

VIRGINIA WOOLF: FACT AND FICTION, AN ONOMASTIC STUDY

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Namers in literature, unlike parents in life, are frequently motivated not by love, but by disdain, jealousy, desire for approval, or even intellectual challenge to adopt, or adapt, real contemporary names for their fictions. Alexander Pope, for example, named the hero of "The Dunciad," Tibbald, thus immortalizing with a dunce cap his literary rival by altering the spelling but not the pronunciation of Theobald. Less violent dislike may also motivate the use of the name of a colleague, a political figure, or person of recent notoriety, for satirical purposes. Fielding, another eighteenth-century writer, was so direct in his allusions to Robert Walpole, in The Historical Register of 1736, that the play aroused the Prime Minister's enmity and contributed to the eventual passage of the Licensing Act. In an earlier age, Greene, by referring to the "upstart Crow" who could "Shake-scene" earned the eternal thanks of Shakespearean scholars. The use of contemporary names

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by writers is not a new phenomenon.

Why, then, have critics had such difficulty with "Virginia Woolf" in the title of Edward Albee's drama? In part the answer lies in the denial of a connection by Albee's spokesman, Flanagan, but in part it also lies in the difference between Albee's reference and those of a Fielding or a Pope. Whereas the latter attached the name to a character or characterization, Albee shouts the name provocatively from the title but attaches it to no specific character. Nevertheless allusions--to her life, her aspirations, her anguish, and her weaknesses as well as to her philosophy and point of view--pervade his play. Although the name "Virginia" and the word "wolf" have many connotations, this article is concerned only with those illusions in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to the woman who wrote A Room of One's Own.¹ Her life-story as well as her literary ideals and personal philosophy weave through this drama.

With the recent publication of Quentin Bell's Biography, Samuel Hynes The Auden Generation, the Letters Home of Sylvia Plath, the Letters of Virginia Woolf, and the first section of her Diary, one learns of the many who were "afraid of," or antagonistic towards, Virginia Woolf.² One learns, too, of the stories about her manners, activities, and foibles that were enlivening literary evenings in the late fifties and early sixties prior to the time Albee's play was produced.

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Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Indeed, many were. According to Bell, "She could charm and she could terrify; but her magic was not purely benevolent. It is said that she could behave with some ferocity, and that she had claws and could bite, that several young men and women had been mauled" (II.97). Among the literary victims of her criticism were the New Signature poets whose volume appeared in 1932. Hynes writes: "It seemed to her [V. Woolf] odd 'that these modern poets should write as if they had neither ears nor eyes, neither soles to their feet nor palms to their hands, but only honest enterprising book-fed brains, unisexual bodies.'"³ Woolf quoted from the poems of Auden, Lehmann, C. Day Lewis, and Spender for examples in her articles. Thus her attacks included those who subsequently became famous.

By the 1960 the "young brainies" of Woolf's generation were the establishment, who, in turn, impressed a new group of young writers—a group of whom Plath and Albee were a part. Regaling her mother with stories of her life in England, Sylvia Plath wrote in October 1960: "Last night Ted and I went to dinner at Stephen Spender's house with an artist; the poet Louis MacNieve and one of his girl friends . . . Their conversation is fascinating—all about Virginia Woolf, what Hugh Gaitskell said to Stephen. . . why Wystan (W.H. Auden) likes this book or that. . . and such like."⁴

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In his "Preface" to Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson observes that a writer cannot be properly evaluated by contemporaries, not until "the effects of favour and competition are at an end: the tradition of . . . friendship and . . . enmities has perished; and the works support no opinion with arguments nor supply any faction with invectives."⁵ Virginia Woolf is still too close to us in time for a true evaluation of her work to be made. The reactions to her personality, however, have not yet ceased to flood our literature. Among these are negative reactions voiced even by her friends.

Shortly after her death, E. M. Forster, in a supposedly eulogistic, if honest, address at Cambridge, said:

She might have become a glorified disease, who frittered away her broader effects by mischievousness, and she did give that impression to some who met her in the flesh; there were moments when she could scarcely see the busts for the moustaches she had pencilled on them, and when the bust was a modern one, whether of a gentleman in a top hat or a youth on a pylon, it had no chance of remaining sublime.⁶

The possible background to this reveals the accuracy of Johnson's observation. Woolf had written an unfavorable review of Aspects of the Novel, questioning Forster's vague definition of the word

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"Life," his criterion for a novel's greatness. A correspondence ensued. Bell quotes Woolf's letter. "Dear Morgan . . . You say 'Each sentence leads to a . . . casket of which the key has unfortunately been mislaid, and until you can find your bunch I shall cease to hunt very anxiously for my own.' . . . but then I'm not writing a book about fiction. If I were, I think I should hunt a little" (II, 134). According to the biographer, Woolf found much that was weak in Forster's next publication. Although this friend and colleague didn't continue the debate with Woolf during her lifetime, we hear his antagonism in that 1941 paper. From Bell, we also learn of Forster's attitude towards women: ". . . he disliked that women should be independent of men" (II,138).

