

Shakespeare—the source of his perpetual appeal. Although she was certainly facetious when she said, as Quentin Bell reports, that “she had reached a point [in her book] at which she had to explain Shakespeare; his genius was universal and her book might therefore be rather long” (*Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, II, 222), Woolf never did capture her thoughts about Shakespeare in any single essay. Instead, he permeated her thinking about the language and forms of literature, and embedded himself in her novels.

The format of the section on “The Reader” differs from that on “Anon”; here, the text is followed first by notes which identify Woolf’s sources, and then by a commentary which outlines the development of the six fragments. Again, editorial changes to the printed text of “The Reader” are recorded in the textual apparatus. Passages transcribed from the typescript in the commentary appear without Woolf’s corrections, while passages transcribed from the manuscript are rendered as final readings.

The Reader

[R3,31c] The great house that Latimer deplored becomes solid and entire in the pages of Lady Anne Cliffords diary.¹ From her childhood she was tenacious of her hereditary rights—her father had the right to carry the Kings sword “and so it lineally descended to me”.² All her youth she fought, against kinsmen, husband and the king himself for her right to inherit the lands in Westmoreland. “. . . I would never part from Westmoreland while I lived upon any condition whatsoever” she told him.³ When the lands and the five castles were hers, she instantly began rebuilding: Not only the land was hers, but diamond buttons, rubies, fur cloaks, + As if to solidify her possessions she wrote out inventories of them. Family love is in part the desire to hand on her property. She sends for her grandchildren in order that they may taste the delight of possession and so refresh her own satisfaction. The sense of the body permeates her pages. All movements become spectacular. Crowds attend her. Six bay horses drag the coach. The coach is lined with green cloth, and laced with green and black silk lace. She is forever asserting her identity. She has her initials carved even over farm house walls. This is her property; this land is hers by right. Certain flesh and blood—[R4,34] that of the Stanleys, the Russells, the Cliffords, the Herberts and above all of the Cliffords has become like a precious stone not to be mixed with baser metal. When Lord Sheffield marries Anne Erwin it was “held a very mean match, and indiscreet on part of him”.⁴ She believes in the immortality of the body as firmly as in the immortality of the soul.

Yet there were moments when even this carapace of possessions proved too heavy for her. “If I had not excellent Chaucer’s book here to comfort me, I were in a pitiable case, having so many troubles as I have here, but when I read in that, I scorn and make light of them all, and a little part of his beauteous spirit infuses itself in me”.⁵ She adds that postscript to a letter about a little cabinet and cup which she had left with Lady Kent when she borrowed a hundred pounds of her. But it is only when she reads that she comments. When she goes to the play she says only “Supped with my Lord and Lady Arundel and

after supper I saw the play of the Mad Lover . . ." or "We stood to see the Masque in the box with my Lady Ruthven"⁶ It was when the playhouses were shut presumably that the reader was born. The curious faculty of making houses and countries visible, and men and women and their emotions, from marks on a printed page was undeveloped + [R4.35b] so long as the play was dominant. The audience at the play house had to draw in the play with their eyes and ears. Without a book of the words they could not deepen and revise the impression left by the play, or ask those questions that are debated now in every newspaper. The lack of general reading accounts for the long pause between Shakespeares death and the 18th century when the plays of Shakespeare hung suspended, unrealised—even in 17 Morgann could say that Shakespeare still lacked half his proper fame.⁷ The lack of a reading public accounts too for the scarcity of criticism and for the general nature of what criticism there is. Both Sidney and Jonson are writing for the small critical public, and thus deal with general questions, and not with particular books and persons.

