

The Many Faces of Virginia Woolf, Medusa, Sphinx, Convert, Celebrity, Prophetess, Professional in Post-2010 Iconotextual narratives by Gazier & Ciccolini, Bechdel, and Gillen & Andrade

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ABSTRACT. This essay discusses three post-2010 iconotextual narratives that do not so much appropriate Virginia Woolf's works as her figure. Whether the focus of a biography in *Virginia Woolf* (2011), a *bande dessinée* by Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini, a tutelary reference in Alison Bechdel's introspective *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), or a brief cameo in *Über 3/1* (2015) by Kieron Gillen and Gabriele Andrade, what cultural values does the cultural phenomenon known as Virginia Woolf reflect and structure? The mythical figures of Medusa and the Sphinx conjured up by Brenda Silver in *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999) still help us understand the Virginia Woolf imagery and imaginary today but less ambiguous archetypes now complexify her visual fashioning, those of the convert, the prophet, and the professional.

KEYWORDS: Virginia Woolf, Author, Text & Image, Celebrity, Portrait

Les Visages de Virginia Woolf, Méduse, Sphinx, convertie, célébrité, prophétesse, professionnelle, dans trois récits iconotextuels postérieurs à 2010 de Gazier & Ciccolini, Bechdel, et Gillen & Andrade

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article compare trois récits iconotextuels récents qui mettent en scène moins l'œuvre de Virginia Woolf que sa figure. Quelle soit le point focal d'une bande dessinée biographique, *Virginia Woolf* (2011) de Michèle Gazier et Bernard Ciccolini, une figure tutélaire qui médiatise l'introspection d'Alison Bechdel dans *Are You My Mother ? A Comic Drama* (2012), ou l'héroïne d'un épisode de deux pages dans un comics sériel, *Über 3/1* (2015) de Kieron Gillen et Gabriele Andrade, quelles sont les valeurs que ce phénomène culturel que nous appelons Virginia Woolf reflète et structure ? Si les figures mythiques de Méduse et du Sphinx convoquées par Brenda Silver dans *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999) restent opératoires, d'autres archetypes moins ambi-

valents viennent complexifier sa construction visuelle et la force de son imaginaire : la convertie, la prophétesse et la professionnelle.

MOTS-CLÉS : Virginia Woolf, auteur, texte & image, célébrité, portrait

The representation of writers as celebrities is a culturally significant phenomenon. Because “academic and popular versioning of Virginia Woolf” (Silver, 1999: 26) has long co-existed, she is a case in point to understand the (trans)formation of the figure of the author in and by what Stuart Hall calls the cultural “battlefield.” (451) If Woolf’s writing is significant to literary studies, Brenda Silver’s seminal *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999) has spotlighted that the biographical staging of her life and the history of the reception of her works together made her not just a celebrity but an icon, that is to say a symbolically charged figure worth considering from a cultural perspective.

Indeed, Woolf (1882-1941) was ushered into the literary canon in American universities in the 1970s just as common readers were becoming increasingly interested in Virginia’s life with the publication of *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972) by her nephew Quentin Bell and the first volumes of her *Letters* (1975) and *Diary* (1977) to complete *A Writer’s Diary* (1953) edited by her husband Leonard. This essay proposes to discuss what becomes of iconic Virginia Woolf today when graphic storytelling, itself essentially hybrid and multiple, appropriates not Woolf’s works but Virginia’s biographical self. Douglas Lanier’s analysis of *Shakespeare and the Modern Popular Culture* partly applies to Woolf. Cultural appropriation of authors is “[r]ooted in concepts of ownership (from Latin *appropriatus*, ‘made one’s own’)” and Virginia Woolf functions “as a kind of property to which groups claim control” (2002: 5). As a heterogeneous group, what cultural values do *Virginia Woolf* (2011), a *bande dessinée* by Michèle Gazier and Bernard Ciccolini, Alison Bechdel’s graphic *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), and comics *Über* vol. 3 chap. 1 (2015) by Kieron Gillen and Gabriele Andrade project onto her? If “appropriation contributes to the formation of collective identities such as those of nation, town, family, gender, and cult,” to what effect do they “gain power over” both Virginia the woman and Woolf the writer? (Ashley, Plesch, 2002: 6; 3) Although falling into different genres—drawn biography, graphic autofiction, and comics uchronia—, and created by authors of different nationalities after traditions that construct diverging Virginia Woolf’s, those contemporary figurations shape a surprisingly consistent figure, and one that no longer corresponds to the cultural construct analysed by Silver in 1999.

