

Virginia Woolf's Rewriting of Victorian Women Writers' Lives

Anne Maria Reus

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds

Leeds Trinity University
School of Arts and Communication

April, 2018

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

The right of Anne Maria Reus to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

© 2018 The University of Leeds / Anne Maria Reus

Abstract:

This thesis examines Virginia Woolf's representation of the lives of nineteenth-century women writers in her journalism and essays. I study Woolf's lifelong engagement with Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, as well as her sporadic interest in Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant to reveal her enduring engagement with the Victorian period and complicate her famous feminist statement that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'. Woolf's literary criticism has a strong biographical component and often blends discussions of women's literary works with extensive examinations of women's historical and social circumstances. It is therefore perfectly situated for an analysis of the continued influence of Victorian biography and gender ideology on her writing.

Based on an analysis of Woolf's engagement with these writers' rich biographical afterlives, I argue that Woolf's responses to Victorian ideology are varied and complex, and range from the outright rejection of exemplary domesticity to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and limiting definitions of femininity. My thesis establishes that Woolf ignores changing modes of female authorship as well as the increasing professionalization of literature throughout the nineteenth century and instead prioritizes domestic amateur writers. While Woolf's engagement with early nineteenth-century writers like Austen and Mitford often revolves around an imaginative reconstruction of their lives, her attitude towards later, better-documented writers like Brontë and Eliot is more contentious and demonstrates that Woolf used her predecessors to position herself as a modern woman writer who is not limited by her gender.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
Abbreviations	6
Introduction	7
‘Those Many Women Who Cluster in the Shade’	10
‘That Perpetual Marriage of Granite and Rainbow’	23
‘A Supplement to History’	31
Thesis Outline	35
1. ‘Vain are these speculations’: Jane Austen	40
‘Dear Aunt Jane’	42
‘Jane Austen Over Again’	51
‘Jane Austen Practising’	57
‘Jane Austen at Sixty’	62
The <i>Common Reader</i> ‘Jane Austen’	68
<i>A Room of One’s Own</i>	71
‘The Coarseness of Jane Austen’	76
2. ‘Even a Lady Sometimes Raises her Voice’: Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning	79
Mary Russell Mitford	81
‘An Imperfect Lady’	85
‘A Good Daughter’	89
‘The Wrong Way of Reading’	94
Outlines	102
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	104
‘Poets’ Letters’	106
‘Aurora Leigh’	109
<i>Flush</i>	115
3. ‘That Indefinable Something’: Charlotte Brontë	125
‘Haworth, November 1904’	127
‘Charlotte Brontë’	134
‘One Must Be A Lady’	140
<i>A Room of One’s Own</i>	146

<i>Three Guineas</i>	153
4. ‘A Gap in your Library, Madam’: George Eliot, Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant	159
George Eliot	164
‘George Eliot’	167
‘The Calm Composure of Death’	174
<i>A Room of One’s Own</i>	177
‘The Compromise’: Mary Augusta Ward (1851-1920)	180
Enslaving her Intellectual Liberty: Margaret Oliphant	189
Conclusion	202
Bibliography	213

Abbreviations

All texts are by Virginia Woolf.

- 3G, AROO* *A Room of One's Own & Three Guineas*, ed. by Michèle Barrett, (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
- CSF* *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Harcourt, 1989)
- D* *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977-1982)
- E* *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie and Stuard N. Clarke, 6 vols. (London: Harcourt (1-4) / The Hogarth Press (5&6), 1986-2011)
- F* *Flush*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009)
- JR* *Jacob's Room*, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999)
- L* *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-80)
- MoB* *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002)
- MD* *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
- ND* *Night and Day*, ed. by Julia Briggs (London: Penguin Books, 1992)
- O* *Orlando*, ed. by Brenda Lyons (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
- PA* *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897-1909*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Pimlico, 2004)
- TL* *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Stella McNichol (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
- VO* *The Voyage Out* (London: Triad Grafton Books, 1978)
- WD* *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Leonard Woolf, Persephone Books (London, 2012)

Introduction

In 'Character in Fiction' (1924), Virginia Woolf declares that

on or around December 1910, human character changed.

I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered or a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that, but a change there was, nevertheless. (*E* 3.422)

Woolf also asserts this intangible shift in perception in her 'Old Bloomsbury' memoir club essay, written around the same time. There, she recalls Lytton Strachey pointedly asking Vanessa Bell if a stain on her dress was 'Semen?', thereby breaking with Victorian taboos surrounding sexuality (*MoB* 56). In both instances, Woolf is working to create a clear break between a long Victorian era and the gradually emerging movement of Modernism, which would transform visual arts, culture and literature. In 'Character in Fiction', Woolf therefore invokes Lytton Strachey's iconoclastic *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which radically dispensed with Victorian notions of greatness, and 'Old Bloomsbury' celebrates the freedom and liberation Woolf attained after escaping Hyde Park Gate and its Victorian conventionality.

By promoting the idea of a radical break between Victorian and Modernist thinking, Woolf obscures how strongly her own life and thinking are rooted in the nineteenth century. The idea of a complete division between two radically different periods maps neatly onto Woolf's reputation as a visionary modernist novelist, experimental biographer and celebrated essayist of the 1920s, but breaks down with a closer consideration of her long and productive career. Woolf's career as a professional writer began with journalism: from 1904 onwards, she contributed reviews and articles to a range of publications including the respectable *Times Literary Supplement*, but also mass market publications like *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping Magazine*. More conventional in form and content than her fiction, Woolf's earliest articles are in direct dialogue with Victorian criticism, and Victorian influences continue to survive in her work long past the end of the period. Celebrated essays like those collected in the *Common Reader Series* (1925, 1932) or *A Room of One's Own* (1929) therefore only represent a small part of her non-fictional output

and are not always representative of Woolf's varied and changeable critical positions over the course of her long career.

As a vastly understudied body of work, Woolf's journalism therefore offers an opportunity to interrogate commonly held assumptions about her Modernism, but it also allows a closer study of her often celebrated feminism by offering a chance to study her engagement with Victorian women writers outside *A Room of One's Own* with its dominant narrative of women's suffering under domestic oppression. Many of Woolf's articles began as reviews of biographies or centenary celebrations and blend literary criticism with a strong interest in women writers' lives. Her journalism therefore makes it possible to trace the development of her ideas as well as her responses to individual writers over the course of her career and allows a detailed examination of Woolf's reaction to changing conceptions of female authorship over the course of the nineteenth century.

In her articles on women writers, just as in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf frequently draws on biography, yet few critics have considered the impact of this ephemeral genre on writers' literary afterlives: a study of the role of Victorian biography in Woolf's engagement with Victorian women writers is therefore long overdue. In this thesis, I will examine Woolf's representations of nineteenth century women writers in a series of case studies, focussing on her lifelong engagement with Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, as well as her essays on Mary Russell Mitford, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant. Each of these writers possesses a rich biographical afterlife dating from the Victorian period, which will allow me to focus on Woolf's varying responses to Victorian conceptions of female authorship and women's writing over the course of her career, and show that Woolf's position as a feminist, essayist and a modernist is more complex than commonly assumed.

I will begin my examination of Woolf's interest in Victorian women writers' lives with a chapter on the various forms Woolf's engagement with biography and life-writing takes over the course of her career. Woolf's reputation as a biographer rests largely on experimental, semi-fictional works such as *Orlando* (1928) and the programmatic essay 'The New Biography'. Thus, Max Saunders argues that 'Of all modernist engagements with life-writing, Virginia Woolf's is the most visible, and her work represents the most sustained and diverse exploration of the relation

between fiction and auto/biography'.¹ In this chapter, however, I will argue that Woolf's engagement with biography is a life-long project with Victorian origins: it predates her Modernist biography and endures long beyond the 1920s. I will draw on Woolf's earliest short stories ('Phyllis and Rosamond'; 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' and 'Friendship's Gallery' (all 1906); and 'Memoirs of a Novelist' (1909)) to show that much of her thinking on history, biography and women's lives develops as a feminist response to Victorian approaches to biography. These stories already introduce the two main impulses that govern Woolf's interest in biography: the political significance of chronicling women's lives and a strong fascination with character and personality. Both dominate her engagement with biography at different points of her career: while the New Biography of the 1920s revolves around personality, a desire to present a collective biography of English women's lives becomes the driving force behind the feminist polemics *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Moving through Woolf's career from her earliest short stories to the works of the late thirties, I will map out the different forces shaping her responses to biography, and ultimately lay the foundations for a closer examination of Woolf's uses of biography in her representations of Victorian women writers.

¹ Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 438.

‘Those Many Women Who Cluster in the Shade’

Virginia Woolf’s interest in biography and life-writing predates her Modernist experiments by two decades: from 1904 onwards, biography becomes a central interest in her professional and private life and consequently, her earliest theories on the topic develop in direct response to Victorian influences. She reviewed biographies and memoirs with increasing frequency, and therefore had ample opportunity to reflect on the purpose and value of life-writing; and structured her history lectures at Morley College in 1905 around representative scenes, thus linking national history with individual lives.² Most importantly, however, her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, biographer and former editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, died in 1904; and one of Woolf’s first forays into professional authorship consisted in assisting Frederic Maitland, a historian, in writing the *Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen* (1906). Much of Woolf’s work for Maitland consisted of editorial assistance in tracking down dates, letters and articles and selecting extracts from Stephen’s correspondence with his wife Julia, which Maitland considered too private to read. She also contributed a brief note, ‘Impressions of Sir Leslie Stephen’, in which she recalls Stephen as a caring and literature-loving father. However, Stephen’s ‘violent temper’ towards the female members of his family, which Woolf would dissect at length in *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and *A Sketch of the Past* (*MoB* 117), is entirely absent from these accounts of his life. As a fundamentally commemorative work, Maitland’s biography was written with an emphasis on family approval and discretion, especially when private correspondence was involved. His unwillingness to credit and include reports of Stephen’s temper is therefore a reminder of the ethics of Victorian biography: its purpose was public commemoration rather than salacious insights into the private life of a great figure.

As a result of this varied backdrop of biographical activity, the question of private and public lives, and the importance of creating a written record for posterity are at the centre of Woolf’s early fiction. Her earliest preserved short story, ‘Phyllis and Rosamond’, dated June 1906, begins with a conscious consideration of the purpose of biography and history:

² Susan David Bernstein, *Roomscape: Women Writers in the British Museum from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013), p. 152.

In this very curious age, when we are beginning to require pictures of people, their minds and their coats, a faithful outline, drawn with no skill but veracity, may possibly have some value. Let each man, I heard it said the other day, write down the details of a day's work; posterity will be as glad of the catalogue as we should be if we had such a record of how the door keeper at the Globe, and the man who kept the Park gates passed Saturday March 18th in the year of our Lord 1568. (CSF 17)

Woolf's interest in chronicles of ordinary lives is also evident in 'The Journal of Mistress Martyn', written in August of the same year: here, it is the historian Rosamond Merridew who introduces speculative sketches of 'the life of the time' into her research upon the system of medieval land tenure; arguing that insights into individual lives are crucial to make a period come to life:

A sudden light upon the legs of Dame Elizabeth Partridge sends its beams over the whole state of England, the King upon his throne; she wanted stockings! and no other need impresses you in quite the same way with the reality of mediaeval bodies, and so, proceeding upward step by step, with the reality of mediaeval brains; and there you stand at the centre of all ages: middle beginning or end. (CSF 34)

Woolf's stories argue for an understanding of history as an accumulation of the lives of ordinary people, not great men: only the 'faithful chronicle' of individual lives lets the reader really inhabit the past.

Woolf's emphasis on the central importance of obscure lives to national history provides a strong link to Leslie Stephen's philosophy. As editor of George Smith's *Dictionary of National Biography* from its inception in 1882 until 1891, Stephen played a prominent part in shaping late-Victorian discourses on national biography. While his co-editor Sidney Lee pursued a traditional approach focussed on the commemoration of distinguished men, Juliette Atkinson argues that Stephen represented a more inclusive approach to national biography and his editorship resulted in making the *Dictionary of National Biography* 'a homage to mediocre, second-rate and neglected lives'.³ In his 1898 essay on 'National Biography',

³ Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), p. 222.

Stephen suggests that ‘every individual life is to some extent an indication of the historical conditions of his time’:

It is the second-rate people – the people whose lives have to be reconstructed from obituary notices, or from references in memoirs and collections of letters; or sought in prefaces to posthumous works; or sometimes painfully dug out of collections of manuscripts, and who really become generally accessible through the dictionary alone – that provide the really useful reading.⁴

However, Stephen also argues for further moral reasons for acknowledging ordinary lives. In an essay on ‘Forgotten Benefactors’ (1896), Stephen suggests that ‘we habitually under-estimate the enormous value of the services, whether of man or woman, done in the shade, and confined within a very limited area’.⁵ Partially a veiled tribute to his recently deceased wife Julia, who represented ‘the ideal – the type which reconciles all the conditions of human life, physical and moral – the “perfect woman”’, the essay celebrates domestic sacrifices performed by ‘people condemned, or perhaps I should say privileged, to live in obscurity, whose very names shall soon be forgotten, and who are entirely eclipsed by people whose services, though not equally valuable, are by their nature more public’.⁶ Stephen therefore distances his recognition of women’s domestic contributions from ‘any theory of women’s rights’ and instead praises the superior morality of obscurity. As Atkinson argues, his aim is neither to transgress social boundaries nor change the status quo:

Stephen presents a very reassuring picture of the act of resurrecting hidden lives, where individuals cooperate rather than struggle. There is no sense that drawing attention to the obscure might destabilize social boundaries, just as there is no conception that in having attention paid to them, the obscure will transcend their condition.⁷

⁴ Leslie Stephen, ‘National Biography’, in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1898), I, pp. 1–36 (p. 12, p. 21).

⁵ Leslie Stephen, ‘Forgotten Benefactors’, in *Social Rights and Duties* (London: Schwan, Sonnenschein & Co., 1896), II, pp. 225–67 (p. 251).

⁶ Stephen, ‘Forgotten Benefactors’, pp. 245–6.

⁷ Atkinson, p. 239.

Ultimately, therefore, Leslie Stephen expands the focus of Victorian national biography to include a wider portion of the population, but fails to see biography as a tool of political significance.

Woolf clearly draws on Stephen's approach to biography in her early stories, but adds an explicitly political dimension: in a feminist revision of his conception of biography as a supplement to history, her early stories address and attempt to remedy the historical neglect of women. Thus, 'Phyllis and Rosamond' argues that

as such portraits as we have are almost invariably of the male sex, who strut more prominently across the stage, it seems worth while to take as model one of those many women who cluster in the shade. For a study of history and biography convinces any right minded person that these obscure figures occupy a place not unlike that of the showman's hand in the dance of the marionettes; and the finger is laid upon the heart. (*CSF* 17)

Woolf defends her decision to write the lives of two daughters of the Edwardian middle class by a subversive use of Victorian anti-suffragist rhetoric: women's domestic influence, previously invoked to exclude them from public life and politics, is now used by Woolf to argue for their historical significance.⁸ Woolf's commitment to demonstrating the limitations and frustrations of such a domestic existence cause her to confidently reject the lives of two professional daughters because 'their careers have so much likeness to those of men themselves that it is scarcely worth while to make them the subject of special enquiry' (*CSF* 18).

Similarly, Stephen's autobiographical focus is complemented by Woolf's own: thus, Anna Snaith situates the story 'at the intersection of autobiography, biography and history and sociology. Woolf fictionalizes fragments of her own life *and* a representative English, upper-middle-class woman's life in 1906 through a conceptualized and an actual crossover between fact and fiction'.⁹ Where Stephen eulogized his wife's conformity to the ideal of the Angel in the House, Woolf clearly draws on her own experience when she juxtaposes the intellectual starvation and

⁸ Valerie Sanders discusses this particular type of anti-suffragist rhetoric in *Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 17-19.

⁹ Anna Snaith, "My Poor Private Voice": Virginia Woolf and Auto/Biography', in *Representing Lives: Women and Autobiography*, ed. by Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 96-104 (p. 98).

tedium of ‘daughters at home’ with the freedoms of Bloomsbury. Ultimately, the story emphasizes the apparently unbridgeable gap between those two worlds. Phyllis and Rosamond fail to rise to the intellectual challenges of a party in Bloomsbury, and their struggles are met with incomprehension by their hostess: although she is a writer with ‘a literary delight in seeing herself reflected in strange looking-glasses, and of holding up her own mirror to the lives of others [...] she had never considered the Hibberts as human beings before; but had called them “young ladies”’ (*CSF* 26). Likewise, Phyllis’ honest self-examination only results in a resigned acceptance of her inability to change her situation: ‘what did she really want, she asked herself? What was she fit for? to criticise both worlds and feel that neither gave her what she needed’ (*CSF* 28).

A desire to document and recover women’s lives through ‘strange-looking glasses’ also motivates Woolf’s approach in ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, which links the exploration of domestic life through the fictive medieval diary of Joan Martyn with an exploration of the modern professional life of historian Rosamond Merridew. Like ‘Phyllis and Rosamond’, the story works as partially autobiographical fiction: thus, Katherine Hill suggests that Leslie Stephen envisioned his daughter as a future biographer and historian.¹⁰ This familial expectation recurs in Woolf’s complaint that

I got sat upon as usual by the Quaker – (who thinks it right to criticise her relations, and never to praise them) for ‘journalism’ – She thinks I am going to sell my soul for gold, which I should willingly do for gold enough, and wants me to write a solid historical work!! (*L* 1.166)

The extensive frame narrative of ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’, which details Rosamond Merridew’s professional struggles in a male-dominated discipline therefore gains additional significance as Woolf’s tentative imagining and rejection of a potential future. Woolf explores the role she could play as a female historian in restoring women’s lives to national history, but also, as Caroline Smith and Heidi Stalla have noted, showcases her skills by drawing on her extensive research on the

¹⁰ Katherine C. Hill, ‘Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution’, *PMLA*, 96.3 (1981), 351–62 (pp. 351-55).

real-life counterpart of her fictional Martyn Hall, Blo' Norton Hall and its previous tenants.¹¹

In this story, Woolf extends her feminist revision of Stephen's national biography to his friend and biographer Frederic Maitland. Leena Kore-Schröder suggests that Maitland, a legal historian with a strong interest in medieval lives as documented in court roles, served as 'a historiographical model which strongly inspired and supported' Woolf's work, and argues that 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' is

[h]alf-tribute, half-joke, the story is inspired by affection for an admired friend, (and he was a very close one) in the same way that the contemporaneous 'Friendship's Gallery' is written for Violet Dickinson, and much later, *Orlando* for Vita Sackville-West.¹²

However, Woolf deviates from Maitland's model in some important respects, suggesting that her story is a revision, not a tribute. She imagines a female historian, Rosamond Merridew, and uses her to draw attention to the customary exclusion of women from historical narratives, deliberately writing Maitland out of his own speciality in an attempt to reclaim part of the public narrative of history for women. Woolf's choice of document further supports this reading: she focuses on the private diary, chronicling the life of an obscure woman, not the official medieval court roll, which was Maitland's specialty, and privileges women's domestic lives over male, public forms of writing. 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' therefore is, as Laura Lojo-Rodriguez asserts, the starting point of 'a consistent, lifelong project to reach behind the traditional models of masculine education which dominated the literary world in which she lived'.¹³

Woolf's early short stories show her rejecting the examples of male models of writing and thinking, instead aiming to find a more congenial way of exploring

¹¹ Heidi Stalla, 'The Play of Fact and Fiction in Virginia Stephen's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn"', in *Virginia Woolf and Heritage: Selected Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane de Gay, Tom Breckin, and Anne Reus (Clemson, SC: Clemson UP, 2017). Catherine F. Smith, 'Histories of a House', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 18 (1982), 2 (p. 2).

¹² Lena Kore-Schröder, 'Who's Afraid of Rosamond Merridew?: Reading Medieval History in "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn"', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 50 (2008) <<http://jsse.revues.org/719>> [accessed 12 January 2015] (paragraph 8, paragraph 12).

¹³ Laura Lojo-Rodriguez, 'Virginia Woolf's Female History in "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn"', *Short Story*, 16.1 (2008), 73-86 (p. 74).

women's lives; and despite the historical and biographical influence of Stephen and Maitland, Woolf's experiments are in fiction, or at the very least generically ambiguous in their reworking of factual evidence, preferring fictional characters and documents over pure history and autobiography. Like her historian Rosamond Merridew, who defends her imaginative restoration of medieval lives by exclaiming, 'Let me draw a line here then so— and put the whole of this question of right and wrong, truth and fiction behind me' (*CSF* 35), Woolf blends fact and fiction in her chronicles of women's lives, suggesting that fictionality and authenticity are not mutually exclusive, and facts not always the best representation of life. This sustained interest in finding a new form of fictional biography therefore demonstrates that Woolf's later advocacy for a more experimental approach to life-writing in the later 'The New Biography' is not solely a Modernist breakthrough. Instead, it builds on a long history of biographical experimentation that begins in the wake of the Victorian period and continues under its influence.

Woolf's experiments in historical fiction are supplemented by a brief venture into biography with 'Friendship's Gallery' (1907), a comical life of Violet Dickinson in three chapters. As a literary tribute to a close female friendship, it is also an important precursor to *Orlando*. Woolf's use of satirical biography and literary romance, hyperbole and fairy tale suggests the liberating power of fictional discourses: 'Friendship's Gallery' represents a move towards the prioritization of character over external facts and historical research; and substitutes a distinctly female way of life writing for the male Victorian influence of the previous two stories. Throughout the biography, Woolf consistently contrasts the actual reality of Dickinson's life with the expectations shaped by romantic fiction and traditional narratives of women's lives:

For when you are writing the life of a woman you should surely begin
Her First Season
and leave such details as birth parentage education and the first
seventeen years of her life to be taken to granted. [...] But then this
biography is not a novel, but a sober chronicle; and if Life will begin
seventeen years before it is needed, it is our task to say so valiantly
and make the best of it. (*E* 6.523)

Dividing Dickinson's life into three chapters – her life up to her first season, the purchase of a house, and travels to Japan – Woolf emphasizes freedom, female friendships and independence instead of Dickinson's failure to adhere to the conventional narrative of marriage and children. In Woolf's hands, Dickinson's purchase of a cottage introduces a 'momentous change' (*E* 6.528) and proves that fulfilment and independence were attainable to Victorian women outside of the narrow pattern of family life prescribed by novels and social expectations, thereby supporting Woolf's demand for more varied and lifelike narratives in fiction and biography.

This criticism of inadequate life narratives forms part of a larger dissection of the genre of biography. Woolf visually aligns her manuscript with the typographical conventions of biography by omitting the full versions of names and places, and humorously appeals to the reader's imagination to substitute the chapters of incident and character development lacking from her narrative: 'From this bald and hasty paragraph a person of discrimination will construct whole chapters which I have no time to write out' (*E* 6.524). However, she also begins a more serious discussion of biography as an inadequate medium for the representation of personality and character. Thus, in a moment of meta-biographical discourse, Woolf's narrator complains that

Often she [my heroine] has whisked behind a paragraph and it was only when I had done it and set it in its place in the pile raised in her honour that I discovered that she was behind and not in front; that I had made a screen and no pane of glass. (*E* 6.534)

Casting her biography as a tribute, however comical in nature, Woolf introduces one of her most enduring criticisms of biographical writing: hagiographic and clichéd, it often fails to lead to a better understanding of its subject due to the ineptitude of the biographer. However, Woolf's certainty of Dickinson's presence as a coherent, knowable subject, even if obscured by language, also demonstrates that her theory of biography had not yet reached the uncertainty inherent in Orlando's 'many thousand' selves (*O* 213) or the 'fifty pairs of eyes' needed to see Mrs Ramsay (*TL* 214): if the biographer could only find the right words, Violet Dickinson would appear clearly to her readers.

Woolf's private, experimental writing in 1906 clearly revolved around the political significance of the representation of women, but the meta-biographical commentary of 'Friendship's Gallery' points forwards to her increasing interest in uncovering the fundamental shortcomings of the genre, extensively addressed in 'Memoirs of a Novelist' (1909), unsuccessfully written for publication in the *Cornhill Magazine*. As the review of the fictional biography of an invented Victorian novelist, 'Memoirs of a Novelist' exceeds the generic ambiguity of her earlier stories and continues her exploration of women's representation. Additionally, Woolf draws on her now substantial experience as a literary critic to discuss the problems of popular biography by sketching the fictional but realistic life of Miss Willatt, a minor writer of popular Victorian novels, whose clichéd biography is ineptly written by an admiring friend. Miss Willatt's early life – her lack of beauty as well as excessive learning, a period of strong religiosity, and a move to London following her father's death – appears to be inspired by George Eliot, but Woolf turns to satire by making Miss Willatt a mediocre novelist and an expert on the soul surrounded by a group of female admirers, one of which is her biographer Miss Linsett.

Although 'Memoirs of a Novelist' shares some key features with Woolf's previous stories, such as generic ambiguity and a preoccupation with women's lives, Woolf is notably less optimistic about the value of biography and the insight to be gained from recording Miss Willatt's life. Where 'Phyllis and Rosamond' and 'The Journal of Joan Martyn' had suggested that past life and experience could be recovered through the simple solution of truthfully recording them, Woolf now complicates this straightforward approach to obscurity: 'Memoirs of a Novelist' questions the possibility of ever properly capturing personality in a conventional and respectfully superficial biography. The fictional reviewer draws attention to the flaws of Miss Linsett's biography, which conceals as much as it reveals, and attacks its silence on Miss Willatt's disappointments in love: 'The most interesting event in Miss Willatt's life, owing to the nervous prudery and the dreary literary conventions of her friend, is thus a blank' (*CSF* 73). Conventionality also impacts Miss Linsett's language, which consists largely of clichés hiding Miss Willatt's true personality:

Although she felt his (her father's) death with the tenderness of a devoted daughter, she did not give way to useless and therefore selfish repining. [...] 'The poor, it might be said, took the place to her of her

own children.’ To pick out such phrases is an easy way of satirising them, but the steady drone of the book in which they are embedded makes satire an afterthought; it is the fact that Miss Linsett believed these things and not the absurdity of them that dismays one. She believed at any rate that one should admire such virtues and attribute them to one’s friend both for their sake and for one’s own. (*CSF* 74)

Woolf’s attack on Miss Linsett’s hagiography echoes her critique of conventional narratives of women’s lives in ‘Friendship’s Gallery’ and emphasizes again that a new way of writing about women had to be found. Additionally, her discontent with language itself, only hinted at in the previous piece, is now made explicit. The essay’s quest for the fictional Miss Willatt relies instead on non-verbal clues. The internal contradictions, silences and gaps of Miss Linsett’s narrative as well as a portrait provide the only clue towards Miss Willatt’s true personality: ‘The sight of that large, selfish face, with the capable forehead and the surly but intelligent eyes discredits all the platitudes on the opposite page; she looks quite capable of having deceived Miss Linsett’ (*CSF* 74). These criticisms of the genre will recur throughout Woolf’s career, not only explicitly in ‘The New Biography’ and ‘The Art of Biography’, which I will discuss next, but also in her essays on the unknowability of Jane Austen’s true personality, Mary Russell Mitford’s disappearance behind her biographer’s inept platitudes, or the solid shrine with which John Cross cemented George Eliot’s reputation as a dull and humourless woman.

Most importantly, however, Woolf complicates the ideas of obscurity and recovery that had appeared straightforward in her previous stories. The belief that recording the lives of Joan, Rosamond and Phyllis would restore them to history is central to her early stories. However, in ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ Woolf questions this assumption: Miss Willatt is unknowable although her life has been recorded in a biography. With her death, access to her innermost self and true feelings has been lost forever, but additionally, the narrator notes that ‘it does not seem, to judge by appearances, that the world has so far made use of its right to know about Miss Willatt’ (*CSF* 70): although she lived in the recent Victorian past and her *Memoir* is more easily accessible than Joan’s private diary, Miss Willatt has faded from public consciousness and is unlikely to return from obscurity because no one is interested in her life. ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ therefore takes a more sombre tone than Woolf’s

previous exercises in life-writing. Woolf asserts that merely recording obscure lives neither guarantees a return to public awareness, nor a real knowledge of the subject's personality. Like Leslie Stephen's apolitical appreciation of domestic obscurity, the aimless writing of biographies does not lead to any meaningful engagement with the past. Woolf's story therefore contains an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of a political impulse driving engagement with biography, yet paradoxically, Miss Willatt's impenetrable obscurity makes her much more fascinating to Woolf than any real and well-documented popular Victorian novelists could be. Her mystery and the unconfirmable open-endedness of her character allow Woolf to explore more abstract questions of representation instead of focussing on the implications of her literary choices. This is in strong contrast to her reaction of actual popular novelists like Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant: as chapter 4 will show, Woolf reacts with strong rejection and condemnation to writers who chose to write for the wrong market and finds little to appreciate or discover in their lives and character.

In addition to this discussion of biography, Woolf's introduction of a Victorian novelist also marks a more decided turn towards literary traditions and female predecessors specifically. Given that she would start work on *Melymbrosia* the year after, Woolf's brief consideration of women's writing strongly foreshadows the direction her own interests was to take:

After all, merely to sit with your eyes open fills the brain, and perhaps in emptying it, one may come across something illuminating. George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë between them must share the parentage of many novels at this period, for they disclose the secret that the precious stuff of which books are made lies all about one, in drawing-rooms and kitchens where women live, and accumulates with every tick of the clock. (*CSF* 75)

Woolf confidently sketches out the future domain of her own writing, life itself. While her strong rejection of Victorian biography, by now representative of bad biography, suggests a wish to change the future of biography into a different course, this tentative expression of a strong tradition of Victorian women's writing suggests that Woolf was beginning to look back in a search for her own origins. Some of this interest also resurfaces in her reviews of the next decade: many of the later *Common*

Reader essays, especially those on Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë, are based on long centenary essays and reviews of major biographies written around this time. Like her search for the fictional Miss Willatt, they are shaped by Woolf's attempt to reconstruct these writers' personalities, suggesting that her search for her predecessors revolved strongly around establishing a posthumous personal connection with them.

Woolf also revisits and reworks many of the themes that dominated her fictional experiments of the 1910s in *Night and Day* (1919). Her analysis of the impact of the Victorian poet Richard Alardyce's legacy of greatness on the Hilbery family fuses her previous semi-autobiographical approach to women's domestic lives with a closer examination of the commemoration of great men of letters and their legacies. In Mrs Hilbery, Woolf draws a thinly-veiled portrait of her step-aunt Anny Thackeray Ritchie, and the Hilberys' social prominence has strong similarities to the Stephen family's position in late-Victorian literary circles.¹⁴ Woolf fictionalizes these autobiographical elements to explore the family's suspension between Victorian traditions and the potential of new, as yet unexplored and unimagined ways of living: as Mary Jean Corbett notes, Woolf's critique of marriage participates in the debates of much late-Victorian and New Woman fiction, but does not yet move beyond it.¹⁵ While Katharine Hilbery escapes from Alardyce's suffocating legacy through a conventional marriage resolution, Woolf's portrait of Mrs Hilbery's creative paralysis is more pessimistic. Trapped in her role of witness to her father's greatness, her futile attempts to write his biography consume her life and keep her fixated in a position of daughterly admiration. This allows Woolf to address the fundamental flaws of traditional biography, which aims to present an idealized and censored image appropriate for public consumption instead of granting a true insight into subject's personality and life. Alardyce's semi-public shrine at the Hilberys' house therefore exists in constant contrast with his daughter's private memories. Her parents' unhappy marriage, her mother's 'reckless existence' and her father's

¹⁴ Julia Briggs, 'Introduction to *Night and Day*', Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. xiv–xvii. Briggs also suggests that Katharine and Ralph's courtship plot can be read as Woolf's response to, and reworking of, Leonard Woolf's depiction of their own courtship and marriage in *The Wise Virgins* (1914).

¹⁵ Mary Jean Corbett, 'Behind the Times? Virginia Woolf and the Third Generation', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 60.1 (2014), 27–58 (p. 41).

alcoholism, and his subsequent existence as irreproachable but uninspired poet, are omnipresent but unspeakable memories for Mrs Hilbery:

For its own sake, Katharine rather liked this tragic story, and would have been glad to hear the details of it, and to have been able to discuss them frankly. But this became less and less possible to do, for though Mrs Hilbery was constantly reverting to the story, it was always in this tentative and restless fashion, as though by a touch here and there she could set things straight which had been crooked these sixty years. (*ND* 83)

In Mrs Hilbery's constant failure to write this truer version of her father's life, Woolf presents a satirical comment on Anny Thackeray Ritchie's inability to write about her father's life and equally unhappy marriage: forbidden to write his life by Thackeray himself, Ritchie resorted to a more fragmentary mode of paying tribute to his genius through a series of biographical introduction to his works. Woolf emphasized the impossibility of establishing a real connection under the censorship of conventional morality by using Alardyce's portrait, and not Mrs Hilbery's many memories, as catalyst of a moment of true understanding for Katharine:

He would have understood, she thought, suddenly; and instead of laying her withered flowers upon his shrine, she brought him her own perplexities – perhaps a gift of greater value, should the dead be conscious of gifts, than flowers and incense and adoration. (*ND* 271)

This search for a brief glimpse of true character, and a sense of connection across time, points to the direction which Woolf's interest in biography would take. As my discussion will show, with the *New Biography* of the 1920s, Woolf largely abandons the search for women's hidden lives and turns towards an exploration of the problem of presenting character with truthfulness in biographical writing.

‘That Perpetual Marriage of Granite and Rainbow’

In the 1920s and 1930s, biographical discourses changed radically: the rise of literary Modernism and the widespread popularity of the genre combined to produce a number of changes in biographical theory and practice. Frequently named the New Biography after Woolf’s 1927 essay, the key characteristics of this movement are summarized by Laura Marcus as

a new equality between biographer and subject, by contrast with the hero-worship and hagiography of Victorian eulogistic biography; brevity, selection, and an attention to form traditionally associated with fiction rather than history; the discovery of central motifs in a life and of a “key” to personality, so that single aspects of the self or details of the life and person came to stand for or to explain the whole; and a focus on character rather than events.¹⁶

While the vast majority of biographical writing is for a popular audience and without lasting literary impact, the majority of critics distinguish The New Biography as a genuine literary movement driven by artistic convictions and a vision for the future of biographical writing.

Woolf’s biggest contributions to this discussion are ‘The New Biography’, *Orlando* and *Flush* (1933). ‘The New Biography’ is a programmatic essay that offers a theoretical framework for the blend of fact and fiction which had characterized her earlier short stories; and *Orlando* and *Flush* put these theories into practice. Despite the long history and Victorian roots of her own biographical experiments, Woolf uses ‘The New Biography’ to stake out a new territory for herself and fellow biographers and claims a radical break with the Victorian past. Quoting *DNB* editor Sidney Lee’s claim that biography’s aim is the ‘truthful transmission of character’ (*E* 4.473), Woolf begins her essay by demonstrating the inherent contradiction of his statement:

if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that

¹⁶ Laura Marcus, ‘The Newness of the “New Biography”’: Biographical Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century’, in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. by William St. Clair and Peter France, British Academy Centenary Monographs (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 193–218 (p. 196).

the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (E 4.473)

‘The New Biography’ represents a clear shift in Woolf’s priorities: while her earlier interest had been quasi-historical and focuses on leaving a record of representative ordinary lives, the preservation of character is now at the centre of her interest. Her polemical history of biography focuses on the obstinacy of Victorian biographers, who failed to learn from the masterful characterization of Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Victorian biography is a ‘parti-coloured, hybrid, monstrous, birth’: extensively researched, it presents ‘truth in its hardest, most obdurate form’, but the reader’s quest for an authentic self at the core of this ‘amorphous mass’ of information is likely to end in failure (E 4.473). Woolf links this lack of real insight with her previous criticisms of Victorian hagiography in ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ and *Night and Day*: a desire for respectability and conventional morality produce great men ‘above life size in top hat and frock coat’ for public veneration (E 4.475) and keep reader and biographer in an attitude of respectful veneration.

Woolf’s New Biography is mainly defined in opposition to this Victorian ‘artistic wrongheadedness’: her biographer ‘preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgement’ and becomes a true artist through the use of novelistic strategies and the synthesis of meaningful moments into a representative whole, thereby assuring the ‘queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow’ (E 4.478) which promised factual veracity as well as intense personality. This new theory of biography is perfectly suited to explaining Woolf’s method in *Orlando*. ‘[A] biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called *Orlando: Vita* [Sackville-West]; only with a change from one sex to another’ (WD 116), *Orlando* is designed to flout biographical conventions. Woolf questions fundamental concepts such as time, gender and the span of a human life, all of which used to provide the stable basis of biography. Likewise, she prioritizes character and atmosphere over facts: Orlando shares important personality traits with Vita Sackville-West, but also experiences defining moments in the lives of her ancestors and British literary history. Additionally, Woolf complicates her previous reliance on portraits to establish a meaningful connection that bypasses biography: *Orlando*’s illustrations make use of a range of

portraits and photographs of Sackville-West and other people to represent Orlando at various life stages and playfully undermine the reader's assumption of a stable relationship between personality and external appearance. However, *Orlando* also demonstrates the limitations of Woolf's New Biography. Despite the exalted position of the new biographer, external cultural and social constraints continued to limit what could be put in writing: Woolf's use of fantasy and fiction therefore also serve as a disguise for Sackville-West's extra-marital lesbian affairs. Additionally, *Orlando* reveals how the newly emancipated biographer could become a threat to the biographical subject. Thus, Suzanne Raitt notes that Woolf assumed her position as editor of Sackville-West's life just when their affair began to decline: '*Orlando* at once mourned the death of Sackville-West's fidelity and punished her by ousting her from the centre of her own life'.¹⁷

Furthermore, the question of the wider applicability of Woolf's theory remains: notably, Woolf concludes 'The New Biography' by judging that Harold Nicholson's semi-fictional *Some People* (1927) falls short of her visionary requirements, leaving her its only true representative. Woolf's New Biography responds to problems of characterization and the representation of consciousness that also reappear in her novels of the 1920s, such as the central mystery of Jacob's inner life in *Jacob's Room* (1922), the inadequacy of strictly linear forms of life-writing, hinted at in Woolf's skilful fusion of past and present in Clarissa Dalloway's experience of daily life, and the delicate balance of autobiographical commemoration and literary innovation that characterizes *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Woolf's fiction therefore demonstrates innovative ways of resolving some of these problems, but critics rarely acknowledge that the majority of her journalism from the period remains formally conservative and fails to implement the New Biography's radical new methods. As I will show in the following chapters, Woolf's articles on nineteenth century women writers frequently contain brief biographical sketches, but these remain conventionally factual and rarely explore creative ways of writing lives.

Additionally, the question of the absolute novelty of Woolf's method remains: while 'The New Biography' argues for an absolute division between Victorian biography and Woolf's modernist experiments, this is clearly not reflective of her own development. Despite being rooted in late-Victorian biographical

¹⁷ Suzanne Raitt, *Vita & Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 29-40, quotation on p. 34.

discourse, Woolf's earliest experiments in fiction already explore the potential of generically ambiguous fictional biography. Both as a biographical tribute and as a satirical biography, 'Friendship's Gallery' is a clear predecessor of *Orlando* and provides an early example of the freeing potential of a fictionalized mode of narration: Woolf's *New Biography* is therefore merely a more sustained exploration of the same impulse. Likewise, Victorian biography was not always as monolithically hagiographic as Woolf suggests: while *Orlando* is undeniably a uniquely challenging and successful experiment in fictionalized biography, biographical conventions began to gradually change from the late-Victorian period to Woolf's modernist experiments in the 1920s.

Instead, Woolf's protest serves as a public severing of ties with her own late-Victorian biographical origins, Leslie Stephen and the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf's opening quote on the 'truthful transmission of character' is taken from Sidney Lee's 'Principles of Biography' (1911) and is doubly representative of Stephen: Lee was his co-editor, but his essay was also first delivered as the annual Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge. Choosing a late-Victorian and Edwardian biographer over more conservative mid-Victorian ones therefore required Woolf to manipulate Lee into becoming a representative of hagiographic Victorian biography: thus, Ray Monk notes that Woolf misrepresents Lee's central argument and crucially omits the beginning of his sentence, which specifies that 'The aim of biography is not the moral edification which may flow from the survey of either vice or virtue; it is the truthful transmission of personality'.¹⁸ Likewise, Laura Marcus notes that the *Dictionary of National Biography's* editorial policy, demanding 'No flowers by request' as well as 'concision, candour, and analysis and synthesis rather than the accumulation of facts' is not too far removed from the qualities Woolf endorses in 'The New Biography'.¹⁹ Woolf therefore rewrites late-Victorian biographical history in an attempt to reject Leslie Stephen's influence on her own development as a writer and biographer.

Woolf's decision to obscure the late-Victorian influences on her writing paradoxically also extends to her feminist revision of Stephen and Maitland's historiographical biography. 'The New Biography' presents an exclusively male

¹⁸ Quoted in Ray Monk, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character', *Philosophy and Literature*, 31.1 (2007), 1–40 (p. 30).

¹⁹ Marcus, 'The Newness of the "New Biography": Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century', p. 196.

history of biography and lacks the programmatic imperative to record women's lives that had characterized her earliest fiction. Although Woolf notes the proliferation of Victorian biographies of men of letters after Boswell's introduction of the inner life as a suitable subject, she never extends this discussion to biographies of women writers. The next chapters will show that Woolf was intensely familiar with works like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) or the immensely popular Austen family's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869), which pose their own questions regarding hagiography and the imposition of stereotypical femininity, yet she failed to acknowledge them in her history of biography. Likewise, the challenges of writing women's lives outside a traditional narrative of courtship and marriage, which Woolf had thematized in 'Friendship's Gallery' as well as *Night and Day*, go unmentioned at a point in time where Woolf's position as a critic made her well-qualified to draw attention to this problem. Considering that 'The New Biography' was published only two years before *A Room of One's Own* with its extensive reference to, and use of, female biography, Woolf clearly had not simply forgotten about the problem of women's lives, as the next section will show. It does, however, suggest that the extreme interest in character and individuality which drive the New Biography is hard to combine with Woolf's feminism, which tends to focus on women's lives collectively and prizes insight into social structures over individuality. This will become apparent in my discussion of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* in the last section of this chapter, but is also part of a wider pattern in Woolf's career: as the following chapters will show, her engagement with individual writers frequently moves from detailed character studies to more simplistic portraits in support of a feminist argument.

'The Art of Biography' (1939), Woolf's final essay on biography, is in many ways the antithesis of 'The New Biography'. Where 'The New Biography' and *Orlando* had marked a high point in Woolf's engagement with fictionalized biography, suggesting that an elusive mixture of fact and fiction might transform the genre forever, 'The Art of Biography' reverses this statement in the pessimistic assertion that biography's factual basis will forever prevent it from being more than a craft. The essay is informed by Woolf's experience in writing her first and only conventional biography, *Roger Fry* (1940): commissioned by Fry's family, the biography required a delicate negotiation between her own desire for a truthful depiction of Fry's love life in particular, and his family's wish to suppress Fry's

affair with Vanessa Bell as well as his homosexual relationships at Cambridge, as Hermoine Lee has shown.²⁰ Forced to partially relinquish her creative control over the narrative, Woolf also struggled with the mass of information available in the form of letters and lectures, complaining that her writing was ‘too minute and tied down’ (*WD* 299) and ‘too detailed and too flat’ (*WD* 301): without the creative release provided by fictionality, the commitment to factuality was limiting and caused her to see the biography as ‘a failure – and what a grind...’ (*WD* 321).

This decidedly negative experience informs Woolf’s outlook in ‘The Art of Biography’, which relegates the genre to the status of a useful craft. Abandoning the polemical opposition between Victorian and Modernist writing for a study of biographical censorship, Woolf instead traces the genre’s move towards greater candidness, from Froude’s *Life of Thomas Carlyle* (1882-84), which revealed the unhappy marriage and personal shortcomings of the great Victorian man of letters to a scandalized audience, towards deliberately iconoclastic works such as Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907) and Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918). While Woolf presents a more nuanced assessment of the gradual movement towards biographical freedom, she nevertheless questions whether biography can transcend this inherent limitation of the biographer’s power. Woolf argues that

when the biographer complained that he was tied by friends, letters, and documents he was laying his finger upon a necessary element in biography; and that it is also a necessary limitation. For the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only – the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision. The world created by that vision is rarer, intenser, and more wholly of a piece than the world that is largely made of authentic information supplied by other people. And because of this difference the two kinds of fact will not mix; if they touch they destroy each other. (*E* 6.185)

Woolf’s emphatic insistence on the impossibility of successfully fusing fiction and facts therefore results in her demotion of biography. Without any of the artistic freedoms and creative licence of fiction, biography cannot transcend its status as an ephemeral and inferior genre: ‘The artist’s imagination at its most intense fires out

²⁰ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 709.

what is most perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, embed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live' (*E* 6.187). As Laura Marcus summarizes, 'imaginative truths are always perceived as of a higher order than the truths of 'fact' and Woolf's approach to life-writing privileges the internal life, nuance, and character over the external reality of facts and non-fiction'.²¹

Woolf's emphasis on the perishable nature of facts reflects a more nuanced approach to the concept of factual veracity that replaces the simple dichotomy that had determined 'The New Biography'. Woolf draws attention to the role that custom and convention play in shaping the supposedly solid facts of a life:

But these facts are not like the facts of science – once they are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change. What was thought a sin is now known, by the light of facts won for us by the psychologists, to be perhaps a misfortune; perhaps a curiosity; perhaps neither one nor the other, but a trifling foible of no great importance one way or the other. The accent on sex has changed within living memory. This leads to the destruction of a great deal of dead matter still obscuring the true features of the human face. Many of the old chapter headings – life at college, marriage, career – are shown to be very arbitrary and artificial distinctions. The real current of the hero's existence took, very likely, a different course. (*E* 6.187)

Woolf's covert allusions to homosexuality and gender acknowledges the socially imposed limits to truthful biography more directly than her previous essay on the New Biography, but the professional middle-class man remains the norm for biographical writing. Woolf makes it clear that lives that deviate from this pattern are still underrepresented and returns to the political purpose driving her earliest short stories by emphasizing the value of these more obscure lives: 'Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious?' (*E* 6.186). However, Woolf's previous confidence in 'a faithful outline, drawn with no skill but veracity' (*CSF* 17)

²¹ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994), p. 109.

is now replaced by an awareness of the multiplicity of competing viewpoints modernity can offer:

Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. (*E* 6.186)

Woolf's advocacy for biography as a means for better understanding the complexity of human character links her late writing with her earliest short stories: the looking glass metaphor recalls the Bloomsbury writer Sylvia's delight in 'seeing herself reflected in strange looking-glasses, and of holding up her own mirror to the lives of others' (*CSF* 26) in 'Phyllis and Rosamond' and connects it to the central feminist argument of *Three Guineas*: 'the world of professional, of public life, seen from this [domestic] angle undoubtedly looks queer' (*3G* 133). Despite its demotion to auxiliary to fiction, biography therefore emerges as a useful tool for providing the 'fertile facts' that provide inspiration and a better understanding of past and present. This extensive use of biography as an alternative to official history therefore links 'The Art of Biography' with the more explicit feminism of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, which draw extensively on biographies of Victorian women to substantiate their argument.

‘A Supplement to History’

As the previous two sections have shown, the use of biography as a substitute for historical records is a recurrent theme in Woolf’s theorizing on the subject, but she puts it into practice in her feminist polemics *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). As Woolf’s most political works, both texts offer an explicit analysis of women’s marginalized position in society and draw extensively on biography as factual evidence of inequalities and a corrective to incomplete official historical records. Both texts use biography systematically to move beyond the individual life: *A Room of One’s Own* argues for a connection between women’s material circumstances and female literary traditions and *Three Guineas’* more aggressive argument explores the continuities between the institutions of a patriarchal society and fascism. The essays therefore suggest a return to and revision of Leslie Stephen’s *Dictionary of National Biography*: Woolf offers her own collective biographies of women’s lives, which supplement the nation’s official history of great men.

Biography informs the narrative of *A Room of One’s Own*: Woolf’s argument is presented as a fictional autobiographical essay, in which the narrator, a woman writer, shows the links between historical injustices and contemporary oppression by visiting several hostile public institutions before withdrawing into the safety of her own study. The essay is therefore situated at a similar intersection of social history, autobiography and fiction as Woolf’s earliest stories. While Woolf’s imaginary life of Judith Shakespeare similarly explores the past through a fictional lens, the main argument, that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’ (*AROO* 3), is substantiated by Woolf’s extensive use of the biographies and works of past women writers. Individual biographies therefore act as a substitute and supplement for more traditional works of history, which Woolf dismisses in the British Museum section of the essay as considerably less factual than commonly believed, with much research on women written ‘in the red light of emotion, and not in the white light of truth’ (*AROO* 30). Woolf’s considerable scepticism about the value of biased information therefore occasions a turn towards the biographies and works of women writers. However, what the essay (as well as Woolf scholars) fail to consider is the provenance of those supposedly superior sources: as the following chapters will show, emotion and bias also impact the biographical narratives that

Woolf uses to shape her argument and Woolf herself frequently fails to distance herself from popular Victorian conceptions of women writers and female creativity.

