Greatness Engendered
Booth, Alison

Published by Cornell University Press

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Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. 

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If Eliot and Woolf share in an ideology that prizes women’s sacrifice to a common good, how can their own eminence be accommodated to this ideology? To unmask the productive contradiction between their visions of selflessness and their own cultivated distinction, I need to address the vexed issues of authorial identity and biographical criticism, which not incidentally relate to the ambiguities I have been unearthing in Victorian ladylike reform. When we personify canonical authors, whether women or men, how can we not reinforce an exclusive metaphysics of origins? How do Eliot and Woolf design themselves as authors, earning greatness in spite of womanhood, while at the same time appealing to an alternative to masculine identity and authority?

That postmodern proclamations of the death of the author should coincide with the “second wave” of feminism and a burgeoning interest in female authorship is perhaps no accident. Feminism itself owes much to humanism and the long historical movement toward an elaborated concept of the individual, but it quickly emerges as a challenge to notions of autonomy and authority underwritten by patriarchy. Instead of equality for the unified female subject, many feminists turn to an ideal of feminine selflessness or deconstruction of the subject; instead of inserting more women’s biographies in a single cultural history, they attack the specious unity implied in the concepts of a “life” and a “universal” history. Yet as the word itself indicates, selflessness might range from a subversive jouissance to a coerced submission; the Angel in the House, after all, is conceived as essentially selfless. Moreover, many theorists’ insistence on the breakdown of all grounds for authority may reveal an unconscious resistance
to sharing cultural privilege with the marginalized groups who are beginning to grasp at it (Morgan 6; Jardine 45–46). In any case, much as feminist thought has been enhanced by a distrust of models of identity and authority, feminist literary criticism (like feminist scholarship generally) could hardly have launched itself without regard for the existence of certain individual, historical women, such as those in the supposedly dead role of “author.”

The limitations of biographical criticism are obvious, but the tendency to conflate author and work in such criticism reveals some subtle aspects that should not be dismissed. First, there is the fact that criticism of women authors has seldom escaped being biographical. Many feminist critics have traced the historical effects of an enforced intimacy between women and their writing. Writer and text are liable to be mistaken for each other, and to be read aesthetically as trivial and morally as loose (Ellmann 29). Access to the privacy of the author seems more intensely desired when the author is a woman, given the charged cultural value of a woman’s privacy. It would seem, then, to be a sign of progress that women writers be accorded the ability to distance themselves from their work as men are allowed to do. Second, however, such distancing has its drawbacks for women: to place the author at an aesthetic remove—indifferent, paring his fingernails—may not be for a woman quite what it is for a man. Obscurity and self-effacement for her may be qualities that preclude authorship rather than help her assume godlike authority. It has been the task of many literary women to invent ways to display exceptional powers that seem to transcend ordinary identity (mere womanhood) yet never to claim the self-determined authority of masculine hero or author (Waugh 8–10).

Humility is conventionally demanded of women and their works. In 1847 George Gilfillan praised Felicia Hemans as a great woman poet precisely because she would not compete for greatness in masculine terms: “Sympathy, not fame, was the desire of her being”; instead of being a “maker” herself, “her life is a poem” (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 3: 28–29). Greatness, for Eliot and Woolf if not for Hemans, entailed fame as well as sympathy: the brazen authority as well as the careful distinction between self and work, along with the affirmation of “others.” Their heroines may be honored for an unambitious servitude, like that of Mrs. Hemans, to art and sympathy; Dorothea Brooke is told she is a poem (M 166). But to be indistinguishable from the art which does mend nature is to risk oblivion; no “poem” was ever immortalized as an author.

The successful writer, male or female, must carefully tend the fiction
of authorial personality as the ground on which the work stands, but for women writers this has been a particularly unsteady fiction to sustain. In this chapter I examine how Eliot and Woolf sustain this fiction. I offer a reading of their lives in terms of Woolf’s feminist biographical criticism, consider briefly some of the preconceptions of women’s unfitness for authorship against which they contended, and finally, analyze the apparently distinct strategies of the masculine and androgynous narrators as two versions of an aesthetics of impersonality.

**Virginia Woolf on George Eliot**

Although I have already presented some details of Woolf’s reading of Eliot’s authorial personality, the full story of the Victorian Grand Old Woman of Letters must be told as Woolf reconstructed it for her own use. Here as in all her biographical criticism of women writers, Woolf contends with the model that generally shapes the lives of heroines in biography as well as fiction, a model divided between irreconcilable erotic and ambitious plots (to adapt Nancy Miller’s use of Freud’s terms in “Emphasis Added” [346]; D. Barrett 17–19). To some extent, Woolf inherited her reading of Eliot, especially from Leslie Stephen’s biography;¹ this inherited reading stresses the erotic plot, or the suffering-woman-behind-the-book. She reiterates her father’s criticism of the novelist’s womanly faults; in *George Eliot*, Stephen attributes Eliot’s limitations to a natural feminine diffidence and desire for respectability. Woolf, more generous, assumes that those limitations were culturally imposed: Eliot’s narrow range (as compared to Tolstoy’s, for example) is due to the enforced “suburban seclusion” of a woman living with a married man. Yet at the same time, Woolf seems to hold Eliot’s struggles with her reputation against her, as a kind of self-imposed handicap “which, inevitably, had the worst possible effects upon her work” (”Women and Fiction” 47; RO 73–74).

¹Woolf retains the Victorian reading of Eliot more than Showalter allows. Woolf does not share in the “malice, rivalry, and cant” of women novelists who were Eliot’s contemporaries, but not because she “had never sat down to the task of being George Eliot” (“Greening,” 292–97). Perhaps under the influence of more recent Woolf scholarship, Showalter implies a closer relation between Woolf and Eliot in her very different version of this essay in *Sexual Anarchy* (69). Besides her father and Edmund Gosse, Woolf’s 1919 essay relies on Lady Ritchie for a portrait of Eliot as “not exactly a personal friend, but a good and benevolent impulse” (152). J. Russell Perkin briefly retraces Woolf’s reception of Eliot (105–8).
The greatest obstacles for the biographical critic of Eliot, Woolf finds, are the masculine narrative persona and the ambition and charmlessness of the historical woman. The textual George Eliot is obviously too manly; she “committed atrocities with” the “man’s sentence” (RO 79–80). The imposing stature granted to her by the Victorians as an exception among women—Herbert Spencer admitted her novels, “as if they were not novels,” to the London Library (“GE” [1919] 150–51)—frustrates an impulse to love and pity the woman, but it helps that she is dead and has come to be laughed at. More useful still is the indescribable ugliness (physical appearance usually rears its ugly head in criticism of a woman’s work):

Her big nose, her little eyes, her heavy, horsey head loom from behind the printed page and make a critic of the other sex uneasy. Praise he must, but love he cannot; and however absolute and austere his devotion to the principle that art has no truck with personality it is not George Eliot he would like to pour out tea. On the other hand, . . . Jane Austen pours, and as she pours, smiles, charms. (“Indiscretions” 72–73)

A critic of the same sex, Woolf is uneasy until she can treat Eliot as “an Aunt”: “So treated she drops the apparatus of masculinity which Herbert Spencer necessitated; indulges herself in memory; and pours forth . . . the genial stores of her youth, the greatness and profundity of her soul” (75). Although Woolf sets Eliot in a catalogue that includes the “maternal” Gaskell and culminates in a Diana-like Austen, whom “we needs must adore,” it is the “inimitable” Aunt who inspires Woolf’s most passionate literary “indiscretion” (“Indiscretions” 75–76; compare “Phases of Fiction,” CE 2: 78–80). Woolf here treats Eliot as neither the inhibiting mother-saint nor the equine sibyl, but an aunt-novelist (like Anne Thackeray Ritchie) to put writers of the same sex at ease.2

Woolf needs to discover a precursor at once truly great, by masculine standards she is unwilling to abandon, and truly feminine. Thus she claims that the mind that created was one and the same as the woman

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2Thackeray’s daughter, Anne, the sister of Leslie Stephen’s first wife, was the only contemporary novelist besides Trollope that Eliot admitted to reading toward the end of her career (GE Letters 6: 123, 418), and her marriage to a younger man, Richmond Ritchie, provided Eliot with reassuring precedent for her own marriage to John Cross (GE Letters 6: 398; Haight 536). In 1879, Edith Simcox recorded Eliot’s remark that she had visited her friends “Mrs. Ritchie . . . and Leslie Stephen” (GE Letters 9: 267), and Lewes’s son Charles visited Mrs. Ritchie on 23 May 1880 to explain Eliot’s marriage (Haight 542).
who suffered; a false patriarchal convention divided the personality that the female successor can reunite. "I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her. . . . I think she is a highly feminine and attractive character—most impulsive and ill-balanced . . . and I only wish she had lived nowadays, and so been saved all that nonsense. . . . It was an unfortunate thing to be the first woman of the age" (VW Letters 2: 321-22). Perhaps "nowadays" an ambitious woman might avoid monstrous disguises.

