network/book_project/authors/1_Key_Findings.pdf).

- The author Nicola Griffith is running a Literary Prize Data collection group, mainly in science fiction but now branching out into other publishing genres. She also monitors other initiatives to count sex-based imbalance in publishing (<https://nicolagriffith.com/tag/literary-prize-data/>).
- Strangehorizons.com surveyed how male and female authors in science fiction were reviewed on 9 May 2016:
<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2016/20160509/1sfcount-a.shtml>).

Given that scholarly criticism is an extension of the book reviews and literary criticism that these surveys measure, I was interested in exploring whether academic publishing would yield empirical evidence of observable bias in the sex of the subjects as well as the authors of published scholarship.

In this article, I discuss ‘authors’, meaning scholars who publish their research, and ‘subjects’, meaning the writers studied. In my use of the terms ‘sex’, ‘gender’, ‘woman’, ‘female’, ‘man’, and ‘male’, I follow Judith Butler’s dictum that gender is performative, and that there is a distinction between the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, in that a person’s sex is a biological condition and gender is a social construction: the terms are not synonymous.¹

By seeking to understand how ‘women’ authors and ‘female’ subjects are represented in the marketplace, I was guided by the personal names of authors and subjects to understand whether the individuals self-identified as male or female. Thus, I read authors using names understood as female in that society to self-identify as women, and male names as an indicator of male identity. Where it was not possible to identify an author’s sex by their first name I classed them in a separate, ‘unknown’ category, acknowledging that the author’s intention was not be identified by their sex through their name. In turn, all the subjects in the dataset are researchable historical figures, so their self-identification as male or female is a matter of record.

Data collection group 1: The essayists

My first dataset represents the number of essays by women included in a popular teaching anthology, looking at the volumes covering the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Excluding extracts from full-length works, journal / diary entries, and poems entitled 'An Essay on ...', the ninth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2012) contains:

- four essays by women from the eighteenth century, and 22 by men
- seven essays by women from the nineteenth century, and 24 by men
- five essays, all by one woman, from the twentieth century, and 13 by men.

The numbers reflect the greater popularity of the essay as a literary form in the earlier centuries than in the more recent past. However, through this representation, this anthology suggests that women were, respectively, only one fifth, one third, and one half as likely to be worth studying as essayists than their male peers. It is also remarkable that Norton selects only one twentieth-century woman essayist for study, although it is not surprising that this is Virginia Woolf, an important practitioner in this form in her day.

I supplemented these data by counting the names cited in Chris Baldick's volume of *The Oxford English Literary History, The Modern Movement 1910-1940* (2004). My own examination of popular periodicals published within this date range offers the names of over twenty women essayists who were prolific, ubiquitous even, in the period covered by Baldick's volume,² yet he only mentions Woolf in this field. His influential study suggests by omission that no other woman essayist or critic of worth existed at this time, which we know to be untrue.

The essay is an understudied form compared to, say, Romantic poetry, which we can use as a model to think about apparent sex bias in how the form is offered to students. The recent process of recovery for the work of women Romantic poets refutes the conventional view that had been promulgated from the mid-nineteenth century that there were no women Romantic poets worth considering.³ There is a lag in this process, that leads first from new research to scholarly publication, and then to syllabus adoption and canonisation through inclusion in anthologies and other teaching texts. In the case of the essay, it seems probable that its literary history as reflected in Baldick and in the *Norton Anthology* has yet to catch up with modern scholarly opinion. However, these data indicate that, in 2004 and in 2012,

there was a serious problem at the canonisation end of the process with the invisibility of women writers in literary history. The problem may lie with authors and editors, or with the publishers for not encouraging authors and editors to offer a more balanced account. Concerning Virginia Woolf, it is arguable that by being the only twentieth-century woman essayist offered for students' consideration, her work is forced into a representative position (which is hardly how Woolf's writing should be taught), and entirely occludes the work of her female peers.

Visibility is crucial in synoptic criticism. It is a truism that women's writing must be made available if it is to be known, and it must be discussed in the literary critical environment as often as that of men's writing. It has been clearly established for many decades that women writers have been under-represented as part of the literary environment. Feminist scholarship has argued this since the 1970s, but the evidence described above from a small but indicative source shows that women writers are still routinely ignored or marginalised as literary figures or as professional authors.