Although by 1962, the year of the production of Albee's play, the English novelist had been dead for more than twenty years, the factionalism that had surrounded her, particularly during the closing decade of her life, persisted.⁷ Most criticism of the play, however, ignores both the challenge implicit in the title and the unity that Albee creates through the reference to Woolf. Robert Brustein in reviewing the play in 1962, for example, observes that Albee's two main characters, George and Martha, are unconvincing as solid characterizations and that the drama plays tricks on the audience: "It is certain that the play collapses at its moment of climax.

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But the difficulty is not that the author introduces a spurious element into an otherwise truthful play. It is, rather, that he suddenly confronts us with a moment of truth after an evening of stage illusions. . . . In short, Albee is a highly accomplished stage magician, but he fails to convince us there is nothing up his sleeve. His thematic content is incompatible with his theatrical content,—hi-jinks and high seriousness fail to fuse."⁸

Other critics have been less harsh on Albee and have found allegorical messages in the play: the most frequently repeated is the historical one—George (a Professor of History) represents the first President of our country, and Martha represents his wife.⁹ Religious symbolism has also been read into the text. Another suggestion is that Albee is masking the portrait of a homosexual relationship by calling his two main characters George and Martha rather than giving them both male names, the rationale being that in 1962 homosexuality would have been unacceptable on the stage.¹⁰ Still another proposal, one focused on the title, is offered by Flanagan who says it was inspired by a slogan scrawled on the mirror of a Greenwich Village bar.¹¹ Within the context of the play, the title is supposed to be a humorous take-off on "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?"

I believe, however, that the name "Virginia Woolf" is not a casual reference but is positively related to the English writer.

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Moreover, I think that the work is a tour-de-force of literary allusions, deriving its greatest coherence from the combination of name and challenge in the words "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

Albee's drama owes several debts to Woolf's life and philosophy. First, there is the matter of form. The characters in Albee's play are constantly involved in bitter, caustic, and frequently ironic verbal attacks. Ralph Partridge describes Woolf's methods of conversation:

She was particularly hard on innocent young women with any intellectual pretensions. She would question them in a relentlessly encouraging way, get them to air all their high-minded views and then expose their utter ignorance and ineptitude to the assembled company in her low mocking voice, without ever losing the benign expression on her face. Yet the relish with which she punctured their poor aspirations to partake in intelligent conversation was only too evident.

(II,97-98)

Since no artist takes his material "whole" from his source but alters it to give it shape within the body of a work, Albee adapts the patterns of conversation, described in the biography, to both Martha and George. He also presents parallels, sometimes

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skewed, to the plot, if one may call the story of a life a "plot." Basic to plot is the role of the child in a childless marriage. George and Martha invent the imaginary child because they "could not have one." Honey and Nick have no children because Honey is afraid of the pain of giving birth. Is it just a coincidence that Virginia Woolf, too, had wanted to have children but had remained childless? Bell tells us that in 1912 she "was still cheerfully expecting to have children" (II,7). In the end, however, after having consulted specialists, "Leonard decided and persuaded Virginia to agree that, although they both wanted children, it would be too dangerous for her to have them" (II,8).

More indirect a plot parallel is that surrounding marital infidelity. In Albee's play, George never wavers into sexual infidelity, Martha does. In Virginia Woolf's life there were no extra-marital affairs with men. There were, however, several close friendships with women. Of her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, Bell writes:

The work "friendship has a coy look on this page and I would use the work "affair" is I were perfectly certain of not being misunderstood. . . There may have been--on balance I think there probably was-- some caressing, some bedding together.

(II,116,119)

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Virginia Woolf's mental breakdowns have been well-documented by Bell as well as by other biographers. Albee, although his is merely a passing reference, includes the tantalizing question--one that not only relates to Martha but also to the line between truth and illusion in George's own mind. Turning to Nick, his young antagonist, when both their wives are absent from the stage, George queries:

GEORGE: (quietly) Where's my little yum yum?
Where's Martha?

NICK: She's making coffee...in the kitchen.
She...gets sick quite easily.

GEORGE: (Preoccupied) Martha? Oh, no, Martha
hasn't been sick a day in her life, unless
you count the time she spends in a rest home...

(p, 89)

But George says no more. We are left with one of the many ambiguities of the drama.