Three Guineas, envisioned as a sequel to *A Room of One's Own*, shares its fusion of factual evidence and fictional framework: Woolf's three fictional letters provide the essay with a thematic structure for its extensive fact-based argument, for which she had been carefully 'observing and collecting these 20 years' (*WD* 190): 'And I'm quivering and itching to write my – what's it to be called? – "Men are like that"? – no, that's too patently feminist. The sequel then, for which I have collected enough powder to blow up St. Pauls' (*WD* 179). Although Woolf's early intention had been to write a genre-defying text that combines the history of the Pargiter family with essays on politics, society and gender, *The Pargiters* failed to form into the seamless whole envisioned in 'The New Biography'. Instead, Woolf published the revised novel portion of the text as *The Years* (1937), followed by *Three Guineas* a year later. Despite its fictionalized origins, however, *Three Guineas* takes its non-fictionality more seriously than *A Room of One's Own*: Woolf scrupulously documented her sources in extensive footnotes despite feeling 'suspicious of the vulgarity of the notes: of a certain insistence' (*WD* 289) and forced herself to commit to sober documentation instead of 'surrendering to vision' (*WD* 189). At the same time, Woolf is more suspicious of biography's own biases: moving away from an exploration of individual consciousness and towards statistics and social trends, it is now 'the coloured light of biography' which needs to be supplemented with 'the white light of facts' collected in Woolf's three scrapbooks of newspaper articles (*3G* 167).

A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas* signal a shift in Woolf's interests in biography: she moves from character studies and the lives of individual women towards aggregates of experience which record the history of all women, making the essays experimental contributions to biography itself. Alison Booth therefore sees both works as evidence of Woolf's unconscious 'immersion in collective biographical tradition', both within her family through Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography* and Anny Thackeray Ritchie's *Book of Sibyls* (1883), as well as more generally though the genre's extreme popularity in both Victorian and

Modernist periods.²² Most obviously, Woolf provides a biographical project that corrects the *Dictionary of National Biography*'s most glaring oversight by providing an alternative history of women's contribution to national, literary and social history, exploring what it means to be English and female. Woolf effectively offers a rebuttal to Stephen's preference for domestic and self-sacrificing femininity by moving women writers, feminist activists and social reformers out of obscurity. She thus provides her own supplement to history:

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear. (*AROO* 42)

A Room of One's Own and *Three Guineas* therefore fulfil the aim of Woolf's earliest short stories: they collect a record of women's lives and reinsert them into a bigger historical (and literary) narrative.

However, Woolf falls short of her earlier goal in one respect: none of the women she invokes are particularly obscure or forgotten. The vast majority of the women writers Woolf lists in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* had been the subjects of biographies throughout the nineteenth century and, as the narrator wearily admits, were hardly in need of recovery:

And after all, we have lives enough of Jane Austen; it scarcely seems necessary to consider again the influence of Joanna Baillie upon the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe; as for myself, I should not mind if the homes and haunts of Mary Russell Mitford were closed for the public for a century at least. (*AROO* 42)

Paradoxically, Woolf rejects a well-established female literary tradition but dedicates the rest of her essay to retracing the lives of famous novelists, most notably Jane

²² Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), p. 229.

Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, who come with extensive biographical afterlives. Woolf's focus on a narrow group of canonical novelists therefore contributes to the continued obscurity and devaluation of the majority of nineteenth-century women writers, who are excluded from her literary history. Booth similarly notes that

[t]he ample supply that was at Woolf's fingertips appeared too substantially personal (like woman writers who expose their anger) or too domesticated by common recognition. The desired history of women consists of elusive traces, departed beings to whom one attributes bodies and passions but not, in Woolf's imagining, registered names.²³

Like the fictional Judith Shakespeare, Woolf's ideal woman writer is obscure and awaiting recovery, but without any biographical and literary history: she can be reshaped and adapted to Woolf's purpose, and, like the unknowable Miss Willatt in 'Memoirs of a Novelist', her literary and personal shortcomings are forgiven because she provides endless cause for speculation. Over the next chapters, I will therefore explore what happens when Woolf leaves the realm of idealized obscurity and encounters her real and well-documented predecessors. By studying a range of novelists who all, at some point of their careers or afterlives, had been canonical writers, I will examine how Woolf reacts to shifts in the literary canon and changing ideas and ideals of female authorship, and show how her interest in biography drives her engagement with Victorian women writers' personalities and lives.

²³ Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman*, p. 232.

Thesis Outline

In the following chapters, I will examine Woolf's representations of nineteenth-century women's lives in her journalism and essays. Woolf's journalistic oeuvre is a complex body of work: spanning almost four decades, it has a wide thematic range and differing audiences as well as origins. However, it is rarely studied in its own right, even though, as Leila Brosnan argues in *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence*, engagement with Woolf's journalism has the potential to transform our understanding of her:

What is missing from this ever-burgeoning scholarly industry devoted to Virginia Woolf, then, is an investigation of her essays and journalism alone and as a corpus, as a body of writing that develops and reveals its own self-determining aesthetic dimensions as well as an associate historical environment. [...] Relocating interest in non-fiction may, in turn, lead to a questioning of the critical practices we use to establish and maintain those versions of authors, literature and literary history which either exclude non-fiction or prioritize fiction, thereby generating revisionary readings of both Virginia Woolf and modernism.²⁴

By examining Woolf's essays and articles on the most prominent nineteenth century women writers, I intend to contribute to a better understanding of Woolf's uses of traditional and experimental biography, her relationship to her female predecessors, and her complex relationship to the Victorian era.

While there are still few sustained studies of Woolf's journalism, her lasting Victorian affinities have attracted some critical attention: thus, in *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians* (2007), Steve Ellis argues that Woolf is more properly described as a post-Victorian writer and positions her novels between 'affiliation with and dissent from her Victorian past, which reciprocally and necessarily signifies affiliation with and dissent from her modern present'.²⁵ Likewise, Jane de Gay's *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (2006) demonstrates Woolf's deep immersion in and

²⁴ Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburg: Edinburgh UP, 1999), p. 4.

²⁵ Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 2.

engagement with the literary past in her novels; and Marion Dell argues for the importance of the influence of Julia Margaret Cameron, Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Stephen in Woolf's artistic development in *Virginia Woolf's Influential Forebears* (2016).²⁶

Woolf has been a 'feminist icon' particularly in America from the 1970s onwards, as Brenda Silver notes,²⁷ and much of that fame stems from the extreme popularity of *A Room of One's Own*, yet there are surprisingly few critics examining her wider engagement with Victorian woman writers. Alison Booth's *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (1992) provides a comprehensive study of feminine greatness in their lives and works, and Emily Blair's *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (2001) explores thematic continuities between Woolf's novels and the domestic fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant.²⁸ Woolf's reception of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë has been the subject of several articles, most notably by Janet Todd, Jean Long and Cora Kaplan.²⁹ However, there exists no comprehensive and comparative analysis of Woolf's engagement with women writers' afterlives in her journalism: neither her changing responses to individual writers across her long career, nor her reaction to the gradually changing standards of female authorship across the nineteenth century have been studied.

In 'The Field of Cultural Production', Pierre Bourdieu argues that literary and cultural products cannot be understood outside their social and structural context: far from being the history of a few great names, the field of literary production is composed of indefinite interrelated positions corresponding to genres, cultural and literary prestige, and economic position. Literature as a profession is characterized by an 'extreme permeability of borders' and flexible definitions of professional belonging and 'the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary

²⁶ Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006). Marion Dell, *Virginia Woolf's Influential Forebears: Julia Margaret Cameron, Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Prinsep Stephen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁷ Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), p. 24.

²⁸ Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992). Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2007).

²⁹ Janet Todd, 'Who's Afraid of Jane Austen?', in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives, Women & Literature*, ed. by Janet Todd (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 107–27. Jean Long, 'The Awkward Break: Woolf's Reading of Brontë and Austen in *A Room of One's Own*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 3 (1997), 76–94. Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007).

legitimacy, i.e., *inter alia*, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers'. Each writer therefore has to signal her belonging to this field as well as where she is positioned relative to its other occupants.³⁰ Thus, Bourdieu further suggests that

in a universe in which to exist is to differ, i.e. to occupy a distinct, distinctive position, they must assert their difference, get it known and recognized, get themselves known and recognized ('make a name for themselves'), by endeavouring to impose new modes of thought and expression.³¹

While Bourdieu is mainly concerned with writers' positioning against their contemporaries, his analysis nevertheless applies to Woolf's proceeding more generally: her establishment as a critic begins with a partial revision and dissociation from Leslie Stephen's influence, and, with increasing fame, turns into a Modernist rejection of Victorian and Edwardian writing, as well as a turn towards women's points of view and female literary traditions, which distinguish her from many (predominantly male) contemporary writers and critics.

However, Woolf's position-taking also occurs in relation to her female predecessors. Woolf's position as women writer was assigned to her by others even before she assumed an explicitly feminist point of view. Leila Brosnan notes that Woolf 'occupied a precarious yet enabling borderline position in the world of journalism: her age, gender and inexperience put her on the outside contributor list, but her connections established her securely on the roll of insiders'.³² While Woolf's social position and literary connections enabled her to overcome the limitations of gender, it nevertheless remains an important factor in her development as a writer. Because Woolf was perceived to be writing within a female tradition by other writers, her engagement with Victorian women writers always also reflected back on her own position: her inclusion and rejection of past writers from the history of women's writing advertise Woolf's own convictions about female authorship, genre and professional writing. In the following chapters, I will therefore analyse a range of case studies to show how Woolf positions herself in relation to her predecessors.

³⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), p. 29-30, p. 42, p. 43.

³¹ Bourdieu, p. 58.

³² Brosnan, p. 47.

My selection of case studies is guided by Woolf's own interest: these are the writers that receive the majority of her critical attention, and recur in essays throughout her career; unsurprisingly, therefore, many of them are firmly canonical.

The first chapter examines a Victorian case of family censorship: I trace Woolf's changing responses to Jane Austen, demonstrating how increased access to her letters and juvenilia led Woolf to reject her exemplary femininity, promoted in the Austen family's biographies and frequently used by Victorian men to censor women writers. While Woolf's engagement with Austen still revolves around a search for female predecessors and traditions, she becomes a much more positive figure: Woolf recovers Austen as a complex and sophisticated writer and role model, and reinvents her as a predecessor of modernist writing.

In the second chapter, I examine two writers that are rarely discussed in connection with Woolf: Mary Russell Mitford, author of immensely popular sketches of rural village life, and her friend and protégé Elizabeth Barrett Browning provide Woolf with an opportunity to examine money, freedom and domestic tyranny in a patriarchal society. Using biography in innovative and creative ways, Woolf fills in unexplored gaps in their lives to present a reconstruction of Mitford as victim to her father's oppression that challenges nostalgic Victorian constructions of her peaceful village life, and responds to sensationalist retellings of Barrett Browning's life by highlighting her poetic achievements as well as situating her in a wider critique of Victorian and modern society. Woolf's creative use of biography therefore links her early reviews of Mitford's biography with her later experiments in *Flush*, the biography of Barrett Browning's spaniel.

The third chapter examines Woolf's lifelong fascination with Charlotte Brontë, in many ways the Victorian antithesis to Austen's image of demure femininity. In a perpetuation of Victorian literary criticism, Woolf's engagement with Brontë frequently revolves around her unfeminine passion and anger; and, in contrast to her biographical revision of Austen and Mitford, remains relatively stable over the course of her career. While Woolf recontextualizes Brontë's anger at women's oppression in a wider feminist argument, she nevertheless condemns its artistic impact, showing that her own feminist aims often operate at the expense of individual writers.

The fourth chapter examines Woolf's equally tense relationship with professional women who wrote for a living: my study of George Eliot, Mary Augusta

Ward and Margaret Oliphant shows how Woolf systematically undercuts, silences and misrepresents this generation of direct predecessors; an attitude which is particularly pronounced in her attack on Ward and Oliphant's writing for a popular market. Finally, the conclusion will address some of the most important themes emerging from this thesis: Woolf's own self-positioning in relation to the women writers she invokes in her writing, her complex relationship with the Victorian period, and the implications these have for her feminism outside her most famous essays.

1. 'Vain are these speculations': Jane Austen

There is Jane Austen, thumbed, scored, annotated, magnified, living almost within the memory of man, and yet as inscrutable in her small way as Shakespeare in his vast one. She flatters and cajoles you with the promise of intimacy and then, at the last moment, there is the same blankness. Are those Jane Austen's eyes or is it a glass, a mirror, a silver spoon held up in the sun? ('Personalities', *E* 6.439)

As the above quotation suggests, the Jane Austen (1775-1817) portrayed in Woolf's essays is mysterious and unknowable. Although Woolf displays a thorough familiarity with Austen's works, Jane Austen herself remains elusive and inscrutable; and the scarcity of authenticated information about her life would suggest that Woolf's reception of Austen is solely based on her works. However, virtually all of Woolf's essays on Austen begin as reviews of official family biographies. Woolf's view of Jane Austen therefore develops in response to the exemplary woman writer promoted in these works, and changes after the publication of Austen's juvenilia and letters, which allow an uncensored view on a satirical and irreverent writer.

Current criticism of Woolf and Austen ignores this biographical aspect to focus on intertextual readings instead: for example, Jane de Gay, Nick Smart and Kathryn Simpson argue for the central importance of Austen to Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915).¹ Susan Todd and Jean Long have contributed insightful essays on Woolf's ambivalent attitude towards her famous predecessor based mainly on the *Common Reader* essay and *A Room of One's Own*, but both ignore that Woolf's engagement with Austen follows a clear trajectory when read chronologically.² Only two very short essays by Judith Lee and Emily Auerbach from the field of Austen studies have questioned the provenance and transformation

¹ Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 24-33. Nick Smart, "'Never See Rachel Again': Virginia Woolf and the End of Domestic Fiction", in *Voyages Out, Voyages Home: Selected Papers from the Eleventh Annual Conference On Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane De Gay and Marion Dell (Clemson, SC: Clemson UP, 2010), pp. 62-69. Kathryn Simpson, 'Persuading Rachel: Woolf and Austen's "Little Voyage of Discovery"', in *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, ed. by Jane De Gay, Tom Breckin, and Anne Reus (Clemson, SC: Clemson UP, 2017), pp. 134-40.

² Janet Todd, 'Who's Afraid of Jane Austen?', in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives, Women & Literature* (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 107-27. Jean Long, 'The Awkward Break: Woolf's Reading of Brontë and Austen in *A Room of One's Own*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 3 (1997), 76-94.

of Woolf's Austen, but neither essay moves beyond the status of a cursory overview: a full critical study of Austen in Woolf's essays is therefore still missing.³

In this chapter, I will address this gap in scholarship by tracing Woolf's changing responses to Jane Austen over the course of her career. Although Austen was not a Victorian writer, her biographical afterlife stems from this period. Hermione Lee notes that 'the best-known fact about Jane Austen's posthumous life is that her story was guarded and shaped by her family', most notably through James Edward Austen-Leigh's highly successful *Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870), which presented her as a highly idealized representative of Victorian femininity.⁴ I will show how Woolf's initial rejection of this perfect predecessor, who was frequently used by Victorian men to control subsequent women writers, transforms into approval of the satirical and irreverent writer revealed in Austen's letters and juvenilia. In the 1920s, Woolf recovers Austen as a complex and sophisticated writer and role model, and reinvents her as a lost proto-modernist and predecessor of all women's writing. Woolf's changing responses therefore illustrate the central importance of biographical materials to her engagement with Austen, and anticipate the modern move away from the Austen of hagiographic family biographies towards a more feminist and even malicious writer.

³ Judith Lee, "'Without Hate, without Bitterness, without Fear, without Protest, without Preaching": Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen', *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 12 (1990), 111–16, p. 111. Emily Auerbach, "The Geese vs. the "Niminy Piminy Spinster": Virginia Woolf Defends Jane Austen', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 29.1 (2008) <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol29no1/auerbach.html>> [accessed 12 March 2015].

⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), p. 65.

‘Dear Aunt Jane’

After her death in 1817, Jane Austen’s biographical afterlife remained firmly under the control of her family. *Persuasion* (1818), published posthumously, lifted the anonymity of her authorship in a brief biographical note written by one of her brothers. Henry Austen presented a portrait of perfection: his sister’s tranquil life was devoted to ‘usefulness, literature and religion’, her temper, manners and wit were faultless, and her religious view accorded with those of the Church of England. This idealization extended to her apparently effortless perfection in writing: ‘Every thing came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen. It is not hazarding much to say that she never dispatched a note or letter unworthy of publication’.⁵ Austen’s anxiety about his sister’s career as a writer manifests itself in contradictory ways. While he insists on her exemplary modesty and lack of ambition, noting that ‘[n]either the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives’, he is also compelled to defend her failure to rival best-selling works of the day: her novels ‘may live as long as those that burst on the world with more éclat’ by virtue of their supreme quality.⁶

James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, published in 1870, was similarly driven by a desire to promote his aunt while retaining control over her public image. With the death of Cassandra Austen, her sister’s surviving manuscripts and letters had been distributed among the different branches of the Austen family, prompting a competition to gain control over the only authentic Jane Austen. Since Austen-Leigh’s biography collected information and memorabilia from an aging and dying generation of eyewitnesses, including Austen’s siblings, their children and her friends, its account of Austen’s life and character forms the basis of virtually all subsequent biographies.⁷ However, he crucially lacked access to the majority of Austen’s surviving letters, which were in the possession of Fanny Knight and would be published by her son Edward, the first Baron Brabourne, as *Letters of Jane Austen*

⁵ Henry Austen, ‘Biographical Notice of the Author’, in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 135–43 (p. 141).

⁶ Henry Austen, p.137 and 140.

⁷ Emily Auerbach, ‘Searching for Jane Austen: Restoring the “Fleas” and “Bad Breath”’, *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 27 (2005), 31–38 (p. 32).

(1884), promising its readers access to ‘the confidential outpourings of Jane Austen’s soul’.⁸

In contrast to the intimacy promised by the *Letters*, Austen-Leigh’s biography follows Henry Austen’s example in presenting a tightly controlled image of a domestic saint, the ‘dear Aunt Jane’ of her nephews and nieces’ early childhood memories of Steventon parsonage and Chawton cottage. Kathryn Sutherland summarizes that

‘St. Aunt Jane of Steventon-cum-Chawton Canonicorum’, as Austen-Leigh’s hagiographical portrait has been wittily dubbed, is a comfortable figure, shunning fame and professional status, centred in home, writing only in the intervals permitted from the more important domestic duties of a devoted daughter, sister and aunt.⁹

Austen-Leigh’s main concern is therefore to align Jane Austen with Victorian ideals of femininity: thus, in his *Description of Jane Austen’s person, character and tastes* he apologizes that ‘she was not highly accomplished according to the present standard’ of female education, but largely ignores her knowledge of literature and accomplishments as a writer.¹⁰ Sutherland likewise argues that Austen-Leigh attempts to ‘deflect enquiry from anything as intense, familiarly disruptive, or counter-social as writing and disingenuously disclaims the existence of what he cannot (or will not) know about creative genius.’¹¹ To preserve this image of a domestic Jane Austen, J.E. Austen-Leigh carefully edited Austen’s letters and juvenilia to preserve the image of an innocent Victorian maiden aunt. Emily Auerbach notes that references to miscarriages, fleas and bad breath as well as Austen’s extensive reading are deleted, while domestic news are preserved; additionally, his selection from Austen’s juvenilia, a brief parodic ‘Mystery Play’, lacks the transgressiveness of

his supposedly docile aunt’s iconoclastic minor writings, those rowdy spoofs and satiric fragments about young women who toss rivals out

⁸ Kathryn Sutherland, ‘Introduction’, in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. xiii–xlvi (pp.xxv–vi, quote on p.xxv).

⁹ Sutherland, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

¹⁰ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 71.

¹¹ Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 86.

the window, raise armies, and get “dead Drunk.” [...] This fragment gives no hint of the outrageous heroines and audacious scenes contained in most other youthful pieces.¹²

Austen-Leigh’s domesticating mission determines the popular image of Austen to this day: the biography included an engraved portrait of Jane Austen, based on a watercolour sketch by Cassandra Austen, which has become the standard portrait of Austen. The original sketch presents a tired-looking Austen, whose face is dominated by ‘dark, staring eyes and the unsmiling, unpretty mouth’, as Margaret Kirkham notes; the engraving in contrast presents a prettier and younger-looking woman with a decorative lace cap smiling serenely.¹³ While neither portrait was considered a great likeness by eyewitnesses,¹⁴ this beautification is therefore symptomatic of the lasting impact of Austen-Leigh’s desire to present a flawless and idealized version of his aunt.

Woolf’s first article on Austen, ‘Jane Austen’, is a 1913 review of William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh’s *The Life and Letters of Jane Austen*. As Deirdre Le Faye notes, this is generally considered ‘the first proper biography’ of Austen because it combines the information, anecdotes and letters previously held by the different branches of the Austen family.¹⁵ Woolf appears to have read the various Austen biographies attentively: she reveals her understanding of the extent to which Jane Austen is a carefully curated family construct, created to conceal as well as reveal aspects of her life and personality, by putting the question of her true character at the centre of her review. Woolf notes the biography’s unification of the various family traditions – ‘they have brought together all that is known about Jane Austen’ – but also comments on the ‘family taste and modesty’ more generally:

In many ways Jane Austen must be considered singularly blessed. The manner in which from generation to generation her descendants respect her memory is, we imagine, precisely that which she would

¹² Auerbach, ‘Searching for Jane Austen’, pp. 34–36 (p. 33).

¹³ Margaret Kirkham, ‘The Austen Portraits and the Received Biography’, in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by Janet Todd, Women & Literature (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 29–38 (p. 29).

¹⁴ James Edward Austen-Leigh, p. 192.

¹⁵ Deirdre Le Faye, ‘Introduction’, in *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), p. xi.

have chosen for herself – and she would have been hard to please. (*E* 2.9)

Woolf's comments offer a polite dismissal of such Victorian proceedings: the review was published four years after Woolf had attacked this superficial and deferential mode of writing biography in 'Memoirs of a Novelist'. Woolf's suggestion of Austen as a particularly elusive biographical subject who delights in misleading her biographer similarly recalls key ideas from the short story.

Woolf argues that a true knowledge of Austen's character is impossible: the decisive event in Austen's afterlife is Cassandra Austen's destruction of her sister's letters, because '[t]o her alone did Jane Austen write freely and impulsively' (*E* 2.9). Woolf prioritizes the unmediated access promised by the lost letters over the secondary information gathered in biographies; and as in 'Memoirs of a Novelist' and *Night and Day*, she turns towards a portrait to provide a true connection across time:

For the rest, we cannot grudge Jane and Cassandra the glance of satisfaction which they must cast at each other as after fresh scrutiny of that serene and smiling face we turn away baffled, and they know that their secrets are their own forever. (*E* 2.10)

Woolf's projection of Austen's mysterious and inscrutable nature onto Austen-Leigh's improved portrait demonstrates that visual records are just as fallible and open to manipulation as written ones. However, Woolf's discovery of hidden depths behind the perfectly smooth surface of the Austen of family biography also reveals the potential of such a blank slate: lacking other definite evidence of Austen's character, Woolf can confidently assert Austen's own collusion in her disappearance, and counter the male-dominated perspectives on Austen with a secret conspiracy between the sisters. Asserting that 'their secret is their own forever', Woolf at once invalidates the biographical labour of generations of male Austens by redirecting the readers' attention to the sisters' relationship with each other, and a female perspective on Austen that has been lost forever.

Woolf's dissatisfaction with the family biographies is directly linked to their failure to explain and contribute to a better understanding of Austen as a writer. While anecdotes of Austen outside of her family circle exist, they only serve to complicate her official persona: Philadelphia Austen remembers a 'whimsical and

affected' cousin of twelve, Mrs Mitford recalls a teenaged Jane Austen as the 'prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly', who then, according to her daughter Mary's acquaintance, turned into the 'most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of "single blessedness" that ever existed' (E 2.10). However, instead of exploring the tensions between these disparate accounts, Woolf dismisses them altogether as 'wrong'. Only Marianne Knight's account of how 'Aunt Jane would sit very quietly at work beside the fire at Godmersham library, then suddenly burst out laughing, jump up, cross the room to a distant table with paper lying on it, write something down' (E 2.10) provides a valuable insight into Austen's composition habits. This memory allows Woolf to reconstruct Austen as a writer who truly enjoyed her craft and easily integrated it into her daily routine; and adds to the understanding of her works: 'it is by the means of such trifles that we draw a little closer to the charm, the brilliance, the strength and sincerity of character that lay behind the novels' (E 2.10).

While Woolf's discussion of the Austen family biographies shows some scepticism about the idealized image they promote, her literary criticism of Austen shows a stronger adherence to Victorian traditions. Woolf's discussion of Austen's merits as a writer circles around the problem of gender and femininity, but never directly addresses it. Thus, she argues that Austen is '[u]nlike other great writers in almost every way', a vague but suggestive comparison which hints at the fact that literary greatness is predominantly male greatness and Austen stands out by virtue of her gender (E 2.11). Woolf's perfunctory praise of Austen's writing is further undermined by her suggestion that 'she has limitations of a kind particularly likely to cramp a writer's popularity': Woolf's review also served to advertise Sybil Brinton's *Old Friends and New Fancies: An Imaginary Sequel to the Novels of Jane Austen*, evidence of Austen's enduring popularity. Her concerns therefore appear misplaced and maliciously undermine her predecessor's status. Woolf's analysis of Austen's novels continues the play between surface and depth which characterized her approach to the biographies:

The mere sight of her six neat volumes suggests something of the reason, for when we look at them we do not remember any page or passage which so burnt itself into our minds that from time to time we take the book down, read that sentence again and exalt. [...] She was

never a revelation to the young, a stern comrade, a brilliant and extravagantly admired friend, a writer whose sentences sang in one's brain and were absorbed into one's blood. (*E* 2.11)

Like the bland image of feminine perfection constructed by the Austen family, the 'six neat volumes' suggest a faultless gentility which falls short of true genius: Austen accepts the limitations of her position too complacently and 'has too little of the rebel in her composition, too little discontent, and of the vision which is the cause and reward of discontent' (*E* 2.12).

Woolf's criticism therefore strongly implies that Austen's exemplary femininity is her greatest flaw. Although she stops short of actually contrasting Austen with another writer, her oblique references to a more passionate and lyrical mode of writing, as well as Austen's lack of rebelliousness strongly invoke another clergyman's daughter: Charlotte Brontë. Woolf's phrasing is suggestive: as chapter 3 will show, Brontë's passion and discontent are frequently the focus of her analysis and she functioned as a particularly close 'brilliant and extravagantly admired friend' to Woolf during the 1910s. In pitting Austen and Brontë against each other in a discussion of ideal femininity, Woolf resorts to familiar Victorian territory. Most famously, George Henry Lewes had carried out a heated epistolary discussion with Charlotte Brontë about Austen's merits as a model to women writers, which Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) had made public. Although Brontë receives Lewes' criticism of *Jane Eyre* politely, she is evidently not inclined to follow his model of female writing: 'I *think*, too, I will endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's "mild eyes," "to finish more and be more subdued;" but neither am I sure of that'. Brontë's defence of her own mode of writing involves a denigration of Austen's 'carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers' which highlights the interplay of cultivated femininity and pleasant neatness before turning to outright rejection: 'Can there be a great artist without poetry? [...] Miss Austen being, as you say, without "sentiment," without *poetry*, maybe is *sensible*, real (more *real* than *true*), but she cannot be great'.¹⁶ Brontë's resistance to Austen, which denies the possibility that patriarchally-sanctioned femininity could lead to real greatness, also offers Woolf a model for refusing to be judged on this very narrow definition of literary merit: as

¹⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), pp. 273-275.

Jane de Gay notes, 'Patriarchal approval marginalised Austen as much as it valued her.'¹⁷

In addition to aligning herself with Charlotte Brontë's rejection of Austen, Woolf's analysis also draws on Leslie Stephen's criticism. Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Austen follows the Austen family tradition in its focus on her exemplary domesticity as a contended spinster: 'Her domestic relations were delightful, and she was especially attractive to children' is an apt summary of Austen-Leigh's editorial stance on his aunt.¹⁸ Stephen is similarly focussed on femininity in his assessment of Austen's literary skills. His praise of Austen's awareness of 'the precise limits of her own powers' automatically assumes female inferiority, while his emphasis on 'the unequalled finesse of her literary tact' as well as her novels' 'unconscious charm' fuse expectations for women's behaviour with their writing. By supporting his critique of Austen with several disparaging quotes from Brontë's letters, Stephen also provides a model for Woolf's more implicit comparison of the two writers.¹⁹ Stephen's scepticism towards Austen is even more evident in his *Cornhill* article 'Humour', written without the need for editorial impartiality. Suggesting that 'Austenolatry is perhaps the most intolerant and dogmatic of literary creeds', Stephen questions the value of Austen's domestic masterpieces:

[A]s much skill may have been employed in the painting of a bit of old china as in one of Raphael's masterpieces. We do not therefore say it possesses equal merit. And, on the same principle, allowing all possible praise to Miss Austen within in her own sphere, I should dispute the conclusion that she was therefore entitled to be ranked with the greatest authors.²⁰

Stephen's dislike for Austen also manifests itself in a condemnation of her apolitical acceptance of the social hierarchies and values of her time, as well as lack of philanthropy towards the Regency poor. Revising his previous praise of Austen's awareness of her limitations, Stephen now makes her the stereotype of female

¹⁷ De Gay, p. 25.

¹⁸ Leslie Stephen, 'Austen, Jane', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1885 <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/904>> [accessed 9 August 2016].

¹⁹ Stephen, 'Austen, Jane'.

²⁰ Leslie Stephen, 'Humour', *The Cornhill Magazine*, 33.195 (1876), 318–26 (pp. 324–25).

shortcomings, as well as the champion of a self-centred élite. His most damning association is between Austen and a prudish Victorian middle-class who enjoy her humour and novels only because they are proper and respectable.

Stephen's absolute dismissal of Austen from the ranks of great authors provides important context for Woolf's uneasy assertion that Austen is 'unlike other great writers in almost every way': while Woolf partly revised Stephen's position by allowing Austen a tenuous hold on literary greatness, his preference for men writing about a wider sphere clearly influences Woolf's own judgement. Stephen's criticism of Austen's political and social complacency are similarly echoed in Woolf's criticism of Austen's lack of discontent. However, where Stephen judges Austen for falling short of his own ideal of philanthropic femininity, Woolf is more concerned with the causes of her 'conservative spirit'. She suggests that 'a clergyman's daughter in those days was, no doubt, very carefully brought up' (*E* 2.12), and therefore shifts the focus to the impact of patriarchal culture on Austen's writing: 'the chief damage which this conservative spirit has inflicted on her art is that it tied her hands together when she dealt with men' (*E* 2.12). Arguing that 'it rests with the novelist to break down the barriers; it is they who should imagine what they cannot know', Woolf makes Austen's education in nineteenth-century femininity, rather than any innate limitations, her biggest obstacle to greatness.

Woolf ends her sketch with a short portrait of Austen, the writer, that moves beyond critical and biographical traditions and points to where her argument will be the most productive in the future. Building on Marianne Knight's recollection of Austen laughing while composing her novels, Woolf provides her own vision of Austen as a model of artistic happiness:

Life itself – that was the object of love, of her absorbed study; that was the pursuit which filled those unrecorded years and drew out “the quiet intensity of her nature”, making her appear to the outer world a little critical and aloof, and “at times very grave”. (*E* 2.13)

Woolf adds depth to the previous portraits of the domestic saint whose literary activity is virtuously unobtrusive by suggesting that Austen's real satisfaction came from literary achievement and artistic creativity, not ideological conformity. Woolf's exploration of Austen's writing life questions the myth of her effortless perfection, and draws attention to the skill and dedication underpinning her writing:

Only those who have realised for themselves the inadequacy of a straight stick dipped in ink when brought into contact with the rich and tumultuous glow of life can appreciate the full wonder of her achievement, the imagination, the penetration, the insight, the courage, the sincerity which are required to bring before us one of those perfectly normal and simple incidents of an average human life.

(E 2.14)

Woolf's closing paragraph therefore suggests a deeper understanding of Austen based on their shared struggles as novelists. Her search for her own method in writing *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, whose engagement with Austen I will explore in the next section, therefore adds to her appreciation of Austen's success in representing ordinary life. At the same time, Woolf's interest in Austen's writing also serves as the beginning of an investigation into the representation of women's artistic labour and a questioning into the previously asserted effortless of her writing. Poised between received wisdom and her own desire to better understand women writers of the past, Woolf's essay is only just starting to question the image of the perfect Victorian woman writer presented by previous generations, and explore a mutual interest in the representation of ordinary life.

‘Jane Austen Over Again’

The question of Austen’s relevance to modern literature continues to dominate Woolf’s thinking over the next decade. Woolf invokes Austen in a variety of contexts, ranging from intertextual engagement in *The Voyage Out* (1915), brief comments in the reviews ‘A Scribbling Dame’ and (1916) and ‘Mr Howells on Form’ (1918), a diary entry concerning Mansfield’s verdict on *Night and Day*, ‘Miss Austen up to date’, as well as ‘Jane Austen and the Geese’ (1920), Woolf’s review of yet another Austen family biography. In all of these works, Woolf approaches her famous predecessor in contradictory ways: on the one hand, Austen provides a model for a fictional method that captures ordinary life, on the other hand, as the Victorian icon of ideal women’s writing she has acquired much baggage and offers much to reject.

The Voyage Out and *Night and Day* have been read as novels in dialogue with Austen and the tradition of domestic writing she represents by critics such as Jane de Gay, Nick Smart, Kathryn Simpson and Susan Hudson Fox. However, Woolf’s engagement with Austen in *The Voyage Out* stands out because, in contrast to her frequently subtle literary allusions, Woolf inserts explicit literary criticism into the dialogue. Austen’s role as ideal woman writer is discussed in a conversation between Rachel Vinrace and Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, making explicit the oppositions which dominated Woolf’s previous article: thus, conservative and traditional Richard Dalloway’s approval of Austen is based on her perfect femininity – ‘she does not attempt to write like a man’ – although her novels send him to sleep instantaneously, while Rachel Vinrace dislikes her for being ‘so like a tight plait’ (VO 70, 67). A similar ambivalence surrounds Austen’s novel *Persuasion*: discussed by all three characters, and gifted by Clarissa Dalloway to a reluctant Rachel, it is nevertheless read by none and leaves Austen’s relevance to a modern audience questionable. Woolf’s focus on *Persuasion*, Austen’s last and least traditional novel, appears indicative of her scepticism towards the traditional courtship novel, yet *The Voyage Out* is nevertheless in close dialogue with Austen. Thus, Jane de Gay argues that Woolf uses Austenian irony and satire to insert veiled social criticisms into her narrative, but only partially adapts her neat courtship narratives: Rachel’s death prevents a traditional marriage ending for her narrative, but also ‘affirms what

Austen hints at: that marital happiness is easier to assert in a conclusion than to demonstrate in a developed narrative'.²¹ Similarly, Kathryn Simpson suggests that

If *Persuasion* begins to challenge established structures of authority – of class, gender, and generation – through the process of testing the “tight plait” of the courtship plot, *The Voyage Out* unravels these more fully as it opens up a far more complex set of questions about male and female relationships, about gendered roles and identities and about what it is possible to think, feel and say about women’s desires.²²

Woolf offers a similarly double-edged take on Austen’s reputation for exemplary femininity in ‘A Scribbling Dame’ (1916), a review of *The Life and Romances of Mrs Eliza Haywood*. There, Woolf negatively contrasts Haywood’s productive professionalism with Austen’s refined and feminine mode of writing:

In what sense Mr Whicher can claim that Mrs Haywood ‘prepared the way for [...] quiet Jane Austen’ it is difficult to see, save that one lady was undeniably born some eighty years in advance of the other. For it would be hard to imagine a less professional woman of letters than the lady who wrote on little slips of paper, hid them when anyone was near, and kept her novels shut up in a desk. (*E* 2.24)

Far from presenting a disadvantage, Austen’s lack of professionalism here serves to absolve her from all suspicion of mercenary motives and emphasises her superior artistic motives: as in Austen-Leigh’s biography, her delicacy in concealing her work is evidence of her modesty and lack of ambition, making her authorship and fame accidental. Woolf’s aggressive defence of Austen from association with ‘a writer of no importance’ (*E* 2.23) therefore introduces a new distinction in her canon of female writing. She strongly contests the idea that Haywood could have contributed anything to the development of women’s writing and disqualifies her from inclusion in a female history of literature due to her mercenary dedication to popular literature. As the introduction argued, unlike her imaginative restorations of forgotten predecessors, Woolf’s actual encounters with neglected women writers such as

²¹ De Gay, pp. 24-33, quotation on p. 31.

²² Simpson, p. 140.

Haywood are never particularly productive; and her dismissive attitude towards women who had to support themselves through writing will be examined in greater detail in the last chapter on Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant.

Although Woolf utilizes Austen to exclude Haywood from the past of women's writing, she is more ambivalent about Austen as a model writer when the future of fiction is at stake. In another review, 'Mr Howells on Form' (1918), Woolf contrasted Austen's formal perfection with the aimlessness of current fiction:

We cannot recognize among ourselves a conception of the art of fiction such as Jane Austen seems to have held so surely and unquestioningly [...] It is not that life is more complex and difficult now than at any other period, but that for each generation that point of interest shifts, the old form puts the emphasis on the wrong places. (*E* 2.315-6)

Despite Austen's impact on Woolf's own work, and the fundamental similarities she had established between their aims in fiction at the end of 'Jane Austen', Woolf is more hesitant to embrace her as a useful model for modern(ist) fiction in this essay. Austen's emphasis on courtship and marriage, as well as the formal perfection of her novels, appear out-dated and uninspiring when compared to Modernist experiments. Woolf's belief in Austen's instinctual knowledge of her literary aims draws strongly on family myths like Henry Austen's assertion that 'Every thing came finished from her pen; for on all subjects she had ideas as clear as her expressions were well chosen' and again demonstrates the damaging impact of this particular conception of feminine writing.²³

Woolf's rejection of Austen as a model for her own writing becomes even more explicit in the aftermath of the publication of *Night and Day* a year later. In an overall not unfavourable review in the *Athenaeum*, Katherine Mansfield had criticized the novel's depiction of a pre-war society lacking any sense of impending doom by describing it as 'Miss Austen up to date'.²⁴ Mansfield is not the only critic to find similarities to Austen in the novel: thus, Susan Fox comments that *Night and Day*'s 'skilful Austen-ticity' lies in its 'apparent preoccupation with tea-table drama

²³ James Edward Austen-Leigh, p. 147.

²⁴ Katharine Mansfield, 'A Ship Comes Into The Harbour', *The Athenaeum*, 21 November 1919, 1227 (p. 1227).

and drawing-room minutiae' which hides a more serious political engagement.²⁵ However, in a subsequent diary entry, Woolf specifically singles out this comparison from Mansfield's much longer review, suggesting that she was neither intending to copy Austen nor felt flattered:

K.M. wrote a review which irritated me – I thought I saw spite in it. A decorous dullard she describes me, Jane Austen up to date. Leonard supposes that she let her wish for my failure have its way with her pen. He could see her looking about for a loophole of escape. 'I'm not going to call this a success – or if I must, I'll call it the wrong kind of success.' (*D* 1.314)

Mansfield's review demonstrates how easily Austen's reputation could be weaponized even in the early twentieth century: as a Victorian model of women's writing, she implied charming but limited fiction lacking wider social relevance. Woolf was clearly unable to offer a more relevant interpretation of Austen as a model for modern, experimental writing: at the end of the year, she resolved to find her own method in fiction through rejecting Austen's influence: 'I'd rather write in my own way of "four passionate snails" than be, as K.M. maintains, Jane Austen over again' (*WD* 22).

Woolf displays a similar scepticism about Austen's value in modern society in 'Jane Austen and the Geese', her review of Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh's *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* (1920). Mary Augusta, the daughter of Austen's first biographer James Edward Austen-Leigh, presents the first female perspective on a great aunt she had never known. Unfortunately, her rambling biography, dedicated to 'all true lovers of Jane Austen' and intended to silence all critics, is predominantly a relapse into Victorian modes of writing: as with previous family biographies, its main aim is the assertion of Austen as paragon of virtue, domesticity and morality.²⁶ However, Austen-Leigh is innovative in emphasizing the Austen family's links to the British Empire and eighteenth century politics, thus introducing a key argument of modern feminist interpretations of Austen's life, which frequently assert that she

²⁵ Susan Hudson Fox, 'Woolf's Austen/Boston Tea Party: The Revolt against Literary Empire in *Night and Day*', in *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Hussey, Vara Neverow, and Jane Lilienfeld (New York: Pace UP, 1994), pp. 259–65 (p. 260).

²⁶ Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* (London: John Murray, 1920).

‘was deeply involved in, and cognisant of, the major ideological debates of her time’.²⁷

Predominantly, Woolf uses her review to mock M.A. Austen-Leigh’s concern about the misconception of Austen’s works and persona: ‘Never have we had before us such certain proof of the incorrigible stupidity of reviewers. [...] Ever since Jane Austen became famous they have been hissing inanity in chorus’ (*E* 3.268). Woolf refutes Austen-Leigh’s concerns by arguing that Austen, one of the most tightly controlled and exemplary figures of literary biography, is hardly in need of defence:

Of all writers Jane Austen is the one, so we should have thought, who has had the least cause to complain of her critics. Her chief admirers have always been those who write novels themselves, and from the time of Sir Walter Scott to the time of George Moore she has been praised with unusual discrimination. (*E* 3.268)

Woolf’s overall adherence to the image of a Victorian Austen means that she accepts many of Austen-Leigh’s assertions concerning Austen’s domestic happiness unquestioningly, but is highly resistant to Austen-Leigh’s attempts to connect Austen more firmly with the political life of her times. Austen-Leigh highlights the family’s connections to India and Warren Hastings, the French Revolution, and Austen’s strong interest in the Navy. However, Woolf strongly resists this more worldly writer and ridicules Austen-Leigh’s widening of Austen’s English horizon:

It is therefore undeniable that Jane Austen might have ‘indulged in romantic flights of fancy with India and France for a background’, it is equally undeniable that Austen never did. Yet it is difficult to deny that had she been not only Jane Austen but Lord Byron and Captain Marryat into the bargain her works might have possessed merits which, as it is, we cannot truthfully say that we find in them. (*E* 3.269)

Woolf’s eagerness to dismiss this construction of Austen extends to misquoting Austen-Leigh’s assertion of Austen’s ultimate patriotism in setting her novels in the English countryside; and suggests that the domestic Aunt Jane of James Edward

²⁷ Hermione Lee, p. 75.

Austen-Leigh's construction, who Leslie Stephen had condemned for her lack of political awareness, still dominates her imagination.

As before, Woolf is most interested in new information on Austen's development as a writer, and suggests that the biography's most interesting, and only redeeming feature is Austen-Leigh's inclusion of the marginal notes that teenaged Jane Austen left in Goldsmith's *History of England*. Although they are 'slight and childish' (E 3.269) and say nothing of substance – other than that Jane Austen was a reader with a keen sense of humour even at a young age – Woolf utilizes these notes to silence both Austen's critics and those who want to refashion her:

Only to hear Jane Austen say nothing when the critics have been debating whether she was a lady, whether she told the truth, whether she could read, and whether she had personal experience of hunting a fox is positively upsetting. We remember that Jane Austen wrote novels. It might be worth while for her critics to read them. (E 3.269)

Woolf's dismissal of biographical speculation as irrelevant compared to Austen's novels is a memorable last line, but the firm division between work and life that this suggests would be questioned just two years later: as the rest of this chapter will show, public access to Austen's private and juvenile writings caused cracks in her Victorian image and led Woolf to re-evaluate her character and even the supposedly static quality of her novels.

‘Jane Austen Practising’

Love and Freindship and Other Early Works, the first collection of Austen juvenilia, was published in 1922, making it the first substantial addition to Austen’s works since the publication of *Persuasion* roughly one hundred years earlier. Woolf’s ‘Jane Austen Practising’ therefore differs from her previous reviews. Instead of evaluating yet another variation of Austen’s life, the essay sets out to shatter the oppressive comfort of her Victorian reputation for perfection: ‘All over England for the past ten or twenty years the reputation of Jane Austen has been accumulating on top of us like these same quilts and blankets. [...] Something must be done about it’ (E 3.332).

Woolf’s essay indulges in the sense of having unmediated access to a more authentic Austen from ‘long before she was the great Jane Austen of mythology’: drawing on the ammunition derived from the contents of Austen’s notebook of juvenilia, *Volume the Second*, Woolf offers instead a vision of an irreverent and satirical teenager who mocks the literary and social conventions of the day. She emphasizes the freshness and immediacy of the manuscripts collected in the volume: ‘Nobody (for we may leave Mr Chesterton [the editor] to the end) has been here before us and so we may really read Jane Austen by ourselves for the first time’ (E 3.332). Although Woolf celebrates this intimate access to Austen and contrasts it with the heavily mediated biographies, her delight at stumbling across an apparently private manuscript is largely the result of Chesterton’s strategic editorial decisions. As Kathryn Sutherland observes, none of the ‘print editors of the early manuscript notebooks attempt to regulate them for publication to such a degree as to suggest that their proper textual state is print’.²⁸ This illusion of intimacy is the result of features like the hand-painted watercolour illustrations and Austen’s mock-solemn dedications, which imperfectly imitate the appearance of eighteenth-century novels. Additionally, the choice to preserve Austen’s eccentric spelling for the titular short story ‘Love and Freindship’ undermines her previous claim to perfection: while her novels may be flawless, in private, even Jane Austen made spelling mistakes.

The juvenilia exposes Austen’s impeccable morals and absolute respectability as myths, and allows Woolf to reject the feminine perfection of Victorian biography. Bursting with illegitimate children, seductions, adultery, and openly selfish,

²⁸ Sutherland, *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives*, p. 211.

manipulatively fainting heroines, the stories illustrate Austen's irreverent approach to morality, and show that the eighteenth-century parsonage she inhabited differed widely from Victorian constructions of it. Thus, Woolf speculates that

[t]he little Austens had the freedom of the house as no other children would have it for a century at least. Money and marriage would no doubt be jokes in the nursery as they were, much more coarsely, on the stage. And clever children, beginning to laugh at their elders, would in the year 1790 pick up the latest new novel and make fun of its heroine. (*E* 3.332)

Woolf therefore rewrites the narrative of Austen's childhood: predating the Victorian era and its preoccupation with childhood innocence, the Austen children's participation in the ordinary life of their period demonstrates that even before adulthood, they possessed a much greater knowledge of forbidden topics than the Victorian construct of Austen allowed for. As a rare insight into Austen's beginnings as a writer, the juvenilia also allows Woolf to revisit some of the myths of the discretions of Austen's writing. Woolf draws attention to the encouragement her writing must have received even in childhood: 'The authoress of these lines had, if not a whole sitting room to herself, some private corner of the common parlour where she was allowed to write without interruption' (*E* 3.333). This supportive environment, and Austen's enthusiastic audience of family and friends, therefore differs fundamentally from the discreet and unobtrusive writing suggested by her biographers: although the adult writer may have hidden the minute pages of her novels at the creak of a door, the teenager compiled her manuscripts in volumes and dedicated them to family and friends, suggesting that she wrote without censorship or shame.

Although the essay's title, 'Jane Austen Practising', emphasizes the unfinished state of the juvenilia, Woolf's judgement on its overall literary value is extremely positive, suggesting that despite her new insights into Austen's development as a writer, she continued to accept the myth of her innate literary talent and perfection. Although the juvenilia were dedicated to Austen's family and siblings, Woolf elevates them beyond mere schoolroom productions and asserts their wider relevance due to Austen's innate talent: 'She is writing for everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own; in short, is writing' (*E* 3.332). In contrast to the

tight formal control of the mature novels, Woolf imagines Austen creating her works for herself, to fulfil a deep-seated need for creative self-expression: written ‘as fast as she could write, and faster than she could spell’, they prove that she was ‘in the enviable position of having one page to fill and a bubbling fancy capable of filling half a dozen’ (*E* 3.333). Yet despite the nonsensically exaggerated satire of many of the pieces, Woolf works to elevate them above the status of early experiments and argues that Austen’s development between juvenilia and novels was relatively insignificant. Focussing her discussion largely on the more measured social satire of a ‘Collection of Letters’, Woolf finds evidence of Austen’s idiosyncratic talent of transcending the personal in every situation:

Girls of seventeen [...] have no fixed point from which they see that there is something eternally laughable in human nature. They do not know that wherever they go and however long they live they will always find Lady Grevilles snubbing poor Marias at a dance. But Jane Austen knew it. [...] Whatever she writes is finished and turned and set in its relation to the universe like a work of art.’ (*E* 3.334)

Ultimately, therefore, the juvenilia’s consistent social satire allows Woolf to assert once again that Austen instinctively knew her proper sphere as a writer – courtship, marriage and society – and readily accepted her limitations in eschewing experiments with other forms. Austen’s juvenilia survives in three volumes of fair copies, which suggests that it is the result of some sort of selection process, yet Woolf assumes that the ‘Collection of Letters’ accurately represents the entirety of Austen’s early writing, and turns her perfection into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is further emphasized through Woolf’s use of fairy tale tropes: picturing an infant Austen entering a contract with a fairy godmother – ‘She had agreed that if she might rule over that territory she would covet no other’ (*E* 3.334) – Woolf constructs a narrative not unlike that promoted by the various family biographies.

