# Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing

## *A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own*

Sharon L. Jansen

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Grateful acknowledgment is also made to the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, for supplying a photograph of their copy of Virginia Woolf's 1929 Hogarth Press edition of *A Room of One's Own*, and to The Andy Warhol Museum, for supplying a photograph of the first page of Valerie Solanas's 1967 *SCUM Manifesto*, a copy of which is in their archive.

# Dedication

For my dear friend, colleague, and confidant Tom Campbell,
without whom this book would never have been written

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# Acknowledgments

For more than thirty years, I have guided readers through some of the most well-known texts of the Western canon: *The Iliad* and *Agamemnon*, *Beowulf*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Wyatt and Surrey's Petrarchan sonnets, Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I am not always successful—one recent student, encountering Beowulf for the first time, told me that she found the warrior to be as "loathsome" as the monster Grendel. Even so, that unfortunate experience didn't deter her from taking another literature class, this one focusing on the work of women writers—when we read Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, my *Beowulf*-loathing student suddenly fell in love with literature.

*Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own* is a book about books, a guide that explores a dream landscape women have shared over the centuries—an imagined "women's world." In undertaking this task, I am deeply indebted to the students I have taught over the years, many of whose insights about texts are included here. Without them, this book would simply not have been possible.

On a more personal note, I am indebted to Professor Thomas J. Campbell, who has been a friend and colleague for more years than I care to count. As I indicate in my dedication, I would never have attempted this project without his encouragement and support.

Many people have been uncommonly generous with their time and resources as I have been engaged with this project. I am particularly indebted to Henrietta Garnett, not only for her permission to reproduce Vanessa Bell's cover art for Virginia Woolf's 1929 *A Room of One's Own* but for her many kindnesses; to Karen Kukil, at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, for her speedy response to my request for help in acquiring a photograph of this cover art; to Auste Mickunaite and Sandra Powlette, both of the Permissions Department at the British Library, both of whom went beyond the call of duty in helping me with the Christine

de Pizan image included here; and to Matt Wrbican, archivist at The Andy Warhol Museum for his willingness to answer my many, many questions about Valerie Solanas and the Museum's copy of her *SCUM Manifesto*.

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# CHAPTER 1

# Reading Nafisi at the YMCA

I can remember the exact moment when everything changed—when the unrelated bits and pieces from a lifetime of reading suddenly shifted, rearranged themselves, and fell into unexpected place. It was as if I had twisted the smooth, round barrel of a kaleidoscope and watched as the individual shards of color dissolved and then resolved into a new and unexpected pattern. And yet, even now, I am still a little disappointed, because it hardly seemed the right place for such a revelatory moment. There's always something going on at the Lakewood Family YMCA, but it's hardly the ideal spot for an epiphany.

I also remember that I wasn't exactly in the right frame of mind for sudden insight. Although it was just a couple of days after Christmas, I wasn't in a festive mood. I was feeling old and resentful. A graying baby-boomer, I was slowly recovering from a knee injury, which meant I was facing the mind-numbing boredom of another session on the recumbent bike. In my mind there is only one thing worse than pedaling madly to nowhere: pedaling madly to nowhere in front of a bank of TVs tuned to ESPN and ESPN2. And that, unfortunately, was exactly what I could look forward to on most days at the Y. I could always take a book, of course, but that still posed a dilemma, since I wasn't convinced that any physical activity I could perform while reading actually counted as exercise. I recall hesitating before I left the house that day, but in the end, since I prefer guilt to anything involving men, balls, and nets or goal posts, I grabbed a paperback off my desk at the last minute and headed out the door before I could change my mind.

Although the Y wasn't busy on that just-after-Christmas afternoon, the air inside was still warm and thick, heavy with the smell of chlorine. As the outer doors closed behind me, I left the twenty-first century and stepped into a disco inferno, the sound system frantically spitting out one 70s dance song after another. I caught the end of "Carwash" as I dug the Y card out of my gym bag, and by the time I had checked in and grabbed a towel, we

were all "Kung Fu Fighting." I climbed through the humid air to the second floor, and, just as I got my bike adjusted perfectly, the Bee Gees were reminding me that, when the feeling was gone and I couldn't go on, it was tragedy. Only then did I look at the book I had picked up on my way out the door: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

For a while, as I pedaled gingerly, warming up my stiff knee, I ignored Nafisi's book entirely. It was, as I said, just after Christmas, and I was finding plenty of amusement in watching the people around me. But then, intrigued by the cover illustration of two veiled women, their eyes downcast, I opened the book: "In the fall of 1995, after resigning from my last academic post, I decided to indulge myself and fulfill a dream. I chose seven of my best and most committed students and invited them to come to my home every Thursday morning to discuss literature." So began *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and so began my awakening.

