Virginia Woolf: Good morning, William. I am so glad you could join me here this fine morning.

William Wordworth: G'day, Mrs. Woolf—it is with great reverence that I join you here. I hear that you are quite the elite lady now in the early 20th century.

VW: I am curious to find out who told you such a thing. But William—do you mind that I call you William? It feels more natural—I must ask you this. Not just for myself, but for all voiceless women. You must understand, literature is such a powerful medium, and I often wonder about how to make it more universal, you see—

WW: Ah, but I was not aware of such a threat. It already is universal. As I state in the Preface of my Lyrical Ballads, the poet is "a man speaking to men"(Wordsworth, Preface 655)—he is the ambassador of the everyday life, everyday emotions, enabling their universality through his exalted language. You see?

VW: William, William. I feared you would say this to me. While I am not necessarily disagreeing with your idea of genius, you are forgetting two crucial elements. Allow me to explain two concepts that may sound new to you. I believe, in order to achieve the genius you speak of, the material condition of genius and the importance of androgyny must be present. Without them, genius is but a neglected seed.

Androgyny

WW: I must ask you to elaborate on this concept of “androgyny”—my friend Samuel [Taylor Coleridge] mentioned it once, but I cannot grasp what it entails.

VW: Androgyny is a difficult state to achieve. Androgyny indicates a state of complete absorption, where one does not filter the word with overtly masculine reinforcement of the “I,” nor the female anger against the oppression.

WW: I must defend that my version of the poet is completely absorbed with the world—as a man speaking to men, the poet must be inspired and moved by his worldly surroundings to be able to illustrate it clearly to the rest of mankind.

VW: You distress me with such single-sexed language; it will do no one any good. This is why I categorize you under the “masculine writers” in my book, A Room of One's Own. While I admit there is some merit in reading masculine writing—it is blunt, with no
sense of guilt hovering around it—it becomes redundant. I get tired of it. There is so much assertiveness, so much force.

**WW:** But to make poetry productive and balanced, one must exert that sense of power and authority to establish that sense of equilibrium throughout, because poetry invokes excitement. And excitement, as you know, is not a stable state of being. To contain this spilling of excitement all over, one needs the rules of metre.

**VW:** You speak of poetry having such a sense of purpose. It is this sense of purpose I speak against. You tell me that poetry is spontaneous, yet all these rules you impose make me dizzy. Masculinity is so full of rules, so full of anxiety to prove one’s power, full of this…this sense of self and superiority that distracts from the sense of aesthetics. Too set in your own ways, too sure of yourselves, you men are.

**WW:** You call my style too manly. Who, then, is the real-life “androgynous” writer you speak of?

**VW:** One name I provide confidently is that of William Shakespeare; his writing is what I would call truly androgynous. It is porous; ideas ebb into and out of the text, with no outpouring of anger or air of superiority. Jane Austen—she is a little bit after your time, I apologize for the obscure reference—is another writer I prefer; she writes calmly, with a straightforward unassuming manner. It is much more superior and effective to the anger of Lady Winchilsea.

**WW:** But what, exactly, is the connection between gender and genius? Are there specific traits in each one that you wish to address? I must confess it has never been an issue of mine, for I only worry about bringing the language of the poet to the language of mankind. I would not distinguish “woman” or “man” kind—it seems rather superfluous.

**VW:** Because there must be a balance between the two to make a full genius. I will show you an example of manly writing. Would you mind if I use one of your poems as an example? At least you will get my reference that way. Your poem, “My heart leaps up,” is an appropriate one.

(Reads) “My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky …” (Wordsworth, “My Heart” 1-2) Yes, simple—direct—it is rather pleasant to read a man’s writing sometimes, after all the winding roads of a woman’s words and her abrupt interjections of anger on the road.

**WW:** Why, thank you. I always try to bring poetry to the ordinary people and make it more accessible for them.

**VW:** I understand. Let me read a few more lines: “The Child is the father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety.” (7-10) Why, that is a nice sentiment, William. But—oh, I must interject with a “but”. Your directness leaves nothing much to the imagination, no mystery or suggestive power to draw the reader in. Nothing behind the curtains to see, nothing left to wonder—soon the reader
will say: “but—I am bored!” Do you understand now? Single-sexed writing is detrimental—it is like ploughing only half of your vastly fertile field. Why let that good soil sit idle? Do you see? Woman-manliness, or man-womanliness, is what I desire. And so must you, William. Only then can the mind race free and let the imagination run amply, bountifully, with no superiority complex or guilt obstructing the way.

**Material Conditions**

**WW:** But I, too, believe in the impromptu nature of free-flowing genius; only that will make poetry true and truly brilliant. Poetry is an unmediated and spontaneous medium.

**VW:** But true genius cannot be cultivated in material draught. Do you understand what I mean?

**WW:** Indeed I do not, nor agree. I believe in the transcendental nature of the poet. He can rise above any circumstance, just as his language transcends the ordinary state of the world and makes it extraordinary. If he were a true poet, his circumstances should not matter.

**VW:** To quote King Lear, "nothing can come of nothing" (Shakespeare 1.1. 90 ). Do you see? The fruit of genius cannot grow on a desert. The ability to create must be sustained by comfortable physical conditions. For how can one transcend the body and its physical needs? Who can concoct grand notions when he or she is hungry? Or oppressed by illness? Or denied the education they wish for? How will it translate?