Silver argues that Woolf became not only “a ‘celebrity,’ ‘known for [her] well-knownness’ to a broad spectrum of people who might never have read a word of her writing or even realized that a real woman named Virginia Woolf had lived” but “acquired an iconicity that exists independently of her academic standing or literary reputation, of her perceived value as a writer and the perceived value of her works” because she stands “at the borders between long-established dualisms, for example, those of mind and body, powerful and female,

the voice of high culture and popular culture.” (Silver, 1999: 9; 9; Stimpson, 1999: xii)

I will argue that although Silver’s association of well-known pictures of Virginia Woolf, especially the 1902 Charles Beresford portrait¹ and the 1929 Lenare photographs,² with two disruptive mythical archetypes “associat[ed] with fear” (Silver, 1999: 27), Medusa and her paralysing gaze and the Sphinx with her self-absorbed look, still makes sense today, Virginia Woolf also operates as a less ambiguous rallying figurehead and positive role model. For lack of space, this essay does not delve into the different national histories of Virginia Woolf’s reception, appropriation, and versioning. Rather, it focuses on three highly different post-2010 word-and-image appropriations of her biographical self to bring to light a new global trend in the graphic fabrication of the cultural phenomenon we refer to as Virginia Woolf. If the values aggregated onto what I would like to call the Virginia Woolf mystique may still be read in reference to Medusa and the Sphinx, she is no longer the petrifying beauty described by Silver but an inspiring public figure legitimised after new types, the convert, the prophetess, and the professional.

Portrait of the writer as a convert and a celebrity: *Virginia Woolf* by Gazier and Ciccolini

A keen explorer of the biographical genre, Virginia Woolf has herself become the object of passionate biographies reassessing the posthumous portrayal published by her nephew in 1972 under the guidance of her husband. This biographical fever is expanding to iconotextual narratives, reaching larger categories of readers and creating new popular versions of Woolf after new narrative models.

In 2011, Michèle Gazier (story) and Bernard Ciccolini (art) published *Virginia Woolf*, a *bande dessinée*, at Naïve, an eclectic record label created in 2008 that developed a book branch put into liquidation with its 250 title catalogue in 2016 when the label was bought out. Woolf features in their “Great women’s destinies” collection alongside Coco Chanel, Isadora Duncan, or Marie Curie. The eclectic scope of the collection signals its intention to provide female readers—quite young ones, the medium suggests—with inspiring, positive female role-models. It mediates figures of female artists remote both historically and culturally; in popularising the artistic or scientific achievements of pioneers of the past, it hopes to inspire tomorrow’s female elite.

Virginia Woolf presents itself as a well-researched book. Its final page “bibliographies and landmarks” lists seven reference biographies alongside French landmark translations of Woolf’s major works. It asserts its own voice in the ongoing biographical debate. The authors intend to right Bell’s biogra-

1 See <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitZoom/mwo8081/Virginia-Woolf?LinkID=mp04923&role=sit&rNo=1> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

2 See <https://kaykeys.net/passions/viriniawoolf/index.html> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

phy and give the floor to the defence team, drawing from Lee's, Lemasson's, and Forrester's empathetic biographies all entitled *Virginia Woolf* (respectively 1997; 2005; 2009), mostly quoting from Lee's and Forrester's. Advertised by a "librarian's choice" sticker in some Paris circulating public libraries [Fig. 1] when it came out, it resonates with today's taste for both drawn biographies and empowerment literature. It conveys a militant image of Virginia Woolf to *bande dessinée* readers who might not be familiar with her biographies even though they too are to be found on public library shelves.

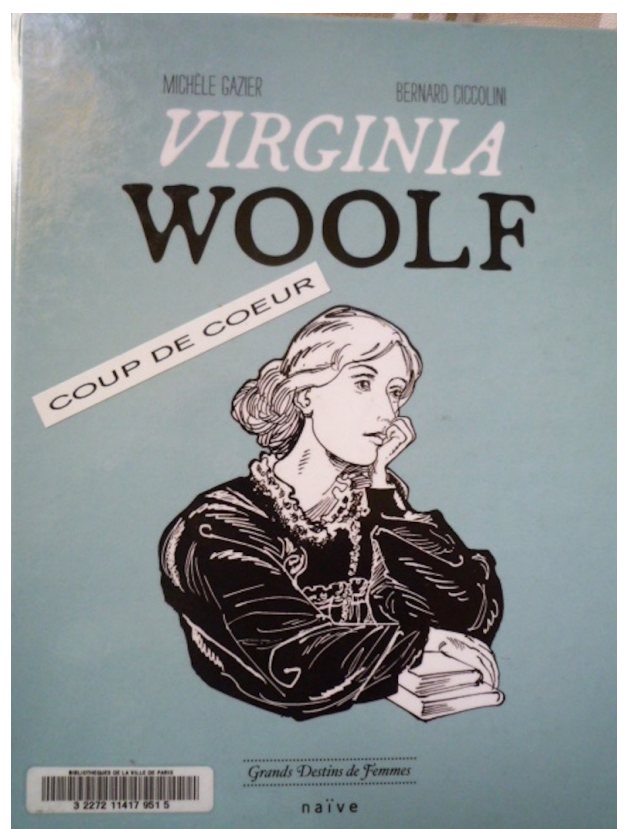


Figure 1: Book cover with librarian's choice sticker, Michèle Gazier (story) and Bernard Ciccolini (art), *Virginia Woolf*, Naïve, 2011, photographed by Caroline Marie.

