

VIRGINIA WOOLF

AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DOMESTIC NOVEL



EMILY BLAIR

Virginia Woolf
and the
Nineteenth-Century
Domestic Novel

SUNY series, Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Pamela K. Gilbert, editor

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Emily Blair

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*To my parents, Bob and Dolly Blair,
who taught me to love life, literature, and houses*

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Portions of this book have already appeared in print. An early draft of Woolf's responses to Margaret Oliphant in *Three Guineas*, a section of chapter four, appeared in *Virginia Woolf Out of Bounds: Selected Papers from the Tenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Jessica Berman and Jane Goldman (New York: Pace University Press, 2001). The "Jeanie" section of chapter two appeared with some revision as "The Wrong Side of the Tapestry: Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*" in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33, no. 2 (2005).

Abbreviations

WORKS BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

Unless otherwise stated, citations are to the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich current editions. The date of first publication is given here.

- PAA* *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals*. 1897–1909.
 Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. 1990.
- AROO* *A Room of One's Own*. 1929.
- CDB* *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*. 1950.
- CR* *The Common Reader*. 1925.
- CR2* *The Second Common Reader*. 1932.
- D* *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*. 5 vols. Edited by
 Anne Olivier Bell. 1977–1984.
- DM* *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. 1942.
- E* *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Vols 1–4. Edited by
 Andrew McNeillie. 1968–1994.
- GR* *Granite and Rainbow: Essays*. 1958.
- L* *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Edited by Nigel Nicolson
 and Joanne Trautmann. 1975–1980.
- M* *The Moment and Other Essays*. 1947.
- MOB* *Moments of Being*. 2nd. ed. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. 1985.
- MD* *Mrs. Dalloway*. 1925.
- ND* *Night and Day*. 1919. Penguin Books 1992.
- O* *Orlando*. 1928.

- P* *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*.
Edited by Mitchell A. Leaska. New York Public Library 1977.
- RF* *Roger Fry: A Biography*. 1940.
- TG* *Three Guineas*. 1938.
- TTL* *To the Lighthouse*. 1927.
- W & W* *Women and Writing*. Edited by Michele Barrett. 1979.

WORKS BY MARGARET OLIPHANT
AND ELIZABETH GASKELL

- MM* *Miss Marjoribanks*. 1866. Penguin Books. 1998.
- W & D* *Wives and Daughters*. 1866. Penguin Books. 1996.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry the Wrong Side Out

In her second novel, *Night and Day* (1919), Virginia Woolf depicts her protagonist, Katherine Hilbery, as someone who has no aptitude for literature: “She did not like phrases. She had even some natural antipathy to that process of self-examination, that perpetual effort to understand one’s own feeling, and express it beautifully, fitly, or energetically in language” (*ND* 32). Lacking this aptitude, Katherine is put in charge of household affairs: “Ordering meals, directing servants, paying bills, and so contriving that every clock ticked more or less accurately in time, and a number of vases were always full of fresh flowers” (*ND* 32). Woolf’s narrator observes that Katherine was “a member of a very great profession which has, as yet, no title and very little recognition” (*ND* 33). Notably, her mother, Mrs. Hilbery, who does have an aptitude for literature, often observes that Katherine’s domestic work is “Poetry the wrong side out” (*ND* 33).

Woolf’s description of domestic management as “poetry the wrong side out” generates the first series of questions that animate this study. Her metaphor recognizes the double-edged nature of nineteenth-century descriptions of domesticity. On the one hand, these descriptions gestured toward a feminine aesthetic: the work of ideologues counseled women on the material practices of maintaining a home and associated these with elevated spirituality. They interspersed their methodical and hortatory instructions for arranging beautiful combinations, creating aesthetically pleasing “wholes” in the domestic setting, with literary touchstones. On the other hand, while Woolf’s metaphor recognizes that the domestic is

poetic, it also draws attention to how domestic work goes awry, how it exceeds the poetic. To be sure, the domestic is one in a series of underprivileged terms associated with the feminine—the everyday, the detail, and the material—that we hardly associate with poetry. Woolf’s representation of domestic work as the “wrong” side of poetry then reflects the untidy connections among literature, women, their conduct, and houses. These connections are complicated by how the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincides with the emergence of the middle class and an increasing focus on domesticity even as it condenses a history of comparisons between architecture and literature from Plato into the twentieth century (Mezei and Briganti 838).