Data collection group 2: Books in print and on the market

Drawing on my observations from the data in group 1, and from the idea of the self-perpetuating publishing circle, I developed a hypothesis that female authors are less likely to be the subjects of scholarly monographs, and, to a lesser extent, essay collections. I tested this by counting the books in print on British literary authors active in the period 1930-60, from seven British publishers' catalogues available online.⁴ I surveyed the online catalogues of Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Bloomsbury Academic, Palgrave Macmillan, Manchester University Press, Liverpool University Press, and Routledge. These are the most well-known and influential publishers for the field of twentieth-century literary scholarship in the UK, and were chosen because their websites were accessible for methodical searching, although some were less accessible than others. Since most buyers browse and buy online, the works offered online by these publishers were relevant as an indication of what scholarly work was available.

I recorded data from 236 titles, in these categories:

- title of the text

- name(s) of the author(s)
- date of publication (plus original publication date if this was a reprinted work)
- sex of the subject of the work
- when the work had both male and female subjects, I recorded the male : female subject ratio, basing the count on the information in the publishers' publicity
- sex of the author(s), or 'unknown'

Notes were added on particular phenomena, and (as a response to the data as it emerged) if Virginia Woolf was a subject. The data were processed by David Marsh PhD MStat, a statistician specialising in the interpretation and visualisation of large datasets showing trends over time. The data visualisations are publicly available on Tableau.⁵

It should be recalled that these data come from a discrete area and period of academic scholarship, and that these results will undoubtedly differ from different samples taken from other periods and subjects. However, these books were all published because a publisher agreed to do so. Sex bias in the results is thus connected to the publishers' decisions to accept a book proposal, whether based on market conditions, their sense of balance for their lists or the quality of the writing in book proposals received.

Figure 1. Timeline of data and relative numbers of books published, each column representing five years. The data in 2015-2019 are necessarily incomplete.

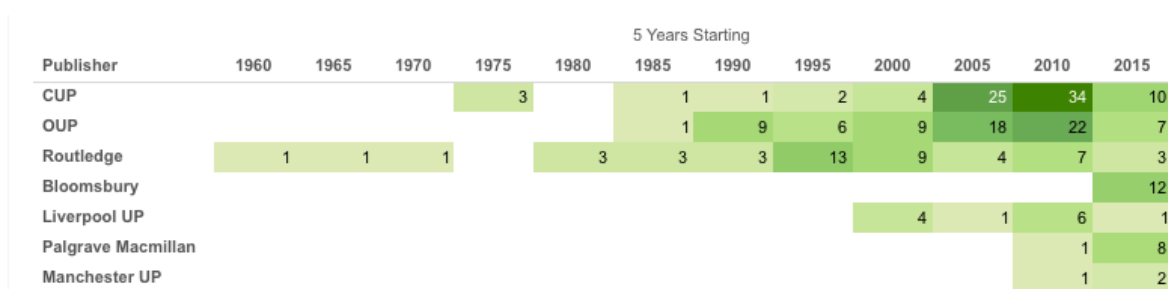


Figure 1 shows the timeline.

Notice that some of the publishers have been operating for much less time than others, and that Routledge actively publicises the availability of some older books as reprints. The relative darkness of the colour of the cells shows more or fewer books (respectively) exist in

the sample for that 5-year period. CUP, followed by OUP, have the most books on their lists for literature in 1930-60, with the period 2010-2014 being most prolific.

Figure 2: Numbers of books published by male and female authors, on male and female subjects.

Subject	Author			Total books
	Female	Male	Both	
Female	33	8	2	43
Male	18	124	4	146
Both	20	25	2	47
Total books	71	157	8	236

Figure 2 shows the numbers of books split by sex of author (horizontal axis), and sex of the subject (vertical axis). Figures 3 and 4 highlight the big imbalances revealed by the data.

Figure 3: Male authors compared to female authors.

Subject	Author			Total books
	Female	Male	Both	
Female	33	8	2	43
Male	18	124	4	146
Both	20	25	2	47
Total books	71	157	8	236

Figure 3 shows that more than twice as many books in the sample are by men than by women. While this imbalance may be a function of books from earlier periods of scholarship still being present in the sample, it is remarkable that so many more men than women are publishing their work.