In the midst of the Islamic revolution in Iran and under the increasingly repressive regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Azar Nafisi dreamed of escaping the world in which she lived by creating a world where she could find the freedom she had lost. She had been warned by her friends that "withdrawing" into the world of her imagination "could be dangerous," warned about the risks of cutting herself off from "the outside world" and "restricting" herself to "one room." But Nafisi did not see her retreat as defeat or as restriction; rather, she wrote, "It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality that had turned hostile." In her escape from one world—and in the simultaneous creation of another—she was liberated. In a room of her own, she escaped from the realities of life in Iran and found her own reality, her own freedom. And that's what changed *my* world, for I had heard it all before. I had even *read* it before. Although I was busy pedaling to nowhere, I had finally arrived. Nafisi's "memoir in books" had just transformed my own memories of books.

* * *

What was it about Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* that led to my awakening on that December afternoon? It wasn't that I identified with Nafisi herself, though there were some similarities. We were both in our fifties, both passionate about books, both dedicated to sharing that passion with our students. But she was the daughter of a politically prominent Iranian family—her father, Ahmad Nafisi, had been the mayor of Tehran, her mother, Nezhat Nafisi, one of the first six women elected to the national parliament—while I was the daughter of a man who was out of work more often than he went to work and a woman who was overworked by an endless series of minimum-wage jobs. The extent of my parents' political

involvement was voting in presidential elections every four years, though since my mother deliberately cast her ballot only so she could cancel out my father's, even that involvement was less political than deeply personal.

Nafisi came from an educated, cultured family. At one point she notes that for eight hundred years the Nafisis were *hakims*, "men of knowledge," who had "prided themselves" on their "contributions to literature and science." Her father wrote poetry, entertained his young daughter with elaborate stories from *A Thousand and One Nights*, and delivered a speech—in French—to Charles de Gaulle. My father, who hadn't finished high school, thought there were only two life skills worth knowing, neither involving literature, though they did involve a bit of skill, if not science: he taught me how to parallel park beautifully and how to merge into freeway traffic seamlessly. He didn't write poetry or tell stories, and the only speeches I ever heard him deliver were to me when I hadn't finished my math homework—and they were delivered, emphatically, in English. Nafisi's mother made "fabulous Turkish coffee," "thick" and "bittersweet"; mine drank a cup of Sanka in the morning while leaning over the kitchen sink. In her own Tehran home, Nafisi prepared *croque monsieur* for her family; in mine, we made grilled cheese with Velveeta.

My own struggle for an education, especially higher education, contrasted sharply with Nafisi's experience. In my home, no one had ever been to college. My father had briefly thought about finishing high school and using his G.I. bill benefits after World War II but, as he liked to say, he decided to "major in billiards" instead. My mother was lucky to have finished high school—she was the first person in her family ever to have graduated, and I became only the second. For Nafisi, by contrast, access to education was assumed, an advantage that she did not always recognize or appreciate. Early in her book, we catch a glimpse of her at an elite private school in Switzerland. In the middle of her history lesson, she is called to the principal's office: "There I was told that they had just heard on the radio that my father, the youngest mayor in Tehran's history, had been jailed. Only three weeks earlier I had seen a large color photograph of him in *Paris Match*." One "small compensation" for her father's imprisonment, she writes, is that she did not "have to continue" her education; she happily abandoned her studies, left the exclusive Swiss boarding school, and returned to Iran. When her father was finally released from jail four years later, she traveled to the United States.

There, I suppose, our lives do seem to have run parallel, at least for a time. We both studied literature in college and then went on to attend graduate school at large state universities. Nafisi received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Oklahoma in 1979; I received mine from the University of Washington a year later, in 1980. Maybe that's when it

becomes clear that our lives, despite certain superficial similarities, were never really parallel. Nafisi had left Iran when she was eighteen; after the shah was forced into exile, she was happy to go back and begin teaching English literature at the University of Tehran. I had also left home at the age of eighteen, but when I left, I knew I would never return. There are some advantages in a life lived with less privilege: I had no desire to return the way I had come, no remembered home for which I longed, no illusions about the past. But for Nafisi, it was different. She tried to go home; she had not realized yet that "the home she had left seventeen years earlier" was "not home anymore." That would take time.