The reader then comes into existence some time at the end of the sixteenth century, and his life history could we discover it would be worth writing, for the effect it had upon literature. At some point his ear must have lost its acuteness; at another his eye must have become dull. Our own attempt when we read the early Elizabethan plays [to] supply the trumpets and the flags, the citizens and the apprentices is an effort to revert to an earlier stage. As time goes on the reader becomes distinct from the spectator. His sense of words and their associations develops. A word spelt in the old spelling brings in associations. + [R4.36b] As the habit of reading becomes universal, readers split off into different classes. There is the specialised reader, who attaches himself to certain aspects of the printed words. Again there is the very large class of perfectly literate people who strip many miles of print yearly from paper yet never read a word. Finally there is the reader who, like Lady Anne Clifford read excellent Chaucers book when they are in trouble. "and a little part of his beauteous spirit infuses itself in me". And the curious faculty—the power to make places and houses, men and women and their thoughts and emotions visible on the printed page is always changing. The cinema is now developing his eyes; the Broadcast is developing his ear. His importance can be gauged by the fact that when his attention is distracted, in times of public crisis, the writer exclaims: I can write no more.

But the presence of the reader was felt even while the play was still on the stage. It was for him that Burton composed that extraordinary

composition the Anatomy of Melancholy.⁸ It is there that the reader makes his first appearance, for it is there that we find the writer completely conscious of his relation with the reader, and he reveals himself. I am a bachelor. I am neither rich nor poor. I am a tumbler over of other mens books. I live in college rooms. I am a spectator not an actor. There is no playhouse audience forcing him to embody his [R4.37] meditations. The vast accumulations, of learning, that have filtered from books into the quiet college room meander over the page. He sees through a thousand green shades what lies immediately before him—the unhappy heart of man. The reflections serve to chequer the immediate spectacle. From books he has won the tolerant sense that we are not single figures but innumerable repeated. In pursuit of melancholy he travels over the whole world, though he has never left his college room. We are at a remove from the thing treated. We are enjoying the spectacle of melancholy, not sharing its anguish.

It is here that we develop faculties that the play left dormant + Now the reader is completely in being. He can pause; he can ponder; he can compare; he can draw back from the page and see behind it a man sitting alone in the centre of the labyrinth of words in a college room thinking of suicide. He can graify many different moods. He can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, can read what is not written. There is a long drawn continuity in the book that the play has not. It gives a different pace to the mind. We are in a world where nothing is concluded.

Notes

¹ The descriptions and quotations in the three succeeding paragraphs are based on *The Diary of Lady Anne Clifford*, ed. V. Sackville-West (Heinemann, 1923), and George C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Pembroke & Montgomery. 1590–1676. Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal: Titus Wilson, 1922). The Williamson biography is noted in both MH/B.2c and HRN, v. 16, 57. The *Diary* is noted in HRN, v. 16, 55–56, and at the end of "Notes for Reading at Random."

² *Diary*, p. 6.

³ *Diary*, p. 48.

⁴ *Diary*, p. 90.

⁵ Williamson, p. 197. "Pitiable" reads in the original "pitiable."

⁶ *Diary*, p. 47.

⁷ Probably Maurice Morgann, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777), a copy of which is now in the Woolf Collection, Washington State University, Pullman.

⁸ Woolf's notes on Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. A.R. Shilleto, Vol. I (Bell, 1893)—the source of this section—are found in HRN, v. 16, pp. 53–54, 58.

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CONTENTS

Preface	LUCIO P. RUOTOLO	i
Virginia Woolf's <i>The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn</i>	SUSAN M. SQUIER	
Introduction	LOUISE A. DESALVO	
Text of <i>The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn</i>		237
Notes		240
Virginia Woolf's "Friendships Gallery"	ELLEN HAWKES	268
Introduction		270
Text of "Friendships Gallery"		273
Notes		300
Virginia Woolf's <i>Orlando</i> : an Edition of the Manuscript	MADÉLINE MOORE	
Introduction		303
Text of <i>Orlando</i>		308
Notes and Commentary		340
Appendix A: From Vita Sackville-West to Harold Nicolson		347
Appendix B: From Harold Nicolson to Vita Sackville-West		353
Appendix C: From Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West		353
"Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's Last Essays	BRENDA SILVER	
Introduction		356
"Notes for Reading at Random"		369
Text of "Notes for Reading at Random"		373
"Anon"		380
Text of "Anon"		382