In keeping with her need to confirm the woman's feminine personality, Woolf recreated a Victorian image of the works as chronicles of rural life. She shared many early readers' preference for the works that drew on "the genial stores" of Eliot's upbringing in Warwickshire, Scenes of Clerical Life, Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and Silas Marner (Carroll, Critical Heritage, 2, 16-20). The author of robust country scenes might be viewed as more masculine than feminine, and it was only in the early works that "George Eliot" was accepted as the genuine name of a man. Yet the details of "the homespun of ordinary joys and sorrows" in a lost past inevitably carry feminine associations ("GE" [1919] 154). As I consider in the next chapter, Eliot's emulation of Dutch realism could gratify nostalgia for the maternal and for a lost sense of community (Graver 250–55) while defying the classical artistic order and gender hierarchy that trivialize domestic detail (Carroll, Heritage, 17; Schor).

The nostalgic reading of Eliot was not enough for Woolf, however; she refused to "confine her to village life and lament the book-learned period which produced Middlemarch and Romola." In other words, Woolf rescues the woman writer from the feminine sphere of letters. In Eliot's hands, the novel, no longer "solely a love story, an autobiography, or a story of adventure" ("GE" [1921]), becomes the narrative of a collective history particularly associated with women. Woolf insists that the later novels forfeit the early charm for the sake not of bluestocking pedantry but of "wider scope" ("GE" [1921]). The loss of the charm associated with home and the past is thus no repudiation of the authority of feminine experience but a means of expanding its influence.

For Woolf as for Eliot the challenge is to command "wider scope" without assimilating the masculine norm of human experience; indeed

\[1\] In quoting this passage I have omitted a piece of the sort of gossip Woolf treasured for casting predecessors as suffering heroines (the editors swiftly put down the charge as "quite unfounded"): "(Mrs. Prothero once told me that she—George Eliot that is—had a child by a Professor in Edinburgh . . . the child is a well known Professor somewhere else—)." Was the great writer but a woman after all?
in their writings the feminine itself seems to approximate an ideal universality. It is for awakening a dormant, feminine common life that Woolf values Eliot most of all: for having expressed not only everyman’s “ordinary joys and sorrows” but also the sufferings of women who never escape “the common sitting-room” (RO 69, 118; “Women and Fiction” 46). “The romance of the past” fades from the novels after The Mill on the Floss (“GE” [1919] 156), but they gain power to express “the ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb.” Eliot’s heroines come to represent the yearning of all women torn between romantic confinement and an unfulfilled desire for some less personal object; this yearning “brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something . . . that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. George Eliot had far too strong an intelligence to tamper with those facts. . . . Save for the supreme courage of their endeavour, the struggle ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy” (“GE” [1919] 159–60). The heroines’ story of feminine self-sacrifice “is the incomplete version of the story of George Eliot herself.” Eliot, unlike her heroines, found fulfillment in “learning” and “in the wider service of [her] kind,” “confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men.” In short, she transcended her fated personality as a woman, though “the body . . . sank worn out” (159–60). While Woolf certainly wished to attain Eliot’s wide range of cultural achievement through other means than Eliot’s, she honors the “triumphant” great writer and loves the woman who sank under the burden of personality, decking her visited tomb with “laurel and rose” (160). She portrays the Victorian author as the incomplete version of the story of Virginia Woolf herself.

Woolf’s heroines are also incomplete versions of their author’s own story, though she does grant artistic fulfillment to the unmarried, childless Lily Briscoe and Miss La Trobe, as well as improbable fame and family fulfillment to her magical, aristocratic poet, Orlando. Both authors’ heroines must to a large extent typify feminine “suffering and sensibility”; they must preserve a degree of womanly silence even in triumph (or erupt in destructive, disfiguring rage, like Mrs. Transome or Rose Pargiter) so that Eliot and Woolf may articulate the untold story of “universal” feminine experience. The story is generated in the gap between the female characters’ potential and their achievement, in their struggle with the burden of personality. As feminist biographical critics, we repeat this move; our subjects, the women writers, might be heroines in a plot of women’s education and ambition that necessitates suffering because of the “facts” of
oppression—setting aside the circumstances of women outside the modern English middle class. We presumably never end in Woolf’s tragedy or Eliot’s melancholy compromise.

The Biographical Common Ground

If Eliot and Woolf, then, complete the heroine’s story by fulfilling the ambition of a woman of letters, it is not without strain on the more private plot of womanhood. The biographies of these two women writers suggest similar ingredients in their erotic and ambitious plots: similar pressures, strategies, and achievements. At the same time they suggest some of the reasons why an understanding of the author’s life adds a crucial dimension to our reading of a text, preventing the illusion of a universal context. Many feminist theorists have joined in the assault on biographical criticism, yet all feminist criticism, however chastely textual, ultimately refers to the specificity of female experience; the “feminine” is never simply a writing-effect, but also registers the living effects of female human beings.

Anglo-American feminist criticism, in its so-called second stage, the study of the female literary tradition (Showalter, “Feminist Criticism,” 248), has been most openly biographical in its approach to works by women. At times this approach does draw too direct a correspondence between a woman’s sexual identity and her authorship; it is a deterministic prejudice as old as men’s criticism of women’s writing. I hear the echo of Leslie Stephen’s reading of Eliot: “In spite of her learning and her philosophy, George Eliot is always pre-eminently feminine” (George Eliot 74). To restore value to the writing of women does not necessarily challenge the mode of thought that defined the feminine other in the first place. Thus Peggy Kamuf charges feminist critics who are preoccupied with “women’s language, literature, style or experience” with reinstating humanistic epistemology, “with its faith in the universal truth of man” (44). Toril Moi admonishes readers of American biographical feminist criticism: “For the patriarchal critic,

I wish to avoid any deterministic reading of these careers: the varied styles of literary life devised by women in their day suggest that there is no prescribed female writer’s strategy. Consider Eliza Lynn Linton, who, according to Haight, at the outset provided Marian Evans with the example of a woman making a living by writing (81), who later married and became an outspoken antagonist of women who spoke out, and who resented Eliot’s unconventional success as woman and novelist (Anderson 288, 297). Or take Rose Macaulay, who became a kind of Anglo-Catholic lay-sister while sustaining a prolonged affair with a married man and wrote novels like witty retorts to Mrs. Humphry Ward.
the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim, with Roland Barthes, the death of the author” (62–63). Similarly, Mary Jacobus scorns the American feminist “flight toward empiricism” as part of the obsession with origins and authority that constitutes Western metaphysics. Yet Jacobus concedes, “The category of ‘women’s writing’ remains as strategically and politically important in classroom, curriculum, or interpretative community as the specificity of women’s oppression is to the women’s movement” (“Woman in This Text?” 138).

We won’t go far, I think, with a premature Foucauldian dismissal of the category “woman” along with the category “man,” because in practice that is to deny the “specificity of women’s oppression,” including the distinctive burden of personality that arises when we modify “author” with “woman.” From this more pragmatic angle, Nancy Miller counters Peggy Kamuf’s anti-authorial stance: “To foreclose . . . discussions of the author as sexually gendered subject in a socially gendered exchange” may be to deny the material context of our theoretical discourse. Text-centered approaches, whether New Critical or Poststructuralist, have been used to evade the political context of the choice of text, which always entails the privileging of one kind of authorship (or particular author[s]) over another. Feminist critics may retain a concern with the signature or sexual identity of the author, Miller hopes, without naive empiricism or a demand for positive role models: “The author can now be rethought beyond traditional notions of biography” (“Text’s Heroine” 50). This is my hope, as well; as women authors or critics we risk appearing simple-mindedly personal unless we show ourselves capable of mastering theory (or any dominant cultural discourse), but we should not forfeit the ironic insights of the outsider’s “difference of view” (“GE” [1919] 160; Jacobus, Reading Woman, 27–28; Christian 69). Like the women novelists, we may be damned if we do invoke biography or the personal, but we will be damned if we don’t: the personal is always attributed to texts written by women whether or not the authors strove to write in an impersonal mode. With Cheryl Walker, I would advocate the inclusion of the author’s biography and of historical context(s) as contributing, unfolding texts in an alert intertextuality (560).

Woolf herself laid a foundation for feminist biographical criticism, with her emphasis on the material and ideological conditions that

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5Miller has continued to pursue a political yet deconstructed idea of writing and the author. “So why remember Barthes”? she asks, recalling his 1968 “The Death of the Author” (“Changing the Subject” 104–5). See Subject to Change 16; Getting Personal 1–30.
have constrained women's writing. In one sense, this tendency was true to her heritage; the biographical mode dominated nineteenth-century criticism, including Eliot's essays. As we would expect, Woolf's biographical criticism probes further than Eliot's would have done into private details and physical circumstances, while taking a more phenomenological approach to identity ("The New Biography," CE 4: 229–35). Yet both authors preferred reticence about the writer's intentions, doubting the relevance of biography to criticism of the novel.

