

**“I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends... But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men.”**

**To what extent are fictitious friendships reliant on the opposite sex?**

“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; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer!”<sup>1</sup> remarks Woolf in her acclaimed seminal work ‘A Room of One’s Own,’ conveying with mock pain the blatant chasm that there would be in our literature if these role reversals truly existed. But that is a fictitious what if. The driving point is that the chasm, where women are concerned, is not something hypothetical but real. Fiction subjects its women characters to the ownership of men; either their place is taken into consideration only in relation to men or they are seen through the eyes of a man. This has left no room for the female perspective and is perhaps the reason why we seem to be suddenly yearning for it. In pursuit of the portrayal of female friendship in novels, we find only a scattered handful that explore at their heart the relationship between women, and of these very few predate the current century.

The story of female friendship is something that is only emerging now, as if it were still too painful to imagine what a novel might look like without the unnaturally calm, domineering and eternally *truthful* opinion of a male figure. Current affairs, such as the Me Too campaign’s vocalisation of abuse and rape, facilitate the fiction of today and are changing what it means to be, feel and speak out as female. Yet there seems to be a lag between what we see in our newspapers and the pages and lines we read in our books, as if fiction were a more timeless and therefore, a more dangerous place in which to include real female relationships or allow women to be multifaceted entities. In the characters of Lenú and Lila of Elena Ferrante’s ‘My Brilliant Friend’<sup>2</sup> I could feel the essence of two girls radiating off the page for the first time. The novel is driven solely on the entwined, childhood friendship of two girls and their journey over the course of their lives. Tethered together

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia, ‘A Room of One’s Own’, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrante, Elena, ‘My Brilliant Friend’, Europa editions, 2018.

from the moment they face their fear of the ‘ogre’<sup>3</sup> Don Achille where Lila waits for and gives the more frightened Lenu her hand, the girls embark on a reliant, shared existence. What is astounding about the book is that, while male characters are plentiful, it is never their perspective we see the world through but that of the girls. Not only are men subsidiary, but when boyfriends inevitably emerge, it is what the best friend will say, her value judgement about the relationship, that is of importance. This art of female conversation is portrayed in a way that is neither frivolous nor critical, but instead, honest and soul-baring.

Woolf wrote that women’s writing was easily cast aside for being too upset and ‘indignant’, which made their work ‘deformed and twisted’<sup>4</sup> and that this predisposition to mediocrity (in her eyes) failed to lead most female writers to build out of the personal something eternal. Their personal was too tainted with anger to be of lasting significance. At this point in her argument women’s books are being compared to and judged in relation to books written mostly by men. Woolf does not take into account the idea that women’s anger could be both the driving force behind and a legitimate subject for fiction in its own right. Ferrante’s novel, for example, is filled with anger over the suppression of women’s desires to improve and educate themselves. The men - fathers, brothers, boyfriends - hold power over the women of the neighbourhood. They wield it in order to try and control the desires of the girls, either directly or indirectly, through a patriarchy which has brainwashed their mothers and female teachers. Lila is told she cannot continue with her education past elementary school by both her father and mother. This most brilliant of students is forced to stop using her brain and comes to rely heavily on the generosity of the men in her life for survival. But Ferrante shows how the girls fight back. In spite of coming from the depths of poverty they are unfazed and outwit the neighbourhood’s attempt to keep them uneducated. Lila studies by herself, using books from the library, with Lenu’s help. Ferrante shows how poverty and male dominance pose no obstacle to the friendship which is the driving force of their lives.

Virginia Woolf writes that women are everywhere but their lives have gone unrecorded. Through writers like Jane Austen and the Brönte sisters, the female story began to emerge. We can see this continuing now in the fictional world of film. Predominantly female casts as in the film ‘The Favourite’ are an embodiment of femininity which have until now been shunned. Director Yorgos

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<sup>3</sup> Ferrante, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, p. 81.

Lanthimos said of cinema that because of its inherently ingrained male gaze, “women are portrayed as housewives, girlfriends...” He continues, “our small contribution is we're just trying to show them as complex and wonderful and horrific as they are, like other human beings.”<sup>5</sup> This echoes the plea of Woolf that labels such as male and female merely restrict us and that we should strive to be fully human in an unsexed way instead. But Woolf’s need, echoed in our own century by Lanthimos, to portray women characters in a way that is not categorised, limited or moulded by gender is proof that we still find ourselves shaped by a model made by men. We feel our fiction must please the male gaze and be acceptable to male consciousness. Key to this problem in all fiction, screen or print, is the idea of markets and what will sell. Deborah Davis originally wrote the script of ‘The Favourite’ in 1998. The poignant tragic story of Queen Anne and her tumultuous relationships at court was ready and waiting to be filmed two decades ago. Resistance to making the film came, however, not only because of the lesbian relationships depicted in it, but also because of the lack of powerful male characters.<sup>6</sup> The film’s triangulated friendship between Queen Anne, Sarah Churchill and Abigail Masham might not be historically very accurate but it chimes with our need to see women in positions of power where men fade into the background. That the women are also vulnerable, rivalrous to an extreme, and even silly at times does not detract from the fact that they have our attention. We are fascinated by their feelings for each other, and their ability to scheme and manipulate power at court. Again, as in Ferrante, female relationships are the driving force of the narrative; they transcend the male point of view.

