

“WHAT WOMEN CAN DO WHEN THEY
PUT THEIR MINDS TO IT”:¹
ELAINE SHOWALTER AND VIRAGO PRESS

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The Gift

The distinguished literary critic Elaine Showalter made a new contribution to the universe of feminist scholarship during the summer of 2003. Showalter's previous contributions to the field include, of course, the groundbreaking books *A Literature of Their Own*, *Sexual Anarchy*, and *Inventing Herself*, as well as dozens of articles and essays. This particular contribution, however, was in the form of a noteworthy book collection: a nearly complete set of first editions from the London-based, feminist publisher Virago Press. The Virago collection is not Showalter's first gift to Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; in 2002, she gave Rutgers her collection of nineteenth-century Victorian women's novels and writings amassed when she was starting out as a young scholar. Speaking at the Fifteenth Annual Louis Faugeres III Bishop Lecture at the time of this earlier gift, Showalter expressed the hope that others would follow her lead: "Indeed, I want to encourage everyone to enjoy the satisfactions of giving away their books while they are still alive."²

Showalter has published numerous titles with Virago Press and has served on its board of directors; she received the books in this collection during her tenure on the board. The books have been cataloged and shelved in appropriate stack locations throughout the Rutgers University Libraries system (primarily in the Alexander Library stacks) rather than being cloistered in a separate, noncirculating collection. One might suggest that this is keeping with Showalter's dynamic style of scholarship; these circulating books will ensure their easy accessibility and continual, regular use by students, faculty, and other scholars.

The Giver

Showalter's link to Rutgers University dates back to 1970, when she joined the English faculty at Douglass College. "Douglass and Rutgers nurtured my work and believed in its importance when women's literature, feminist criticism, and gynocriticism were new and radical ideas. I'll be forever grateful," she recently observed.³ Showalter was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and received a B.A. in English from Bryn Mawr College (1962), an M.A. from Brandeis University (1964), and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Davis (1970). After leaving Rutgers in 1984, Showalter moved to Princeton University, where she became Avalon Foundation Professor of the Humanities and Professor of English. She remained at Princeton until her retirement in 2003. Long considered a pioneer in the field of feminist literary criticism, Showalter has a noteworthy list of awards acknowledging the importance her work over the years. They include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977–1978), a Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship (1981–1982), and, most recently, a Mellon Emeritus Fellowship (2004), one of sixteen fellowships awarded for the first time by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Showalter's ties to Virago Press date back to its early years. "I am one of many godmothers of the press," she proudly notes.⁴ Virago's publication of Showalter's landmark book *A Literature of Their Own* in 1978 was a watershed occasion for both author and publisher, and when the press celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1993, Showalter enthused about the impact of being published by Virago:

Thanks to Virago *A Literature of Their Own* transcended its beginnings in an American university press [Princeton] to reach the wider reading audience in Britain for whom it had really been written, and in the last twenty years scores of those lost women writers of the past have come back from obscurity to be re-discovered in their green Virago dresses by a new generation.⁵

A Feminist Press

Virago, which publishes all of its books in paperback, called its early series of reprints of "lost women writers" the Virago Modern Classics. In *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Showalter provided a