Virginia Woolf's transmedial versioning is culturally complex. On the one hand, it epitomizes the way portrayals of Woolf must today still take a stand in relation to Quentin and Leonard's quasi-official version defining Virginia in relation to her couple. In the wake of Ellen Hawkes Rogat (1974) and Jane Marcus (1983), many academics have denounced that stranglehold by her self-promoting patriarchal relatives, even pointing an accusing finger at Bell, "the owner of the Virginia Woolf Estate," "insisting on 'the triple ply' of Woolf as artist, feminist, socialist, against what she saw as the depoliticised, aestheticised, and enfeebled Virginia Woolf constructed by her recent biographers and the keepers of her literary estate." (Marcus, 1988: 207; Laura Marcus, 2000: 233-34) Silver still exposed "[t]his construction of Woolf as apolitical, frail, asexual and private [which] is by no means obsolete today" (Snaith, 2000: 3). In France,

while purporting to sketch a balanced portrait of the Woolfs, Geneviève Brisac and Agnès Desarthe divide their chapter on Leonard's influence, "How Virginia Stephen became Virginia Woolf" in *La Double Vie de Virginia Woolf*, into paragraphs entitled "her publisher" or "her male nurse" and Alexandra Lemasson devotes a whole chapter to "Leonard the Saviour" ("Comment Virginia Stephen est devenue Virginia Woolf"; "son éditeur"; "son infirmier" Brisac, Desarthe, 2004: 57; 60; "Leonard le sauveur" Lemasson, 2005: 154-55).

On the other hand, its focus on Virginia's private life subversively serves its empowering purpose in a paradoxical way where biography overlaps with literature. It reflects and disseminates the recent version of the Woolf couple as *Outsiders Together*, after the title of Natasha Rosenfeld's 2000 biography. Virginia's gradual appropriation of Leonard's judeity is the central leitmotiv in Gazier as in Forrester. As they return from Nazi Germany, Virginia declares: "I share Leonard's anguish. He is Jewish and, now, I am Jewish too." ("Je partage l'angoisse de Leonard. Il est juif, et désormais, je suis juive aussi" Gazier 2001b: 71; Forrester, 2009: 94-98. My translation). Her self-chosen judeity, the emblem of her female writer's posture as an outsider, accounts for her suicide: "Les troupes d'Hitler sont entrées dans Paris. C'est la fin. Comment l'Angleterre pourra-t-elle leur résister ? Et nous, juifs, leur échapper ? Le suicide est notre seule issue³." (Gazier, 2011b: 80)

While claiming neutrality: "The point for us was not to take sides" ("il ne s'agissait pas pour nous de prendre parti", Gazier, 2011a), Gazier and Ciccolini's choice to spotlight her becoming-Jewish is a militant gesture. Virginia did not actually convert, but the conversion structure categorises her as a committed writer, contradicting Leonard's posthumous portrayal of his wife as "the least political animal that has lived since Aristotle invented the definition" (Woolf, Leonard, 1968: 27). Virginia's appropriation of her husband's judeity is paradoxically constructed as her ultimate act of rebellion, turning her into a political icon. Popular culture is now *afraid of Virginia Woolf*, as Edward Albee put it in 1962, because she combines antagonistic values, wife/writer, private/public, art/politics/religion, through contradictory archetypal narratives, the scapegoat Jew and the conversion narrative. In keeping with the hagiographical model of legends or lives of the saints, Virginia's life story is a tale of self-realisation through self-sacrifice and empowerment through disempowerment that also resonates with the Romantic construct of the writer as doomed genius.

Virginia's private "unhappiness," radiating in the sepia colours of the pictures, is transmogrified into art. She renounces the world she transfers into her works, so that her whole life journey becomes readable in retrospect in terms of predestination through two intertwined conversion narratives, with a political edge: Virginia becomes a Jew and Woolf, a writer. This, I believe, is the reason why her life story remains conventionally understood from her suicide backwards, as in Forrester, even though Gazier and Ciccolini mean to avoid depicting her life "as though her suicide obliterated her whole existence in despair and

3 "Hitler's troops have entered Paris. This is the end. How can England resist them? How can we, Jews, escape them? Suicide is our only way out." My translation.

darkness.” (“[c]omme si son suicide avait oblitéré de désespoir et de noirceur l’ensemble de son existence” Gazier, 2011a). The chiasmic structure of the book underlines this poetico-biographical stance which reads Woolf’s works through Virginia’s life, and vice versa. The first three silent panels show the gradual transformation of a seascape into a delicate handwriting while the final three shift from Virginia’s suicide in the River Ouse to an empty house full of Hogarth Press editions of her works (Gazier, 2011b: 1-3; 88-90).