And so it wasn't like looking in a mirror when I opened *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi's story was not my story. Her book didn't appeal to me because it offered me a flattering reflection of my own life. Her book, in fact, is explicitly *not* autobiography—it is, as the subtitle notes, "a memoir *in books*." When I opened Nafisi's book, it was my own *reading* that made a new kind of sense. What struck me so suddenly and forcibly that December afternoon in the YMCA was listening to her describe her dream. She decided to withdraw from the world and to retreat into a self-created world, a world not only separate from the world of men but a world populated only by women. This was a dream I had read many times. This was the creation story that women had been writing and rewriting for more than six hundred years.

* * *

Perhaps the most widely known iteration of this I-have-a-dream fantasy is Virginia Woolf's. Based on a series of lectures on women and fiction she delivered at Newnham and Girton colleges in 1928, Woolf's now-classic *A Room of One's Own* begins in conflict and opposition. The opening line suggests that there has been a debate underway for some time and that we, her readers, have somehow just arrived, a bit late, right in the middle of it. Things are a little heated. Woolf seems to have turned around and pointed her finger at us at the very moment we open the book. This immediate confrontation is unsettling: "But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" The rest of this slim volume is Woolf's response to the startling challenge posed at the outset. "I will try to explain," she continues, offering her now well-known formulation: "a woman must have money and a room of her own." Just over a hundred brief pages of exposition and explanation later, she reiterates her dictum: "it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door." The five hundred pounds "stands for power to contemplate," the lock on the door of one's own room "means the power to think for oneself."

From Azar Nafisi's retreat in the heart of Tehran to Woolf's private room with a lock on the door, my mind caromed back to my own memories of books, which had suddenly begun to shift and realign themselves into a new order. I forgot my stiff knee and the chlorine-soaked air. Instead of the frantic disco beat and the rhythmic whizzing of the cardio machines around me, I could hear only the voices of women who had imagined rooms of their own, women who had dreamed their dreams long before either Virginia Woolf or Azar Nafisi were able to articulate theirs. And I began to see these imagined worlds not as a series of isolated, individual dreams but as one continuous—or, perhaps, recurring—dream, appearing night after night in the minds of women as they slept over the course of centuries.

Not all of the pieces fell into place that December day at the YMCA, of course, but the pattern that I had not seen earlier had emerged, and I felt compelled to explore it for myself. Nafisi's memoir in books focuses primarily on nineteenth- and twentieth-century English and American writers. My own memories begin with books from a much more distant past. They begin where the dream seems to have begun—or, at least, with the first woman I know of who told us about her dream. At the turn of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan took up her pen and recorded her construction of a refuge for women in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. We catch a glimpse of that same dream in Venice, in Moderata Fonte's *The Worth of Women*. The thirty-eight-year-old Fonte finished her account of female retreat—a secluded garden in Venice shared by a small group of friends—on 1 November 1592. She died in childbirth the next day.

Some sixty years later, the dream of a female retreat resurfaces. In a series of letters composed over the course of a few months in 1660 and 1661, Anne-Marie-Louise d'Orléans, duchesse de Montpensier, and her correspondent, Françoise Bertaut, madame de Motteville, fantasize about delivering themselves from the "slavery" of their lives as women and establishing their liberty in a "rural Republic." Of course, de Motteville concedes graciously, since her friend, the duchess, was "born to rule and to wear a crown," it is only fitting that she be the one to preside over their empire, however small it may be. Small, too, was the female paradise envisioned by Margaret Cavendish just a few years later. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, she imagines a small group of women fleeing from the world of men and marriage and electing to join a convent. This is not to be a religious retreat devoted to prayer and self-denial but, as the title of the play indicates, a haven where they enjoy themselves by indulging in the pleasures that are routinely denied them as women.

A similar venture is advanced by Mary Astell just at the end of the seventeenth century. But the title of her work—*A Serious Proposal to the*

*Ladies*—signals an intention quite different than the one Cavendish's Lady Happy has in mind. Lamenting the stunted minds that are the necessary result of women's lack of education, Astell proposes a corrective. "Now as to the proposal," she writes, "it is to erect a monastery" that will function for women as a place where they will find a "blissful recess from the noise and hurry of the world." Here they can devote themselves to prayer, study, and self-improvement. And, more important, in their retreat they will find themselves liberated "from the rude attempts of designing men." This retreat is not merely a room with a lock on its door—like so many of the dreamers here, Astell thinks big.

