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**'I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anyone else. Do not dream of influencing other people.'**  
**To what extent was this possible for female writers pre-1928? Ninety years on, is the situation any different?**

What is it to be oneself? For men, this has always been a simple question. The Ancient Greeks believed that it was *muthos*, to speak<sup>1</sup>. From the beginnings of civilisation, language has been both the form through which men express themselves and, as Mary Beard explains in *Women and Power*, 'a - if not the - defining attribute of maleness'<sup>2</sup>. However, when faced with the question, 'what is a woman?', Virginia Woolf could only reply: 'I assure you, I do not know.'<sup>3</sup> The 'whole of feminine history has been man-made'<sup>4</sup>, so when women look to define 'self', they are faced only with a man's interpretation. Furthermore, it describes women solely in relation to men: as their daughters, wives and mothers. Their identity is inseparable from their male counterparts. However, writing can be an escape from this lack of selfhood. Woolf saw Aphra Behn's ability to make a living through her writing as the beginning of 'the freedom of the mind'<sup>5</sup>. In taking a man's *muthos* and using it to express themselves in written form, women can be independent of the male sex. Pre-1928 - when for many years women could not even possess property - a woman's voice was her own.

Nevertheless, 'a thousand circumstances conspired against the woman writer'<sup>6</sup>. Victorians believed that a woman's sole function was reproduction<sup>7</sup> and that studying could damage her ovaries. Consequently, education for girls was highly restricted. If Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that 'one is not born a genius, one becomes a genius'<sup>8</sup> is correct, then limited education before 1928 made it almost impossible for any woman to write, and therefore be herself in her writing. Even for the few women who did succeed in becoming writers, the battle for self-expression was not over. As de Beauvoir points out, 'the very successes of women aroused new attacks against them'<sup>9</sup>. The more female writers succeeded in being themselves, the harder men fought to suppress them. Even Mary Shelley, whose work was supported by her

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<sup>1</sup> Beard, M, *Women and Power* (London: Profile Books, 2017), p.6

<sup>2</sup> Beard, p.17

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, V, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classic, 2008) p.142

<sup>4</sup> de Beauvoir, S, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p.159

<sup>5</sup> Woolf, V, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2004) p.74

<sup>6</sup> de Beauvoir, p.138

<sup>7</sup> de Beauvoir, p.155

<sup>8</sup> de Beauvoir, p.164

<sup>9</sup> de Beauvoir, p.138

peers, often felt 'the desire to wrap night and the obscurity of insignificance'<sup>10</sup> around herself rather than appear in print, vulnerable to men's criticism. Criticism of female writers not only discouraged them from writing, it also dictated what they wrote. The fear of being accused of 'coarseness and immorality'<sup>11</sup> made women censor themselves. They wrote only within the safe bounds of social convention: 'gentle religious reflections, books of calming advice, brief homilies, or fanciful romances'<sup>12</sup>. Any deviation from the social norm - any revelation of a female writer's true self - risked impoundment in a mental institution.

So, to paraphrase Woolf, whose genius, whose integrity, must it have 'required to face all that criticism and hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking?'<sup>13</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first women to write openly about herself and her sex. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she called for a 'revolution in female manners'<sup>14</sup>. However, having fought to be herself, Wollstonecraft's reputation - the public image of her selfhood - was denigrated after her death to the extent that the entry for 'prostitution' in the index of *The Anti-Jacobin Review* reads: 'see Mary Wollstonecraft'<sup>15</sup>. This posthumous denigration of female writers pre-1928 was not untypical: Mary Shelley, the Brontës, George Eliot and even Virginia Woolf all suffered attacks on their reputation after they died<sup>16</sup>. It is easy to reduce a person to a caricature after their death. De Beauvoir wrote that as long as a woman 'still has to struggle to become a human being, she cannot become a creator'<sup>17</sup>. The dismissal of female authors after their death is indicative of the wider issue of women not being able to be human, to have a self. They are 'other'<sup>18</sup>, nothing more.