As I read them, the drawings that copy real life photographs reflect the contradictory values projected onto that new version of Woolf. Paradoxically, the self-proclaimed, self-sacrificing outsider is depicted as a celebrity. Although overlooked by Bell, Lee, or Forrester, the increasingly public status of Woolf as she asserts herself artistically and politically takes centre stage in the second half of Lemasson’s biography. It discusses Virginia’s intoxication with celebrity after the publication of *Mrs Dalloway*, “intoxicated by the countless invitations her new found celebrity status did not fail to attract” and *The Years*: “constantly worrying about the reception of and comments on her books, the way she herself would be perceived, and whether or not she was a fashionable writer.” (“enivr[é]e des nombreuses invitations que ne manque pas d’attirer sa nouvelle célébrité”; “s’inquiétant constamment de l’accueil de ses livres, des commentaires qu’ils allaient susciter, de la manière dont elle-même allait être perçue, du fait d’être ou pas une romancière à la mode” Lemasson, 2005: 198; 235. My translation). Gazier has Woolf hunted by journalists at her house in Rodmell and a fan buying *The Years* at a bookshop exclaim: “*The Times* says it is a masterpiece!” while others swoon: “I so loved *Mrs Dalloway*!”, “Ah! *A Room of One’s Own*!” (“*Le Times* dit que c’est un chef d’œuvre!”; “J’ai tellement aimé *Mrs Dalloway*!” ; “Ah! *Une chambre à soi*!” Gazier, 2011b: 73; 72; 72) Ciccolini self-reflexively copies authentic photographs about celebrity to stage Woolf’s celebrity. In 1905 Virginia and male friends in the guise of African princes and ambassadors tricked the Royal Navy into showing them the Dreadnought battleship and informed the press. The transgressive hoax spreads over three pages the final panel of which duplicates the genuine front page of the *Daily Mirror*⁴ on March, 4th while another shows the six protagonists crossing a London street in a single file, in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Beatles’ 1969 much-copied *Abbey Road* album cover (Gazier, 2011b: 30; 28).

While claiming reliability of its sources, the book cover’s combination of three historical photographs [Fig. 1]⁵ points to Woolf as a multi-layered, half-historical half-imaginary visual artefact. She sits in three-quarter profile, her head resting on her hand, her other arm lying on top of a pile of books on an invisible desk, a mirror image of the portrait showing her at her desk in her attic room. [Fig. 2] She is wearing her mother’s Victorian black dress, as in the

4 See <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitZoom/mw136268/The-Dreadnought-Hoax?LinkID=mpo4923&role=sit&rNo=5> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

5 Note that the Spanish translation reproduces the one-page panel that shows Virginia near the River Ouse in reference to her suicide.

1924 *Vanity Fair* cover by Maurice Beck and Helen MacGregor.⁶ On these two portraits her hair is cropped but the drawing borrows her emblematic Gibson bun from the ubiquitous 1902 Charles Beresford portrait.⁷ That her mother's dress on that collage should define Woolf as a cultural and temporal shifter is underlined by the fact that, while in real life she only put on the dress to pose for the camera, the *bande dessinée* has her wear it when, holding one of her sister's babies, she agrees she should marry Leonard: "Why not?" and again during her affair with Vita Sackville-West,⁸ herself cross-dressed in a man's suit ("Pourquoi pas?" Gazier, 2011b: 41; 55). Those key moments still define Virginia as a childless, unhappily married homosexual, precisely those cultural values Silver associated with Medusa in 1999.

However monstrously hybrid private Virginia may be, public Woolf is framed within the conventional markers of the canonised author. Many panels focus on her hands, handwriting, desk, or books, those metonymical markers of the writer. One panel is of particular interest in that it copies and alters a photograph staging Virginia in her attic room at Monk's House in 1932 [Fig. 2]. While the photograph plays on the "Saint Jerome in his study" paradigm with Virginia daydreaming and oblivious to the blurry books on her table, Ciccolini's panel [Fig. 3] does away with the patterned armchair that does not face the table and has Woolf write at her desk, the whole paraphernalia of the studious writer well in view. The abstract window with its otherworldly light gives way to a naturalistic cityscape. This produces a conventional portrait of the artist at work, one that, precisely, is nowhere to be found in the real life portraits that never catch Woolf in the act of writing at her desk. *Are You My Mother?* and *Über* also portray Virginia Woolf at work, but in a contrasting way, as a speaker.

6 See <https://alicewonderland2.blogspot.com/2008/08/virginia-woolf-by-maurice-beck-and.html> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

7 See note 1.

8 See <https://plaisirsacultiver.com/2011/12/19/virginia-woolf-de-michele-gazier-et-bernard-ciccolini/> (last accessed 08.03.2020).



Figure 2: Virginia Woolf at Monk's House, 1932 (Public domain).