Figure 4: Numbers of male-authored books about male subjects compared to the total.

Subject	Author			Total books
	Female	Male	Both	
Female	33	8	2	43
Male	18	124	4	146
Both	20	25	2	47
Total books	71	157	8	236

Figure 4 shows that more than half the books in the sample were by men writing solely about literature by men. This suggests that there is a sex bias in the subjects that male scholars choose to study, or in the subjects for which they receive research funding, or in the book proposals accepted by their publishers.

To look at the balance in publication of books about male and female subjects, the data until 1995 are expressed in Figure 5 as a continuum running between 0% (all male subjects) and 100% (all female subjects). The horizontal line is the ideal balance at 50%, a happy medium of equal representation in the publishers' catalogues for both male and female subjects active in 1930-60.

Figure 5: Books published to 1995, expressed as percentages of female subjects.



The size of the circles in Figure 5 indicates the numbers of books published in that year, so the larger circle indicates two books, and smaller circle indicates one. The colours indicate the sex of the author, and in the size of these circles we can see growth in what was offered to the market over time, looking from left to right. There are some striking, isolated instances to notice. Except for two books published in 1985-86 (the large green circle at the 0% level), all the female authors over the period 1969-95 published on female subjects. In

1994 two books appeared on both male and female subjects by both male and female authors. Notice that for this period no men published on female subjects (but recall that this may, or may not, be different for other publishing periods and subject areas).

For the data from 1996 to 2017, shown in Figures 6 and 7, the evidence becomes more complicated, so has been split between books authored by men and women.

Figure 6: Male-authored books published 1996-2017, expressed as a percentage of female subjects.

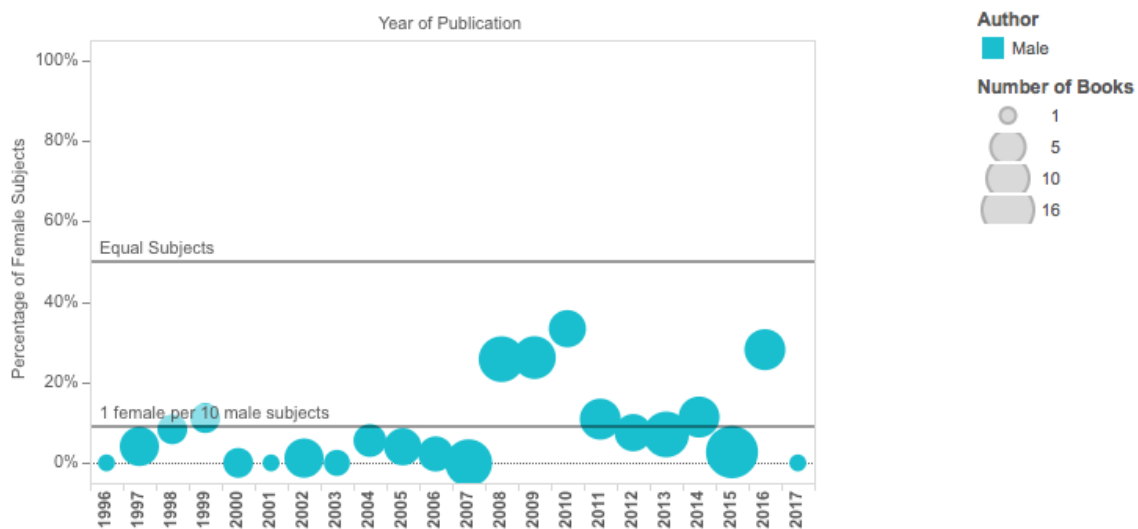


Figure 6 shows books published 1996-2015, looking only at the data for male authors (Figure 7 shows the data for female authors). We can see immediately that there are great many more books in print dating from this period than from the earlier period (the largest circle here represents 16 books, rather than two). We can also see some books by male writers about female subjects, but the publication ratio is only approximately one female subject for ten male subjects, shown by the regression line. This ratio improves from 2008, but the marked bias against women subjects by male authors noted in Figure 5 has continued.

Figure 7: Female-authored books published 1996-2016, expressed as a percentage of female subjects.

