

## "My Madness Saved Me": The Madness and Marriage of Virginia Woolf

**Thomas Szasz**

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London's famed Speakers' Corner, soapbox plinth to generations of agitators and cranks, is a stone's throw from Bloomsbury, an address so indelibly part of Virginia Woolf iconography that it could qualify for National Trust status. The author is an eminently recognized iconoclast: author of some thirty books on psychiatry, professor emeritus of psychiatry at State University of New York in Syracuse, staccato stylist of the Walter Winchell school. For these reasons, Anglophile academics and cinema snobs will likely scurry past. That is their loss. For anyone who can dare hear their received literary pieties challenged, the only surprise of his catapult lobs onto the rose-tinted sepulchre of Virginia and Leonard Woolf's "marriage of true minds" is how often he hits his target, despite some scattershot.

Woolf's life and mirroring novels are defined by these verities: English, wife, writer, and neurasthenic; or feminist, genius, and bi-polar. Her nephew Quentin Bell's 1972 hagiography typically conflates a willful half-mad artistic rapture of inspiration with clinical certitude: "All that summer she was mad."

Szasz asks, "Was her alleged manic-depression an unintentional medical illness or an intentional hysterical stratagem?" His answer shrewdly pre-empts her posthumous Hollywood halo: "She was an intelligent and self-assertive person, a moral agent who used mental illness, psychiatry and her husband to fashion for herself a life of her own choosing [Madness] was her property, her treasure, her identity she transformed [it] into the triumph of literary-psychiatric immortality." Thus it could be said that she was no more mad than, say, Proust (though he was far, far kinder to his servants).

Although Leonard has long been cast as Virginia's long-suffering nurse, Szasz amplifies the shadows glimpsed behind their window-box marriage. True, Leonard gained enviable status into her bohemian caste (though it seems unlikely that she accepted sexual relations with him any more than she did with women). Yet her diaries and letters are still disturbing for their rather brutal class-bound, blue-blood anti-Semitic asides for the "penniless Jew" she deigned to marry, coupled with conscious gratitude that a marriage at age thirty would liberate her from her spinsterhood and her effete upbringing. If she emasculated him by her flouted definition of marriage, he in turn controlled her putative desire for children (which he presumably did not share) by vetting her doctors, avoiding those that recommended motherhood, favoring those who thought her too mentally fragile to withstand it. Submitting to his strict monitoring even her access to reading and writing that might over-stimulate her nerves, she became (again) the dutiful daughter, he the beloved father.

Even her rare outbursts at her husband were held a symptom of her madness, enforced bedrest being the only cure. She dramatized, then retreated. In this co-dependent marital drama, Bloomsbury is almost Albee country. *My Madness Saved Me* is distinguished by illuminating, provocative insights that should not fall on deaf ears. (August 18, 2009)

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