Disapproving of gossip as Woolf does not, Eliot repudiates curiosity about authors in severe moral terms:

I am thoroughly opposed in principle (quite apart from any personal reference to myself) to the system of contemporary biography. . . . The mass of the public will read any quantity of trivial details about a writer. . . . Even posthumous biography is, I think, increasingly perverted into [a time-wasting] indulgence. . . . It seems to me that just my works and the order in which they appeared is what the part of the public which cares about me may most usefully know. (GE Letters 6: 67–68)

Woolf characteristically granted that details may not be trivial (and Eliot's narrators often insist on their importance). Woolf condones a reader's interest in the "truth" behind the fiction ("nothing is more fascinating"), and she would indulge popular appetites. But she clearly dissociates the novel from the author, who can tell us about himself but who is probably unable to "say anything about his own work" (Introduction v–vi). The author is one thing, a very interesting thing, and the canon of "his" works is another.

Though Eliot and Woolf both engaged in biographical criticism themselves, it would not have been news to them that the living being who becomes an author has little final say as to what the book becomes in the hands of readers, and that he or she is profoundly unknowable, like Lydgate "a cluster of signs for his neighbours' false suppositions" (M 105). Yet both authors share a biographical model of character as development largely determined by milieu and hence to a degree intelligible; Woolf's three pieces on Eliot confidently enlist the circumstances of Eliot's life as determinants of the works. Curiously, she passes harshest judgment where personalities and circumstances are

*We should bear in mind Eliot's early grounding in the Higher Criticism with its decentering of biblical authorship.
The Burden of Personality

especially public; she is most lenient with the most obscure writers or with the great whose “lives” are lost. “The people whom we admire most as writers, then, have something . . . impersonal about them.” We know too much about the Victorians, she claims: it is impossible to imagine “George Eliot gathering her skirts about her and leaping from a cliff” as Sappho did (“Personalities,” CE 2: 275, 274). Though we know almost too much about Woolf’s most private life, we still can romanticize her as having taken an abstract, sapphic plunge—perhaps because narrative conventions are stronger than unglamorous details.

In my Introduction I traced the canonization of these great women of letters. Here I am concerned with the intense fascination with the personalities of these authors, as though to read their works, not unusually autobiographical, were to read a woman. Both idolatry—of Eliot in her own day and Woolf in ours—and repudiation have fixated in either case on the author’s appearance. Woolf’s mournfully serene face has been reproduced so often in the photographs, and Bloomsbury has been so thoroughly palpated, that we confront a popular legend when we approach her work (Rose, Woman of Letters, 249–51). The few portraits of Eliot reveal, in spite of the disproportion of nose and chin, a face as evocative as Woolf’s: the serenely mournful expression, the head elegantly tilted, the hair plainly drawn back (compare the illustrations in Bell and in Haight); Ina Taylor has located additional photographs of Eliot (though Eliot claimed never to have sat for any) that give images of the woman as various as her shifting names (xiv). Indeterminate as it was, Eliot’s notorious ugliness seems to have haunted Woolf; it was not a trait ingratiating to the heir of great beauty on the mother’s side. Woolf wrote in 1919, “The long, heavy face with its . . . almost equine power has stamped itself depressingly upon the minds of people who remember George Eliot” (“GE” [1919] 151). Woolf neglects to mention that those “who remember George Eliot” often perceived the great sage as highly feminine in person (Carroll, “Sibyl,” 13–14). Instead she dwells on the public persona as an obstruction to the secret femininity that she privately discovered in Eliot’s works.

Most interpreters of both writers, however, seem unable to distinguish the embodied woman from her narrative style, perceived as too masculine or too feminine. Defenders must compensate by uncovering a feminine Marian Evans Lewes and a masculine Virginia Woolf; one variation of the latter is the robust, political Woolf exhumed by feminists. Ugly and instructively wise, Eliot must be certified to be gentle (Haight entitles a chapter of his biography “ ‘Someone to Lean Upon’ ”). Beautiful, cultivated, and charming, Woolf must overcome
the role of Invalid Lady of Bloomsbury (Bell 2: 146, 210; Plomer 324; Caramagno); her voice, we learn, was deep and strong (as was Eliot’s [Marcus, Languages, 139; Bell 2: 200; Haight 11]), and her wit was as lively as any Cambridge Apostle’s (Sackville-West, “Woolf III,” 318, 320).

In Seduction and Betrayal, Elizabeth Hardwick provides an instructive variation on these schematic biographical readings of the women writers. Attacking American feminist critics for recuperating Woolf’s “androgy nous vision,” Hardwick praises Eliot in contrast: “The ‘masculine’ knowledge a writer like George Eliot acquired from her youth in Warwickshire is way beyond anything Virginia Woolf could have imagined. . . . The aestheticism of Bloomsbury, the ‘androgy n y’ if you will, lies at the root of Virginia Woolf’s narrowness. It imprisons her in femininity” (139). This may be a unique instance of attributing Eliot’s masculinity to her rural origins rather than her excessive learning, but it is a typical association of femininity with smothering narrowness—an association that itself motivated Eliot’s masculine persona and Woolf’s impersonal aesthetics.7

Hardwick’s animosity to Woolf may of course also be fueled by the resentment many women feel toward ladies of unassailable refinement. Like the commandment to be charming, the commandment to be a lady has been enforced with great zeal, as though women more than men, even today as they enter the “LADIES” room, must emulate their betters in the class scale. Eliot’s initial class standing was more likely to be pitied than resented, but each of her heroines beginning with Maggie Tulliver either is born a lady or becomes one. The pattern of marrying or blossoming “up,” while it answers to the tradition of fairy tales and novels of manners, also follows Eliot’s ascent, though hers was through cultural achievement rather than love or feminine “nature.” For Esther, Rosamond, and Gwendolen the social ladder proves to be a trap, but for their author it proved enabling: she “rose” to the ranks of educated gentlemen.

Different as their origins certainly were, Eliot and Woolf can be read as heroines struggling against much the same odds with much the same success. Both women overcame the pieties of their upbringing, whether Evangelical or humanist (and Leslie Stephen’s humanism owes much to Eliot), to consort with the freethinkers of their day; both

7Curiously enough, Hardwick chimes in with Woolf’s argument in A Room of One’s Own when she maintains that only artists who unite “masculine and feminine into a whole” can create universal art (139). If Hardwick felt that Carolyn Heilbrun’s ideal of androgyny (Toward a Recognition) was somehow effeminate, many feminists since have attacked androgyny as a masculinist ideal.
triumphed over their educational disadvantages as girls to master classical and contemporary learning and literature. Both dutiful daughters understood that nursing the sick and pouring the tea must always supersede the translation project or the literary reviewing—until they escaped to homes of their own. Both lost their somewhat remote mothers while they were in their teens. They were both strongly attached to their fathers who, though they encouraged their clever daughters, expected them to lend domestic service. Each woman viewed her father as an inhibiting power. Mary Ann, before Evans's death, wrote: "What shall I be without my Father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence" (GE Letters 1: 284). As a measure of the distance Woolf has traveled from Eliot's (and her own) early filial piety, her comment in 1928 on her father's death expresses no horror at her own propensities, but only a sense of release: his "life would have entirely ended mine. . . . No writing, no books" (VW Diary 3: 208). After their fathers' deaths (and supported by small inheritances), they were able to begin careers in earnest, publishing translations or reviews and essays before building up confidence to write and publish eight or nine novels as well as biographies, poetry, or stories, while they kept up their correspondence and amassed notebooks and journals.

This might be the model narrative of success, but it would be dull without a hint of the great woman's suffering, and certainly we must not omit the love interest. Eminence took its toll: Eliot was often ill and despondent as she wrote her novels; Woolf went into severe depressions after every novel appeared. The suffering was mitigated for each woman by a fortunate union with a loving man of letters capable of tending her career, supplying confidence when she despaired. Lewes assisted at the labor of Eliot's novels much as she helped him with such works as Physiology of Common Life (1859). As their library testifies, they were true Victorians in their curiosity and erudition on countless subjects. The Woolfs were a similarly productive and versatile couple; the Hogarth Press was their version of the Victorian cottage industry of letters.