Although the juvenilia allow Woolf to revise some of the common assumptions about Austen’s childhood and writing process, others, like Woolf’s belief in Austen’s limitations as an entirely apolitical writer, remain intact. Although Austen’s mockery of the sentimental heroines of romances and their excessive artificial sensibility suggest that even at a young age, Austen was highly critical of the unrealistic images of femininity they promoted, Woolf continues to envision her

as a writer cut off from larger societal issues. Austen's novels abound with subtle attacks on patriarchal society which resonate with Woolf's own writing: *Pride and Prejudice* satirizes contemporary conduct books, *Northanger Abbey* provides a chilling portrait of General Tilney's domestic tyranny and defends novels despite their association with female reading, and *Persuasion* criticizes the inherent male bias in literary representations of women.²⁹ Given this range of potential areas for identification, Woolf's lack of response is puzzling: Jean Long suggests that 'Austen's subtle jabs so resembled Woolf's own that she was oblivious to them. It is possible however that Woolf did recognize Austen's protests for what they were and chose not to discuss them' from a recognition of their ineffectiveness as political protests.³⁰ Although Long provides a reasonable explanation, she fails to take into account the Victorian legacy of Austen's domesticity. Margaret Kirkham argues that 'the received "life" of Jane Austen, together with general ignorance about the development of feminist ideas from the beginning of the eighteenth century, has obscured her importance as a feminist moralist of the age of Enlightenment'.³¹ It is therefore just as likely that Woolf, accustomed to regarding Austen as limited in scope and without political interest, developed a sort of patriarchal blind spot for her subtle criticisms: as 'Jane Austen and the Geese' had already demonstrated, Woolf strongly rejected attempts to turn Austen into a more political and worldly writer.

Despite this oversight, Woolf demonstrates her self-awareness as a reader and critic of Austen by acknowledging the ease with which one can project a favourable reading onto anything in order to make it accord with the established myth of Austen, the ideal writer: 'we might be reading too much into these scraps and scribbles. We are still under the influence of the quilts and counterpanes' (*E* 3.334). While Woolf uses the juvenilia to reveal a knowledge of the world which is incongruous with Victorian expectations of female innocence, she cannot entirely shake off patriarchal influence on her view of Austen's limitations; and although her introduction had promised a glimpse at the real Austen, unmediated and intimate, Woolf has to acknowledge that she cannot un-know the tradition build up around her.

²⁹ Emily Auerbach, *Searching for Jane Austen* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2004), p. 142. Miriam Rheingold Fuller, "'Let Me Go, Mr. Thorpe Isabella, Do Not Hold Me!': *Northanger Abbey* and the Domestic Gothic', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 32 (2010), 90–104. Chapter 5 of *Northanger Abbey* consists almost entirely of the narrator's defence of the novel. Long, pp. 87–89.

³⁰ Long, p. 88.

³¹ Kirkham, p. 32.

Although Woolf had gained access to Austen's private writings for the first time, Austen remains as elusive as she did in Woolf's first essay. Biography thus ultimately obscures the writer as much as it reveals her, Woolf seems to suggest, but nevertheless, the joy of reading these fragments surpasses these scruples. 'Jane Austen Practising' therefore occasions Woolf's first tentative revision of her predecessor, but her true potential becomes apparent in 'Jane Austen at Sixty', where Woolf moves on to inventing Austen's lost future.

‘Jane Austen at Sixty’

Written in 1923, ‘Jane Austen at Sixty’ was occasioned by the publication of R.W. Chapman’s *The Works of Jane Austen* in five volumes. Although it is nominally a review of Chapman’s volumes, Woolf instead dedicates the majority of the essay to an exploration of the unwritten novels of Austen’s lost future. Today, ‘Jane Austen at Sixty’ is rarely considered as an independent essay: even the *Essays of Virginia Woolf* gives its first two paragraphs in a footnote to the *Common Reader* article ‘Jane Austen’, into which Woolf later incorporated it. Nevertheless, when read on its own, it is evident that ‘Jane Austen at Sixty’ represents a definite turning-point in Woolf’s discussion of Austen: Woolf creatively engages with Austen’s life and future to reinvents her as an important lost proto-modernist predecessor for her own method in fiction.

Although gender and Austen’s status as the perfect woman writer had been important factors in Woolf’s previous reviews, Woolf does not explicitly examine their impact on Austen’s popularity until ‘Jane Austen at Sixty.’ Woolf pays the customary tribute to Austen’s talent – ‘of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness’ – but also examines the patriarchal and paternalistic dynamic behind her well-guarded reputation:

There are twenty-five elderly gentlemen living in the neighbourhood of London who resent any slight upon her genius as if it were an insult offered to the chastity of their Aunts. It would be interesting, indeed, to inquire how much of her present celebrity Jane Austen owes to masculine sensibility; to the fact that her dress was becoming, her eyes bright, and her age the antithesis in all matters of female charm to our own. A companion enquiry might investigate the problem of George Eliot’s nose; and decide how long it will be before the equine profile is once again in favour, and the Clarendon Press celebrates the genius of the author of *Middlemarch* in an edition as splendid, as authoritative, and as exquisitely illustrated as this. (*E* 4.155n)

Woolf’s allusion recalls the enduring image of the smiling and humble aunt of Austen-Leigh’s memoir, and exposes the danger of a chivalrous attitude in literature: Austen’s perceived feminine perfection detracts from her literary achievements and

instead offers a nostalgic retreat to an idealized past where women smiled instead of arguing for their independence. Interestingly, Woolf extends this benevolent impulse even to the editor Chapman himself. This accusation is supported by recent criticism by Kathryn Sutherland, who argues that '[i]n some senses, Chapman's Austen is chiefly a vehicle for annotation' and notes the somewhat patronizing editorial approach to the volumes, which imitated the process of emending classical texts to improve the grammar and style of Austen's novels to the level of perfection expected from her.³² Woolf's dismissal of the scholarly apparatus and what Sutherland terms the volumes' 'faux-Regency presentation – old-fashioned binding with marbled paper sides, type-facsimile first-edition title-pages' – suggests that to her, they merely represented another attempt to create a particularly quaint and old-fashioned Austen at the expense of her works.³³

By dedicating an entire review to the novels which Austen could have written had she lived longer, Woolf sidesteps the question of biographical and editorial legacies: relying on her imagination to create an entirely new Jane Austen, Woolf attempts to substitute a more authentic writer. Of course, Austen's imaginary future is as fictive as the construct promoted in family biography and the paratexts of Chapman's edition, yet Woolf continues the revision of her previous review by moving beyond the static assertion of Austen's perfection and exploring her potential for development:

Enough attention perhaps has never yet been paid to the novels that Jane Austen did not write. Owing to that peculiar finish and perfection of her art, we tend to forget that she died at forty-two, at the height of her powers, still subject to all those changes which often make the final period of a writer's career the most interesting of them all. Let us take *Persuasion*, the last completed book, and look by its light at the novels she might have written had she lived to be sixty. (*E* 4.155n)

Crucially, Woolf wrote 'Jane Austen at Sixty' when she herself was forty-one, only a year younger than Austen at the time of her death. Her sudden interest in imagining Austen's future therefore occurs at a time when Woolf herself was only just developing her own fictional method and becoming better known as a Modernist

³² Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives*, pp. 23-35, quotation on p. 45.

³³ Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives*, p. 36.

writer, and well before she had written her own masterworks. Woolf's diaries confirm that she saw herself as a writer discovering how to write: on finishing *Jacob's Room* in July 1922, she wrote that '[t]here's no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; and that interests me so that I can go ahead without praise' (*WD* 47). Suggesting that *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) would be 'more close to the fact than *Jacob*: but I think *Jacob* was a necessary step, for me, in working free' (*WD* 52-3), Woolf therefore saw *Jacob's Room* taking on a similar prophetic role in her own development as *Persuasion* does for Austen's unwritten novels. As Judith Lee suggests, Austen becomes 'a character in whom she inscribes some of her own aesthetic and psychological assumptions'.³⁴ Woolf gives Austen a central role in her early plans for the first *Common Reader* volume: even half a year before the publication of 'Jane Austen at Sixty' in December 1923, Austen was the first author mentioned in a list of potential chapter headings, suggesting Woolf's strong interest in revisiting her.

Freed from the constraints of her previous Victorian persona, Austen becomes a role model for Woolf's own development. Woolf's analysis of *Persuasion* discovers an Austen who is, much like herself, actively experimenting with new ways of fictional representation. No longer a woman content within a limited sphere, Woolf's diagnosis of discontent is the last step in a revision of the Victorian Austen: Woolf's uses *Persuasion*'s 'peculiar beauty and [...] peculiar dullness' to argue that 'while we feel that Jane Austen has done this before, and done it better, we also feel that she is trying to do something which she has never yet attempted' (*E* 4.153). Woolf's reading of *Persuasion* combines literary criticism with psychological conjecture to argue for its deeper emotionality:

Her attitude to life itself is altered. She is seeing it, for the greater part of the book, through the eyes of a woman who, unhappy herself, has a special sympathy for the happiness and unhappiness of others [...]
There is an expressed emotion in the scene at the concert and in the famous talk about women's constancy which proves not merely the biographical fact that Jane Austen had loved, but the aesthetic fact that she was no longer afraid to say so. Experience, when it was of a serious kind, had to sink very deep, and to be thoroughly disinfected

³⁴ Judith Lee, p. 111.

by the passage of time, before she allowed herself to deal with it in fiction. (*E* 4.154)

Woolf insists on a personal experience behind Austen's depiction of disappointed love, but does not specify any particular incident (Austen's documented flirtation with Tom Lefroy or the mysterious seaside admirer recorded by Cassandra Austen would be obvious contenders).³⁵ Asserting only the essence of her experience, Woolf's analysis therefore manages to maintain Austen's impersonality as a writer, something she had confidently asserted in 'Jane Austen Practising'. Instead, Woolf uses Austen's hypothetical experience for an exploration of her method, particularly the process of fictionalizing life and emotions into art, which was the focus of her own interest at the period.

Austen's novels, particularly *Persuasion*, therefore provide an important and heretofore unacknowledged intertext for *Mrs Dalloway*: both novels explore the consequences of disappointed lovers reuniting, and Mrs Dalloway's party offers an interesting parallel to *Persuasion*'s emotionally charged meeting at a public concert. Most importantly, the question of transforming personal experience into impersonal truth is central to both texts. On writing Septimus' narrative in June 1923, Woolf questioned

Am I writing *The Hours* from deep emotion? Of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squirt so badly that I can hardly face spending the next week at it. [...] I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that "reality" gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself? (*WD* 57)

Faced with the problem of converting her own experiences into 'the true reality' of fiction, Woolf was evidently looking for successful examples of this in fiction. Austen therefore becomes a model of such a transformation, and her perfect impersonality as a writer is heightened even more by Woolf's insistence on Austen's private disappointments as the basis for Anne Eliot's experience: another example of a self-fulfilling prophecy projected onto Austen.

³⁵ Hermione Lee, pp. 67-69.

Woolf's projection of her fictional aims and problems onto Austen becomes even more evident in Woolf's closing paragraph. Woolf draws on J. E. Austen-Leigh's 1870 biography to emphasize Austen's absolute personal obscurity as a writer, thereby creating a strong contrast to the life she imagines she would have lived only a few years later: 'She would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends, read, travelled, and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure' (*E* 4.154). This metropolitan Austen who moves between the capital and a rural retreat seems to resemble Woolf herself more closely than any figure suggested by the various Austen biographies – not least because Austen's income from her novels would have been unlikely to fund complete financial independence with frequent travel.

At the core of Woolf's vision of Austen is the innovation in fiction she would have caused: even with more experience of life and her sense of security shaken, Woolf argues that Austen would have continued to explore an ordinary life akin to Woolf's own 'ordinary mind on an ordinary day' (*E* 4.160). Stylistically, likewise, Woolf's predicted developments move Austen closer to her own writing: a turn from dialogue and towards interiority would have made her a predecessor to Henry James and Victorian psychological realism. Woolf suggests that

She would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is. She would have stood farther away from her characters, and seen them more as a group, less as individuals. Her satire, while it played less incessantly, would have been more stringent and severe. (*E* 4.155)

In noting the gradual shift of Austen's novels from dialogue to the representation of interior thought, Woolf's speculation is again based on highly perceptive literary criticism: Sutherland similarly notes that '[t]he hybrid idiom of free indirect discourse, [Austen's] particular contribution to the development of the English novel, allowed her to write at the same time from within and from without a character'.³⁶

³⁶ Sutherland, p. 174. Austen's use of free indirect discourse remains an important factor in modern analysis of her work, see for example: Laura Mooneyham White and Carmen Smith, 'Discerning Voice through Austen Said: Free Indirect Discourse, Coding, and Interpretive (Un)Certainty', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 37.1 (2016)

Ultimately, however, the future of Austen's writing also expresses Woolf's own interest in conveying the unsaid and 'what life is', or as she wrote about *Mrs Dalloway*, 'the central things' (*WD* 58). In 'Jane Austen at Sixty', Woolf therefore rewrites the usual pattern of literary tradition: instead of making her fiction fit the pattern of Austen's writing, she remakes Austen into a lost proto-modernist predecessor. Although the essay ends with consternation – 'Vain are these speculations' (*E* 4.155) – Woolf's acknowledgement of Austen as an important predecessor forms the basis for her more explicit tribute in her *Common Reader* essay 'Jane Austen' and points towards Austen's central position in the community of women writers established in *A Room of One's Own*.

<<http://www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol37no1/white-smith/>> [accessed 8 March 2018]. Mary Beth Tegan, 'Training the Picturesque Eye: The Point of Views in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', *The Eighteenth Century*, 58.1 (2017), 39–58. Rebecca Richardson, 'Dramatizing Intimacy: Confessions and Free Indirect Discourse in *Sense and Sensibility*', *ELH*, 81.1 (2014), 225–44.

The *Common Reader* ‘Jane Austen’

After the publication of Chapman’s volumes, which included the novel fragments *Sanditon* and *The Watsons*, Woolf’s view of Austen remained relatively stable. As is typical for the essays in the series, her *Common Reader* essay ‘Jane Austen’ (1925) combines extracts of Woolf’s essays of the previous decade and turns this textual collage into one coherent whole. Although Woolf therefore expands her discussion of Austen’s works by exploring *Sanditon* and *The Watsons*, her main concern is with reconciling the different aspects of Austen she had uncovered before. Austen’s multiple incarnations had been central to Woolf’s previous essays: the visionary writer existed at odds with the idealized aunt of biography, while the surviving fragments of gossip suggested a much more disagreeable persona. These contrasting personas had co-existed awkwardly (particularly, as previously discussed, in the 1913 ‘Jane Austen’), but Woolf now draws on them to express the variety of Austen’s writing:

Charming but perpendicular, loved at home but feared by strangers, biting of tongue but tender of heart – these contrasts are by no means incompatible, and when we turn to the novels we shall find ourselves stumbling there too over the same complexities in the writer. (*E* 4.146)

With the range of Austen’s writing expanded to include juvenilia, unwritten novels and incomplete fragments, neither writer nor oeuvre resembled the epitome of feminine perfection introduced in Woolf’s first essay.

Woolf’s exploration of unlikely Austens finds its endpoint with the novel fragments, which offer an unprecedented chance of investigating Austen’s creative method. With no surviving manuscripts of the published novels and very little information from eyewitnesses, Austen’s composition process remains mysterious: the novel fragments therefore prove that even Austen deleted words and substituted paragraphs, and that her innate perfection was little more than a myth. Woolf therefore argues that ‘[t]he second-rate works of a great writer are worth reading because they offer the best criticism of his masterpiece. Here her difficulties are more apparent, and the method she took to overcome them less artfully concealed’ (*E* 4.149). With access to an unrevised novel in a draft stage, Woolf can finally look

behind the façade of Austen's perfection and imagine her at work; and while her reading is entirely speculative, it allows Woolf to recast the flawless perfection of the published novels as the result of revision and rewriting:

To begin with, the stiffness and bareness of the first chapters prove that she was one of those writers who lay their facts out rather badly in the first version and then go back and back and back and cover them with flesh and atmosphere. (*E* 4.149)

Woolf's addition of hard work and failure into Austen's writing practice therefore breaks with the Victorian tradition of a ladylike writer who intuitively and effortlessly created works of perfection: Austen's writing was a serious endeavour and relied on her continued application and hard work.

As in her previous essays, Woolf uses this newly-gained insight to strengthen the similarities between Austen and herself. The novel fragments, 'outwardly trivial' and flawed, link Austen's 'pages of preliminary drudgery' (*E* 4.149) with Woolf's own 'devil of a struggle' (*WD* 57) in writing *Mrs Dalloway*. Again, Woolf retrospectively aligns Austen's method in fiction with her own:

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. (*E* 4.149)

It is no coincidence that Wolfgang Iser chose this quotation to illustrate the process at the core of reader response theory:³⁷ Woolf's analysis of Austen shows how her restraint in writing invites readers to engage with the text and supply its deeper meaning. Austen's ability to evoke strong emotional responses by means of ordinary life provides an example for Woolf's quest for 'deep emotion' (*WD* 57) in *Mrs Dalloway*. While Woolf's ultimate solution, to 'dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth' (*WD* 60), differs from the form of Austen's novels, it achieves a similar purpose in supplying ordinary life with deep imaginative meaning.

³⁷ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279-99 (p. 280).

In exploring Austen's failures and drawing on her method in fiction, the *Common Reader* 'Jane Austen' demonstrates how radically Woolf had revised the writer since the 1913 version of the essay. However, whenever Woolf moves beyond a discussion of Austen as a writer, remnants of Victorian influence on her thinking become more evident. In addition to her already discussed resistance to a politically interested Austen, Woolf's brief character sketch uses language strongly suggestive of the ideal femininity found in the family biographies and Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biography* entry. Woolf asserts that 'the wit of Jane Austen has for partner the perfection of her taste': 'It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unflinching good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are amongst the most delightful things in the English language' (*E* 4.152). By linking this moral dimension of Austen's work to 'the depth, the beauty, the complexity of her scenes', Woolf perpetuates a tendency to elevate Austen's literature by virtue of her character (*E* 4.152).

The *Common Reader* 'Jane Austen' therefore charts the potential, but also the limitations of Woolf's reinvention of Austen. While traces of the Victorian Austen still remain in Woolf's sketch of her deep morality, Woolf's invention of a highly critical, perfectionist writer who had to work hard to produce her seemingly effortless masterworks facilitates Woolf's identification with Austen, and lays the basis for *A Room of One's Own*, where Austen is transformed from merely Woolf's literary predecessor to that of all women.

A Room of One's Own

A Room of One's Own builds on the successive revisions of Austen from repressive model of Victorian femininity to proto-modernist predecessor and is the culmination of Woolf's rewriting: in her final assessment of Austen's merit, Woolf positions her at the centre of a female canon of novelists and transforms her into the originator of the woman's sentence in a feminist reinterpretation of her status as model writer. However, this heavily symbolical Austen also loses the more distinctive personality she had acquired from 'Jane Austen Practising' onwards: as representative of all women, Austen becomes more generalized and idealized, and Woolf streamlines her image to facilitate her integration into a community of women writers.

Woolf's chronology of women's writing in *A Room of One's Own* revolves around the Victorian household: of her four great novelists, Austen alone is not a Victorian and undoubtedly belongs to an earlier generation than the Brontës and George Eliot. Woolf therefore strives to undo Austen's association with the eighteenth century and make her more Victorian instead: thus, her suggestion that 'Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney' ignores the fact that Burney survived Austen by 23 years (*AROO* 60).³⁸ Likewise, although Woolf's close reading of the juvenilia had uncovered Austen's happy eighteenth-century childhood home, which provided a supportive space for writing, in *A Room of One's Own*, she reverts to Austen-Leigh's more famous anecdote of Austen's absolute secrecy to illustrate middle-class women's lack of privacy:

[M]ost of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party. (*AROO* 60-1)

Austen therefore becomes both the representative and the ideal of the Victorian woman: deprived of space and limited to an education in 'people's feelings' and 'personal relations' (*AROO* 61), she is nevertheless perfectly adapted to her situation

³⁸ Additionally, Woolf ignores the fact that Austen's novels pay tribute to Burney's early work. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in particular borrows its title from Burney's *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782) and shares important thematic concerns; and in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's defence of the novel singles out Burney's contributions to the genre. See also Claire Harman, *Fanny Burney: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 2000), pp. 268-9.

and transcends these obstacles to produce great novels. While Woolf focuses her discussion on four novelists, Austen is the only one whose writing is not harmed by her situation. Because Charlotte Brontë's anger impacts her writing and Woolf argues that the novel was an uncongenial medium for George Eliot and Emily Brontë, Austen therefore becomes her ideal woman writer:

I could not find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest. That, perhaps, was the chief miracle about it. Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. (*AROO* 61)

For Woolf, Austen's excellence lies in the impersonality she had previously praised as the defining feature of her satire in 'Jane Austen Practising'. Woolf had applauded Austen's transformation of personal snubs into generalized satire, but now expands this to the entire social system: Austen is able to transcend externally imposed barriers to produce writing which is impersonal and at the same time distinctly pervaded by the author's personality. Jean Long notes that 'it is odd that not a word of Austen's prose is quoted by Woolf to illustrate its perceived faultlessness' but by focussing on an intangible quality which is independent of subject matter, Woolf sidesteps all discussion of Austen's limited sphere and places her with Shakespeare in the first ranks of English literature.³⁹

Woolf's evaluation of Austen's talent in *A Room of One's Own* is more abstract and given to idealizations than in her previous reviews, and is remarkably similar to the Austen family biographies: here, too, Austen miraculously performs exemplary feminine behaviour and displays superhuman perfection. Woolf suggests that 'perhaps it was in the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched completely' (*AROO* 62). In asserting Austen's acceptance of a limited sphere as her greatest merit, Woolf reverses her original criticism from her 1913 essay. However, where that essay had noted that Austen's contentedness rested on her ability to gain pleasure through her writing, Woolf's argument now comes to occupy a slightly paradoxical position: although Austen's perfect adaptation to her circumstances appears to be the result of luck, Woolf contrasts her conformity to patriarchal expectations of women's writing with

³⁹ Long, p. 90.

Charlotte Brontë's angry rejection of such expectations, thereby heavily implying that Brontë's rebelliousness was a personal flaw. Despite her rejection of a Victorian Austen, Woolf therefore ultimately returns to a patriarchal critical tradition of using her to censure more rebellious writers.

However, if aspects of Woolf's Austen draw on her previous uses as model of femininity, Woolf also offers another rebuttal to the assumption of the effortless nature of her writing. The question of how much Austen was consciously adapting to external expectations haunts Woolf's argument, and the tension between unconscious adaptation and deliberate refusal to adapt to external pressure resurfaces in Woolf's discussion of women's artistic integrity:

What genius, what integrity it must have required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. [...] They wrote as women write, not as men write. (*AROO* 68)

Woolf's exploration of the psychological strength required to adhere to an artistic vision in the face of societal disapproval mirrors her earlier discovery of the constant work underlying Austen's superficially flawless novels. By emphasizing the artistic vision behind Austen's work, Woolf also questions a critical tradition which asserts Austen's conformity to patriarchal expectations: her novels succeeded in spite of patriarchal criticism and are the result of a conscious, constant resistance to a sexist devaluation of her worth.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf refrains from the larger-scale Modernist reinterpretation of Austen which had characterized her approach in 'Jane Austen at Sixty' and the *Common Reader* 'Jane Austen'. However, she subtly incorporates quotations which invite a comparison between herself and Austen. Woolf's discussion of the pervasive sexism a woman writer was likely to encounter examines

that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronising, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them [...]; admonishing them, if they would be good and win, as I suppose, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentleman in question thinks suitable – '... female novelists should only aspire to

excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex'. (*AROO* 68)

Woolf's analysis builds up to the revelation that her quotation, 'rather to your surprise', was written in 1928 and therefore demonstrates contemporary bias. Although Woolf gives a slightly extended version of the quotation in a footnote, she omits its author and context, and therefore its personal significance: it was written by her friend Desmond MacCarthy. The full quotation runs

If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen and, in our own time, Mrs Virginia Woolf, have demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished). (*AROO* 111 n13)

MacCarthy's comparison recalls Katharine Mansfield's judgement on *Night and Day* being 'Miss Austen up to date'.⁴⁰ However, in contrast to her earlier outrage, Woolf's diary entry on McCarthy's review is remarkably calm and detached:

I was amused to find that when Rebecca West says 'men are snobs' she gets an instant rise out of Desmond; so I retorted on him with the condescending phrase used about women novelists' 'limitations' in *Life and Letters*. But there was no acrimony in this. (*WD* 131)

Where Woolf had previously resented association with Austen, she now rejects the sexism that drives it. The reappearance of MacCarthy's review in *A Room of One's Own*, as well as repeated ironical references to Rebecca West's 'arrant feminism' (*AROO* 32, 53), make it clear that Woolf recognized MacCarthy's condescension as part of a literary system stacked against women. In defending Austen's achievements, she was also implicitly defending herself against such backhanded compliments; her removal of her own name from the quotation achieves a detachment and impersonality similar to Austen's, and ensures that her subtle mockery of MacCarthy does not overshadow her strongly argued defence of all women.

By making Austen the originator of the woman's sentence, Woolf proudly embraces her literary heritage, but also presents a tradition of women's writing

⁴⁰ Mansfield.

which culminates in her own work. Woolf traces Austen's literary innovation, the 'perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use' to a more generalized future of female writing:

The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands – another reason, perhaps, why she wrote novels. Yet who shall say that even now 'the novel' (I give it inverted commas to mark my sense of the word's inadequacy), who shall say that even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use? No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and, providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. For it is the poetry that is still denied outlet. And I went on to ponder how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts. Would she use verse? – would she not use prose rather? (*AROO* 70)

The ambiguity of Woolf's pronouns allows a seamless transition from Austen to the women writers of the future, achieving a sense of community across literary periods and genres. The similarities between these poetics of women's writing and *The Waves*, Woolf's 'abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem' (*WD* 137) suggest that at the centre of this community is Woolf herself, taking on Austen's legacy and carrying it into the future.

‘The Coarseness of Jane Austen’

Although she is not ‘one of the obscure women of the past, of whom I wish I knew more’ (*AROO* 97), Woolf’s engagement with Austen nevertheless thrives on the discovery of private manuscripts, literary fragments and letters which had been suppressed by her family to preserve the image of a domestic saint. Woolf’s slow recovery of a multidimensional Austen is therefore exactly the rewriting of history which she encouraged her female audience in *A Room of One’s Own* to perform. Yet having transformed an oppressive Victorian legacy into a mystical feminist foremother, Woolf’s interest in Austen quickly waned: *A Room of One’s Own* is her last substantial piece of writing on Austen, and subsequent comments suggest that Woolf struggled to find much use for a figure who, despite all her revisions, continued to signal a ladylike decorum and lack of political engagement.

In the spirit of ‘Jane Austen at Sixty’, Woolf’s letters provide an insight into what her own unwritten essays on Austen might have looked like. Woolf’s epistolary discussions of Austen continue to free her from Victorian legacies by re-examining her gentility and character, which had previously resisted attacks. In a 1936 note to Chapman, Woolf writes that ‘I have often thought of writing an article on the coarseness of J.A. The people who talk of her as if she were a niminy piminy spinster always annoy me. But I suppose I should annoy them’ (*L* 6.87). Given that Woolf made these remarks to the editor of Austen’s letters, it is likely that she was considering these as evidence for claims: a negative review of the two volumes in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1932 had also caused her considerable annoyance by its lamentation of Austen’s lost gentility. The anonymous review, written by E.M. Forster, strongly criticized the ‘catalogues of trivialities’ assembled in the two volumes:

In the letters, how Miss Austen’s occasional comments on expectant motherhood do jar! She faces the facts, but they are not her facts, and her lapses of taste over carnality can be deplorable, no doubt because they arise from lack of feeling. She can write, for instance, and write it as a jolly joke, that “Mrs. Hall of Sherborne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband.”

Did Cassandra laugh? Probably, but all that we catch at this distance is the whinnying of harpies.⁴¹

Forster's disappointment with the letters is palpable: they destroy all illusions about Austen's gentility and virtue, focus on local life and gossip instead of literature, and record the disadvantages of women's living conditions in the early nineteenth-century with cynicism and no illusions. Forster's review was misattributed to Woolf by several acquaintances, making her defend the value of these insights into Austen's domestic life and character even more forcefully. Thus, she writes to Ethel Smyth that

I bought Jane Austen, and find as I suspected that the man or woman is entirely flatly and absolutely wrong, and that the Austen letters are so important and interesting that I fear I shall have to write about one of these days myself [...] What I shall proceed to find out, from her letters, when I've time, is why she failed to be much better than she was. Something to do with sex, I expect; the letters are full of hints already that she suppressed half of her in her novels – Now why? (*L* 5.127)

Woolf's disingenuous question finds an obvious answer in Forster's misogynist attack on the 'whinnying of harpies': her exploration of Austen and sex would likely have come to the conclusion that Austen employed self-censorship because, like the narrator of 'Professions for Women', she knew 'what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions' (*E* 6.482).

Ultimately, Woolf's exploration of Austen's half-suppressed coarseness was never written. Partly, this is likely due to Woolf's own awareness that writing about Austen, sex and coarseness, would have annoyed people. However, her lack of interest in publicly revising Austen again was also the result of Woolf's increasing interest in the interconnections between patriarchy and fascism, feminism, and pacifism, which clearly found nothing to relate to in a writer she continued to view as entirely apolitical. Jean Long suggests that Austen's 'anger and her means of inoffensively leaching it out through irony, were of diminishing use to Woolf since

⁴¹ E. M. Forster, 'Miss Austen and Jane Austen', *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) 10 November 1932. No. 1606, p. 821. 'E. M. Forster on the Letters of Jane Austen - Then and Now, 1932', *The TLS* <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/e-m-forster-jane-austen/>> [accessed 8 March 2018].

they only mirrored her own, and confined her inside the decorously limited world in which she had grown up'.⁴² Austen was therefore of limited use as a model for Woolf's increasing politicization and more direct attacks on society, and her lack of purchase in Woolf's last decade as a writer is born out in one of the few remaining allusions to her. 'If Jane Austen had lain as a child on the landing to prevent her father from thrashing her mother, her soul might have burnt with such a passion against tyranny that all her novels might have been consumed in one cry for justice', she speculated in the second *Common Reader* essay on 'Mary Wollstonecraft' (*E* 5.472). Because of her peaceful life, Austen also does not appear in *Three Guineas* as a victim of patriarchal society: since Woolf never officially revised her verdict that her writing was not harmed by patriarchal structures, Austen remained a model of successful adaptation to patriarchal society, and from Woolf's vantage point of a world quickly approaching World War II, her life and worldview were more quaint and antiquated than ever before.

⁴² Long, p. 92.

2. 'Even a Lady Sometimes Raises her Voice': Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Her loves were vegetable, and her lanes were shady. ('An Imperfect Lady', *E* 3.210)

Such being the natural temper of her mind, it is not surprising that even when she was triply imprisoned by sex, health, and her father in a bed room in Wimpole Street it was her intention to write a novel-poem. ('Aurora Leigh', *E* 5.262)

Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855) has virtually disappeared from literary history: although her entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1894) credited her with laying 'the foundation of a branch of literature hitherto untried' with the sketches of rural life collected in *Our Village*, the narrator's wish in *A Room Of One's Own* has come true and 'the homes and haunts of Mary Russell Mitford' (*ARO* 42) have been closed to the public for quite some time.¹ Although Mitford began her career almost contemporaneously with Jane Austen, she lived well into the nineteenth century and her afterlife and cultural impact are predominantly shaped by Victorian culture. Amongst Mitford's many literary friends was the famous poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61), whom Woolf convicts 'of some complicity in the development of modern poetry' in *Flush* (*F* 109 n2). Both women shared the experience of living under the rule of a despotic father, but their close epistolary friendship revolves around literature and the spaniel Flush, Mitford's gift to Barrett Browning following the death of her brother, who acts as a substitute for the absent Mitford and a source of distraction and consolation in Barrett Browning's isolation.

Although both writers were important literary figures during the nineteenth century, neither has been extensively studied in relation to Woolf. Mary Russell Mitford is virtually invisible within Woolf studies, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning is most commonly mentioned as the owner of Flush, but not an influential woman writer in her own right: to date, Anna Snaith is the only critic to acknowledge Barrett Browning's centrality to Woolf's thinking in the 1930s.² Despite the scarcity of

¹ Elizabeth Lee, 'Mitford, Mary Russell', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1894 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.001.0001/odnb-9780192683120-e-18859>> [accessed 13 June 2018].

² Anna Snaith, 'Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf's *Flush*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 48.3 (2002), 614-36.

criticism, both writers clearly played an important role in the development of Woolf's increasingly political feminism: her reviews take their lives as a starting point for an exploration of biographical representation and the impact of patriarchal society on women's domestic lives. Woolf's reviews of Constance Hill's *Mary Russell Mitford and her Surroundings* (1920) show that Mitford's life alerted Woolf to issues surrounding money, writing, and patriarchy which she explored in greater detail in *A Room Of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*; but the inadequacy of Hill's biography also inspires Woolf to provide her own fictional account of Mitford's life which tests the method of *Orlando* on a smaller scale. While Mitford's literary legacy is therefore completely irrelevant to Woolf's engagement with her, Woolf's engagement with Barrett Browning wavers between domestic and literary. Her 1906 review of the (Barrett) Brownings' correspondence presents a detailed analysis of Mr Browning's impact on his daughter's life and poetry, yet in 1931, Woolf counters the public interest in Barrett Browning's dramatic life with a review that praises *Aurora Leigh* (1856) as an extraordinary representation of mid-Victorian life. Barrett Browning's eloquent discussion of women's place in Victorian society, as well as Woolf's continued interest in her life, combine to anticipate Woolf's criticisms (and use of Barrett Browning's life) in *Three Guineas*. Woolf finally brings together Mitford and Barrett Browning in *Flush* as background characters in the spaniel's life: Woolf's continues the playful fictionalizing of the blank spaces in Mitford's life by extending it to her dog, and continues her previous analysis of domestic tyranny by interrogating Victorian society's desire to dominate women, dogs, and servants from Flush's perspective.

Mary Russell Mitford

Although she is virtually forgotten today, Mary Russell Mitford was among the best-known writers of the early Victorian period. She began publishing poetry in the Regency era, wrote several moderately successful historical tragedies in the 1820s and 1830s, worked as a literary editor and cultivated an active network of literary correspondents.³ Most importantly, however, Mitford gained international fame as the author of a series of sketches of rural English village life, *Our Village*. The series started its life in the *Lady's Magazine* in 1822 with 'sales of the magazine increasing dramatically' due to its popularity; and five volumes of *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* were published in 1824, 1826, 1828, 1830, and 1832, and reissued throughout the century.⁴ In the Victorian period, *Our Village* began to represent a nostalgia for a lost rural idyll, and Mitford and the village of Three Mile Cross became a popular destination for literary tourists. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, '[d]istinguished visitors crowded to her cottage. Passing coachmen and post-boys pointed out to travellers the localities in the village described in the book, and children were named after Miss Mitford's village urchins and pet greyhounds'.⁵

Various critics have demonstrated that this phenomenon constitutes a Victorian response to Mitford rather than an intentional bid for nationalistic nostalgia on her part. Thus, Barbara Onslow defends Mitford from 'a rather unfair reputation for romanticization' and argues that '*Our Village* as rural idyll is as much a construct of later Victorian readings and volume illustrations as it is hers'.⁶ Kevin Morrison similarly asserts that *Our Village* in its original magazine context was 'ambivalently torn between idyll and real world and conflicted about how best to respond to the social turmoil afflicting the English countryside in the 1820s'. Only the later book publications 'become invitations to nostalgia' and help to shape 'a national

³ Katie Halsey, "'Tell Me of Some Booklings": Mary Russell Mitford's Female Literary Networks', *Women's Writing*, 18.1 (2011), 121–36.

⁴ Martin Garrett, 'Mitford, Mary Russell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18859>> [accessed 1 February 2017].

⁵ Lee.

⁶ Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 91.

consciousness through shared images of rural England'.⁷ Likewise, Deirdre Lynch notes that towards the end of the century, Mitford's sketches gained 'afterlives as a publishing phenomenon' in 'amply illustrated, newly kitschified editions' for readers throughout the British Empire and, as Onslow suggests, 'fixed readers' idea of *Our Village* for generations to come'.⁸

Mitford was a writer in a transitional period: for the first time in literary history, the financial success of the magazine market made professional authorship, male as well as female, possible and profitable.⁹ However, as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes, '[b]ut for her father, she would have been rich': Dr Mitford married the heiress Mary Russell and squandered her fortune of £28,000 as well as £20,000 his daughter won in the Irish lottery on 'gambling, speculation, greyhounds, entertaining, and whig [*sic*] electioneering'.¹⁰ Mitford supported her parents through her writing, but despite working eight to twelve hours a day, Onslow records that

[s]he told Elizabeth Barrett Browning she was never without 'pecuniary care' pressing on her thoughts last thing at night; waking every morning 'with a dreary sense of pain and pressure. [...] Only her parents' needs 'reconcile me to the perpetual labour, the feverish anxieties and the miserable notoriety of such a career'.¹¹

Mitford never married and instead devoted herself to her family: both parents died only after long illness, and her father left substantial debts which she could only pay through a subscription organized by friends.¹²

Evidently, there was a wide discrepancy between Mitford's public persona and her private life. Alison Booth notes that

biographical portraiture almost invariably pictured her at home, though the interior of that very small house hardly invited many to

⁷ Kevin A. Morrison, 'Foregrounding Nationalism: Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* and the Effects of Publication Context', *European Romantic Review*, 19.3 (2008), 275–87 (p. 277, p. 283).

⁸ Deirdre Lynch, 'Homes and Haunts: Austen's and Mitford's English Idylls', *PMLA*, 115.5 (2000), 1103–8 (p. 1106). Barbara Onslow, quoted in Morrison, 'Foregrounding Nationalism', p. 283.

⁹ Linda H Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2009), pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ Garrett.

¹¹ Onslow, p. 91.

¹² Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 113.

linger. Homes and haunts writing both made Mitford and did her in; [...] a woman writer caricatured for unpoetic appearance and for floral cheerfulness and comfortable hospitality; her works and persona were interpreted through the spirit of a genre that matches the locale.¹³

This is also apparent in biographical accounts of Mitford's life. Constance Hill's biography *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (1920), which will feature prominently in this chapter, encourages literary tourism and a nostalgic immersion in the past. The biography glosses over the unpleasant aspects of Mitford's life – her father, poverty, and incessant work – and it lacks psychological depth: Hill's Mitford resembles the narrator of *Our Village*, always cheerful and radiating 'peace and good-will upon all who surround her'.¹⁴ Hill's biography completely loses its chronology after Mitford's youth. Instead, the chapters are organized around localities, and lengthy extracts from Mitford's works and letters describing English towns, villages, and great houses are presented alongside Hill's own descriptions of these sites. Ultimately, Hill's work is therefore a guidebook to Mitford country as much as a biography.

Modern criticism struggles to locate Mitford near the literary canon: thus, Alison Booth argues for Mitford's relevance to modern critics 'as part of the current recovery of successful women writers between Austen and the Brontës'.¹⁵ However, although Mitford's period of greatest productivity was pre-Victorian, she was incontestably part of the literary scene at the middle of the nineteenth century: as with the majority of writers, Woolf therefore possessed multiple points of contact for her. Most importantly, *Cornhill* contributor James Payn cultivated a very close epistolary friendship with Mitford, which he commemorated in his memoir *Some Literary Recollections* (1894), dedicated to his close friend, Leslie Stephen. Additionally, Woolf knew of Mitford through Anny Thackeray Ritchie, who edited and introduced an immensely popular selection of fifteen *Our Village* sketches with over one hundred illustrations in 1893, preserving Mitford's appeal for a new generation. In common with other Victorian editions, Ritchie's introduction to the volume locates Mitford firmly in the literary circles of a romanticized past, but her

¹³ Booth, *Homes and Haunts*, p. 104.

¹⁴ Constance Hill, *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1920), p. v.

¹⁵ Alison Booth, 'Revisiting the Homes and Haunts of Mary Russell Mitford', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 30.1 (2008), 39–65 (p. 40).

insightful sketch of Mitford's life gains poignancy by acknowledging the frequent anxiety and suffering which Dr Mitford caused his daughter.¹⁶

Woolf's essays on Mitford consist of three reviews of Hill's biography, ('An Imperfect Lady' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6 May), 'A Good Daughter' (*Daily Herald*, 26 May), and 'The Wrong Way of Reading' (*Athenaeum*, 28 May)); the *Common Reader* essay 'Outlines: Mary Russell Mitford'; and a short review of Mitford's letters in 1925. Although these works are limited to a much shorter period of time than her essays on Austen and Brontë, Woolf achieves a similar sense of development by presenting three different responses to *Mary Russell Mitford and her Surroundings*. While all three reviews are dismissive of Hill's biography, 'An Imperfect Lady' voices this criticism most strongly, and raises the issues of biographical representation, and Dr Mitford's gambling. 'A Good Daughter' investigates the interconnected issues of money and domestic tyranny in a way which points to Woolf's later analysis in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*; and 'The Wrong Way of Reading' explores the role of veracity and imagination in biographical writing, anticipating the fictional method of *Orlando*. All three articles therefore introduce themes which Woolf would further develop in other works throughout the decade: this suggests that for Woolf, Mitford fulfilled a similar function to Anny Thackeray Ritchie, the 'transparent medium' for the Victorian Age. Despite her outright dismissal in *A Room of One's Own*, Mitford's life and biography therefore underpin Woolf's later feminist writing and experimental biography: as Marion Dell suggests of Woolf's engagement with her predecessors, 'she reveals her appreciation by using them, albeit without acknowledgement'.¹⁷

¹⁶ Anny Thackeray Ritchie, 'Introduction', in Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village; By Miss Mitford; With an Introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie; and One Hundred Illustrations by Hugh Thomson*, ed. by Anny Thackeray Ritchie (London: Macmillan and Co, 1893), vii-liiii.

¹⁷ Marion Dell, *Virginia Woolf's Influential Forebears: Julia Margaret Cameron, Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Prinsep Stephen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 9.

‘An Imperfect Lady’

Woolf begins ‘An Imperfect Lady’ with a sustained attack on Constance Hill’s biographical endeavours. Running through a list of canonical women writers from Sappho to George Eliot, Woolf finds that ‘what with one thing or another, Mary Russell Mitford is the only woman left’ (*E* 3.210). Woolf’s surprise at Hill’s choice appears authentic from a modern perspective because Mitford is an obscure minor writer now, but if, as Alison Booth suggests, Mitford remained popular well into the 1920s and 1930s, this constitutes the first in a series of subtle attacks on Hill’s limitations.¹⁸ Woolf’s offer of two more reasons for Hill’s choice of author confirm her satirical intent: ‘In the first place, Miss Mitford was a lady; in the second, she was born in the year 1787’ (*E* 3.210). In short, Hill was eager to continue her series of biographies of eighteenth-century women writers – ‘Jane Austen, Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth have been done already’ (*E* 3.210) as Woolf pointedly remarked – and Mitford offered another popular author unlikely to present any challenges to a genteel biographer. Woolf openly mocks Hill’s preference for picturesque sketches of Regency society and the strict limits to her nostalgic evocation: ‘Bonaparte is the limit of the imagination on the one side, as Monmouth is on the other; it would be fatal if the imagination took to toying with Prince Albert or sporting with King John’ (*E* 3.211).

Woolf is not interested in Mitford’s home as a writer’s house: her focus is on the domestic dynamics inside it. This is a departure from Hill’s focus on literary tourism, and in contrast to the Woolf’s evident fascination with this topic in other essays (like ‘Haworth, November 1904’, which will be discussed in the next chapter), suggesting that gender, not genre as in Booth’s formulation, determines Woolf’s reading of Mitford’s life. Woolf suggests that Hill’s superficial treatment and Mitford’s passive endurance of her father are symptomatic of women’s socialization:

It is undoubtedly because of their reticence that Miss Hill is on the side of the ladies. They sigh things off and they smile things off, but they never seize the silver table by the legs or dash the teacups on the floor. It is in many ways a great convenience to have a subject who

¹⁸ Booth, *Homes and Haunts*, pp. 105-6.

can be trusted to live a long life without once raising her voice. Sixteen years is a considerable stretch of time, but of a lady it is enough to say 'Here Mary Mitford passed sixteen years of her life and here she got to know and love not only their own beautiful grounds but also every turn of the surrounding shady lanes.' (E 3.211)

Hill's romantic past would be impossible without the unspoken code of female conduct, which ensured that Mitford remains complicit in suppressing the unpleasant aspects of her life. Class is also closely linked to the successful nostalgia of *Our Village*: Mitford might be living in close proximity to agricultural labourers, but she is the daughter of a gentleman; thus positioned, she can safely interpret the rural population and their customs to her middle-class readers. Like the saintly Jane Austen of the previous chapter, Hill's Mary Russell Mitford never fell in love and lived an uneventful life, and Woolf is impatient to destroy this illusion, both to turn Mitford into a more complex and therefore more interesting biographical subject, and to restore a voice which was erased even by its owner.

Woolf introduces Dr Mitford ironically, as a Gothic spectre haunting, and indeed destroying this idyll both for the reader and Mary Russell Mitford: 'Even cupboards have their secret springs, and when, inadvertently we are sure, Miss Hill touches this one, out, terrible to relate, topples a stout old gentleman. In plain English, Mary Russell Mitford had a father' (E 3.211). Woolf cites the catalogue of Dr Mitford's wrongdoings:

Only, if from your earliest childhood your father has gambled and speculated, first with your mother's fortune, then with your own, spent your earnings, driven you to earn more, and spent that too; if in old age he has lain upon a sofa and insisted that fresh air is bad for daughters, if, dying at length, he has left debts that can only be paid by selling everything you have or sponging upon the charity of friends – then even a lady sometimes raises her voice. (E 3.212)

Woolf therefore offers a feminist reinterpretation of Mitford's life and thoroughly condemns Dr Mitford's financial and psychological abuse of his daughter. This approach differs substantially from that of Hill, who prefers to focus on Mitford's filial devotion in an attempt to preserve an harmonious picture: 'Miss Mitford's biographers have justly censured her father's evil courses, some considering him as

altogether worthless; but surely there must have been many redeeming qualities in one who called forth such love from such a daughter?’¹⁹ Mitford never quite ‘dashed the teacups on the floor’ and expressed her anger at her exploitative father (and Woolf’s comments on Charlotte Brontë’s anger in *A Room of One’s Own* make it dubious if she would have approved enthusiastically). Nevertheless, Woolf attempts to restore her voice in the review, quoting from her letters that ‘I had toiled and striven and tasted as deeply of bitter anxiety, of fear, and of hope as often falls to the lot of woman’ (*E* 3.212).

Mitford’s profound unhappiness therefore briefly breaks through the review’s comic mode, but it is the very mundane nature of her ‘secret’ which adds an undercurrent of domestic horror. While Mitford’s imperfect respectability begins as Woolf’s mockery of Constance Hill, it gains greater poignancy through Mitford’s very real anxiety and suffering: her unwillingness to leave her father and keep her income are the socially sanctioned consequences of her status as a daughter. Woolf hints at this wider dimension of the problem through the comical admission that ‘[m]any women have had fathers’ (*E* 3.212), thereby opening up the possibility that they, too, suffered under them. Woolf therefore offers a recognition, however feeble, that Mitford’s case was by no means singular but rather a symptom of a patriarchal society; and signals a very early step into the direction of *Three Guineas* and its analysis of the position of an educated man’s daughter in a patriarchal society.

