

and biography. There is clear and inescapable evidence that he did and that Virginia responded eagerly to his efforts. Woolf read approximately fifty books in 1897; of these, nearly one third by my count (14) came from Sir Leslie and dealt with history or biography. (I find only 6 occasions, in fact, on which other people suggested or gave books to Virginia, and she mentions no one except Sir Leslie as suggesting or giving her books more than once.) Precisely what the 1897 journal describes is an ongoing reading program, an arrangement whereby Virginia obtained books from her father's library and read them under his direction. On 10 January, for example, Virginia notes that she has obtained the second volume of Froude's *Carlyle* from her father and that he has instructed her to read it slowly and then reread other books he has lent her. On 10 March, Virginia makes another entry that refers to their ongoing discussions about historical and biographical texts: on their morning walk, Virginia tells her father that she has finished *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* and then feels most "bold" when she suggests Lowell's literary criticism as her next book. On page after page of the 1897 Diary, we find Woolf getting books from Leslie Stephen and returning them to him. DeSalvo is absolutely correct when she insists that the 1897 Diary does not document Leslie Stephen's "exclusive domination" over Virginia Woolf's reading tastes, but I do not suggest that it does. Nor do I suggest that Leslie Stephen was entirely responsible for Woolf's interest and work in history. I argue that the 1897 Diary depicts Leslie Stephen carrying out his plan to educate Virginia in history and biography, and the reading Woolf lists supports my contention.

DeSalvo further insists that Leslie Stephen deprived Virginia of her lessons and, she implies, humiliated Virginia by forcing her to dig a back garden. This position again caricatures the relationship between Stephen and Woolf and presents only part of the story told by the 1897 Diary. While it is true that Dr. Seton ordered Virginia's lessons stopped on 9 May, Virginia continued to read the Macaulay that Leslie Stephen had suggested to her on 13 April and did not stop until she finished it on 17 May, whereupon Stephen promptly gave her Carlyle's *French Revolution* (18 May). This continued reading suggests that Stephen did not deprive Woolf of her books and intellectual stimulation; he instead continued a less rigid form of instruction, one that both he and Dr. Seton viewed as not so taxing. Whether or not we call this reading a "formal" course of instruction, we can appreciate its importance to Virginia. Further, Stephen did not necessarily demean Virginia when he bought gar-

dening tools for her: muscular Christian that he was, Stephen sincerely believed in the tonic effects of exercise and fresh air. Stephen followed what we today might recognize as scientifically uninformed and perhaps sexist medical advice. But it was the best advice Stephen could get, and we can hardly blame him for the limits of medicine in his generation.

I am puzzled by DeSalvo's reluctance to give Leslie Stephen even a little credit for influencing his daughter in a positive fashion. He was a maddening figure, and an oppressive one, but he was in important ways an enabling figure too, and we cannot understand the full force of Virginia's reactions to him—both negative and positive—unless we acknowledge some of Stephen's good points. Contrary to DeSalvo's insistence, acknowledging the depth and ambiguity of Virginia's relation to her father does not diminish her. In fact, it diminishes Virginia far more to insist that she saw her father as one more male-Victorian obstacle to her quest for self-actualization. Fortunately, we do not have to choose between the "charming fiction of a doting father" and the equally charming, and equally fictitious, notion of a Virginia Woolf born of her own Platonic conception of herself. The truth lies in some complicated human amalgam of the two.

As for Fox's letter—the doors of Oxbridge were indeed open to women in 1897, but this is not the point Virginia makes in her quote. Oxford did not award women degrees until 1919, Cambridge until 1948. While Fox is correct to point out that Leslie Stephen could not envisage his daughter as "Lord Chancellor," this is beside the point too. Stephen's letter to Julia shows that he *could* picture his daughter as a writer, and we are concerned, after all, with whether or not his behavior toward Virginia influenced her to become an author. Finally: the borders between history and literature are not as impermeable as Fox's letter suggests. Woolf herself pictures history, biography, and literature as melting into one another, as many of her literary critical essays suggest, and she does not envision the gulf between the two that Fox creates.

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Fiction and the External World

To the Editor:

The provocative theoretical speculations in Peter J. Rabinowitz' "Assertion and Assumption:

Fictional Patterns and the External World" (*PMLA*, 96 [1981], 408–19) emerge with a commendable and, for today, unusual clarity. Thanks to the lucidity of Rabinowitz' discourse the reader may engage with, and question, the ideas expressed with some confidence that he or she has understood what is being said (at least until told differently by Rabinowitz himself). Rabinowitz proposes that the distance between the "authorial audience" and the "narrative audience" implied by a work of fiction (the one discernible largely on the basis of silent assumptions about the nature of reality and/or the relevance of literary conventions, the other discernible largely on the basis of direct assertion) will enable an actual reader to determine the degree to which a work may be viewed as "realistic." This approach, he claims, has the advantage of avoiding the "recurring difficulties" that crop up whenever realism "is defined in terms of the relationship between the novel and some external, empirically verifiable world" (p. 411). Unfortunately, Rabinowitz has not altogether skirted these difficulties, as evidenced by his example of *Anna Karenina*, in the paragraph introduced by the statement I have quoted.

Rabinowitz considers *Anna Karenina* realistic because the distance between authorial and narrative audiences is slight: "the narrative audience is asked to accept very little beyond the beliefs of the authorial audience and virtually nothing that *seriously* contradicts those beliefs. Thus, while the narrative audience believes that Anna exists, this belief hardly conflicts with the authorial audience's prior experiences; *it is not improbable that such a person should exist and act as she does*" (p. 412; emphasis mine). The slippage occurs in Rabinowitz' last clause. How is the reader to decide about the probable existence of such a person except "in terms of the relationship between the novel and some external . . . world" (p. 411)? How can Rabinowitz go on to maintain that his approach has "the advantage of treating realism as something 'in the text' and hence as something that remains constant despite historical change" (p. 412)? The dubious element in this argument is, of course, the concept of "assumption." Beliefs that a text may be assumed to assume cannot be neatly divorced (and certainly are not in Rabinowitz' article) from a real reader's,

as distinct from an implied reader's, assumptions about a contemporary or past external reality.

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Mr. Rabinowitz replies:

David Ketterer's astute letter raises some important theoretical issues. I am not sure I agree with his claim that my approach fails to treat realism as something "in the text": since the "improbability" in the clause he italicizes is improbability from the authorial audience's point of view, it is at least theoretically separate from the point of view of actual readers. But I would agree with him that there are practical problems in application. As he suggests, it is difficult (if not impossible) for us to *decide* what the beliefs of the authorial audience are without falling back on our own notions about the nature of reality.

Ketterer's letter reminds me how much my essay plays down a factor I have increasingly come to regard as crucial in reading: the prior knowledge that the actual reader needs in order to make sense of a text. Specifically, my argument assumes cultural continuity. We can make reasonably accurate claims about the authorial audience of a given text only if there is considerable overlap between our beliefs and those of the intended readers. We can, for instance, determine what the authorial audience of a nineteenth-century French novel thought about the status of women—but only because we are familiar with Western concepts of social status to begin with and because we are aware that, in the culture we share with nineteenth-century Europe, social status is usually gender-related. As a consequence, the methodology I propose is more likely to work where there are subtle differences between the author's intended audience and ourselves than where the areas of disagreement are more fundamental. A reader who picks up a single text from a culture about which he or she knows nothing beforehand will probably not be able to extract its assumed values at all.

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