Figure 3: Top of page 25, Michèle Gazier (story) and Bernard Cicolini (art), *Virginia Woolf*, Naïve Livres, 2011, photographed by Caroline Marie.

Portrait of the author as a prophetess and a professional: *Are You My Mother?* by Bechdel and *Über* by Gillen and Andrade

Apart from iconotextuality, *Über*, British story writer Kieron Gillen's Avatar alternative history epic, and American author Alison Bechdel's multi-awarded "autobiografiction" (Saunders, 2010⁹) have little in common. However, if neither is about Woolf's life, both represent a conference she gave on "Women and Fiction" in Cambridge in 1928. In *Are You My Mother?* Donald Winnicott and Virginia Woolf mediate Bechdel's introspective coming to terms with her mother, her true self as an artist and lesbian, her publication of *Fun Home*, and her mother's painful reaction to it. Bechdel's reminiscence of her attending a conference by Adrienne Rich conjures up the image of Woolf's talk. Gillen's uchronic comics imagines that the Germans are about to win World War Two thanks to an extraterrestrial technology which allows them to create supersoldiers. Stephanie, a scientist and double agent, delivers the mutation-triggering formula to the Allies who are then able to carry their own experiments on superhumans. *Über* is illustrated by Canaan White, Daniel Gete, and Gabriel Andrade in turn. Andrade draws vol. 1, chap. 3 where Stephanie remembers attending Woolf's conference at Cambridge (Gillen, 2015: 2L-2R).¹⁰ In fact, Woolf gave two conferences to female students in Cambridge in 1928, at Newnham and Girton, which become Fernham in their published rewriting *A Room of One's Own*. The settings are so minutely drawn that it is fairly easy to infer which each transposes.

Bechdel shows the first [Fig. 4]: "On Saturday 20 October [...], Woolf drove to Cambridge with her husband Leonard, her sister Vanessa Bell and her niece Angelica to deliver her paper to the Arts Society in Newnham. They stayed with Pernel Strachey, Principal of Newnham." (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xiv) One of the listeners remembers this "rather alarming occasion": "she was nearly an hour late; and dinner in Clough Hall, never a repast for gourmets, suffered considerably. Mrs Woolf also disconcerted us by bringing a husband and so upsetting our setting plan." (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xiv) After the meal, the hall was set up for the talk. The panel matches this description, with the female figure sitting beside Woolf probably Miss Strachey and the "darkened dining hall" with its "audience of about two hundred" (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xv; Bechdel, 2012: 187), a bundle of lines of listeners and tables with empty tea cups. Leonard, Vanessa, and Angelica are nowhere to be seen.

Über stages the second conference: "The following week, Woolf travelled to Cambridge again, this time by train accompanied by Vita Sackville-West, to speak to the ODTAA at Girton on the evening of 26 October 1928." (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xv) It was given to a smaller audience in a smaller room: "The

9 The term "autobiografiction" was not coined by Saunders but by a contemporary of Virginia Woolf, Stephen Reynolds.

10 It is not paginated. References correspond to what readers see: 2L-2R: the second double-page left and right.

ODTAA at Girton was a select, closed society with restricted membership. While Woolf's talk at Newnham was delivered in a large hall, at Girton it was held in the small Reception Room" (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xvi). As in Bechdel, Vita is nowhere to be seen; both reenactments erase Virginia Woolf's family and friends to focus on her public persona.

The question is not whether it makes more sense that Woolf should appear in Bechdel's introspective "metabook" (Bechdel, 2012: 285) alongside Winnicott than in boisterous *Über* alongside mutant supersoldiers. After Lanier made it clear that iconic authors are sacred figures "widely regarded as repository of fundamental truths" (2002: 14), we may consider all three iconotextual versions of Pop Woolf as differing only in degree while likewise contributing to shaping the ever-changing cultural significance of her multifaceted figure. The staging of the Cambridge talk by Bechdel and Gillen, while etching different versions of Woolf to different narrative purposes mediated to different audiences, illustrates the way she still embodies and redefines the questions of the female voice, face and body, and the female gaze that were central to Silver's ground-breaking essay in 1999.

Bechdel depicts her two tutelary figures in contrasting ways. Although psychoanalyst Winnicott is drawn recounting a dream about his mother on James Strachey's coach and at work discussing "the mysteries of sex, birth, love, hate, death, the self, the other and whether god exists," the way children express love, or arachnophobia (Bechdel, 2012: 27; 155; 281; 277), Woolf is never shown writing even though numerous panels show manuscript pages of *To the Lighthouse*. Furthermore, whereas Winnicott's portrayal is quite accurate, Woolf's is vague, which is surprising since Bechdel usually works after precisely posed photographs, even of herself. Bechdel's ethereal Woolf walking her dog in the square on the double page just before her unlikely silent encounter with Winnicott may copy the 1932 National Portrait Gallery photograph of Virginia with her niece Angelica¹¹ or combine several pictures. Her shapeless mid-ankle dress and flappers' T-strap pumps rather seem to offer a "generally circulated cultural memory" (Ellis, 1982: 3) of Woolf similar to that disseminated by fashion designers in the 2010's.¹²