As critics and biographers have shown, Woolf was fascinated by Victorian society and Victorian literary traditions.¹ She set out to transform the Victorian realist tradition in her own writing: this project involved her in delineating the appropriate grounds for creating modern fiction and women’s fiction in particular. In her letters, diary entries, reviews of women writers, and, more extensively, in her efforts to create a tradition of female writing in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf works to untangle the connections between women and fiction and, implicitly, between women and the domestic space that contains them. She argues that the connections between women and fiction might mean “women and what they are like; or [they] might mean women and the fiction that they write; or [they] might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or [they] might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together” (*AROO* 3). Woolf acknowledges that explaining the relationships between women and fiction poses an “unsolvable problem.”

Nevertheless, *A Room of One’s Own* creates a history of women and writing, with its closing sections advising the twentieth-century woman writer both to leave the common sitting room and to focus on the “infinitely obscure lives of women,” the accumulation of unrecorded domestic labor, life on the streets, and the ever-changing world of gloves and shoes and scents in a shop (*AROO* 91). Thus, Woolf’s analysis of women and fiction inscribes an essential ambivalence about the relationship of women to domestic practices and to the ornament that structures women’s lives, an ambivalence that saturates both her fiction and her modernist manifestos in the 1920s.

Feminist critics and Woolf studies in general rightly resist connecting Woolf with nineteenth-century domestic practices, preferring to focus on her critique of the debilitating nature of nineteenth-century descriptions

of femininity and her increasingly insightful and prescient analysis during the late 1920s and the 1930s of the connections among women's art, their social history, and the larger moral and political history of England. While Woolf critics generally acknowledge her ambivalence about the nineteenth-century social context and, in particular, about nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity, they have not examined the inextricable ties of this ambivalence with Woolf's creation of a modernist aesthetic and a woman's canon.

As Woolf's work narrates the history of women's writing, she operates on a principle of selection that valorizes the four great women novelists—Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot—while dismissing such popular and influential Victorian writers as Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant.² Indeed, taken as a whole, her evaluations of the nineteenth-century woman writer create a set of negative criteria that the twentieth-century woman writer must overcome. Her principles of exclusion make distinctions among her nineteenth-century predecessors that generate the second set of questions that animate this study. In examining these criteria, this study works to untangle Woolf's relationship to the domestic tradition in English literature, to nineteenth-century realism, to female-authored Victorian conduct literature, to the male-authored figure of "The Angel in the House," and to the nineteenth-century debate over the woman question. The chapters trace a path of negative influence intended to demonstrate how by 1937 Margaret Oliphant has become a rhetorical figure for Woolf, standing in for the woman writer Woolf disavows, the woman writer she fears to become.

Woolf's principles of exclusion complicate her notions of matrilineage and bring us back to the ambivalence she feels about nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity. By examining her negative assessments of the "minor" Victorian woman writer, we can deepen our understanding of Woolf's own struggle with a male aesthetic tradition that codes the domestic and its detail as trivial and ephemeral.³ In the early 1920s, Woolf was recording evaluations of her own writing as being overly feminine, of her position in the literary market as a "lady novelist," "the cleverest woman in England," with irritation (*D2* 132, 131). A few examples of these early twentieth-century criticisms provide evidence of how critics—male and female—associated domestic preoccupations with flimsy writing and suggest why Woolf had doubts and anxieties about what constitutes a "woman's writing." Katherine Mansfield derisively claimed in 1919 that *Night and Day* was "Miss Austen up-to-date" (313). In the late

1920s, Desmond McCarthy criticized Woolf's "butterfly lightness" (D3 197). He described *Mrs. Dalloway* as "a long wool-gathering process . . . used chiefly to provide occasions for some little prose poem . . . as when the tiny gathers in some green silk Mrs. Dalloway is sewing on her belt remind her of summer waves" ("The Bubble Reputation"). Mary McCarthy identified Woolf as part of a group of "women writers" with an interest in "décor," "drapery," and "sensibility" (qtd. in Silver, *Icon* 51). M. C. Bradbrook's "Notes on the Style of Mrs. Woolf" in 1932 catalogues Woolf's violations of traditional aesthetic hierarchies as it deprecates the "smoke screen of feminine charm" in *A Room of One's Own* that serves "the same purpose as [Woolf's] nervous particularizing" in her fiction (38). Bradbrook implicitly demeans Woolf's characters, heroines who "live by their social sense": "they are peculiarly sensitive to tone and atmosphere: they are in fact artists in the social medium, with other people's temperaments and moods as their materials" (34). Because "Intensity is the only criterion" of the experiences that Woolf's fiction depicts, "there is" writes Bradbrook, "a consequent tendency for everything to be equally intense in Mrs. Woolf's works" (35). There are no solid characters, no structure: the heroines "are preserved in a kind of intellectual vacuum" (37). In 1938, Q. D. Leavis severely criticized what she called Woolf's plan in *Three Guineas* to have "'idle, charming, cultivated women' whose function would be to provide those dinner-tables and drawing-rooms where the art of living . . . is to be practised" (415). Despite these criticisms of the overly feminine, domestic nature of her writing, Woolf learns, in the words of Helene Cixous, to "sense and desire the power and the resources of femininity; to feel astonishment that such immensity can be reabsorbed, covered up, in the ordinary" (31). Even though Woolf dismisses "minor" nineteenth-century women's fiction engaged with the same feminine characters, preoccupations, and details for which she herself was criticized and, indeed, which her own work in the 1930s criticizes, it is instructive to read these writers' work against Woolf's. When we do so, we find that this work points to a specifically feminine aesthetics, an aesthetics that always recognizes the untidy relationships between women's art and women's real lives; an aesthetics that Woolf herself describes as being an integral part of women's fiction.

