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WORKING PAPER

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A Board Room of One's Own?  
Women Rhodes Scholars and Abundance

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by

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# A Board Room of One's Own?

Women Rhodes Scholars and Abundance

**Professor Susan Rudy**

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## **A Board Room of One's Own?**

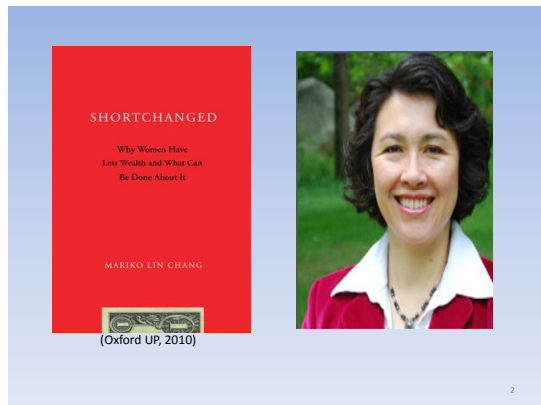
## **Women Rhodes Scholars and Abundance**

Professor Susan Rudy, Director

The Rhodes Project

## **Introduction**

To begin to think about the theme of this conference -- “Feminism in Academia: An Age of Austerity?” -- and by way of inspiration, I want to begin with three quotations. The first quotation is from a 2010 book by Mariko Lin Chang, a former Harvard sociologist who is now a consultant to universities about how to hire for diversity.



It will become apparent in a moment why the quotation is important to my argument. But I begin with this book for another reason: its title. “Shortchanged” may name one of the feelings that inspired this conference, the feeling that, in an age of austerity, women “pay” more, in the sense that we get back less than we’re entitled to. We feel “shortchanged.”

We may consider feeling shortchanged a sign that we do indeed find ourselves, as feminists in academia, inhabiting an age of austerity. But is feeling shortchanged actually a new feeling for women? I’ll return to these questions in a moment. For now, here’s my first quotation, which opens Chapter 2 of Chang’s book:

“My aunt ... died by a fall from her horse  
when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay.  
The news of my legacy reached me one night  
about the same time that  
the act was passed that gave votes to women.  
A solicitor’s letter fell into the post-box  
and when I opened it I found that she had left me  
five hundred pounds a year for ever.

Of the two—the vote and the money—  
the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important.”

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929)

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My second quotation is from an interview I did two weeks ago with an Australian woman who was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship in 2007. She is currently a DPhil Candidate in International Relations at Oxford:

“‘A woman must have money  
and a room of her own.’  
On a Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford,  
women scholars have both.”

- DPhil Candidate, Oxford, and Australian Rhodes Scholar (Class of 2007)

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My third quotation is from “For Feminist Consciousness in the Academy,” an essay by Sarah Amsler forthcoming in *Politics and Culture*:

“The model of the financially independent, intimately unattached, economically productive, consuming and politically hard-nosed woman easily promises joy for capitalist development.”

- Sarah Amsler (2012). “For Feminist Consciousness in the Academy.” *Politics and Culture* (forthcoming).

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Except for that last quotation, you may be wondering, what’s all this got to do with the subject of this conference? I’ve been wondering that myself, since, just to confuse you more, now that I’ve given you three quotations to think about, I need to admit that there are three fundamental mismatches between what I want to talk about today and the subject of this conference.

### My Conundrum

What I want to talk about	Themes of this conference
Women and Money	Women and Austerity
Professional Women (including women outside the academy)	Academic Feminism
Oxbridge Women and Abundance	Academic Women and Austerity