11 See <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mwo8590/Virginia-Woolf-Angelica-Garnett?LinkID=mpo4923&search=sas&sText=virginia+woolf&wPage=0&role=sit&rNo=8> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

12 Woolf inspired several Winter 2014 collections, see <https://bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com/2014/02/24/woolf-at-london-fashion-week/>, and Alexa Chung in 2018, <https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/news/alexa-chung-s-latest-collection-inspired-virginia-woolf/>. Also see the "Lesprit Virginia Woolf" series in French *Marie France*, August 2010, and Tim Walker's photographs for *Vogue Italia*, December 2015 <https://bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com/2016/02/02/vogue-photographer-inspired-by-woolf/> (last accessed 08.03.2020).



Figure 4: Page 187, Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, photographed by Caroline Marie.

In the only panel where Woolf speaks, her body and face are hardly visible [Fig. 4]. As Bechdel compares Rich's lecture on poetry and sexual politics with its published version "Blood, Bread, and Poetry," she remarks: "A *Room of One's Own*, of course, began as a lecture to women students at Cambridge in 1928. Woolf read from her notes, almost inaudibly, in a darkened dining hall." (Bechdel, 2012: 187) "[T]he acoustics were poor" (Bradshaw, Clarke, 2015: xv) at Newnham, but it is striking that even when she is not silent Woolf is associated with inaudibility. She addresses students at an odd angle, striking a sharp contrast with the front close up view of Rich.¹³ Rich speaks on a platform with mikes while the picture below, twice as large, pushes Woolf out of the frame far left at the vanishing point of rows of tables and students. Woolf might have discussed the lack of a female Shakespeare with her 1928 audience "inaudibly," but her much-quoted theory is so prominent in the panel that it screens her out. Six speech bubbles expand into a column on the right hand side covering the speaker under her own words, an accurate quote of the end of the third chapter and the beginning of the fourth about the state of mind of women in the sixteenth century. Woolf is all but erased from the conference panel, the vividness of her words materialised by two long bubble pointers reaching out to the audience.

The dichotomies her (dis)figuration conveys — visibility/silence, invisibility/inaudibility, inaudibility/textual visibility — displace Brenda Silver's question about Lenare's Sphinx portrait glimpsed at in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Frears, 1987): "how do we begin to decipher the film's construction of her enigmatic, silent, Mona Lisa-like stare?" (Silver, 1999: 163-64) Precisely, Bechdel's

13 See <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/adrienne-rich> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

Virginia Woolf never stares at readers the way young Alison does on both end papers of the hardback. The three Tavistock Square panels show her in profile looking down at her dog, in three-quarter profile from behind, then in profile again, possibly looking at Winnicott in the background¹⁴ (Bechdel, 2012: 24; 25; 26). In the Cambridge panel [Fig. 4], her sketchy head emerges from above a long table, half-concealed by the halo of a table lamp. Disregarding the conventional conception of Virginia as “an acknowledged beauty” (Silver, 1999: 11)—just as she ignores the presence of Leonard the Beast—and doing away with Medusa’s stare, Bechdel illustrates Woolf’s idea that “[w]e think back through our mothers if we are women” (Woolf, 2015: 56), laying emphasis on the intellectual lineage that ties her to Woolf through Rich. The juxtaposition of the two conferences on the page creates a continuity, as though they made up three moments in a single zooming out logic, disregarding Rich’s attack in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”: “every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women.” (Rich, 1993: 169) This contemporary version of the Sphinx paradox, present but faceless, inaudible but wordy, creates an oxymoronic rapport with Woolf, between worship and iconoclasm.

While Bechdel blurs the portrait of Virginia under Woolf’s words, Andrade closes up on her striking face. In her two-page cameo appearance,¹⁵ five panels out of eight show her addressing about thirty young women in a classroom. The episode delves into double agent Stephanie’s psychology. She tells a soldier about her first memory, when her elder sister “at Girton in Cambridge” “sneaked [her] in to a lecture to see a certain famous lady speak.” (Gillen, 2015: 1R) She then tells His Majesty’s Human Cohen, a mutant supersoldier, that her first memory is the day she was recruited as a PhD student at Oxford: “I’ve come to think of that conversion in a cramped corner of a terribly traditional pub as my first memory” (Gillen, 2015: 6R). Back to Bletchley, she discovers she is compatible with the mutagenic agent and tries to tell Alan Turing yet another first memory before he cuts her short: “Which one is it this time, Stephanie? Were you at Cambridge or Oxford? Top of the class or drop-out? Born in an outhouse or the palace gardens? I like you, Stephanie, but I can’t abide how you *lie*” (Gillen, 2015: 9R). The following double-page spread shows her wading in the gory result of her scientific experiments in a nazi lab before she laments, on the next: “To win this war I’ve done monstrous things. We all have. I’ve had the slurry of people wash around my ankles. I may as well have bathed in it. And now, after all that? Now it looks like we’re going to lose” (Gillen, 2015: 11L-11R; 12L). Of course, Gillen might have imagined the Woolf cameo partly for the sake of a buzz: “Virginia Woolf is going to be the character find of 2014, mark my words.” Interestingly, he banters with a commentator about the “Big Bad” Woolf’s “scary” aura on Twitter [Fig. 5]. *Über* is full of intertextual references