In her assessments of her nineteenth-century predecessors, Woolf does not engage in her own elegiac, even nostalgic, leaning toward the romantic atmosphere of the 1860s; she is thus not discouraged from undertaking a serious analysis of their limitations. Nevertheless, Woolf's disavowal of

Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant does conceal certain thematic similarities in their dealings with women's domestic lives. This study juxtaposes readings of Woolf's modernist and feminist manifestos and her innovative novels in the 1920s against the most complex work of Gaskell and Oliphant, work that was serialized in the 1860s. "Mrs. Gaskell" and "Mrs. Oliphant" were leading "lady novelists," whose work on "women's lot," women's daily lives, provides a fictional representation and context for the social practices of the 1860s, practices that Woolf identified as structuring her own young adult life at the turn of the twentieth century. In the posthumous "A Sketch of the Past" (1941), an unfinished autobiographical fragment written late in Woolf's life, she writes that she and her sister Vanessa "lived under the sway of a society that was about fifty years too old for us. . . . We were living say in 1910; they were living in 1860. Hyde Park Gate in 1900 was a complete model of Victorian society" (*MOB* 147). To be sure, Gaskell's and Oliphant's novels provide us with a picture of Victorian women's lives that resonates with Woolf's double-edged description of Katherine Hilbery's domestic management. Like Woolf, Gaskell and Oliphant create profoundly conflicted portraits of women's domestic lives, suggesting themselves that nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity are "poetry the wrong side out."

I read Woolf's work, then, to explore how she represents domestic space and how she denounces the confines of domestic spaces and practices. Brenda R. Silver has usefully argued for Woolf's iconic power: "her location on the borders between high culture and popular culture, art and politics, masculinity and femininity, head and body, intellect and sexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality, word and picture, beauty and horror" (11). Because she allows art and the domestic to interpenetrate, turning poetry the wrong side out, Woolf's work consecrates even as it questions woman's role in the domestic sphere. As she works to undermine the powerful image of "The Angel in the House," she sustains a tension between the nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity that inspired this image and the nascent images of women entering the professions. Woolf maintains even as she revises Victorian notions of femininity that figure women as central, yet invisible, as assembling, yet dispersed. These descriptions provide Woolf with a rich aesthetic model, not only for the social occasion as a work of art, but for her representations of modern subjectivity. Indeed, one could argue that Woolf finds, in the words of Cixous, that "You can't just get rid of femininity. Femininity is inevitable" (358).

Whereas most studies of Woolf have sought to sever Woolf's ties to nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity created by both male- and female-authored conduct and lifestyle literature, I maintain that recognition and analysis of her persistent fascination with such descriptions deepen our appreciation of Woolf's work as they simultaneously advance our understanding of a number of characteristics of feminine aesthetics, especially the relationships between women and interior domestic space and between women and aestheticized representations of everyday domestic practices. Moving between the Victorian and modernist periods, my investigation of Woolf's own relationship to domestic space, to modernist aesthetics, to nineteenth-century conduct and lifestyle literature scrutinizes a range of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sources, including the literature of conduct and household management, as well as autobiography, essay, poetry, and fiction. I build on the traditions of Woolf studies and feminist work in nineteenth-century fiction and domesticity, the work of scholars who, to borrow Woolf's metaphor, "have been before me, making the path smooth and regulating my steps" as I develop my case for Woolf's struggle with domesticity as "poetry the wrong side out" (*W & W* 57). This allows me to link up many critical studies of Woolf with studies of Gaskell and Oliphant. To approach Woolf's connections with Gaskell and Oliphant, I have used an intertextual method, which enables me to read the novels of each writer closely at the same time that it allows me to develop the conversations between these texts and their historical and cultural contexts. In *Desire in Language*, Julia Kristeva illuminates how Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the dialogic nature of texts situates the text within history and society. Thus situated, a text absorbs and replies to another text; it becomes "a perpetual challenge of past writing" (69). "The writer" Kristeva explains, "can use another's word, giving it a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had. The result is a word with two significations: it becomes *ambivalent*" (73) Kristeva's conception of an ambivalent ethic—"negation as affirmation"—aptly describes Woolf's relationship to the nineteenth-century society and literary traditions she sets out to transform (69).