At least, one could argue, these women had a chance to be themselves, however brief. Pre-1928, successful female writers were the lucky few, possessing Woolf's requirements of money and private space. Elizabeth Barrett Browning enjoyed all the conditions necessary for a Victorian woman to write. At thirteen, she decided that she had 'natural ill health'<sup>19</sup> - something she undoubtedly exploited in order to write.<sup>20</sup> Her condition allowed her to stay in her room reading and writing, with no social or household obligations.<sup>21</sup> It was only when Barrett was forty, and well-established as a writer, that she left her room to marry Robert Browning. These unique conditions

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon, L, *Outsiders* (London: Virago Press, 2017), p.59

<sup>11</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.129

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, C, *Romantic Outlaws* (London: Windmill Books, 2016), p.142

<sup>13</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.86

<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft, M, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London: Penguin Books 2008), p.48

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, C, p.513

<sup>16</sup> de Beauvoir, *passim*

<sup>17</sup> de Beauvoir, p.723

<sup>18</sup> de Beauvoir, *passim*

<sup>19</sup> Forster, M, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p.22

<sup>20</sup> Forster, p.39

<sup>21</sup> Forster, p.52

gave her the leisure<sup>22</sup> and the privacy to write, and to be herself in her writing. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf clarifies the need for a woman to have 'five hundred a year and a lock on the door'<sup>23</sup> if she is to write. Given that 'it is often from the mass that masculine genius has risen'<sup>24</sup>, the lost potential in terms of female writers from less privileged backgrounds must be severe. Like Shakespeare's sister as imagined by Woolf<sup>25</sup>, many would have been lost to marriage, motherhood or poverty, with little means to be themselves.

Even Elizabeth Barrett Browning was denied one core part of herself: her name. It was only at the age of thirty-two that she was able to take full credit for her work.<sup>26</sup> Male pseudonyms were common for nineteenth-century female writers: the 'Bell' siblings, George Eliot and George Sand all disguised their identity.<sup>27</sup> The reaction to the revelation that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* demonstrates the reasoning behind this: critics immediately began to condemn her as a female upstart rather than addressing her arguments.<sup>28</sup> Woolf 'would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman'<sup>29</sup>. In order to be taken seriously pre-1928, female writers had to sacrifice their selfhood.

However, Woolf believed that women's use of pseudonyms 'may have been not only with a view to obtaining impartial criticism ... but in order to free their consciousness from the tyranny of what was expected of their sex'<sup>30</sup>. The issue of a woman's gender defining her writing is still prominent, with genres such as 'chick-lit' used to trivialise female authors. Even a book's cover can define the author's gender and, with no agency over its design, female writers are unable to control the image of themselves and their work that is presented to the public. The genre of 'women's fiction' coincides with the concept of women as 'other': while books by men are for everyone, the work of female writers is seen as almost exclusively for women. In order to appeal to boys, JK Rowling had to publish the Harry Potter books under an androgynous name. The way for women to escape this 'tyranny of sex'<sup>31</sup> may be to shun femininity altogether and write like men. The semantic field of masculinity has always been used in the ameliorative. Today, one is told to 'be a man' or 'man up'. Even Wollstonecraft called for women to 'emulate the virtues of man'<sup>32</sup>. The

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<sup>22</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.138

<sup>23</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.121

<sup>24</sup> de Beauvoir, p.138

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

<sup>26</sup> Forster, p.87

<sup>27</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.58

<sup>28</sup> Gordon, C, p.152

<sup>29</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.57

<sup>30</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.129

<sup>31</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.129

<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft, p.133

undertone of these sentiments is 'don't be a woman'. Both before 1928 and today, a female writer is told to renounce her femininity, which is - according to de Beauvoir - 'a part of her humanity'<sup>33</sup>.

Arguably the very structure of literature renders female writers incapable of fully being themselves. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that 'a woman who may choose to reason, to express herself, in accordance with masculine techniques, will be bent on stifling an originality that she has cause to mistrust'<sup>34</sup>. According to radical feminist theory, society must be destroyed and remade in order to achieve gender equality, since it was created solely to accommodate men. Similarly, for a female writer to be truly herself, perhaps literature requires a revolution. As Mary Beard wrote, 'You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure.'<sup>35</sup> Pre-1928 this may have seemed impossible, with literature's strict codes of language and form. Yet, with the arrival of modernists like Woolf, the literary canon became more accepting of experimentation. New styles of literature such as Woolf's 'stream of consciousness' may have allowed female authors to fit more comfortably into their writing, therefore letting them be themselves.

When they have been able to, women have used their writing as a way to influence society - for example, Jane Eyre's passionate speech for women's rights. Beneficial though this may be, one could argue that there is a disadvantage to this form of writing. Jeanette Winterson points out that 'there has been so much concentration on Woolf as a feminist and a thinker, that the unique power of her language has still not been given the critical attention it deserves'<sup>36</sup>. The assumption that all women use their writing as a feminist manifesto risks eclipsing their true selves and their art. Perhaps Woolf's warning - 'do not dream of influencing other people' - is an attempt to prevent this. When Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* under her own name, one reviewer admitted that he was 'always taught to suppose that the rights of women were the proper theme of the female sex'<sup>37</sup>. In this way, female writers both pre- and post-1928 are reduced solely to their cause. However, perhaps (at least until equality between the sexes is achieved) this is inevitable. For women, the mere act of self-expression is and has always been an act of rebellion.