Although ‘An Imperfect Lady’ hints at the lessons to be learned from Mitford’s life, their force is weakened by Woolf’s overall pleasant and amusingly witty tone: she joins Mitford and Hill in their ladylike reticence by sighing things off and smiling things off and burying her criticisms in comical brief asides to the reader. Woolf uses the ‘surface manner’ of her own Victorian tea table training, which allowed her ‘to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud’ (*MoB* 152), to smuggle a brief feminist critique past the editor. Yet ultimately, by framing her analysis of Dr Mitford’s role in his daughter’s life as a mock sensational revelation, and concentrating her criticism on Hill’s failures as biographer, Woolf makes it easy to ignore and dismiss the wider implications of her analysis and silences her own voice. Ultimately, Woolf therefore distances herself from Mitford’s situation and assumes a position of perfect

¹⁹ Hill, p. 140.

respectability herself. She concludes the article with a condemnation of Constance Hill, not Dr Mitford:

That is the worst of writing about ladies; they have fathers as well as teapots. On the other hand, some pieces of Dr Mitford's Wedgewood dinner service are still in existence [...] If there is nothing improper in the suggestion, might not the next book be devoted entirely to them?
(*E* 3.212)

‘A Good Daughter’

‘A Good Daughter’ continues the exploration of some of the issues raised in ‘An Imperfect Lady’: most prominent among these are Mitford’s ‘infinity of feelings which are now only to be guessed at. We can scarcely go wrong if we suppose them to refer in about equal proportions to her father and to her money’ (E 3.213). By providing an early opportunity to work through the themes which will dominate *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, Mitford’s life therefore underpins Woolf’s later argument in both essays despite her superficial absence.

As in her previous review, Woolf draws on humour to maintain a detached, slightly ironical tone: ‘It is amusing to reflect that the florid gentleman [Dr Mitford] who spreads prosperously across the canvas was maintained for a number of years upon the loves of milkmaids and the frolics of greyhounds’ (E 3.214). Woolf displays a similarly amused and condescending attitude in her most sustained comment on Mitford’s works:

To be a popular writer in the year 1850 it was very necessary to write well. The women writers, in particular, wrote very well. Presumably the ordeal of appearing in print was then so severe that no lady went through it without taking pains with her deportment. Jane Austen, moreover, had set the fashion. [...] The result is that Miss Mitford is still readable – well preserved, as we say of some trim, hale, old spinster who has never been ravaged by passion or lost her figure in bearing children. (E 3.214)

Woolf’s faint praise for Mitford’s ‘still readable’ works remains superficial, and her discussion of Mitford’s authorship similarly revolves around her surface manner. Her comparison between Mitford’s style and a lady’s best deportment makes obvious that for a woman to write meant to appear in public and open herself up to attacks from critics, but also suggests that the biography’s reticence, which Woolf finds frustrating, stems from Mitford as much as Hill. Since Hill’s biography is composed ‘chiefly by means of quotation’ (E 3.213), Mitford’s ability to appear amiable and respectable without betraying her true feelings contributes considerably to its superficial tone and cheerful attitude. Woolf had rejected Austen’s flawless perfection and serene composure in her early criticism, and she similarly questions

Mitford's lack of passion and her permanent cheerfulness. Mitford's nature writing, focussed almost solely on externalities, is a far cry from the interiority and true emotion which Woolf was beginning to aim for in her own work.

Given that Mitford belonged to the first generation of fully financially independent professional writers, male or female, it is surprising that Hill and Woolf uncritically accept her career as a matter of course. Peterson notes that '[f]or women in the 1830s, as for men, the key aspects of professional authorship were respectable social status, genius or genial wit, and silence about earnings': Mitford functioned as a model woman writer since she 'trumpets neither her earnings nor her father's faults – and hence earns *Fraser's* [*Magazine's*] praise' in a discussion of literary luminaries.²⁰ Mitford's skilful adherence to this code of conduct therefore influences later representations of her career, such as Hill's biography: in contrast to the Austen family's contortions in justifying female authorship, Hill accepts Mitford's private and public existence as entirely unproblematic. She ignores Mitford's literary ambitions or her reasons for publishing and mentions only briefly that her writing generated the family income. Her critical comments are limited to admiring clichés – 'Miss Mitford's capacity of throwing herself heart and soul into the widely varying subjects upon which she was engaged was truly remarkable'²¹ – but she draws attention to Mitford's correspondence with famous mid-century writers to boost her prominence as a literary figure. While Victorian biographies like Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) focus on the conflicting demands on a woman writer's attention, the indeterminate status of Mitford's works allows Hill to avoid this discussion: written in a tone which assumes familiarity between reader and narrator, Mitford's sketches often revolve around mundane domestic matters such as a comically unsuccessful shopping trip to Reading and make firm distinctions between private life and public appearance impossible. Hill contributes to this development by quoting without distinction from Mitford's private letters and her various publications, thereby creating cohesion between her private and public personae. Ultimately, Mitford's literary work therefore appears like a private and personal activity: Hill's only references to Mitford's literary work imagines her composing in her garden while enjoying

²⁰ Peterson, p. 33.

²¹ Hill, p. 230.

flowers and the sun, and therefore obscure the public and professional nature of her writing.

A similar attitude is evident in Woolf's review: in contrast to the growing feminism which marks much of her writing on female authorship in patriarchal society during the 1920s, Mitford's professional self-sufficiency appears entirely unremarkable, and Woolf settles for a brief and flippant comment on the 'ordeal of appearing in print'. Discussing Mitford's writing in terms of female department, Woolf breaks the silence surrounding Dr Mitford and money and focuses on the intrinsic connection between Mitford's private identity as a daughter and her public role of successful writer caused by her father's dependence on her. This suggests that for Woolf, Mitford's professional career has been normalized into the sphere of regular female activities: writing to support her family is an extreme extension of Mitford's duties as a daughter, but not a departure from the home into the marketplace.

Woolf is evidently more interested in Mitford's lack of agency and control over her life and earnings than any questions of professionalism. Woolf's investigation of the inner workings of the Mitford household leads her from the well-preserved spinster appearing in print to her drawing room self, a 'sentimental, conservative, impulsive English lady with a deep respect for conventions, property, the classics and the church', but most importantly, locates the real Miss Mitford in 'a little room to herself up in the roof': there 'she did her accounts, waited for the door to slam, wrote about her greyhounds, and sighed pretty frequently' (*E* 3.214). This image of Mitford encountering her innermost self in her private room would seem to offer itself as an illustration of many of the points Woolf makes in *A Room of One's Own*: it allows Mitford to distance herself from the constant demands on her attention coming from family and literary tourists and offers a place for reflection and respite as well as work. However, the demands of the household and drawing room, usually such a central point in Woolf's analysis of nineteenth-century women writers, appear to be irrelevant in these reviews of Mitford's life. Whether it is due to the Mitfords' poverty and the implicit assumption that there would not be a household of significance to run, or a judgement on Mitford's lack of serious literary skills, Woolf fails to examine this aspect of her life in *A Room of One's Own* as well as her reviews.

However, 'A Good Daughter' also implicitly offers a third reason for Mitford's unsuitability for *A Room of One's Own*: even in her private room, she is incapable of escaping from external constraints. Anna Snaith argues that

[c]ontrary to Elaine Showalter's formulation, a room of one's own does not mean withdrawal or exile. It is a liberating private space, an active choice, and, importantly, it is from the room that the woman will gain access to the public sphere through writing.²²

However, even nine years before the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's portrayal of Mitford's room already demonstrates that this element of active choice was completely lacking from her life: even with a room, a profession and an income of her own, Mitford remains bound up in patriarchal society. While Woolf would not explicitly discuss this problem until *Three Guineas* eighteen years later, she hints at it when she mentions that Mitford's theatrical ambitions had to be put aside for the financially more lucrative *Our Village*, thereby recasting her career as another form of domestic slavery. Mitford's great struggle is not the search for a room of one's own and freedom from household chores, but the need for an independent existence and an untouchable income of her own. Woolf's portrayal of Mitford's room therefore strongly hints at the room's potential to become a prison: while she is at liberty to lament 'the lot of women' within it, she can escape neither filial duties nor patriarchal society.

Woolf's constant focus on Dr Mitford's exploitation of his daughter therefore draws attention to the irony of its title: Mitford's status as 'Good Daughter' demanded a self-sacrifice as complete as that of Coventry Patmore's Angel in the House, and relies on a sense of complete entitlement on the case of Dr Mitford which differs from the 'infantile fixation' discussed in *Three Guineas* only in its manifestation (3G 257-61). Woolf's review resists discussing these problems outright, and her conclusion is resigned: 'But what is the use of scolding her now? It was none of his fault, she said; had all the gold of Peru been poured into her lap she would not have exchanged him for another' (E 3.214). Woolf rephrases Mitford's original: 'I would not exchange my father, even though we toiled together for our daily bread, for any man on earth, though he could pour the gold of Peru in my lap'

²² Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 2. Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977), p.285.

(*E* 3.223 n13); thereby removing the ambiguity of Mitford's statement, which seems to refer to a husband as much as a different father. Crucially, however, Woolf also ignores the context of the quotation: in 1812, with their loss of fortune and home still two years away, Mary Russell Mitford could envision poverty to mean only 'toiling together for our daily bread.' Given a chance to change her opinion, the solitary writer in the attic room might well have retracted this earlier and more optimistic choice.

‘The Wrong Way of Reading’

Woolf’s gradual addition of psychological depth to her sketch of Mitford’s life in ‘A Good Daughter’ implicitly continues her critique of Hill’s biography. ‘An Imperfect Lady’ had made it very clear that she believed Hill incapable of presenting even one convincing insight into Mitford’s inner life, while she herself was able to present at least three different perspectives. Although the article remained factual, Woolf’s interest in juxtaposing different perspectives on Mitford therefore strongly recalls her approach to characterization in *Jacob’s Room*, which she was writing contemporaneously. On May 8, she had complained in her diary about the onslaught of Mitford reviews:

Partly [owing] to the horror of writing 1,2,3,4, reviews on end, 3 concerning Mitford too, I’ve been groaning & grumbling, & seeing myself caged, & all my desired ends – Jacob’s Room that is – vanishing down avenues. (*D* 2.35)

While her first two articles were non-fictional reviews of Mitford’s life and Hill’s biography, in ‘The Wrong Way of Reading’, Woolf’s interest in fictional representation comes to the forefront: the review is informed by Woolf’s novelistic practice and combines speculation on the limits of biographical experimentation with fantastical rewritings and imaginative exploration of Mitford’s life.

From the very beginning, ‘The Wrong Way of Reading’ is true to its programmatic name. Woolf begins her essay with the concession that

one must own that there are certain books which can be read without the mind and without the heart, but still with considerable enjoyment. To come straight to the point, the great merit of these scrapbooks, for they can scarcely be called biographies, is that they licence mendacity. (*E* 3.218)

The resulting review, adding embellishment to Hill’s unconvincing projection of Mitford, reads like a missing link between the exuberant biographical parody of ‘Friendship’s Gallery’ (1906) and the more sustained blend of fact and fiction in *Orlando* (1928).

Woolf begins her parody of Hill with a depiction of Mitford’s birth. Hill’s biography briefly informs her reader that ‘Here [in Alresford] it was that the doctor

started a practice soon after his marriage with Miss Russell, the only child and heiress of the late Dr Russell, Rector of Ashe, and here, on the 16th December, 1787, Mary, also an only child, was born'. She quickly moves from such intimate details to the more pressing question of the house's design, quoting from Mitford that 'The breakfast-room ... was a lofty and spacious apartment literally lined with books, which, with its Turkey carpet, its glowing fire, its sofas and its easy-chairs, seemed, what it indeed was, a very English nest of comfort.'²³ In Woolf's retelling, these details are combined and embellished, supplying the likely dynamics of the Mitford's marriage and satirizing Hill's lack of detailed personal information:

So Miss Mitford was born in the breakfast room about eight-thirty on a snowy morning between the Doctor's second and third cup of tea. 'Pardon me,' said Mrs Mitford, turning a little pale, but not omitting to add the right quantity of cream to her husband's tea, 'I feel...' [...] 'Observe,' says Mendacity, 'with what an air the Doctor drinks his tea, and how she, poor lady, contrives to curtsy as she leaves the room.' Tea? I inquire, for the Doctor, though a fine figure of a man, is already purple and profuse, and foams like a crimson cock over the frill of his fine lace shirt. 'Since the ladies have left the room,' Mendacity begins, and goes on to make up a pack of lies with the sole object of proving that Dr Mitford kept a mistress in the purlieus of Reading [...] Poor Mrs Mitford! Twenty-one years ago she left the breakfast-room and no news has yet been received of her child. Even Mendacity is a little ashamed of itself, and, picking up *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings*, announces that everything will come alright if we possess ourselves in patience. (*E* 3.218-19)

In modelling her brief history of Mitford's birth after Sterne's scandalously explicit *Tristram Shandy*, Woolf provides another rebuttal to Hill's genteel reticence. M.-C. Newbould notes that Woolf distances herself from the Victorian disapproval of Sterne's indecency and bawdiness and instead focuses on the metafictional

²³ Hill, p. 4 and 5.

commentary and creative play with conventions which characterizes his work; and her engagement with biography in this review follows similar lines.²⁴

Woolf's humorous defence of her fantastical invention as fact-based reveals the exaggeration and hyperbole driving her biographical fiction: 'the touch about the cream, for instance, might be called historical: for it is well-known that when Mary won £20,000 in the Irish lottery, the Doctor spent it all on Wedgewood china' (*E* 3.218). Strictly speaking, of course, Mitford's birth preceded her lottery win on her tenth birthday, and although Hill dedicates several paragraphs to the surviving pieces of Wedgewood, she can only verify the existence of 'a tureen of beautiful shape, two or three soup plates and a couple of butter-boats'.²⁵ Woolf's invention does, however, reveal the potential of her throwaway line at the end of 'An Imperfect Lady', suggesting Hill write the life of the dinner service. The comment reveals Woolf's strong understanding of the importance of objects in nineteenth-century commodity culture, and anticipates thing theory's recognition that objects 'are nearly always in the process of escaping from consumer cycles of exchange, affixing themselves instead to the identities, memories, affections, and aspirations of the characters they possess.'²⁶ Woolf here returns to the dinner service to demonstrate its power to reveal unwelcome truths: through her satire, it can finally speak to the abuse of power and reckless profligacy which it beheld. As witness to a bygone age, it also closely resembles the mountain of Victorian relics that offer a history of the age in miniature in *Orlando* (*O* 160). Throughout the review, Woolf's satire continues to mock particular moments in Hill's loosely-structured collection of anecdotes, such as the pleasure of encountering the last relics of the Mitfords' china or her digressions into snowstorms, fossil collection, and encounters with the French aristocracy. The effect partially relies on the reader's ability to recognize the elements of Hill's rambling biography, but in weaving into her fiction the facts of Mitford's life, or at the very least, the facts that Hill presents in her biography, Woolf already practises humorously the form she would suggest in earnest in 'The New Biography': an 'amalgamation of rainbow and granite', of fact and fiction.

²⁴ M.-C. Newbould, "'The Utmost Fluidity Exists with the Utmost Permanence": Virginia Woolf's Un-Victorian Sterne', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 16 (2010), 71–94.

²⁵ Hill, p. 55.

²⁶ Jennifer Sattaur, "Thinking Objectively: An Overview of "Thing Theory" in Victorian Studies", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40.1 (2012), 347–57 (p. 347).

Woolf's turns Hill's disregard for time, structure and major life events into playful protests against the strict form of traditional biography and parodies her ineptitude in a display of her own skill as a writer and critic. She mimics Hill's haphazard style, and its tendency to introduce largely irrelevant information on the history of buildings, localities or ancient families. Likewise, Mendacity's failure to keep an eye on its chronology is a pointed reference to Hill's failure to do the same in most of her biography, which drifts vaguely between the 1820s and 1840s without much concern for offering a temporal structure for the reader. Closely resembling *Orlando* (not least in introducing personified character traits) and the associative style and scene-making Woolf and other modernists would advocate in the New Biography, Woolf's satire therefore reveals the potential of breaking with good form.

Woolf's parodically exaggerated inclusion of one of Hill's bigger digressions, the account of a severe snowstorm, likewise formulates some of the key aspects of *Orlando*. In 'The Wrong Way of Reading' she suggests that

[t]here is something very charming in an ancient snowstorm. The weather has varied almost as much in the course of generations as mankind. The snow of those days was more formally shaped and a good deal softer than the snow of ours, just as an eighteenth-century cow was no more like our cows than she was like the florid and fiery cows of Elizabethan pasture. Sufficient attention has scarcely been paid to this aspect of literature, which, it cannot be denied, has its importance. (*E* 3.219)

The formal snowstorms of Hill's biography are of a piece with Mitford's own well-controlled and regulated landscape, which obligingly supplies her with monthly topics for her sketches and therefore with an income, but in 'The Wrong Way of Reading' they function as a further illustration of Hill's shortcomings. Although her biography abounds with natural scenes, she never utilizes them beyond the stereotypical evocation of a nostalgic rural past. Paula Maggio notes of the *Common Reader* version of Woolf's essay that it is only one of a series of contributions to a theory on weather articulated in Woolf's non-fiction:

She maintains that weather and literature are linked in a manner that parallels the symbiotic connection between the human world and the

natural world, a view that allows her to disavow the commonly held belief that the two operated within an independent duality.²⁷

Similarly, Orlando witnesses the change from the ‘light, order, and serenity’ of the Age of Enlightenment upon which ‘the stars looked down, glittering, positive, hard, from a cloudless sky’ to the Victorian period: clouds approach and ‘[w]ith the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness, all was doubt, all was confusion’ (*E* 3.155, 156). Woolf alludes to Ruskin’s *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, as Jane de Gay notes, but also demonstrates a more effective use of biographical weather than Hill.²⁸

While the previous example shows Woolf playfully appropriating Hill’s flaws to transform them into a literary commentary and method, her satire eventually prompts a serious enquiry into the problems of biography, and particularly the problem of knowing people, which is of central importance to *Jacob’s Room*. Woolf relates a condensed version of Hill’s ‘Chapter V. Lyme Regis’, which focuses largely on the King of Saxony’s visit to Lyme Regis, where he gathered fossils with Mary Anning and ‘an old woman seated herself in the King’s coach – was she Mary Mitford?’ (*E* 3.220). Since she was not, Woolf concludes that

[i]n the year 1844 Mary Russell Mitford was fifty-seven years of age, and so far what we know of her is curiously negative; she had not known Mary Anning, she had not found an ichthyosaurus; she had not been out in the snowstorm, and she had not seen the King of France. (*E* 3.220)

Blurring the boundaries between philosophical enquiry and bad writing, Woolf uses Hill’s ineptitude as a biographer, which led to an inability to understand the facts of Mitford’s life, as entry point for a serious discussion of the fundamental difficulties of truthful representation of character and mind:

Even in the case of our friends the deposit is all spun over by a myriad changes; what they are depends upon what we are; then there are

²⁷ Paula Maggio, ‘Digging for Buried Treasure: Theories about Weather and Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Essays’, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 78 (2010), 23–26 (p. 24).

²⁸ Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf’s Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), pp. 141–42.

marriage, separation, the taking of office, and the birth of children; in short, when we come to say what anyone is like we often find ourselves in Miss Hill's predicament without her excuse and merely reply that an anonymous old woman once sat in the King of Saxony's coach. If this is so with the living, what can we know about the dead? (E 3.220)

Woolf's ultimate conclusion is therefore slightly more sympathetic towards Hill's struggles: while the key facts of Mitford's life are known, the fundamental incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of her true character condemns any biographical endeavour to failure.

With this conclusion, the review also echoes themes at the heart of *Jacob's Room*. Woolf implicitly demonstrates that 'what they [people] are depends on what we are' by presenting multiple points of view on Jacob which nevertheless preserve the central mystery of his being. Linda Martin notes that

[t]hroughout the novel, Woolf employs an experimental, externalized mode of narration that cultivates in readers the odd sensation that Jacob is already absent or out of reach, even though he is alive and before our eyes until the very last pages.²⁹

Particularly Woolf's description of omnibus passengers travelling alongside each other provides an explicit link to the previous passage in its emphasis on unreadability: 'Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, [...] and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all' (JR 85).

Woolf's own brief account of Mitford's life wavers between emphasis on Mitford's unknowability and an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in her life: 'Poor Miss Mitford – but how 'poor Miss Mitford' if we know nothing about her?' Woolf's account of Mitford's 'passion for her father' therefore introduces psychological speculation to make up for her opacity (E 3.220). Woolf continues to draw on nature imagery with the assumption that it was Mitford's '[s]quat, brown, beetle-browed' looks which caused her feelings of inferiority to and infatuation with her father; and

²⁹ Linda Martin, 'Elegy and the Unknowable Mind in *Jacob's Room*', *Studies in the Novel*, 47.2 (2015), 176–92, p. 176.

utilizes the feeling of stasis which Hill's nostalgia and lack of temporal structure cause and applies it to Mitford's life:

if we consider what it must be like to sit at the same window, year in, year out, hoping that a dog may trip up an old woman, or that the cobbler's little girl may break the jug in which she is carrying him his beer in order that the Americans may rejoice in the simplicity of rural England, one feels that to smash the window, strangle the doctor, and hamstring all the ponies in Berkshire would, as they say in novels, be the work of a moment. (*E* 3.221)

Woolf's pointed juxtaposition of the literary realism of *Our Village* and the actual reality of life in Three Mile Cross provides an eloquent commentary on the practice of naïve readers like Constance Hill, who take Mitford's words and images at face value. However, by drawing attention to the artificiality of Hill's life of Mitford, Woolf also continues her interrogation of the genre of biography. It is similarly framed and selective; and, as this assumption of Mitford's point of view demonstrates, often relies on the invention of an interior life which, however plausible it might seem to us, cannot always be verified – given that Dr Mitford died a natural death and Mitford's only known revolt lies in the quiet complaint of her letters. The violent disruption of this nostalgic rural idyll through Woolf's imaginary revolt therefore continues her feminist critique of Mitford's life: as Bonnie Kime Scott notes, '[a]s she became increasingly aware of feminist and pacifist standpoints, Woolf grew skeptical of "Englishness" – national identification with a place often used to promote patriarchal and national projects, including war'.³⁰

Woolf's rejection of Mitford as a symbol of nostalgic national identity in 'The Wrong Way of Reading' therefore allowed her to use experimental biographical techniques to restore Mitford to life and make a case for her complexity as a subject; but Woolf needed to go beyond Hill to find anecdotes which supported her assertion that 'there are thousands [of words] craving to be used of her' (*E* 3.221). James Payn's *Literary Recollections* provide a character sketch of Mitford which allowed just that: in his reminiscences Mitford emerges as a kindly mentor to a young man with literary ambitions, 'a venerable fairy, with bright sparkling eyes, a clear,

³⁰ Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012), p. 114.

incisive voice, and a laugh that carried you away with it'.³¹ Payn provides Woolf with several scenes for her final paragraphs: Mitford's delight over finding a glow worm in her bedroom when she could no longer leave her house, her preoccupation with books in her correspondence (which becomes Woolf's most explicit acknowledgement of Mitford's status as literary paragon in the 1850s), Charles Kingsley's memories of her, and a description of the book-stuffed interior of Mitford's cottage. Woolf utilizes this last to fashion a memorable, but comically absurd final picture of Mitford. Sitting in a cottage packed with books, she is even physically hard to read: 'though she was undoubtedly dressed, no one could tell what she was dressed in; or know from looking at her as she lay on two chairs which was tiny Miss Mitford and which was rug, quilt, skirt, or dressing gown' (*E* 3.222). Woolf's essay thus ends with an image of a very informal Mitford in her private setting, offering a counterbalance to the well-preserved and impeccably behaved lady of the first review. Nevertheless, Mitford is overshadowed and almost erased by the objects surrounding her, her virtual disappearance a strong indication of Woolf's lessening interest in her.

³¹ James Payn, *Some Literary Recollections* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1884), p. 77.

Outlines

Woolf's brief 1925 review of a new edition of *The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford* provides a vital clue as to why Mitford would never become an influential figure in her personal canon of women writers. Although Woolf touches upon some of the major themes of her previous reviews in summoning again the image of a 'cultivated old maid, who won a lottery ticket and supported an incompetent father, and wrote excellent prose' and acknowledges that Mitford 'possessed the now extinct art of writing letters which can go straight to the printer without the erasure of a single word' (E 4.15), the letters leave Woolf disappointed. Mitford's inaccessibility and the lack of interiority, which Woolf had previously blamed on Hill's shortcomings as a biographer and possibly a flaw of the genre of biography itself, remain the focus of Woolf's complaints: 'Delightful as they are and entertaining, one would like occasionally to feel that Miss Mitford was in a hurry, or in a temper, or had something very urgent to say' (E 4.15) Presenting a carefully cultivated, amiable and cheerful narrator who writes 'full pages about the Elizabethan drama, Scott's novels, and the sunshine and the flowers and the cats' (E 4.15), the letters conceal Mitford's true self as efficiently as Hill's ineptitude as a writer had done. While Woolf's reviews demonstrated that a more imaginative writer could have found traces of Mitford's private sorrows and concerns in her life, her superficiality therefore discourages further exploration.

Unlike most other women writers discussed here, Woolf does not speculate extensively about Mitford's character: she lacked Jane Austen's potential for reinvention and remained an easily dismissible well-preserved spinster. Woolf's disappointment with Mitford finds its expression in her revised *Common Reader* essay of the same year. One of a series of 'Outlines', Woolf's essay is composed of the first part of 'The Wrong Way of Reading' and most of 'An Imperfect Lady' with very minor modifications. Woolf therefore makes Mitford a background character in her own life. Her existence prompts a discussion of gentility and biography, but Woolf's exclusion of her most explicit feminist analysis in 'A Good Daughter' as well as her biographical summary makes Mitford herself less relevant than ever. Mitford's ambiguous absence is similarly felt in *A Room of One's Own*: Woolf begins her essay with the rejection of the conventional history of women's writing, including 'some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford' (AROO 3), and repeats in

Chapter 3 that ‘as for myself, I should not mind if the homes and haunts of Mary Russell Mitford were closed to the public for a century at least’ (*AROO* 42). Yet by publicly excising Mitford from her own literary history, Woolf also acknowledges her importance and lingering influence. As I will show, Mitford’s reappearance in *Flush* is evidence of her continued importance in shaping Woolf’s thinking on women patriarchy as well as a catalyst for experimental biography.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Woolf's catalogue of women writers in 'An Imperfect Lady' had also featured Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but 'Mrs Browning was a married woman' (E 3.210) and therefore disqualified from treatment by delicate lady biographers like Hill. While Hill might have had reservations about prying into the private life of a married woman, the general public did not. By the 1930s, Barrett Browning, once a 'behind-the-scenes contender for the prize position of England's Poet Laureate in 1850'³² whose portrayal of female authorship in *Aurora Leigh* had inspired generations of Victorian women writers, had been transformed into a damsel in distress. Her imprisonment by a tyrannical father and subsequent elopement with fellow poet Robert Browning by far overshadowed any lingering remembrance of her reputation as a poet. Marjory Stone suggests that unease with women's literary achievements was a major factor in this loss of status:

While many late Victorian critics continued to approach EBB as one of the century's major poets, those hostile to the implications of her achievement increasingly carried the day [...] By the early twentieth century, hostility to the author of *Aurora Leigh* had subsided, but at the cost of reducing EBB to an appendage of her husband.³³

Barrett Browning thus presented to Woolf a case study of women's lives in patriarchal society in several respects: through her own experiences, through her politically engaged poetry, and in her afterlife and loss of literary prestige. As Anna Snaith notes, Woolf was highly attuned to this phenomenon:

Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning was all to do with context: the phenomenon of Barrett Browning's popularity and decline, as well as Barrett Browning's own interest in contemporary politics, seen particularly in "Aurora Leigh," the text that caught Woolf's imagination. Woolf understood that the fascination with Barrett

³² Carol Hanbery MacKay, 'Emerging Selves: The Autobiographical Impulse in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and Annie Wood Besant', in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. by Adam Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), pp. 207–20 (p. 209).

³³ Marjorie Stone, 'Browning, Elizabeth Barrett', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3711?rskey=uy4TVq&result=1>> [accessed 13 June 2018].

Browning's life had prevented readers from fully appreciating the politics of her writing.³⁴

Woolf not only understands the fascination of Barrett Browning's life, she falls prey to it herself: in her first review, the 1906 'Poets' Letters', Woolf approaches Barrett Browning as a quickly fading Victorian relic whose main significance lies in her resistance to domestic tyranny, and is more interested in refuting Leslie Stephen's views on 'The Browning Letters' (1899). After a long period of silence, Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning is renewed in 1930 by the sensational play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. Although her review of *Aurora Leigh* (1931) attempts to restore Barrett Browning's status as a major Victorian poet, Woolf's interest in her personal life continues to dominate her discussion. This is most evident in *Flush*, which concludes this chapter by uniting both writers. Although Woolf reinserts Mary Russell Mitford into the narrative of Barrett Browning's life, ultimately, domestic tyranny and the (Barrett) Brownings' courtship continue to dominate the narrative: Woolf draws on the lessons learnt from both writers' private lives to highlight the complex problems of gender, class and power at the heart of society from the perspective of a dog.

³⁴ Anna Snaith, 'Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism', p. 615.

‘Poets’ Letters’

Coinciding with the low point of Barrett Browning’s popularity, Virginia Woolf’s review of Percy Lubbock’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her Letters* (1906) questions her relevance to a modern readership. While Woolf celebrates the volume for interpreting Barrett Browning for a new century, she is ambivalent about the literary merit of her poetry and ultimately sees her main relevance in providing an example of the worst excesses of the Victorians.

Woolf begins her review with a summary of the contemporary indifference towards Barrett Browning:

We should have to interpret some brief decisions to the effect that she was a bad poet, and that our fathers were strangely mistaken when they exalted her to the place which she holds, in theory at least, at the present day. It is true that a candid inquirer would have to enlarge and qualify such a verdict considerably before it could be allowed to stand; but in its rude way it points to a fact that need not be made the subject of inquiry here, that Mrs Browning, as a poet, has ceased to play much part in our lives. (*E* 1.101)

Woolf’s decision to make Barrett Browning a symbol of the bygone Victorian era is in keeping with the essay’s constant dialogue with Leslie Stephen’s review of ‘The Browning Letters’ (*National Review* in 1899, expanded for *Studies of a Biographer* III (1902)). Written only two years after his death, Woolf’s essay therefore forms part of the deliberate revision of Victorian legacies that also dominated the contemporary short stories discussed in the introduction: her strong awareness of generational divides and changing approaches to privacy and biography inform its approach to Barrett Browning and her life and letters.

Woolf’s review begins with a mockery of the Victorian delicacy which discourages the reading of intimate correspondence:

It was dreadful, the sensitive said, to overhear; but if one did sin, the more callous suggested, it was as well to be guilty of a pleasant crime. And the eavesdropper became so weary of those emphatic voices, protesting and asseverating, uttering commonplaces with dreadful distortion of the lips and drowning even the simple emotions in a

twisted torrent of language, that he might surely consider that his fault was expiated as soon as committed. (*E* 1.102)

Woolf's celebration of Lubbock's double service to readers in tastefully selecting appropriate sections from Barrett Browning's letters, and trimming their excessive language and sentiment, is a direct response to Leslie Stephen's essay's extensive analysis of 'the claim of men of genius to posthumous privacy'.³⁵ While Stephen notes that Barrett Browning believed letters to be the 'most vital part of biography' without which the 'dead would be deader', ultimately, his concerns about the demoralizing effect of publicity prevail.³⁶ Woolf's language mocks Stephen's expression of ethical unease in reading a married couple's private correspondence:

The sense of impropriety which besets one every now and then in reading—that uncomfortable suspicion that one is, after all, an eavesdropper – is purely due to the following all the little ins and outs through so long a correspondence, and the feeling that one is looking over the shoulders of the writers at a moment when they would have shown the door to an intruder.³⁷

Stephen proposes to resolve this moral dilemma by publishing a more discreet selected edition of the letters. While Woolf's review praises Lubbock for providing exactly this, her comical conflation of Stephen's ethical concerns and Barrett Browning's excessively verbose sentimentality also dismisses his concerns as just as antiquated and Victorian as her language.

As in her early short stories, Woolf introduces an explicitly feminist element into her revision of Stephen's thinking: Woolf appreciates Barrett Browning's letters for the insight they grant into the excesses of patriarchal society, an element largely ignored by Stephen. Combining Woolf's engagement with Stephen and her interrogation of Mr Barrett's impact on his daughter's life, the essay therefore introduces the influence and legacies of fathers as an important topic in Woolf's engagement with Barrett Browning. Stephen had defended his interest in the letters by emphasising their value to the literary critic: 'A man's infirmities are, after all,

³⁵ Leslie Stephen, 'The Browning Letters', in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1902), III, pp. 1–35 (p. 1, p. 12).

³⁶ Stephen, p. 14, p. 26.

³⁷ Stephen, p. 32.

part of him; [...] and very often they suggest the only excuse for his shortcomings'.³⁸ Woolf builds on this line of argument, but expands it from personal to political. She explores Barrett Browning's existence as 'a life-long prisoner in a London house, guarded by a mad gaoler in the person of her father, and nourished almost solely upon books and writing' (*E* 1.102). Woolf therefore values the letters largely as documentary evidence of her father's tyranny: 'In hands less just and discriminating the story becomes so monstrous that its real effect upon Mrs Browning is obscured. But as it is told here, with the perpetual illustration of the letters, it becomes clearly a thing that did really happen' (*E* 1.102). Like the facts supporting the argument of *Three Guineas*, Barrett Browning's letters therefore offer a valuable insight into the tyranny of the private house, but also provide Woolf with a much-needed context for her work as an act of self-assertion and defiance:

The vigour with which she threw herself into the only life that was free to her and lived so steadily and strongly in her books that her days were full of purpose and character would be pathetic did it not impress us with the strength that underlay her ardent and sometimes febrile temperament. (*E* 1.103)

Drawing on Barrett Browning's analysis of how literature had to become a substitute for everything else her life was lacking, Woolf highlights the direction her later interest in Barrett Browning and women's coping mechanisms in patriarchal society would take: poetry, like *Flush*, is merely a substitute for suppressed emotion and lack of social interaction.

Ultimately, however, Woolf's review is an elegy rather than a celebration: ending with a lament of Barrett Browning's lost potential, Woolf suggests that

it is not possible to consider what she might have done had her life been propitious – had not one half dwindled in a London sick-room – had not the other been exposed suddenly to the fierce Italian sun and Robert Browning. (*E* 1.103)

With 'sane poetry' made impossible by her circumstances, Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning remains superficial and her relevance limited.

³⁸ Stephen, p. 7.

‘Aurora Leigh’

If Woolf’s lack of interest in Barrett Browning’s works needed further proof, it lies in two and a half decades of silence that follow this review. However, when Barrett Browning returns, she does so with full force, and as Snaith remarks, her ‘writing, her life, her reputation, and of course her dog, Flush, are behind much of Woolf’s thinking throughout the 1930s’.³⁹ Although Woolf claimed that she had read *Aurora Leigh* ‘by chance with great interest’, it is more likely that seeing the play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street: A Comedy in Five Acts* (1930) caused the sudden return of her interest (L 4.301). Woolf confessed to being ‘rather disappointed, though amused by the astonishing story – which is not an exaggeration’ and thought the play ‘rather feeble’ (L 4.351, 349): Julia Novak argues that the play depicts ‘Barrett Browning as an entirely relational creature, defined through and dependent on, first, her possessive father and, later, increasingly, her “life-giving” bridegroom’.⁴⁰ Building on Barrett Browning’s renewed popularity, Woolf revises the verdict of her earlier article and offers a competing and corrective reading of her life and work. She moves beyond exploration of Barrett Browning’s life to assert her reputation as a prominent poet in her own right and celebrates *Aurora Leigh*’s relevance as a genre-defying experimental poem and an important social commentary on women’s position in Victorian society.

While Woolf’s previous article had suggested a division between Barrett Browning’s Victorian and modern reputation, ‘Aurora Leigh’ examines the contrast between her popularity as quaint figure of romance and the obscurity of her poetry. Asserting that ‘the only place in the mansion of literature that is assigned her is downstairs in the servants’ quarters, where [...] she bangs the crockery about and eats vast handfuls of peas on the point of her knife’ (E 5.258), Woolf’s vivid imagery comically exaggerates the condescension of the anonymous male critic she quotes: ‘Her importance, they say, “has now become merely historical. Neither education nor association with her husband ever succeeded in teaching her the value of words and a sense of form”’ (E 5.258). Woolf’s quotation highlights the disparity of treatment between Barrett Browning and her husband and sets the stage for her discussion of

³⁹ Snaith, ‘Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism’, p. 614.

⁴⁰ Julia Novak, ‘The Notable Woman in Fiction: The Afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’, *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31.1 (2016), 83–107 (p.89).

Aurora Leigh's struggles as a writer by introducing women and literature as a central concern of the essay. Although Woolf claims 'to muse with kindly condescension over this token of bygone fashion', her superficially disparaging comparisons – 'it is not a book but a dusty mantle with fringes and furbelows that our grandmother actually wore; a cluster of wax fruit that they stood in a glass case' – point to its ability to perfectly represent many different aspects of the society and culture of the early Victorian period (*E* 5.258, 259). Like the curious 'conglomeration [...] of the most heterogeneous and ill-assorted objects, piled higgledy-piggledy in a vast mound' (*O* 160) which the Victorian age had left behind in *Orlando*, it allows Woolf a study of the age in miniature. Heterogeneity is *Aurora Leigh*'s most striking feature: thus, Kerry McSweeney argues that Barrett Browning

unscrupulously mixes genres (novel, autobiography, social satire, tract for the times, treatise on poetics, theodicy), subjects (geographically ranging from the slums of London to the New Jerusalem), and themes (sexual, vocational, aesthetic, social, religious), and holds them all suspended in a cornucopian fluency of discourse.⁴¹

Woolf's focus reveals therefore as much of her own preoccupations in the late 1920s and 1930s as it does of Barrett Browning's: Victorian experiences of womanhood, educational disparity and the struggle for creative expression in a suitable form are all important themes with *Aurora Leigh*, but also point towards Woolf's use of Victorian (auto)biography to explore these topics in *Three Guineas*.

Woolf's strong and immediate response to *Aurora Leigh* as a personal, almost autobiographical narrative aligns her with Victorian women's responses to the text: Stone notes that 'EBB had a particularly powerful effect on women writers and reformers.'⁴² Woolf's review includes a detailed summary of Book 1, but none of the others, suggesting that Aurora's Victorian childhood and education resonated most strongly with her: after losing her parents, Aurora returns from Italy to England where, Woolf summarizes, 'Aurora suffered the education that was thought proper for women', memorizing assorted facts and doing needlework in preparation for marriage (*E* 5.260). Woolf treats Aurora's passionate exclamation against this feminine education with slight amusement, yet Aurora's survival strategies clearly

⁴¹ Barrett Browning, p. xx.

⁴² Stone.

resonate with Woolf's own use of private spaces in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's review notes the private retreat offered by Aurora's green bedroom and the freedom provided by 'books, books, books!' (*E* 5.260/ *Aurora Leigh* l. 833): as Anne Wallace argues, 'the green fabrics of Aurora's domestic space [...] become continuous with the green plants of the outdoor world, the province of the male pedestrian poet' and thereby enable Aurora's poetic development by a symbolical escape from the rules of her aunt's household.⁴³ By her own admission, Woolf read *Aurora Leigh* for the first time in 1931, three years after the publication of *A Room of One's Own*, ruling out any direct influence. Yet these and other similarities suggest that despite being born at opposite ends of the century, Woolf was finding strong resonances of her own experience of Victorian society and femininity in Barrett Browning's writing. As Christine Chaney notes,

[w]hat is distinctive and important about the discourses that Barrett Browning "joins" in *Aurora Leigh* is the way they present the unique life story of a single woman in such a way as to compellingly witness and argue for what society should allow for *all* women – a place for both work and love, marriage and equality.⁴⁴

Barrett Browning's stance on education and literature again shows strong similarities to many of Woolf's conclusions in *Three Guineas*, yet Woolf does not name her as an influence: Julia Briggs therefore proposes that those 'parallels now seem obvious, but were perhaps so much at the forefront of her mind as to have been almost invisible to her'.⁴⁵ Despite their gender-based exclusion from formal education, Aurora, Woolf and Barrett Browning are united by a distrust of universities and instead advocate for the value of the alternative form of instruction, like their own unrestricted access to their fathers' libraries. Woolf quotes Aurora's description of her unstructured literary education, which rejects a conscious searching for virtue and utilitarian approaches to books:

It is rather when
We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge

⁴³ Anne D. Wallace, "'Nor in Fading Silks Compose": Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh*', *ELH*, 64.1 (1997), 223–56 (p. 244).

⁴⁴ Christine Chaney, "The 'Prophet-Poet's Book'", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 48.4 (2008), 791–99 (p. 794).

⁴⁵ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 272.

Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound,
Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth –
'Tis then we get the right good from a book (*E* 5.260/*Aurora Leigh* l.
705-709)

Sheila Cordner notes that Barrett Browning privately rejected university education – ‘a worn-out plaything in the hands of one sex already, & need not be *transferred* in order to be proved ridiculous’ – and suggests that the failure of Romney's schemes for social reform lie in his inability to understand human nature, an art not taught at university.⁴⁶ Woolf cultivated a similar lifelong scepticism towards university education, and in *Three Guineas* accuses universities of contributing to social division: ‘Do they [facts] not prove that education, the finest education in the world, does not teach people to hate force, but to use it?’ (*3G* 150). Woolf's critique ends with the proposal of a different set of values for education: envisioning a new college which teaches the ‘art of understanding other people's lives and minds’, she returns to the literary education and intuitive reading which her own schooling had focussed on (*3G* 154).

Although *Aurora Leigh* extensively examines the obstacles to female authorship in the nineteenth century in general terms and *Aurora* lacks Barrett Browning's disturbing domestic life, Woolf treats the book predominantly as a personal, quasi-autobiographical narrative: ‘*Aurora* the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual’ (*E* 5.261). Returning to the focus of her previous review, she suggests that Barrett Browning's poetry cannot be judged without taking into account her virtual imprisonment by her father:

Mrs Browning could no more conceal herself than she could control herself, a sign no doubt of imperfection in an artist, but a sign also that life has impinged upon art more than life should. [...] The idea of the poem, we must remember, came to her in the early Forties, when the relation between a woman's art and a woman's life was at its closest, so that it is impossible for the most austere critic of that work not to take into account the circumstances under which it was done.
(*E* 5.261)

⁴⁶ Sheila Cordner, ‘Radical Education in *Aurora Leigh*’, *Victorian Review*, 40.1 (2015), 233–49 (p. 234).

Woolf's review therefore offers two radically different interpretations of the room of one's own: Barrett-Browning's enforced imprisonment provides a pessimistic commentary on Aurora's escape into her green bedroom's literary sanctuary, pointing to women's inability to escape entirely from patriarchal society and revealing the potential even for literature to be a tool of oppression. This recalls the similarly divided nature of Mitford's little attic bedroom and her literary career, equally successful and oppressive: in both cases, fathers' tyranny over their daughters extends far beyond the household into every aspect of their public and private lives and leaves its traces in their works. Woolf answers Barrett Browning's rhetorical question, 'And do you also know what a disadvantage this ignorance [of real life] has been to my art?' emphatically:

it is not surprising that even in the depths of her sick-room her mind turned to modern life as a subject for poetry. She waited, wisely, until her escape had given her some measure of knowledge and proportion. But it cannot be doubted that the long years of seclusion had done her irreparable damage as an artist. She had lived shut off, guessing at what was outside, and inevitably magnifying what was within. (*E* 5.263)

As in 'Poets' Letters', for Woolf, Barrett Browning's life therefore ultimately overshadows her poetry: like Charlotte Brontë, whom I will discuss in the next chapter, patriarchal society prevented her from reaching her full potential despite her innate genius.

Although Woolf's engagement with Barrett Browning's poetry is brief and fails to lead to a complete revision of her critical neglect, Woolf ends her essay by acknowledging the importance of her literary ambition and innovation in attempting to write 'a poem of modern life', or a novel in blank verse:

Aurora Leigh, the novel-poem, is not, therefore, the masterpiece that it might have been. Rather it is a masterpiece in embryo; a work whose genius floats diffused and fluctuating in some pre-natal stage waiting the final stroke of creative power to bring it into being. Stimulating and boring, ungainly and eloquent, monstrous and exquisite, all by turns, it overwhelms and bewilders; but, nevertheless, it still commands our interest and inspires our respect. (*E* 5.263)

Although Woolf argues that *Aurora Leigh* lacks the subtlety and nuance of novelistic character development, and demonstrates that the ordinary talk of the Victorian drawing room was unsuited to poetical representation, its vividness and heightened intensity also convince her that ‘the street, the drawing-room, are promising subjects; modern life is worthy of the muse’ (*E* 5. 267).

Most relevant for this positive judgement may be the fact that Woolf had just finished the first draft of *The Waves*, her own masterpiece and ‘the greatest opportunity I have yet been able to give myself’ (*WD* 159). Unlike Barrett Browning, who had complained of her fruitless search for female predecessors that ‘I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none’,⁴⁷ Woolf could clearly identify with Barrett Browning’s ambition to transcend generic boundaries and create a new kind of poetry for her generation. Although Woolf approached the challenge of the generically hybrid novel poem from a radically different angle, she did present the modernist view on her age in *The Waves* and would soon struggle with finding a form that could combine political essay and fiction in *The Pargiters*. Her assessment that ‘Yet I respect myself for writing this book – yes– even though it exhibits my congenital faults’ (*WD* 159) sounds very similar to her final verdict on *Aurora Leigh* as the form most suited to Barrett Browning’s own peculiar flaws and gifts as a writer.

⁴⁷ Barrett Browning, p. xvii.

Flush

In *Flush*, the two halves of this chapter finally come together: Woolf unites both writers through the spaniel Flush, Mitford's gift to her friend; and combines the separate lessons gained from their lives into one overarching dissection of women's place in patriarchal society. Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning transitioned almost seamlessly from *Aurora Leigh* to *Flush*: in 1933 she wrote to Ottoline Morrell that

Flush is only by way of a joke. I was so tired after the Waves, that I lay in the garden and read the Browning love letters, and the figure of their dog made me laugh so I couldn't resist making him a Life. I wanted to play a joke on Lytton—it was to parody him. (*L* 5.161-2)

Despite Woolf's tendency to dismiss *Flush* as merely a biographical joke, which is reflected in its comparative critical neglect, Woolf continues the enquiry into tyranny and oppression that also characterizes her engagement with Mitford and Barrett Browning's lives and fathers, and draws on *Aurora Leigh*'s exploration of Victorian society and the London poor. Additionally, *Flush* also continues Woolf's playful exploration of the gaps in Mitford's recorded life, moving from her dinner service to her dog, and provides a novel perspective on the Brownings' romance. *Flush* therefore unites many of the previous strands of analysis into one book, while providing another example of Woolf prioritizing both writers' lives over their works, not least in making an illiterate dog the protagonist of their stories.

In *Flush*, Woolf restores Mitford as an important figure in Barrett Browning's life: the excessive focus on Barrett Browning's love life, which Woolf had lamented in 'Aurora Leigh', also affects the biographical representation of her friendship with Mitford. After Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were introduced to each other in 1836, Mitford quickly 'came to act as a literary mother to EBB': she encouraged her poetic talent and '[t]heir letters teem with discussions of English, American, and European authors, particularly women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen, and writers of the day such as Tennyson and George Sand'.⁴⁸ Mitford witnessed Barrett Browning's second prolonged illness as well as the loss of her favourite brother and 'sent letters and gifts of flowers to revive EBB's interest in life after Bro's death and gave her additional reason to live with the gift of

⁴⁸ Stone.

the spaniel Flush in January 1841'.⁴⁹ Their relationship declined after Barrett Browning's marriage in 1846, and Mitford's decision to publish the intimate details of Bro's death in her *Recollections of a Literary Life* (1851) created a rift between them, but there is little doubt that Mitford (and Flush) were amongst Barrett Browning's most important relationships during her imprisonment in London. Thus, K.A. Morrison argues that Barrett Browning's biographers generally struggle to adequately define their relationship with its 'intense emotional intimacy' based on a shared interest in Flush and his various exploits:

These seemingly trivial discussions do not fit with the current understanding of Barrett Browning as a serious poet and thinker who tackled complex philosophical and social issues. [...] As such, any consideration of the triangulated relationship of Barrett, Mitford, and Flush would detract from the spectacular love story of Elizabeth and Robert with which so much criticism is invested.⁵⁰

Woolf was clearly attuned to the extreme importance of Flush for both women, and their friendship is fundamental to the narrative.