This is not a comparative study. Rather, I first examine Woolf's reviews and critiques of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant against their most critically acclaimed novels, *Wives and Daughters* and *Miss Majoribanks*, respectively, in order to illuminate Woolf's complex fascination with English domesticity and female creativity in a new light. My study then juxtaposes these readings of Gaskell and Oliphant against

Woolf's own critically acclaimed novels of the 1920s, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. In these readings, I trace unacknowledged lines of influence and complex interpenetrations that Woolf attempted to disavow, arguing that the novels of Gaskell and Oliphant provide Woolf with rich examples of ways to negotiate the feminine in fiction and ways to valorize the unrecorded lives of women through a subversive elevation of the very domestic detail that for Woolf damages the integrity of the lesser nineteenth-century women's novels. These lines of influence help us to conceive a tradition and enlarge our understanding of Woolf's feminine aesthetic, placing her in a body of women's writing to which she very much belongs.

My first chapter lays the groundwork for examining the three overlapping, but "unsolvable" relationships that connect women and fiction. First, I take up Woolf's role in the production of women's writing as a disciplinary field and identify inconsistencies in Woolf's selective "thinking back through her mothers," inconsistencies that lead her to deride and exclude Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant. In the second section, I contextualize the rich history of the relationship in English literature between the architecture of the house and the architecture of the self. Literary representations of the house as an essential part of the self provide a background for Woolf's struggle with interior domestic space as a space of masculine retreat. I close with an overview of Victorian domestic ideology, its roots in early Evangelical Protest forms and its popular representations of the art and science of domestic management.

Chapter two considers Woolf's conflicted relationship to Victorian descriptions of femininity and etiquette practices in three of her most famous essays—"Modern Fiction" (1919), "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1925), and "Professions for Women" (1931). These essays merge modernism and feminism through Woolf's dialogic engagement with nineteenth-century "conventions" and her attempts to kill "The Angel in the House." I explore how Victorian conventions have a provocative overlap with the Bloomsbury formalism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry. In her 1920s novels, Woolf's focus on interior domestic space echoes the domestic focus of her Bloomsbury contemporaries. Suggestively, the intertextuality between the nineteenth-century discourse on domesticity and Bloomsbury's focus on significant form provide Woolf with a language and an aesthetic framework that offer her terms for staking out her own literary territory against both the Edwardian male novelists and her modernist male contemporaries. Inscribing her vexed relationship to Victorian

domestic models, her modernist projects thus merge into her feminist projects as she attempts to “span” the curious division of the two realms of experience—“convention” and “intellect.”

Chapter three examines how reading Gaskell’s novel gets Woolf “thinking furiously about reading and writing” as she is working on *Mrs. Dalloway*. I juxtapose Woolf’s critique of Gaskell’s fiction—her apparent inability to create interesting characters and her excessive use of detail—against Gaskell’s advice on novel writing and her musings on the relationship between “objects and feelings” in the writing of fiction. I then turn to a close reading of the details in Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* (1865). Through her use of telling details, Gaskell blurs the comforting ideological work of her novel’s plot as she points to the double edge of Victorian descriptions of femininity. Gaskell’s novel, like Woolf’s depiction of domestic work as “poetry the wrong side out,” reveals the unseemly potential of domestic detail. It is precisely Gaskell’s focus on details and her ability to keep the tension between “objects and feelings” taut that allows her to develop psychological complexity in her characters. This complexity, I demonstrate, not only prefigures but exceeds Woolf’s own ideals for women’s future writing as it reveals how supremely trivial feminine detail can dramatize a critique of Victorian domesticity.