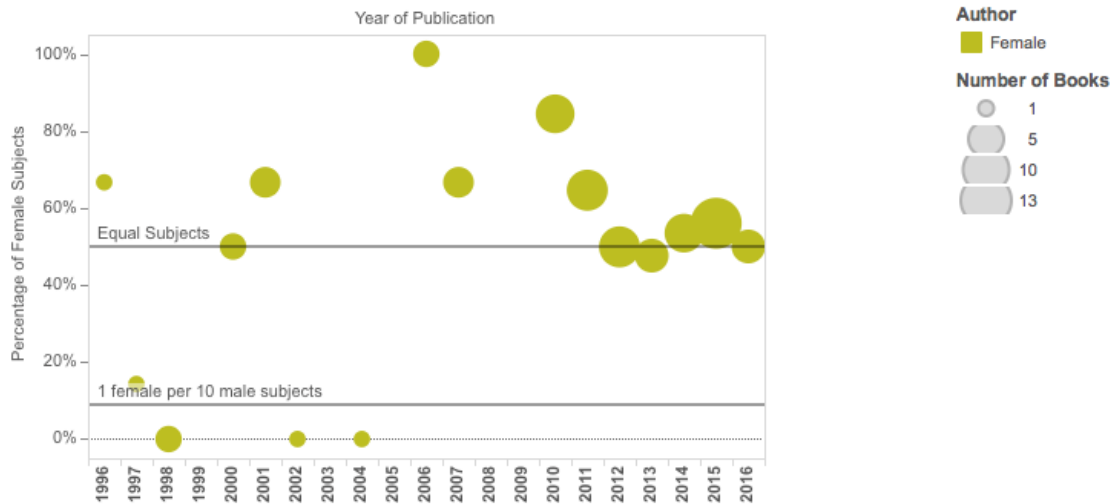


Figure 7 shows a pleasing cluster of gender equality from 2012 in what women authors write about, in contrast to male authors in the same period who came nowhere near that balance. There are also more books published by women authors, though not as many as by men, as Figure 4 shows. However, there are also more empty years, in which books by female authors did not appear at all.

Figure 8 presents the data by publisher, rather than authors and subjects over time, and explores the differences between publishers in whom and what they publish.

Figure 8: The data organised by publisher, percentage of female subjects, and sex of authors.

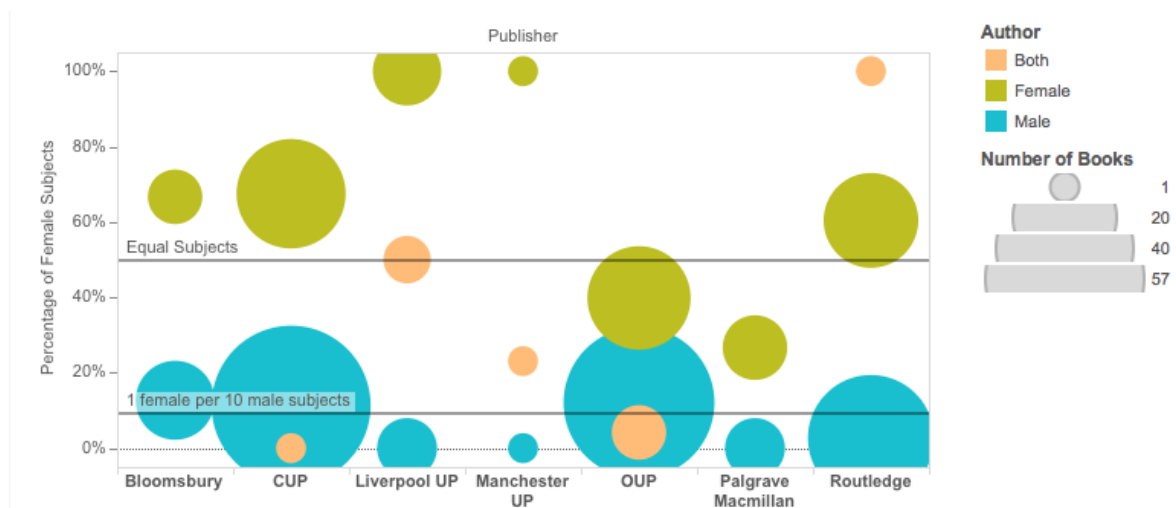


Figure 8 shows the publishers arranged on a horizontal axis, against a vertical axis showing the percentage of female subjects in the books in the sample. The three biggest samples are from CUP, OUP and Routledge. The books from Liverpool University Press in this sample show a fairly even representation of male and female authors and subjects, followed by Manchester University Press and Routledge. Routledge's market share has a similar profile to that of CUP, but its 32 books by male authors have almost zero interest in female subjects. Palgrave Macmillan's four male authors don't write about women at all, and its four women authors write more about men than about women. ⁶