I would not want to exaggerate the woman writer's dependence on the tolerance of the men around her, but it seems certain that without

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*In Three Guineas Woolf writes of the "infantile fixation" of fathers who claim complete possession of their daughters. Nevertheless, "it was the woman, the human being whose sex made it her sacred duty to sacrifice herself to the father, whom Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett had to kill"—not the father himself (134–35).
some release from the conventional roles of daughter, wife, and mother neither Eliot nor Woolf would have excelled as they did. In spite of their famous departures from convention (Eliot’s alliance with Lewes, Woolf’s briefer one with Vita Sackville-West), both led quiet domestic lives, forfeiting with regret the right to have children (Haight 205, 413; Showalter, Literature, 272–73). The ban on childbearing suggests a similarity between the status of the mistress and the madwoman. An unmarried woman and a woman liable to suicidal bouts with insanity were equally denied the full status of motherhood, although Eliot welcomed the role of “Madonna” and “Mutter” to Lewes’s sons and others (Beer, Eliot, 27, 109–12; Homans 22), while Woolf, though vicariously engaged in her sister Vanessa’s mothering, tended to designate other women to mother her (Marcus, Languages, 96–114). Woolf herself points out that “the four great women novelists” (Austen, the Brontës, and Eliot) bore no children (“Women and Fiction” 45); although literary creation and childbirth were welcome analogies, they seemed to be antinomies in most women’s lives.

Perhaps because of their unusual domestic circumstances, Eliot and Woolf were able to combine a reclusive private life with public prominence and wide access to culture. Woolf noted that Eliot played the retiring sibyl, and Rose Macaulay observed the same of Woolf, in spite of the fact that both hobnobbed with the cultivated and famous. Nor was Eliot the pitiable recluse Woolf imagines; she traveled frequently and extensively and associated with such prominent figures as Liszt, Martineau, Spencer, and Tennyson, not to mention the “mothers and grandmothers” of Woolf’s feminism (TG 102). Bloomsbury was a province of its own and did not inevitably foster Woolf’s cosmopolitan historical insight, as Clive Bell’s jingoistic Civilization suggests. Both women of letters did strive to capitalize on the enforced privatization of a woman’s life; Woolf urged the woman writer to find a room of her own (Showalter, Literature, 285, 297; RO 24), whereas Eliot expressed gratitude for her involuntary isolation from polite society, which afforded her a kind of room of her own. Whatever the cost, a certain retreat from the world seems to have been necessary for both Eliot and Woolf, perhaps because the personality of a famous woman seems especially assailable.

Woolf’s insight into this vulnerability sometimes renders her blind to her predecessors’ ambition and love of homage. Thus the great women become victims of convention and self-doubt. “It was the relic of the sense of chastity. . . . Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought inef-
tively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention . . . that publicity in women is detestable” (RO 52). This picture of women writers as veiled inmates in a “harem” (“Indiscretions” 75) cannot explain the triumphant strategy of a writer such as Eliot. Woolf’s belief in self-sacrificing femininity leads her to deny that Eliot is driven by “that romantic intensity . . . a sense of one’s own individuality, unsated and unsubdued,” that is usually associated with heroism and fame (“GE” [1919] 154–55). Yet few writers have been more intensely (and ambivalently) ambitious than Eliot.

It is true that like other women writers she found it difficult to assume the single-minded individualism expected of the great Romantic artist. The very definition of “greatness,” according to George Henry Lewes, entails a self-determination culturally proscribed for women:

The greatness of an author consists in having a mind extremely irritable, and at the same time steadfastly imperial:—irritable that no stimulus may be inoperative . . . ; imperial, that no solicitation may divert him. . . . A magisterial subjection of all dispersive influences, a concentration . . . these are the rare qualities which mark out the man of genius. In men of lesser calibre the mind is more constantly open to determination from extrinsic influences. (Principles of Success 33)

The gendered opposition here between terms of political power and “influences” is ominous: socialized as women, Eliot and Woolf could be easily marked out as less than men of genius because they remained open to “dispersive . . . extrinsic influences,” the validated demands of others. In compensation, they devised magisterial, impersonal narrative personas that make a virtue out of susceptibility to others, to the extrinsic and distracting. “Dispersed are we,” intones the musical commentary in Between the Acts (95–98). The historian of Middlemarch, claiming to be dwarfed by the “great” predecessor Fielding, struggles like Lewes’s lesser man against distraction: “All the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe” (105). But like Miss La Trobe the playwright’s self-effacement, this is no genuine expression of modesty, but a claim to greatness through selflessness, beyond gender, beyond the cult of personality and genius.
Greatness Engendered

Judgments on Womanhood and Women Writers

In spite of their best efforts, both Eliot and Woolf faced the gendered biographical criticism of their day, which defined greatness according to the model of the imperial masculine self. Perhaps surprisingly, they turned around and applied the same tools in their criticism of other writers; in their cultural judgments they often sound like the voice of tradition. Women writers who seemed untrue to their innate “vocation” as well as those who appeared too womanly met alike with their disapproval: the unwomanly and the womanly were incompatible with greatness.

Though Eliot and Woolf defy gender stereotypes, they have often been characterized as representing (and preferring) opposite genders. Woolf appears to show a strong bias toward the feminine, whereas Eliot has usually been read as having pitched her tent in the masculine camp. In Ruby Redinger’s terms, Eliot was a woman of “masculine identification” as opposed to Woolf, who celebrated androgyny (59). These characterizations correspond with the authors’ different readings of other women writers to a large extent: Eliot seems severe, Woolf sympathetic. But Woolf too could be competitive and destructive.

The mocking denigration of minor women writers in Eliot’s essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” and the indulgent admiration for lesser women writers in many of Woolf’s critical essays may seem representative. After all, Eliot never claimed to prefer women as Woolf did. In her essay on Fuller and Wollstonecraft, Eliot asserts that it would be “overzealous” to claim women’s “actual equality with men,” just as she disputes the authenticity of Dickens’s saintly poor people and Stowe’s virtuous slaves: “If the negroes are really so very good, slavery has answered as moral discipline” (“Three Novels” 327).

To me this skepticism remains a challenge to such champions of the oppressed as Woolf, who risk glorifying the effects of oppression. Woolf, however, is no simple sentimentalist of femininity, and she has foreseen a problem that Eliot largely missed, the problem of the masculine norm. In early, positivistic essays at least, Eliot upheld a standard of human development as though it were not fundamentally alien to those who have had no opportunity to measure up to it. Later, and in fiction, she questions the standard itself; she mocks those who prematurely answer the woman question: “If there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude” (Prelude, M 4; Blake 306). Woolf too denies the validity of standards belittling women: “There is no mark on the wall to measure
the precise height of women. There are no yard measures”; the “uni­
versities” and “professions” have “hardly tested” the new element in
their midst (RO 89). Both women authors might be restating Anne
Elliot’s charge in Persuasion: “Men have had every advantage of us in
telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher
a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (237). Such remarks seem
richly ironic, traceable as they are to the pens of women who had
broken all standards for female achievement.

Eliot retained, however, a sense that men had not only the advan­
tage over women but also inherently superior qualities that she pre­
ferred, in spite of her sympathy and admiration for womanhood. Like
Woolf, she had throughout her life numerous intimate friendships
with women, some of whom were drawn to her with romantic love,
however unreciprocated. She admonished Edith Simcox, a journalist
and women’s labor organizer, “that the love of men and women for
each other must always be more and better than any other.” Eliot
went on to say, according to Simcox, that “she had never all her life
cared very much for women . . . that she cared for the womanly ideal,
sympathised with women and liked for them to come to her in their
troubles, but . . . the friendship and intimacy of men was more to
her” (Haight 535). The womanly ideal was one thing, and a proposed
lesbian bond quite another.9

Woolf’s bonds with women reveal the opposite structure of power.
In A Room of One’s Own and Orlando, written during her affair with
Vita Sackville-West, Woolf affirms a preference for womanly qualities.
“Better is it,” thinks Orlando, “to be clothed in poverty and ignorance,
which are the dark garments of the female sex; . . . better to be quit
of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires”
and to enjoy, instead, “contemplation, solitude, love” (O 160). In her
later romantic attachment to the composer Ethel Smyth, Woolf said,
“Women alone stir my imagination” (Cook 728; Abel 12, 37; DeSalvo
119, 303–4; Marcus, Languages, 80). Yet her advocacy of androgyny
and her love of women never entirely erased her belief in a heterosex­
ual norm of gender difference, while her fascination with spinster

9Dorothea Barrett draws a contrast between Marian Evans Lewes’s expressed prefer­
ence for men and the “bias towards her own sex” in George Eliot’s fiction; “George
Eliot is a feminist,” but Marian Lewes was not (23, 175). I agree that the novels make
a stronger feminist argument than can be constructed from the life, but I would not
attempt such a clear demarcation; some statements in the letters and elsewhere are as
feminist as anything in the fiction.
In spite of their different orientations toward women, Eliot and Woolf applied remarkably similar standards of judgment to women writers. They both assumed that a woman’s disadvantage—which must become her strength—lay in her confinement to domestic life; her expertise must be in the detail of domestic experience, from counterpanes to courtship. This material was infinitely rich, as novels by men as well as women had shown since the beginning. But the woman writer, like a number of Eliot’s and Woolf’s heroines, continued to grow restless indoors and to violate her threshold by stepping out. Strangely, Eliot and Woolf can be seen standing outside the door telling her how much more seemly she appears within her familiar environs. It is fatal to the woman writer to write like a man; it only adds fuel to the male critics’ inevitable ridicule if she pretends to learning or theology; and if she overindulges her imagination or raises a protest she positively fails in her duty. In short, if she is in every way as much like Jane Austen as she can be, she may do fine things as a novelist; otherwise, she is a woman thrown entirely on her own resources, like Jane Eyre in the wild.