Chapter four investigates Woolf’s personal and professional connections with Margaret Oliphant through the letters and autobiographical writings of her father, Leslie Stephen, and her aunt, Anne Thackeray Ritchie. Through their correspondence, I show how Oliphant’s career accrues meaning for Woolf. Oliphant becomes both a negative model of the compromised woman writer and a positive model of feminine mentorship. In describing her life as a writer who supported two families, Oliphant narrates the life of the nineteenth-century woman writer in terms that are strikingly parallel to Woolf’s own narrative of the obstacles that face the woman writer in *A Room of One’s Own*. Yet Woolf’s anger explodes at Mrs. Oliphant in *Three Guineas* (1938) for the way that she “has prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty” by writing novels in order to earn money to send her sons to Eton. Her anger here suggests that Woolf’s ideas about the publishing woman have shifted by the late 1930s once she has securely established her own position in the field of literary production. Woolf’s fears of woman’s lack of containment—the corrupting influence of her desire for money and the evidence of her sexual activity in her children—cluster around the figure of Oliphant, who becomes Woolf’s avatar of the bad woman writer.

Chapter five examines Margaret Oliphant's comic masterpiece, *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865–1866). Like Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, Oliphant's novel pursues detail to undo its own plot, thus complicating the association between the feminine and detail as trivial. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's conceptions of mimicry, I demonstrate how Oliphant's novel focuses on a highly stylized version of the feminine middle-class self-creating individual and dramatizes the tensions between women's contracting sphere and expanding influence. While Oliphant's ironic narrator extols the hostess's adept social skills and their ability to create power alliances, her plot pairs these against the failed artistic career of a young decorative artist. Through this pairing, Oliphant approaches her own struggle to balance the existential and material obstacles that she faces in the interpenetration of her own life history writing novels and supporting her children. Like Gaskell, Oliphant thus inscribes her own ambivalence about nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity even as she elevates the Victorian society hostess, whose superior taste in decorative detail and lack of economic necessity figure her as domestic genius.

The sixth and final chapter considers Woolf's citations of nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity to illuminate how she shuttles between valuations of domestic artistry and critiques of women's indirect influence in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In her modernist masterpieces, Woolf's depiction of femininity resonates with the depictions of Gaskell and Oliphant as she simultaneously reinvents the novel and revises the marriage plot. Woolf's thinking in the 1920s about the "social side" makes a useful point of departure for considering her representations of the hostess figure. By juxtaposing her ideas about the hostess with the spiritual and material dimensions of nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity in the work of Sarah Lewis, Sarah Stickney Ellis, Mrs. Beeton, and John Ruskin, it becomes possible to perceive an oscillation that Woolf both inherits and reinvents. These descriptions create a sense of the feminine as spiritually "dispersed" at the same time that they advise women to "assemble" in the practice of domestic arts. This Victorian legacy provides the basis for a rereading of Woolf's 1920s novels: the silent debates over Clarissa's parties and Mrs. Ramsay's dinner illustrate how Woolf elevates domestic artistry for its ability to arrest an aesthetic sensation of the everyday moment. Her novels create a model of feminine subjectivity, closely linked to nineteenth-century descriptions of feminine spirituality and Evangelical models of domestic retirement.

The epilogue briefly considers several real-life examinations of domestic women: two of Woolf's pithy portraits of Victorian women and one contemporary lifestyle appropriation of Woolf herself as enjoying domestic tasks. These portraits inscribe the reversibility of the domestic, suggesting its ability to turn women's lives inside out, yet never ignoring its poetic potential.

1

The Slant of the Kitchen Chair

Reassessing Virginia Woolf's Relationship to Her Nineteenth-Century Predecessors

The house plays a large role in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary imagination: houses and novels inform one another even as they become intimate spaces that help us to make sense of ourselves. The house serves as an analog for the novel, but it also serves as an analog for the mind and the body, for social status and for the nation.¹ Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Gaston Bachelard have explored the house for its psychic, archetypal, ontological values.² In particular, Bachelard focuses on the house's ability to shelter daydreaming: the house has a dynamic power of integration. Feminist and gender studies have recently analyzed the house for the complicity between architecture and gender.³ As a building and as an idea, the house has inextricable ties to women's daily lives, their labor, their social place, and their identities. Working to untangle the connections between women and fiction and, implicitly, between women and the domestic space that contains them, Woolf acknowledges that explaining these relationships poses an "unsolvable problem."

Gendered representations of houses, writers, and fiction itself saturate her criticism of other writers, especially women writers, becoming sites wherein Woolf both appropriates and contests the specific legacies of Victorian femininity. In an essay on Ellen Terry's autobiographical writing, Woolf aptly captures the house's dynamic power: "But even while she analyses herself, as one artist to another, the sun slants upon an old kitchen chair" (*M* 211). This humorous passage suggests how inescapable the house is for the woman artist: it distorts her vision of herself and her

artistic creation. Much as Woolf works to criticize the house's participation in women's lesser contributions to the arts, however, the repressed returns. Instead of moving away from the domestic focus of nineteenth-century fiction in her innovative modernist narratives, Woolf refashions both the nineteenth-century woman's domestic novel and the materialist and masculinist bias she perceives in Georgian fiction by herself adopting the language and imagery of nineteenth-century domesticity to make a case for a female-centered modernist aesthetic.