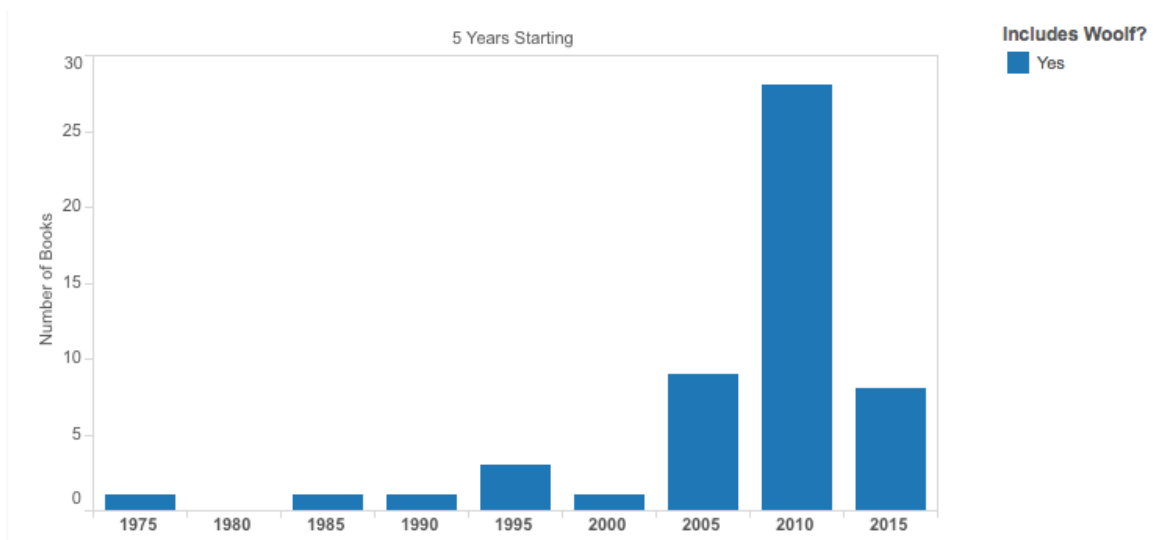
Twenty-two of the CUP books in this sample are by female authors. The relative position of the female-authored 'bubble' shows that their subject is 67% female. (The 50% line marks a 50:50 balance.) But 57 of the CUP books in the sample are by male authors with hardly any focus on female subjects: 11%, just over 1 in 10.

Nineteen of the OUP books in the sample by female authors deal more with male subjects than female, at 40%. But fifty of the OUP books by male authors have little to no interest in female subjects: at 12%. The male-author 'bubbles' for OUP and CUP are very similar in size.

The Virginia Woolf effect

It became evident during data collection that the number of titles featuring Virginia Woolf constituted a disproportionate fraction of the books on female subjects. Using the publishers' descriptions of the books on offer in their catalogues, information aimed at the potential buyer, I noted which of the 236 books in the sample were about Virginia Woolf. The 52 results are represented in Figure 9, separated out in the five-year segments.