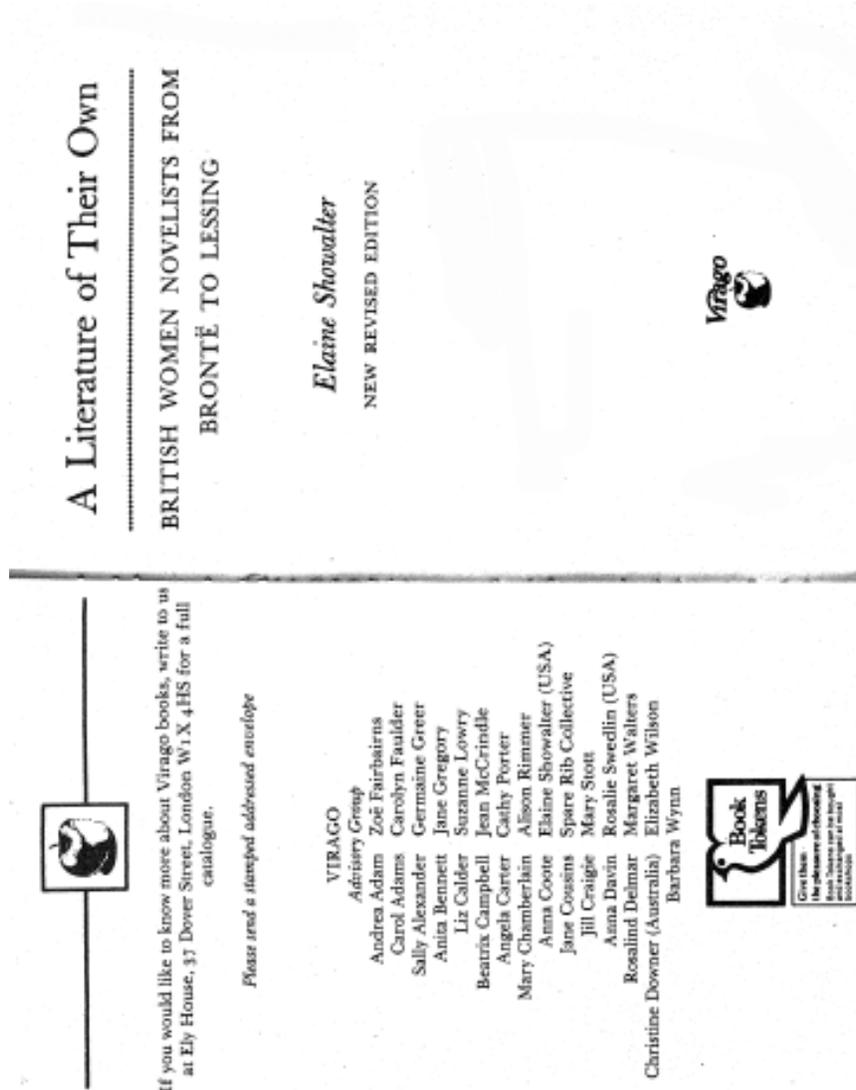


Figure 4.I Virago edition of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1978)

guide for the selection of authors whose works were subsequently reprinted, often with new prefaces, in the series. Writers on the list include George Eliot, Grace Paley, Elizabeth von Arnim, Pat Barker, Edith Wharton, Mae West, Angela Carter, Willa Cather, and Molly Keane. The series attained hallmark status; according to novelist Margaret Drabble, “The Virago Modern Classics have reshaped literary history and enriched the reading of us all. No library is complete with them.”⁶ Other major feminist writers published by Virago include Margaret Atwood, Eva Figes, Kate Millett, Juliet Mitchell, Adrienne Rich, Lynne Segal, and Sheila Rowbotham.

The year 2003 was an auspicious time for Showalter’s gift: Virago was celebrating another anniversary, its thirtieth. The Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood marked the occasion (officially celebrated on May 23, 2003, at Chelsea Physic Gardens in London) with a poem that captured Virago’s scrappy but spirited beginnings, as well as its remarkable growth:

Back then, to Soho’s seedier nooks
Came a band of lasses keen on books.

They stormed the land of spangles and garters—
One room on King William they hired, for starters.

Up dimly-lit stairways they bravely groped,
While men in macintoshes leered and hoped.

They had leather satchels and sensible shoosies,
though some mistook them for upmarket floozies.

And though there WAS the odd bit of fighting,
they took on the task of—women’s writing!

(A notion THEN some set great store on
was that women’s writing was an oxymoron.)

But though doubters pointed and quipped and jeered,
they rolled up their sleeves and persevered.

Their revenues were often less than slender,
But on writers they lavished care so tender

And readers too were deeply grateful
For Virago’s high-heaped female plateful.

Though their first author tours were do-it-yourself trips,
 Soon they were into dump bins and shelf strips.

They stopped re-boiling the coffee grounds,
 And they grew by leaps, and they grew by bounds.

To-night we've put on our shirts and dresses
 to toast Virago's many successes—

So raise a glass to the half-gnawed fruit
 of knowledge—and clap and stomp and hoot,

And cheer an appropriately rowdy cheer—
 Hooray for Virago's thirtieth year!⁷

(with permission of Margaret Atwood)

This was not the first time that Atwood referred to the “dump bins and shelf strips” at Virago; ten years earlier, she had used the phrase as the title of her tribute to the press in *A Virago Keepsake*, a small monograph published by the press to celebrate its twentieth anniversary.⁸ At that time, twenty (in keeping with the anniversary) Virago authors, including Maya Angelou, Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Amanda Cross (Carolyn Heilbrun), Alice Miller, Showalter, Deborah Tannen, and Tatyana Tolstaya, contributed essays to the *Keepsake*, many of them recalling their feelings on being published by Virago, as well as describing its impact on their work. For Byatt, writing prefaces to Virago's reprints of Willa Cather's novels proved to be an education; although Byatt had not previously studied Cather's work, she came to respect and admire her, noting, “It takes a long time to feel one's way into her strange pace and shifts of focus, which I now think were radically innovative.”⁹ Pioneer feminist Kate Millett is quoted in the volume as saying that “she loves being a Virago author and is very proud to be included.”¹⁰