And what about Teresa of Ávila's interior castle? And Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*? Or Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *Herland*, published in 1915, just a few years before Woolf delivered her lectures—in a women's college—on women and fiction? And, since my reading has been as eclectic as Nafisi's, my politics at times as revolutionary, I recalled the long-forgotten (in my mind anyway) *SCUM Manifesto*'s call for women to overthrow the government, to "destroy the male sex," and then to establish their own brave new world. I hadn't thought about that radical 60s polemic in years, but there, reading Nafisi at the YMCA on that afternoon in late December, it suddenly sprang to mind, along with an unlikely companion, the late medieval *Assembly of Ladies*. Was Valerie Solanas's vision of an all-female utopia, where the wrongs that women had suffered for centuries were finally redressed, really all that different from the "true paradise" of Pleasant Regard, where women sought a refuge—and justice—far from the men who had deceived and betrayed them? I wonder now whether Nafisi and her students might have found their own struggles in late-twentieth-century Tehran mirrored in the complaints of the female petitioners in that fifteenth-century English dream vision.

Through the course of my years of reading and teaching, I had never considered the link between all these works. Reading Azar Nafisi at the Y—who was herself reading *Lolita* in Tehran—made my own lifetime of reading make a new kind of sense.

As I have thought more about the variations on the dream these women shared, I have come to realize that there is an ever-present shadow world hovering always in the background, perhaps a recognition that behind this dream there is a nightmare reality. If it is glorious freedom to withdraw from the world, even into confinement, it is hell when women are forced from the world and confined by their own fathers and husbands. In addition to the possibilities of the Convent of Pleasure or Millenium Hall, there is the nightmare world of women enclosed: Arcangela Tarabotti's scathing account of being "buried alive" in a convent by her father, for example, or

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's brief story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," about a wife confined—for her own good, of course—to a small room for a rest cure. What a difference there is between a room of one's own and a room with yellow wallpaper.

If some of the names and titles here seem unfamiliar, it is no wonder, for the voices of many of these women writers were silenced for centuries. Let Christine de Pizan serve as an example. She was a widely known intellectual in her day, and *The Book of the City of Ladies*, completed in 1405, was translated from its original French into all the vernacular languages of Western Europe. Copies were sent from one aristocratic woman to another, often handed down from mother to daughter; after the advent of printing, Christine's book was available to a wider reading audience. *The Book of the City of Ladies* was translated into English and printed by Brian Anslay in 1521, but his was to be the only English edition for more than 450 years—until Earl Jeffrey Richards's English translation for Persea Books, published in 1982. Although there is a now a second edition of Richards's translation, as well as several newer English translations, including a readily available Penguin version, I cling to my copy of that 1982 paperback. It's falling apart. The pages have come loose from their binding and are now being held in place by an array of clips and fasteners. There are so many marginal comments, made over the course of twenty years of reading, rereading, and teaching, that Christine's text is almost obliterated on some pages by all the scribbled marginal notes in pencil and in varying colors of ink with emphasis added here and there by yellow highlighter. Individual sheets of notepaper have been paperclipped onto some of the pages, and there are so many Post-Its stuck on still others that the book is almost twice its original thickness. The whole is held together with a rubber band. I could easily get a new desk copy of the book—to be honest, I've already been sent two—but I cling to this ragged volume stubbornly, as if it is the only link between Christine de Pizan and me. I don't want her to disappear again.

Holding onto books as if they were some kind of talisman is exactly what Nafisi was doing in Tehran. As the Iranian Revolution grew in its intensity, she feared that her beloved books would disappear completely. To preserve them—and, perhaps, to preserve herself as well—she went on buying binges, grabbing indiscriminately any English books she could find on the shelves. The book, the physical object she could hold, signified a world to which she was desperately clinging. I think she would understand why I can't let go of my copy of *The City of Ladies*.

Like a dream itself, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is neither chronological nor systematic. What unifies Nafisi's reflections is not chronology but conversation—bits of her classroom lectures, remembrances of exchanges with friends, family,

colleagues, and, of course, the intimacies shared by the small group of young women who join her in reading *Lolita*. There are also the hostile speeches of student radicals and religious polemic from the government. And, always, the voices that emerge from the books themselves—Lolita's, Daisy Miller's, Elizabeth Bennet's. In what follows, I, too, have filled the pages with voices in conversation—my own observations and the reactions and reflections of my students, but most significantly, I have put these women dreamers and their texts in conversation with one another, pairing them in ways that reveal their distinctive voices even while they speak of the dream they share.

