“Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers ... literature would be incredibly impoverished, as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women.”

Do you agree?

In *A Room Of One’s Own*, the narrative persona of Virginia Woolf finds herself surprised by a line in the fictional Mary Carmichael’s novel, *Life’s Adventure*: “Chloe liked Olivia.”\(^1\) That she is so taken aback by this simple statement of Platonic affection between two women suggests to the reader exactly how rarely Woolf sees these kinds of relationships in fiction: the characters of women refracted through voices belonging to their own gender, not “shown”, as she later elaborates, “in their relation to men”\(^2\). She uses this as an example of the way in which the overwhelmingly male canon of literature before 1928, when *A Room Of One’s Own* was written, apparently stifles female creative expression. However, in this essay I shall argue that, while I agree there has been a lack of complexity in female characters especially pre-1928, defining characters in relation to gender stereotypes alone results in “literary doors” being closed on both genders.

Interestingly, one of Woolf’s exceptions to the rule that women don’t tend to like women in literature is that “They are confidantes in... the Greek tragedies”.\(^3\) To the reader, this may seem strange: Greek tragedy takes place in a society in which women’s “very existence was a testimony to the gods’ hatred of mankind” (Marilyn Arthur, 1977)\(^4\). In ancient Greece, women were often denied access to public platforms such as sports arenas and even religious shrines. Why, then, are women offered more representation and more freedom of action than expected on the classical stage? Critic Helene P. Foley comments that the tragic heroines “who take action, and especially those who speak and act publicly and in their own interest, represent the greatest and most puzzling deviation from the cultural norm.”\(^5\) Antigone conspires against a king to bury her brother; Electra kills her own mother in an act of revenge, Medea her own children. At a cursory glance, it does not make sense that such transgressive acts would be depicted, even in fiction, by male writers in a patriarchal society – and, moreover, that these female characters are more developed than mere flat antagonists, who demonstrate symbolically the havoc which occurs when male authority and control over the female breaks down. Rather, we see characters like Medea, even as she commits the ultimate act of wrath towards her husband Jason, as complex,

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1 Woolf, Virginia. *A Room Of One’s Own*, Penguin Modern Classics (2000), pg 81
2 Woolf, Virginia. *A Room Of One’s Own*, pg 82
3 Woolf, Virginia. *A Room Of One’s Own*, pg 82
conflicted and at times sympathetic. Even Aegeus, a king and very much a male, finds her anger towards her husband justified: “I find that disgraceful,” he says of her impending banishment and Jason’s consent to it. Medea is given space within the play text to soliloquize and muse on her fate; in this way she becomes a “thinker”, seemingly contradicting Woolf’s assertion that women in fiction are permitted characterisation only in relation to men and male perceptions. Medea is initially motivated by her love for a man, but even so Euripides crafts her in her many speeches into a deeper character than the ‘woman scorned’.

Possibly the closest analogue to Medea in Shakespeare, a woman who subverts traditional gender norms in order to commit a criminal act, is Lady Macbeth. Unlike Medea, despite her character having been conceived centuries later, she is in no way sympathetic to the audience. “Fill me to the crown to the toe, top-full/With direst cruelty,” she demands of the “spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts”; the extremity of her intention is made clear by her use of the superlative “direst” and the arrhythmic verse with which she expresses herself, in particular the emphatic trochee in “cruelty”. Shakespeare does allow her to be something altogether other than what male society would usually permit – but the character of Lady Macbeth goes against the values ascribed to femininity at the cost of her own goodness. Clearly her gender, and the stereotypes ascribed to it, do not limit or check her actions throughout the course of the play.

However, being defined by female gender roles is not merely synonymous with being subordinate to the male characters in a work of fiction; it goes beyond that. It could be argued that, in their very efforts to push against the confines of traditional female behaviour, the Medeas and Lady Macbeths of literature are also characters built around their relationships with men, or, at least, around masculine expectations regarding their behaviour. The subtitle of Tess of the D’Urbervilles runs “A Pure Woman, Faithfully Presented”, demonstrating that even the Victorian Thomas Hardy acknowledges that he must work against societal pressures if Tess is to be a “fallen woman” and still remain morally good in the eyes of her readers.

This must partly be due to the fact that much of fiction has been written by men for a male audience. The Greek theatre would have been open mostly to the male sex, its plays certainly penned for a male demographic. Nor would Shakespeare’s Globe have been accessible to many women – if she had enough financial autonomy to afford the threepenny entrance fee, a woman was likely to be frowned upon by those who thought she should be attending

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to domestic duties (Thomas, 2009). And, as Woolf herself puts it, while chastity was still of importance to a woman’s social standing, “no girl could have walked to London and stood at a stage door and forced her way into the presence of actor-managers without doing herself a violence” (Woolf, 1929); thus, our female playwrights before modern history are few and far between. Among the poets, Keats is said to “not want ladies to read his poetry” (Keats, 1818). Even in the proverbial language of the Bible, the reader is assumed to be male - “He that smiteth his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death” (Exodus 21:15 King James Bible) – even where the “smiter” may be either male or female. This default setting to male in literature extends to spoken language: in French, if addressing a group of people containing both men and women, the male third-person plural pronoun is used (as in “ils ont”). Thus the dearth of complex female voices and minds in literature can be explained: there have been in the past few female writers to conceive them.

Where there have been female writers to record female characters, the results are significant. Works such as Villette, Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre are deeply introspective examinations of a woman’s inner life. Lucy Snowe, in particular, is allowed by Charlotte Bronte to be harshly self-critical and to form nuanced relationships with other female characters, such as Ginevra Fanshawe – making her both “friend of woman” and a “thinker”. Jane Eyre struggles with her ethical system and cannot excuse her lover’s treatment of his ex-wife. Agnes Grey is faced with economic and social difficulties which threaten her personal wellbeing. All these women are characterised independently of the male gaze, with their own beliefs and dreams.