This chapter lays the groundwork for examining three overlapping, but "unsolvable" relationships that connect women and fiction throughout Woolf's work: her vexed relationships to the minor Victorian women writers whose work she dismisses, to the house, and to Victorian definitions of femininity. The first section examines Woolf's role in the production of women's writing as a disciplinary field to identify inconsistencies in her selective "thinking back through her mothers," inconsistencies that lead her to dismiss Elizabeth Gaskell and deride and exclude Margaret Oliphant. Paradoxically, while Woolf's conceptions of what constitutes women's writing focus on the central question of women's social history—"the domestic problem" and "the respectability of the woman writer"—at the same time, they advise the woman writer to record the same domestic detail that Woolf seems to eschew. The second section contextualizes the rich history of the relationship in English literature between the architecture of the house and the architecture of the self by reading William Cowper's "The Task," Walter Pater's "A Child in the House," and E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. These literary representations of the house as an essential part of the self provide a background for Woolf's struggle with interior domestic space as a space of masculine retreat. Her own descriptions of the divided and gendered spaces at Hyde Park Gate, the house of her Victorian childhood, support Bachelard's conjecture that the house has a dynamic integrative power. These descriptions both reproduce the way that Victorian architecture inscribed the separation of spheres in domestic structures and anticipate the recent critical work in architecture's complicity in shaping gender.⁴ The chapter closes with an overview of Victorian domestic ideology, its roots in early Evangelical Protestant forms and its popular representations of the art and science of domestic management in the work of female ideologues—Sarah Stickney Ellis and Mrs. Beeton—and in the work of male ideologues—Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin. This work deepens the "unsolvable" connections among the woman writer, her respectability, and the domestic space that contains her.

QUESTIONS OF CANON: A BLACKLIST OF HER OWN

Critics have granted canonical status to *A Room of One's Own*, arguing that it establishes every metaphor American feminists use to discuss women and writing.⁵ Woolf's essay has been tremendously influential in twentieth-century feminist criticism and in creating the woman's tradition in English. The uncritical acceptance of Woolf's structuring metaphor that when we write "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (AROO 76) has initiated a model of feminine influence in the canon that is based on Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of a harmonious, cooperative pattern of maternal influence and on Jane Marcus's theory of "a democratic feminist 'collective sublime'" (*Art and Anger* 82). In their pioneering work, Gilbert and Gubar identify the intensely, exclusively, and necessarily patriarchal dynamics of Western literary history and Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" wherein a male poet can become a poet only by invalidating his poetic father. In contrast, the female writer experiences "an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship,'" a fear not only that she cannot fight her male precursors, but also that the act of writing goes against the effects of socialization to become self-annihilating (46–53). She must fight against the male writer's "reading of her," redefining her socialization (49). Woolf famously creates a shorthand for the woman writer's struggle against her socialization when she kills "The Angel in the House." "In other words," Gilbert and Gubar explain, "women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art" (17). The female writer must begin her struggle by actively seeking female precursors (49). Woolf learned early on how women influence one another and provide what Marcus identifies as "a liberation from the loneliness of individual anxiety" (83). Yet Marcus's claim that Woolf might tell us "Abandoned, motherless daughters must find new mothers, real and historical, a linked chain of sisterhood over past time in present space, and rescue and redeem their own mothers' lives from their compromises with the patriarchy" (93) implicitly reveals how revisionist Woolf's active search for proper female predecessors was.

Woolf paradoxically juxtaposes the structuring metaphor that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" with her valorization of the "four great women novelists" (*W & W* 45), marking as "possibly relevant" (AROO 66) the fact that "not one had a child, and two were unmarried" (*W & W* 45). This paradox suggests that Woolf's metaphors of cooperation and matrilineage require a new reading. Woolf argues that

The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life—the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task—it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer. (*W & W* 44)

Nevertheless, her own narrative of nineteenth-century women's fiction privileges the extraordinary nineteenth-century woman writer: the four great women novelists—Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. Woolf's ambition is to place herself—also childless—among the great women writers. Her negative references to the more normative careers of Mrs. Humphry Ward, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant, key women in nineteenth-century print culture, suggest her desire to elevate her own career above theirs. Woolf's evaluations of these "minor" nineteenth-century women writers recall dismissive masculinist associations of the feminine and the domestic, yet they also reverse nineteenth-century canonical criteria that valorized the domestic life of the woman writer. Woolf's comments generate a series of nagging concerns, concerns that continue to engage her: chastity and the woman writer, domesticity and the fertilizing power of the domestic woman, and finally, a persistent questioning of the value of domestic creativity and its evanescent nature.