The works I've chosen to include here reflect my individual, perhaps even idiosyncratic, choices, though I have read most of them with my students—as I said, this book reflects that moment when a lifetime of reading suddenly made a new kind of sense. I have made no attempt to be comprehensive or systematic; students who took my literature course called "Reading Women's Worlds" a couple of semesters ago are still e-mailing me with new titles for me to consider, and every once in a while a colleague stops by my office with yet another great piece for me to read. A dear friend, who used to send my son books when he was young, is now sending me not just the names of books related to my topic, but the books themselves—a battered copy of *Little Women*, a book I haven't read since my own childhood, a new paperback edition of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Lately, when I have a few free minutes before class, I log onto the Literature Online database and browse the titles of critical articles that appear when I type "a room of one's own" in the Quick Search box and then click "Go!" There's always something new—right now I'm intrigued by an article that was published in April 2008 by Deniz Gündogan. The article, in Turkish, is entitled "Kurmaca Yazin ve Kadin," and all I can tell from the LION record is that it compares Latife Tekin's *Gece Dersleri* to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. I also see that among the 125 or so articles published in just the past five years, Woolf's book is compared to others written by Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese writers whose names I do not recognize and whose books I don't always find when I search at Amazon or Barnes and Noble.

The possibilities seem as varied as readers themselves, and my hope is that this guide will not only introduce those readers to new titles they have not encountered before, but that it will also help them to read their old favorites in new ways. As for me, in the end, I will return to where it all began: Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

## CHAPTER 2

# I Have a Dream: Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

Early on in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (or, rather, the first-person narrator Woolf creates) travels through rainy London streets to the ultimate source for truth about any and every subject: she goes to the British Library, then housed inside the famed British Museum. She is determined to find the answers to the "swarm of questions" she has about women—she has "a thousand questions" but not a single answer. Surely the answers are there in the library, just waiting for her. "If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum," she asks, then where is it to be found? But her search for answers is in vain. Instead, in one of the most poignant phrases to be found in her book, Woolf describes her narrator, standing in the British Library, "looking about the shelves for books that were not there."

Looking for books that are not there. Even today, even now, as I sit in a room of my own, a room filled with shelf after shelf of books by and about women, I find this image impossibly moving. And yet the very book that might have changed everything for Woolf *was* there all the time, right on the shelf: the British Library owns a copy of Bryan Anslay's English translation of Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published in 1521. The Library also owns a lavishly illustrated fifteenth-century manuscript anthology of Pizan's works, including *The Book of the City of Ladies*, planned and produced in Pizan's own workshop, probably under her personal supervision. The volume originally belonged to Isabel of Bavaria, queen of France, and contains a beautifully executed illustration of Pizan, on her knees, presenting the queen with this very copy of her work. Would everything have

been different if only Woolf had found *The Book of the City of Ladies* on the shelves that day in the British Library? I'd like to think so.

If products are any indication, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is now a pop-culture icon. You can buy t-shirts, mugs, aprons, tea towels, and even deck chairs emblazoned with the title of Woolf's book—you might even be able to buy all these items at the Room of One's Own Feminist Bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin, though I'm not sure about that. All these products, and more, are available online with a few mouse clicks and a credit card. You might have enjoyed the Roz Chast cartoon, published in the 26 May 2007 *New Yorker*, which "updates" Woolf's title—among other things, the twenty-first century woman is looking not just for a room of her own, but a room with "adequate ventilation," "near a grocery store," and not "please God" in Queens, all for "under $2000 a month." You can buy a matted print of this cartoon for $125, a box of notecards for $29.95, a hooded sweatshirt, and, of course, a t-shirt, sized not just for women but also for men and children. Meanwhile, *The New York Review of Books* gallery displays five different David Levine caricatures of Virginia Woolf, from 1966, 1970, 1977, 1978, and 1980, but the Woolf t-shirt that first went on sale in 1983 isn't offered any longer. There's no reason to be disappointed, however. You can still buy a Levine caricature of Woolf on a postcard—in fact, two *different* postcard books include Woolf. She's in the "Women Writers" set, of course, but I am happy to see that she's also included in the series of "Writers" postcards, and either collection is a bargain—twenty cards cost just $9.95. Woolf is one of thirteen caricatures included in the David Levine 2010 calendar. She is also one of the writers pictured on the David Levine mousepad, available for $12.95.

Cartoons and caricatures published in the *New York Times* and in *The New York Review of Books* may suggest Woolf appeals just to elitists or to snobs, but all the t-shirts and mugs show that her reach extends far beyond the realms of Manhattan and academia. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway in 1962. I was only eleven then, and just fifteen when the 1966 film version, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, played in theaters. I was too young to see the movie but old enough to conclude that Virginia Woolf must be a terrifying figure. In fact, Albee's title, if not the play itself, seems to have generated a lot of anxiety about Woolf. Even so, *Masterpiece Theater* invited Virginia Woolf into the living rooms of American homes in 1991, airing Eileen Atkins's one-woman dramatization of *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's life and work have also inspired a few feature films—*Orlando* was released in 1992, *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1998, and Nicole Kidman won an Oscar for her portrayal of Woolf in *The Hours*, released in the United States in 2003. Not that these have necessarily been huge box

office hits—more of my students know that Madonna and Rosie O'Donnell starred in *A League of Their Own* than recognize the allusion to Woolf in the film's title.