Virago's paperback reissues of “forgotten” texts were also welcomed by authors still alive to appreciate these new incarnations of their work. British writer Nina Bawden, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and author of *Afternoon of a Good Woman* (1976) and *Family Money* (1993), among other titles, observed,

Now, since Virago have begun reissuing those of
 my novels that are out of print, and I have been looking at

them afresh in their beautiful new jackets and even (out of anxiety as much as vanity) been glancing through them re-reading here and there, I have realized not just that the characters in them are still in my mind . . . but that I still know as much about them as I ever did.¹¹

In addition to their literary value, Bawden noted that she realized her books provided a kind of “coded autobiography” and, as a whole, “reflected the concerns of my adult life, including to some extent what sociologists might call the rise and fall of the Welfare State.”¹²

Beginnings

Carmen Callil and Ursula Owen, the directors of Virago when I came on board, were inspiring, energetic women entrepreneurs, great feminists, and wonderful friends. In the 70s we were a small group out to change the literary world; as Virago became increasingly successful and celebrated, I took great pride in having been there at its birth.

—Elaine Showalter¹³

Virago’s beginnings in the mid-1970s were modest; it was run as an independently owned editorial imprint by Carmen Callil, Ursula Owen (who became a director in 1974), and Harriet Spicer. At the time, Callil described Virago as “the first mass-market publisher for 52% of the population—women.”¹⁴ Money for most of the publishing at this time was provided by Carmen Callil, Ltd., an existing publicity company. In 1976, Virago became independent; its capital was just £1,500, which was subsidized by a £10,000 loan. The first book published as an independent company was *Life as We Have Known It* by Co-operative Working Women. A kind of credo for the fledgling firm appeared on page 2 of every Virago book:

Virago is a feminist publishing company: “It is only when women start to organize in large numbers that we become a political force, and begin to move towards the possibility of a truly democratic society in which every human being can be brave, responsible, thinking and diligent in the struggle to live at once freely and unselfishly.”

—Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*¹⁵

Rowbotham's book *Hidden from History*, aimed at a younger audience interested in learning more about women's history, helped to inspire the beginning of the Virago Reprint Library in 1977.

Another successful series launched by the publisher at this time was the Virago Travellers series, which included reprints of remarkable travel stories by Gertrude Bell, Emily Eden, Lucie Duff Gordon, and Lady Mary Wortley. In 1986, it published Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*, a firsthand account of the harshness of life in nineteenth-century Upper Canada, originally published in London by Bentley in 1852. In her introduction to the new volume, Margaret Atwood described that what drew her to Moodie's writing were "the hints, the gaps between what was said and what hovered, just unsaid, between the lines, and the conflict between what Mrs. Moodie felt she ought to think and feel and what she actually did think and feel."¹⁶

A more academic, but no less socially conscious, set of titles appeared as Virago's Education Series, published in association with the University of London Institute of Education. Books in this series included *Counting Girls*, a collection of discussions of girls and mathematics compiled by Valerie Walkerdine; *Un/Popular Fictions* by Gemma Moss, and *Teaching Black Literature* by Suzanne Scafe. Another was *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters* by Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey, published by Virago in 1989. The first sentence of *Democracy* is provocative: "When John Osborne looked back in anger in the 1950s, what he saw was the kitchen sink."¹⁷ The authors proceed to tell stories of "the kitchen," and how the mothers ("heroines or victims?") who inhabited them influenced their children (for good and ill).

Making Its Mark

Virago made an impact on popular culture in 1978 with the republication of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, which was adapted as a major television drama. Similarly, Ann Oakley's novel *The Men's Room*, published by Virago in 1988, went on to become a major dramatic series on TV. In 1979, Atwood began her long and fruitful relationship with Virago (fifteen works of fiction, beginning with the novel *Surfacing*, and three collections of poetry, with more than one million copies sold). Men—but only dead men named George who wrote about the "new woman" of the late 1800s—made their appearance on the Virago list in the following year. The Georges included

George Gissing, George Bernard Shaw, George Meredith, and H. G. (Herbert George) Wells. In 1983, Virago garnered public attention when celebrities and authors staged a rally at Central Hall, Westminster, in support of the Virago title *Over Our Dead Bodies: Women Against the Bomb*, edited by Dorothy Thompson. Some 2,000 people attended the event. In 1991, Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men Talking*, a best seller in the United States, did likewise in England.