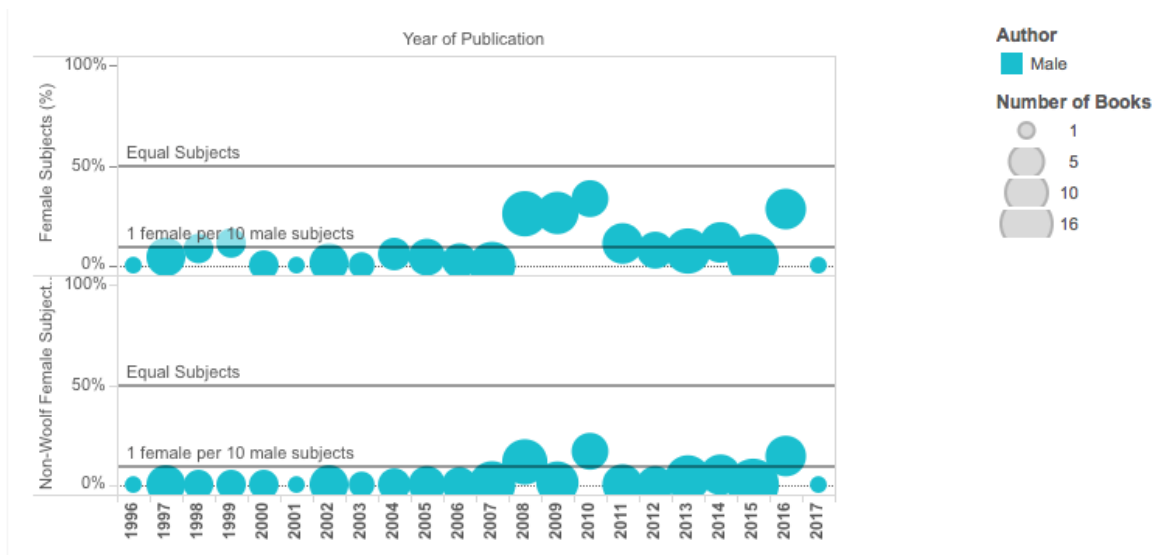
Figure 9: Numbers of books about Virginia Woolf, 1975-2020.



The centenary of Woolf’s statement, ‘On or about December 1910, human character changed’⁷ was clearly the reason for the immense spike in books about Woolf in 2010-2014, and for the relatively high numbers in 2005-2009 and 2015-2019. This reflects another external influence on the choice of research subject, the importance of the literary anniversary for scholars, and for the academic publishing industry. The same phenomenon may be seen in the rapid increase in the number of books on First World War subjects that have appeared on the market since 2013.

By removing Woolf from the visualisations, the data look quite different, and perhaps give a truer reflection of how many books were published on women subjects, by both male and female authors. Recall that Figure 6 shows the data on books written by men, showing that men hardly wrote about women at all, and that there was a spike in the numbers of women subjects they wrote about, in 2008-2010. Figure 10 gives the data from Figure 6 in the top half of the visualisation, and repeats it in the lower half with the Woolf titles removed.

Figure 10: Non-Woolf data (below) compared to complete data on books by male authors (above), 1996-2017.



The non-Woolf visualisation in Figure 10 shows that the representation of women subjects written about by male authors is significantly lower. This suggests that Virginia Woolf represents most of the female subjects in books by men in the sample.

It is highly likely that male authors have published books with these publishers on female subjects other than Virginia Woolf, but they do not appear to have been allowed to remain in print. If they existed, they were not selling, and have been dropped from the catalogues (despite the healthy ebook reprint market, of which Routledge and CUP have taken advantage: see Figure 1). Somewhat surprisingly, the data also shows that the same pattern exists for female authors.

Figure 11: Non-Woolf data (below) compared to complete data on books by female authors (above), 1996-2017.