Still, this 1992 Penny Marshall film proves that it's not just snobs who love playing with Woolf's title. I admit that we academics do seem to be particularly fond of this sin—the allusion to Woolf has become something of a staple of critical essays about women writers. Sally Alexander's "Room of One's Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias" (2000), José Esteban Muñoz's "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in New America" (2008), and Turgay Bayindir's "A House of Her Own: Alice Walker's Readjustment of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in *The Color Purple*" (2009), to name only three examples, show how irresistible Woolf's title is. And yet it's not just literary critics—there is Deborah Felder's 2005 *A Bookshelf of Our Own: Works That Have Changed Women's Lives* and Deborah Owens's 2009 *A Purse of Your Own*, a finance book for women. In 2007, to commemorate its thirtieth anniversary, the Canadian journal *A Room of One's Own* shortened its name to *Room*, but added the tagline "A Space of Your Own" to its print cover and online logo. A recent exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (Paris) features "A Room of One's Own," a display of the work of several women artists "exploring the notion of private space, weaving new connections between mental projections and exhibition space." In Istanbul, "Room of One's Own" is the title of the first exhibition of 2010 at the Outlet Independent Art Center and features the work of eight Turkish women artists. Woolf's title is so popular that "a room of one's own" even has an entry in *Merriam Webster's Dictionary of Allusions*, and the online *Urban Dictionary* defines "Virginia Woolf" as "FemmeNazi lesbian psycho bitch whore who wrote books such as *A Room Of One's Own*." (With a click of your mouse you can get this definition on your own "custom *Urban Dictionary* mug" for $19.95). There's also "A Doghouse of One's Own," a blog post from the "Spanish Inquisitor." One reader of the piece wonders whether this is a pseudonym for "Virginia Wolf," but the Inquisitor identifies himself as a "55 year old, white, married male, a lawyer by trade, living in America, and an atheist."

As all of these products and references indicate, Virginia Woolf's book is thoroughly embedded in the popular imagination, but it wasn't always this way. *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929 by Woolf's own Hogarth Press in England and by Harcourt Brace in the United States, sold well. As Woolf notes in her diary, her "next year's income" had been "made" by the book's sales. But, despite the book's popular success and the range and significance of Woolf's literary output, interest in her work began to wane after World War II. Like so many women writers before her, Woolf all but disappeared.

If any single work can give us a glimpse of her "official" status and reputation some twenty years after her death, it may be the multivolume Oxford History of English Literature. J. I. M. Stewart's *Eight Modern Writers*, published in 1963, includes a chapter on James Joyce, born in 1882, the same year as Woolf, and a chapter on D. H. Lawrence, born three years later. But Woolf is not one of Stewart's select "eight." In more than six hundred pages of literary history, he mentions Woolf's name only three times, once noting the influence of Joyce's *Ulysses* on Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and a second time citing the "revealing absurdity" of her view of Joyce himself. (The third reference, from Stewart's introduction, remarks that Woolf dismissed the Edwardian novelists and poets writing before the First World War because they represented the "thick dull middle class of letters.") But today, although new books go out of print faster and faster, there are at least six editions of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* currently available at Amazon, and all the literary critics in the world can't account for those numbers.

In being lost before she was found again, Woolf resembles no one so much as Christine de Pizan, with whom I have paired her in this chapter. In her lifetime, Pizan was a well-known writer and intellectual. At the turn of the fifteenth century she participated in the *querelle des femmes,* the so-called debate about women, by engaging in a lively battle of the books with prominent scholars and royal officials. Around the year 1400, a treatise praising the very popular but deeply misogynist dream vision *Le Roman de la rose* was circulating in Paris. Pizan objected publicly to this praise; by 1402, more than twenty documents, including letters, sermons, and polemical treatises debating women's worth had appeared. Pizan's own efforts to defend women were included in the illustrated manuscript collection she presented to the French queen, now on the shelves of the British Library.

Over the course of the next twenty years, Pizan produced an extraordinary body of work in verse and in prose, including scores of lyric poems in a variety of forms, a biography of Charles V of France, a manual of good conduct for the French dauphin, a book of "teachings and moral proverbs" for her son, a treatise on warfare and military arts, a series of works on politics and good government, philosophical reflections on the mutability of fortune and the "prison" of human life, a conduct book for women of all social classes, the only contemporary French poem on Joan of Arc's 1429 victory at Orléans, and the book for which she is now most well known, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. These works earned Pizan an international reputation. She was fully engaged with the newly emerging humanism of Italian scholars. She was invited to join the English court of Henry IV, and to Milan, to the ducal court of Giangaleazzo Visconti, a dedicated bibliophile, although she chose to remain in France. Her works were presented to

and collected by powerful men, including the English duke of Bedford and the earl of Salisbury and the French dukes of Berry, Burgundy, and Orléans. (It was the duke of Burgundy, Philip the Bold, who commissioned Pizan's biography of his brother, Charles V, king of France.)

