

# Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

Ap. 8 (2015)

History and Contemporary Literature



**Jeanne Dubino, ed. Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace**

*Susan Wegener*

doi: [10.12681/syn.16217](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16217)

Copyright © 2015, Susan Wegener



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Αναφορά 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

**Jeanne Dubino, ed. *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. xv+263. \$91.28. (Hd.)**

Jeanne Dubino's collection *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace* complicates the often-invoked Woolf as uncompromising artist by presenting a shrewd businesswoman who carefully crafted and capitalised on her cultural image, who focused on writing for a mass audience, who was very aware of how much money her writing brought in, and who did what she could do to make the most money possible from her writing. For such a seemingly specific topic as Woolf and the literary marketplace, there is an amazing range of perspectives on the theme. By looking at Woolf's careful, intentional creation of her brand as highbrow author, and investigating Woolf's control of her cultural capital, this collection troubles the assumption that an artist's 'pure' devotion to art for art's sake is at odds with the idea of writing for money.

Implicitly, these essays refuse to deify Woolf as chaste artist, and instead realistically forefront her very practical, indeed often capitalist, approach to the marketplace. With this collection, we receive insight into the young Virginia Stephen's ambitious creation of her writerly presence, and the Woolf-as-publisher whose marketing tactics sometimes meant manipulating readers and taking on middlebrow characteristics. While this collection does articulate this more calculating, less romantic side of Woolf, the reader should not expect to become jaded. Certainly Woolf was aware of her literary position and used her name, her printing press, and her business sense to make as much money as possible from her writing. Far from suggesting artistic compromise, this perspective reminds us of the writer whose awareness of the market contributed to her notoriety almost as much as did her talent.

Dubino's organisation and flawless sequencing divides the fifteen essays into four sections, and helps the reader to grasp the theme both specifically and generally, moving from Woolf's engagement with and her relationship to the marketplace, to "Woolf's Marketplaces," and "Marketing Woolf." In the first segment, Beth Rigel Daugherty's "Reading, Taking Notes, and Writing: Virginia Stephen's Reviewing Practice" examines how Virginia Stephen began her career as a book reviewer. Showing that Woolf's primarily self-taught skill demonstrates a negotiation between writing for editorial approval and writing for "the integrity of one's self/ideas/voice," Daugherty presents a novice Woolf who, even as she learned and developed her craft, carefully shaped her style and voice with an eye toward the writer she intended to become (36). In "Circulating Ideas and Selling Periodicals: Leonard Woolf, the *Nation* and *Athenaeum*, and Topic Debate,"

Elizabeth Dickens examines how Leonard Woolf, during his stint as literary editor of *Nation and Athenaeum*, encouraged debate on the pages of that periodical to both provoke and interest readers, and evaluates Virginia Woolf's own persuasive tactics in her writing. Vara Neverow's "Woolf's Editorial Self-Censorship and Risk-Taking in *Jacob's Room*" portrays Woolf as a "crafty and cautious" writer who deliberately modified her writing to fit the needs of her intended audience (68). The last piece in Part I, Jeanette McVicker's "Between Writing and Truth: Woolf's Positive Nihilism," examines how Woolf looked to Greek philosophy in her attempt to represent a "'truthful' rendering of human reality in art, one shaped by experience, memory, and imagination," particularly the truth of women's lives (76).

Part II considers Woolf's relationship to the marketplace, and begins with Katie Macnamara's "How to Strike a Contemporary: Woolf, Mansfield, and Marketing Gossip," which theorises that Woolf, motivated by her contentious relationship with Katherine Mansfield, used gossip as a marketing technique to reach readers who might otherwise have not accessed her work. Heather Bean also investigates how Woolf's market strategies were inspired by other writers in "Something of a Firebrand: Virginia Woolf and the Literary Reputation of Emily Brontë." Bean shows how Woolf used her own cultural capital to reclaim Emily Brontë's methods of appealing to her readers' emotions to effect social change. In "Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein: Commerce, Bestsellers, and the Jew," Karen Leick examines how Woolf's denigration of Gertrude Stein's claim to be "the most popular of living writers" stemmed from Woolf's critical association between commercialism and Jewishness (Stein quoted in Leick 122). Leick's discussion of Woolf's anxieties about her own ambition anticipates the third segment, "Woolf's Marketplaces," by pointing out the discrepancies between Woolf's fear of becoming a "popular" author and her desire for financial success (125).