Virginia Woolf predicted that 'in a hundred years ... women will have ceased to be the protected sex'<sup>38</sup>. Yet ninety years on, a female writer 'still has many ghosts to

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<sup>33</sup> de Beauvoir, p.692

<sup>34</sup> de Beauvoir, p.717

<sup>35</sup> Beard, p.86

<sup>36</sup> Winterson, J, *Art Objects* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.70

<sup>37</sup> Gordon, C, p.152

<sup>38</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.42

fight, many prejudices to overcome<sup>39</sup>. Our very language reinforces women as 'other': for example, the use of noun rather than adjective to describe women in professions. Instead of 'female writer', we routinely hear 'woman writer' - yet never 'man writer'. This demonstrates that women are still defined by their gender rather than their self. The lack of Woolf's 'five hundred a year' also remains problematic. A recent study estimated that 47% of authors, writers and translators come from middle-class backgrounds.<sup>40</sup> Not only are working-class authors underrepresented, they are still prevented from being themselves: Yorkshire writer Carmen Marcus 'killed her accent' to be taken seriously<sup>41</sup>. We also tend to overlook the difficulties facing female authors outside Western spheres. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, African writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recalls being told that she 'should never call [herself] a feminist, since all feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands'<sup>42</sup>. Around the world, many female writers are still subject to cultural attitudes similar to Victorian ones.

Of course, in order to express themselves publicly, female authors must be published, but there remains a bias against women in the publishing world. Catherine Nichols revealed this prejudice when in 2015 she sent out her new novel to publishers under both her own name and that of a man: 'George sent out 50 queries, and had his manuscript requested 17 times. He is eight and a half times better than me at writing the same book.'<sup>43</sup> This, alongside the fact that JK Rowling published her recent detective series under the pseudonym 'Robert Galbraith', indicates that it is still beneficial for a female author to conceal her identity. Perhaps even more shockingly, there are consistent attempts to credit the work of female writers to men. Some people claim *Frankenstein* as Percy Shelley's creation,<sup>44</sup> and a decade ago La Sapienza University analysed Elena Ferrante's novels and decided that they were written by her husband, Domenico Starnone<sup>45</sup>. Even when female writers are able to be themselves in their literature, men persist in trying to discredit them.

Modern society has also created new necessities in order for female authors to be themselves: Gloria Steinem describes reading *A Room of One's Own* and silently adding, 'and a car'<sup>46</sup>. With the evolution of technology, women are facing new

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<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.144

<sup>40</sup> de Waal, K, 'Make Way For Working Class Writers, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/10/kit-de-waal-where-are-all-the-working-class-writers->

<sup>41</sup> de Waal

<sup>42</sup> Adichie, C, *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p.9

<sup>43</sup> Nichols, C, 'Homme de Plume', 2015,

<https://jezebel.com/homme-de-plume-what-i-learned-sending-my-novel-out-und-1720637627>

<sup>44</sup> Gordon, C, p.216

<sup>45</sup> Winterson, J, 'The Malice and Sexism Behind the 'Unmasking' of Elena Ferrante', 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/07/unmasking-elena-ferrante>

<sup>46</sup> Steinem, G, *My Life on the Road* (London: Oneworld, 2016), p.70

challenges to their selfhood. Mary Beard suffered a 'vile bout of internet comments on [her] own genitalia'<sup>47</sup>. Platforms such as social media deter female writers from expressing their views for fear of abuse. The internet age also takes away a woman's agency over her identity in a more literal sense: well-known female writers risk their image being stolen or fake accounts set up in their name. In the modern world of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', the public image of a person's self is becoming increasingly unreliable.

Modern conditions for female writers may not be perfect, but pre-1928 it was almost impossible for women to write, let alone be themselves in their writing. Today, things are different. In her 1972 essay, *Sisterhood*, Gloria Steinem notes: 'I no longer think that I do not exist.'<sup>48</sup> Today, women have a voice in literature. Virginia Woolf wrote that the end is to be reached 'only when a woman has the courage to surmount opposition and the determination to be herself'<sup>49</sup>; in the words of Jeanette Winterson, 'this is what literature offers - a language powerful enough to say how it is'.<sup>50</sup> From Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, literature is one of the few channels through which female writers can be themselves, and help other women find themselves too.

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<sup>47</sup> Beard, p.29

<sup>48</sup> Steinem, G, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1985), p.117

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *Selected Essays*, p.138

<sup>50</sup> Winterson, J, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p.40

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