Margaret Ezell shows how Woolf's canon inverts the nineteenth-century value placed on women writers who were also biological mothers and, as such, nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment (97). Ezell's useful study of the writing of women's literary history documents how by 1840 literary biographies had "domesticated" the witty, "androgynous" Restoration woman writer who had competed critically with men in earlier anthologies and assessments of a literary tradition (96). By the nineteenth century, the critical evaluation of women's writing shifts from its eighteenth-century focus on intellectual content and rivalry with men's writing to a separate category of "women's writing." Women's writing begins to function under different criteria that stress the feminine sentiments expressed by a woman writer's style. "Delicacy" becomes the primary standard of judgment in evaluating nineteenth-century women's

writing (93). Thus, major nineteenth-century anthologies examine the woman writer's life in order to illustrate her adherence to modest feminine conduct in a didactic effort to establish role models. These anthologies emphasize the domestic life of the woman writer so that evaluators tend to give more attention to her social background than to her "formal scholastic achievement" (96). Ezell explains how mothers take on a newly prominent place in the literary biographies and become models of womanly attainment. The nineteenth-century woman writer must represent her class and sex: Ezell emphasizes that "Without success as a 'woman,' a female writer can expect little credit to be given to her writings" (97).

Ezell's study identifies key features of the accepted twentieth-century canon that she aligns with Woolf's reversal of these criteria for the twentieth-century woman writer in *A Room of One's Own*: Woolf canonizes women writers based on her theory of "the isolated, self-destructive female artist" (46); "women's books continue each other" (42); thus women's writing establishes, using Marcus's terms, "a 'collective identity' for female writers and readers" (42); such an identity focuses on the means of repressing women writers and historically defines women writers through silence or absence (43). Ezell argues that several anthologies "document" Woolf's thesis as they focus on common and continuing patterns in women's writing (42). Such models of the female writer emphasize professional publication and economic independence, while at the same time they construct a canon that relies on the hierarchies found in the male canon (44). Ironically, Woolf devalues the productive publishing careers of Gaskell and Oliphant because of their apparent adherence to nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment by combining their domestic lives with their careers as writers.

Analyzing the ambivalence of the matrilineage that Woolf claims in *A Room of One's Own*, Elizabeth Abel argues that Woolf "simultaneously promotes a celebration of matrilineage and aggravates a complaint about nurture" (*Fictions* 96). In effect, Woolf creates two mothers: the biological mother and the nurturing mother.⁶ According to Abel, "Woolf systematically depicts the writing daughter only as negotiating issues of difference and continuity with her female precursors, not as hungering for sustenance from them" (96). Woolf's only fictional mother in *A Room of One's Own*, Mrs. Seton, can either bear children or earn money to feed them. Thus, Abel concludes that Woolf compensates for a socially inflicted maternal failure—the inability of women to make money to endow their daughters' educations—by creating a representation of the

woman writer who helps her establish continuity in the tradition that she retrospectively creates: “the woman who is biologically *not* a mother” (100). In Woolf’s creation of her nineteenth-century predecessors, the four great women novelists are childless; their literary careers help Woolf to negotiate difference from a female tradition aligned with nineteenth-century definitions of feminine domestic competence. Mrs. Humphry Ward, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Margaret Oliphant were productive novelists whose work in the literary market place provided money for their children’s—sons’ and, in the case of Elizabeth Gaskell, daughters’—educations. By working to disengage maternity from the “great” nineteenth-century woman writer while simultaneously figuring the history of women’s writing as matrilineal, Woolf defines the twentieth-century woman writer largely by her struggle with nineteenth-century models of womanly attainment.

Pierre Bourdieu’s insights into the relationship between cultural practices and broader social processes, including the social position and the role of the intellectual, provide a telling framework for examining Woolf’s struggle—“her anxiety of influence”—with her nineteenth-century female predecessors. Bourdieu posits a “field of cultural production,” a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relationships of force independent of the political and economic fields. Literature is one such field of cultural production in which writers, agents in the field, compete for a position—for recognition, prestige, celebrity, and the authority inherent in such recognition. In this way, the literary field becomes a site of struggle in which writers compete for control of the beliefs that govern what constitutes aesthetic value. Bourdieu argues that “what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer” (*Field* 42).