Kudos

Awards to Virago authors began to arrive during the publisher's first decade. In 1979, Amrit Wilson won the Martin Luther King Award for *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*. Another Virago volume, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, won this prize in 1985. Other prizes also came along: in 1981, Sheila MacLeod, author of *The Art of Starvation: Anorexia Observed*, won the Mind Book of the Year Award; the First Fawcett Society Prize was awarded in 1982 to *Union Street* by Pat Barker. Other Virago authors who went on to win the Fawcett include Carolyn Steedman, for *The Tidy House* (1983); Jill Liddington, for *The Long Road to Greenham* (1990); and Jacqueline Rose, author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992). The Guardian Fiction Prize was awarded to Lucy Ellmann for *Sweet Desserts* in 1988, and Michele Roberts won the W.H. Smith Literary Award in 1993 for *Daughters of the House*, which also had been short-listed in 1992 for the distinguished Booker Prize. More recently, three of Virago's titles were chosen for the Orange Prize short list: *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, Shirley Hazzard's *The Great Fire* (the 2003 winner of the National Book Award in the United States), and *Ice Road* by Gillian Slovo, published in paperback by Virago in 2004.

Who's in Charge?

Virago has changed hands several times over the years. The small independent firm did not escape the trend toward conglomeration among publishing houses in the latter half of the twentieth century; in 1982, it became a wholly owned subsidiary of the Chatto, Virago, Bodley Head and Cape Group (CVBC). Five years later, the Virago company regained its independence when original publisher Carmen Callil, along with board

members Lennie Goodings, Ursula Owen, Alexandra Pringle, and Harriet Spicer, completed a buyout from CVBC with financing from Rothschild Ventures and Robert Gavron. Random House UK, which owned CVBC at that time, retained a 10 percent stake in the firm and continued to handle its sales and distribution. In 1993, Rothschild Ventures profitably sold its shares in the company to the directors and to Gavron, who became the largest single shareholder. A downturn in business the following year necessitated downsizing the company, which was still profitable in 1995 when the board sold it to Little, Brown. The firm operated as an imprint of Little, Brown, with board member Lennie Goodings serving as publisher. A noteworthy boon to the firm was Atwood's best-selling book *Alias Grace* published by Virago in 1997.

Electrifying (in More Ways than One)

Virago Press marked the millennium by launching its website in 2000. A regularly published newsletter, highlighting recent and upcoming Virago publications, is also available online at no charge. Virago has kept up with the times in print as well. The Virago Vs, a series begun in 1997, is described this way:

Controversial, feisty, provocative and stylish, catering for a new generation with rather different reading tastes . . . broadly aimed at the 20-35 year-old-age group. It is sometimes frivolous, sometimes deeply serious, but the main requirement for the list is quality writing.¹⁸

Whether or not one believes that they qualify as "chick lit," these titles strike a more contemporary note than previous Virago titles in their content and target audience. Books published in this series include Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (which went on to win a Betty Trask Award), the German best seller *In Search of an Impotent Man* by Gaby Hauptmann, and Marilee Strong's *A Bright Red Scream*.

"Virago?"

In the late 1970s, when Virago director Carmen Callil wanted to reprint Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, Brittain's husband, Sir George Catlin, reacted

with distaste to the idea of being published by a company with “the deplorable title” of Virago. “I think it an extremely *bad* title (!!Lesbian),” he declared.¹⁹ Taken as a reflection of the prefeminist era in which it was said, Catlin’s negative take on the word *virago* should probably not be surprising; the 1976 *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines “virago” as a “[t]urbulent woman, termagant; woman of masculine strength or spirit”; a “termagant,” by the way, is I. an “[i]maginary deity of violent and turbulent character, often appearing in morality plays. 2. Brawling overbearing woman, shrew. . . .”²⁰ While the Virago Press logo, an apple with a bite taken out of it, did not seem to warrant explanation (Tree of Knowledge, one assumes), the firm did see fit to devote almost an entire page of its website, titled “A Virago is a Virago is a Virago,” to selected quotes about the word *virago*. While synonyms for “virago” provided by *Roget’s Thesaurus* include “[s]hrew, vixen . . . dragon, scold, spitfire, [and] fury,” we are also reassured that “[d]uring the Renaissance a learned woman was called a Virago, a title which was perfectly complimentary . . . at that time a virago was a woman, who by her courage, understanding and attainments, raised herself above the masses of her sex.”²¹ Jane Mills, author of the Virago title *Womanwords*, considers its meaning at some length:

Like virtue, *virago* originates from the Latin *vir* meaning male person. The word first appeared in English as a direct adoption from the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible where it was the name given by Adam to Eve in Genesis 2:23.