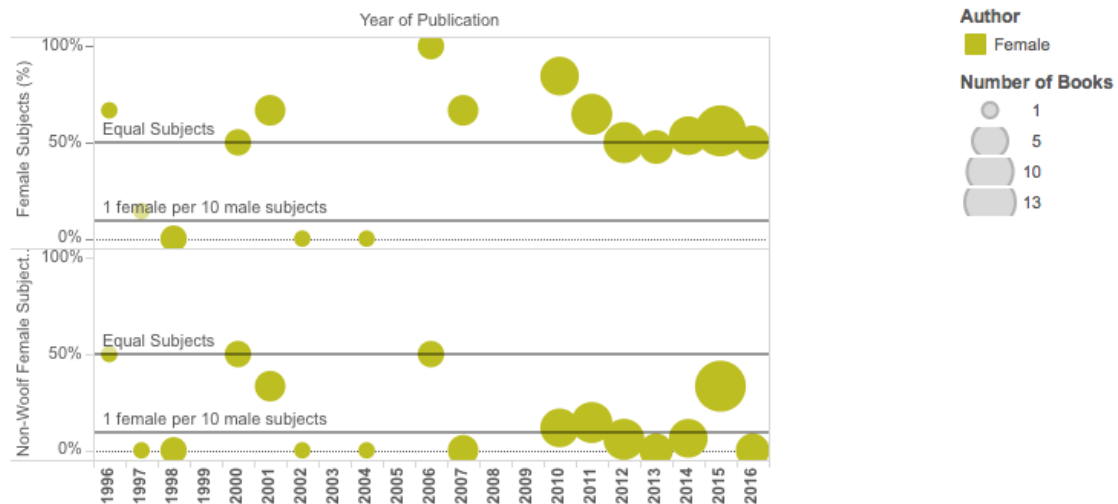


Figure 11 shows the data for female authors. The top half of the visualisation shows that books by female authors became more evenly distributed across the spectrum of male and female subjects over time, leading to an admirable balance since 2012. The lower graph shows the data without the Woolf titles. We can now see that since 2010, Woolf has been the main – almost the only - female subject for women authors in this sample, since there are hardly any green bubbles on or above the 50% line. There are very few books in print by women about women authors apart from on Woolf.

Conclusions

Several issues emerge from these data that need to be considered. Since academic publication is directly connected to research, often based on a PhD thesis, the choice of authors that women and men study and publish on may be a simple matter of taste and inclination, or it may reflect different levels of external influence. Up to the end of the twentieth century it was possible, indeed normal, for British doctoral students in literature departments to apply for personal funding for research on their own choice of subject, and to be supported by a supervisor who fitted that research. More recently, research funding from group projects and supervisor-driven funding bids has become as important for PhD research as the increasingly more competitive personal grant, producing a larger category of PhD research that is influenced as much by the supervisor's personal interests and access to archives, as by the researcher's inclinations.

Beyond this, departmental culture will also affect acceptance and support of a research project, and will influence the direction of a cohort of doctoral research projects through its own research clusters and strategic positioning as a department and within a School or faculty. Very broadly speaking, this clustering of research over time may have produced an agglomeration of research subjects, favouring some and rejecting others. This has clear implications for sex bias in literary research, as we have seen from the data on works on Virginia Woolf.

From the business side, it is worth considering the power of precedent within a publishing house, and the effect that such a bias may have on developing lists, and accepting proposals on subjects not otherwise on the market, within one publishing house or among the lists of competitors. 'Competitors' may not necessarily imply that competing publishing houses offer the same product: market distinction is also important. However, if a publisher is offered a book on a subject that no other publisher has already accepted, peer acceptance comes into play, and the publisher acts as a gatekeeper as well as an entrepreneur.

The clear increase seen in the numbers of books by women authors published from 2009 (in Figure 7) may be explained by more female authors being active in the academic market, thus increasing the statistical likelihood of books by women authors being accepted. I sent these data to the commissioning editors for twentieth-century literature at each of the publishers concerned, and received a uniform response from CUP, Bloomsbury Academic, Routledge and Palgrave, who confirmed that the sex of the author was not a consideration when assessing books they might accept for publication.⁸

The data suggest that what women publish on is far more likely to be literature written by women. Yet the data also indicate that there is a dearth of books on woman as a subject. If more men published research on women subjects, this imbalance might be redressed. Why does this not appear to have happened?

There is a business argument that puts the onus on the buyers and readers to demand more diversity in the books on the market, yet some responsibility should rest with the publishers during the commissioning process. Markets can lead as well as follow. David Avital from Bloomsbury Academic asked a question from the perspective of wanting to publish new work on less-known subjects. 'How do you reflect and give a publishing outlet to the important scholarly work of rediscovering authors who have been left out of literary canons

thanks to the gender biases (and indeed biases of race and sexuality) that we know are there in a way that makes for sustainable publishing (i.e. books that will sell what we need them to in order to cover the costs of production, marketing etc)?⁹ A publisher such as Routledge, that is a subsidiary of a much bigger publishing group with access to cross-subsidised overheads, is more able to take a risk on less obvious subjects that smaller publishers might not be able to afford. Does the way ahead for the risky or less-published subject lie with the conglomerates rather than with the traditional academic publisher?

