

# VIRGINIA WOOLF

AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY DOMESTIC NOVEL

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EMILY BLAIR

Virginia Woolf  
and the  
Nineteenth-Century  
Domestic Novel

Emily Blair

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## Abbreviations

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### 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.

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## INTRODUCTION

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.