The major resemblance, however, is one of tone--a tone inextricably connected with Albee's misogyny in this drama and ultimately with Woolf's feminism. Thus in the first act Martha's arrogance, drunkenness, domineering attitude, impatience, and rudeness all conspire to create a character whom we, as audience, loath and to build our sympathies for George--sympathies which

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never, even when he is most ugly--veer away from him. In the stage-directions, we read of MARTHA "braying, ugly." We hear her speak "Look, muckmouth...you cut that out" (p.21). And then the ferocity at the play's opening sucks us into the pit:

MARTHA: Good grief? Don't you know anything?
Chicago was a thirties musical, starring
"little Miss Alice Faye. Don't you know
anything?

GEORGE: Well, that was probably before my time,
but. . .

MARTHA: 'Can it! Just cut that out!

(p.7)

Long before the guests have arrived, the audience has rejected Martha. The dramatist's attitude towards women extends deeply into the play. Sometimes it may be observed in the language of Martha, frequently in the speeches of the men:

GEORGE: Martha's tastes in liquor have come
down. . . simplified over the years. . .
crystallized. Back when I was courting
Martha--well I don't know if that's
exactly the right word for it--but back
when I was courting Martha....

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MARTHA: (Cheerfully) Screw, sweetie!

(p.23)

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GEORGE: ...and try to keep your clothes on, too.

There aren't many more sickening sights
than you with a couple of drinks in
you and your skirt up over your head,
you know...

MARTHA: ...a zero...

GEORGE: ...your heads, I should say...

(p.17)

The final example that characterizes this speech pattern occurs in one of the earlier bouts:

MARTHA: George hates Daddy...not for anything

Daddy's done to him, but for his own...

GEORGE: (Nodding...finishing it for her)

....inadequacies.

MARTHA: (Cheerfully) That's right. You hit it...

right on the snout. (Seeing GEORGE

EXITING) Where do you think you're going?

Even at those moments when some slight sympathy for Martha might be evoked because both characters are "slashing away at everything in sight" (p.152), it is George who has the insight:

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"You're deluded...Martha, you're deluded... I thought at least you were...on to yourself. I didn't know. I...didn't know."

MARTHA: (anger taking over) "I'm on to myself." GEORGE: (As if she were some sort of bug) "No...no...you're sick" (p.152).

And here male superiority is exhibited. He knows she's ill, just as Leonard knew Virginia was ill. "It was a symptom of Virginia's madness that she could not admit that she was mentally ill; to force this knowledge upon her was in itself, dangerous" (II,224).

Nor does the ferocity abate even when Albee adopts another Woolf technique, that of intensive questioning. Although Partridge attributed it to Woolf's desire to "puncture" the aspirations of the young, most reports inform us that she was motivated by a desire to know everything about life. She found "no human experience... too trivial to be interesting... She was a life enhancer."¹² George's intention, as he frankly admits while questioning Nick about Honey's false pregnancy and her father's "God money" is to "get the goods on you." (p.111).

Another parallel between the style of Virginia Woolf and the material in this play is the tendency on the part of the characters to fabricate stories. Both in Woolf's diaries and in the biography, examples abound. It might be a friend, an acquaintance, someone she saw on the street, or a member of the family, about whom she would

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build a fiction. Bell quotes a delightful letter from Virginia to Vanessa while the novelist is anxiously awaiting her sister's critical reaction to To The Lighthouse (II, 127). Albee's play too is riddled with fictions: the young man who killed his father, the incidental mention of a trip to Majorca, and of course, the great major fiction, George and Martha's son.

But fiction plays another role as a connecting link between Woolf and this American drama. Albee's thematic concern is with the nature of truth. It is perhaps not accidental that some of the verbal echoes of Virginia Woolf in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? emanate from that remarkable feminist essay, A Room of One's Own and from its discussion of truth and fiction, reality and illusion.

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact...

I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an invention; so is Fernham; "I" is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.¹³

In the American idiom of Albee, George challenges, "That's for me to know and you to find out" (p.39). The main question that

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tortues Albee's characters and that functions chorally throughout the work pertains to the nature of truth.

GEORGE: (To Nick) Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh toots: eh?

MARTHA: You were never in the Mediterranean... truth or illusion...either way.

(p. 201)

At this point, truth and illusion merge for Martha. Eventually, however, she must acknowledge the conflict. Pleadingly she asks George to recognize the difference. "Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference." He refuses; "No; but we must carry on as though we did" (p. 202). Finally, Martha, by altering the conjunction admits: "truth or illusion. . . Doesn't it matter to you at all?" (p. 204). Albee's final response, as Ruby Cohn observes, is an insistence on this dichotomy. "George kills illusion, but it is problematical whether Truth will succeed. . . George and Martha may rebuild their marriage on the base of Truth, though their gifts seem more destructive than constructive."¹⁴ Albee believes that one must be wary of the power of illusion for it can distort our perception of reality.