14 See <http://airshipdaily.com/blog/breaking-down-breakdowns-are-you-my-mother-by-alison-bechdel> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

15 See <https://scans-daily.dreamwidth.org/4726551.html?thread=150811159> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

that rub on it the “inert decoration or simple-minded token of prestige” (Lanier, 2002: 16) of the literary canon and deepens its metanarrative dimension. The Woolf episode grounds the uchronia into history while blurring the boundaries between truth and lies, reality and fiction. Stephanie’s oath that: “On the matter of fiction I would never lie” (Gillen, 2015: 6R)—which turns out to be a lie—does not so much resonate with *A Room of One’s Own* as with Woolf’s works at large, since all explore the ambiguous boundaries between life and fiction.

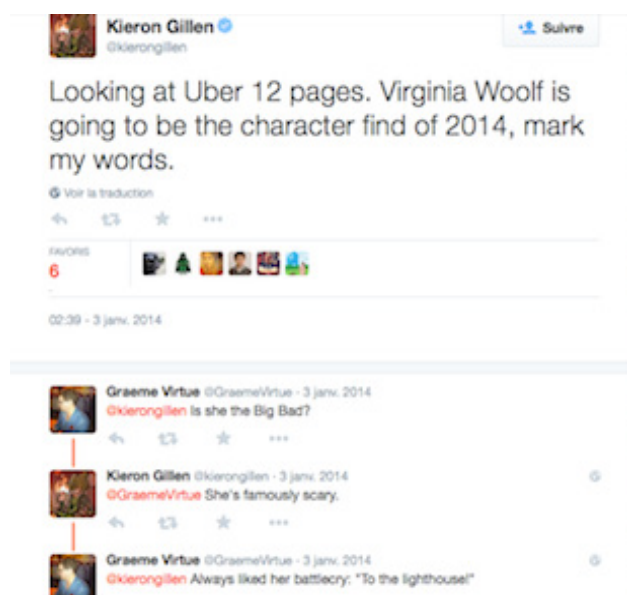


Figure 5: Kieron Gillen, tweet and comments, 03 01 2014, screenshot by Caroline Marie.

This episode also reflects and (trans)forms Pop Woolf in the eyes of today’s readers. Like her, Stephanie is a monster: not only has she “done monstrous things” but she embodies dichotomies Silver associates with female monsters, beauty/horror, truth/lie. Like Gazier’s Woolf, she escapes through self-chosen, ever-changing “conversion” (Gillen, 2015: 12R; 6R). A panel closes up on young Stephanie mesmerised, looking up at the off-frame “famous lady” whose speech bubble reads: “But at second sight the words seemed not so simple.” (Gillen, 2015: 1R; 6L) [Fig. 6] To popular culture, Woolf remains an awe-inspiring Medusa as well as a celebrity. Precisely, Andrade draws her face after the 1929 Lenare photographs¹⁶ Silver associates with the Gorgon.

16 See note 2.

12 1937.¹⁷ The middle left panel has Woolf stand up behind the desk, pointing to her audience with her outstretched hand. In the top right panel, she has left the desk and is walking between rows of chairs, one hand closed to suggest seriousness and focus, the other reaching out to her audience. The middle left panel closes up on her profile. Now standing, she is resting her chin on one of her hands while addressing her audience. In the final panel, she is looking down at Stephanie, her arms crossed, one index finger touching her thumb, a sign of focus and rational discourse. As noted by Farah Karim Cooper in her study of *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage*, the mobility of the hands signifies expressivity of speech: “This association is partly rooted in the classical oratorical teachings that claimed vocal delivery (*pronunciatio*) should be accompanied and supplemented by action (*actio*), meaning the voice should be assisted by the persuasive gestures of the hand.” (Karim-Cooper, 2016: 20) Here, the emphasis on the “expressive versatility” of those “transitory Hieroglyphics” that have been considered to make up “another Tongue, which we may justly call the *Spokeman of the Body*” since Roman rhetoricians theorised the rapport between speech and gesture, doubles the performativity of Woolf’s speech, an exact quote of the first lines of *A Room of One’s Own*, thus redefining her metonymically as a doubly “effective and affective communicator” (Karim-Cooper, 2016: 75; Bacon; qtd Karim-Cooper: 7; Bulwer, 1644: 2; qtd. Karim-Cooper: 21; 74).