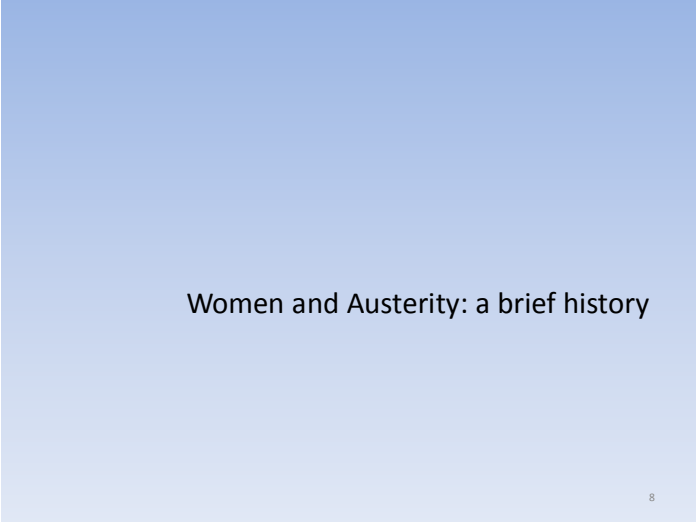
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- I want to talk about the importance of money for women and this is a conference that asks us to take on the implications, for women, of the current age of austerity.
- I want to talk about professional women – including women outside the academy – and this is a conference about academic feminism.
- I want to talk about Oxbridge women and this is a conference about austerity in the academy – not so much a problem for Oxbridge women, who, if anything, have rather to deal with the problem of abundance.

But of course these subjects are not completely disconnected. Surely we have professional – and even Oxbridge – women today because we have had feminism for decades. Even in an age of austerity, we have at least some women with wealth because they have had access to the academy and been supported by feminism. We can take seriously the voices and experiences of the most privileged women without forgetting that they don't speak for all women. So in summary, what I will speak about, briefly, today are the following five interrelated topics

## Summary

1. Women and Austerity: a brief history
2. The Status of Academic Women
3. The Rhodes Project
4. Answering Woolf's Question (What is a woman?) with Rhodes Women's Interviews
5. Abundance: collaborators wanted



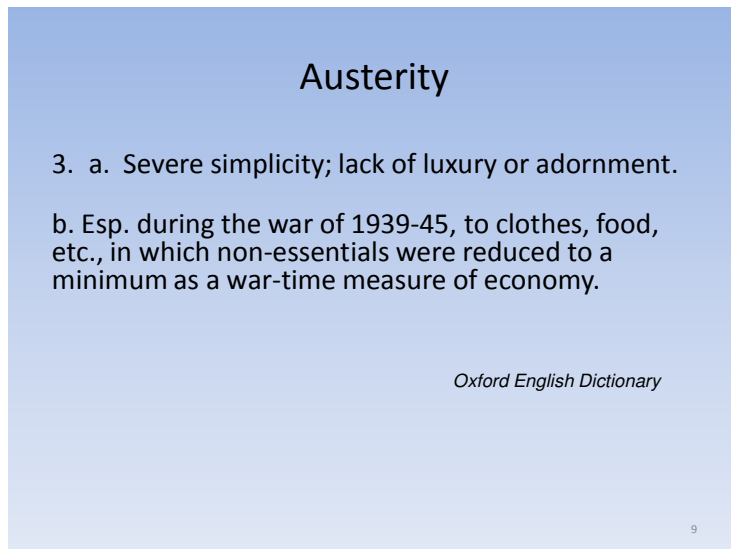
## Women and Austerity: a brief history

It is no doubt self-evident and yet worth saying that for most of recorded history women have lived in an age of austerity and been denied access to the academy. And yet, since the early twentieth century, increasing numbers of women expect to earn university degrees, have professional lives, and take for granted not only rooms, but incomes, of our own (see Kanter 1977).

As I will argue in a moment, the experience of women Rhodes Scholars gives us much to think about in relation to the three key themes of this conference: feminism, academia, and austerity. But before I turn to what the women themselves have to say, let's situate these themes in an historical context, first by historicizing the concept of austerity and the status of academic women and then by turning more carefully – as I so often do when I need to think about women -- to Virginia Woolf, whose *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and “Professions for Women”(1931) -- address all three themes in ways that, even 80 years later, feel highly relevant.



It is worth recalling that, in twentieth century economic terms, “austerity” is a second world war word.



It refers to “severe simplicity, lack of luxury or adornment, especially regarding clothes, food, etc, in which non-essentials were reduced to a minimum as a wartime measure of economy.”