Woolf suggests that 'in fact very little is known about him [Flush], and I have had to invent a great deal. I hope however that I have thrown some light upon his character', but Flush is in fact one of the better recorded dogs in history (*L* 5.167). In addition to the Browning's correspondence, Woolf also reread Mitford's letters for details of Flush's life (she had already drawn attention to the prominent role of household pets in 'The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford' (1925)); and her representation of the relationship between Flush and Barrett Browning draws strongly on her poems 'To Flush, My Dog' and 'Flush or Faunus'. Moreover, Woolf herself possessed a highly developed animal fantasy life in her own relationships: Scott summarizes that 'Animal identities, reaching well into Woolf's maturity, might comment lightly on regrettable behavior, or work into fantasies that facilitated disclosures about the body and sexual desire – otherwise subjects of reticence and coding for Woolf'.⁵¹ She was therefore ideally situated to understand and convey

⁴⁹ Stone. Snaith sets the date slightly earlier, she quotes EBB thanking Mitford for Flush in a letter in December 1840 (*F* 9n).

⁵⁰ Kevin A. Morrison, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Dog Days', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 30.1 (2012), 93–115 (p. 98).

⁵¹ Scott, p. 155.

Flush's symbolical and emotional value, which goes far beyond his commercial one as a purebred spaniel:

He was of the rare order of objects which cannot be associated with money. Was he not of the still rarer kind that, because they typify what is spiritual, what is beyond price, become a fitting token of the disinterestedness of friendship; may be offered in that spirit to a friend, if one is lucky enough to have one, who is more like a daughter than a friend; to a friend who lies secluded all through the summer months in a back bedroom in Wimpole Street, to a friend who is no other than England's foremost poetess, the brilliant, the doomed, the adored Elizabeth Barrett herself. (*F* 13)

Mitford and her friendship with Barrett Browning frame the series of threatening male figures which otherwise dominate Flush's life. Dr Mitford, Mr Barrett and the dog snatcher aim to control and dominate dogs and women, and from Flush's jealous point of view, even Robert Browning is characterized largely by his ability to take Barrett Browning away from him. Woolf therefore sets a nourishing and supportive female relationship against male tyranny.

As her original aim of parodying Lytton Strachey's work suggested, Woolf continues her biographical experimentation of the 1920s by presenting another piece of sustained fictionalized biography and extends the limits of ordinary biographical representation: as David Herman notes, '[w]ithin the frame of a biographical narrative about historically attested personages, situations and events, Woolf recounts Flush's perceptions, memories, and emotions without evidentiary backing, and also without overtly marking these reports as hypothetical or conjectural'.⁵² Christine Reynier proposes that Flush's aristocratic descent exposes not only Victorian biography's preference for noble subjects to ridicule: Woolf's satire 'may well extend to Lytton Strachey's own biographies which, for all their irony and iconoclasm, still focus on Queen Victoria, Cardinal Manning and other well-known figures.'⁵³ However, the majority of critics praise Woolf for her extension of the

⁵² David Herman, 'Modernist Life Writing and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 59.3 (2013), 547–68 (p. 551).

⁵³ Christine Reynier, 'The Impure Art of Biography: Virginia Woolf's *Flush*', in *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography*, ed. by Frédéric Regard (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), pp. 187–202 (p. 191).

limits of biography: thus, Scott suggests that ‘*Flush* sustains Woolf’s interests in biography and lives of the obscure. Flush and Miss Barrett’s loyal maid, Wilson, pose comparable challenges of depicting marginality to the biographer.’⁵⁴ Others go even further in suggesting that Woolf’s biography manages to transcend barriers between species: Herman argues that ‘by making Flush a receptor, Woolf uses modernist methods of narration to underscore fundamental continuities across human and non-human ways of negotiating the world; she therefore models a form of life writing that resists conferring special status on human lives in particular’, and Thomas Lewis notes that ‘through the dog’s sensations and most especially through his olfactory nerve Woolf was able to go beyond the limitations of biography.’⁵⁵

However, Woolf’s elevation of Flush works at the expense of Mitford and Barrett Browning: she is notably less interested in reinventing their lives, and their literary careers go largely unnoticed in the main narrative. Woolf acknowledges Mitford and Barrett Browning’s intense friendship by making Flush, its physical substitute and symbolical embodiment, the centre of interest. However, Flush’s lifespan and physical location during his life dictate much of her narrative focus: consequently, Mitford is only a marginal figure, present in Flush’s early youth and deathbed memories, and by necessity, the narrative overlaps with the famous story of Barrett Browning’s courtship, elopement and marriage. Given that Woolf envisioned *Flush* as a popular bestseller to ‘stem the ruin we shall suffer from the failure of *The Waves*’ (L 4.380), this was likely a calculated risk. While Woolf restores Mitford as an important character in the lives of Flush and Barrett Browning, she is easily overshadowed by Barrett Browning’s biographical afterlife. This popular romantic narrative therefore continues to dominate *Flush*: Woolf embraces the famous love story as much as she interrogates it.

By choosing the point of view of a dog, Woolf conveniently and humorously resolves Leslie Stephen’s Victorian dilemma of being present in Barrett Browning’s marriage ‘at a moment when they would have shown the door to an intruder’.⁵⁶ Consequently, Barrett Browning’s domestic life, her imprisonment by her

⁵⁴ Scott, pp. 170-71.

⁵⁵ Herman, p. 561. Thomas S. W. Lewis, ‘Combining “the Advantages of Fact and Fiction”’: Virginia Woolf’s Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush and Roger Fry’, in *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. by Elaine Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb (Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 295–324 (p. 307).

⁵⁶ Stephen, p. 32.

dominating father as well as her happier marriage, largely eclipses her professional achievements, which Flush neither understands nor communicates in great detail. Despite writing a biography featuring two women writers, Woolf makes their literary careers implicit background activities left for the knowing reader to substitute instead of explicitly discussing the act of writing, as she did in *Orlando*. A similar loss of detail is evident in Woolf's depiction of Barrett Browning's mind: the reader is denied access to her thoughts due to the limits of Flush's understanding and much of the brilliance and intelligence which Woolf had observed in 'Aurora Leigh' is therefore lost. Novak likewise notes that Woolf's narrative skews away from Barrett Browning's professional achievements:

While Barrett Browning is never shown working on her poetry, she is, in fact, repeatedly depicted as an avid letter-writer, and *Flush* contains several such quotations from the letters. Woolf thus focuses on Barrett Browning the private woman, with all her personal tragedies and joys, rather than on Barrett Browning the poet.⁵⁷

Woolf therefore loses sight of Barrett Browning's literary achievements more or less accidentally: she relegates explicit acknowledgement of her works to the endnotes, suggesting that as in her reviews, Woolf ultimately finds Barrett Browning's life more useful than her works.

Woolf's depiction of Mary Russell Mitford's life in *Three Mile Cross* continues the earlier deconstruction of her idyllic rural life. Woolf's account of Flush's rambles through the fields strongly resembles Mitford's own sketches of similar walks with her dog Mayflower and its successors in *Our Village* in tone and content. However, Woolf effectively contrasts Flush's delight in his absolute freedom with Mitford's own imprisonment by her father. As in her earlier reviews, Woolf couches her criticisms of Dr Mitford with humour and juxtaposes his lack of refinement with Flush's impeccable lineage: 'the mating of Dr Mitford's ancestors had been carried on with such wanton disregard for principles that no bench of judges could have admitted his claim to be well bred or have allowed him to perpetuate his kind' (*F* 9). However, Woolf uses Flush's lack of human socialization to thoroughly dispel any romanticized notions about the genteel poverty of Mitford's life in a rural cottage, vividly contrasted with the material wealth of Wimpole Street:

⁵⁷ Novak, p. 94.

Until this moment he had set foot into no house but the working man's cottage at Three Mile Cross. The boards were bare, the mats were frayed; the chairs were cheap. Here there was nothing bare, nothing frayed, nothing cheap – that Flush could see at a glance. [...] Up the funnel of the staircase came warm whiffs of joints roasting, of fowls basting, of soups simmering – ravishing almost as food itself to nostrils used to the meagre savour of Kerenhappock's penurious fries and hashes. (*F* 15)

Flush's own increasing fortune in moving on to material prosperity in Wimpole Street and later freedom in Italy, and Barrett Browning's escape from imprisonment suggest that Woolf presents a narrative of liberation and improvement. However, Mitford's fate provides a cautionary tale against too much optimism: she remains 'still sitting in her greenhouse at Three Mile Cross' until her own death, denied a similar happy ending by her enduring devotion to an undeserving father (*F* 88).

While Dr Mitford and Mr Barrett provide explicit examples of the tyranny of Victorian patriarchs, Woolf also weaves more subtle allusions to the damage inflicted by Victorian social conventions into her narrative. Thus, Woolf repurposes the tragic fate of Nero, the Carlyles' dog, for her narrative:

But there was a certain morbidity, it seemed to Flush now, among the dogs of London. It was common knowledge that Mrs Carlyle's dog Nero had leapt from a top storey window with the intention of committing suicide. He had found the strain of life in Cheyne Row intolerable, it was said. (*F* 93)

Woolf's use of this anecdote constitutes a last word in her engagement with Leslie Stephen's review of the Browning letters. Stephen had drawn extensively on the controversy around Froude's publication of Carlyle's *Reminiscences of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (1881) and his *Life of Carlyle* (1882-84), both revealing Carlyle's inconsideration and irritability in his relationship with his wife, to argue against too great an insight into domestic affairs of men of genius. Woolf's footnote furthers the comparison between Jane Carlyle and Nero as victims of patriarchal oppression by naively wondering if Nero was 'driven to desperate melancholy by associating with Mr Carlyle' (*F* 114 n8). Taken together, this net of allusions suggest a strong feminist and political argument for biographical truthfulness rather than discretion:

only by exposing the domestic tyranny suffered by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Russell Mitford, and Jane Carlyle can the full damage of patriarchal society be exposed, and women's points of view be made accessible.

Although *Flush* does not include any meaningful representation of Barrett Browning's life as a writer, Woolf addresses many of the same topics as her poetry did, suggesting that Woolf continued to draw on her reading of *Aurora Leigh* and possibly other works. Thus, Christine Reynier posits that *Flush* can be read as a response to Barrett Browning's call for political poetry by women in 'A Curse for a Nation' (1860) and notes that *Aurora Leigh* and *Casa Guidi Windows* are 'woven into Woolf's text' through her depictions of women's domestic imprisonment and Italy's classless society.⁵⁸ Arguably, the biggest continuity between *Aurora Leigh* and *Flush* lies in their depiction of Victorian society, which reveals both writers' social awareness, but also their own limitations as middle-class women. Where Barrett Browning argues for a more compassionate approach to poverty by charting the failure of Romney's schemes to reform and unite two apparently separate classes through marriage, Woolf responds by demonstrating that the surface respectability of Wimpole Street is already inextricably linked to the slum through complex systems of economy and power, exemplified by the dog snatchers:

If one forgot, as Miss Barrett forgot [to lead your dog on a chain], one paid the penalty, as Miss Barrett was now to pay it. The terms upon which Wimpole Street lived cheek by jowl with St Giles's were well known. St Giles's stole what St Giles's could; Wimpole Street paid what Wimpole Street must. (*F* 53)

Woolf's footnote acknowledges Barrett Browning's awareness of the problem, but also suggests that she is too complicit in this stratified social system to effect any change:

Readers of *Aurora Leigh* – but since such persons are non-existent it must be explained that Mrs Browning wrote a poem of this name, one of the most vivid passages in which (though it suffers from distortion natural to an artist who sees the object once only from a four-wheeler,

⁵⁸ Reynier, p. 192–93, p. 197.

with Wilson tugging at her skirts) is the description of a London slum.
(*F* 109n5)

Yet Woolf appears to be projecting some of her own discomfort on Barrett Browning: Snaith notes that Woolf likewise ‘had trouble with the Whitechapel chapter, rewriting it three times in January 1933. She was confronting her own privilege and her own experience of otherness.’⁵⁹

In recognizing the absence of simple solutions to complex societal problems, Woolf’s political analysis in *Flush* therefore points forwards to *Three Guineas*. Scott notes that ‘Flush has impressed numerous critics as a study of women’s conditioning under patriarchy’, but not all of these interpretations account for the complexity of Woolf’s political position.⁶⁰ Thus, Susan Squier provides a straightforward reading of *Flush* as ‘a physical and psychological journey from imprisonment in London to freedom in the foreign cities of Pisa and Florence: archetype for the woman writer’s development’ and points out the parallels between Flush’s imprisonment and that of Barrett Browning; yet this reading fails to account for victims of patriarchal oppression like Mitford and Jane Carlyle, who never escape from their domestic tyrants.⁶¹ Additionally, Woolf depicts a more complex interrelationship between tyranny and love than this reading suggests. Flush conquers his hatred of Robert Browning out of love for Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a disturbing parallel to Mitford’s and Barrett Browning’s decision accept their fathers’ abuse as an expression of love: Woolf therefore strongly hints at Barrett Browning’s own capacity for tyranny by forcing Flush to submit her will. *Flush*, like *Three Guineas*, therefore cannot establish simple dichotomies and demonstrates that there are few uncompromised positions in society. Pamela Caughie similarly argues that ‘Flush resembles less the woman writer than the writer’s servant Wilson’: both lack any meaningful agency and are completely dependent on Barrett Browning.⁶²

Woolf’s increasing awareness of the interconnections of tyranny and fascism, and the lack of real alternatives therefore provides a strong link between *Flush* and the pessimism of *Three Guineas*. Her inability to offer an alternative to the

⁵⁹ Snaith, ‘Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism’, p. 623-24.

⁶⁰ Scott, p. 172.

⁶¹ Susan M. Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985), p. 122.

⁶² Pamela L. Caughie, ‘Flush and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 10.1 (1991), 47–66 (pp. 60-61).

Browning's romance, or an escape for Mitford, is just another symptom of this interconnectedness and explains why *Flush* embraces marriage as a path to literary creativity and freedom, in direct contradiction to *A Room of One's Own*. Mitford and Barrett Browning demonstrate that Victorian society did not allow an independent position for women: even after achieving financial independence, they could at most exchange the men who controlled their lives, not exist independently from them. Yet Woolf also uses Barrett Browning to show middle-class women's complicity in this system, as oppressors of the poor, dogs and servants. Woolf had described *Aurora Leigh* as presenting 'people who are unmistakably Victorian, wrestling with the problems of their own time' (E 5.526), yet the political scope of *Flush* transcends the Victorian era despite its focus on the 1840s and 1850s. *Flush* therefore anticipates *Three Guineas* in its reading of contemporary political developments through the lens of Victorian politics and policies. Woolf's playful mockery of Flush's pride in his racial purity and superior breeding parodies the increasing nationalist and anti-semitic political discourses of the 1930s, and her use of Barrett Browning to demonstrate the pervasiveness of domestic and social oppression translates easily to a larger-scale analysis of contemporary society.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf uses Barrett Browning, not Mitford, to demonstrate Victorian fathers' 'infantile fixation' and desire for absolute control over their daughters' lives. The popular play of Barrett Browning's life had already introduced Mr Barrett as a well-known figure associated with paternal abuses of power, and his literal imprisonment of his daughter offers a more clear-cut example of tyranny than Dr Mitford's financial dependence – not least because Mitford's successful career undermines Woolf's focus on women's lack of professional options. While Woolf therefore returns to a more simplistic view of Barrett Browning as solely a victim of society, her previous analysis of Mitford's and Barrett Browning's lives informs the shape of her argument. As in *Flush* and 'A Good Daughter', Woolf cannot envision a way of reforming society from within: the idealistic, but entirely imaginary Outsiders' Society is a manifestation of this problem rather than a solution. Julia Briggs likewise observes that

[a] sense of frustration and helplessness, a recognition that some problems might have no solutions, is never far beneath the surface of *Three Guineas*, contributing to the complex twists and turns of the

arguments, the occasional moments of defeat, the reluctance to give the guineas, and the non-involvement of the members of the Outsiders' Society – their roles as observers rather than agents.⁶³

While Woolf never managed to resolve this dilemma, it helps to demonstrate the immense value of non-canonical or underappreciated women writers to her work: from her earliest reviews to *Flush*, Woolf uses disappearing women's lives to explore the inevitable interconnections of patriarchy, tyranny and society, presenting a trajectory which culminates in the arguments of *Three Guineas*. While her engagement with them is less obviously literary than that with their more famous counterparts, it nevertheless shows her reading, responding and embracing their lives and work, demonstrating that if Woolf as a critic might sometimes be tyrannically dismissive, she could also assume their position and work with them against the system.

⁶³ Briggs, p. 328.

3. 'That Indefinable Something': Charlotte Brontë

When we think of her we have to imagine someone who had no lot in our modern world; we have to cast our minds back to the fifties of the last century, to a remote parsonage upon the wild Yorkshire moors. Very few now are those who saw her and spoke to her; and her posthumous reputation has not been prolonged by any circle of friends whose memories so often keep alive for a new generation the most vivid and most perishable characteristics of a dead man. ('Charlotte Brontë', *E* 2.26)

Virginia Woolf's engagement with Charlotte Brontë often revolves around the question of distance: as in the above quotation from her 1916 centenary review, her essays emphasize Brontë's remoteness, both geographical and temporal, from modern metropolitan society. However, Woolf's article also proves that this distance does not diminish Brontë's relevance for the modern reader: 'when her name is mentioned, there starts up before our eyes a picture of Charlotte Brontë, which is as definite as that of a living person, and one may venture to say that to place her name at the head of a page will cause a more genuine interest than almost any other inscription' (*E* 2.25).

Woolf's life-long interest in Charlotte Brontë is evident from the many essays she published on her: her first published article, 'Haworth, November 1904', two centenary reviews in 1916 and 1917, a *Common Reader* essay as well as discussions in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* demonstrates the continued relevance of Brontë's life and work to her own. In focussing exclusively on Charlotte, I am following Woolf's own interests: although she sometimes evokes the Brontë sisters as a trio, she generally ignores Anne completely and limits her frequent but brief references to Emily to her incontestable poetical genius. This uneven response is likely to be a result of Charlotte's more prominent biographical afterlife: as the only sister to cultivate strong friendships outside her family, and the subject of a biography by fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, she is considerably less mysterious than Emily and more tangible than Anne and provides Woolf with a case study of a Victorian woman writer's life. Cora Kaplan has noted that in modern feminist debates on women's subjectivity and experience, '*Jane Eyre*, its heroine and its author (the distinctions between book character and writer are frequently blurred) have acted as a kind of cultural magnet [...], drawing widely dispersed issues into

the novel's field of meaning'.¹ Although Woolf's essays predate these debates, they fall into a similar pattern: Woolf is susceptible to conflating Brontë and her heroines and she mixes literary criticism and biographical speculation to analyse women's position in Victorian society, as well as to criticize Brontë's responses to these challenges.

Woolf's writing on Brontë is divisive: virtually all critics focus on her condemnation of Brontë's anger in *A Room of One's Own*, but their interpretations differ strongly. Andrea Zemplinska reads Woolf's criticism as an important manifestation of a Modernist aesthetic of impersonality; Cora Kaplan takes it as a deliberate attack on a literary outsider, driven by Woolf's metropolitan and socioeconomic prejudices; and Jean Long reads Woolf's juxtaposition of Austen and Brontë as symbolical of the unresolved binary of anger and irony in Woolf's feminism. Jane Lilienfeld is the only critic to date to study Woolf's identification with Brontë beyond *A Room of One's Own*, but her queering approach completely neglects the chronology of Woolf's various other essays: a comprehensive study of Woolf's engagement with Brontë over the course of her life is therefore lacking.

Woolf's essays reflect not only on Brontë's Victorianism, they also frequently negotiate her own heritage: her early essays draw extensively on Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), and Leslie Stephen's literary criticism on the Brontës remains a lifelong influence. Focussing on the problems of female authorship and Brontë's failure to adhere to critics' expectations of Victorian femininity, Woolf's discussion frequently moves within the same parameters as these texts and often resorts to the same stereotypes as these Victorian critics. Woolf's fascination with Brontë is most palpable in her early essays, which explore her character in detail and suggest a strong identification with her famous predecessor. Paradoxically, however, Woolf's move towards increasingly feminist literary analysis bring Brontë's limitations into focus and her unfeminine anger at patriarchal society make her both a target of Woolf's scorn and a model for her own writing.

¹ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), pp. 15–36 (p. 17).

‘Haworth, November 1904’

‘Haworth, November 1904’ is not only Virginia Woolf’s first article on the Brontës, it is the first essay she ever wrote for publication.² As part of her recuperation after Leslie Stephen’s death, she was sent on a visit to her cousin Madge Vaughan and her husband, then headmaster of Giggleswick School, during which she also visited Haworth. In her article, Woolf combines a fairly conventional description of a trip to Haworth with a deeper reflection on the purpose and value of literary tourism: she pits her own experience of Haworth against Gaskell’s iconic descriptions in the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, but despite a subtle subversion of Gaskell’s tale of misery, Woolf ultimately fails to release Brontë from the confines of Haworth and the Parsonage.

Like many of Woolf’s early essays and stories, she continues a dialogue with the Victorian period through frequent references to Gaskell’s biography and the Brontë tourism it encouraged. Literary tourism and an increased interest in heritage sites were relatively recent phenomena: thus, Nicola Watson argues that throughout the nineteenth century, ‘readers were seized en masse by a newly powerful desire to visit the graves, the birthplaces, and the carefully preserved homes of dead poets and men and women of letters.’³ Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* contributed to this development by drawing a close connection between the sisters’ unconventional writing and their residence in Yorkshire. After providing a detailed description of the slow approach to Haworth parsonage by rail and coach, her second chapter presents a brief and selective history of Yorkshire, arguing that

[f]or a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Brontë, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be made acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earliest years were passed, and from which both her own and her sisters’ first impressions of human life must have been received.⁴

² Published 21 December 1904. Although ‘The Son of Royal Langbrith’ was published December 14, Woolf actually wrote ‘Haworth, November, 1904’ first (*L* 1.158).

³ ‘Introduction’, in *Literary Tourism And Nineteenth Century Culture*, ed. by Nicola Watson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–12 (p. 3).

⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 15.

The isolation of Haworth and the wild hostility of Yorkshire and its inhabitants are therefore recurrent themes in Gaskell's biography. First used to explain the sisters' unsociability, they developed into a staple of the Brontë myth. As Watson notes,

Brontë country, as it thus emerges at the end of the century is an amalgam of biographical and ambiguously real and fictive locations. [...] "Brontë country" effectively amplifies Haworth Parsonage as a narrative space which compacts together inextricably the Gothic of the sisters' lives and of their novels.⁵

By 1904, it was therefore impossible to approach Haworth without expectations shaped by almost half a century of Brontë writing, yet Woolf deliberately breaks with some of the most common tropes of the genre in her essay. Having begun by condemning 'pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men' as 'sentimental journeys', Woolf is mainly interested in gaining a better understanding of the Brontës as writers, and her refusal to perform the customary reactions to Brontë country forms part of a wider interrogation of the value of literary tourism (*E* 1.5). Although she draws on Gaskell's biography to assert that 'Haworth expresses the Brontës; the Brontës express Haworth; they fit like a snail to its shell' (*E* 1.6), Woolf's essay presents a radically different view on Gaskell's sublime and awe-inspiring landscape. Gaskell's 'wild, bleak moors – grand from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier'⁶ are crucial to maintaining what Deirdre D'Albertis calls the biography's 'myth of martyred female creativity'.⁷ Woolf, in contrast, encounters a more welcoming Yorkshire: even in winter, she sees 'a very cheerful land, which might be likened to a vast wedding cake, of which the icing was slightly undulating; the earth was bridal in its virgin snow' (*E* 1.6). Andrea Zengulys similarly notes that Woolf is 'pointedly unsentimental in her stance':⁸ distancing herself from Gaskell's dramatic hyperbole

⁵ Nicola Watson, 'Homes and Haunts', in *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 90–117 (p.126).

⁶ Gaskell, p. 11.

⁷ Deirdre D'Albertis, "'Bookmaking Out of the Remains of the Dead": Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*', *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences*, 39.1 (1995), 1–31 (p. 1).

⁸ Andrea Zengulys, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), p. 154.

(‘fifty years ago there were few fine days at Haworth’ (E 1.6)), she finds Haworth itself ‘dingy and commonplace’ (E 1.6) and the recently opened Brontë museum a sad ‘mausoleum’ with a ‘pallid and inanimate collection of objects’ (E 1.7).⁹

However, Woolf’s reaction to Charlotte Brontë’s dresses reveals that the irony with which she distanced herself from the earnest literary tourist was partly feigned, for her strongest emotional reaction occurs when confronted with these intensely personal possessions:

The most touching case – so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one’s gaze – is that which contains the little personal relics, the dresses and shoes of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. (E 1.7)

Although Woolf had, with some irony, called Haworth ‘the shrine at which we were to do homage’ (E 1.6), her reaction suggests that these objects on display do really function as relics. Thus, Deborah Lutz’s description of the function of secular relics like hair jewellery in Victorian culture closely resembles Woolf’s experience: ‘[t]o pore over the relic is to fall into the reverie of memory, to call to mind the absent being. The object disappears and becomes pure symbol, pointing only outside of itself’.¹⁰ Woolf experiences a moment of personal connection and recalls the physical presence of an unknown woman through her dress, which preserves the imprint of her body. However, her emotional reaction also points to a serious limitation of literary pilgrimages: the dress epitomizes the dangers of literary tourism and, as Zemgulys argues, ‘the literary museum teaches Woolf how easily it is to *misread*’ a heritage site by letting the person eclipse the author.¹¹

Woolf’s failure to maintain her detached attitude reveals her inability to completely resist Victorian legacies: her ready distinction between the woman and the writer imitates the dominant narrative strategy of Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography.

⁹ The Brontë Society, formed in 1894, opened the museum in 1895. It did not move into its present home in the Brontë parsonage until 1928. See Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 101.

¹⁰ Deborah Lutz, ‘The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39.01 (2011), 127–42 (p. 135).

¹¹ Zemgulys, p. 155.

Faced with the problem of accounting for contradictory facets of Brontë's personality, her feminine domesticity and her public identity as a writer, Gaskell divided her life into two separate existences. She notes that with the publication of *Jane Eyre*,

Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents – her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character – not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled.¹²

Drawing on the Brontës' short-lived pseudonyms, Gaskell's biography upholds a division between Currer Bell, the scandalous author of *Jane Eyre*, and the perfectly dutiful daughter, sister and wife Charlotte Brontë. This duality of existence allowed Gaskell to reconcile what Linda Peterson terms the 'oppositional mode of the early nineteenth century'. Gaskell moves beyond the singular focus on exemplary domesticity, which had dominated earlier biographies of women writers, because the parallel currents of Brontë's life allow her domestic life to coexist with artistic brilliance.¹³ Although she privileges private life and domesticity, Gaskell nevertheless allowed readers to witness Brontë's performance of 'literary genius in a masculine guise', as D'Albertis calls it, by quoting extensively from Currer Bell's literary correspondence with publisher George Smith, his editor W. S. Williams and literary figures like G. H. Lewes, in addition to Charlotte Brontë's more intimate correspondence with Ellen Nussey and other female friends.¹⁴

Although Woolf superficially rejects Gaskell's legacy, the rest of the article similarly demonstrates Gaskell's fundamental importance to Woolf's view of the Brontës: the structure of the essay as well as Woolf's imaginative reconstruction of the sisters' lives show the impossibility of gaining unmediated access to their world without relying on Gaskell as an intermediary. Woolf references the biography's gloomy graveyard frontispiece and frequently invokes Gaskell's authority in affirming the relevance of the places she visits. More importantly, however, the essay takes its fundamental structure from Gaskell's first chapter: Woolf imitates

¹² Gaskell, p. 271.

¹³ Linda H Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), p. 134.

¹⁴ D'Albertis, p. 9.

Gaskell's slow, scenery-focussed approach from Keighley and the uphill journey to the parsonage, ending in the Church at the family's memorial tablets. However, where Gaskell's biography ultimately moves from a gloomy beginning to an intimate encounter with Charlotte Brontë through anecdotes and letters, Woolf's essay most obviously reflects the inability of the literary tourist to fully restore the dead author to life. This sense of difference emerges most clearly during Woolf's courtesy visit to the parsonage, then still housing Haworth's vicar. Although Woolf is once more aloof in asserting the sisters' traceless disappearance from their former home – 'there is nothing remarkable in a mid-Victorian parsonage, though tenanted by genius' (E 1.8) – she cannot resist imaginatively populating their home. Nicola Watson emphasizes the essential importance of the parsonage in Gaskell's narrative by combining the two halves of Charlotte Brontë's existence into one coherent whole:

the house is uniquely impacted as a biographical site in Gaskell's biography. [...] Above all, the house is the essential mechanism in compacting Charlotte Brontë, clergyman's daughter, eldest sister and lady, confined within a household routine detailed at every juncture, with Currer Bell, celebrated author of 'wild', 'romantic' and 'shocking' tales.¹⁵

Woolf's essay performs a similar motion: collapsing the division between Charlotte Brontë and Currer Bell, she recalls that in the kitchen, 'the girls tramped as they conceived their work' (E 1.8).¹⁶ However, Woolf's reaction also makes clear that the significance of the parsonage hinges on the biographical information Gaskell provides. In itself, the house is irrelevant and does not offer a new and unmediated encounter with Brontë: Gaskell's narrative therefore provides the information for Woolf's imaginary encounter. However, Woolf also offers a slight revision of her previous assertion that the Brontës 'fit like a snail to [Haworth's] shell' (E 1.6): the claustrophobic nature of this nightly wandering subtly questions the sisters' perfect fit in such a constricted environment. Woolf's slip of memory, which places them in the kitchen instead of the sitting room, only serves to heighten the social, financial

¹⁵ Watson, 'Homes and Haunts', p. 118.

¹⁶ 'The sisters retained their old habit, which was begun in their aunt's life-time, of putting away their work at nine o'clock, and beginning their steady pacing up and down the sitting room. At this time, they talked over the stories they were engaged upon, and discussed their plots. Once or twice a week, each read to the others what she had written, and heard what they had to say about it'. Gaskell, p. 247.

and ideological obstacles they faced in achieving recognition as authors: without a study or library for the celebration of their literary achievements, the parsonage contributes to a better understanding of the Brontës' work by highlighting that their writing was marginal to the household's daily life.

Although Woolf's visit to Haworth does not contribute any significant new insights into the Brontës' work, her visit also repeats another important structuring motive from Gaskell's biography: the younger writer's literary pilgrimage to an established woman writer's house. Linda Peterson notes that

pilgrimage to an older woman writer's house is a *topos* in the memoirs of Victorian women writers; in the *Life* it specifically functions to reinforce the exemplary domesticity of all three women [Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë and Harriet Martineau] and the high literary goals that they share.¹⁷

Jane Lilienfeld has noted the biographical similarities between Woolf and Brontë – their shared motherlessness and loss of family members, as well as their conventional and possessive fathers – to argue that there existed 'areas of identification with the Victorian novelist, for the imagination that saw the parsonage saw it with a view of Woolf's own life'.¹⁸ However, Lilienfeld's family-focussed analysis ignores Brontë's potential importance as a model of female authorship: like Brontë's visits to Harriet Martineau, which helped establish her place in the literary world, Woolf's journey to Haworth therefore acquires a double meaning. While the essay largely frames it as an act of ultimately futile literary tourism, Woolf symbolically repeats Brontë's ritual of initiation into a female tradition of writing, complete with a lingering legacy of Victorian authorship at odds with domesticity.

Nevertheless, Brontë's actual relevance as a literary role model in Woolf's early career is limited. While Woolf's construction of Brontë in her essay shows the strong impact of Gaskell's Victorian concept of female authorship, her portrayal of her own emerging professional identity is based on a radically more modern approach to writing: in her letters, Woolf declares herself 'a lady in search of a job',

¹⁷ Linda Peterson, "Triangulation, Desire, and Discontent in "The Life of Charlotte Brontë", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 47.4 (2007), 901–20 (p. 905).

¹⁸ Jane Lilienfeld, "'The Gift of a China Inkpot': Violet Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and the Love of Women in Writing", in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. by Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, Cutting Edge (New York: New York UP, 1997), pp. 37–56 (p. 51).

wanting ‘to work like a steam engine’ (*L* 1.167, 172). Likewise, her determination to turn to journalism in search of a profitable source of income demonstrates pragmatism, both about her social position and the gentility of her work: as Leila Brosnan notes, ‘Woolf’s journalism did much to confirm her status as an “insider” in the literary world at large’.¹⁹ From this position, the Brontës’ laborious entry into the literary world seems quaint and antiquated, and Woolf’s essay emphasizes this sense of distance between their worlds. Concluding that ‘[t]he circumference of her life was very narrow’ (*E* 1.8), Woolf neglects the fact that all three sisters left Haworth during the course of their professional lives and instead returns to Gaskell’s enduring connection of the Brontës and Yorkshire. By firmly locating Charlotte Brontë in the Victorian past, Woolf therefore sets the tone for her future writing on Brontë: her next essay, a centenary celebration of her life and works, tries to overcome this sense of distance by attempting to recreate Brontë from her works.

¹⁹ Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburg: Edinburgh UP, 1999), p. 47.

‘Charlotte Brontë’

Woolf’s 1916 centenary article on Charlotte Brontë for the *Times Literary Supplement* was published during a transitional phase in her writing: like her 1913 article on Jane Austen, it is still in close dialogue with Victorian criticism, but it also begins an exploration of representation and character in fiction which signals the development of her Modernist aesthetic and distinctive style as a novelist. In its ambivalent positioning between eras, the essay resembles Woolf’s contemporaneous ‘Hours in a Library’, which combines a celebration of canonical classics (implicitly located in Leslie Stephen’s library) with a call to go ‘along unchartered ways in search of new forms for our new sensations’ (E 2.60). Although ‘Charlotte Brontë’ continues the tentative exploration of authorship begun in ‘Haworth, November 1904’ by considering the relationship between text and reader, Woolf’s engagement with Brontë remains intensely personal and offers a character study as much as literary criticism: as in her previous article, biography therefore interferes with a more obviously literary appreciation of Brontë’s works.

Although the problem of how to connect with Brontë remains Woolf’s central concern, ‘Charlotte Brontë’ reverses the approach of ‘Haworth, November 1904’. Instead of avoiding familiar tropes, Woolf emphasizes Brontë’s complete social and geographical isolation and, slightly hyperbolically, her impending disappearance:

When we think of her, we have to imagine someone who had no lot in our modern world; we have to cast our minds back to the fifties of the last century, to a remote parsonage upon the wild Yorkshire moors. Very few now are those who saw her and spoke to her; and her posthumous reputation has not been prolonged by any circle of friends whose memories so often keep alive for a new generation the most vivid and perishable characteristics of a dead man. (E 2.26)

Woolf’s focus on the irrevocable loss of ephemeral character traits echoes her earlier short story ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’. However, in ‘Charlotte Brontë’, she explores alternative means of gaining insight into Brontë’s character: where ‘Haworth, November 1904’ attempted to explain Brontë through an encounter with the physical remnants of her life, ‘Charlotte Brontë’ attempts to locate her in her novels. Woolf’s reading of Brontë’s novels questions the boundaries between the woman and the

author that the previous essay had so insistently asserted, and implies that Brontë and her heroines are virtually identical. Although Woolf thereby avoids explicitly drawing on Gaskell's biography, she acknowledges its continuing impact: it 'stamped our mind with an ineffaceable impression' (*E* 2.27) of Brontë's life and personality, and therefore continues to shape her engagement with Brontë.

Woolf defends her interest in reading Brontë through her works by linking it to an exploration of readers' relationships to the author. Arguing that works of art are defined by their ability to transcend the periods of their creation, she posits that

the novels of Charlotte Brontë must be placed within the same class of living and changing creations, which, as far as we can guess, will serve a generation yet unborn with a glass to measure its varying statue. In their turn they will say how she has changed to them, and what she has given them. (*E* 2.27)

As in her later *Common Reader* essay on Austen's novels, Woolf's approach to reading anticipates reader response theory in arguing that 'one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential', with different readers filling in 'the unwritten part of the text' with their unique experiences and realities.²⁰ Conflating Brontë's characters and the author herself, Woolf's open-ended reading process therefore offers a more multifaceted and malleable image of Brontë and allows her to transcend her static mid-Victorian image. Woolf supports her reading by offering her essay as one of many possible interpretations of Brontë. She resists the temptation of 'assigning her to her final position' and declaring her reading as authoritative (*E* 2.27) and merely offers her readers 'her little hoard of observations' to complement their own: a nod towards the individuality of readers' responses delivered with all the authority of a centenary review in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

Woolf's reflections on the reading process demonstrate a move towards a firmly Modernist mode of thinking. Thus, her exploration of the interplay between consciousness and text in 'Charlotte Brontë' is echoed in a fictional form in the exploration of the thought process caused by a snail in 'The Mark on the Wall' (1917). Likewise, in her focus on the preservation and understanding of character,

²⁰ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279-99 (p. 279).

Woolf's reflections are closely connected with her interest in biography. This becomes even more evident in her 1917 review of the essay collection *Charlotte Brontë 1816-1916: A Centenary Memorial*, also entitled 'Charlotte Brontë'. Woolf celebrates the collection's widely divergent and even contradictory interpretations of Brontë: 'although we must resign the comfort of depending upon an infallible support, by this means we get a much richer, more various, and finally, we believe, truer estimate than is usual' (E 2.192). Brontë's potential for multiple identities and meanings, and her critics' competing and contrasting interpretations point towards Woolf's later replication of this fragmented characterization in *Jacob's Room* (1922).

Although the 1916 essay demonstrates Woolf's emerging development of an innovative method in fiction, her actual criticism is decidedly more conventional. Many of her arguments can be traced back to a variety of Victorian sources, most prominently Leslie Stephen's literary criticism and Gaskell's biography. Particularly Woolf's fusion of *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Brontë forms part of a well-established critical tradition. Woolf's focus on the immediacy of Brontë's narrative and the strong sense of personality arising from her novels strengthens this identification:

It is not possible, when you are reading Charlotte Brontë, to lift your eyes from the page. She has you by the hand and forces you along her road, seeing the things she sees and as she sees them. She is never absent for a moment, nor does she attempt to conceal herself or to disguise her voice. At the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* we do not feel so much that we have read a book, as that we have parted from a most singular and eloquent woman. (E 2.28)

Autobiographical readings have been part of the critical tradition of *Jane Eyre* from its publication: critics tended to take the subtitle 'An Autobiography' at face value despite the potentially male pseudonym accompanying it. Thus, George Henry Lewes classified *Jane Eyre* as 'an autobiography, – not perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances but in the actual suffering and experience' and the *Revue des Deux Mondes* thought it 'eminently and vigorously personal.'²¹ However, most influential on Woolf is Leslie Stephen's article on Brontë in his *Cornhill* series *Hours in a Library*. Stephen not only identifies Brontë's heroines as 'mouthpieces of

²¹ Miriam Allot, ed., *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allot (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 84, p. 89, p. 101.

her peculiar sentiment', but also suggests that the critic can 'infer her personality more or less accurately from the mode in which she contemplates her neighbours, but it is directly manifest in various avatars of her own spirit [...] when they speak we are really listening to her voice'.²² Woolf's description of Brontë's intensity of language and vision also echoes Stephen's fire imagery. In Stephen's words, Brontë's stories

always give us the impression of a fiery soul imprisoned in too narrow and too frail a tenement. The fire is pure and intense. It is kindled in a nature intensely emotional and yet aided by a heroic sense of duty.²³

Likewise, Woolf judges that 'her production, whatever its faults, always seems to issue from a deep place where the fire is eternal' (*E* 2.30).

Woolf's essay differs from Stephen in the extent to which she reads this passion biographically. Stephen pursues a heavily analytical reading which focuses on 'what, in a scientific sense, would be an inconsistent theory, and, in an aesthetic sense, an inharmonious presentation of life': the unresolved contrast between individual passions and social conventions in Brontë's novels leads him to argue that she lacks a consistent philosophical framework.²⁴ Woolf, in contrast, suggests that Brontë's greatest limitation is her lack of professional and emotional experience, criticizing that 'to be always in love and always a governess is to go through the world with blinkers on one's eyes' (*E* 2.29). This rejection of Brontë's apparently excessive emotionality again has Victorian precedents. Most famously, as Gaskell chronicles, Brontë's friendship with Harriet Martineau ended when her review of *Villette* criticized Brontë's emotional introspection: '[t]here are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love; there is an absence of introspection, an unconsciousness, a repose in women's lives'.²⁵

However, in singling out love as the defining element of Brontë's work, Woolf was also reacting to recent biographical discoveries. She was writing 'Charlotte Brontë' three years after Brontë's unrequited love for her Brussels tutor

²² Leslie Stephen, 'Hours in a Library: No XVII – Charlotte Brontë', *The Cornhill Magazine*, 36.216 (1877), 723–39 (p. 735).

²³ Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', p. 737.

²⁴ Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', p. 737.

²⁵ Gaskell, p. 425.

Constantine Héger had been officially confirmed, with a strengthened conviction of the autobiographical basis of Brontë's heroines. Four passionate letters from Brontë to the married Héger had been donated to the *British Library* in 1913 by Héger's heirs and had been published in *The Times*, confirming longstanding rumours such as Leslie Stephen's speculation that Paul Emanuel in *Villette* was 'hardly explicable, except as portrait drawn by a skilful hand guided by love, and by love intensified by the consciousness of some impassable barrier'.²⁶ While Woolf's essay avoids all mention of this recent discovery, it informs her depiction of Brontë's character as well as writing habits: she pictures Brontë writing in compulsive wish-fulfilment, as an almost involuntary reaction to 'the burden of sorrow and shame which life had laid on her' (*E* 2.29). While Woolf's choice of words conveys a sense of the condemnation Brontë's transgression of Victorian moral codes would have occasioned, she also envisions her writing as an act of resistance and a form of exerting control over her life:

Every one of her books seems to be a superb gesture of defiance, bidding her torturers depart and leave her queen of a splendid island of imagination. Like some hard-pressed captain, she summoned her powers together and proudly annihilated the enemy. (*E* 2.29)

This focus on the emotional quality of Brontë's writing leaves little room for ambition or the conscious development of literary qualities, but it does assert Brontë's genius, leaving her ultimately triumphant despite her limitations.

Woolf's interest in pursuing this specific reading of Brontë also provides an example of the kind of personal, reader-response oriented approach the essay championed. The question of writing as a means of self-assertion was intensely relevant to Woolf at this period of her life: following a breakdown after her marriage, she had only just resumed her activity as a reviewer in 1916 after a three-year hiatus. In a 1930 letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf reflected on the extreme significance of writing during this time: 'I was so tremblingly afraid of my own insanity that I wrote *Night and Day* mainly to prove to my own satisfaction that I could keep entirely off that dangerous ground. I wrote it, lying in bed, allowed to write only for one half hour a day' (*L* 4.231). As a fellow woman writer whose tendency towards morbidity was documented in detail by Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë therefore offered an example

²⁶ Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', p. 732.

of how to use writing for psychological recovery, while ‘Charlotte Brontë’, only Woolf’s third article that year, demonstrated her return to her previous professional position as literary authority.

Woolf’s ultimate praise of Brontë as ‘not only as a writer of genius, but as a very noble human being’ (*E* 2.31) suggests a personal identification which explains the intimate tone and personal focus of the essay. Although in ‘Haworth, November 1904’, the woman temporarily overshadows the author, here, Woolf defends and deliberately creates a personal encounter as part of the special relationship between reader and author: ‘we are conscious of something that is greater than one gift or another and is perhaps the quality that attaches us to books as people – the quality, that is, of the writer’s mind and personality’ (*E* 2.31). Zemgulys posits a seamless development from ‘Haworth, November 1904’ to *A Room of One’s Own*, suggesting that ‘the Charlotte Brontë reliquary [in Haworth] afforded Woolf an early insight into how the personal can obtrude in both writing and reading, insight that her work of feminist criticism will explain’.²⁷ However, Woolf’s celebration of a personal connection with Brontë demonstrates that this is not true: at least in her centenary article, the woman and the author are equally important, and equally fascinating. The value of this personal connection lessens only during the 1920s: Woolf’s increasing focus on Brontë in her social context results in a desire to distance herself from her flawed predecessor.

²⁷ Zemgulys, p. 157.

‘One Must Be A Lady’

During the 1920s, Woolf’s interest in women’s literary tradition and their living conditions becomes more prominent. As the previous chapter has shown, Woolf’s thinking becomes increasingly feminist: her reviews of Mary Russell Mitford from the same period offer a feminist revision of her life, and a similar shift occurs in Woolf’s discussion of Charlotte Brontë. Woolf’s reviews ‘Women Novelists’ (1918) and her Mitford review ‘An Imperfect Lady’ (1920) anticipate *A Room of One’s Own* in their interest in the domestic obstacles and gendered expectations past women writers encountered. However, this re-examination of Brontë’s life also leads Woolf to develop a more critical attitude towards her: in her *Common Reader* essay ‘Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights’ (1925), Woolf therefore distances herself from Brontë’s flawed writing by focussing on her geographical and social isolation.

In her 1918 review of R. Brimley Johnson’s *The Women Novelists*, Woolf articulates key questions which would eventually lead her to write *A Room of One’s Own*:

What, for example, was the origin of that extraordinary outburst in the eighteenth century of novel writing by women? Why did it begin then, and not in the time of the Elizabethan renaissance? Was the motive which finally determined them to write a desire to correct the current view of their sex expressed in so many volumes and for so many ages by male writers? (*E* 2.314)

Although Woolf is hesitant about the book’s premise – ‘experience seems to prove that to criticise the work of a sex as a sex is merely to state with almost invariable acrimony prejudices derived from the fact that you are either a man or a woman’ (*E* 2.314) – it clearly serves as a springboard for her own analysis. Johnson traces the development of women’s writing through the works of Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot and offers a comparative literary analysis and a reading of the cultural context that shaped female authorship. As Woolf’s initial questions suggest, she is almost exclusively interested in the latter: while she does not yet offer an answer (‘money and a room of her own’ (*AROO* 3)) to these questions, she is confident that ‘the question is not one merely of literature, but to a large extent of social history’ (*E* 2.314). ‘Women Novelists’ therefore prompts

Woolf with an opportunity to re-examine Brontë as a woman writer in a patriarchal society.

Anticipating the focus of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's exploration of women's social history focuses mainly on the domestic obstacles they encountered:

[Fanny Burney's] manuscripts were burned by her stepmother's orders, and needlework inflicted as a penance, much as, a few years later, Jane Austen would slip her writing beneath a book if anyone came in, and Charlotte Brontë stopped in the middle of her work to pare the potatoes. (*E* 2.315)

While Johnson references the burning of Burney's manuscript several times to illustrate how hostile her environment was to female authorship, Woolf draws on an anecdote from Gaskell's biography to add domestic duties to the gender norms which discouraged women from writing. Although Charlotte generally pursued paid employment while Emily, as the daughter at home, was responsible for supervising the parsonage household, Gaskell introduces an anecdote designed to demonstrate Charlotte Brontë's exemplary domesticity even in moments of the highest artistic inspiration. She recounts that while working on *Jane Eyre*,

Miss Brontë was too dainty a housekeeper to put up with [Tabby's imperfect potato peeling]; yet she could not bear to hurt the faithful old servant, by bidding the younger maiden go over the potatoes again, and so reminding Tabby that her work was less effectual than formerly. Accordingly she would steal into the kitchen and quietly carry off the bowl of vegetables, without Tabby's being aware, and breaking off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing, carefully cut out the specks in the potatoes, and noiselessly carry them back to their place.²⁸

Gaskell's anecdote demonstrates Brontë's humility and willingness to prioritize her domestic duties, as well as the sisters' kindness and loyalty to their aging servant. Its softening of a scandalous author clearly appealed to a Victorian audience: thus, Lucasta Miller traces its evolution in late-Victorian collections of exemplary women's lives, where Brontë became a model of domesticity to young girls who

²⁸ Gaskell, p. 246.

were almost certainly forbidden from reading her works.²⁹ Although Brontë's paid work as teacher and governess would have offered a more forceful example of outside disruptions to her writing, Woolf prioritizes an anecdote which allows her to reject Gaskell's interpretation of Brontë's choices: in shifting the focus from Brontë's character to her inability to commit herself fully to her work, Woolf begins her analysis of the stifling effects of Victorian femininity and offers a feminist revision of Brontë's sacrifice. As in 'Haworth, November 1904', she also subtly downplays the family's economic position: Woolf adds to the strength of her argument by omitting the existence of the parsonage servants and turning Brontë's deliberate act of kindness into a necessity.

Woolf's change of context may seem a trivial incident, but she displays a similar hesitancy about the Brontës' social status in 'An Imperfect Lady'. As part of her ironic assessment of women writers' suitability for inclusion in Constance Hill's biographies, she suggests that 'The Brontës, however highly we rate their genius, lacked that indefinable something which marks the lady' (*E* 3.210). As the last chapter showed, Woolf mocks the code of conduct which makes Hill prefer Mitford's quiet suffering over potentially more outspoken biographical subjects, but ultimately adheres to the same rules in burying her analysis of Dr Mitford's abusive behaviour under a humorous tone of voice. Woolf therefore contrasts not only Austen, but also herself, with Charlotte Brontë when she proclaims that

[o]ne must be a lady. Yet what that means, and whether we like what it means, may be doubtful. If we say that Jane Austen was a lady and that Charlotte Brontë was not one, we do as much as need be done in the way of definition, and commit ourselves to neither side. (*E* 3.211)

Woolf avoids a closer dissection of the values and assumptions that drive her social distinction. Her ability to invoke Brontë without further explanation suggests that her Victorian reputation as a coarse and unfeminine writer continued to endure, and was actively perpetuated by Woolf. However, Woolf's concern with female voicelessness and repressed anger, which permeates the review, also hints at the potential for a more positive interpretation of Brontë's lack of status. Unlike Woolf, who maintains her feminine surface manner throughout the discussion of Mitford's abusive home,

²⁹ Miller, p. 85.