Both *Are You My Mother?* and *Über* depict Woolf as an orator and militant rather than a solitary writer at her desk. They rethink the rapport between Virginia, Medusa, and the Sphinx, the mythical figures Silver understands the Woolf icon in relation to. The Sphinx, it would appear, no longer delivers a mixed message. Ambiguity no longer characterises Woolf’s speech as *A Room of One’s Own* is (re)presented and redefined as oral discourse conveying a direct, inspirational feminist message. Whether disembodied or charismatic, Virginia Woolf has become a lecturer, an orator, a prophetess.

The raised hand of the Roman orator conjures up religious iconography: “From its very inception, the raised arm functioned as both a mimetic vehicle for the expression of action and a symbol of a deeper spiritual message.” (Roberts, 1998: 53) Indeed, in the first panel the enveloping back of the chair gives Woolf the appearance of an enthroned saint. Since pictures tend to convey meaning according to their own inter pictural logic, it is worth remembering that:

In art, the gesture [of the raised arm] figures prominently in portrayals of prophets, biblical kings, Christ Pantocrator, and the apostles. When Christ (more rarely a prophet or a Church father) is holding a scroll or a codex in his left hand, the raised right hand takes on an added meaning, becoming a gesture of speech. In this juxtaposition, the scroll or codex signifies the written word of the

17 See <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19370412,00.html> (last accessed 08.03.2020).

Christian dogma, while the raised hand signifies the voice of the spoken word of God, the divine Logos. (Roberts, 1998: 54)

“Virginia Woolf, whom her detractors in the 1930s labeled the ‘High Priestess of Bloomsbury,’” (Silver, 1999: 8) has become a prophetess, an apostle of feminism.¹⁸ A new sacralising posture is projected onto her, that of the inspirational orator addressing her followers. Visually, just as any patrimonialised nineteenth-century male author, she is staged as a guru amid followers, “sit[ting] on a throne reigning over a group of adepts, like an icon” (“[elle] trône au milieu d’un groupe d’adeptes, telle une icône” Meurée, Watthee-Delmotte, 2012: 163).

Today, Virginia Woolf as shaped by popular culture remains a cultural shifter defying cultural boundaries through the dichotomies noted by Brenda Silver in 1999, beauty/horror, highbrow/lowbrow, heterosexual/homosexual. However, 2010’s Pop Woolf as versioned in the three iconotextual portrayals studied here deliberately wrong foots Leonard Woolf and Quentin Bell’s “depoliticised, æstheticised, and enfeebled Virginia Woolf” (Laura Marcus, 2000: 233-34). The models of Medusa and the Sphinx conjured up by Silver remain valid but are complexified by new archetypes, the Jew, the convert, the prophetess, the writer as craftswoman, and the orator as professional. The professionalism of the feminist icon as author is foregrounded as Virginia Woolf is being revamped as a mass-consumable role model. The political, performative force of her words, either handwritten, printed, or spoken, is materialised in the invention of a new hybrid iconography that copies and cross-pollinises historical photographs of Virginia, intended for either private use or public circulation, with the iconotypes of the writer at her desk, the celebrity, or the prophet. Whether she is figured as a star as in Gazier and Ciccolini or a lecturer that may be seen and heard in person as in Bechdel or Kieron and Andrade, the Woolf Mystique is drawing the Medusa/Sphinx imagery and imaginary closer into the intimate sphere of readers. At once awe-inspiring and inspiring, kept at a sacred distance and made even more familiar through reduplication and hybridisation of real-life photographs, Woolf functions like a medieval relic: “Only so long as the relic was repeatedly consumed and appropriated, made over into a powerful ritual object, did it retain its value. By appropriating the saint’s relic, a community thus produced that cult object” (Sponsler, 2002: 7-8). Paradoxically, this new versioning of Virginia Woolf completes the portrait gallery of broadly circulating pictures depicting her as a “twentieth-century madwoman with a bedroom of her own—witty and malicious, yes, and productive, but again [...] delicate, ethereal, asexual, apolitical, etc.” (Silver, 1999: 123) with a missing iconotype, the woman of letters as an influential professional.

18 On Woolf’s ambivalent attitude to feminism, see Maggio.

List of figures

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Figure 2: Virginia Woolf at Monk's House, 1932 (Public domain).

Figure 3: Top of page 25, Michèle Gazier (story) and Bernard Ciccolini (art), *Virginia Woolf*, Naïve Livres, 2011, photographed by Caroline Marie.

Figure 4: Page 187, Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, photographed by Caroline Marie.

Figure 5: Kieron Gillen, tweet and comments, 03.01.2014, screenshot by Caroline Marie.

Figure 6: Pages 2L-2R, Kieron Gillen (story) and Gabriel Andrade (art), *Über*, vol. 3 chap. 1, photographed by Caroline Marie.

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