**WW:** But you must know, the poet is more refined than what we’d call the ordinary mankind. The poet possesses senses and faculties more acute and more sensitive—which is what enables him to deliver the divine works of literature that conveys the wonders of the world. The poet is the defender of humanity, solid bedrock of mankind. Simultaneously, he is able to surpass humanity, because of his superior ability to understand mankind and eventually soar above it.

**VW:** Listen to yourself, William. First, your poet is a rock, then he—since you are so insistent on this single-sexed language—suddenly seems to develop wings. Consider this, William; how would you be able to spread your wings, if your wings had all the feathers plucked out?

**WW:** How could the wings be devoid of feathers, if they are elevated with the mind of the poet?

**VW:** Let me re-phrase that. If the wings are untouchable—as you would say they are—what if the wing-bearer was too heavily oppressed by the gravity of the earth, this earthly rock of foundation you eloquently call humanity? Allow me to illustrate a more tangible example. Since I’ve already quoted him, let us think about Shakespeare's sister. Her name is Judith.
**WW:** I was not aware he had a sister…

**VW:** Well, how would you know? Women are too marginalized and too anonymous to leave any mark in history. But listen for one minute, William. Unlike William, her brother, Judith is a woman. Yes, we have established this already. So unlike her brother, who can transgress the bounds of the home to attend school every morning, Judith is kept within them. While her brother transgresses the homely boundaries and leaps towards the ethereal realm of ideas by learning Classics and Rhetoric, Judith tends the earthly matters of the home—sewing, sweeping, cooking—the domestic realm is tedious and tenuous.

**WW:** Such were the natural courses of upbringing at the time…

**VW:** Pha! Natural, you say—is it natural to deprive a plant of sunlight? But I meant to say more. So William—her brother, that is—already surpassing the boundaries of his home frequently, decides to surpass yet another border of his hometown to try his luck in London. While her brother is off never thinking about boundaries, Judith must be aware of hers and ensure she does not go beyond them. Even the occasional verse she fancies and writes down when the parents are unaware—so unacceptable for a woman to write, especially verse!

**WW:** Did she write about nature? Did she engage herself as a true poet would?

**VW:** We would all be richer for knowing, were her poems not destroyed by the fireside where she feared to dream every night! But just when she is about to forget, Judith faces new boundaries, yet again—because she is to be married off to a stranger, you see. She abhors the idea, she absolutely dreads it; so she makes a desperate attempt to free herself from the confines that have been imposed upon her all her life—she runs to London, because that’s where her brother is, after all, and the theatre companies.

**WW:** The dreadful city!

**VW:** The poor soul! It will be the only and the last attempt, for the homely boundaries that kept her will haunt her in the form of derision and rejection from the men. What is she doing outside of the home—is she unaware that the theatre is no place for a woman? The domestic mark will not leave her, but sadly she has no home to go back to, except for the squalid abode of the actor-manager Nick Greene, a sympathetic character who pities her. He pities her enough to construct yet another confine for her—this time, with pregnancy. And you must know the dangers of childbirth and poverty crossing each other’s ways; Judith Shakespeare must return to the earth that detains and controls her, with no word or dream escaping the earth into the realm of the page.

**WW:** How tragic, indeed. And to have it all happen in the desert of the man-made city! It is indeed a miracle Shakespeare could create such beautiful poetic works in the space of London. For me, only nature can correspond to the unrestrained and enriched nature of the poet—
VW: So you understand the need for the fertility of scenery; then again, you are a Romantic, and you worship the scenery of Nature excessively at times. Then do you understand my fertility of circumstance motif in this story? Do you see how impossible it may be to sow the seeds of genius effectively when the land is ploughed with salt of oppressive custom?

WW: Then you do not believe in the power of language to bridge the dichotomy between the conditions of ordinary life to genius?

VW: William. (Cluck of the tongue) Asking for genius under impoverished conditions is like asking for water in a scorching desert. When you are shut out, neglected and belittled, the will to transcend will be buried across from Elephant and Castle, where the omnibuses pass by, indifferent and unaware.

WW: Was there any particular reason why you chose Judith Shakespeare as an example? Do you hold her mind in high esteem?

VW: I speak of her to demonstrate why it has been impossible to produce women Shakespeares; they need the privilege that men enjoyed for so long instead of being rejected. On that tangent, I must confess that the narrative of Judith Shakespeare is the product of my imagination only, as she died during childhood—though she really is buried across from Elephant and Castle, if you must know. You speak of the mind as though it exists entirely on its own, when in fact, the body is so closely linked to it—no Cartesian dualism about it! And this is why women have not created poetic masterpieces. Women need a room of their own, privacy that leads to privilege that will allow them to unleash their genius—for there is no voice without the presence of vocal chords.

WW: You have certainly done well taking away my vocal chords today, Mrs. Woolf. I must say that you have provoked me to examine the body as a necessary entity for poetic genius. For that, I would like to buy us some drinks, to re-nourish those vocal chords and the rest of our constitution. Would you kindly direct us to a nearby pub?
Works Cited