This rendition of Eliot’s and Woolf’s counsel to women writers might also paraphrase the critical doctrine of George Henry Lewes and Leslie Stephen; it is not, however, a complete account of what Eliot and Woolf had to say about women writers. Eliot, for example, greatly admired Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charlotte Brontë, both of whom diverge markedly from Austen in their use of melodrama and social protest. Woolf similarly swerves from the Austen model by encouraging the Mary Carmichaels, the twentieth-century women novelists who write of women’s relations to each other and to their work outside the home, as well as those writers of the future who will disregard altogether the injunction that women should write novels if they must write (RO 95, 80–81).

It is helpful to consider the preconceptions about women’s literary style and vocation that Eliot and Woolf would have encountered, as Lewes and Stephen expressed them, if we are to understand their responses to other contenders for the role of grand old woman of letters. In “The Lady Novelists,” Lewes claims: “To write as men write is the aim and besetting sin of women; to write as women is the real office they have to perform.” Women are “better in finesse of detail, in pathos and sentiment” than men; their expertise on “domestic experiences” fits them to be novelists. (As though to contradict the notion of gender-specific style—or perhaps to affirm that Eliot’s impersonation of the masculine essay style was opaque—this essay was misidentified as the work of George Eliot [Herrick 11–12]). Given his
taste for domestic realism in women's fiction, Lewes not surprisingly considered Austen "the greatest artist that has ever written" in terms of economy of "means" to "end," and took it upon himself to counsel the young author of Jane Eyre to study Jane Austen. Charlotte Brontë repudiated Austen's genteel propriety as Jane Eyre spurns Rochester's offer of gilded captivity: "I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses" (Gaskell 337). Brontë was not to be domesticated; she wrote Lewes, "I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity" (386)—an interesting challenge to Woolf's claim in A Room of One's Own that Bronte's work was inhibited by her self-consciousness as a woman. Lewes's review of Shirley enraged Brontë: "After I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly—I even thought so cruelly—handled the question of sex" (398).

It is impossible to judge whether Lewes had learned to set aside the question of sex when he came to nurture his "wife" as a novelist less than a decade later, but he certainly had not abandoned his predilection for Austen and domestic realism. Marian Evans, after she eloped with Lewes to "Labassecour" (as she put it, referring to Brontë's name for Belgium in Villette [Haight 147]), began to write fiction under Lewes's urging and guidance. Unlike Brontë, she accepted Lewes's commendation of Austen (Marian and George read Austen's novels aloud together in 1857 [Haight 225]). For her the model of Austen seems to have been instructive, opening rather than closing possibilities. The novice George Eliot already possessed the powers of realistic description and sober judgment that Lewes urged Brontë to learn from Austen; what George Eliot needed, according to Lewes, was "dramatic power" ("How I Came to Write Fiction," GE Letters 2: 406–10). Austen, then, offered Eliot not a fenced-in garden but a liberation from dutiful translation or the first person plural of the Westminster Review. The Austen model would not, however, have deflected the cruel "question of sex" without the added authority of masculinity. Eliot's domestic critic seems to have been willing to treat "George Eliot" man-to-man.

Leslie Stephen, like George Henry Lewes, respected women novelists, and he certainly encouraged his daughter to write, though he


11 See Moers (48–52) on Adam Bede as an inversion of Emma, focusing on the agricultural fringe of Austen's world. I would add that Esther Lyon is another Emma, this time taught to choose the Robert Martin figure, Felix Holt.
imagined making an historian out of her (Hill 351–53; Rosenbaum 33; DeSalvo 219). His account of Eliot’s late beginnings as a novelist seems prescriptive of his daughter’s own: “Women who have the gift have been often kept back by the feminine virtue of diffidence” (George Eliot 52). Even more than Lewes, Stephen subordinates a supposed women’s sphere of experience and hence literary achievement. In noting that the character of Adam Bede was largely a portrait of the author’s father, Stephen revealingly remarks:

Men drawn by women . . . are never quite of the masculine gender.

. . . Adam Bede is a most admirable portrait; but we can, I think, see clearly enough that he always corresponds to the view which an intelligent daughter takes of a respected father. That is, perhaps, the way in which one would like to have one’s portrait taken; but one is sensible that the likeness though correct is not quite exhaustive. (George Eliot 74–75)

Granting that a male author’s heroine may be equally incomplete, Stephen persists in distinguishing George Eliot’s outlook from that which “one,” as a man of letters, shares with men of genius; it is assumed that a woman is limited to describing what she has experienced or reiterating what she has learned. The diary of Eliot’s tour of Italy, for example, seems an unoriginal record, whereas the resulting novel, Romola, is “‘academic,’ ” mainly due to the “defect” of the author’s womanhood, which Stephen almost claims to have discovered. “George Eliot, I have suggested, was a woman; a woman, too, of rather delicate health, exhausted by hard work; and, moreover, a woman who, in spite of her philosophy, was eminently respectable,” and hence out of her depth in the male realm of history, among “the ruffian geniuses of the Renaissance” (120–21, 135–36).

Woolf may have sought to circumvent her father’s prescriptive view of women’s writing in her own ideal of androgyny: “The fully developed mind . . . does not think specially or separately of sex” (RO 103). But as we have seen, she too needed to insist that George Eliot “was a woman.” In a 1918 review, she conditionally endorses R. Brimley Johnson’s version of Stephen’s judgment: “A woman’s writing is always feminine. . . . For all her learning, ‘George Eliot’s outlook remains thoroughly emotional and feminine.’ ” She adds in her own assent to Stephen, “The absurdity of a woman’s hero or of a man’s heroine is universally recognized” (“Women Novelists” 70–71). She attempted to convert the old principle that women will write as women into an open opportunity to invent new forms of literature quite unlike
the writings of men. Like Lewes’s promotion of the Austen school, then, Stephen’s patronage of George Eliot may have helped the beginning writer resist the foreclosure of her potential by identifying a female literary tradition. Ostensibly, Eliot and Woolf agreed with their domestic critics that this tradition centered on novels of domestic realism, but their own work was not about to stay at home.

Eliot and Woolf had reason to fear that the constriction on their experience as women would brand them as inferior “lady” novelists. Thus, Eliot needed to clear the ground for her own far-reaching development as a novelist when she wrote “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) in the anonymous, gentlemanly voice she adopted for the Westminster Review. The essay is an intriguing attempt to anticipate the criticism she herself might attract as a novelist; she satirizes women’s abuse of certain conventions she would endeavor to exploit to greater effect. As though she has completely seen through the cult of woman’s mission with its exaltation of minutiae (“trifles make the sum of human things,” as Sarah Ellis says [1]), she heaps scorn on “mind-and-millinery” novels, with their combination of exquisite accessories and ignorant philosophies (compare the disjunction between Hetty Sorrel’s beautiful “eyelashes” and weak “morals” [AB 155]). In these works, ill-educated heroines offer their influence as “a sort of dial by which men have only to set their clocks and watches, and all will go well” (“Silly Novels” 301–2), very much as Dorothea Brooke would more compellingly do. Middlemarch, not incidentally, proves the fateful importance of Lydgate’s taste in trifles; his costly furniture and wife force him to set his watch to the common time.

In this review Eliot goes on to deplore the “mental mediocrity” of historical fiction by women. This exacting genre requires genius, wide learning, and “sympathetic divination, [to] restore the missing notes in the ‘music of humanity’ ” (320–21)—faculties she would later exercise in her own historically inspired fictions. Though she pities impoverished ladies driven to ply their pen as they would the needle, she suspects that most women writers are motivated by vanity and a restless fantasy life; this unworthy majority, her competition, should cede the field to professionals who understand the responsibilities of art, and who will raise the reputation of the lady novelist. That this reputation remained low, or that Eliot at least wished not to belong to this class of writers even in her eminent success, is suggested by a satire on authoresses in her last published work, Theophrastus Such.

12 For instance, the sinister baronet becomes Sir James Chettam; the dying first husband who blesses the match of the heroine and her lover becomes Casaubon forbidding Dorothea’s union with Ladislaw.
Vorticella is a provincial hostess and the author of "The Channel Islands," a much-trumpeted, bad book. "What one would have wished . . . was that she had refrained from producing even that single volume, and thus from giving her self-importance a troublesome kind of double incorporation"; the plump lady and plump book should both have effaced themselves ("Diseases of Small Authorship," TS 155).

