

## Syllabus

### Finding a Voice: Female Creativity and Expression in Literature

#### Reading and Discussion series

In a recent essay, Mary Beard, a Classics scholar at Cambridge, discusses how women have been silenced by the patriarchal system. Starting with Penelope in *The Odyssey* and moving forward to the 2016 US election, Beard shows how the silencing of women is built into western culture. She complicates the “simple diagnosis of misogyny” (Beard 8) by showing that women have traditionally been silenced only in the public realm while they have been “heard” in the realm of the home—with one exception: “Women may ...in extreme circumstances publically defend their own sectional interests, but not speak for men or the community as a whole” (Beard 16). Kate Manne, writing from the position of a philosopher, redefines misogyny in her new book *Down Girl*, using incidences of strangulation both literally and metaphorically to show the ways in which women have been silenced by men. As Manne argues, “Part of male dominance, especially on the part of the most privileged and powerful, seems to be seizing control of the narrative—and with it, controlling [the woman], enforcing her concurrence” (Manne 11). And as early as 1929, Virginia Woolf lamented the lack of a clearly-defined tradition of women writers (and artists) as well as a strictly codified role for creative women that made creativity, even communication, difficult. After a visit to “Oxbridge,” Woolf pondered: “Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?—a thousand questions at once suggested themselves” (Woolf 25).

Over the course of six sessions, we will read excerpts from these three writers, and then move into a study of 5 books written by women that explore women’s creativity—in art, in literature, in “theatre,” and in alternative ways of creating a space in which they can use their creative talents. We will begin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina*, at time when women’s roles were beginning to change, to discuss the ways in which Haywood attempts to empower her female protagonist in a world hostile to female voice and power. From there we will move to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where Bronte’s heroine rejects the constraints of her domineering husband and actually supports herself and her son as an artist. I will provide images of art to go along with some of these books. And we will examine the ways these writers wrestle with their characters’ creative drives. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ali Smith, in her stylistically radical novel *How to Be Both*, creates two novels in one as a way of exploring women’s creativity and its relationship to aesthetics. While Siri Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* shows how her female protagonist must create three male masks behind which she can hide her gender in order to be successful in the art world. Finally, we will examine the way Rachel Kadish’s contemporary historians in *The Weight of Ink* unearth texts that call into question historical, gendered assumptions about scholarship, translation, and creativity.

GOALS: In this period of "Me Too" and a resurgence of feminist issues:

1. To focus on questions of the attempted silencing of women and the ways in which women writers have found their voices.
2. To explore the ways in which women writers' creative imaginations emerge in their investigations of women characters finding creative outlets for their ideas--whether in literature, art, theatre, or "translation."
3. To show, following Virginia Woolf and Mary Beard, how women artists, in spite of not having role models, a room of their own, or financial support, have found ways to express themselves artistically.
4. To guide readers through some "difficult" texts through reading questions, guided discussion, and analysis of art images as a way of bringing important but challenging authors to a general audience.

- Intro Meeting: **Tuesday, September 4 at 4 pm,**  
Hand out books and photocopies; set schedule of reading
- Session 1: **Tuesday, September 11, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Mary Beard, "'The Public Voice of Women,' first essay in *Women and Power*.  
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, excerpts  
Kate Manne, "Eating her Words," excerpts
- Session 2: **Tuesday, October 2, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina*
- Session 3: **Tuesday, October 23, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Anne Bronte, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*
- Session 4: **Tuesday, November 13, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Ali Smith, *How to be Both*
- Session 5: **Tuesday, December 4, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Siri Hustvedt, *The Blazing World*
- Session 6: **Tuesday, December 18, 4 to 5:30 pm**  
Rachel Kadish, *The Weight of Ink*

#### Bibliography:

Mary Beard. *Women and Power*, 2017 (first essay) **ISBN-13:** 978-1631494758

Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*, 1929 (excerpts) **ISBN-0-15-678733-4**

Kate Manne. *Down Girl*, 2018 (excerpts) **ISBN-978-0-19-060498-1**

Eliza Haywood. *Fantomina*, 1724 **ISBN-13:** 978-1551115245

Anne Bronte. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 1848 **ISBN-978-1853264887**

Ali Smith. *How to Be Both*, 2014 **ISBN-978-0-375-42410-6**

Siri Hustvedt. *The Blazing World*, 2014 **ISBN-978-1-4767-4723-1**

Rachel Kadish. *The Weight of Ink*, 2017 **ISBN-978-0-544-86646-1**

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