Woolf, on the other hand, believes in the necessity of illusion for human survival. In her Diary for 1917, she describes the gloom that overtook her after having had a perfectly fine time

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at a party in town. Blaming her mood partially on Leonard's tenseness, she notes the difficulty, even after having slept, of dispelling the gloom. Her feeling of failure persisted throughout the day:

We slept. I woke to a sense of failure and hard treatment. This persisted, one wave breaking after another, all day long. We walked on the river bank in a cold wind, under a grey sky. Both agreed that life seen without illusion is a ghastly affair.

Illusions wouldn't come back. However they returned about 8:30, in front of the fire, and were going merrily till bedtime, when some antics ended the day.¹⁵

For Woolf, life without illusions was unbearable.

"Illusion" is also important thematically in Albee's play. To quote the dramatist's friend Flanagan, once more: "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" means "Who's afraid of life without false illusions?"¹⁶ Mathematically, deducting those elements that are the same, we are left with: "Virginia Woolf" equals "Life without false illusions." Since "illusion" means "(1) the state or fact of being intellectually deceived or misled; (2) a misleading image presented to the vision, something that

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deceives or misleads intellectually;" or finally "the perception of something objectively existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation," the use of the term "false" with "illusions" seems somehow redundant. The line between "false illusion" and "illusion" seems "illusory." The conflict in their sense of the nature of truth, however, provides one more point of contact and challenge for Virginia Woolf and Albee's drama.

Whether a critic finds the title an oblique fusing of "anti-feminism with nameless fear," a healthy affirmation of "male strength over female weakness," or a portrait of the "domineering . . . : Woman. . . in which the submissive Male is raised to the point of 'tragic heroism' in his understanding of the woman who would kill the thing she loves," critics tend to agree on the definition of the female in Albee's work.¹⁷ She is the exact opposite of the type of woman Virginia Woolf projected in A Room of One's Own. She is the product of anger and misogyny. Nevertheless she shares with Woolf's character a concern for truth and illusion, reality and fiction.

In another age, an age when satire was a highly praised form of literary expression, a unity such as Albee achieves around the name "Virginia Woolf" might have proved a source of pride for the dramatist. In our age, unfortunately, the value placed on unfathomable meanings takes precedence over direct allusion.

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Nevertheless Albee's most creative achievement here lies in his interweaving of a personality and her literary themes into a drama with the provocative title 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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Footnotes

¹ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929); Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962; rpt. New York: Pocket Books Simon and Schuster, 1964). All quotations from the play are followed by the page number within the body of this article.

² Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1972). All subsequent quotations will be included within the body of this article and will be indicated by volume number and page. Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation (New York: Viking Press, 1977); Sylvia Plath, Letters Home (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, ed. Nigel Nicolson, I (London: Hogarth Press, 1975); The Diary of Virginia Woolf, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

³ Hynes, p. 85.

⁴ Plath, p. 463

⁵ Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). vol. XII of the Yale edition of the works of Samuel Johnson, 61.

⁶ E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, The Rede Lecture, 1941 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1942), p. 10.

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⁷ Bell discusses this II,183-86. Included here are the criticism of Prince Mirsky and Frank Swinnerton; the one attacked her as "a peddler of capitalist narcotics, the other as a clever intellectual snob." Wyndham Lewis's criticism was especially disturbing to her. This was during the mid-thirties when Virginia was also scorned by the young writers of the Left (although as Bell observes, "in a sense, she had been in Left-Wing politics for much longer than they had").

⁸ Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p.147.

⁹ Orley I. Holtan, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and the patterns of History," Educational Theatre Journal 25 (1973), 46-52.

¹⁰ Anne Paolucci, From Tension to Tonic, The Plays of Edward Albee (Carbondale, Ill., Southern Ill. U.P., 1972), p. 47; Michael Rutenberg, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest (New York: Discus, 1970), pp. 234-235.

¹¹ William Flanagan, "Edward Albee: An Interview," The Paris Review, (1966), p. 103 quoted in Albee by C. W. E. Bigsby (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd), p. 38.

¹² Nigel Nicolson, in Recollections of Virginia Woolf, ed. Joan Russell Noble (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., (1972), p. 128.

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- 13 A Room, p. 4.
- 14 Ruby Cohn, Edward Albee (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 22, 24.
- 15 Diary, p. 73.
- 16 Flanagan, p. 38.
- 17 Richard E. Amacher, Edward Albee (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1969), p. 90; Thomas P. Adler, "Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? A Long Night's Journey into Day," Educational Theatre Journal 25 (1973), 66-70; Paolucci, p. 46.