Woolf, neither so patronizing nor so rivalrous when she surveyed the possibilities for women's achievement in literature, tended to blame women's failures on societal pressures rather than on undisciplined silliness. "Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man?" she wrote. "Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome." Yet the true novelist seeks "to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy" ("Professions for Women" 61-62). If in conceiving this passive (and feminine?) state Woolf unthinkingly obeys the convention of the masculine pronoun, we must grant that the internal obstacles are very great indeed. The woman novelist can point to no external obstacles, and only has her own struggling self-consciousness to blame.

In A Room of One's Own, Woolf offers women a kind of catch-22, like Bardo's simultaneous praise of Romola for being unlike a woman and reproach for being nothing more.13 Women must write as women write, yet they must not be mere women writers. Male pseudonyms may be ineffective veils, as she charges (RO 52), but they helped gain Eliot and the Brontës both "impartial criticism" and freedom "from the tyranny of what was expected from their sex" ("Women Novelists" 70). That tyranny extended over generic expectations: though Woolf's great women writers wrote novels, women should not be merely novelists ("Women and Fiction" 46): "The overflow of George Eliot's capacious mind should have spread itself when the creative impulse was spent upon history or biography" (RO 70). Eliot wrote poetry as well as historical and biographical essays, of course, and Woolf overflowed into history and biography. Indeed, Woolf gives voice to the restlessness both authors must have felt in the sphere of domestic fiction; their careers reveal their effort to command the impersonal realm of historical discourse, epic poetry, or drama. In spite of Woolf's rejection of women's meager generic portion, she rather tyrannically imposes a code of feminine decorum: "It is fatal for a woman to lay

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13Dr. Malone, in The Years, emulates Bardo's criticism of his daughter's assistance with his scholarship: "Nature did not intend you to be a scholar, my dear" (81).
the least stress on any grievance . . . ; in any way to speak consciously as a woman” (RO 108). In effect (whether describing or enforcing this code), she undermines the possibility of the specifically womanly writing she calls for.

Eliot’s and Woolf’s patronizing assessments of the handicaps on women writers at times seem to imply that they alone of all women shared the perch with men of letters. Like most contemporary critics they held the personality of the woman as well as the quality of the work up to scrutiny, demanding selfless devotion in both plots, the woman’s life and the career. Eliot and Woolf did find some contemporaries and predecessors to admire according to these exacting criteria. They were not unwilling to grant the excellence of literary women such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Wollstonecraft, either because these authors were able to reconcile artistic calling and womanhood or because they refused to reach a compromise.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning impressed both Eliot and Woolf as a distinctly feminine writer who seized a masculine artistic freedom. In her 1857 review of Aurora Leigh, Eliot calls Browning “all the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess,” one who exhibits “all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex.” As Gillian Beer explains in citing this review, however, Eliot believes the feminine writer must, like Barrett Browning, incorporate masculinity along with femininity in order to achieve “liberty from sexual type: ‘there is simply a full mind pouring itself out in song as its natural and easiest medium’” (16). Woolf’s similar reading of Aurora Leigh expresses stronger misgivings about the feminine personality displayed in the work. “Elizabeth Barrett was inspired by a flash of true genius,” Woolf allows, “when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work, is the true place for the poet.” Barrett Browning herself, according to Woolf, “was one of those rare writers who risk themselves . . . in an imaginative life which . . . demands to be considered apart from personalities.” Yet the poem is too personal: “The connexion between a woman’s art and a woman’s life was unnaturally close.” In Aurora Leigh, the feminine “genius,” then, remains “in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power,” because the woman poet cannot escape her personality after all (“Aurora Leigh” 137–44). Both great women of letters find in Barrett Browning, lauded as the greatest English woman poet in her day, the incomplete version of their own stories: a somewhat too easy, personal, feminine artist, though a great venturer in the poetic territory of the drawing room that Eliot and Woolf were to mine so profitably.

Like Woolf, Eliot viewed other women writers through the lens of
personality, at times empathizing with suffering and admiring fidelity to womanly duty while praising the escape from the “negations” of personality. Eliot compared her own career with those of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Margaret Fuller, both noted partisans of the oppressed, and though Eliot might not entirely concur with their reforming zeal, she admired the combination of public mission and ladylike private life. Eliot sustained a long friendship in letters with Stowe, acknowledging her as one who properly fulfilled a dual vocation of womanhood and art (outdoing Eliot in the former at least): “Dear friend and fellow-labourer—for you have had longer experience than I as a writer, and fuller experience as a woman, since you have borne children and known the mother’s history from the beginning” (GE Letters 5: 31). She praised Stowe’s “rare genius”: “‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Dred’ will assure her a place in that highest rank of novelists who can give us a national life in all its phases” (“[Three Novels],” 326).

The example of Fuller seems to have illustrated a conflict between vocations—as explicator of the national life and as woman—that was closer to Eliot’s experience, as Thomas Pinney points out: “It is a help to read such a life as Margaret Fuller’s,” Eliot wrote in 1852 (before her union with Lewes); “I am thankful, as if for myself, that [the life] was sweet at last” (GE Letters 2: 15; Essays 199). Eliot perceived that the postponed romance plot in Wollstonecraft’s and Fuller’s ambitious lives was similar to her own; the late loving marriage after literary endeavor comes to Barrett Browning and Aurora Leigh as well. Eliot particularly admired Fuller’s “calm plea for the removal of unjust laws and artificial restrictions, so that the possibilities of [woman’s] nature may have room for full development.” Fuller could be seen as a heroine of the ilk of Romola or Dorothea, a crusader who does no harm to Tennysonian “distinctive womanhood” (“Fuller and Wollstonecraft” 200). Indeed, Fuller’s brother, in the edition of Woman in the Nineteenth Century that Eliot reviewed, reassures us (as Gaskell did in her biography of Brontë) that “literary women” and female reformers do not necessarily “neglect the domestic concerns of life.” Rather, Fuller is remembered “as the angel of the sick-chamber,” whose “gentleness was united to a heroism . . . truly womanly” (Preface, Ossoli iv–v). Her belated marriage and sudden death soon after make her a heroine like Gaskell’s Brontë, while her drowning has a fortuitous literary respectability; Eliot recalls Wollstonecraft’s earlier attempt to drown herself (GE Letters 5: 160–61) and rewrites aspects of these exemplary lives in Maggie Tulliver’s drowning and Mirah Lapidoth’s attempted suicide. It is difficult not to believe that Woolf was trying to write the closure of her own life into such a tradition.
Woolf as much as Eliot tries to read her literary women as heroines, linking text and personality, and she too discovers womanly greatness in Mary Wollstonecraft. But although both Eliot and Woolf rediscover the "loving woman's heart" in the legendary hyena in petticoats ("Fuller and Wollstonecraft" 201), Woolf is not certain that the feminine susceptibility is to the credit of the great reforming author. She admiringly paraphrases Wollstonecraft's doctrine: "Independence was the first necessity for a woman; not grace or charm." The reformer "won fame and independence and the right to live her own life," but according to Woolf she was always brought up short by her desire for domestic love. The woman herself embodies conflict: "These contradictions show[ ] . . . in her face, at once so resolute and so dreamy, so sensual and so intelligent, and beautiful into the bargain." Ultimately, like Dorothea, "she has her revenge" when woman and text form an immortal unity: "We hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living" ("Wollstonecraft" 97–99, 103).

In other portraits of female predecessors Woolf is less tolerant of the conflict between womanhood and ambition, though it is clear that to compromise in favor of womanhood is to forfeit all claim to greatness. Mrs. Humphry Ward, whose books "we never wish to open" again, chose the route of "compromise" (the melancholy alternative to tragedy for Eliot's heroines, according to Woolf). Her fulfillment as a lady of letters, "beloved, famous, and prosperous," entailed no disinterested devotion to art, though she was active in public causes, including the ignoble anti-suffrage campaign. The worst is that "her imagination always . . . agrees to perch"; she has become mere historical personality ("The Compromise" 171–72). In contrast, Olive Schreiner seems to have some of Wollstonecraft's vision, and to share the honor of tragedy (in ultimate obscurity and isolation) rather than compromise, but her egotism prevents her from measuring up to Woolf's standard for greatness. Schreiner's "famous book," The Story of an African Farm, "has the limitations of" the Brontë's "egotistical masterpieces without a full measure of their strength. The writer's interests are local, her passions personal." Nevertheless, like a reverse of Mrs. Humphry Ward, Schreiner earns "pity and respect" as one of "those martyrs" to "the cause . . . [of] the emancipation of women." If she is "one half of a great writer" ("Olive Schreiner" 180–83), the other half is marred by egotism and politics (even if, unlike Ward's politics, Schreiner's are correct).