Pizan also presented copies of her book to influential and powerful women. As we have seen, one contemporary manuscript copy of *The Book of the City of Ladies* is illustrated with a picture of Pizan presenting an anthology of her work to the French queen, Isabel of Bavaria. Valentina Visconti, the duchess of Orléans (and the daughter of the book-loving Giangaleazzo), and the dauphin of France and his wife, Margaret of Burgundy, also owned copies of *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In succeeding generations, Anne of France, Anne of Brittany, Louise of Savoy, Margaret of Austria, and Marguerite of Navarre—all of them politically powerful women—had copies of *The Book of the City of Ladies* or of Pizan's conduct book for women, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies,* or of both. Anne of France's copy of *The Book of the City of Ladies* illustrates particularly well the circulation of Pizan's text among generations of women, since Anne, who functioned as virtual king of France for eight years during her brother's minority, inherited her copy from her mother, the French queen Charlotte of Savoy, who owned several of Pizan's works; in composing a series of lessons for her own daughter, Suzanne of Bourbon, Anne relied at least in part on Pizan's *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. As another example of the way women passed along Pizan's work, Isabel of Portugal, duchess of Burgundy, sent a copy of *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* to her niece, Isabel, the queen of Portugal; the younger Isabel commissioned the translation of the *Treasure* into Portuguese, while in 1518, another queen of Portugal, Eleanor, patronized the publication of the Portuguese text.

As I have noted above, *The Book of the City of Ladies* was first translated into English by Bryan Anslay and published in 1521. But however significant Pizan's books were to the women who received them, had copies of them produced and reproduced for one another, or who were able to read them when they were eventually printed, Christine de Pizan and her defense of women almost disappeared from view. Anslay's was the only English translation of the text until 1982, when Earl Jeffrey Richards's edition was published. A modern French translation was published by Éric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau in 1986. A quick check on WorldCat, the global catalogue of library holdings, reveals that you can now find copies of the book not only in French and English but also in Italian, German, Spanish, Catalan, Dutch, and Chinese—Pizan's international reputation in the past twenty years has regained something of its fifteenth-century status. Although you can buy postcards of Pizan at the British Library Bookstore (a former

student now studying in London just sent me one), you can't yet buy a Christine de Pizan mug. You can, however, join the Christine de Pizan Society, you can subscribe to the Christine de Pizan newsletter, and you can attend international conferences devoted to Pizan's life and work—such conferences have been held in France, the United States, Scotland, Germany, Italy (she was born in Venice), Austria, and Switzerland.

But it's more than their lost-and-found histories that link Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* and Woolf's *Room of One's Own*. Although separated by more than five centuries, both Pizan and Woolf argued that what was essential for women was a space of their own, and it is to their I-have-a-dream dreams that we will turn our attention now.

* * *

*A Room of One's Own* began as a pair of lectures on women and fiction that Virginia Woolf delivered at two Cambridge women's colleges in October 1928. Girton College had been established in 1869 as a college for women, Newnham in 1871 as a place to safely house young women traveling to Cambridge to attend a series of "Lectures for Ladies" inaugurated in 1870. Unlike Oxford, which admitted women fully to the university in 1920, Cambridge did not accept women's "full membership" in the university until 1948; formal efforts to admit women to the university were defeated in 1887, 1897, and again, after World War I, in 1920. The very question of granting young women Cambridge degrees was deemed so offensive, in fact, that the protests of male students in 1897 resulted in significant property damage. Celebrating their exclusion of women in 1920, male undergraduates destroyed the college gates at Newnham. (The gates memorialized Anna Jemima Clough, an English suffragist who was the first principal of Newnham when it opened to house women attending the lectures "for ladies" at Cambridge.) Today you can read both Girton and Newnham's proud histories on their websites, and at the Newnham site you can see pictures of the protests against women in 1897 and of the 1920 damage to the memorial gate. But neither college mentions Virginia Woolf's lectures in October of 1928 as part of its history. Among the "short biographies" of those "who have been significant in the history of the College" listed on the Newnham College "History" page, you will not find Virginia Woolf's name. Women are "all but absent from history," Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own*. They are still absent. We find only "blank spaces on the shelves" in the most surprising places.