Early in her journalist career Woolf actively sought a space in the literary field. Jeanne Dubino shows how Woolf “diligently . . . pursued her family’s social connections in order to realize her dream as a writer” (26). Agreeing with Andrew McNeillie, Dubino argues that by 1918 Woolf has a growing tendency to focus less on the texts she is reviewing and more on expressing her own views (37): Woolf “undermines authorities, takes on the position of underdog, emphasizes the reader, demonstrates her interest in the private self, and adopts a mock-serious and playful tone while at the same time making her criticism less covert and more explicit” (38–39). Woolf’s “mock-serious and playful tone,” so present in her

essays on nineteenth-century women writers, suggests Woolf's desire to break with the past and create her own place in the literary field. Bourdieu explains such "position takings":

It is significant that breaks with the most orthodox works of the past, i.e. with the belief they impose on the newcomers, often take the form of *parody* (intentional, this time), which presupposes and confirms *emancipation*. In this case, the newcomers "get beyond" the dominant mode of thought and expression not by explicitly denouncing it but by repeating and reproducing it in a sociologically non-congruent context, which has the effect of rendering it incongruous or even absurd, simply by making it perceptible as the arbitrary convention it is. (*Field* 31)

Woolf "get[s] beyond" the life of the nineteenth-century woman writer by reproducing that "life" parodically in her reviews and critical essays. These reviews and essays slowly increase her literary authority as she creates and defends her own position in the literary field and prepares a readership for her own fiction. In Bourdieu's terms, Woolf begins to delimit the field of women writers. She imposes a retrospective definition of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define what constitutes women's writing.

Even as Woolf transforms the definition by which a woman writer becomes acceptable, however, her polemics against nineteenth-century women writers "imply a form of recognition" that underscores her selective application of matrilineal models (Bourdieu, *Field* 42). Bourdieu observes that "adversaries whom one would prefer to destroy by ignoring them cannot be combated without consecrating them" (42). As Woolf works to establish a break with the generation preceding her, she returns selectively to the traditions of the next generation back from them, a generation "whose influence may have persisted in a shadowy way" (58). Bourdieu's explanation of how such shadowy influence might persist is provocative for examining Woolf's "anxiety of influence" over her disavowed nineteenth-century predecessors:

Each author, school or work which "makes its mark" displaces the whole series of earlier authors. . . . Because the whole series of pertinent changes is present, practically, in the latest . . . a work or an aesthetic movement is irreducible to any other situated elsewhere in the series: and *returns* to past styles . . . are never

'the same thing,' since they are separated from what they return to by negative reference to something which was itself the negation of it (or the negation of the negation, etc.). (60)

Woolf makes her mark on the field of women's writing when she names it as a disciplinary field. Even so, she valorizes some literary mothers and demeans others. As she claims her right to discuss and judge what constitutes women's writing, she inserts herself into a dialogue. Because Woolf's approach in many of her essays is parodic and often polemical, her citation of nineteenth-century women's lives reveals an active ambivalence about her predecessors. Her every word becomes an "absorption of and a reply to another text,"⁷ as she negotiates the terms that might delineate a separate sphere of woman's writing. Nonetheless, as Woolf herself makes clear, "masterpieces are not single and solitary births: they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (*ARRO* 65). Therefore, Woolf's recognition of the dialogic nature of novels—that "books continue each other" (*ARRO* 80)—belies her own dismissal of lesser-known woman writers.

The legacy of Woolf's female predecessors is vexed. In her early review of R. Brimley Johnson's *The Women Novelists* (1918) and later in her essays "Women and Fiction" (1929), *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and "Professions for Women" (1931), Woolf engages in what Gilbert and Gubar identify as the woman writer's "actively seeking a *female* predecessor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against the patriarchal authority is possible" (49). Paradoxically, however, Woolf's "active" search for such female predecessors actually began by excluding, by creating a "blacklist" of literary mothers who represent just such a threatening force that Woolf wants to disavow, even "kill." During her apprenticeship period as a journalist before she had published any of her own fiction, Woolf wrote to Violet Dickinson in 1907 asking for recommendations of books to review: "I wish you could tell me of some books to write about. I am sobbing with misery over Vernon Lee, who really turns all good writing to vapour, with her fluency and insipidity—the plausible woman! I put her on my black list, with Mrs. Humphry Ward" (*L1* 320).⁸ Mrs. Humphry Ward stands for Woolf as an early example of the compromised woman writer who, like Margaret Oliphant and Elizabeth Gaskell, lived life within the boundaries of nineteenth-century descriptions of femininity