Apparently, Eliot's and Woolf's ideal of greatness for the woman writer would be almost impossible to fulfill, if one must be both genius and angel, must live down and live by one's personality as a woman.
These great women of letters deplored writers who sought a way out of this bind through a manly style, as much as they censured women (writers or heroines) who attempted to live egotistically for themselves as men appeared able to do. These prescriptions often concern the question of style. On the one hand, Eliot lauded the forgotten women of the French Enlightenment who created “a new standard of taste” combining exalted sentiment with simple language (“Woman in France” 54, 58), much as Woolf praised Austen’s “perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use” (RO 80). On the other hand, no literary persona could be more transparent than a woman’s “exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire,” in Eliot’s words (“Woman in France” 53). Yet Woolf, like Eliot, would label self-consciously feminine writing “silly”: “The women who wished to be taken for men in what they wrote were certainly common enough; and if they have given place to the women who wish to be taken for women the change is hardly for the better” (“Women Novelists” 70). But how were women authors to choose between dressing in ludicrous frills or in men’s oversize suits? Their only hope, perhaps, was to suppress the cruel “question of sex” altogether by offering up work so authoritative as to constitute a kind of reinvention of the personality of the author.

**Eliot’s and Woolf’s Strategies of Impersonality**

Eliot and Woolf sidestepped their own intermittently held ideal of woman’s anonymous mission and their own criticism of the disabilities of women writers to pursue careers as women of letters. They did not write as, according to their different lights, women were supposed to write. In their own narrative strategies and styles, Eliot and Woolf display their ambivalence toward women’s role as outsiders in an androcentric tradition. The marginal vantage seemed an opportunity, yet at the same time a constraint they would not themselves accept. How not to think of themselves as women writers was the first difficulty. As Woolf, in spite of her introspective diaries, might have said of her own personality as well as of Eliot’s, “For long she preferred not to think of herself at all” (“GE” [1919] 157). The great women of letters became powerful personalities that covered their works, yet the success of their narrative strategies depended upon a transmutation of personality as well as a difficult relation to an audience often seen as embodying patriarchal judgment.
Eliot had had painful experience, not only of the costs of sickroom heroism (in tending her father) but also of the consequences of overstepping the bounds of woman’s sphere. She would be genius and angel in spite of her notoriety as freethinking journalist and “wife” of a married man (Carlyle wrote her off as a “Strong minded Woman” [Haight 160–61]). First she acted the clerical gentleman, as though she intended to be a supremely convincing actress in male attire. Later she affirmed her “heart” as a sibyl selflessly devoted to art and human progress. Though as Gillian Beer puts it, “‘George Eliot’ was name without person” initially, the author soon fled the clerical pose; the style outlasted the disguise, in the novels after Adam Bede (Beer, George Eliot, 22–24, 55, 17). Eliot went on to develop the freest possible approximation of “egolessness,” which undoubtedly required that the author herself appear to retire from the public eye and that she present, in the novels, the evils of egotism and the virtues of self-sacrifice. The narrators of Eliot’s later works seem to speak from the reservoirs of a mind that has survived the burden of a personal life: she, for one, is free to have a “human” voice. The narrative strategy, then, would seem to give the lie to Woolf’s detection of an autobiographical femininity in Eliot’s work, yet Woolf is also right. The very evasion of personality is an indication of the burden to be sloughed off.

Woolf’s own narrative strategy is more difficult to identify, as to some extent it succeeds in avoiding the question of sex through a disembodied, interpersonal voice that freely penetrates all the characters. Virginia Blain describes Woolf’s “life-or-death combat” in the early novels with “the masculine voice of the omniscient narrator”; her later impersonal narrators (like Eliot’s “human” narrators) reveal “the gender consciousness that betrays a female perspective” (119, 133). Except for the parodically male biographer in Orlando, Woolf in general does not personify her narrators or allow them first-person commentary. Is this an attempt at the androgynous unself-consciousness she has shown is next to impossible for women, or is this a feminine narrative stance? I would argue that in other contexts Woolf would have defined such interpersonal indeterminacy as in itself feminine, but that she needed to perceive her own strategy as beyond gender.

Woolf’s curious insistence on an identifiable gender of style was somehow not meant to apply to her own work. Yet as she defines women’s writing, it resembles not only écrite feminine in Hélène Cixous’s vision, but also her own egoless style. The theorists of écrite feminine, of course, insist on divorcing the actual sex of the author
from the gender of style, much as Woolf seems momentarily to do in her definition of androgyny in *A Room of One's Own*. But Woolf also reverts to a more essentialist view ("The book has somehow to be adapted to the body" [RO 81]), much as Cixous echoes old stereotypes of women's inherent qualities. Cixous defines feminine style as one of "flourishes . . . near and distant byways," "sweeping away syntax." Woman is likewise perceived: "Secretly, silently . . . she grows and multiplies . . . adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity . . . because she's a giver" (287, 290, 292). Eliot as well as Woolf would recognize such a style and being, the cousin of "Anon" and of the incalculably diffusive Saint Theresas. The persona-without-boundaries that Woolf devised for her narrators thus may have seemed to be a new way to be freely "human" in a hitherto suppressed feminine mode, but it sustains the ideology of influence.

Woolf's narrative ideal of androgynous unself-consciousness, like Eliot's narrative ideal of selfless objectivity, serves as a screen for female personality. In practice, the two writers' styles and narrative personas were of course various, and a close examination of each could engage a long study in itself. I reserve extended discussion of the novels for later chapters (particularly Chapters 5–7) and instead focus briefly here on the strategies Woolf and Eliot employ for constructing an audience, especially in their essays, in which both authors generally adopt a masculine, self-effacing persona. These guises were designed in response to an audience personified in terms of the gendered spheres: the authoritative audience of the essay was male, while the casual novel reader was female.

In "The Influence of Rationalism," Eliot satirizes the public she has won as a novelist: "The general reader of the present day does not exactly know what distance he goes; he only knows that he does not go 'too far.' . . . He likes an undefined . . . amelioration of all things: . . . something between the excesses of the past and the excesses of the present" (398). This opinionated gentlemanly reader has an earlier counterpart among the ladies: "Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction" ("Amos Barton," SCL 41). Neither the liberal nor the sentimental reader is, of course, Eliot's ideal reader (Prince 9). Mrs. Farthingale, like the "world's wife" (MF 428), will be

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14Woolf's famous comment on Dorothy Richardson's style tries to identify a nonessential gender: "She has invented . . . a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old. . . . Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description." But Richardson's sentence "is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex" ("Dorothy Richardson" 191).
even less lenient than the vaguely liberal gentleman in judging women like Maggie Tulliver and Marian Evans who go “too far.” If the author had allowed herself to be vulnerable to such criticism of her work, she might have met the fate of the scholar Merman: “The gall of his adversaries’ ink had been sucked into his system” (“How We Encourage Research,” TS 49). Instead, she constructed a sympathetic coterie, the “we” or “you and me” of the meditative passages in Middlemarch, for example. The narrator him/herself cannot be charged with being either too detached, like the male reader, or too involved, like the female, since he/she, and the nonadversarial coterie, partake of both.

Woolf apparently shares Eliot’s desire for a non-gendered collective of readers upon a common ground. Like Eliot, she invites “us” to join a club, but the modern club is, at least in theory, open to all. Her “common reader” has no professional key to culture, but “has, as Dr. Johnson maintained, some say in the final distribution of poetical honours.” Yet Woolf instinctively invokes “the great man’s approval” as though the honors will be distributed much as in the past (“The Common Reader” 1–2). Further, Woolf inadvertently signals the exclusion of women from the club of active truth-lovers: “For the true reader is essentially young. He is a man of intense curiosity; of ideas; open-minded and communicative, to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study” (“Hours in a Library,” CE 2: 34). Like “George Eliot” personifying his associates as gentlemen, Woolf here conceives the ideal audience of literature as male; this essay, significantly, borrows its title from one of her father’s books (and recreates the young mountain-climbing Stephen: the true reader “climbs higher and higher” [“Hours,” CE 2: 34]). Woolf, too, hides on occasion behind the equivalent of a male pseudonym (notably in early essays such as this one written for The Times Literary Supplement in 1916). Yet in marked contrast to Eliot, she did broadcast a female voice in some feminist essays, books, and on radio (VW Diary 5: 83). At the same time she anticipates male adversarial response, humorously represented by a counterpart to Mrs. Farthingale, “Sir Chartres Biron” spying on her lectures to the women’s college: “We are all women, you assure me?” (RO 85); Biron, fictional as he sounds, actually was the magistrate in the Radclyffe Hall obscenity trial, as Marcus reminds us (Languages 166). This personified censor helps consolidate a female subset of the consensual “we.” For the most part, however, Woolf seems to rely on a trouble-free audience for her fiction, one that is never personified, gendered, or addressed (Jacob’s Room and Orlando are examples of exceptions).