From her two Cambridge lectures on "Women and Fiction," Woolf produced a thousand-word essay published in the March 1929 issue of *The*

*Forum* under the same title, "Women and Fiction." The *Forum* piece is easy enough to read, and it is very informative, but it is not really memorable. Judged only by the Woolf we meet in "Women and Fiction," no one would be afraid of Virginia Woolf, much less want to flaunt their allegiance to her on a t-shirt or coffee mug. To open the cover of *A Room of One's Own* is, however, an entirely different experience.

In spite of its current iconic status, most general readers are a little afraid of *A Room of One's Own*, even though it's appealingly short—just a little over a hundred pages in most printed editions, only fifty or sixty in popular textbooks like *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* or *The Longman Anthology of Women's Literature*. Many students read just a bit of *A Room of One's Own*, usually the third chapter, widely published today as "If Shakespeare Had a Sister." My students eagerly anticipate reading "the whole thing," but to begin at the beginning, to open the book to "Chapter One," is a bit unsettling. Instead of the measured calm of the *Forum* essay ("The title of this article can be read in two ways"), the opening of *A Room of One's Own* is disconcerting—it catches us off guard. "But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" Surely this can't be the beginning—we must have missed a page or two, or maybe an introduction or a preface. I remember this feeling of having missed something important the first time I read Woolf's book. In fact, I remember double-checking the paperback copy I was holding to make sure it was the *whole* book and not another selection or even a condensed version of the whole. As we read these opening words, we're also immediately and uncomfortably aware that there's an argument going on, or at the least a polite disagreement: "But. . . ." As much as we'd like to, we can't avoid the conflict. And then suddenly there is Woolf herself—or is it Woolf?—stepping in to calm us. "I will try to explain," she says.

The *Forum* essay not only avoids any kind of conflict, but any real sense of Woolf at all—or, at least there is no "I." The piece opens blandly: "The title of this article can be read two ways. . . ." All is carefully disguised by the impersonal ("it is necessary to," "it is to be found in," "it is extremely difficult to") or carefully modulated by the inclusive "we" ("Why, we ask," "we are asking questions to which there are no answers," "Of our fathers we know always some fact"). In *A Room of One's Own*, by contrast, the perspective shifts constantly. The first confusion is with the title—"a room of one's own"—and in that opening question—"what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" The indefinite pronoun is an obstacle for American readers. We're not comfortable with "one." It sounds a little affected, and when we try to use it ourselves, we get confused and quickly give up—"one needs a room of their own," we might say or write. Despite

these difficulties, we might reach out to "one" when we're trying to sound important—or at least that's what my writing students say when I ask them why they chose "one" instead of just writing "I." Why does Woolf choose "a room of one's own" instead of "a room of my own" or "rooms of our own"? If she had chosen either of these first-person pronouns, we would have known right where she stood. But where does she stand in relation to that demand for "a room of one's own"?

Still, the "you" and "we" of the opening line seem to give us something personal and direct to hold on to. The speaker addresses her readers (or are they listeners?) familiarly as "you," and those readers/listeners represent a cohesive group who regard themselves as "we." This "we" can be a little upsetting for male readers, who—maybe for the first time in their lives—feel that a "we" definitely does *not* include them. (By comparison, when E. M. Forster, Woolf's Bloomsbury friend and colleague, presented his paper entitled "The Feminine Note in Literature" to a Cambridge audience, he knew his audience was exclusively male: "We are going to talk about women," he begins, "and very fortunately, none of them are in the room.") Once we get past Woolf's "we," which may—or may not—include us, we then encounter the calming and authoritative "I." Our narrator answers her initial question with a simple declarative statement: "I will try to explain."

And yet this authoritative "I" is, on further inspection, anything but reassuring. Our speaker doesn't present herself as an authority—she's only going to "try" to explain. This "I" doesn't know what the topic she has been asked to speak about means. "Women and fiction" might mean "women and what they are like," or "women and the fiction they write," or "women and the fiction that is written about them"—or it might even mean "that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light." Even if our narrator actually *did* know what she was supposed to be speaking about, she still doesn't know what to say: "I should never be able to come to a conclusion," she admits. As far as she is concerned, then, the problem of what "women and fiction" really means will remain "unsolved." And so instead of delivering the lecture she was asked to deliver, she proposes telling her audience a story.

But who is she? "Here then I was," she says as she is about to begin her story, but even while asserting the value of her story, she undercuts its significance. Our first-person narrator is emphatically *not* Virginia Woolf, but someone else entirely, though we're not exactly sure who: "call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance," our narrator says. By this point we're not only a little confused, we're also more than a little frustrated. The distinctive