Charlotte Brönte’s ‘Jane Eyre’, according to Woolf, does not achieve this transcendence. Woolf saw problems in the heroine’s loss of autonomy when she falls in love with Mr Rochester. To some extent, it could be argued that Jane finds and settles into her true self only when viewed alongside her male companion, which contradicts the novel’s depiction of Jane as a feisty being. However, one must also acknowledge that a marriage to Rochester freed Jane from the restraints of her social class and therefore effected a release from the intellectual barriers that made such a marriage impossible. Although this tempering and mediating by a man disturbed Woolf, she also had unequivocal praise for Bronte. Talking about the narrative voice of ‘Jane Eyre’, Virginia Woolf

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Favourite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Favourite) retrieved 2nd March 2019 (Tartaglione, Nancy (30 August 2018). "Olivia Colman On 'The Favourite': It Was "Awfully Fun Having Sex With Emma Stone" – Venice". *Deadline Hollywood*.)

<sup>6</sup> Ceci Dempsey, the film’s first producer, speaks of the difficulty of finding financing. Ibid. McVey, Ciara (7 November 2018). "[Ceci Dempsey on Yorgos Lanthimos' 'Particular' Vision for 'The Favourite'](#)". *The Hollywood Reporter*.

remarks: “The writer has us by the hand, forces us along her road, makes us see what she sees, never leaves us for a moment or allows us to forget her.” It is this viewing of the world solely through the eyes of Jane, or perhaps of Bronte herself, that allows the novel to be seen not in relation to men, revolving around them, but enables the reader to navigate Jane’s mind in pursuit of what she wants. The defining friendship here is between the narrator and the assumed female reader, which, I would argue, does in deed go beyond the prescribed relationship with men.

Taken to the extreme, society’s ability to oppress, with women placed right at the bottom of the chain, can be seen clearly in Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’<sup>7</sup>. Atwood highlights, through the thoughts and narration of her main character Offred, the fact that even our language is tailored for the crafting of men. She comments on the use of the word ‘fraternize’ and its meaning of ‘to behave like a brother,’ pointing out that there is no corresponding word for ‘to behave like a sister’<sup>8</sup>. Friendship between women in this fiendish society, which is run on fear and with the sole aim of maximising women’s reproductive capabilities, is not allowed because of its revolutionary potential. Offred tells us that the girls in the dormitories “learned to whisper almost without sound”<sup>9</sup> for fear of punishment for having thoughts of their own. Atwood shows, nevertheless, how women subverted the system by creating communicative spaces for themselves.

The continuous effort needed to overcome obstacles like these in the writing of fiction is something that must be removed if we are ever to see more female perspectives, and thus female friendships in our fiction. Virginia Woolf did not have access to the many genres and extremes of story telling we have today, where the scope for exploring female relationships is ever widening. In Ferrante’s weekly column for ‘The Guardian’ she spoke of not being able to “trace a line of separation between fiction and non-fiction.”<sup>10</sup> The idea of ordering reality in order to form fiction, of being faithful to the actual world rather than of making things up, is something that Woolf also advocates. Ferrante, referencing Woolf, writes that she is more interested in “how much truth the fiction inherent in writing is able to capture” than in making up scenarios from random incidents.<sup>11</sup> Books exploring

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<sup>7</sup> Atwood, Margaret, ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’, Vintage Books London, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Atwood, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Atwood, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ferrante, Elena, ‘I am tired of fiction, I no longer see a reason to go hunting for anecdotes’, The Guardian Life and Style, 17 February 2018, retrieved 1 March 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Ferrante, Elena, ‘I am tired of fiction, I no longer see a reason to go hunting for anecdotes’.

women and their myriad friendships would benefit from this change of perspective, I suggest, as women will be seen as they are in relation to each other in reality, and not through the male gaze of established fictional conventions. As Woolf says in 'Orlando': "As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking."<sup>12</sup> Instead of the artificial guise of women seen only in relation to men we will finally get to 'sororize'<sup>13</sup> among ourselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Woolf, Virginia, 'Orlando', chapter 6.

<sup>13</sup> Sororize is Atwood's word for behaving like a sister. Atwood, p. 21.