Part III focuses on this gap between Woolf's words and actions. In "Virginia Woolf and the Middlebrow Market of the Familiar Essay," Caroline Pollentier discusses Woolf's disparagement of and pointed separation from the modern familiar essay, even as she produced non-review essays for that genre's market, while Patrick Collier's "Woolf Studies and Periodical Studies" examines how Woolf "rais[ed] the periodical marketplace as a deforming influence," yet continued to acknowledge the importance of publishing in a periodical as a way to reach vast audiences (155). Both Collier and Melissa Sullivan in "'The Keystone Public' and Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*, *Time and Tide*, and Cultural Hierarchies" invoke Woolf's criticism of the middlebrow ethos, despite her willingness (and desire) to publish in both high and middlebrow periodicals. John K. Young also examines the complexities and ambivalence in the space between the creative and commercial aspects of Woolf's writing in "'Murdering an Aunt or Two': Textual Practice and Narrative Form in Virginia Woolf's Metropolitan Market." In his

analysis, Young analyses how the narrator in *A Room of One's Own* achieved intellectual freedom not by earning money as a writer, but because she inherited money from an aunt. This detail, Young shows, indicates Woolf's own relationship to the literary marketplace: "for not only is Woolf... signaling her own inevitable implication in the colonialist system, but she is doing so by masking Hogarth's commercial success" (183).

The final section, "Marketing Woolf," continues to examine this "intersection between the ideological and the aesthetic" (185), but turns to the ways in which Woolf's works have been commodified globally. Elisa Bolchi's "The 'Grand Lady of Literature': Virginia Woolf in Italy Under Fascism" discusses how literary critics introduced Italian readers to Woolf's writing, while Sara Villa demonstrates how *Orlando* avoided Fascist censorship because of translator Alessandra Scalero's sensitive evasion of controversial triggers in "Translating *Orlando* in 1930s Fascist Italy: Virginia Woolf, Arnaldo Mondadori, and Alessandra Scalero." Yuzu Uchida's "Appropriating Virginia Woolf for the New Humanism: Seward Collins and *The Bookman*, 1927-1933" examines Woolf's contributions to the American New Humanist magazine *The Bookman*, and describes how its editors capitalised on Woolf's literary "lineage" (as Leslie Stephen's daughter) and erroneously contextualized Woolf's works to fit their philosophy (227). Interestingly, the essay reports that Woolf was uncharacteristically silent about this misappropriation of her work, and provocatively speculates on the reasons for this. In the final essay in this anthology, "Don't Judge a Cover by Its Woolf: Book Cover Images and the Marketing of Virginia Woolf's Work," Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta discusses the variations in cover art on Woolf's books in the last eight decades, and examines the cultural values and marketing trends that prompted such changes.

The collection as a whole paints a welcome picture of Woolf as an expert participant in the market, someone with business sense enough to know what her audience wanted and what would make the most money. Many critics, including Anne Fernald, Patrick Collier, Kathryn Simpson, Alice Staveley and others, have investigated and commented upon Woolf's engagement with the literary marketplace, noting Woolf's conflict between art and commerce. Woolf's tight control over the publication of her writing is evident in her ownership of the Hogarth Press, and her careful attention to profit margins and income from her writing is well documented. Critics have proven, albeit a bit apologetically, that Woolf did write for money and engage in self-marketing, demonstrating Woolf's business acumen, but often qualifying that she struggled with what she saw as a compromise with her art.

This collection refuses such evasions, and for the most part, each essay contributes to the overall sense that rather than agonise over any conflict between art and commerce, Woolf embraced the literary marketplace, ambitiously built her

brand, and enjoyed her cultural capital. This admission does not in any way discount Woolf's own documented struggles with and doubts about the relationship between writing and selling. Indeed, Simpson in particular points out Woolf's clear association between capitalism and Fascism, and how in many ways, engaging in the marketplace is a feminist problematic (18). But it is helpful to be reminded that, unlike Sara Pargiter in *The Years*, who refused to denigrate her writing by "sign[ing] on and serv[ing] a master," Woolf herself saw the value and practicality of such work (341). Fittingly, in her essay in this collection, Leick points out that Sara equates writing for money with Jewishness, yet to fail to compromise meant that she would remain in her Jewish neighborhood. "She must accept the literal presence of the Jew, or take on characteristics that Woolf, at least, specifically associates with the Jew" (127). Such seeming contradictions are addressed by the essays in this collection; like Woolf's relation to Jews and Jewishness, her association with the marketplace is complicated and often unsettled.

*Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace* contributes to scholarship on Woolf not only because it demonstrates the myriad perspectives from which one might approach Woolf's relation to the marketplace, but also because it distinguishes itself from existing approaches. This anthology promises connections between the literary marketplace to vast other topics, from periodical studies, to Jewish studies and beyond.

Susan Wegener  
Purdue University

### Works Cited

Collier, Patrick. "Virginia Woolf in the Pay of Booksellers: Commerce, Privacy, Professionalism, *Orlando*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 48.4 (Winter 2002): 363-92.

Fernald, Anne. "A Feminist Public Sphere? Virginia Woolf's Revisions of the Eighteenth Century." *Feminist Studies* 31.1 (Spring 2005): 158-82.

Simpson, Kathryn. "Economies and Desire: Gifts and the Market in 'Moments of Being: Slater's Pins Have no Points.'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.2 (Winter 2005): 18-37.

Staveley, Alice. "Marketing Virginia Woolf: Women, War, and Public Relations in *Three Guineas*." *Book History* 12 (2009): 295-339.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Years*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937.