Brontë can raise her voice and ‘dash the teacups on the floor’: a more direct and effective approach from which Woolf, Austen, and Mitford are debarred.

Woolf’s desire to increase the distance between Brontë and herself sets the tone for her *Common Reader* essay ‘Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights’ (1925): in addition to Brontë’s social and geographical situation, her intensely personal mode of writing is increasingly at odds with Woolf’s more impersonal modernist fiction. Woolf’s change of position is particularly striking because, like many of the *Common Reader* essays, ‘Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights’ is based on a revised version of her earlier enthusiastic centenary essay. This makes Woolf’s shift away from strong personal identification and a speculative, open-ended reading of Brontë’s personality more apparent: in the revised essay, Woolf presents a fixed image of Brontë deeply embedded in and defined by Haworth’s social and geographical isolation. Woolf’s return to geographical determinism therefore revises the scepticism she displayed about the value of literary geography in ‘Haworth, November 1904’. While Woolf does not attempt to retrace her journey to the Brontës’ parsonage, she is notably less interested in exploring Charlotte Brontë’s character than in her centenary essay, offering instead a detailed exploration of the environment that formed it. Woolf’s interest in the impact of Brontë’s social position on her writing is therefore in keeping with her move towards a feminist re-evaluation of women’s writing, but also signals a return to Gaskell, who first posited the strong link between Brontë and Yorkshire: Woolf’s image of Charlotte Brontë ‘in that parsonage and on those moors, unhappy and lonely, in her poverty and her exaltation’ (*CR* 155) firmly limits Brontë to an existence in Haworth and ignores her life in Brussels. In strong contrast to her on-going re-evaluation of Austen, Woolf therefore appears to have internalized Gaskell’s position, signalling her inevitable return to Victorian ways of interpreting Brontë.

This solidification of Brontë’s image is accompanied by a more critical analysis of how ‘[t]hese circumstances [...] may have left their traces on her work’. While Woolf still praises the immediacy and timelessness of *Jane Eyre*, her analysis focuses more strongly on Brontë’s formation as a writer, particularly her lack of education and literary professionalism. Woolf suggests that Brontë’s style

owed nothing to the reading of many books. She never learnt the smoothness of the professional writer, or acquired his ability to stuff

and sway his language as he chooses. [...] [S]he writes as a lead writer in a provincial journal might have written. (CR 158)

Woolf delivers this verdict with all the force of her own professionalism: by now a metropolitan avant-garde novelist and celebrated essayist, she relegates Brontë to the position of a talented but crude predecessor. While Brontë's 'own authentic voice' remains forceful and poetic, Woolf strongly implies that she never acquired the sophistication which distinguishes her own writing from that of the amateur:

we read Charlotte Brontë not for exquisite observations of character – her characters are vigorous and elementary; not for comedy – hers is grim and crude; not for a philosophic view of life – hers is that of a country parson's daughter; but for her poetry. (CR 158)

Again, Woolf is drawing on Leslie Stephen in expressing this sense of superiority: he similarly suggested that Brontë's 'mind, with its exceptional powers in certain directions, never broke the fetters by which the parson's daughter of the last generation was restricted'.³⁰ Where Stephen speaks as a university-educated man of letters, Woolf uses her professional status: as Kaplan notes, it is in 'the disdainful voice of a metropolitan intellectual that Woolf carefully crafts the degradation of Brontë's class status and education – one that willingly distorts the breath of her reading as well as her experience of other places'.³¹

This widening sense of distance also shapes Woolf's discussion of Brontë's 'overpowering personality', which dominates her novels and is strongly at odds with Woolf's preference for impersonality. While Woolf still praises the intense power of *Jane Eyre*, the strong personal identification between Brontë and her heroines is now further evidence of Brontë's limitations as a writer: 'She does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist; all her force, and it is the more tremendous for being constricted, goes into the assertion, "I love", "I hate", "I suffer"' (CR 159). Noting Brontë's 'desire to create instantly rather than observe patiently' (CR 158), Woolf echoes George Henry Lewes' debate about literary femininity with Brontë – she refused 'to finish more and be more subdued' and be like 'observant' Jane Austen³² – but also re-introduces personality

³⁰ Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', p. 729.

³¹ Kaplan, p. 19.

³² Gaskell, pp. 273-74.

into her analysis. Woolf heightens Charlotte's limitations by comparison to Emily Brontë, who transcends both her limiting environment and personal grievances: 'There is no "I" in *Wuthering Heights*. There are no governesses. There are no employers. [...] She looked out upon a world cleft into gigantic disorder and felt within her the power to unite it in a book' (CR 159). Woolf's encounter of Modernist elements in Emily Brontë's writing is reminiscent of her approach to Austen's fiction. Emily's talent to 'free life from its dependence on facts, with a few touches indicate the spirit of a face so that it needs no body' (CR 161) is closely aligned with Woolf's own goal to convey life 'this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit [...] with as little mixture of the of the alien and external as possible' (CR 150). In contrast, Charlotte Bronze remains distinctly un-modernist and unfeminine, and Woolf's attempts to distance herself from this unfashionable writer culminate in *A Room of One's One*, where Brontë becomes a model of how not to write.

A Room of One's Own

A Room of One's Own begins with a repudiation of conventional approaches to the 'great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction'. Woolf summarily dismisses the possibility of a superficial analysis consisting of

simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs Gaskell.

(*AROO* 3)

Woolf's selection is familiar: not only is it an apt summary of a possible Victorian canon, it also presents a fairly accurate overview of her own engagement with past women writers. Woolf's ironical dismissal of her earliest Brontë tribute, 'Haworth, November 1904', therefore announces the completion of her revision of Charlotte Brontë. Woolf now firmly places her in a tradition of women's writing: in *A Room of One's Own*, Brontë becomes the embodiment of the flawed Victorian woman writer, hampered in her development by patriarchal society and geographical isolation likewise.

Woolf's criticism of Charlotte Brontë is central to the argument of *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf traces the development of women's writing from the excessively hostile ideological climate of the Early Modern period to its emergence as a respectable means of employment at the end of the eighteenth century; but emphasizes how subtle sexism and the limitations of a Victorian middle-class lifestyle continued to restrict women's writing. Suggesting that the narrow confines of a middle-class life explain the sudden emergence of the novel as women's medium of choice, Woolf argues that

all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. (*AROO* 61)

Woolf's literary history elides women's contributions to other genres, particularly non-fiction, as the next chapter will explore in greater detail; but she also ignores

large numbers of other nineteenth-century novelists by focussing only on Charlotte Brontë's reaction to this limited sphere.

In contrast to Austen's quiet transcendence of society's constraints, Woolf finds in *Jane Eyre* an example of open rebellion against Victorian gender and class politics. Again conflating Brontë and her heroines, Woolf's extensive quotation includes Jane's programmatic speech on women's desire for a wider sphere:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags.
(*AROO* 63)

Woolf makes Brontë representative of the Victorian woman: in voicing her anger at women's exclusion from public and intellectual life, Brontë 'puts her finger exactly not only upon her own defects as a novelist but upon those of her sex at that time' (*AROO* 63). Woolf's central argument is that Brontë creates an 'awkward break' (*AROO* 63) in the narrative of *Jane Eyre*:

[I]t is clear that anger was tempering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience – she had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world. (*AROO* 66)

Woolf's biographical reading of *Jane Eyre* fits into the pattern of her previous engagement with Brontë, but her fixation on only one specific example leaves her open to criticism: unlike her more generalized praise of Austen, this critical reading of *Jane Eyre* is not necessarily convincing. Even without drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's famous feminist interpretation of Bertha as Jane's double, Woolf's 'awkward break' is very subjective. Jane's passionate soliloquy ends by condemning the laughter of those who disparage women's ambitions, and is followed by Bertha's actual laughter: this aligns Bertha with Jane's adversaries, and eases the transition

from Jane's internal to her external world. Thematically, as well, Jane's speech resonates with the political context of the 1840s. Brontë skilfully invokes the social unrest of the Hungry Forties as well as Chartism, then at the heights of its power by reminding the reader that 'Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth' (*AROO* 63). Woolf reduces this bold political statement to 'some personal grievance': as Kaplan notes, this 'critical strategy goes further to devalue that voice, pre-emptively eroding its ability to speak either universally, for "most people", or for women' despite its universal applicability.³³

Woolf's discussion of Brontë therefore creates its own awkward break in the argument of *A Room of One's Own*, and her exploration of Brontë's life and death goes beyond the requirements of her argument. Now discarding Gaskell's interpretation of Brontë's exemplary domesticity, Woolf focuses instead on her passionate anger and failure to adapt her writing to the requirements of Victorian femininity:

The woman who wrote these pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself when she should be writing of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted? (*AROO* 63)

Utilizing even Brontë's early death, Woolf's analysis is intensely personal and adheres to a fiction of women's personal responsibility for changing their disadvantaged position. Thus, Woolf chastises Brontë for her poverty in a voice that echoes the angry male voice she otherwise dissects throughout the essay: 'One could not but play for a moment with the thought of what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë had possessed say three hundred a year – but the foolish woman sold the copyright of her novels outright for fifteen hundred pounds' (*AROO* 63). Woolf's attack on Brontë's business sense highlights that her publisher made a fortune at her

³³ Kaplan, p. 19.

expense, yet ignores the fact that Brontë was following standard mid-Victorian practice: as in 'Jane Austen at Sixty', Woolf takes an uncharacteristically profit-oriented approach to literature and unrealistically implies that fiction would have funded a life of travel and metropolitan society.

Ironically, Woolf's focus on Brontë's anger perpetuates a Victorian critical tradition that chastises Brontë for her imperfect femininity while undertaking a feminist critique of Victorian ideology. Thus, Jean Long notes that

the Victorians were particularly exercised by the combination of anger and femininity in an author. With a different emphasis this is also what informs Woolf's objections to Charlotte Brontë's writing, since Brontë's highly personal voice calls attention to both her anger and her femininity, and links the two.³⁴

More specifically, Woolf's criticism again draws on Leslie Stephen's essays and offers a feminist revision of his verdicts. In *Hours in a Library*, Stephen argues that Brontë is fundamentally conflicted because she advocates for individual passions as well as duty as the commanding principles of life:

The imprisonment is not merely that of a feeble body in uncongenial regions, but that of a narrow circle of thought, and consequently of a mind which has never worked itself clear by reflection, or developed a harmonious or consistent view of life. There is a certain feverish disquiet which is marked by the peculiar mannerism of the style. [...] At its worst, it is strangely contorted, crowded by rather awkward personifications [...] We feel an aspiration after more than can be accomplished, an unsatisfied yearning for potent excitement, which is sometimes more fretful than forcible.³⁵

Stephen's stylistic analysis links Brontë's geographical situation with her personal flaws, and thereby provides the basis for Woolf's character study of Brontë. Although Woolf re-contextualizes Stephen's verdict, arguing that Brontë's inability to 'get her genius expressed whole and entire' is due to patriarchal society, not philosophical inferiority, her image of Brontë's 'deformed and twisted' books and

³⁴ Jean Long, 'The Awkward Break: Woolf's Reading of Brontë and Austen in *A Room of One's Own*', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 3 (1997), 76–94 (p. 81).

³⁵ Stephen, 'Charlotte Brontë', p. 737.

her ‘cramped and thwarted’ life clearly draw on Stephen’s ‘contorted’ style, full of ‘feverish disquiet’ and ‘unsatisfied yearning’: both believe that Brontë is ‘at war with her lot’ (*AROO* 63).

Woolf’s decision to devote multiple pages of analysis to Brontë’s protest against patriarchal society suggests that she is more than just a negative example: while Woolf aggressively distances herself from Brontë, she also strongly identifies with her anger. As in ‘An Imperfect Lady’, Brontë therefore represents the freedom to express her feelings directly and presents Woolf with an opportunity to examine her own anxieties regarding women’s voices, anger and femininity. These dominate the narrative structure of *A Room of One’s Own*: Woolf’s fictional autobiographical narrative balances the insistence of a first-hand account of women’s exclusion from institutions of culture and learning with the possibility of distancing herself to maintain a ladylike indifference. Woolf thereby avoids the disruptive anger for which she censured Brontë, but Long notes that this patriarchal adaptation also prevents Woolf from expressing herself ‘whole and entire’ (*AROO* 63):

Woolf’s work was similarly compromised at this stage in her career by her uneasy mediation between, on the one hand, the need to protest her own educational privations and the general dispossession of women and, on the other, her barely-acknowledged tendency to heed [...] the male reader’.³⁶

Woolf’s own reflection following the essay’s reception after publication demonstrates this mediation of extremes:

It is a little ominous that Morgan won’t review it. It makes me suspect that there is a shrill feminine tone in it which my intimate friends will dislike. I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton, Roger and Morgan; that the press will be kind and talk of its charm and sprightliness; also I shall get a good many letters from young women. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously. Mrs Woolf is so accomplished a writer that all she says makes easy reading... this very feminine logic... a book to be put in the hands of girls. I doubt that I mind very much. (*WD* 148)

³⁶ Long, p. 78.

Fearing both to alienate male friends with ‘a shrill feminine tone’ and that her ‘charm and sprightliness’ will undermine the force of her argument, Woolf charts the impossibility of her position in her diary entry, but also reveals her hesitancy to fully commit to the feminist position of *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf’s objection to its hypothetical classification as ‘a book to be put in the hands of girls’ anticipates male critics’ dismissal of her essay, but is also evidence that she has accepted and internalized this implicit devaluation. Yet given its genesis as a lecture at Girton College, this is exactly what *A Room of One’s Own* should be: an address to the women and girls who will be the future of women’s writing.

Woolf’s diary entry therefore reveals the drawback of her polite tone: adhering to the polite ‘surface manner’ of the Victorian drawing room leaves the reader to infer the unsaid and to correctly read through her irony, thereby risking that her more serious criticism will pass unnoticed (*MoB* 152). In contrast, Brontë directly and unambiguously sets out women’s desires and discontent in the extract from *Jane Eyre*, even rejecting blame from the beginning: she acts as a foil for Woolf’s own anger, and her inclusion of Brontë’s speech disrupts her previously detached surface manner and allows her to express her personal anger, albeit in another woman’s voice, while also demonstrating how deeply ingrained her Victorian training on proper femininity remained. Long similarly reads Woolf’s act of ‘ventriloquism’ as

the best of both worlds: she is able without embarrassment to express her own anger through the voice of “a most singular and eloquent woman” (*E* 2 28) while at the same time, [...] allowing herself to criticize Brontë’s angry voice on literary grounds.³⁷

However, Long’s easy dismissal of Woolf’s demolition of Brontë’s life and work as merely literary criticism ignores its personal component: Woolf’s attack on Brontë severs all possible connection between herself and the flawed and angry woman Brontë had come to represent because she had once functioned as an almost personal friend and model. Yet in employing Brontë to express a core belief which she could not express for herself, Woolf also seems to return to her earlier admiration for Brontë as ‘a hard pressed captain’ who proudly faces and annihilates her enemies: she manages to express an anger which Woolf would keep suppressed until the

³⁷ Long, p. 90, p. 91.

publication of *Three Guineas*, where Brontë's personal life, no longer regarded as being in her own control, becomes the focus of Woolf's enquiry.

Three Guineas

The frequency of Woolf's engagement with Charlotte Brontë drops sharply after *A Room of One's Own*. As is the case with the majority of the writers discussed in this thesis, Woolf's interest shifts from detailed biographical studies to the patterns dominating women's lives more generally. However, although *Three Guineas* constitutes Woolf's last substantial engagement with Charlotte Brontë and focuses largely on her significance as a nineteenth-century woman, Brontë remains a subtle influence throughout the period.

Woolf's letters are evidence of her continued interest in Brontë. Thus, writing to Nelly Cecil in 1932, Woolf discusses the latest Brontë biography by novelist E.F. Benson. Benson, a nephew of the Sidgwick family who had briefly and unsuccessfully employed Brontë as a governess in 1839, intended his biography to offer a correction of what he perceived as Gaskell's overly flattering portrait: his Charlotte is rigid and self-centred and fails to understand the tortured genius of her siblings Branwell and Emily.³⁸ Woolf's private dismissal of Benson's biography suggests a certain amount of protectiveness of Brontë:

I daresay [*Charlotte Brontë* by] E. F. Benson was all right – its only I detest the collocation (is that the word?) of that tubby ruddy fleshy little Clubman with Charlotte. Its impure. Its like cats marrying dogs – against the right order of things. Let him stick to Dodo. I cant follow the Bronte enthusiasts. A lunatic, living I think near Hatfield, has sent me a book proving that Branwell [Brontë] wrote *Wuthering Heights* – the work (her work that is,) she says, of years. One of Benson's points was that Charlotte had no feeling of any kind for the other sex; but was entirely decimated (is that a word?) by passion for one of those obscure old frumps – Hussey, [Ellen] Nussey – what was her name? Yet I can remember, or think I can, old George Smith preening himself – hundreds of years ago – when my mother said – oh this is

³⁸ In keeping with this very critical stance, Benson dismisses Brontë's complaints about her employers and fails to include anecdotes about her difficulties in managing the Sedgwick children. In contrast, Claire Harman notes that A.C. Benson's recollected that 'one of his cousins "certainly on one occasion threw a Bible at Miss Brontë"'. Claire Harman, *Charlotte Brontë: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), p.117.

millions of years ago, I may well have invented it – “I am sure Charlotte was in love with you Mr Smith”. (*L* 5.80)

Woolf’s non-sequitur on Brontë enthusiasts contains another rebuttal of Benson: like her ‘lunatic’ from Hatfield, Benson also devotes an entire chapter to proving that *Wuthering Heights* was partially written by Branwell Brontë. Likewise, Woolf’s dismissive reference to Benson’s popular *Dodo* series (1893-1921), featuring ‘the smoking, shooting, screaming composer of Masses, Miss Staines’³⁹ caricaturing Ethel Smyth,⁴⁰ suggests a potential further cause for antipathy: while Woolf was by no means always positively disposed towards Brontë and Smyth, she clearly resents Benson’s self-aggrandizement at women’s expense.

The question of who is allowed to appropriate Brontë is central to Woolf’s reaction: in strong contrast to her centenary essay, which celebrated Brontë’s ability to adapt to different readers’ needs, Woolf shows herself unimpressed with Benson’s queer reading of Brontë’s relationship with Ellen Nussey. Contrary to Woolf’s assertion, Benson only states that ‘[n]ever again did she give her heart to anyone, man or woman, in joy and exaltation’ and provides a summary of the Héger affair as well as a brief allusion to Brontë’s presumed flirtation with George Smith.⁴¹ However, Woolf’s strong rejection of Benson’s conjecture complicates Jane Lilienfeld’s assertion that ‘the reconstructed figure of the lesbian Brontë [encountered through Vita Sackville-West] reshaped Woolf’s earlier conception of Brontë’.⁴² By 1932, Woolf was willing to resort to her own memories of the Smith family’s Brontë cult to question the existence of a lesbian Brontë, even though in another letter she dismisses Reginald Smith as a ‘long faced old lantern jawed man, who kept Charlotte Brontes socks in a glass case in his drawing room’ (*L* 5.96).

Woolf’s resentment of men’s uses of Brontë links her private review with her public analysis of Brontë as the victim of an overly possessive father in *Three Guineas*. As I have noted in my previous discussion of Barrett Browning and Mitford, *Three Guineas* departs from the more ambivalent feminism of *A Room of*

³⁹ ‘Dodo’, *The Spectator Archive*, 1893 <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/17th-june-1893/22/dodo>> [accessed 5 February 2018].

⁴⁰ Elizabeth R. Kertesz, ‘Smyth, Dame Ethel Mary (1858–1944), Composer, Writer, and Suffragist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-36173>> [accessed 5 February 2018].

⁴¹ Edward Frederic Benson, *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1932), p. 43.

⁴² Lilienfeld, p. 49.

One's Own: Woolf firmly and directly attributes women's suffering to an oppressive patriarchal system perpetuated by men. It therefore represents a culmination of Woolf's partial but complex identification with Brontë's anger: thus, Jane Lilienfeld emphasizes that 'Woolf adapts not only the fearlessness of Charlotte Brontë, but one of her central images' in the fires set ablaze by the daughters of educated men.⁴³ Woolf's fire imagery recalls her earlier reviews with their assertion that Brontë's writing issued from 'a deep place where the fire is eternal' (E 2.30) as well as their links to Stephen's similar imagery. However, Woolf's externalization of these fires mirrors her shift from Brontë's character and reaction to patriarchal society to a closer examination of the family dynamics inside the parsonage.

Woolf's addition of Patrick Brontë to her representative trio of Victorian fathers both follows and subverts traditional Brontë biography. The first edition of Gaskell's biography had featured extensive and sensational anecdotes of Patrick Brontë's domestic tyranny, which allegedly greatly contributed to the miserable living conditions of the Brontë children even before their more famous suffering at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge. While Patrick Brontë's denial of the truth of her allegations led Gaskell to cut the majority of these anecdotes from subsequent editions of her biography, stories of his 'strange eccentricity' still found their way into Leslie Stephen's entry on Charlotte Brontë for *Dictionary of National Biography*:

He enforced strict discipline; the children were fed on potatoes without meat to make them hardy. He burnt their boots when he thought them too smart, and for the same reason destroyed a silk gown of his wife's. He generally restrained open expression of his anger, but would relieve his feelings by firing pistols out of his back-door or destroying articles of furniture. [...] He was unsocial in his habits, loved solitary rambles over the moors, and, in consequence of some weakness of digestion, dined alone even before his wife's death and to the end of his own life.⁴⁴

⁴³ Lilienfeld, p. 54.

⁴⁴ Leslie Stephen, 'Bronte, Charlotte', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1885 <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/3523>>.

If Woolf had wanted a portrait of Patrick Brontë as a sensational villain, these Victorian sources would have provided it. Instead, however, Woolf limits her analysis to his superficially much more mundane refusal to sanction his daughter's marriage, again derived from Gaskell:

There is the case of the Rev. Patrick Brontë. The Rev. Arthur Nicholls was in love with his daughter Charlotte; 'What his words were,' she wrote, when Mr Nicholls proposed to her, 'you can imagine; his manner you can hardly realize nor can I forget it . . . I asked if he had spoken to Papa. He said he dared not.' Why did he dare not? He was strong and young and passionately in love; the father was old. The reason is immediately apparent. 'He [the Rev. Patrick Brontë] always disapproved of marriages, and constantly talked against them. But he more than disapproved this time; he could not bear the idea of this attachment of Mr Nicholls to his daughter. Fearing the consequences . . . she made haste to give her father a promise that, on the morrow, Mr Nicholls should have a distinct refusal.' Mr Nicholls left Haworth; Charlotte remained with her father. Her married life — it was to be a short one — was shortened still further by her father's wish. (3G 258-9)

Woolf omits part of the last sentence of the quotation – 'Fearing the consequences of agitation to one so recently an invalid [my italics]'⁴⁵ – to make Brontë's situation more ambivalent: instead of concern for her father's health, fear of his violence appears to drive Brontë's decision. However, Woolf's omission is also driven by a strong personal identification of this situation. As Lilienfeld and Hermione Lee note, Brontë's married life bears a strong resemblance to Stella Duckworth's marriage to Jack Hills, similarly shortened by Leslie Stephen's wish.⁴⁶ Like Charlotte Brontë, Stella died from complications related to pregnancy early in her marriage; and Leslie Stephen's emotional manipulation of Stella resonates with Brontë's concern for her father's health, as Woolf's later analysis in *A Sketch of the Past* demonstrates: 'He was jealous clearly. But in those days nothing was clear. He had his traditional pose; he was the lonely; the deserted; the unhappy old man. In fact he was possessive; hurt;

⁴⁵ Gaskell, p. 420.

⁴⁶ Lilienfeld, p. 51. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 139.

a man jealous of a young man' (*MoB* 115). Stephen's behaviour matches the 'infantile fixation' with which Woolf had diagnosed Patrick Brontë: by amending Gaskell's quotation Woolf therefore at once retains its personal significance, while also distancing herself from the situation.

In *Three Guineas*, Brontë therefore once again ceases to be a famous writer and becomes an ordinary woman. However, while 'Haworth, November 1904' recorded an involuntary response to a secular relic, Woolf's reinterpretation of Brontë as representative of ordinary Victorian women is now deliberate. In strong contrast to the public anger noted in *A Room of One's Own*, in private Brontë dutifully accepted her father's decision and becomes representative of the daughters of educated men who suffered from patriarchal systems. Woolf's analysis therefore emphasizes the overwhelming power of custom and society making protest almost impossible:

But when the father is infected [with infantile fixation] it has a threefold power; he has nature to protect him, law to protect him; and property to protect him. Thus protected it was perfectly possible for the Rev. Patrick Brontë to cause 'acute pain' to his daughter Charlotte for several months, and to steal several months of her short married happiness without incurring any censure from the society in which he practised the profession of a priest of the Church of England; though had he tortured a dog, or stolen a watch, that same society would have unfrocked him and cast him forth. (*3G* 263)

Woolf's criticism of Patrick Brontë's socially sanctioned torture resembles her analysis of her own 'tyrant father – the exacting, the violent, the histrionic, the demonstrative, the self-centred, the self pitying, the deaf, the appealing, the alternately loved and hated father' (*MoB* 123), the well-liked and highly respected critic. Having demonstrated the limits to Brontë's protest and aligned her with suffering femininity, Woolf nevertheless follows the example of this flawed but relatable predecessor by publicly spelling out 'the things it was impossible to say aloud' as a girl in Hyde Park Gate (*MoB* 116).

Woolf's final reference to Brontë, in a July 1938 letter to a Chinese correspondent, offers a summary of her four decades of criticism: 'The life of Charlotte Brontë will perhaps give you a feeling for the life of women writers in

England in the 19th century – their difficulties and how she overcame them’ (*L* 6.259). Woolf wavers between distance and identification when engaging with Brontë. She never quite frees herself from the critical legacies of Gaskell and Stephen, and Brontë remains representative of the flawed women writers of the Victorian period. However, despite these obstacles, Woolf ultimately returns to seeing Brontë as a role model to other women: successfully overcoming personal and societal obstacles, she achieved literary success and personal happiness without ever once losing her voice.

4. 'A Gap in your Library, Madam': George Eliot, Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant

This time let us turn to the lives not of men but of women in the nineteenth century – to the lives of professional women. But there would seem to be a gap in your library, Madam. There are no lives of professional women in the nineteenth century. (*Three Guineas* 200)

'The Victorian age, to hazard another generalisation, was the age of the professional man' (*E* 2.35), Woolf asserts in a 1916 essay on the Victorian biographer Samuel Butler. This generalization, as Woolf would have been aware, was especially true for writers. Graham Law argues that the second half of the century saw 'radical change in both the profession of authorship and the publishing trade in Britain': better copyright protection, the growth of a literary market outside of lending libraries, and the relatively profitable field of journalism led to 'a significant increase in the number of those able to live by the pen'.¹ Paradoxically, this new model of professional authorship was accompanied by an increasing personalization of the author's relationship with the public. Thus, Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi emphasizes the increased importance of 'the management of the structures of feeling generated by a publicity-hungry culture' from the 1860s onwards, while Sarah Wah argues that

the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1882, the growing popularity of publications such as *Celebrities at Home*, the widespread use of the *Celebrity Carte-de-Visite*, and the burgeoning biography industry all reflect a contemporary shift in public interest from a writer's work to publications that disclosed details about a favourite author's private life.²

Although it would be illusory to assume that women had arrived at a position of equality with men, their presence in the literary marketplace had become more

¹ Graham Law, 'The Professionalization of Authorship', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880*, The Oxford History of the Novel in English, ed. by John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), III, pp. 37–55 (p. 37, p. 45).

² Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi, 'Negotiating Fame: Mid-Victorian Women Writers and the Romantic Myth of the Gentlemanly Reviewer', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Proquest Ebook Central: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 187–205 (p. 190). Sarah Wah, "'The Most Churlish of Celebrities": George Eliot, John Cross and the Question of High Status', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15.3 (2010), 370–87 (p. 371).

acceptable. Instead, genre became increasingly more important than gender expectations: thus, Linda Peterson argues that by the end of the century, ‘a duality – if, indeed, it is legitimate to reduce complexities to binaries – splits not “proper lady” from the “woman writer” (a socially gendered distinction) but the popular writer from the high-art woman of letters (economic and aesthetic distinctions)’.³

Woolf’s history of women’s writing largely fails to acknowledge these developments: she praises Aphra Behn for making a living of writing in Restoration society in *A Room of One’s Own*, yet when it comes to the nineteenth century, Woolf prioritizes middle-class women’s drawing-room existence over a detailed examination of the financial independence the literary marketplace could offer. The gap in Woolf’s hypothetical library in *Three Guineas* is therefore of her own making: as the previous chapters have shown, the nineteenth-century writers who most attracted her attention are not the newly emerging professional women writers of the second half of the century, but the writers who worked predominantly in the earlier half on the nineteenth century and existed as quintessentially domestic writers. Jane Austen, working in private and anonymously, is the ideal example of this domestic female mode of writing, but Woolf strives to extend this concept to Mitford, Barrett Browning and Brontë, focussing mainly on their enforced domesticity instead of their social lives and literary connections. But even without Woolf’s reshaping of their careers, none of these women easily fits the mould of the later professional writers: although Brontë’s identity was an open secret in literary circles, she was never photographed and remained Currer Bell to her contemporary readers, with little influence on the cult of literary tourism that developed after her death. Likewise, Barrett Browning’s move from domestic imprisonment to virtual exile in Italy meant that ‘[t]he marketplace never penetrates Barrett Browning’s domestic privacy, thus enabling her to pursue a literary career in a hermetically sealed environment’, as Alexis Easley argues.⁴ As the only woman in Woolf’s canon to depend financially on her writing, Mary Russell Mitford comes closest to actual professionalism, but her existence at the centre of a cult of nostalgic rural tourism obscures this aspect of her career. As in Peterson’s overview of early nineteenth-century authorship, Mitford’s ability to pass as a proper lady is more important and

³ Linda H Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2009), p. 11.

⁴ Alexis Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender and Victorian Authorship, 1850–1914* (Maryland: U of Delaware P, 2011), p. 61.

complements Woolf's focus on women writers' adherence to this socially gendered distinction: like Austen's exemplary femininity and Charlotte Brontë's failure to conform to it, Mary Russell Mitford's ability to maintain a genteel silence about her domestic life determines Woolf's response to her. Although Woolf deplores the impact of the Victorian drawing room on women's writing, she also ignores the women who break free from its influence, suggesting that Victorian gender norms continued to influence her.

Woolf's failure to engage with the later generations of women writers, who predominantly present this new professionalism, has been noted by several critics. Mary Jean Corbett sees this avoidance as a deliberate self-positioning:

[T]he active disavowal of what I call second-generation Victorian women writers, while certainly shaped in part by her familial context, is but one facet of Woolf's broader and deeper drive to establish relations with an earlier, "greater" Victorian generation while bypassing an intermediate and, to her mind, imperfect one.⁵

Similarly, Marysa Demoor suggests that Woolf's attitude towards her immediate predecessors is representative of Modernists' desire to establish their difference from a transitional generation, and notes that 'women writers of the previous period received an even tougher treatment because to the young, both male and female, they were the personification of amateurism and mass culture, often combined with an objectionable materialism'.⁶ While neither Corbett nor Demoor offers a precise definition of this transitional generation, they focus on writers who were still active during the early years of Woolf's own career and therefore represented a directly competing approach to literature.

However, I would like to extend their observation backwards to the latter half of the nineteenth century and suggest that the 1860s are a crucial cut-off point for Woolf's engagement with women writers: her writing on mid- and late-Victorian women writers is negligible compared to her extensive engagement with earlier ones and it is frequently overly critical and dismissive. Woolf promotes the idea of the

⁵ Mary Jean Corbett, "Ashamed of the Inkpot": Virginia Woolf, Lucy Clifford, and the Literary Marketplace', *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 11.3 (2015), 9–30 (paragraph 6).

⁶ Marysa Demoor, "Not with a Bang but a Whimper": Lucy Clifford's Correspondence, 1919–1929', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 30.3 (2001), 233–56 (p. 255).

1860s as a watershed moment, representing Victorian society in its most conventional and objectionable form, in *A Sketch of the Past*:

Father himself was a typical Victorian. George and Gerald were consenting and approving Victorians. So that we had two quarrels to wage; two fights to fight; one with them individually; and one with them socially. We were living say in 1910; they were living in 1860. (*MoB* 150)

Post-1860s women writers could hardly escape being negatively implicated by their stronger association to this period. Unlike the more obscure early writers, they frequently moved in the same circles as Leslie Stephen and continued to exist in living memory: their lives and characters were therefore exceedingly well documented and less malleable, leaving Woolf little opportunity to filter them through her own imagination.

My last case study is therefore devoted to the gaps that Woolf creates in her canon of women writers by overlooking professional women writers. George Eliot (1819–1880), Mary Augusta Ward (1851–1920) and Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897) represent the move towards female professionalism in very distinct ways: Eliot, a public intellectual, represents the ‘high-art woman of letters’ invoked by Peterson and served as an aspirational model for women writers like Ward and Oliphant, who failed to rise beyond the status of popular writers. But Woolf’s unease with Victorian professionalism dominates her reaction to all three. Canonical status and literary achievement were deciding factors in Woolf’s response to writers and she asserts Eliot’s place as one of the great four women writers in *A Room of One’s Own*. However, Woolf neglects Eliot in her essays and reviews, dedicating only two ambivalent reviews to her: an omission that suggests her unease with Eliot’s well-documented public persona and is particularly conspicuous when contrasted with her lifelong engagement with Austen and Brontë. In contrast, Mrs Humphry Ward is an unexpected presence in Woolf’s early career. Two reviews and a lengthy diary entry reveal Woolf’s unwilling fascination with her artistic compromise, but also offer a strong rejection of the Victorian conventionality which Ward comes to represent. Woolf’s engagement with Margaret Oliphant is similarly contradictory: after ignoring her for almost four decades, Woolf offers an influential dismissal of her literary achievements in a short paragraph in *Three Guineas*. There is currently little

criticism on Woolf's engagement with these writers: Alison Booth's *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* and Emily Blair's *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* provide valuable intertextual analyses of Victorian gender ideology and domestic spaces, respectively, but fail to consider the impact of Victorian professionalism on Woolf's representation of Eliot and Oliphant.⁷ I will add to this small body of criticism by discussing Woolf's reaction to these individual writers as part of her ambivalence towards professional writing and Victorian society, thereby demonstrating that the gaps in Woolf's library are due to the highly selective nature of her tradition of women's writing.

⁷ Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered : George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, Reading Women Writing (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992). Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2007).

George Eliot

George Eliot was unquestionably one of the most successful Victorian novelists, a woman writer who rose to unprecedented levels of fame for her intellect – but under a male pseudonym. Although Eliot’s career was undeniably the result of talent and intellectual ambition, it also relied on the careful and successful management of her public image as a writer. Mary Ann Evans’ early life was that of a conventional Victorian daughter: although her loss of faith and connection to radical circles had caused a strained relationship with her family, she acted as caretaker to her father until his death allowed her to move to London in the early 1850s. Assuming a position as reviewer and editor for John Chapman’s radical *Westminster Review*, Eliot quickly learned to mask her gender and assert her authority ‘in strategic and clandestine ways, most often by using Chapman’s nominal editorship as cover’, as Fionnuala Dillane argues.⁸ Her decision to begin her career as a novelist as ‘George Eliot’, not Mary Ann Evans, therefore allowed her to maintain this more authoritative male persona and offered a chance of an unbiased reception from a readership unaware of her journalistic origins. Additionally, it helped to dissociate ‘George Eliot’, the moral voice of a generation, from Evans’s more scandalous private life with George Henry Lewes. Thus, as Rosemary Ashton suggests, Eliot’s pseudonym likely persisted even after her true identity became known because it allowed readers and reviewers to circumvent the morally loaded choice of addressing her as either Miss Evans or Mrs Lewes.⁹

Eliot’s active management of her public persona and the continued use of her pseudonym distinguish her from the earlier writers in Woolf’s canon. Unlike the Brontës, whose pseudonymous existence ended when Gaskell’s biography opened their private life at the parsonage to the reading public, ‘George Eliot’ was a ‘name without person’, as Gillian Beer suggests: she lacked the authenticity of a private existence and could not be pictured at home.¹⁰ Dillane notes that the periodical press resolved this lack of intimate access by constructing two alternative personas, both

⁸ Fionnuala Dillane, “‘The Character of Editress’: Marian Evans at the *Westminster Review*, 1851–54’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 30.2 (2013), 269–90 (p. 271).

⁹ Rosemary Ashton, ‘Evans, Marian’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6794?docPos=1>>. [accessed 26 April 2017]

¹⁰ Gillian Beer, quoted in Fionnuala Dillane, *Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), p.17.

based upon Eliot's fiction: 'Evans was made real by being turned into George Eliot the wise and witty Warwickshire inhabitant who fictionalizes her native landscape and language [...]; alternatively, she was made supra-real, as George Eliot, the intellectual and incorporeal, otherworldly moral authority.'¹¹ Particularly the second persona tied in neatly with Eliot's own efforts to 'indirectly [encourage] publicity which helped to define her position as something grander than storyteller', as Wah notes, but did little to humanize her.¹² Unlike Austen or Brontë, whose domestic context was emphasized in their afterlives, Eliot continued to be mythologized in John Cross's reverential but heavily edited biography, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals* (1885): Cross assumed 'the memorializing role conventionally reserved for great men's widows', as Leah Price argues, and denied readers access to Evans's personal life to avoid the problem of her life with Lewes.¹³ Eliot's image as a novelist therefore suffered considerably after her death, for various reasons: Ashton blames Cross's biography for the fact that 'by the 1890s George Eliot was being described as a heavy, humourless writer', while Elisabeth Jay speculates that her loss of popularity was the result of 'a male clubland taking its revenge for the long years of George Eliot's supremacy'.¹⁴

When writing about George Eliot, Woolf therefore had access to a wealth of information, but Eliot clearly lacked 'that indefinable something' that prompted her to revisit and rewrite Austen and Brontë throughout her career. Woolf could not simply reinvent her, since Eliot's contemporaries were still living; and without an authentic domestic environment to link the public persona to the woman writer, Woolf struggled to find a clear stance and coherent persona for Eliot. Her extensively researched centenary review, commissioned for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1919 and republished in the first *Common Reader*, lacks the strong sense of a writer's personality characteristic of her other criticism from this period. Although Woolf had an opportunity to revise her opinion in a review of Eliot's letters in 1926, she fails to rescue Eliot from her Victorian reputation as she did for Austen: evidently, Woolf felt considerable ambivalence about Eliot and enjoyed questioning

¹¹ Dillane, *Before George Eliot*, p. 145, p. 146.

¹² Wah, p. 375.

¹³ Leah Price, 'George Eliot and the Production of Consumers', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1997), pp. 145–69 (p. 156).

¹⁴ Ashton. Elisabeth Jay, 'Mrs. Oliphant: The Hero as Woman of Letters, or Autobiography, a Gendered Genre', *Caliban*, 31 (1994), 85–95, p. 87.

her literary eminence. Woolf's brief evocation of Eliot, the fallen woman, in *A Room of One's Own* therefore ends her engagement with the great Victorian sage.

‘George Eliot’

Woolf’s longest and most detailed essay on George Eliot was a 1919 centenary article commissioned by *Times Literary Supplement* editor Bruce Richmond (E 4.179). In thus commemorating Eliot’s life, Woolf was once again following closely in Leslie Stephen’s footsteps: he had written the 1885 *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Mary Ann Evans and contributed a volume on *George Eliot* to Macmillan’s *English Men of Letters* series in 1902; but surprisingly, Stephen’s views appear to have impacted Woolf’s essay very little. Possibly due to the weight of this legacy, however, Woolf’s preparations for the article were meticulous and extensive. Although the review was not published until November, her preparations for reading ‘the whole of George Eliot’ began in January. Woolf’s awareness of Eliot’s close proximity to her own life is evident in her letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies: ‘George Eliot fascinates me. Did your father know her? or was she too much under a cloud? Nobody called on her, so she says; and yet her virtue seems to me excessive’ (L 2.285). Gossip about Eliot also plays a big role in Woolf’s letter to Nelly Cecil:

I am reading through the whole of George Eliot, in order to sum her up, once and for all, upon her anniversary, which happily is still months ahead. So far, I have already made way with her life, which is a book of the greatest fascination, and I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her. [...] I think she is a highly feminine and attractive character – most impulsive and ill-balanced (Mrs Prothero once told me that she – George Eliot that is – had a child by a professor in Edinburgh – she knew it for a fact – indeed the child is a well known Professor somewhere else–) and I only wish she had lived nowadays, and so been saved all that nonsense. I mean, being so serious, and digging up fossils, and all the rest of it. Perhaps too she would have written, not exactly better, but less facetiously. It was an unfortunate thing to be the first woman of the age. (L 2.321)

Although Woolf emphatically asserts her intimate knowledge of Eliot, her letter offers a range of contradictory interpretations of her personality and interests: ‘highly feminine and attractive’ despite her male pseudonym, she is also ‘most impulsive and ill-balanced’ and remains the focus of bizarre gossip long after her death. The

woman sketched here by Woolf is clearly at odds with the great writer, and while Eliot undisputedly was ‘the first woman of the age’, Woolf’s dismissive reference to ‘all that nonsense’ suggests her inherent unease with a woman occupying a status of public eminence. Likewise, her actual judgement of Eliot’s writing is not particularly flattering: her letter therefore demonstrates how the wealth of easily accessible information on Eliot prevents Woolf from settling on one coherent and consistent image of her.

Woolf’s essay suffers from a similar problem. Like her centenary essays on Austen and Brontë, ‘George Eliot’ is mainly a character study, but Woolf fails her promise to ‘sum her up, once and for all’. The essay lacks the strong sense of personality which had characterized ‘Jane Austen’ and ‘Charlotte Brontë’ and which Woolf’s earlier pronouncement ‘that no one else has ever known her as I know her’ had promised:

To read George Eliot attentively is to become aware of how little one knows about her. It is also to become aware of the credulity, not very creditable to one’s insight, with which, half-consciously and partly maliciously, one had accepted the late Victorian version of a deluded woman who held phantom sway over subjects even more deluded than herself. (*E* 4.170)

Woolf seems to allude to her own malicious satire in ‘Memoirs of a Novelist’ ten years earlier: Miss Willatt, whose novels critics likened to those of Eliot, is similarly ‘half inspired, conscious of the folly of [her] disciples, sorry for them, very vain of their applause and much muddled in [her] own brains all at once’ (*CSF* 78). Yet despite suggesting that Eliot’s character has been distorted by Victorian interpretations, Woolf draws heavily on Victorian memories to prove that ‘the long, heavy face with its expression of serious and sullen and almost equine power has stamped itself depressingly upon the minds of people who remember George Eliot’ (*E* 4.171). Woolf’s essay therefore demonstrates the oppressiveness of recent memory: with an abundance of anecdotes documenting her existence and character beyond any doubt, Eliot is trapped in a posthumous performance of greatness which obliterates all traces of the more attractive personality found in her novels.

Woolf’s denigration of Eliot sets up her main argument, that her life and afterlife can only be understood by reading her as a woman:

In fiction, where so much of personality is revealed, the absence of charm is a great lack; and her critics, who have been, of course, mostly of the opposite sex, have resented, half consciously perhaps, her deficiency in a quality which is held to be supremely desirable in women. George Eliot was not charming; she was not strongly feminine; she had none of those eccentricities and inequalities of temper which give to so many artists the endearing simplicity of children. (*E* 4.172)

Woolf's discussion resorts to familiar dichotomies in contrasting Eliot, the Victorian sage and a threatening figure, with the ideal Victorian woman, childlike, charming and feminine, and fails to address Victorian anxieties about female intellectuals.

Instead, Woolf's own ambivalence about female professionalism dominates her account of Eliot's life: emphasizing the many ways in which Eliot failed to adhere to Victorian expectations for women, from her wide-ranging intellectual interests, to her relationship with Lewes and ultimately her fame, Woolf focuses mainly in Eliot's alienation from society and appears more frustrated with Eliot's persistent awkwardness than with society's expectations. As already implied in her dismissive reference to 'all that nonsense' in her letter, Woolf shows little sympathy for Eliot's quest for knowledge and plays into stereotypes about women's unsuitability for intellectual labour. Woolf makes Eliot's interest in theology and philosophy appear joyless and unnatural, and her image of Eliot 'raising herself with groans and struggles from the intolerable boredom of petty provincial society' subtly undermines this achievement (*E* 4.172). Woolf's hostility is even more surprising given that Leslie Stephen's *George Eliot* (1902), written almost twenty years earlier, depicts the breadth of Eliot's religious and philosophical learning much more sympathetically and also situates Eliot in a wider circle of acquaintances in Coventry and London. Where Stephen emphasizes that the possibility of intellectual exchange with like-minded people existed even for a Victorian woman, Woolf only sees the resulting alienation from mainstream society.

Woolf's curiously conservative attitude persists into her depiction of Eliot's relationship with Lewes, which she presents as the turning point of Eliot's life:

[A]t the age of thirty-five, at the height of her powers, and in the fullness of her freedom, she made the decision which was of such

profound moment to her and still matters even to us, and went to Weimar, alone with George Henry Lewes. (*E* 4.173)

Particularly when contrasted with the liberal attitudes prevalent in Bloomsbury, Woolf's covert allusion to the enormity of Eliot's lapse of morality appears outdated. Likewise, Woolf's desire to justify Eliot's behaviour, evident in her argument that 'the great liberation which had come to her with personal happiness' enabled Eliot to write her novels (*E* 4.173), seems excessive: in his 1885 entry for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Leslie Stephen had already depicted their relationship sympathetically by emphasizing that '[n]o legal marriage, however, could have called forth greater mutual devotion.'¹⁵ Over thirty years later, Woolf's focus on Eliot's emotional dependence on Lewes was therefore considerably more double-edged. She subtly undermines Eliot's achievements as a novelist by drawing attention to Eliot's resulting social ostracization and its damage on her writing: 'she lost the power to move on equal terms unnoted amongst her kind; and the loss for a novelist was serious' (*E* 4.174).

Although this interest in how women's social positions impacted their writing is in keeping with Woolf's interests of the 1920s, her discussion of Eliot's career differs substantially from that of other women, largely due to Eliot's lack of domestic persona. Thus, in the previously discussed 'Women Novelists' (1918), Woolf briefly draws on Eliot as an example to argue that pseudonyms allowed women 'to free their own consciousness as they wrote from the tyranny of what was expected from their sex' (*E* 2.315), but her main interest lies in exploring the numerous domestic obstacles women writers encountered. As the previous chapters have shown, Jane Austen hiding her manuscripts from the household and Charlotte Brontë peeling the potatoes become symbols of women's inability to work uninterrupted in the middle-class household. In contrast, both in 'Women Novelists' and 'George Eliot', Woolf avoids a closer analysis of Eliot's writing environment: her writing habits and household management (including the fact that although Eliot was childless, Lewes' sons were living with the couple) are not questioned by Woolf and suggest the lasting success of Eliot's desire to separate George Eliot from Mary Ann Evans.

Eliot's ability to escape the Victorian drawing room makes her a singularity in Woolf's canon of women writers, but also a more formidable rival. Her successful

¹⁵ Leslie Stephen, 'Cross, Mary Ann', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1885.

career as a journalist and novelist, as well as her cosmopolitan life within a wide literary network resemble Woolf's own life and career more closely than the domestic lives of Austen and Brontë: as Alison Booth slightly hyperbolically remarks, Woolf 'has succeeded to the title that only George Eliot had won before her, that of the Grand Old Woman of English Letters'.¹⁶ Woolf's essays on Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë frequently lament their lack of literary connections, as well as their early deaths, which prevented them from profiting much from their increasing literary fame. In contrast, Woolf's presentation of Eliot neglects and undermines these aspects of her success: her fame is alienating and her public persona depressing, and Woolf is reluctant to acknowledge Eliot's financial success. Despite her insistence that a larger income could have changed the lives of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, Woolf is unwilling to acknowledge the financial imperative as well as the ambition for a larger audience driving Eliot's career and merely presents fiction as the next step in the narrative of Eliot's self-improvement. In avoiding a topic which Stephen's biography had pragmatically addressed – 'there were sound utilitarian reasons for trying an experiment in the direction of the most profitable variety of literature'¹⁷ – Woolf demonstrates her unease with Eliot's professionalism as well as her dislike for the business side of literature, which will become even more apparent in her treatment of Ward and Oliphant in the later part of this chapter. Ultimately, Woolf therefore turns a potentially exemplary professional career into another example of female suffering under patriarchy.