This version of the creation of woman influenced a late 14th-century meaning of *virago*, applied to a woman, as the other face of Eve: “a man-like, vigorous, and heroic woman: a female warrior; an amazon” (OED). Another late 14th-century meaning of *virago*—wicked woman and later a termagant, scold or shrew—demonstrates the extent to which a female warrior was seen as inherently unsettling to the social order.

Most recently *virago* is used to designate a noisy, domineering woman. The founders of the British feminist publishing house in the early 1970s named their company Virago, not without a little irony.²²

Another Virago author, novelist Fay Weldon, goes so far as to assert that Virago Press has actually succeeded in bringing about changes in perceptions of the word: “The solid substance of their list and the very feel of their books has all but changed the connotation of the word. Say Virago to me now and I visualize an industrious and intelligent lady.”²³

At any rate, it seems clear that in naming itself “Virago” Press, the early founders were sending a message, declaring themselves to be powerful, independent women who were not intimidated by men’s status in society. “Virago” women stand up for themselves and do not conform to stereotypical women’s roles in society. Virago women can compete with men whether it is in the workplace or in society in general.

A Home at Rutgers

Rutgers Associate University Librarian for Collection Development and Management Robert Sewell states how pleased he is with this valuable donation from Elaine Showalter. “This archive of over 250 Virago paperbacks not only adds a rich body of literature to the Rutgers University Libraries, it is also documents the flourishing of the late-twentieth-century feminist literary critical movement. Elaine was there from the beginning, shaping it, helping it find its voice. During the same period, Elaine was at Rutgers, playing an instrumental role in establishing at Rutgers what has become one of the premier women’s studies programs in the country.”²⁴

Of her two gifts to the Rutgers University Libraries, Showalter says, “I’m happy that these collections have found a home in New Brunswick. . . . [The Virago Collection] gives a good sense of where women’s publishing took off in the late 20th century, as well as [being] a fabulous archive of women’s classic texts and introductions to them by other important writers. I hope they will be used and enjoyed by a new generation of readers and researchers.”²⁵

Notes

1. Harriet Spicer, introduction to *A Virago Keepsake to Celebrate Twenty Years of Publishing*, by Margaret Atwood (London: Virago Press, 1993), v–vi.
2. Elaine Showalter, “A Literature of My Own: Living with Victorian Women Writers,” special issue, *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* 50 (2003): 23.

3. Showalter, personal letter to the authors, July 13, 2004.
4. Ibid.
5. Elaine Showalter, "Writing a Literature of Their Own," in *A Virago Keepsake to Celebrate Twenty Years of Publishing* (London: Virago Press, 1993), 85. Other books by Showalter that Virago published include *The Female Malady: Women Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (1987), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (1992), and *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siecle* (1993).
6. Virago website: <http://www.virago.co.uk/virago>.
7. Ibid.
8. *A Virago Keepsake*, 85.
9. Ibid., 16.
10. Ibid., 55.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 11.
13. Ibid., 85.
14. Virago website: <http://www.virago.co.uk/virago>.
15. Ibid.
16. Margaret Atwood, introduction to *Roughing it in the Bush or Life in Canada*, by Susanna Moodie (Boston: Virago, Beacon Travelers, 1986), viii.
17. Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey, introduction to *Democracy in the Kitchen* (London: Virago Press, 1989).
18. Virago website: <http://www.virago.co.uk/virago>.
19. Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself* (New York: Scribner's, 2001), 176.
20. J.B. Sykes, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 1299, 1194. An interesting aside is the fact that another feminist press in London, The Women's Press, also uses a potentially "dangerous" (though ironically domestic) symbol—an iron—as its logo, and the phrase "steaming ahead" as its motto. See <http://www.the-womens-press.com/>.
21. Virago website: <http://www.virago.co.uk/virago>.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid. Jane Mills's use of the word "amazon" prompted a question: why was the enormously successful online bookseller named "Amazon.com"? One of the authors' email inquiries to Amazon provided the answer, and it did *not*, in this instance, have to do with powerful women: "Amazon.com was named for the river, not the

warrior-like woman. The name was chosen because of [the] seemingly endless flow of the huge river” (May 10, 2004).

24. Interview with Robert Sewell, August 25, 2004.

25. Showalter, personal letter to the authors, July 13, 2004.