



Women & Fiction: The Manuscript Versions of a Room of One's Own

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After Virginia Woolf's death most of the manuscript of "Women and Fiction" was given by Leonard Woolf to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, where, until its rediscovery by the author, it lay virtually unknown for nearly 50 years. With transcription and the incorporation of shorter sections of the manuscript from the Monks House Papers at the University of Sussex, it is now possible to follow the intricacies of Woolf's creative process as she develops, through constant revision, the ideas and images that eventually evolved into the influential work of feminist criticism and literary theory, "A Room of One's Own". The basis of Woolf's inspiration lay in two papers she read in October 1928 to Cambridge women's colleges, which she followed with an article on the subject for an American journal. Then, in 1929, she decided to turn these writings into a book and produced, in about a month, the manuscript of "Women and Fiction". "A Room of One's Own" follows the general outline and structure of "Women and Fiction" yet, as the manuscript shows, almost every sentence of the book was revised in the course of its composition as Woolf strives to fuse the diverse forms of lecture and fiction, feminism and literary criticism, polemic and prophecy. "Women and Fiction" reflects the fantasy of "Orlando", which she had just published, and anticipates the mysticism of "The Waves". The manuscript versions contain passages on the life of Mary Arden (as "Shakespeare's sister" was first called) and on an imaginary tribe of unknown Asian women who have written works as great as Shakespeare's and made discoveries as important as Einstein's. There is also a mocking account of Churchill's rhetoric. References to the Cambridge of the day, deliberately concealed in the final version of her polemic, here remain explicit.

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