When Woolf’s female narrator in *A Room of One’s Own* visits a fictional women’s college of an Oxbridge university in the late 1920s, she finds that, in the absence of funding from

wealthy male donors, its inhabitants live in just such an age of austerity regarding their

Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. [...] One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern that there might have been on the plate itself. But there was no pattern. The plate was plain. Next came beef with its attendant greens and potatoes – a homely trinity. [...] Prunes and custard followed. [...] Biscuits and cheese came next, and here the water-jug was liberally passed round, for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry, and these were biscuits to the core. That was all. The meal was over.

- Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (18-19)

luncheon meal:

Earlier that day, lunch at the men's college had been a quite different experience. There, Woolf's narrator was offered wine "flushed yellow and flushed crimson"; there she had enjoyed sole and partridges, sauces, salads and potatoes. There pudding was a "confection which rose all sugar from the waves" (12).

"How good life seemed," this happy, well-fed scholar woman thinks after luncheon at the men's college, "how sweet its rewards, how trivial this grudge or that grievance, how admirable friendship and the society of one's kind, as, lighting a good cigarette, one sunk among the cushions in the window-seat" (12).

A significant portion of the first part of *A Room of One's Own* is devoted to understanding exactly why the foremothers of those women undergraduates had so thoughtlessly not contributed generously to the establishment of the women's college: "What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?" (21) she asks.

But then it dawns on Woolf's narrator; if the women students' mothers had devoted their lives to earning money for donations, the students would probably never have been born.

### The Status of Academic Women

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It is worth remembering that the University of Oxford withheld full degree status from women students until 1920. Full degree status was withheld from women students at Cambridge until 1947.

Full degree status was withheld from women students until 1920 in Oxford and 1947 in Cambridge.

- MariaLaura Di Domenico and Nelson Phillips (2009),  
"Sustaining the Ivory Tower:  
Oxbridge Formal Dining as Organizational Ritual."  
*Journal of Management Inquiry* 18 (4), 326-343.

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Although women were not eligible for full Rhodes Scholarships until 1977, in 1968, the *Washington Post* announced that, in making women Rhodes Scholars, the Trustees of the Rhodes Scholarships were breaking a 50-year tradition.

**Women to Be Rhodes Scholars**

OXFORD, England (AP)—Trustees of the Rhodes Scholarships have broken a 50-year-old tradition and established a fellowship for women at Oxford University. Candidates must be under 30 years old and come from British Commonwealth countries or South Africa. The scholarships were founded under the will of Cecil Rhodes, the empire builder who founded Rhodesia and died in 1902. His will stipulated that Rhodes Scholars should be males from the old colonies and the United States with a fondness for success in "manly sports." The winner of the "Rhodes visiting fellowship," to be introduced next year, will study and teach at Lady Margaret Hall.

Washington Post 27 November 1968.

Women were not eligible for full Rhodes Scholarships until 1977.

See also: Stent, Angela (1974). "The Women's Bid for a Rhodes." *Change* 6 (5), 13-16.

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But what the Trustees actually established were Rhodes "fellowships" for women, which were "separately administered," "financed from a special fund," and "in no way analogous to the Rhodes Scholarships."<sup>1</sup> In the words of Philip Ziegler, official historian of the Rhodes Trust, realising that "some sop would have to be thrown to the feminists," Rhodes House Warden Edgar Williams "devised and put to the Trustees a plan for Women's Visiting Fellowships, by which female graduates from Commonwealth universities would spend a year or two in the senior common room of one of the women's colleges at Oxford."<sup>2</sup>

But in 1977, the Rhodes Scholarships were made available to women and the founder of the Rhodes Project, to which I will now turn, applied.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations taken from Arlene Stent's "The Women's Bid for a Rhodes" in *Change* magazine, June 1974 (p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> See Ziegler's *Legacy: Cecil Rhodes, The Rhodes Trust, and Rhodes Scholarships* (p. 219) published in 2008.



The Rhodes Project  
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The research we're carrying out at the Rhodes Project tells us that, unlike Woolf's women students, our own have thousands of women to count on, women who teach, conduct research, and are administrators in the academy. Women who have the wealth to contribute to research on women. Women who, in occupying a range of professions and spaces of power, are not simply reproducing those spaces. They are fundamentally altering them.

The Rhodes Project is a privately funded research initiative based in London. It was established in 2004 to study the personal lives and career trajectories of the more than 1200 late-twentieth century professional women who, since 1977, have been awarded Rhodes Scholarships.

