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Desecrating Sanctuaries

Universities, if looked at as places of higher education, have multiple connotations. “Higher education” could simply just be the extension of primary and secondary school education. However, if we look at the definition of the word “higher” in a different light, it takes on a whole new meaning. “High” can also mean “of exalted rank, status, dignity, or estimation” (OED). Now, a higher education is something that is elevated. Both Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* and Matthew Arnold in *Literature and Science* are trying to change that system of higher education. That definition of “higher education” meaning “exalted” is what Woolf refers to when she compares the university system to a sanctuary. It’s almost a sacred thing, one that should remain untouched. Both Woolf and Arnold are trying to penetrate that same sanctuary, but the difference between them is the angle from which they are trying to do it—Woolf is trying to make the system move forward, while Arnold is trying to change the system back to what it once was.

The change that Arnold tries to enact is making the system less science-centric and more focused on the humanities. Arnold acknowledges where his science-friendly opposition is coming from when he explains the other perspective, “the study [of *belles lettres*] is an elegant one, but slight and ineffectual [...] and of little use for any one [sic] whose object is to get at the truth” (2). This more science-centered perspective concedes that while the study of *belles lettres* is pretty, it is also quite useless because it takes the focus away from the science itself and puts it on something that doesn’t matter as much. However, Arnold makes the argument that studying

the *belles lettres* would broaden the scope of what we are able to understand about the ancient civilizations from which they came. He sees more to Rome and Greece than just “poems, histories, and speeches” (3); he sees them as the places of “a free and right use of reason and to scientific method, and the founder of our mathematics and physics and astronomy and biology” (3). Arnold understands the complexity of the societies that he studies and contends that adding in the knowledge of the letters will only expand the knowledge on all of the natural sciences that those civilizations have to offer, making the study of letters absolutely crucial to the understanding of the sciences.

On the other side of the coin, Woolf, also a proponent of the humanities (as she writes about women and fiction), is less concerned with the subject matter that the university teaches and more concerned with its accessibility to women. She knows that she has to overcome a lot of obstacles in order to change the culture of the university to allow admission to women. Woolf makes a statement about the university being stuck where it is when she compares it to “a sailing-ship always voyaging never arriving” (9). This image makes the university out to be some majestic and grandiose thing, but it doesn’t move forward and doesn’t have a final destination. That image begs the question, What’s the point of being on a ship if that ship is never going to dock? There wouldn’t be a point, at least in my opinion. Even when she tries to get that ship to start moving, her attempt is immediately a failure. After her encounter with the librarian at the entrance to the library, she vows that she “never will ask for that hospitality again” (8). That culture that kicks women out of the library just because of their gender is so ingrained that it’s off putting for her to try to go there herself. It’s a system that Arnold only briefly acknowledges, perpetuating its own male-centric cycle, and it’s one that Woolf is trying to change.

However, if (when) Woolf's goal of letting women obtain a higher education comes true, she predicts that it would cause chaos to the order that has been so carefully cultivated. She states that the "rare types" preserved in the University "would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement" (8). It would throw the world into an upheaval. That sanctuary where things are preserved and untouched suddenly opens up and now, nothing is sacred. If those educated men had to deal with educated women, then what wouldn't the men do to preserve their superiority and the social order? As the saying goes "hindsight is 20/20", and luckily enough for me, this has already happened. I might be a little biased since I am a girl, but perhaps having those "rare types" fighting on the pavement as girls started becoming educated wasn't such a bad thing. It changed (at least in part) the society of entitlement around boys that suddenly had to prove that they were just as deserving of a spot in the university that the women had to fight so hard for. In increasing the competition and adding new voices into the mix, the university could only improve.

A key difference between Arnold's and Woolf's proposed changes is from where they are trying to make the change: Arnold is trying to do it from within, Woolf from without. Both positions present unique advantages and disadvantages. As Woolf states, "[she] thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and [she] thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (24). Woolf is the one that is locked out, and Arnold is the one that is locked in. At first thought, being stuck inside of a sanctuary couldn't be all that bad. After all, a sanctuary is a place of "shelter, refuge, and protection" (OED). Arnold had the privilege of being protected by that sanctuary. But as a consequence of being trapped there, Arnold knows all too well of how his changes would be difficult to implement. Woolf, on the other hand, never had that privilege. Woolf is looking at the system from the outside as a woman. While Arnold is trying

to change the curriculum, Woolf's goal is just to have access to it. Not knowing the inner workings of the sanctuary that she was trying to penetrate, she was brash enough to try to go into the library alone as a woman (who would've thought!). However, the advantage that she has over Arnold is that without knowing what strategy would work best, she's forced to get creative to try to make changes. She has to go at it more radically to get someone's attention, since no one in the university system knows who she is.

So maybe Virginia Woolf was right. Maybe it really is worse to be locked in a sanctuary than locked out of it in order to make any sort of a lasting change. After all, there are women in universities now, but the sciences still dominate and I still don't know a word of Greek.

Works Cited

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