Ben Doyle from Palgrave Macmillan puts the onus on the authors who send him book proposals: 'The statistics reflect the proposals that we get in - the vast majority dealing with subjects between 1930-1960 (excepting Woolf) are exclusively male-focused, or examine both male and female authors'. He also notes that the period under study may have an inherent bias: 'I also feel that the statistics would likely tell a different story across different time periods - for instance, we publish quite a lot on early modern women's writing - so this snapshot, while very valuable, doesn't necessarily tell the whole story.'¹⁰

Thinking about the first decade of the period under study, the 1930s, there is certainly a prejudice perpetuated by leading literary scholars such as Bernard Bergonzi (1978), Valentine Cunningham (1988) and Frank Kermode (1988), who barely notice the existence of women authors at all.¹¹ Janet Montefiore has remarked: 'The assumption of all the memoirs and histories of the thirties so far discussed is that 'the writer' means, without question, 'the young bourgeois male writer'.¹² The problem may also be generational: in a recent survey of the emergence of the modern novel, edited by two men, one of whom is from the emeriti generation, discussion of women authors was confined to chapters about women authors and bestsellers, and only four women authors were discussed in the rest of this very large book.¹³ This work was published by Oxford University Press, which brings us back to the role of the publisher as gatekeeper.

I suggest that these data, and the responses from some of the publishers concerned, support an identification of active gatekeeping in the academic monograph market as it stands, for many, nuanced reasons. There is a self-perpetuating circle between publishing and the academy. My evidence suggests that publishing a book on an uncanonical female author will be difficult, and keeping it in print will be out of the author's control. Authors of books on female subjects, whatever sex they be, could play the long game and get the

awkward subject into print through journal articles or book chapters, or an edited collection by multiple authors on the subject, before proposing a single-author monograph. But, before all else, I urge scholars who want to encourage the publication of criticism on women subjects to consider subjects other than Virginia Woolf.

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

² The authors Phyllis Bentley, Stella Benson, Elizabeth Bowen, Vera Brittain, Winifred Cullis, E M Delafield, Cicely Hamilton, Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Q D Leavis, Vernon Lee, Emilie Lind af Hageby, Sylvia Lynd, Alice Meynell, Naomi Mitchison, Lady Rhondda, Dora Russell, May Sinclair, Edith Shackleton, Stevie Smith, Freya Stark, Rebecca West and Ellen Wilkinson were all active as contributors to mainstream literary journals and weekly periodicals, 1910-1940, when Virginia Woolf was also active. This research was first presented at 'Women and the Canon', Christ Church, University of Oxford, 22-23 January 2016.

³ 'From about the 1860s until the late 1980s virtually no Romantic poetry by a woman was in print. This is all the more astonishing when one considers that between 1770 and 1835 over 1400 first editions of poetry by women were published.' W R Owens and Hamish Johnson, 'Introduction', *Romantic Writings: An Anthology* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1998), ix-xii, x.

⁴ I chose this date range to coincide with my own scholarly interests, and to link the research results to the conference *Revision, Revival, Rediscovery ... 'Re' words in British Women's Writing between 1930 and 1960*, University of Hull, 25 June 2016, where this research was first presented.

⁵ David Marsh, 'Sex bias in academic publishing on British and Irish literature', May 2016
[\[https://public.tableau.com/profile/david.marsh#!/vizhome/LitPubSex/Story\]](https://public.tableau.com/profile/david.marsh#!/vizhome/LitPubSex/Story), accessed October 2016.

⁶ I should declare an interest here, in that my Palgrave book, *Novelists Against Social Change: Conservative Popular Fiction 1920-1960* (2015), discusses two male authors and one female author.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Character in Fiction' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume Three: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London, 1988), p. 421.

⁸ I received no response from Manchester University Press. OUP and Liverpool UP offered no comment other than to express interest in and acknowledge receipt of the data.

⁹ David Avital of Bloomsbury Academic, email to author, 17 May 2016.

¹⁰ Ben Doyle of Palgrave Macmillan, email to author, 19 May 2016.

¹¹ Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978); Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988); Frank Kermode, *History and Value* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹² Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s. The Dangerous Flood of History* (London : Routledge, 1996), 19.

¹³ Patrick Parrinder and Andrzej Gąsiorek (eds), *The Oxford History of The Novel in English, volume 4, The Reinvention of the British and Irish Novel 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).