Notably, 38% of women Rhodes Scholars are academics.



38% of women Rhodes Scholars are employed in **academia**.

Rhodes Project Findings

My title, “a board room of one’s own?” is an oblique reference to Ann Olivarius, the benefactor of the Rhodes Project, herself a Rhodes Scholar (Connecticut & Somerville 1978), and therefore one of the subjects of our research. She does indeed have a board room of her own—several in fact-- in the middle of her law firm, where the Rhodes Project is based.



One of the ways that she has fundamentally altered the space of the law firm though is by situating a fully-stocked kitchen in the middle of it.



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In 2004, she founded the project, gave it a room of its own, and hired researchers who found contact addresses for an astonishing 376 (or 84%) of the 446 women worldwide who had won Rhodes Scholarship between 1977 and 1995.

On 5 July 2004, Olivarius wrote a personal letter to them all, asking them to fill out questionnaires and tell the project about their lives and career paths. Her three-page single spaced letter describes the impetus for the project, including its point of origin in a conversation she had had with a fellow Rhodes Scholar from Zimbabwe in which she described them both as “leading lives of our own design.”

According to the letter, her friend challenged her, “pointedly” asking “why then, when I allegedly believed in the equality of the sexes and had a politically correct husband, was I the primary caretaker of my children? Of the relatives he and I shared? Of my household? Of our social lives? Of our financial lives – especially as I had a career every bit as demanding as his.”

Ann continued, “she had hit the contradiction in my life square on the head. [...] These are bothersome questions. But these are also the questions of our generation.” “We are the first generation of women who could ‘have it all.’ But what do we have?” she asked.

Others with our backgrounds who happen to be male have been and are Senators, Supreme Court Justices, mayors, generals and even President of the United States. [...] So why are there few or no Rhodes women in these positions? Or are we there, and I just don’t know it?

The women responded in huge numbers. The first questionnaire had such a high response rate (56%) in fact that they sent out a second in April 2005. That questionnaire was detailed and asked questions about finances, health, career choices, politics, and sexuality.

The response rate for the second questionnaire was 31%. They then conducted interviews with 100 individual women. The Rhodes Project archive now includes transcripts of 80 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with this first generation of women Rhodes scholars, all of whom are now professional women: doctors, lawyers, neuroscientists, academics, living and working all over the world. I have just begun the process of interviewing a smaller sample of recent holders of the Scholarships so that we have a current cohort with whom to compare our earlier participants.



Answering Woolf's Question  
with Rhodes Women's Interviews

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What can the Rhodes Project interviews tell us that is relevant to feminism and academia and to the professional women that feminism and academia produces? That feminists in academia are not living in an age of austerity. We are living at a most extraordinary moment in history, a moment when a question Virginia Woolf asked in 1931 can finally be answered:

“The Angel was dead; what then remained? [...] What is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know.

I do not believe anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. [...]

That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here out of respect for you, who are in the process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are in the process of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of information.”

- Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1931)

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“Professions for Women”<sup>3</sup> is an abbreviated version of a speech Woolf gave before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service on January 21, 1931. Woolf’s speech anticipates our present historical moment, when, as Woolf could only dream about in 1931,

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<sup>3</sup> Note the reiteration of the much more infamous call, “Votes for Women.”

“there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant.” In addition to being doctors, lawyers, and civil servants, women Rhodes Scholars are research economists, legal scholars, professors of Economics, Physics, Cardiology, Biochemistry, International Relations and Psychiatry. They are Chief Executive Officers, Chief Operating Officers, and General Counsel, members of congress, journalists, teachers, surgeons and filmmakers. By these women’s “experiments,” Woolf says, “by their failures and successes,” they are in the process of showing us – “for the first time in history” – what a woman is.

Consider, for example, what this woman, the CEO of a very large technology company that is a household name, has to say about abundance:

You might try to take a small job, but it becomes a good job because your like, oh she’s good we will give her more to do and you’re someone who likes to get stuff done and the next thing you know you have a big job and you were trying to have a small job so that you could also paint, or you know, take your kids to playschool, whatever.