While both women of letters advised women to write in a style of
their own, and while both tended to personify the critical audience as male, they devised such different styles that we must abandon any lingering desire to generalize about women’s style. Yet there is a consistency in their need to write beyond gender and self. In nonfiction they come closest to speaking *in propria persona*—Miss Evans, anonymous editor of *The Westminster Review*, was known at least in London intellectual circles, while Mrs. Woolf was widely known to readers of *The Times Literary Supplement*. The risk of being read as an unmediated personality, however, is one that Woolf and Eliot especially guard against in the essays. Here they significantly assert a more masculine authority than seems necessary in their more mediated fiction.

Their different versions of the comradely essayist reflect in part the fashions of their times. To paraphrase Woolf regarding Mr. Birrell on Carlyle: there is a great gulf between Virginia Woolf on George Eliot and the essay which one may suppose that George Eliot would have written upon Virginia Woolf (“The Modern Essay,” *CE* 2: 45). Woolf’s essays range through cultural history and bring together unexpected relevancies as Eliot’s do, but a piece by the modern writer will be a quick and elusive flight compared to the Victorian’s essay, an expedition in search of conviction. It is safe to say that Eliot devotes two sentences to any point that Woolf, with twentieth-century efficiency, would express in one. Reading an essay of either writer, one attends to a voice of great mastery, well-read yet persistently curious, often satirical—a voice, especially in Woolf’s case, distinct from that of her fictional narrators. Whereas Woolf poses more as her audience’s companion than as an authority, Eliot impresses us as the collective voice of Victorian reason; yet both follow the “convention of the *male* reviewer” (Stange, “Voices,” 317; Showalter, *Literature*, 290–93; Daiches 130–41).

In certain essays, Eliot and Woolf confidently survey the industry and profession of literature, satirizing the hackwork that makes life unpleasant for cultivated readers and writers like themselves. In two similar pieces, they turn from a good-humored survey to an attack, whether on the dilettante or the reviewer. Eliot’s “Lord Brougham’s Literature” begins: “It is matter of very common observation that members of the ‘privileged classes,’ who . . . find their time hang rather heavily on their hands, try to get rid of it by employments which, if not self-imposed, they would think rather pitiable.” This caricature of aristocrats who dabble in superfluous crafts is intended as an emblem for Lord Brougham’s *Lives of Men of Letters*, a collection of “third-rate biographies in the style of a literary hack!” Claiming no
personal animosity toward Lord Brougham, and no resentment of any "hard-run literary man" really forced into mediocrity, this reviewer expresses boiling "indignation" against genteel self-indulgence, parasitical on the great originals: "If he has no jewels to offer us, at least polish his pebbles" (138–39). (This 1855 essay suggests that Eliot did not believe literary silliness to be a monopoly of lady novelists.)

Woolf's "Reviewing" similarly begins with an arresting image of amusing labor. "In London there are certain shop windows that always attract a crowd. The attraction is not in the finished article but in the worn-out garments that are having patches inserted in them." Like Eliot's aristocratic poker-makers, Woolf's "women at work . . . putting invisible stitches into moth-eaten trousers" reflect on the confusion between writing as a trade and as a vocation, but in Woolf's emblem, craft sides with literature rather than opposing it: the stitching women are "poets, playwrights, and novelists," the most impertinent passersby are reviewers. Like Eliot's essay, Woolf's sides with the misrepresented men (or persons) of letters, expressing boiling indignation against a different kind of hack: "The reviewer was a louse; his bite was contemptible; yet . . . in the nineteenth century . . . he had considerable power" (CE 2: 204–6). Since both Eliot and Woolf in such essays are writing with the reviewer's power, it is interesting to see their hostility toward minor men of letters who might be said to share their company; Eliot expresses "noble rage" against the fulsome and ignorant biographical critic (142), Woolf a sense of "public duty to abolish" the reviewer who cannot judge by "the eternal standards of literature" (208). It seems that such essays helped the women authors to carve out a place among men of letters whose would consider those supposedly immutable standards of greatness.

If as essayists both Eliot and Woolf strive for authority high above the hacks, the same must be said of their strategies as novelists. Yet we have seen that in novels as well as essays these authors exhibit differing strategies of impersonality, scarcely predictable from the fact of their being women; only Woolf's manners in fiction resemble the conventionally "feminine." Perhaps they have attained "liberty from sexual type," "apart from personalities," as they said Barrett Browning had done. Fair enough, let us not pester them to be women writers.

15In a fascinating and slightly embarrassing letter never sent to The New Statesman, Woolf defines the ranks of culture and declares herself "proud to be called highbrow." The highbrow tradition (from Shakespeare through Henry James, with Austen, Brontë, but not Eliot thrown in) pursues art itself, and loves lowbrow "life itself," but scorns middlesbrows obsessed with "money, fame, power, or prestige" ("Middlebrow," CE 2: 196, 199).
according to the tyranny of what is expected. But why then do they so persistently attempt to define what is expected of their sex, and why do we in turn question the narrative personas and styles of their writings as responses to certain historical patterns of gender expectation? Why, particularly, is Woolf offended by Eliot’s air of authority, preferring Austen’s “woman’s sentence”? Perhaps because these women authors and feminist readers generally are in search of an engendered greatness that would not silence the experience of female personality.

In “Phases of Fiction” Woolf draws a comparison of Eliot and Austen that qualifies Woolf’s apparent preference for ladylike charm, and that reveals her own negotiation of the problems of greatness and womanhood, authority and style. Austen, self-effacing, “went in and out of her people’s minds like the blood in their veins,” whereas “Eliot has kept the engine of her clumsy yet powerful mind at her own disposal” to analyze a hidden “state of mind which often runs counter to the action and the speech.” This description of Eliot’s method suggests a subversive ability to capture the elusive Mrs. Brown as Austen could not have done. The intrusive narrative persona troubles Woolf, however. Unlike Austen, Eliot “at once reveals herself as ‘I.’ . . . ‘I’ will do my best to illumine these particular examples of men and women with all the knowledge, all the reflections that ‘I’ can offer you” (CE 2: 78–80). Woolf identifies her predecessor’s narrative persona (if not her actual style). Eliot’s narrator repeats the claims of authoritative address—though not the phallic pronoun itself; this narrator is at the same time intimately feminine (“melancholy, tolerant, and perhaps resigned”). Yet Woolf’s Eliot has not accepted Austen’s womanly sphere of personal relations (she writes of relations “with God or nature” as well). 16

Perhaps we see here a design for Woolf’s own narrative persona. Eliot’s crime is not self-assertion but an overexposure of her personal claim to knowledge and authority (the “grave mind” that “darkens and thickens the atmosphere” [CE 2: 79]). Woolf would claim every bit of Eliot’s authority to show human relations with history, nature, or spirituality, though in a modern frame of mind. And she would

16CE 2: 78–79. When Eliot’s narrator does use the first person singular, it serves personal memory and fellow-feeling, not hard self-assertion: “I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge,” intones the female Wordsworth at the opening of The Mill on the Floss (7). “Phases of Fiction” appeared in 1929, the same year as A Room of One’s Own, suggesting that Woolf would have been attributing masculine ego to Eliot in using the repeating “I, I, I” (RO 103–4). The repetitions of the pronoun are also displacements, and can affirm “connection to others” in Woolf’s usage, as Patricia Waugh notes (11).
retain Austen's feminine suppression of the "I," becoming the blood in
her people's veins. Thus, finally, her incrimination of Eliot's manliness
seems mainly a dread of the evidence that to succeed on men's terms
a woman author must unsex or efface herself—must become an over-
bearing ego, just like a man, or a charming chameleon, like a lady. In
the twentieth century, she hoped, that sacrifice would no longer be
called for, though she still warns that manifest womanhood can be
"fatal" to the writer and her text.

Woolf's debt to "the first woman" of her father's age was undoubt-
edly difficult to honor. But she wished to emerge from her heritage as
a new voice; she cultivated a style, especially after Night and Day, like
the flashing of fireflies compared to the steady desk lamp of Eliot's
prose. If the style is the man, these different styles are precisely not
the woman writer. In all their complexity, the rich utterances of Eliot's
and Woolf's narrators must be seen as tacit bids for the textual immor-
tality of the great writer. This greatness would be granted, in current
terms, almost exclusively to texts that silenced the woman, erased the
female origin. Readers of their novels knew full well (at least after
Adam Bede) that a woman had written them, but they encountered
implied authors who, unlike the more strictly gendered characters
within the text, enjoyed the freedom of both spheres. If these narrators
were female, they were also impersonal, able to speak in the collective
first person: "we" transcend the individual, "we" commune with
human greatness, "we," though especially intimate with a feminine
common life, partake of an omniscience usually considered a mascu-
line privilege. Ultimately, "we" are immortal, because these women
authors and their "human" narrators are not dead; such is the liberal
myth of culture that the grand old women of letters collaborate in
writing. This myth of a collective history, a common life, which I turn
to next, is both source and confirmation of their recognition as great
women writers.