Even post-1928, the spectre of gender is not easy to dissolve. In A Streetcar Named Desire, by Tennessee Williams, Stella is subservient to her husband Stanley Kowalski. Within the play she acts the role of the victimised, adoring wife: “I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night... And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby...” (Williams, 2009). The central conflict surrounding her character is whether she should remain loyal to her violent, brutish husband, or support her sister Blanche, a choice between marital or familial – the two traditionally feminine spheres of society. Her husband Stanley, meanwhile, insistently and intimidatingly expresses his virility around the two women, deliberately taking his shirt off in front of Blanche (his “Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?” is not really a consideration of her feelings on the matter at all). We see Williams’s own response to such hyper-masculinity in the way he describes Stanley in the

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10 Woolf, Virginia, A Room Of One’s Own, pg 51
12 Project Gutenberg (1989), King James Bible, Exodus 21:15
13 Williams, Tennessee. A Streetcar Named Desire (2009), Penguin Modern Classics, pg 10
14 Williams, Tennessee. A Streetcar Named Desire, pg 14
stage directions: “animal... power and pride... male bird among hens... gaudy seed-bearer”\textsuperscript{15}. His view of women is “crude” and made up entirely of “sexual classifications”. Through the language of the play, Stanley’s manhood is associated with invasion and sexual aggression – hence his rape of Blanche in the climactic moments of the play could be seen as a direct inevitable consequence of such. For Williams, then, perhaps violence is tied up inextricably with maleness, while the female seems to play the part of the victim wherever there is a man involved. Even though \textit{Streetcar} is a criticism of male superiority, we see that viewing characters along gender lines alone reduces the complexity of both male and female characters equally.

Moreover, in \textit{Medea} we see Jason, who is the archetypal Greek male ideal: rational, logical and calm, opposed to the “silly rage” which haunts his first wife. He completely rejects the possibility that he should be more grateful to the eponymous Medea for saving him, instead seeming to scorn the emotional romantic love which motivated her (“But if I told/how Eros with his unerring arrows/forced you to save me, I could injure you”). Again, these qualities, which would be tied up with ideas of masculinity in ancient Greek culture, make him threatening and unpleasant. Like in \textit{Streetcar}, Jason by the end of the play seems, if we define him by gender alone, to be a caricature of the hyper-masculine husband. It is possible, if we view him as a critique of the male ideal in classical Greece, to see him as an extreme caricature of male gender roles.

Shakespeare’s Macbeth, meanwhile, is a case of a male character faced with the danger of emasculation. While his wife demands she be “unsexed”\textsuperscript{16}, she reprimands him on the basis of his gender for his inaction and hesitation about committing murders: “When you durst do it, then you were a man”\textsuperscript{17}. In his relationship with his wife, the gender roles are apparently reversed – which, while appearing progressive and revolutionary at first glance, means that we are still forced to view both characters in relation to gender stereotypes. However, unlike in \textit{Medea}, in which the characters are able embody the archetypes associated with their sexual role, Macbeth is haunted throughout the play by his inability to live up to what his wife dictates a man should be. Even here we see that viewing characters through their adherence to or aberration from conventional gender roles, we lose complexity and “shut literary doors” on male characters as well as female.

With the rise of the “strong female character” trope, could the viewing public ever get a chance to see a female equivalent of Stanley Kowalski? Probably not, in the near future, but this is not because of his overwhelming physical power or his dangerous sexuality; it is because of his fallibility. Because of the pressure to make female heroines tough and courageous, often the subtleties in their characters are lost, while male characters display a wide

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, Tennessee. \textit{A Streetcar Named Desire}, pg 13
\textsuperscript{16} Shakespeare, William. \textit{Macbeth}, Collins (1985), pg 1003
\textsuperscript{17} Shakespeare, William. \textit{Macbeth}, pg 1004
variety of both good qualities and flaws. As Sophia McDougall puts it in her article for the New Statesman, “Sherlock Holmes gets to be brilliant, solitary, abrasive, Bohemian... Female characters get to be Strong.”\(^{18}\) Ultimately, she says, in hurrying to put together a Strong Female Character for consumption by the public with otherwise thin characterisation and development, we demean women just as much as we did when they were solely ‘damsels in distress’. Even as late as 1985, a need was felt for what cartoonist Alison Bechdel conceived as the Bechdel Test, the criteria for passing which are that two female characters converse about something other than a man\(^{19}\). Many works of fiction fail. Thus we can see that Woolf is right to bewail the state of female characters’ treatment in fiction. Pre-1928, female characters often had little real complexity and depth, especially in fiction written (as it largely was) by men.

Yet male characters also lose out on complexity when we view them solely through the lens of gender. This is not to say that there is no place for feminist and gender-based criticism in literature; the aforementioned Stanley Kowalski is definitely meant to be seen as dangerous partly because of his aggressive masculinity. But even then there are other ways to view his character: he is, for instance, made anxious by his lower class status than his wife, and his nature as a Polish immigrant (or a “heterogeneous type”, as Stella puts it). Seeing him only as a man, in relation to male stereotypes, flattens his character. We must also understand that, while rarely reduced to a “lover of woman”, and though they do tend to be more complex than corresponding female characters, male characters can also be viewed only in relation to their gender, which leaves them “impoverished” in a manner similar to their female counterparts. Viewing works of fiction through the lens of gender alone “shuts literary doors” on men as well as women.

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