So I think that its that challenge that if you’re a natural leader which the Rhodes is.., people tend to gather towards you and you tend to be able to make lots of things happen, then this gravitational pull of more and more responsibility comes your way no matter where you go.

It doesn’t matter if you’re at university and you try to just be a professor and do your research and you end up having to be a provost, because people think you’re great and want you to run the university.

It could be in a company and you’re trying to have a small job and you end up doing two jobs, if somebody leaves, they’ll give that person’s job to you too.

So wherever you are you end up trying to get this balance, but because you have talent, charisma, whatever, stuff just comes your way.

Which is great if all you want is power and glory and to run the free world, but what if you’re trying to have balance?

- CEO of Large Technology Company that is a household name; Rhodes Scholar (1987)

Or what this woman, a Canadian, a judge on the court of appeal, who was awarded the Rhodes Scholarship in 1977, had to say when asked about her family’s reaction to her being awarded the scholarship:

On one level, they were obviously proud. I mean, one of the first things my father said to me when I came back home was, now no one will marry you.  
Their orientation was that it was inappropriate for a woman to go to university.

So I had all these degrees and from Oxford, you know, but I was never going to be what women are supposed to be.

- Judge, Court of Appeal, Canada; Rhodes Scholar (1977)

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This woman did go on to marry and raise four children while rising from university law professor to Judge.

Consider now what this woman, a philosophy professor, an American, the director of an Institute of Ethics from the class of 1983, had to say:

I saw these other people doing philosophy, and they were brilliant, and they should be doing philosophy, and I knew, well, I shouldn't use the word brilliant, they were just really good, and I was as good as them and I could see that.

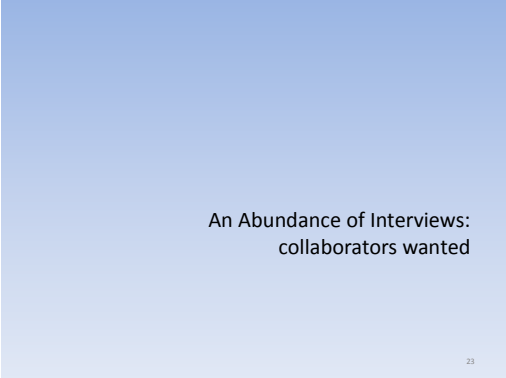
It felt exactly right.

I was doing really well in the DPhil as it turned out, and none of us were the next Kant or Wittgenstein. That was as equally obvious.

So I could recalibrate to a human scale, and that was a great lesson.

- Philosophy Professor, USA; Rhodes Scholar (1983)

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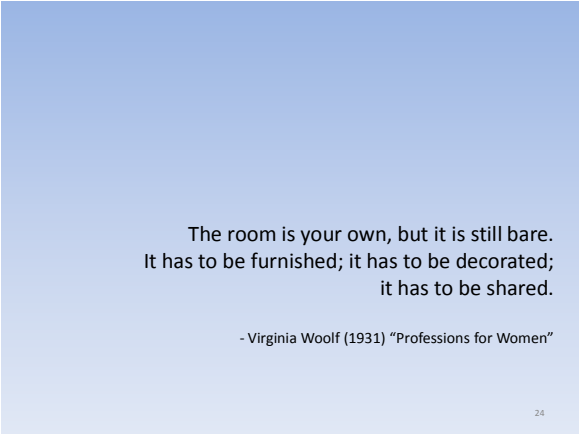


An Abundance of Interviews:  
collaborators wanted

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It is worth noting that these women with so much potential all find it necessary “recalibrate to a human scale.” They might be quite capable of running the free world but it’s not clear that many of them want to. They are, in overwhelming numbers, in committed relationships. Pace the rhetoric of “having it all,” they are finding ways to live their lives with integrity and generosity.

But these are just my first impressions after four months on the job. Much more needs to be done. In closing, let me turn to one final citation from Woolf’s “Professions for Women.”



The room is your own, but it is still bare.  
It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated;  
it has to be shared.

- Virginia Woolf (1931) “Professions for Women”

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If you’re interested in the questions raised in even this tantalizingly small sample from our interviews with women Rhodes Scholars and would be interested in joining our research team, please come and speak with me. Our Rhodes Room has to be shared too.

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