As in her centenary essays on Austen and Brontë, Woolf supplements her biographical sketch with an attempt to recreate Eliot through her fiction. Woolf briefly draws on the popular images of Eliot identified by Dillane – the nostalgic inhabitant of the rural past, and the great disembodied mind – to envision Eliot's writing process:

Still, basking in the light and sunshine of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, feeling the large mature mind spreading itself with a luxurious sense of freedom in the world of her "remote past" [...] Everything to such a mind was gain. All experience filtered down through layer after layer of perception and reflection, enriching and nourishing. (*E* 4.174)

¹⁶ Booth, p. 1.

¹⁷ Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot*, English Men of Letters (London: Macmillan & Co., 1902), p 52.

Envisioning the working of Eliot's mind as an organic process which transforms memory into generalized human experience, Woolf explicitly contrasts Eliot's interest in ordinary life with 'the fiery egotism of Jane Eyre' (*E* 4.174). Unlike Brontë, Eliot manages to transcend the 'damned egotistical self' (*WD* 23) without any trace of her gender or personal grievances like her suffering under her social exclusion – and therefore resembles the Austen reconstructed by Woolf in the 1920s.

However, unlike Austen, Eliot never becomes a model of writing for Woolf. Eliot's well-documented unwillingness to exist within the confines of conventional Victorian womanhood, as well as the greater scope of her later novels complicate Woolf's argument:

In real life she had sought her fortunes elsewhere; and though to look back into the past was calming and consoling, there are, even in the early works, traces of that troubled spirit, that exacting and questioning and baffled presence who was George Eliot herself. (*E* 4.176)

Arguing that Eliot's impersonality fails when it comes to her heroines, Woolf appears to refute her own earlier argument: Eliot's heroines lack the egotism of Jane Eyre, but they serve, just like her, as autobiographical stand-ins and express their author's desire for freedom and independence. While Woolf criticizes the protest coming from Brontë, she condemns Eliot for her excessive didacticism in denying her heroines her own happiness. Although she offers a second, more conciliatory reading that emphasizes Eliot's heroines as representatives of '[t]he ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb', she continues to assert that 'the struggle ends, [...] in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy', suggesting that like her heroines, Eliot wanted more than was compatible with her position as a Victorian woman (*E* 4.178).

Ultimately, Woolf's centenary essay therefore subtly undermines her great predecessor. Woolf's final character sketch fails to resolve Eliot's contradictions:

Thus we behold her, a memorable figure, inordinately praised and shrinking from her fame, despondent, reserved, shuddering back into the arms of love as if there alone were satisfaction and, it might be, justification, at the same time reaching out with 'a fastidious yet hungry ambition' for all that life could offer the free and inquiring

mind and confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men. (*E* 4.178)

Finally achieving the femininity which Woolf had earlier suggesting she lacked, Eliot retreats from the reader into the anonymity of domestic relationship and ultimately the grave. Ending her essay with the ambiguous imperative that 'we must lay upon her grave whatever we have it in our power to bestow of laurel and rose' (*E* 4.178), Woolf appears content to bury Eliot with the past.

‘The calm composure of death’

Woolf’s centenary article on Eliot was quickly followed by a short profile of Eliot for the *Daily Herald*’s ‘Great Names’ series in 1921. Woolf clearly did not intend this article as an in-depth examination of Eliot’s works: she promised to send the article within a week (E 4.294 n1) and her overview of Eliot’s life and works follows a fairly conventional format and includes, like most articles in the series, a recommendation of the most recent edition of Eliot’s complete works.

In contrast to the centenary essay, the *Daily Herald* article foregrounds Eliot’s class background: Woolf introduces Eliot as ‘the granddaughter of a carpenter’ who ‘made herself, by sheer determination one of the most learned women – or men – of her time’ (E 4.293), possibly an appeal to the newspaper’s more radical readership. In her brief overview of Eliot’s career, Woolf’s previous exploration of Eliot’s femininity is replaced by a more conventional overview of her literary career. Woolf divides Eliot’s career into two stages, separating the early novels like *Adam Bede*, based on personal experience of rural life and the most artistically successful, from the flawed but more interesting ‘book-learned’ ones like *Middlemarch*, which expanded the scope of the novel: ‘She was one of the first English novelists to discover that men and women think as well as feel, and the discovery was of great artistic moment’ (E 4.294). Yet despite Eliot’s contribution to the development of the novel, Woolf’s final verdict remains condescending: suggesting that ‘it seems likely that she will come through the cloud which obscured her after the publication of her life – a dismal soliloquy – and hold her place permanently among the great English novelists’ (E 4.294), Woolf undermines Eliot’s position as one of the ‘Great Names’ of English literature as much as the article nominally asserts it, and emphatically buries her in obscurity.

Woolf’s attitude of scepticism towards Eliot continues throughout the 1920s. In 1926, she reviewed R. Brimley Johnson’s selection of *The Letters of George Eliot*, which offered an opportunity to revise her previous position: as earlier chapters of this thesis have shown, the publication of Austen’s letters in the 1930s offered Woolf new and uncensored perspective on aspects of her personality absent from her novels, while Brimley Johnson’s selection of Barrett Browning’s letters in 1906 had given Woolf a first insight into her private life. Here, Woolf begins her review with a

similar reflection on the new, more personal perspective on Eliot to be gained from her letters:

George Eliot lies flattened under the tomb that Mr Cross built over her, to all appearances completely dead. No writer of equal vitality as a writer so entirely lacks vitality as a human being. Yet when the solemnity of the tomb is violated, when her letters are broken into fragments and presented in a volume of modest size, they reflect a character full of variety and full of conflict – qualities that sort ill with the calm composure of death. (*E* 4.386)

Even more than in her centenary article, Woolf here draws a causal relationship between Eliot's unprepossessing reputation and Victorian biography. Suggesting that Cross's biography sanctifies and sanitizes Eliot to the point of obliterating her completely, Woolf's criticism of his overly hagiographic biography is reminiscent of her dismissal of Victorian biography and its '[n]oble, upright, chaste, severe [...] Victorian worthies' in 'The New Biography' a year later (*E* 4.474).

However, although Woolf celebrates the insights into Eliot's personality to be gained from her letters, she remains contradictory and hard to capture. Woolf points to Eliot's views on religion, her move from rural isolation to London literary society, and her changing stance on marriage as evidence that 'nobody changed her skin more completely in the course of sixty-one years' than she did (*E* 4.387). Like Mary Russell Mitford, George Eliot therefore emerges both as the victim of an inept biographer who failed to preserve her personality, and as an inherently contradictory and inaccessible subject. While Woolf partly attributes Eliot's 'unusual violence' to the effort required to break with her early influences, she also returns to her earlier conviction that Eliot was a woman inherently at odds with her environment: 'But there was a strain of impressionability in George Eliot which would have made her uneasy whatever her circumstances. There was something alive and emotional in her which tended to upset the outward solemnity' (*E* 4.387). Woolf's Eliot is emotional and easily depressed, and while her extensive learning expands her sphere beyond that of most Victorian women, Woolf's assertion that her temperament 'impeded her in many ways as a writer' shows that she was unwilling to repeat her treatment of Austen and reinvent Eliot as a model for her own writing. Eliot therefore remains in the grave which the centenary review had assigned her.

Woolf's concluding paragraph offers a cause for this reluctance. Although Woolf had previously seen Eliot only at odds with Victorian morality and femininity, she now finds her an important representative of the Victorian period: 'The whole of the nineteenth century seems to be mirrored in the depth of that sensitive and profound mind which lies buried, so far as the life of the body is concerned, under Mr Cross's tomb' (E 4.388). Eliot's relentless pursuit of knowledge, her embodiment of the desire for self-improvement and her representative status as a great Victorian sage make her the perfect representative of the Victorian spirit. Likewise, the abundance of anecdotes and memories that firmly embed her in Victorian society leave Woolf little room for reinventing her. Woolf had revised Austen based on the freedom her eighteenth-century childhood had offered, and emphasized Charlotte Brontë's absolute disconnection from literary society in London, but Eliot is incontestably a Victorian and cannot be imagined any differently. Woolf's unwillingness to assert Eliot's continued relevance to a modern society is therefore another way of asserting a break with the Victorian past. While Eliot is too famous a writer to be entirely absent from Woolf's library, her independent existence as a professional writer without an authenticated home, as well as her omnipresence on the Victorian literary scene disqualify her from the extensive rewriting and reinvention earlier writers benefited from. This difference also dominates Woolf's engagement with her in *A Room of One's Own*, which I will discuss next: while she cannot entirely dismiss her, Eliot's status and achievements threaten Woolf's argument as much as they support it.

A Room of One's Own

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf invokes George Eliot as one of the four great women writers. As is typical of her collective biographies, Woolf here resorts to streamlined and simplified versions of the writers she discusses to shift the focus to her greater narrative of female traditions of writing, and her treatment of Eliot is no different. But even when taking Woolf's different approach into account, Eliot plays a significantly smaller role in the argument than either Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, both determined by their domestic careers. As a professional writer enjoying great personal and financial freedom, Eliot fits uneasily into the argument of *A Room of One's Own* and Woolf's attempts to shape her into an example of suffering femininity are only partly successful. Eliot threatens to undermine Woolf's argument by her very existence: as Jay suggests, she embodies the myth that 'because a woman had been admitted to the pantheon, gender bias had been overcome'.¹⁸

Throughout her discussion of Eliot, Woolf attempts to better align her career with that of Austen and Brontë by emphasizing her suffering from specifically domestic restraints. As in her centenary article, Woolf focuses extensively on Eliot's youth as well as the consequences of her relationship with Lewes rather than on her independence: from her imprisonment at home, Eliot 'escaped after much tribulation, but only to a secluded villa in St John's Wood. And there she settled down in the shadow of the world's disapproval' (*AROO* 64). Woolf's emphasis on Eliot's isolation accurately describes her position in the 1850s and early 1860s, yet she fails to mention that from the mid-1860s onwards, Eliot's fame as novelist triumphed over most Victorians' moral concerns. This is in strong contrast to her centenary article, which had accounted for her later fame by emphasizing Eliot's lack of social interactions on an equal footing to the rest of society: here, Woolf is content to reduce her to a cliché and resort to Victorian rhetoric surrounding fallen women for the sake of her argument.

Additionally, Woolf attempts to fashion Eliot's life into an example for women's limited experience of the world: 'Had Tolstoy lived at the Priory in seclusion with a married lady "cut off from what is called the world", however edifying the moral lesson, he could scarcely, I thought, have written *War and Peace*'

¹⁸ Jay, 'Mrs. Oliphant', p. 87.

(*AROO* 64). This passage implicitly echoes some of Woolf's earlier criticism concerning the moral didacticism introduced through Eliot's heroines, yet her wider point about the limited scope of women's novels seems ill-suited to Eliot in particular and suggests a flaw in Woolf's argument. In her previous reviews, Woolf had repeatedly emphasized Eliot's achievements in widening the scope of the English novel with *Middlemarch*; and even in *A Room of One's Own*, she had previously asserted that 'the overflow of George Eliot's capacious mind should have spread itself when the creative impulse was spent upon history and biography' (*AROO* 61). Again, Woolf's presentation of Eliot is slightly disingenuous: a lack of (formal) education, access to literary networks and fame might have prevented Austen and the Brontës from writing history had they been so inclined, but as a leading intellectual, nothing was stopping Eliot from moving into new genres and her popularity would have facilitated a positive reception of new works. Additionally, Woolf ignores the fact that by the 1860s, women such as Eliot's contemporary Margaret Oliphant were writing history and biography: pragmatically, sales figures and personal preference presented a much greater incentive for Eliot to continue writing novels. Woolf's reluctance to fully embrace Eliot's status as a professional writer therefore reveals one of the biggest flaws in the argument of *A Room of One's Own*. Her inherent preference for the gentlemanly amateur writer living on inherited income is central to her argument that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (*AROO* 1), but completely at odds with her assertion that middle-class women's emergence in the literary marketplace is 'of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses' (*AROO* 59). While Woolf clearly recognizes the importance of this development, her failure to celebrate Eliot's ability to achieve financial independence and social eminence through literature show her unwillingness to confront the more recent developments of the late-Victorian period in crafting her argument.

Eliot's unquestionable canonical status clearly mandated her inclusion in Woolf's discussion of great women writers, yet she does not fit the mould of the conventional woman writer of *A Room of One's Own*. Lacking the strong association with a domestic environment that Woolf bases much her argument on, and rising to fame as a public intellectual, she is representative of a new type of professional writer. Woolf is hesitant to acknowledge this development, and also fails to acknowledge that Eliot differed strongly from her other great writers by earning a

significant amount of money through writing. However, this unwillingness to consider the financial side of literature only extends to elite writers: Woolf fails to include any popular writers in *A Room of One's Own* and thereby excludes a large section of women writers from her literary history. This bias is also evident in her engagement with Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant, who become representatives of a failed compromise between art and money, and act as a cautionary example to Woolf's future women writers.

‘The Compromise’: Mary Augusta Ward

Mrs Ward is dead; poor Mrs Humphry Ward; & it appears that she was merely a woman of straw after all – shovelled into the grave & already forgotten. The most perfunctory earth strewing even by the orthodox. (*D* 2.29)

Mary Augusta (Mrs Humphry) Ward is a novelist rarely mentioned alongside Virginia Woolf. Ward’s career overlapped with Woolf’s own for fifteen years, yet she was neither a real contemporary nor a predecessor: as a famous novelist beginning to lose her grip on her mass audience around the turn of the century, leader of the female anti-suffrage league and writer of war propaganda, she was Woolf’s antithesis in every conceivable way. Despite or possibly because of this, Ward is a surprisingly constant presence in Woolf’s diary, letters and even her early essays: a popular author moving in the same social circles as the Stephens, Ward is doubly representative of late-Victorian society and artistically compromised professionalism and calls forth Woolf’s vehement rejection of both.

Mary Augusta Ward’s family background resembled Woolf’s own more closely than any of the other writers discussed here. Like Woolf, Ward was firmly connected to great Victorian families: she was the granddaughter of Dr Thomas Arnold, legendary headmaster of Rugby, and niece of Matthew Arnold. However, Ward received more formal schooling than Woolf did: due to her father’s erratic career, she spent her childhood at various boarding schools before joining the rest of her family in Oxford, where Thomas Arnold pursued the university career which Leslie Stephen had renounced. Oxford proved strongly influential on Ward’s life and education: she met and married Humphry Ward there and gained privileged access to the Bodleian library to research early Spanish history.¹⁹ Additionally, Ward played an important role in setting up the Lectures for Women Committee, which ultimately led to the establishment of Somerville Hall, thus improving women’s access to education more generally. In the 1880s, the couple moved to London to pursue careers in literature and journalism, and in 1888, Ward’s ‘drama of religious faith

¹⁹ John Sutherland, ‘A Girl in the Bodleian: Mary Ward’s Room of Her Own’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 16 (1988), 169–80.

and doubt', *Robert Elsmere*, was published to great critical acclaim.²⁰ Ward continued to publish successful novels for the next decade and remained involved in social politics, sponsoring and organizing philanthropic working class settlements in London, which included pioneering classes for children with disabilities and after-school playgroups for the children of working mothers.

However, her career began to suffer after the turn of the century: her increasingly bad health and the great financial drain of her country estate as well as the financial irresponsibility of her husband and son began to impact the quality and quantity of her work, while her decision to head the Women's Anti-Suffrage Association in 1908 led to a loss of popularity and alienation from family, friends, and social reformers.²¹ During the First World War, Ward became a writer of war propaganda at the invitation of Theodore Roosevelt, and was made a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919, but she never recovered her previous popularity and spent the last year of her life virtually bankrupt and severely ill. Unlike other popular writers from the same period, she is still awaiting critical recovery, at least partially due to her reputation as conservative anti-suffragist and war promoter, which tends to overshadow her earlier contributions to social reform.

Although many of Woolf's references to Ward's fiction mock her preference for aristocratic characters and settings, the Wards clearly moved in similar circles as the Stephens. Their acquaintance likely began in the 1880s: the anonymously published *Echoes of the Eighties: Leaves from the Diary of a Victorian Lady*, attributed to Ward by John Cooper, contains several mentions of Leslie Stephen and his wife ('who looked very beautiful in what appeared to be an Indian table cover, which however she wore as a shawl').²² Janet Trevelyan's biography of her mother likewise recalls 'figures like Leslie Stephen, who wrote to her often, especially after his wife's death and came at intervals to Grosvenor Place for a long *tête-à-tête*, sitting on the sofa besides Mrs. Ward, his ear-trumpet between them'²³ and Ward

²⁰ John Sutherland, 'Ward [Née Arnold], Mary Augusta [Known as Mrs Humphry Ward]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36736?docPos=1>> [accessed 19 May 2017].

²¹ Sutherland, 'Ward'.

²² John Cooper, 'Oscar Wilde's Cello Coat', *Oscar Wilde In America Blog*, 2018 <<https://oscarwildeinamerica.blog/2018/01/04/oscar-wildes-cello-coat/>> [accessed 28 February 2018]. Wilfred Partington, ed., *Echoes of the 'Eighties: Leaves from the Diary of a Victorian Lady* (London: Eveleigh Nash Company, 1921), p. 160.

²³ Janet Penrose Trevelyan, *The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1923), p. 189.

forms part of the social scene depicted in Woolf's early diary (*PA* 18, 47, 102). Their social circles continued to overlap for a while after Leslie Stephen's death: in 1904, Woolf and her siblings 'travelled [to Venice] with the Humphrey [*sic*] Wards who, happily, have disappeared' (*L* 1.137) and, because Leslie Stephen had been a Vice President of Ward's Bloomsbury settlement, Ward unsuccessfully tried to interest his daughters in her philanthropic social work in 1905 (*PA* 220).²⁴

However, Ward evidently represented the oppressive Victorian world which they were hoping to leave behind. Thus, in 1911 Woolf reported to Vanessa after attending a 'vast melancholy party' that

I was glad to find that they are as vapid and commonplace as we used to find them, so that we [were] right to hate them. The old passion to fly before them overcame me. Imagine [...] Mrs Humphrey [*sic*] Ward shrilling.' (*L* 1.468)

Similarly, Ward functions as a symbol for literary corruption from the turn of the century onwards, and mocking her is a frequent entertainment for Woolf. Thus, she writes to Violet Dickinson that 'I wish Providence were a better judge of literature and then we should be spared Humphrey [*sic*] Wards, or she might publish them in Paradise' (*L* 1.71). Slightly more restrained in public, Woolf draws on Ward to mock Constance Hill's choice of nostalgia-invoking golden chariots for the cover of *Maria Edgeworth and Her Circle* (1909): 'we should think it strange if the future biographer of "Mrs Humphry Ward and her circle" illustrated his meaning by a hansom cab' (*E* 1.315), while commenting in her diary that the birth announcement 'His Perfect Gift' would make 'a good title for an Academy picture, or a Mrs Ward novel' (*D* 1.57).

It is unclear if Woolf ever reviewed Ward's fiction: she wrote two retrospectives of Ward's artistic choices and career, one a private diary entry on Ward's memoirs (1919), the other a review of her biography entitled 'The Compromise' (1923). A *Guardian* review of Ward's novel *Fenwick's Career* (1906) is listed as a 'doubtful attribution' in the first volume of Woolf's *Essays*, but there are sufficient reasons for accepting it as Woolf's work. From her letters, it is clear

²⁴ S.P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), II, p. 152.

that Woolf wrote a review of the novel in April 1906 which she may have submitted to the *Guardian*:

I sent my H[umphry] Ward to the *Speaker*, but I see they have a review already, longer and even more vindictive than mine. They call her a snob, and a sentimentalist, with no knowledge of art, or humanity. So the honor of English literature is saved, and I can meet Mrs Ward unblushing. (*L* 1.219)

Fenwick's Career, based on the painter George Romney's desertion of his wife for his muse and art, marks a 'distinct decline in the quality of [Ward's] writing' according to her biographer John Sutherland,²⁵ and neither the *Guardian* review nor Woolf's unknown *Speaker* review are particularly positive. Additionally, the politely ambivalent tone of the review fits the style of Woolf's early reviews, and its strong focus on Ward's streamlined writing process, implicitly contrasted with the novel's topic of artistic inspiration and passion, seem like a plausible choice of topic for Woolf given her noted dislike of Ward's writing. Ward is presented as a skilled craftsman assembling a bestseller, and her characters, morally sanitized to make them more palatable, are 'cogs to make the story move or padding to round it off', and Woolf's praise of the skilful plot construction sounds decidedly hollow.

It goes without saying that these disjointed bones we have roughly sketched are put each in its proper place, that the skeleton is completed and clothed with consummate literary skill. Here, as elsewhere, there is no slipshod work, no fine writing; the pen is a servant, never for one instant allowed either to shirk or to domineer, and, further, it is the servant of a remarkably fine, acute, and observant mind. (*E* 1.375)

In a review of a novel concerned with 'art and the artistic temperament' (*E* 1.374), Ward's firm control over her pen suggests a single-minded dedication to the demands of the market as well as a lack of artistic imagination and inspiration. Likewise, the skeletal imagery of the quote hints that despite Ward's skills, the novel resembles Frankenstein's Monster in the way it is constructed from disparate ideas torturously brought to life. While the review lacks the outright condemnation of

²⁵ Sutherland, 'Ward'.

Woolf's reading notes – 'a flimsy book held together by the spun web of words' (*E* 1.376 n1) – its focus on Ward's mechanical production and complete submission to audience expectations and money also recur in Woolf's private reflections on Ward's life.

Woolf's discovery of her own style of Modernist writing led to an increase of her hostility towards Ward, 'that old mangy hack' (*L* 2.68). Thus, writing to Vanessa Bell in March 1919, Woolf's triumph at her own literary ascendance appears inextricably connected to Ward's downfall: 'It is rather fun about the Athenaeum, as every one is to write what they like, and Mrs Ward is to be exposed, and in time they hope to print imaginative prose by me' (*L* 2.341). Following closely on the clash between Strachey and Ward, 'who was raging publicly against the defamation of her grandfather' (*L* 2.281) in *Eminent Victorians*, Woolf was not alone in her violent dislike: as Sutherland suggests, 'by 1918, vilification of Mrs Humphry Ward had reached the level of a minor art form'.²⁶ Woolf's mockery appears particularly hostile because it is mixed with brief acknowledgements of Ward's potential: 'her charm & wit & character all marked as a woman, full of knowledge & humour – & then her novels' (*D* 1.62). '[D]riving her pen day & night' (*D* 1.62) to prevent her family's bankruptcy, Ward almost becomes a tragic figure. The *Representation of the People Act* (1818) caused Woolf to speculate further:

Then the great lady at Stocks [Ward's country estate] must be feeling uncomfortable, though I am malicious enough to suppose that if by some process of selection she alone could represent Belgravia in the House of Lords, the change would not seem so devastating. Imagine her neatly accoutred in black trousers (so my imagination sees her) upon the bench at the Hague Conference! (*D* 1.207)

Woolf offers little understanding, but an acute analysis of Ward as an intelligent and ambitious woman, whose baffling choices are the outcomes of the limited options society offered to women seeking a wider sphere.

In a diary entry on Ward's *A Writer's Recollections* (1918), Woolf similarly focuses on Ward's desire for public recognition and a wider audience. She links the memoir's invocation of celebrity friends and their praise of Ward's novels to her

²⁶ John Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-Eminent Edwardian* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. 201.

own childhood memories of the advertising spectacle occasioned by *Marcella*, published at the height of Ward's popularity as a writer in 1894. This distaste for this public display combines the gendered unease which Woolf exhibited towards Eliot's fame in the contemporary 'George Eliot' review with a rejection of Ward's brand of popular writing:

The enormous sales, the American editions, the rumble & reverberation – Piccadilly placarded with posters 'Marcella out!' – seem like the drum & cymbals of a country fair. No, nothing of this counts. [...] At what point did she cease thinking? Long ago, I should say; & then came to believe implicitly in all the mummery: names of the great serve as an umbrella covering vacancy. (*D* 1.299)

Ward's apparently mindless existence resonates strongly with Woolf's own almost compulsive reading of the memoir: 'anyhow I could not resist Mrs Ward, & I stand in her unconscionably long hours, as if she were a bath of tepid water that one lacks the courage to leave' (*D* 1.299). In setting herself and implicitly her own *élite* aesthetic against this unwilling and unthinking consumption, Woolf resorts to familiar binaries. Thus, Andreas Huyssen argues that '[t]he lure of mass culture, after all, has been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing'.²⁷ Woolf's diary entry therefore charts a moment of literary resolve: setting her own literary vision against Ward's public celebrity, Woolf concludes, 'What would it profit me to gain the approval of the whole world and lose that single voice?' (*D* 1.299).

Considered a model of femininity for her daughters by Julia Stephen,²⁸ Ward's symbolic value is also strongly tied to Victorian society. Thus, Woolf appears to recall her own Victorian 'tea-table training' (*MoB* 152), her education in self-sacrificing femininity when objecting to Ward: 'But all tea table talk to admonish the young, who are, I suppose, now becoming inquisitive & objectionable' (*D* 1.299). *Moments of Being* suggests how deeply Ward was woven into her recollection of life at Hyde Park Gate:

²⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), p. 55.

²⁸ Jane Garnett, 'Stephen [Née Jackson], Julia Prinsep (1846–1895), Celebrated Beauty and Philanthropist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-46943>> [accessed 14 March 2018].

Victorian society began to exert its pressure at about half past four. In the first place, we must be in; one certainly, preferably both. For at five father must be given his tea. And we must be tidied and in our places, [Vanessa] at the tea table, I on the sofa, for Mrs Green was coming; or Mrs Humphrey [*sic*] Ward; if no one came, it was still necessary to be there; for father could not give himself his tea in the society of those days. (*MoB* 151)

Representative of ‘the game of Victorian society’ (*MoB* 152) which required Woolf to perform a traditional model of femininity, Ward’s antiquated morality, political conservatism and lack of serious artistic commitment make her into a representative of everything Victorian Woolf longed to reject: as John Sutherland suggests, ‘[s]corn for what Mrs Humphry Ward represented was formative in Virginia Woolf’s evolution’.²⁹

Woolf’s triumph over Ward finds its clearest expression at the time of her death in 1920. Eager to write her out of history, Woolf notes that ‘Mrs Ward is dead; poor Mrs Humphry Ward; & it appears that she was merely a woman of straw after all – shovelled into the grave & already forgotten. The most perfunctory earth strewing even by the orthodox’ (*D* 2.29). Woolf’s desire to excise all traces of Ward’s existence even extends to a deliberate rewriting of history. As Anne Olivier Bell notes, Ward

had a tremendous send-off, with condolences from Royalty and the eminent, a *Times* leader, a two-column obituary, and a country funeral at Aldbury. Her coffin was preceded by a detachment of the Hertfordshire Constabulary, and the Dean of St. Paul’s, Dean Inge, ventured his opinion that she was ‘perhaps the greatest Englishwoman of our time’. (*D* 2.29 n1)

Like the ‘drum & cymbals of a country fair’ that advertised her novels, Ward’s funeral is a public spectacle, and belies Woolf’s attempt to banish her into obscurity. However, like Eliot who remains buried in her Victorian tomb, Ward posthumously depends on Woolf’s goodwill: her review of her biography offers Woolf the opportunity to assert her triumph over her antagonist.

²⁹ Sutherland, *Mrs Humphry Ward*, p. 201.

Woolf's review of *The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward* (1923) lacks the acerbity of her private comments, and instead strikes an elegiac note in mourning Ward's wasted potential as a writer. However, her intention to write Ward out of literary history is evident: the review, aptly entitled 'The Compromise', examines Ward's career with the intention to 'hand on the dilemma to our readers' (*E* 3.381). Yet Woolf opens with a wholesale dismissal of Ward's fiction:

Her novels, already strangely out of date, hang in the lumber room of letters like the mantles of our aunts, and produce in us the same desire that they do to smash the window and let in the air, to light the fire and pile the rubbish on top. [...] there is a quality, perhaps a lack of quality, about the novels of Mrs Ward which makes it improbable that, however much they fade, they will ever become picturesque. (*E* 3.380)

Woolf's imagery borrows from suffragettes' tactics, a tacit reminder that Ward was on the wrong side of political progress, and assigns Ward's writing to the debris of the Victorian period. The rest of the review, however, presents a surprisingly conciliatory view, in line with Woolf's earlier speculations about Ward's motivations and character. Woolf also credits Janet Trevelyan's biography with bringing Ward to life: it 'so permeates us with the sense of the presence of a human being that by the time we have finished it we are more disposed to ask questions than pass judgement' (*E* 3.381).

Woolf's ambivalence about Ward's public presence shapes her narrative of Ward's life: she sketches the early career of a talented and intelligent woman who seemed predestined to be a Don's wife but became a celebrity instead. Woolf searches for a reason for Ward's social climbing and ambitious living, which together with her social and political work condemned her to write 'at breathless speed novels which filial piety calls autumnal, but the critic unfortunately must call bad' (*E* 3.382). However, she consistently neglects Ward's ambition and subverts her apparent position of public power and influence to emphasize her increasing loss of control. In Woolf's hands, Ward's life acquires an inevitability which leads from children's play centres to the Anti-Suffrage League and war propaganda, providing a cautionary tale against women's public activism. Although Woolf's sketch builds up to the acknowledgment that this public life was a betrayal of Ward's youthful awe of

literature and learning, her proposed ‘honourable’ alternative, a ‘hard life of unremunerative toil’ culminating in a standard of work of Spanish history (*E* 3.381), seems equally unappealing in its reliance on self-abnegation and suppressed ambition: falling back onto the ideal of a domestic literary career in obscurity, Woolf continues to undermine women as public figures.

Woolf’s lack of understanding of Ward’s ambition ultimately results in her inability to explain Ward’s choices, literary and otherwise. Although the review is nominally open-ended, her decision to judge Ward by her substandard fiction makes her own position clear: ‘Mrs Ward was beloved, famous, and prosperous in the highest degree. And if to achieve all this implies some compromise, still – but here we reach the dilemma which we intend to pass on to our readers’ (*E* 3.383). Paradoxically, this focus on Ward’s bad writing, supposed to exclude her from literary history, ensured her continued presence in Woolf’s letters well past her public eminence. As late as 1933, Woolf was joking that ‘they cant [*sic*] say of Hugh and Virginia that they’re Mrs Ward’s miscarriages: we are our own begetters anyhow’ (*L* 5.264). A similarly contradictory attitude governs Woolf’s engagement with Margaret Oliphant: written into the canon only to be dismissed, in *Three Guineas*, she is assigned the position that Ward had held in the 1910s and 1920s.

Enslaving her Intellectual Liberty: Margaret Oliphant

As the epigraph to this chapter suggested, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf claims that there is a gap in her library because '[t]here are no lives of professional women in the nineteenth century' (3G 200). Woolf's engagement with George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward demonstrates that the absence of professional women writers from her library was the result of deliberate exclusion, but Woolf also appears to overlook the fact that in *Three Guineas*, she herself discusses the autobiography of one of the most prominent professional women writers of the nineteenth century, Margaret Oliphant Wilson Oliphant. With a career that spanned the second half of the nineteenth century, Oliphant is undeniably Victorian and a professional writer: she was an important and frequent contributor to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and an extremely prolific writer of novels, short stories and biographies for the popular market. Oliphant's writing supported her own family as well as various other family members, and the conflict between her ambitions as a writer and her responsibilities as a mother is a key theme in her posthumously published autobiography. However, genre and gender combined to lead to her quick loss of popularity after her death: thus, Elisabeth Jay argues that 'swiftly changing literary preoccupations of the end of the century made Margaret Oliphant a convenient symbol for the outdated female romancers of domestic fiction who had too often been prepared to sacrifice artistic integrity to financial need.'³⁰ Had Woolf written about Oliphant in her early career, or omitted her altogether, Oliphant's disappearance from the literary canon would offer a convenient explanation. Instead, however, Woolf ends forty years of silence by invoking Oliphant to demonstrate the dilemma of the professional woman of letters in *Three Guineas*: accusing Oliphant of intellectual prostitution for the sake of feeding her children, Woolf's sudden and detailed memory of a popular writer of the previous century proves once again that the gap in her library of professional writers is of her own making.

While Woolf's discussion of Ward's compromise as a professional writer had focussed on her ambitious social climbing, she uses Oliphant to demonstrate a more fundamental conflict: that between the demands of the popular market and a writer's artistic vision. In keeping with the focus of her analysis of patriarchal society and

³⁰ Elisabeth Jay, 'Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant Wilson', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20712?docPos=1>> [accessed 18 May 2017].

fascism in *Three Guineas*, Woolf heightens this conflict by emphasizing Oliphant's additional obligations as a mother, and asserting that not only artistic freedom, but intellectual liberty is at stake:

[Mrs Oliphant] was an educated man's daughter who earned her living by reading and writing. She wrote books of all kinds. Novels, biographies, histories, handbooks of Florence and Rome, reviews, newspaper articles innumerable came from her pen. With the proceeds she earned her living and educated her children. But how far did she protect culture and intellectual liberty? That you can judge for yourself [...] When you have done, examine the state of your own mind, and ask yourself whether that reading has led you to respect disinterested culture and intellectual liberty. Has it not on the contrary smeared your mind and dejected your imagination, and let you to deplore the fact that Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children? (*3G* 216)

Woolf's discussion of Oliphant resembles her earlier private attacks on Ward in its use of highly aggressive language. Like Ward's fiction, Oliphant's writing corrupts the readers' mind and morality and even weakens English culture itself. Woolf therefore fashions Oliphant into a scapegoat for the rise of fascism and the continued existence of patriarchal society, a charge which would have suited Ward, leader of the Anti-Suffrage League and writer of war propaganda, much better than Oliphant, whose main crime consists writing domestic novels for the Victorian popular market with the intention of providing role models to her female readers.³¹ As with her violent rejection of Ward, Woolf therefore uses Oliphant to position herself as the right kind of writer: although she concedes that 'considering the damage that poverty inflicts upon mind and body [...] we have to applaud her choice and admire her courage' (*3G* 217), she clearly distances herself from Oliphant's compromise and denies her relevance to literary history.

³¹ Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself'. A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 55, pp. 114–16.

By publicly rejecting Oliphant, Woolf once again distances herself from a potential Victorian predecessor: Oliphant's career as a professional journalist *and* novelist resembles Woolf's own more than that of the earlier domestic amateur writers, who lacked access to such public platforms, or even that of George Eliot, who saw journalism as an apprenticeship for her more prestigious fiction. Thus, Joanne Shattock argues that

[Oliphant's] reviewing was phenomenal in its bulk and considerable in its impact. In her writing life of over forty years there were few of her contemporaries, male or female, not to mention writers of the past whose work did not come under her scrutiny. In this she was the precursor of [...] early modernist women writers for whom journalism was a persistent strand throughout their writing lives.³²

Shattock also notes that it was Oliphant's prolific journalism and her public omnipresence, not her novels, which drew forth criticism like Henry James' complaint that 'no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal "say" so publicly and irresponsibly'. Woolf's claim that Oliphant 'prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty' by writing for money similarly undermines the power and institutional weight that attached to her as the official critical voice of *Blackwood's* and ignores the substantial similarities between their positions as female journalists writing in a male-dominated environment. Without a formal education, both women were competing with university-educated men and, most importantly, had to learn how to write under an editor's radar in a predominantly male literary establishment. Decades of writing for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* had honed Oliphant's skills in assuming, but also subtly undermining, a male point of view in her reviews and essays. Woolf likewise learned to cultivate a 'surface manner' while writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*: a suave, polite, 'side-long' approach which allowed her to 'slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud' (*MoB* 152).

Oliphant's position as a popular Victorian novelist with a pragmatic view of her writing as work explains why Woolf did not claim her as an important predecessor, but Woolf also actively manipulates Oliphant's career in her discussion

³² Joanne Shattock, 'Work for Women: Margaret Oliphant's Journalism', in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Bill Bell, and David Finkelstein (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 165–77 (p. 167).

to create a further sense of distance between them. Intriguingly, Woolf's discussion of Oliphant is one of the few places in which the American and British editions of *Three Guineas* differ. Emily Blair, who currently provides the only critical analysis of Oliphant and Woolf, focuses on the American version only: her reading hinges on the fact that three dots come to represent the futility of Oliphant's career and her work's oblivion from public consciousness: 'judge for yourself by reading first a few of her novels... conclude by sousing yourself in the innumerable faded articles, reviews, sketches of one kind or another which she contributed to literary papers'.³³ However, the British version of the essay gives a list of works instead: crucially, this allows a more detailed analysis demonstrating how Woolf's highly eclectic selection of works both undermines Oliphant's reputation and highlights the themes she appears to consider representative of Oliphant's life:

That you can judge for yourself by reading first a few of her novels: *The Duke's Daughter*, *Diana Trewlany*, *Harry Joscelyn*, say; continue with the lives of Sheridan and Cervantes; go on to the *Makers of Florence and Rome*; conclude by sousing yourself in the innumerable faded articles, reviews, sketches of one kind or another which she contributed to literary papers. (3G 216–17)

Woolf's selection is striking: it excludes the first thirty years of a career which spanned almost the entire Victorian period (1849–1897) and deliberately undermines Oliphant's literary achievements by excluding all of her best novels. Instead, Woolf mentions only works from the 1880s and 1890s, when Oliphant's mid-Victorian convictions were becoming obviously antiquated and she was suffering intensely from the death of her sons in 1890 and 1894.

Although Oliphant was never amongst the most popular Victorian novelists, she achieved a certain level of critical acclaim and her works of the 1860s were likened to those of famous contemporaries like Anthony Trollope or George Eliot. Woolf's assessment of her work is therefore somewhat biased: she makes Oliphant appear as conservatively Victorian as possible, and presents a more negative assessment of her works than other critics. Arguably, the variety and copiousness, as well as the differing quality of Oliphant's writings make it difficult to declare any one work characteristic of her style, but virtually all Victorian and modern

³³ Blair, p. 127.

assessments of Oliphant's career single out the *Carlington Chronicles* (mainly 1860s) and her supernatural *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* (from 1880 onwards) as her best work. Thus, Richard Garnett's 1901 *Dictionary of National Biography* entry lists those works as well as multiple later novels like *Hester* and *The Ladies Lindores* (both 1883) as among her best. Likewise, Emily Blair points out another source of positive Oliphant criticism available to Woolf: Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* (1918), which she had reviewed in 'Women Novelists' with a focus on domestic obstacles to women's authorship, also includes an entry on Oliphant in which he singles out *The Chronicles of Carlington* for 'approach[ing] genius' and praises her as the first female 'all-round practical journalist, [...] handling history and biography like a person of culture'.³⁴ While a preference for Oliphant's later work might have been explained by the greater likeliness of Woolf having encountered it, her complete exclusion of Oliphant's best works must be deliberate. This is supported by Woolf's selective use of Garnett's biography. Although she quotes him in a footnote to prove that Oliphant 'lived in perpetual embarrassment' (3G 307 n. 7), she omits his more measured evaluation of the impact of this financial pressure:

Her great gifts – invention, humour, pathos, the power of bringing persons and scenes vividly before the eye – could hardly have been augmented by any amount of study, and no study could have given her the incommunicable something that stamps the great author.³⁵

Instead, Woolf persistently emphasizes that financial pressure and market-orientation shaped Oliphant's non-fiction. Oliphant's lives of Cervantes (*Blackwood's* 'Foreign Classics for English Readers') and Sheridan (Macmillan's *English Men of Letters*) form part of the masses of educational literature with popular appeal published during the period. The series was commissioned for popular appeal and readability rather than rigorous scholarship or innovative literary criticism (a reviewer noted that Oliphant's 'work bears occasional signs of hurry'³⁶),

³⁴ Blair 112. Reginald Brimley Johnson, *The Women Novelists* (London, W. Collins, 1918) <<http://archive.org/details/womennovelists00johnrich>>, p. 191.

³⁵ Richard Garnett, 'Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant', *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1901 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/20712>> [accessed 18 May 2017].

³⁶ 'Mrs. Oliphant's Cervantes', *The Spectator Archive*, 1880 <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/20th-november-1880/20/mrs-oliphants-cervantes>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

but even well-educated men like Leslie Stephen contributed multiple volumes to Macmillan's series. Likewise, *Makers of Florence: Dante, Giotto, Savonarola and their City* (1876) and *The Makers of Modern Rome* (1895) are beautifully bound and illustrated coffee-table volumes: evidence of Oliphant's awareness of the growing market for education travel literature. However, Jay also notes Oliphant's skill to 'transform [the demands of the market] into a vehicle for her own talents'.³⁷ Thus, Oliphant offers a unique female perspective on early Christian women's position in Roman society and notes

the struggle with the authorities of her family for the training of a son, for the marriage of a daughter, from which a woman might shrink with a sense of impotence, knowing that prestige of the noble guardian against whom she would have to contend, and all the forces of family pride, of tradition and use and wont, that would be arrayed against her.³⁸

Explaining female saints' withdrawal into exile as the result of this marginalized social position, Oliphant's analysis resonates strongly with Woolf's own Outsiders Society in *Three Guineas* and demonstrates that Woolf ignores the potential for subversiveness to exist quietly, even in mass-market volumes.

Woolf's random selection from Oliphant's oeuvre of over one hundred novels, unrecognizable to the majority of her contemporary readers, underscores her claims about Oliphant's lack of literary legacy. Additionally, Woolf emphasizes Oliphant's adherence to by then out-dated ideas of ideal femininity. *The Duke's Daughter* (1890), *Diana Trewlany* (written 1877, published 1892) and *Harry Joscelyn* (1881) all participate in late-Victorian marriage debates and discuss questions like a daughter's right to disobey her father by choosing her own husband, whether a single woman's life can offer true fulfilment, and if abusive husbands can ever be reformed. While Oliphant's novels ultimately do assert women's right to determine their own destiny, her reluctance to promote women's rights without significant qualifications weakens her novels' stance: her heroines meekly and angelically suffer and frequently act as agents of moral reform, suggesting that true feminine virtue will subdue even the worst oppression. Nevertheless, Oliphant's

³⁷ Jay, *A Fiction to Herself*, p. 255.

³⁸ Margaret Oliphant, *The Makers of Modern Rome* (London : Macmillan, 1895), p. 8.

close reading of the dynamics of the Victorian home again resonates with Woolf's analysis in *Three Guineas*. In particular, her depictions of despotic and irascible fathers and their compulsive need to control their daughters' lives, as well as men's contempt for the women in their homes, resonate strongly with Woolf's discussion of infantile fixation and her real life examples of such behaviour. The novels therefore occupy a paradoxical position within Woolf's argument: superficially evidence of the futility of Oliphant's literary labour, they also offer further internal evidence for Woolf's claims about the dynamics of Victorian family life to anyone familiar with their plots. While there is no evidence that suggests that Oliphant's writing directly influenced Woolf at any point of her career, this is nevertheless a reminder that her analysis in *Three Guineas* draws on a long tradition of women analysing the dynamics of the Victorian household: Woolf's dismissal of Oliphant is therefore a denial of this tradition.

As with the majority of case studies in *Three Guineas*, Woolf bases her reading of Oliphant's career on a work of biography: 'an illuminating and indeed moving piece of work, the autobiography of Mrs Oliphant, which is full of facts' (3G 216). Woolf's emphasis on the apparently indisputable factual veracity of her reading obscures the extent of her own bias, but also misrepresents the character of the *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Oliphant* (1899). The *Autobiography* is neither a straightforward text nor a reliable interpretation of Oliphant's life and, like John Cross's biography of George Eliot, hinders Woolf's understanding as much as it helps. Like Woolf's own *A Sketch of the Past*, Oliphant's autobiography is incomplete, experimental and fragmented. Originally intended as a semi-private family memoir, the death of most of Oliphant's family members led to the decision to publish the manuscript posthumously under the editorship of Oliphant's cousin, Annie Coghill.³⁹ While Oliphant's manuscript interrogates her conflicting feelings about being a professional writer and a mother without arriving at a conclusion about her motivations, Coghill resorts to a simpler narrative that aligns Oliphant with an ideal of self-sacrificing Victorian motherhood. As Jay notes, 'the reshaping of her

³⁹ Frank Oliphant died of tuberculosis in Italy in 1859 – unexpectedly to his wife, who, despite being the family's main breadwinner, was not informed of his terminal diagnosis; leaving her alone, in debt and with three little children. Three of Oliphant's six children, born between 1853 and 1859, died as infants, her only surviving daughter Maggie died in Rome in 1864. Her sons, Cyril and Cecco (Francis), died in 1890 and 1894 respectively, without ever having achieved financial independence.

autobiography by her literary executors contrived to transform this passionate, witty, wryly self-aware, and immensely energetic author into a model of quietly suffering Victorian femininity'.⁴⁰ This emphasis on Oliphant's artistic and literal self-sacrifice to her children – 'I have worked a hole into my right forefinger', she recorded at one point⁴¹ – as well as her absolute devotion to her sons, therefore resonate strongly with Woolf's analysis in *Three Guineas*.

However, despite these textual resonances, Woolf's reading of the *Autobiography* as merely a 'moving piece of work' (3G 216) is reductive and superficial. Woolf refused to engage with Oliphant's characteristic ambivalence, her search for alternative interpretations and self-aware questioning of her own motives, by promoting the simplistic narrative of Oliphant's intellectual sacrifices for the sake of her children: Oliphant herself dismisses it as 'altogether self-defence'. Throughout the *Autobiography*, Oliphant suggests the existence of an alternative interpretation of her life:

I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth. [...] I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children. That, however, was not the first motive, so that when I laugh inquiries off and say that it is my trade, I do it only by way of eluding the question, which I have neither time nor wish to enter into.⁴²

Exploiting her exemplary motherhood to justify her career choices and most of all her failure to rise beyond the status of popular writer, Oliphant allows a glimpse at a more ambitious woman who values her writing for its own sake, but also demonstrates how, like Ward, she used Victorian gender ideology to justify extending her domestic existence into the public literary marketplace. Although Oliphant vacillates between different interpretations of her career, the general contours of her discussion are surprisingly similar to Woolf's own. Oliphant, too, distinguishes a female tradition of domestic writing, best represented by Jane Austen, from the less feminine success of George Eliot, who needed to be kept 'in a mental

⁴⁰ Jay, 'Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant Wilson'.

⁴¹ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M. O. W. Oliphant*, ed. by Annie Coghill (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899), p. 427.

⁴² Margaret Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, p. 7, p.5.

greenhouse and taken care of'. Although fascinated by the fame of her rival *Blackwood's* author, Oliphant rejects Eliot's success as unnatural and unfeminine, and aligns herself with a tradition of drawing room writing, which does not rely on the 'artificial aids' of seclusion and freedom from interruptions. Additionally, Oliphant contrasts her own failure to manage her public image with Eliot, who 'took herself with tremendous seriousness': she concludes that 'my carelessness of asserting my claim is very much against me with everybody', thereby implicitly again aligning herself with an earlier, more private tradition of women's writing which focussed on feminine modesty, not public eminence.⁴³

Given that by the 1930s, Oliphant had lost all relevance to the contemporary literary canon and Woolf had to remind her readers of the significance of her life and choices, why does Woolf decide on Oliphant as a prime example of 'intellectual prostitution'? Although Mrs Humphry Ward would have offered a more recent and likely more striking example of collaboration with patriarchal society, Oliphant's strictly Victorian career fits more neatly into the selection of predominantly nineteenth-century lives which substantiate Woolf's argument. Most importantly, in using Oliphant to discuss the professional writer's dilemma, Woolf was once again returning to a family legacy from Leslie Stephen. Oliphant and Stephen had met during a summer holiday in Switzerland in 1875, but by all accounts their relationship was tense: once again, therefore, an abundance of biographical information predetermines Woolf's response to a writer and drives her desire to write Oliphant out of literary history.

Although neither Oliphant nor Stephen offer extensive written reflections on their relationship and the exact extent of Woolf's knowledge is therefore difficult to determine, Oliphant's letters and manuscript autobiography offer plenty of evidence of her ambivalence towards Stephen. Much of it is gendered: in Oliphant's eyes, Stephen embodied the social and professional privileges of Victorian masculinity. Thus, she pointedly notes in a letter to the Macmillan partner George Craik that

[t]he only way such kind thoughts could come to practical benefit
would be to find me something like an editorship where there would

⁴³ Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, p. 5, p.7, p. 24.

be a steady income without perpetual strain, such as his friends have found more than once for Leslie Stephen, but then he is a man.⁴⁴

Similarly, Jay speculates that a sudden increase in remarrying widowers in Oliphant's fiction of the late 1870s is the likely result of her intense discussions of Leslie Stephen with her close friend Anny Thackeray Ritchie: she notes that '[i]n a gossipy letter she wrote of him, to John Blackwood, "He appeared the most heartbroken of bereaved husbands two years ago, as well as the most melancholy of men—he is just now on the eve of a second marriage."'”⁴⁵ Oliphant's ambivalence is also apparent in the unedited manuscript version of the *Autobiography*, where she dissects Stephen's personality and agnosticism at great length to come to the conclusion that 'the man has a great deal of charm. He is a cantankerous person and has not a good word for anybody, yet he has a fascination which is more effective than any amount of goodness'.⁴⁶ The published version of the *Autobiography* only briefly notes Stephen's kindness in taking Oliphant's sons on walking tours and including her works in the *Cornhill Magazine*: an acknowledgement of Stephen's power to grant things that Oliphant could not. Blair notes that this resentment also carries into Oliphant's review of Stephen's *The Playground of Europe* (1871). Dismissed by Oliphant as 'a slight passage of arms by letters about some literary works', Blair notes the 'almost metonymic function' Stephen takes on in Oliphant's review: 'he represents the wide sphere of male activities that she cannot enjoy merely because she is a woman.'⁴⁷

Stephen's view of Oliphant appears to have been similarly gendered. While he briefly records her death in the *Mausoleum Book*, his recollection emphasizes Oliphant's extreme disappointments as a mother over her career as a writer: 'Now both boys are dead and before their death had given her much trouble'.⁴⁸ Most influential for Woolf, however, is Stephen's use of Oliphant in his essay on 'Southey's Letters' (originally published in *The National Review* in 1899,

⁴⁴ Jay, *A Fiction to Herself*, p. 249.

⁴⁵ Jay, *A Fiction to Herself*, p. 125.

⁴⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2002), p. 199.

⁴⁷ Oliphant, *Autobiography*, p. 198. Blair, p. 118.

⁴⁸ Leslie Stephen, *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book*, ed. by Alan Bell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 103.

republished in *Studies of a Biographer* in 1902). Stephen begins his essay with a discussion of the man of letters' dilemma, illustrated by Oliphant:

The problem which presents itself to the professional man of letters might be illustrated by that most pathetic autobiography of Mrs. Oliphant which has, I think, been rather harshly judged. Mrs. Oliphant thought (and, as I believe, with some justice) that, if freed from pecuniary pressure, she could have rivalled some more successful authors, and possibly have written a novel fit to stand on the same shelf with *Adam Bede*. She resigned her chance of such fame because she wished to send her sons to Eton. It is, of course, clear enough that, if she had sent them to some humbler school, she might have come nearer to combining the two aims, and have kept her family without sacrificing her talents to over-production. But, granting the force of the dilemma, I confess that I honour rather than blame the choice. I take it to be better for a parent to do his (or her) parental duty than to sacrifice the duty to art or the demands of posterity.⁴⁹

Although Stephen presents Southey as just as prolific and commercially compromised as Oliphant herself,⁵⁰ it is Oliphant who is judged and condemned for her incessant literary production: making a woman the scapegoat for the man of letters' compromises, Stephen's essay demonstrates that gender and prestige were inextricably connected in Victorian criticism.

As with so much of Woolf's writing on Victorian women writers from Austen to Barrett-Browning, Stephen's literary criticism therefore provides a precedent for Woolf's own. Woolf's discussion of Oliphant in *Three Guineas* directly echoes Stephen's paragraph: briefly invoking Oliphant only to provide a negative example, both reduce the *Autobiography* to its emotional impact, with Stephen's 'most pathetic autobiography' finding its match in Woolf's 'illuminating and indeed moving piece of work'. Both suggest that Oliphant's career, free from financial pressures, would have followed a different path, and both emphasize the additional duties of motherhood. In making Oliphant the representative of

⁴⁹ Leslie Stephen, 'Southey's Letters', in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1902), iv, pp. 45–85, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Stephen, p. 50.

intellectual prostitution, Woolf therefore positions herself firmly against the Victorian values and the popular forms of writing she represents and signals her own commitment to artistic masterpieces over pragmatic financial compromise. However, Woolf also continues her feminist revision of Stephen's criticism: while Stephen praises Oliphant's choice of motherhood over artistic achievement, Woolf fashions her into a strong argument against the compatibility of literature and motherhood and a martyr to gender ideology. While this supports Woolf's feminist analysis in *Three Guineas*, it also had a lasting and negative impact on Oliphant's legacy: Woolf added to the continued neglect and misrepresentation of Oliphant in offering a reductive, but easily digestible figure which, as Elizabeth Langland points out, proved influential upon subsequent biographers.⁵¹

By thus perpetuating Stephen's view of Oliphant, Woolf ignores the alternative literary history available through the female side of her family. Anny Thackeray Ritchie provides a more optimistic assessment of her friend's career and her friendship with Oliphant offers an example of mutual literary appreciation and informal female mentorship in the Victorian period, as Blair suggests.⁵² Oliphant had reviewed Ritchie's first novel, *The Story of Elizabeth* (1863), praising her 'wonderful realism and vivid force of line and colour',⁵³ and Ritchie's commemorations of her friend asserts her status as a prominent critic and writer. Ritchie firmly assigned Oliphant a place in the tradition of women's writing and publicly recognized her as a leading novelist of the period, both during Oliphant's lifetime, as in her dedication of her *Book of Sybils* (1883) to this 'dear Sybil of our own' as well as in her 1912 Association for English Studies address *A Discourse on Modern Sibyls*. Ritchie groups Oliphant with firmly canonical authors like George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë as one of the 'torchbearers of the early Victorian days', thereby resisting the devaluation of her friend's career, and praises a fundamentally professional woman

⁵¹ Elizabeth Langland, 'The Receptions of Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy', in *A Companion to The Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 387–405, p. 402–3.

⁵² Blair, 119.

⁵³ Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels.', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 94.574 (1863), 168–83 (p. 171, p. 178).

writer whose ‘work was never-ceasing, but it scarcely seemed to interfere with her hospitable life among her friends’.⁵⁴

Woolf’s literary history therefore takes a very different shape from Ritchie’s. Rejecting Ritchie’s Victorian sibyls, George Eliot and Margaret Oliphant, as well as Mary Augusta Ward, Woolf distances herself from the professional women writers who were her direct predecessors and creates a gap in her library. Woolf’s dismissal of these well-documented and independent writers vividly illustrates the problems that prevent women from thinking back through their mothers: by reducing Eliot and Oliphant to martyrs to their gender and by dismissing Ward entirely, Woolf obscures the emergence of the professional woman writer into the Victorian marketplace and considerably undermines their achievements. Woolf’s engagement with these women writers also demonstrates how much her female canon was shaped by a desire to position herself in relation to literary history: rejecting both popular writing and the Victorian period, Woolf asserts her difference to these predecessors. The conclusion will therefore examine how Woolf herself emerges from this thesis, addressing her position in relation to the communities of women she invokes in her writing, her ambivalent feminism, as well as her desire to distance herself from apparently flawed femininity and Victorianism.

⁵⁴ Anny Thackeray Ritchie, *A Book of Sibyls* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1883). Anny Thackeray Ritchie, *A Discourse on Modern Sibyls*, Pamphlet No. 24 (London: The English Association, 1913), p. 9.

Conclusion

In her 1924 *Vogue* article 'Indiscretions', Woolf offers an irreverent exploration of the literary canon. Moving beyond the book, she examines the personal relationship between reader and author instead: 'It is always indiscreet to mention the affections. Yet how they prevail, how they permeate all our intercourse!' (*E* 3.460). Although much of the essay is devoted to speculations about the great men of literature, Woolf also assembles a community of women writers that welcomes her female readers into their midst. She repudiates the assumption of the anonymous male critic that 'every woman is inspired by pure envy when she reads what another has written' and instead imagines the reader inscribing herself into the literary canon:

Emily Brontë was the passion of her youth; Charlotte even she loved with nervous affection; and cherished a quiet sisterly regard for Anne. [...] George Eliot is an Aunt, and, as an Aunt, inimitable. So treated she drops the apparatus of masculinity which Herbert Spencer necessitated; indulges herself in memory; and pours forth, no doubt with some rustic accent, the genial stores of her youth, the greatness and profundity of her soul. Jane Austen we must needs adore; but she does not want it; she wants nothing; our love is a by-product, an irrelevance; with that mist or without it her moon shines on. (*E* 3.61)

Woolf's brief character-sketches, reminiscent of the scene-making of her Modernist biography, draw attention to the impact that personalities and tastes can have on readers' responses to literature and authors. With each writer taking on a different role in this literary family, Woolf establishes a permanent relationship between readers and their favourite authors: they become part of their genetic makeup. The essay's sub-heading, "'Never Seek to Tell Thy Love, Love That Never Told Can Be' – but One's Feeling's for Some Writers Outrun all Prudence' as well as her assumption of a specifically female audience contribute to Woolf's gossipy and conspiratorial tone. Woolf deliberately assumes the position of the ordinary reader when she asserts that '[t]he critic may be able to abstract the essence and feast upon it undisturbed, but for the rest of us in every book there is something – sex, character, temperament – which, as in life, rouses affection or repulsion; and, as in life, sways and prejudices' (*E* 3.460).

As the previous chapters have shown, even as a critic Woolf was not always as detached as 'Indiscretions' suggests. Woolf's likes and dislikes bring individual writers in and out of focus, and her essays often reveal as much about her own concerns and interests as they do about the nominal subjects. The imaginary community of 'Indiscretions' roughly matches the canon sketched out by Woolf's essays: Austen, Brontë and Eliot are the undisputable canonical great writers that frame Woolf's engagement with more minor Victorian legacies like Mary Russell Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; while the absence of women like Mary Augusta Ward or Margaret Oliphant serves as a reminder of Woolf's rejection of popular writers. Woolf therefore fails to perform a recovery of minor and forgotten writers and instead upholds the traditional canon, as her unenthusiastic but obligatory inclusion of George Eliot suggested.

'Indiscretions' is a pivotal essay in Woolf's writing career: it combines the strong sense of personality typical of her earlier articles on women writers with the growing feminism of her later articles on women's lives. While by the 1920s, Woolf's exploration of how to represent personality had moved to her experimental biography and fiction, the detailed character studies in her centenary articles of the 1910s show that she originally successfully explored the same problem in her literary criticism. In these articles, Woolf tests different ways of reconstructing character: through gossip and anecdotes, as in the case of Jane Austen and George Eliot, as well as more imaginatively by reading Charlotte Brontë through her heroines; while her engagement with Mary Russell Mitford points towards her shift towards new and experimental forms of biography by exploring the impossibility of knowing another person, or recording such knowledge.

At the same time, the community of women writers in 'Indiscretions' points forwards to the collective analysis of representative women's lives in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Her approach to female authorship in her most explicitly feminist criticism from the 1920s onwards is paradoxical: Woolf seeks to address a historical imbalance and draw attention to women's suffering in patriarchal society, yet she also undermines the individual achievements of past writers. Unlike her centenary reviews, which seek to shed light on a writers' personality *and* works, *A Room of One's Own* prioritises women writers' lives over their works and focuses strongly on their perceived limitations and shortcomings to emphasize women's disadvantaged position. Similarly, Woolf's essays on Mary Russell Mitford and

Elizabeth Barrett Browning showcase a skilful analysis of their lives in the shadow of domestic tyranny, but lack the sense of close personal connection typical of her earlier essays: they are most meaningful as examples of women's suffering in patriarchal society and become case studies rather than personal friends. This reductive approach to individual lives becomes most pronounced in *Three Guineas*, where women's lives, read collectively, highlight financial and social inequalities, patterns of abuse and fundamental flaws in the structure of the home and the state and provide Woolf with a factual basis for her argument. Thus, Woolf invokes Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning not as writers, but as Victorian daughters and case studies for parental 'infantile fixation' and altogether drops Mary Russell Mitford, an increasingly unfashionable writer, despite her fundamental importance in prompting Woolf's engagement with domestic tyranny.

Woolf the modern critic therefore does not always assimilate herself into this community of Victorian women writers as easily as the female reader in 'Indiscretions'. Her engagement with Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë frequently wavers between identification and rejection. While Woolf ultimately finds ways to appropriate both of the latter writers for her own purposes – Austen as the lost originator of women's writing, and Brontë as a model for the more direct protest of *Three Guineas* – her engagement with later, more unambiguously Victorian writers demonstrates more clearly how she establishes her own position as a writer and critic in opposition to them. Woolf's preference for amateur élite writers, most conventionally suffering in the middle-class drawing room, leads her to undermine the achievements of a later generation of professional writers: she excludes the majority of professional women writers who achieved financial independence by writing for a popular market from literary history. George Eliot, Mary Augusta Ward and Margaret Oliphant are much less malleable than earlier writers, whose greater personal obscurity allows Woolf to reinterpret them according to her needs. She therefore uses her private and public writing to position herself as distinctly separate from these overtly professional Victorian writers and the mass culture that the latter two represent.

Woolf's engagement with Victorian women writer therefore offers new perspectives on her relationship with Victorian thought and ideology, her feminism and her self-presentation as a writer, as well as her prolific journalism, which I will briefly outline in the rest of this conclusion. Most obviously, Woolf's journalism

positions her between periods: in contrast to the confident Modernism of her novels and programmatic essays such as ‘Modern Fiction’ and ‘The New Biography’, the bulk of Woolf’s articles and reviews occupy a more complex territory. While articles like the Mitford review ‘The Wrong Way of Reading’ demonstrate how her journalism could serve as a testing ground for experiments with fictional biography, Woolf more frequently emerges as Steve Ellis’s ‘post-Victorian’ writer, deeply engaged in a dialogue with the Victorian past.¹ Her frequent use of biography makes this retrospective turn particularly visible. Works like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *A Memoir of Jane Austen* provide not only factual information, but also shape their subjects into conformity with Victorian domesticity, and Woolf cannot always free herself from their influence. Additionally, as Emily Blair suggests, Woolf’s use of these sources is distinctly Victorian: her feminist essays work by creating ‘the same didactic tie between life and literature that conduct books and nineteenth-century anthologies established’.² Likewise, Leslie Stephen’s literary criticism continues to influence Woolf: in *A Sketch of the Past* she noted that ‘I always read *Hours in a Library* by way of filling out my ideas’ (*MoB* 122). Consequently, her writing on Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen and Elizabeth Barrett Browning interrogates and re-contextualizes Stephen’s verdicts, but thereby also perpetuates them. While Woolf engages more frequently and directly with Victorian critics in her early essays, she never entirely frees herself from these influences: thus, in *A Room of One’s Own* her attack on Brontë echoes Leslie Stephen’s criticism, and she deliberately deploys Victorian morality to shape George Eliot into a stereotypical fallen woman.

Woolf’s unwillingness to fully identify with her predecessors may appear surprising in a writer now celebrated for her feminism. Yet ultimately, a desire to distance herself from the flawed and limited women writers of the Victorian past is an important part of Woolf’s self-positioning. Bourdieu asserts that newly emerging writers ‘must assert their difference, get it known and recognized’,³ and as a woman who was writing in a patriarchal literary tradition, Woolf’s own success as a critic and writer was also dependent on her ability to demonstrate the ways in which she

¹ Steve Ellis, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 2.

² Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2007), p. 22.

³ Bourdieu, p. 58.

was not limited by her gender. Thus, Woolf laments Austen's lack of travel, the domestic imprisonment of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot's exclusion from middle-class society, and Charlotte Brontë's geographical isolation in Yorkshire and extensively explores the impact of this on their writing. But she also ignores those writers, particular of a slightly later generation, who freed themselves from such constraints and managed to become professional writers with an independent income. This suggests that to Woolf, too, the acceptable woman writer lived a domestic life largely in conformity to society's expectations which left her writing fundamentally flawed and limited in scope. Ultimately, this makes Woolf's own career much more unique in contrast: Corbett similarly concludes that 'Woolf achieved "exceptional" status by understanding and even enforcing the rules of a game that otherwise might well have excluded her'.⁴

Woolf therefore emerges as a writer conscious of her public persona, who skilfully positions herself to her advantage and, in keeping with her Victorian tea-table training, has come to value a 'sidelong approach' which subtly implies her difference rather than stating it outright. While the idea of Woolf actively managing her public image and shaping her career as a writer co-exists uneasily with Modernism's image as an élite art form, conceiving of Woolf as a prolific journalist (and owner of a publishing house) as well as a novelist makes her close ties to the business of literature more easily visible: as Leila Brosnan remarks, she is now situated 'between the "high" art of literary modernism and the "low" work of journalism'.⁵ This is evident in the works of Jane Garrity and Alice Wood, who have begun to explore Woolf's self-presentation and negotiation with market demands, editors and readers through the lens of her contributions to popular mass market publications such as *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*.⁶ Woolf's own career therefore differs fundamentally from those of the Victorian domestic amateur writers she

⁴ Mary Jean Corbett, "'Ashamed of the Inkpot": Virginia Woolf, Lucy Clifford, and the Literary Marketplace', *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 11.3 (2015), paragraph 6.

⁵ Brosnan. P. 5.

⁶ Alice Wood, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow in British Women's Magazines, 1916-1930', in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, ed. by Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 39-59. Jane Garrity, 'Selling Culture to the "Civilized": Bloomsbury, British Vogue, and the Marketing of National Identity', *Modernism/Modernity*, 6.2 (1999), 29-58. Jane Garrity, 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry, and 1920s British Vogue', in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie (New York ; London: Garland, 2000), pp. 185-218.

prioritizes in her essays. She was keenly aware of and interested in her financial value and reputation as a writer and journalist, as her diary entry from 1925 suggests:

I'm out to make £300 this summer by writing and build a bath and hot water range at Rodmell. But hush, hush – my books tremble on the verge of coming out and my future is uncertain. As for forecasts – it's just on the cards Mrs Dalloway is a success (Harcourt thinks it 'wonderful') and sells 2,000. I don't expect it. I expect a slow silent increase of fame, such as has come about, rather miraculously, since J.'s R. was published. My value mounting steadily as a journalist, though scarcely a copy sold. (*D* 3.9)

Woolf's reflection on the interdependence of her dual roles as journalist and novelist is a useful reminder that, as Leila Brosnan notes, her reputation as an essayist equalled and even surpassed her fame as a novelist during her own lifetime.⁷

Woolf's acute awareness of the importance of establishing herself as the right kind of journalist co-exists with a more traditionally gendered disinclination for the public existence of the professional writer. This is evident from the very beginning of her career: the publication of her first signed essay, 'The Decay of Essay-Writing' (1905) already calls forth two contradictory responses. Woolf chronicles some distinctly gendered anxiety in her diary: 'Gerald [...] tells me my Plague of Essays Article is out in The Academy, with Virginia Stephen signed in full, which seems rather indecent publicity' (*PA* 243). Her use of such a morally loaded term invokes a Victorian morality which prefers women to be safely removed from public life for fear of sexual corruption, and points forwards to her unease with the public existence of Mrs Humphry Ward and her accusation of 'intellectual prostitution' against Margaret Oliphant. In the article itself, however, Woolf skilfully deploys cultural anxieties about mass literature and the reading public to position herself as literary gatekeeper in a very effective entrance into the public world of literature. She paints a bleak picture of the constantly increasing print matter threatening to overwhelm readers:

One member of the household is almost officially deputed to stand at the hall door with flaming sword and do battle with the invading

⁷ Brosnan, pp. 96-97.

armies. Tracts, pamphlets, advertisements, gratuitous copies of magazines, and the literary productions of friends come by post, by van, by messenger – come at all hours of the day and fall in the night, so that the morning breakfast-table is fairly snowed up with them. (*E* 1.24)

Woolf's depiction of this unmanageable invasion of literary texts into the private household confidently broadcasts her membership in London's literary élite. Leila Brosnan notes that in her early career, Woolf 'occupied a precarious yet enabling borderline position in the world of journalism: her age, gender and inexperience put her on the outside contributor list, but her connections established her securely on the roll of insiders',⁸ and 'The Decay of Essay Writing' shows her using this privileged position to distinguish herself from the masses of inferior productions required by 'a monster like the British public' (*E* 1.25). Woolf advocates chronicles of ordinary life instead of a deluge of personal essays to combat this proliferation of literature: 'if they would write of themselves – such writing would have its own permanent value' (*E* 1.26). This solution is familiar: as the introductory chapter showed, this interest in capturing the lives of ordinary people is central to her own fictional experiments of the period.

As this parallel development shows, Woolf's journalism is therefore not a competitor to her fiction. Rather, it makes it possible: it lets her hone her skills as a writer and provides an independent income, but most importantly, her articles often serve as a testing ground for creative methods and theories of fiction. Thus, the detailed personality studies and investigations into different modes of reading and writing in the 1910s serve as a foundation for works such as 'The Mark on the Wall', 'Kew Gardens' and *Jacob's Room*. Likewise, Woolf's shift towards the exploration of external circumstances of women's lives manifests itself in reviews like 'Women Novelists' (1918) long before the publication of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, showing how her most famous essays develop ideas previously extensively explored in her journalism. Some of these themes stretch across Woolf's entire career. Thus, 'The Decay of Essay-Writing' first introduces the tea-table as a symbol for the modern critic's lack of serious engagement with literature and art: 'the amiable garrulity of the tea-table – cast into the form of essays' (*E* 1.26). However,

⁸ Brosnan, p. 47.

the tea-table quickly evolves into a versatile symbol of women's relationship to Victorian society, and Woolf increasingly dissects the social system it represents more critically. Thus, *Night and Day's* examination of Victorian social and literary legacies begins with Katherine mechanically pouring tea and entertaining her parents' friends and acquaintances with only 'a fifth part of her mind [...] thus occupied' (*N&D* 1): Woolf's criticism has expanded from the superficiality of the tea-table talk to its incessant demands on women's time and the invisible female labour sustaining this hospitable atmosphere.

As 'the centre of Victorian family life' (*MoB* 125), the tea-table demonstrates the gendered dynamics underlying the household and Victorian society and therefore joins Charlotte Brontë's potatoes and Jane Austen's hidden manuscripts as a potent symbol of the many obstacles past and present women writers had to negotiate. Woolf's analysis culminates in her dissection of her own 'tea-table training' in *A Sketch of the Past* (*MoB* 152). Woolf traces the multi-generational impact of a Victorian education in femininity, beginning with her mother's youth at Little Holland House: 'She was taught there to take such part as girls did then in the lives of distinguished men; to pour out tea; to hand them their strawberries and cream; to listen devoutly, reverently to their wisdom' (*MoB* 99). Woolf's analysis of her own tea-table training extends the social significance of the tea-table into a metaphor for her deferential attitude in her early writing: 'When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar?' (*MoB* 152).

Although Woolf had symbolically murdered the Angel in the House in the essay 'Professions for Women' (1933), male expectations therefore continue to shape her writing: noting that '[t]his I believe to be a very common experience with women writers – they are impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex' (*E* 6.483), even here the normative strength of male expectations dominates Woolf's voice. The explicitly female narrators of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (as well as 'Indiscretions') are an exception: in the majority of her articles, Woolf assumes male pronouns as the norm and obscures her own identity as a woman. This habit is strong enough to emerge in 'Professions for Women', an essay that addresses women and draws on Woolf's experience of professional life. She breaks with the

assumption of female authorship and defaults to male pronouns for her exploration of the novelist's ideal state of mind in spite of the autobiographical nature of her discussion. Woolf's use of male pronouns therefore creates her own 'awkward break' in her discussion of women's professional lives and highlights the fundamental problem underlying Woolf's writing on women writers. Despite her awareness of the prejudices shaping readers' perception of her own persona, Woolf continues to apply them to the writers she discusses, demonstrating the truth of her assertion that '[i]t is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality' (*E* 6.481). Woolf's focus on Brontë's anger suggests an inability to move past a Victorian disapproval of feminine anger and her inability to perceive Jane Austen as a writer with a political dimension suggests how easily subtle criticism can be misread as ladylike complacency. Likewise, Woolf wavers between condemning and embracing the code of conduct which forbids Mary Russell Mitford to mention her father's domestic tyranny: although she attacks Constance Hill for her complicity in obscuring Dr Mitford's abusive behaviour, her tone remains comical and light-hearted, making it easy to dismiss her criticisms.

Woolf's feminism is therefore complex and contradictory: while she rejects the limitations imposed by Victorian gender norms, she cannot escape their lasting influence and is unwilling to entirely dismiss them. In addition to a nostalgic appreciation for the beauty of the 'civilized qualities' like 'restraint, sympathy, unselfishness' (*MoB* 152) that characterize the Angel in the House, she retains an appreciation of the subversive quality inherent in a domestic and detached mode of living. Thus, Woolf's reflections on her own Victorian tea-table training paradoxically end in an assertion of its value instead of a complete renunciation: 'On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud' (*MoB* 152). Woolf similarly celebrates women's ability to pursue a different mode of thinking about public life in 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air-Raid' (1940): 'Are we not leaving the young Englishman without a weapon that might be of value to him if we give up private thinking, tea-table thinking, because it seems useless? [...] Mental fight means thinking against the current, not with it' (*E* 6.242). By shifting the terms of her discussion away from the male-dominated life of public institutions to one that valorises women's experiences and private spaces, Woolf transforms women's exclusion from public life and institutions into a benefit.

Women's ability to develop and preserve their own unique perspectives informs Woolf's praise of George Eliot's essential femininity ('she would not renounce her own inheritance – the difference of view, the difference of standard' (*E* 4.178) and drives her search for female communities such as the one imagined in 'Indiscretions', but it is most efficiently expressed in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's essay emphatically demonstrates the value of a domestic retreat free from patriarchal loyalties of public institutions by charting the narrator's 'walking tour of the obstacles to female authorship', as Victoria Rosner terms it.⁹ However, this retreat from a hostile public world into the study also creates its own problems. Even when it is well-stocked with women's works, the study is the stereotypical space of the Victorian man of letters: it creates a private, exclusively male space within the domestic sphere, and is as Rosner succinctly states, 'the architectural realization of [masculine] privilege'.¹⁰ Woolf's appropriation of this space is therefore another act of subversion and asserts women's equality to male writers. However, to be able to forget her sex in the study, as Woolf encourages future writers to do, a woman would have to exorcise the ghost of the Victorian man of letters as well as kill the angel in the house: the study is also a reminder that 'everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists' (*AROO* 67). This recognition of the limits to women's ability to completely transcend social systems recurs throughout Woolf's writing on Victorian women writers. Woolf imagines Mary Russell Mitford in her attic room, finally alone and truly herself, yet still in her father's house and under his power; in *Flush*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's skilful decoration of her bedroom cannot disguise the fact that it is a prison; and even Mary Augusta Ward's triumph in gaining access to the Bodleian library only leads her to deny other women's rights to gain patriarchal approval.

Ultimately, Woolf is therefore another part of this social system, and her engagement with Victorian women writers shows the limits to any attempt at subversion. Woolf emerges as a more complex writer, feminist, and woman: her success as a writer is partly the result of her skilful self-positioning which combines an emphasis on the importance of women's writing and literary traditions with a successful attempt to distance herself from these flawed predecessors. Her literary

⁹ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, Gender and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2005), p. 120.

¹⁰ Rosner, p.106.

criticism emerges as an important body of work: it makes it possible to chart the complexity of her engagement with women's literary traditions, but also leads to a better understanding of Woolf's uses of biography and her ambivalent relationship to her Victorian heritage: by presenting multiple ways of narrating and interpreting a life story, biography makes her Victorian links easily visible and offers a new perspective on Modernism's greatest writer.

Bibliography

- Anonymous Review, 'Dodo', *The Spectator Archive*, 1893
<<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/17th-june-1893/22/dodo>> [accessed 5 February 2018]
- Anonymous Review, 'Mrs. Oliphant's Cervantes', *The Spectator Archive*, 1880
<<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/20th-november-1880/20/mrs-oliphants-cervantes>> [accessed 10 September 2017]
- Allen, Brooke, 'Complexity & Contradition: Virginia Woolf & George Eliot', *New Criterion*, 16 (1997), 25–32
- Allot, Miriam, ed., *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974)
- Ashton, Rosemary, 'Evans, Marian', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6794?docPos=1>> [last accessed 26 April 2017]
- Atkinson, Juliette, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010)
- Auerbach, Emily, *Searching for Jane Austen* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2004)
- , 'Searching for Jane Austen: Restoring the "Fleas" and "Bad Breath"', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 27 (2005), 31–38
- , 'The Geese vs. the "Niminy Piminy Spinster": Virginia Woolf Defends Jane Austen', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 29 (2008)
<<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol29no1/auerbach.html>>
[accessed 12 March 2015]
- Austen, Henry, 'Biographical Notice of the Author', in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 135–41
- Austen, Jane, 'Northanger Abbey', *Project Gutenberg*, 1818
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/121/121-h/121-h.htm#link2H_4_0033>
[accessed 30 November 2016]
- , *Selected Letters*, ed. by Vivien Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2004)
- Austen-Leigh, James Edward, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: OUP, 2008)

- Austen-Leigh, Mary Augusta, *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen* (London: John Murray, 1920)
- Barker, Juliet, *The Brontës* (London: Abacus, 2010)
- Barrett Browning, Elizabeth, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Kelly McSweeney (Oxford: OUP, 1993)
- Barrow, Barbara, 'Gender, Language, and the Politics of Disembodiment in Aurora Leigh', *Victorian Poetry*, 53 (2015), 243–62
- Beer, Gillian, 'Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf', in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, (New York: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 80–99
- Benson, Edward Frederic, *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1932)
- Bernstein, Susan David, *Roomscape: Women Writers in the British Museum from George Eliot to Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013)
- Blair, Emily, 'Prostituting Culture and Enslaving Intellectual Liberty: Virginia Woolf's Disavowed Victorian Predecessor Margaret Oliphant', in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman, (New York, NY: Pace UP, 2001), pp. 13–18
- , *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2007)
- Booth, Alison, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, Reading Women Writing (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992)
- , 'Biographical Criticism and the "Great" Women of Letters: The Example of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf', in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. by William H. Epstein, Theory and Practice of Biographical Criticism (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1991), pp. 85–107
- , *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: OUP, 2016)
- , *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2004)
- , 'Revisiting the Homes and Haunts of Mary Russell Mitford', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 30 (2008), 39–65

- Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993)
- Briggs, Julia, 'Introduction to *Night and Day*', Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. xi–xxxv
- , Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2006)
- Brosnan, Leila, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism: Breaking the Surface of Silence* (Edinburg: Edinburgh UP, 1999)
- Broughton, Trev Lynn, 'Studying the Study: Gender and the Scene of Authorship in the Writings of Leslie Stephen, Margaret Oliphant and Anne Thackeray Ritchie', in *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography*, ed. by Frédéric Regard (Saint-Etienne, France: Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), pp. 247–67
- Cano-López, Marina, 'The Outlandish Jane: Austen and Female Identity in Victorian Women's Magazines', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 47 (2014), 255–73
- Case, Alison, 'Gender and Narration in "Aurora Leigh"', *Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), 17–32
- Caughie, Pamela L., 'Flush and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where Has That Little Dog Gone?', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 10 (1991), 47–66
<<https://doi.org/10.2307/463951>>
- , 'Dogs and Servants', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 84 (2013), 37–39
- Chaney, Christine, 'The "Prophet-Poet's Book"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 48 (2008), 791–99
- Collister, Peter, 'Portraits of "Audacious Youth": George Eliot and Mrs. Humphrey Ward', *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 64 (1983), 296–317
- Cooper, John, 'Oscar Wilde's Cello Coat', *Oscar Wilde In America Blog*, 2018
<<https://oscarwildeinamerica.blog/2018/01/04/oscar-wildes-cello-coat/>>
[accessed 28 February 2018]
- Corbett, Mary Jean, "'Ashamed of the Inkpot": Virginia Woolf, Lucy Clifford, and the Literary Marketplace', *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 11 (2015), 9–30
- , 'Behind the Times? Virginia Woolf and the Third Generation', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 60 (2014), 27–58

- Cordner, Sheila, 'Radical Education in Aurora Leigh', *Victorian Review*, 40 (2015), 233–49 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/vcr.2014.0005>>
- D'Albertis, Deirdre, "'Bookmaking Out of the Remains of the Dead": Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*', *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences*, 39 (1995), 1–31
- De Gay, Jane, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006)
- Dell, Marion, *Virginia Woolf's Influential Forebears: Julia Margaret Cameron, Anny Thackeray Ritchie and Julia Prinsep Stephen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
- Demoor, Marysa, "'Not with a Bang but a Whimper": Lucy Clifford's Correspondence, 1919–1929', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 30 (2001), 233–56
- Dillane, Fionnuala, *Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013)
- , "'The Character of Editress": Marian Evans at the Westminster Review, 1851–54', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 30 (2013), 269–90
- Easley, Alexis, *Literary Celebrity, Gender and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* (Maryland: U of Delaware P, 2011)
- , 'Authorship, Gender and Identity: George Eliot in the 1850s', *Women's Writing*, 3 (1996), 145–60
- Ellis, Steve, *Virginia Woolf and the Victorians*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2007)
- Ender, Evelyne, 'Feminist Criticism in a Double Mirror: Reading Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf', *Compar(a)ison: An International Journal of Comparative Literature*, 1 (1993), 83–106
- Epstein, William, ed., *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, *The Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 1991)
- Forster, E. M., 'Miss Austen and Jane Austen', *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) 10 November 1932. No. 1606. p. 821
- , 'E. M. Forster on the Letters of Jane Austen - Then and Now, 1932', *The TLS* <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/e-m-forster-jane-austen/>> [accessed 8 March 2018]

- Fox, Susan Hudson, 'Woolf's Austen/Boston Tea Party: The Revolt against Literary Empire in *Night and Day*', in *Virginia Woolf: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Hussey, Vara Neverow, and Jane Lilienfeld (New York: Pace UP, 1994), pp. 259–65
- France, Peter, and William St Clair, eds., *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford UP/ British Academy Centenary Monographs, 2004)
- Fuller, Miriam Rheingold, "'Let Me Go, Mr. Thorpe Isabella, Do Not Hold Me!': Northanger Abbey and the Domestic Gothic', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 32 (2010), 90–104
- Garnett, Jane, 'Stephen [Née Jackson], Julia Prinsep (1846–1895), Celebrated Beauty and Philanthropist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-46943>> [accessed 14 March 2018]
- Garnett, Richard, 'Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant', *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1901 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/olddb/20712>> [last accessed 18 May 2017]
- Garrett, Martin, 'Mitford, Mary Russell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18859>> [accessed 1 February 2017]
- Garrity, Jane, 'Selling Culture to the "Civilized": Bloomsbury, British Vogue, and the Marketing of National Identity', *Modernism/Modernity*, 6 (1999), 29–58
- , 'Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry, and 1920s British Vogue', in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie (New York ; London: Garland, 2000), pp. 185–218
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009)
- Green, Laura, "'Long, Long Disappointment": Maternal Failure and Masculine Exhaustion in Margaret Oliphant's Autobiography', in *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, ed. by Ellen Bayuk Rosenman and Claudia Klaver (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008), pp. 36–54
- Hadjiafxendi, Kyriaki, 'Negotiating Fame: Mid-Victorian Women Writers and the Romantic Myth of the Gentlemanly Reviewer', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Proquest Ebook Central: Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 187–205

- , ‘Profession, Vocation, Trade: Marian Evans and the Making of the Woman Professional Writer’, *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 5 (2009)
- Halsey, Katie, ‘Tell Me of Some Bookings: Mary Russell Mitford’s Female Literary Networks’, *Women’s Writing*, 18.1 (2011), 121–36
- Harman, Claire, *Charlotte Brontë: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2015)
- , *Fanny Burney: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 2000)
- Helms, Gabriele, ‘The Coincidence of Biography and Autobiography: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*’, *Biography*, 18 (1995), 339–59
- Herman, David, ‘Modernist Life Writing and Nonhuman Lives: Ecologies of Experience in Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 59 (2013), 547–68 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2013.0034>>
- Hill, Constance, *Mary Russell Mitford and Her Surroundings* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1920)
- Hill, Katherine C., ‘Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution’, *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 351–62 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/461911>>
- Huysen, Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986)
- Iser, Wolfgang, ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 279–99
- Jay, Elisabeth, *Mrs Oliphant: ‘A Fiction to Herself’. A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)
- , ‘Mrs. Oliphant: The Hero as Woman of Letters, or Autobiography, a Gendered Genre’, *Caliban*, 31 (1994), 85–95
- , ‘Oliphant, Margaret Oliphant Wilson’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20712?docPos=1>> [last accessed 18 May 2017]
- Johnson, Reginald Brimley, *The Women Novelists* (London, W. Collins, 1918)
- Jung, Sandro, ‘Currer Bell, Charlotte Brontë and the Construction of Authorial Identity’, *Brontë Studies*, 39 (2014), 292–306
- Kaplan, Cora, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007)
- , ‘Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist-Feminist Criticism’, in *British Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. by Terry Lovell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990)

- Kertesz, Elizabeth R., ‘Smyth, Dame Ethel Mary (1858–1944), Composer, Writer, and Suffragist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-36173>> [accessed 5 February 2018]
- Kirkham, Margaret, ‘The Austen Portraits and the Received Biography’, in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by Janet Todd, Women & Literature (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 29–38
- Knox, Marisa Palacios, ‘Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution in Aurora Leigh’, *Victorian Poetry*, 52 (2014), 277–300
- Kore-Schröder, Lena, ‘Who’s Afraid of Rosamond Merridew?: Reading Medieval History in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”’, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 50 (2008) <<http://jsse.revues.org/719>> [accessed 12 January 2015]
- Langland, Elizabeth, ‘The Receptions of Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy’, in *A Companion to The Victorian Novel*, ed. by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 387–405
- Law, Graham, ‘The Professionalization of Authorship’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880*, The Oxford History of the Novel in English, ed. by John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 2012), iii, 37–55
- Le Faye, Deirdre, ed., *Jane Austen’s Letters* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011)
- Lee, Elizabeth, ‘Mitford, Mary Russell’, *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1894
 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.001.0001/odnb-9780192683120-e-18859>> [accessed 13 June 2018]
- Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997)
- , *Virginia Woolf’s Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005)
- Lee, Judith, “‘Without Hate, without Bitterness, without Fear, without Protest, without Preaching’”: Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen’, *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 12 (1990), 111–16
- Lewis, Thomas S. W., ‘Combining “the Advantages of Fact and Fiction”’: Virginia Woolf’s Biographies of Vita Sackville-West, Flush and Roger Fry’, in *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays*, ed. by Elaine Ginsberg and Laura Moss

- Gottlieb (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 295–324
- Lilienfeld, Jane, “‘The Gift of a China Inkpot’: Violet Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and the Love of Women in Writing’, in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. by Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer, (New York, NY: New York UP, 1997), pp. 37–56
- Lojo-Rodriguez, Laura, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Female History in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn.”’, *Short Story*, 16 (2008), 73–86
- Long, Jean, ‘The Awkward Break: Woolf’s Reading of Brontë and Austen in A Room of One’s Own’, *Woolf Studies Annual*, 3 (1997), 76–94
- Lutz, Deborah, ‘The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 127–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150310000306>>
- Lynch, Deidre, ‘Homes and Haunts: Austen’s and Mitford’s English Idylls’, *PMLA*, 115 (2000), 1103–8 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/463282>>
- MacKay, Carol Hanbery, ‘Emerging Selves: The Autobiographical Impulse in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and Annie Wood Besant’, in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. by Adam Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), pp. 207–20
- Maggio, Paula, ‘Digging for Buried Treasure: Theories about Weather and Fiction in Virginia Woolf’s Essays’, *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 78 (2010), 23–26
- Marcus, Laura, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994)
- , ‘The Newness of the “New Biography”’: Biographical Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century’, in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. by William St. Clair and Peter France, British Academy Centenary Monographs (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 193–218
- Martin, Linda, ‘Elegy and the Unknowable Mind in Jacob’s Room’, *Studies in the Novel*, 47 (2015), 176–92
- May, William, ‘Letters to Jane: Austen, the Letter and Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing’, in *Uses of Austen: Jane’s Afterlives*, ed. by Gillian Dow and Clare Hanson (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 115–31

- McDonagh, Josephine, 'Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction: *Our Village to Villette*', *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political, and Cultural Studies*, 55 (2013), 399–424
- McDonnell, Jennifer, 'Ladies Pets and the Politics of Affect: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Flush', *Australian Literary Studies*, 25 (2010), 17–34
- Miller, Lucasta, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2001)
- Mitford, Mary Russell, *Our Village; By Miss Mitford; With an Introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie; and One Hundred Illustrations by Hugh Thomson*, ed. by Anny Thackeray Ritchie (London: Macmillan and co., 1893),
 <<https://archive.org/details/ourvillage00mitf>> [accessed 12 March 2018]
- Monk, Ray, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character', *Philosophy and Literature*, 31 (2007), 1–40
 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2007.0015>>
- Mooneyham White, Laura, and Carmen Smith, 'Discerning Voice through Austen Said: Free Indirect Discourse, Coding, and Interpretive (Un)Certainty', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal On-Line*, 37 (2016)
 <<http://www.jasna.org/publications/persuasions-online/vol37no1/white-smith/>> [accessed 8 March 2018]
- Morrison, Kevin A., 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Dog Days', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 30 (2012), 93–115
- , 'Effects of Publication Context', *European Romantic Review*, 19 (2008), 275–87
- Newbould, M-C, "'The Utmost Fluidity Exists with the Utmost Permanence": Virginia Woolf's Un-Victorian Sterne', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 16 (2010), 71–94
- Newton, K.M., 'The Otherness of George Eliot', *Textual Practice*, 28 (2014), 189–214
- Novak, Julia, 'The Notable Woman in Fiction: The Afterlives of Elizabeth Barrett Browning', *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31, 83–107
- Oliphant, Margaret, 'Novels.', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 94 (1863), 168–83
- , *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M. O. W. Oliphant*, ed. by Annie Coghill (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899)
- , *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Ormskirk: Broadview, 2002)

- , *The Makers of Modern Rome* (London : Macmillan, 1895)
- Onslow, Barbara, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000)
- Parke, Catherine, “‘The Experiment Just Begun’: Virginia Woolf’s Reading of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*”, *Publications of the Missouri Philological Association*, 8 (1983), 31–35
- Partington, Wilfred, ed., *Echoes of the 'Eighties: Leaves from the Diary of a Victorian Lady* (London: Eveleigh Nash Company, 1921)
- Payn, James, *Some Literary Recollections* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1884)
- Peterson, Linda H, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2009)
- , ‘Margaret Oliphant’s Autobiography as Professional Artist’s Life’, *Women’s Writing*, 6 (1999), 261–78
- , ‘Triangulation, Desire, and Discontent in “The Life of Charlotte Brontë”’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 47 (2007), 901–20
- Price, Leah, ‘George Eliot and the Production of Consumers’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1997), 145–69
- Raitt, Suzanne, *Vita & Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)
- Ray, Joan Klingel, ‘Victorians versus Victorians: Understanding “Dear Aunt Jane”’, *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 30 (2008), 38–52
- Reynier, Christine, ‘The Impure Art of Biography: Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*’, in *Mapping the Self: Space, Identity, Discourse in British Auto/Biography* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2003), pp. 187–202
- Richardson, Rebecca, ‘Dramatizing Intimacy: Confessions and Free Indirect Discourse in *Sense and Sensibility*’, *ELH*, 81 (2014), 225–44
- Ritchie, Anny Thackeray, *A Book of Sybils* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1883)
- , *A Discourse on Modern Sibyls*, Pamphlet No. 24 (London: The English Association, 1913)
- Robinson, Solveig C., ‘Expanding a “Limited Orbit”: Margaret Oliphant, “Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine,” and the Development of a Critical Voice’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 199–220

- Rosenbaum, S.P., *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), ii
- Rosenberg, Tracey S., 'The Awkward Blot: George Eliot's Reception and The Ideal Woman Writer', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3 (2007)
- Rosner, Victoria, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, Gender and Culture (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2005)
- Sanders, Valerie, *Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)
- Sattaur, Jennifer, 'Thinking Objectively: An Overview of "Thing Theory" in Victorian Studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40 (2012), 347–57
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150311000428>>
- Saunders, Max, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010)
- Setecka, Agnieszka, "'They Are Never So Good as I Meant Them To Be": Margaret Oliphant's Assessment of Her Literary Career in Her Autobiography and Letters', in *Ex-Changes: Comparative Studies in British and American Cultures*, ed. by Katarzyna Więckowska and Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), pp. 37–45
- Shattock, Joanne, 'Margaret Oliphant and the Changing House of Blackwood', in *Studies in Victorian and Modern Literature*, ed. by William Baker (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2015), pp. 51–60
- , 'Work for Women: Margaret Oliphant's Journalism', in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Bill Bell, and David Finkelstein (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 165–77
- Silver, Brenda, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000)
- , 'What's Woolf Got to Do with It?: Or, the Perils of Popularity', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 38 (2009), 20–60
- Simpson, Kathryn, 'Persuading Rachel: Woolf and Austen's "Little Voyage of Discovery"', in *Virginia Woolf and Heritage*, ed. by Jane De Gay, Tom Breckin, and Anne Reus (Clemson: Clemson UP, 2017), pp. 134–40
- Smart, Nick, "'Never See Rachel Again": Virginia Woolf and the End of Domestic Fiction', in *Voyages Out, Voyages Home: Selected Papers from the Eleventh Annual Conference On Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane De Gay and Marion Dell (Clemson: Clemson UP, 2010)

- Smith, Catherine F., 'Histories of a House', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 18 (1982), 2
- Scott, Bonnie Kime, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2012)
- Snaith, Anna, "'My Poor Private Voice": Virginia Woolf and Auto/Biography', in *Representing Lives: Women and Autobiography*, ed. by Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 96–104
- , 'Of Fanciers, Footnotes, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf's Flush', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 48 (2002), 614–36 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2002.0070>>
- , *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000)
- Squier, Susan M., *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics Of the City* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985)
- Stalla, Heidi, 'The Play of Fact and Fiction in Virginia Stephen's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn"', in *Virginia Woolf and Heritage: Selected Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane De Gay, Tom Breckin, and Anne Reus (Clemson, SC: Clemson UP, 2017), pp. 190-95
- Stephen, Leslie, 'Austen, Jane', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1885 <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/904>> [accessed 9 August 2016]
- , 'Bronte, Charlotte', *Dictionary of National Biography Archive*, 1885 <<http://oxforddnb.com/view/olddnb/3523>> [accessed 10 July 2016]
- , *George Eliot*, *English Men of Letters* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1902)
- , 'Hours in a Library: No XVII – Charlotte Bronte', *The Cornhill Magazine*, 36 (1877), 723–39
- , 'Forgotten Benefactors', in *Social Rights and Duties* (London: Schwan, Sonnenschein & Co., 1896), II, 225–67
- , 'Humour.', *The Cornhill Magazine*, 33 (1876), 318–26
- , 'National Biography', in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1898), I, 1–36
- , *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book*, ed. by Alan Bell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977)
- , 'Southey's Letters', in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1902), iv, 45–85

- , ‘The Browning Letters’, in *Studies of a Biographer* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1902), III, 1–35
- Stone, Marjorie, ‘Browning, Elizabeth Barrett’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford UP)
 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3711?docPos=1>>
- Strachey, Lytton, *Eminent Victorians*, ed. by John Sutherland, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003)
- Sutherland, John, ‘A Girl in the Bodleian: Mary Ward’s Room of Her Own’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 16 (1988), 169–80
- , *Mrs Humphry Ward: Eminent Victorian, Pre-Eminent Edwardian* (Oxford: OUP, 1991)
- , ‘Ward [Née Arnold], Mary Augusta [Known as Mrs Humphry Ward]’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36736?docPos=1>> [accessed 19 May 2017]
- Sutherland, Kathryn, ‘Introduction’, in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. xiii–xlviii
- , *Jane Austen’s Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005)
- Tegan, Mary Beth, ‘Training the Picturesque Eye: The Point of Views in Jane Austen’s Persuasion’, *The Eighteenth Century*, 58 (2017), 39–58
- Todd, Janet, ‘Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen?’, in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by Janet Todd, *Women & Literature* (New York; London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 107–27
- Trevelyan, Janet Penrose, *The Life of Mrs Humphry Ward* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1923)
- Wah, Sarah, ‘“The Most Churlish of Celebrities”: George Eliot, John Cross and the Question of High Status’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 370–87
- Wallace, Anne D., ‘“Nor in Fading Silks Compose”: Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in Aurora Leigh’, *ELH*, 64 (1997), 223–56
 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.1997.0010>>

- Watson, Nicola, 'Homes and Haunts', in *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain*, ed. by Nicola Watson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 90–117
- ed., 'Introduction', in *Literary Tourism Annd Nineteenth Century Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–12
- Wood, Alice, 'Modernism and the Middlebrow in British Women's Magazines, 1916-1930', in *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, ed. by Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 39–59
- Zemgulys, Andrea, *Modernism and the Locations of Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008)